Magna Carta:
The most famous legal text in history.
The foundation of the rule of law.
Stolen.

When Huckleberry Jones is packed off by his parents from New York to a camp for "exceptional teenagers" at Oxford University, his first question is: Why? But meeting the beautiful, enigmatic Kat might just make his time there worthwhile. Together with new friends Mei and Tshombe, he discovers that young people from four continents can have more in common than their differences.

Then Huck finds himself trapped in a mystery linked to an 800-year-old parchment—and solving it could cost him his life.

"A whip-smart psychological thriller with an atmospheric Oxford setting, anonymous notes, a mystery in a clock tower, and a twist you won't see coming."
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SIMON CHESTERMAN

I, Huckleberry

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author of the Raising Arcadia trilogy

I, Huckleberry

a novel

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Now

Is it all right if we don't begin at the beginning? To make sense of things, to really understand, you sometimes have to start at the end. Time's funny like that. We experience life in one direction—a series of moments and encounters, flowing one to the next. Yet their significance only dawns on us as our own sun begins to set.

It's a cliché that youth is wasted on the young. That kind of misses the point. Youth is all potential: everything's possible. If we knew what was coming, if we could foresee the doors that would open and those that would slam in our faces, then who would bother? The daily struggles that loom like mountains, then recede in the rear-view mirror. When you're a kid, every day is a new beginning. Even the police give us a free pass, wiping the slate clean at the magical age of eighteen. A chance to start over. By then, though, it's too late. You are who you were. One day you look back and every step that you thought was a choice seems predestined, nudging you, pushing you to wherever the hell you ended up. Every decision, every happenstance, inexorably forming your character and shaping your destiny.

In any case, to make sense of my story you definitely need to begin with the end. We'll get to the only child, born-to-loving-parents-in-Riverdale, NY, and so on soon. None of that means anything unless you know where it is leading. Which is to me, age sixteen, running up the stairs of a medieval clock tower, clutching a fragment of an 800-year-old parchment, booted footsteps clattering behind me.

The banister is slick and offers neither balance nor grip. I reach another wooden landing and pause to catch my breath, panting clouds of vapour into the cold night air. The wood creaks under my weight—too many kebabs, I guess. With enough force it might be possible to smash some of the beams, but that's unlikely to block the path. In my pocket, my fingers close on Kat's cigarette lighter. A fire? But the wood is too damp.

The footsteps below do not pause. Onward and upward, then. I continue to climb, one leg after the other, though that's as far ahead as my plan goes. The parchment is getting damp. In the bare light of the stairwell I imagine the text beginning to bleed, quill strokes of a thirteenth-century royal scribe undone by a twenty-first-century dropout.

And criminal. If only it were the police chasing me. The boots reach another landing and continue up the next flight. My leg aches but I push on, past the frozen mechanism of the clock, bursting suddenly through an arch and onto a narrow balcony, its crenellated ledge overlooking spires and gabled roofs. The mist has become a drizzle and I almost slip on the weatherworn stone. I take out my phone, but it's too late. Thirteen messages. Nowhere else to run and no one left to call.

From the street below, student carollers rouse themselves against the rain once more and break into song. They probably stand around a cardboard box or open violin case, raising money for starving children, animal welfare, some worthy cause. What they lack in talent they make up for in enthusiasm. Bless them. Urgent good tidings and dreams of figgy pudding waft up from the cobbled street below. It almost brings a smile.

Almost. I wonder what hitting the cobblestones from this height will feel like. Painful, most likely, before the darkness. The footsteps behind me slow as they approach the archway, wary of a trap. I turn my back, looking out across the dreaming spires one last time. The still night air carries the voices of the carollers, offering final wishes for a Merry Christmas. Until the resonance is broken by the scrape of a knife on stone, whetting the blade one last time before the end.

She fooled us all. My fingers tighten on the parchment, damp ink now leeching through to my skin. I close my eyes and brace myself for what is to come.

Then

1

So, I was indeed born to loving parents in Riverdale, New York. Technically, that's the Bronx, but our neighbourhood had more in common with the Upper West Side than the rest of the borough. Going by property prices and school fees, we might as well have been part of gentrified Manhattan. Even the numbered streets just carried on into the two hundreds, after a small gap that appears to have sunk in Spuyten Duyvil Creek.

My parents were academics who met as New Yorkers studying abroad at Oxford University. Maybe that fixed its place for them as a kind of romantic time capsule, idealised for architecture and academia as much as for the fading memory of their own youth. A photograph of the two of them in a convertible hung in our hallway, green hills rolling behind their younger and happier selves. They gave up driving years ago and now rarely look beyond the city. I remember Dad explaining the sun's motion by saying that it rises in the Upper East Side and sets in the Upper West

Side. It was years later that I found out he stole that from a *New Yorker* cartoon.

I say my parents were loving, but they weren't exactly affectionate. Our bookshelves bore dozens of tomes on developmental neurobiology, child psychology, and so on, mostly purchased in the three months leading up to my birth. I was a teenager before I began to understand that my parents were more comfortable thinking of me as a challenging new research project than the fruit of their loins.

Mom and Dad's hearts were usually in the right place, but their methods left something to be desired. As part of a war on sugar when I was eight, Mom spent several weeks trying to persuade me that the ice cream cart occasionally plying our streets only rang its bell when it had run out of ice cream. A falsifiable claim, as I showed her in chocolate mint. She was angry but took a photo nonetheless. I still have it somewhere.

Another of their obsessions was the danger posed by social media. When they finally consented to let me have my own phone at age twelve—a few well-placed news articles about kidnappings may have helped my case—they bought the only device still in production that had no access to the internet. That put me in the niche market that lumped the children of over-protective parents together with old folks who just wanted a damn telephone with numbers like they used to make.

Oh, and they named me Huckleberry. As Dad never tired of explaining, this was after Mark Twain's most famous character, who rafted down the Mississippi River in

the antebellum South with an escaped slave on a crusade against racism. "What will be your crusade, son?" he used to ask. When I got around to reading *Huckleberry Finn*, I pointed out to him that Huck only ended up on the river because his father was the town drunk—and that he thought he would go to hell for freeing Jim.

Dad looked fit to explode—he wasn't big on being contradicted—but Mom told me she liked the name precisely because Huck did the right thing, despite what everyone else believed. "A good heart is a better guide in this world than a badly trained conscience," she told me. "Aim for that, and you'll do just fine."

Mrs Sellwood used to say that wisdom is the compliment that experience pays to failure. She said a lot of stuff. Much of it sounded like it came off the side of a cereal box, but every now and then she cut through the BS and helped me see something true and real. She never commented on my name, except once she asked me if I was going to let my name define me, or if I was going to define it. At the time, I said I wasn't sure. Maybe I am now.

Despite the all-American name, or maybe because of it, I inherited Mom and Dad's fascination with England. Alongside the how-to books on child development were books on King Arthur, Stonehenge, and Jack the Ripper. To these I added countless variations on the English boarding school novel, dreaming that my parents might send me off in top hat and tails to attend Eton or the like. That never happened, but as my sixteenth birthday approached they mentioned over dinner that they'd enrolled me in a winter programme at Oxford.

By then a new pile of books was growing, on the topic of college admissions—the next module in my parents' Child-Rearing 101. It was pretty clear that a December in England was meant to plant a seed about doing university there, or maybe it was CV-padding for applications back home. Mom was upbeat as usual, telling me how much fun I would have. Vague on details, though. As for Dad, he got this exasperated look when I asked him why this was sprung on me so suddenly. "It'll be good for you," was all he said, as if I was still in a high chair and he was shovelling broccoli into my mouth.

Personally, I was pretty confident I could get into Harvard or Yale if I wanted to. A line mentioning Oxford on the application wouldn't hurt. Brand name colleges like brand name students.

Well, let's back up a step. It might be an exaggeration to say that I was on a path to waltz into Harvard or Yale. My grades were good but not stratospheric. I had the usual cello-debating-public service record, but was hardly Nobel Prize material.

Truth be told, I struggled a bit. My grades were above average, sure. Though this was at a school where half the students were there to learn how to manage the income from their trust funds. And I was never on the debate team. I don't know why I said that I was—it sort of rolled off the tongue and onto the page. I did argue with my teachers, I suppose. But you don't normally—*one* does not normally put that on one's curriculum vitae.

It was Mrs Sellwood who had first encouraged me to think about going abroad. Unlike most of my teachers,

she seemed to want to understand me rather than just get through the day. She also knew I was interested in psychology and mentioned once that the programme at Oxford was first-rate. Some time away from the US wouldn't hurt either. "As a girl," she told me, "I spent a year in Australia with relatives. In that time, I learned something about that country, and I learned a great deal about my home by seeing it from a distance. But most of all I learned about myself."

So Mom talked school into letting me out a few weeks early, and off to England it was. I waved so long to Felix and the trust-fund bunch, packed my brolly (that's an umbrella), and we arrived in Oxford one glorious day on the bus from Heathrow Airport. Blue sky and sunlight made the limestone buildings glow; secret college lawns and neighbouring fields shone the purest green. We walked the cobblestone streets, Mom and Dad giggling at memories they were too embarrassed to share with me.

Until the clouds returned and a veil of drizzle marked the onset of winter. Even so, any deficiencies in the English climate were more than compensated for by the English people themselves. Mom and Dad had briefed me on how to avoid being an ugly American abroad, but nothing could prepare me for the English. They were even more polite than Canadians. After Mom and Dad went back to their hotel, I saw an old man hit his head on a door and the first thing to come out of his mouth was, "Sorry."

I had to stop and write that one down in my diary straight away. A gift from Mom, it was bound in dark green leather with crisp, creamy paper and faint grey lines. Fancier than

my usual notebooks—standard black with red corners, 192 pages held together by an elastic closure—it took a little getting used to. But a new country meant turning over a new leaf figuratively, so why not also do it literally? Hah. I wrote that down also.

That was when I first saw Kat. Standing outside the college entrance, she was leaning against a stone column and staring into the middle distance as though she were posing for a portrait. In New York, I once went to the Met to see an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite art. Kat reminded me of Proserpine—pale skin, raven hair, a hint of doom. I had just sat down on a bench to write when I smelled something burning. It took a moment to trace it to the cigarette held at her side. She brought it up to her lips, an orange glow followed by a lazy expulsion of smoke.

She realised that I was staring before I did. I looked away, but she was already moving in my direction. Finishing the sentence, my diary closed as a waft of nicotine and perfume preceded her.

"What's the matter," she said, a mix of challenge and curiosity in her voice. The top two buttons of a dark blue shirt were undone, revealing a birthmark on her neck. I tried not to stare at that either. "Haven't you seen someone smoke before?"

I stood up, blurting out the first thing that came into my head. Unfortunately, it was the truth. "Well, not anyone under forty," I said. "Don't you guys vape here?" I had got up too quickly and my left leg nearly gave way, remnant of a childhood injury. I tried not to wince.

"Oh, you're *American*," she laughed, smoke following

her words and drifting into my face. Her perfume recalled the duty-free shop at the airport, but the smoke was giving me a headache. "That explains a lot." She raised the diminishing cigarette to her lips once more, then looked at it in disappointment. Exhaling to the side this time, she dropped the butt on the ground, extinguishing it under the heel of a patent-leather pump.

"What exactly does it explain?"

She was already absorbed in her phone. "Luncheon. Must dash. Bye." She looked me briefly in the eye, contemplated smiling, thought better of it, swung a bag onto her shoulder, and disappeared into the college.

I watched her leave, then put the diary into my backpack. I waited before reaching in to take out a tissue. Kneeling, I picked up the cigarette butt. Flecked with a deep red from her lipstick, I held it at a distance until I could drop it in the trashcan—rubbish bin—by the door.

Her lunch appointment, I soon discovered, was the same one as mine: a welcome meal at our new home-away-from-home, Warneford. That morning, Mom and Dad had dropped me and my luggage off in the pokey new quarters assigned to me, before trying to walk off some of the jetlag.

Check-in had been more elaborate than the summer camp in Maine. Dad had to pull out his reading glasses to squint at page after page of agreements and waivers, signing my rights away with a flourish. A bored administrator presented me with a black wristband—some kind of low-end Fitbit, by the look of it—and then asked for a cheek swab and a strand of my hair.

"But we've only just met!" I joked.

Mom tittered, but the administrator's expression did not change. At last, I opened my mouth so that she could run a Q-tip down the inside and seal it in a plastic cylinder. She then produced a pair of blunt-looking scissors, so I yanked out a couple of hairs for her. They went into another cylinder.

"Welcome to Warneford," she intoned.

If I had teeth like that, I wouldn't smile much either. "Thanks," was all I said. Then I felt bad; the poor state of English dentistry wasn't her fault. Mrs Sellwood used to say that it took more muscles to scowl than to smile, and that this was nature's way of telling us to be nice to one another. I'm pretty sure that was bogus, but I thanked the lady again.

Mom and Dad walked me back to my room. I tried out the wristband, which unlocked the door.

"No need to worry about losing your keys," Mom said.

I tried the lock a few more times. "Why am I here again?" I asked.

"Oh for God's sake," Dad burst out. "We've been over this a dozen times."

Mom put her hand on his arm. "It's a camp for exceptional teenagers, bright boys and girls, like you. A chance to get to know them and, especially, to get to know yourself. Go in with an open mind, OK?"

"OK." I looked out the window at the bleak sky. "I still don't understand why we couldn't go skiing in Vermont."

Mom raised a finger to stop Dad's response. "Many of the kids here are interested in psychology, same as you," she said. "You'll have classes with some of the best people at Oxford. It's going to be great."

I fiddled with the wristband. “Mrs Sellwood did say that the programme here was one of the best.”

The sound of Dad’s hand slapping the wall made me jump. “Of all things, that’s the one you can’t leave behind.”

Mom shot him a look. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s take a photo outside before Dad and I go back to the hotel. Then it’s going to be time for your orientation programme. They said all scheduled activities will go straight into your calendar.”

We went to the front entrance and asked an old man on his way inside to take our photo. I waved goodbye to Mom and Dad as the man hit his head on the door, apologising to it. I sat to write that down, met the cigarette-toting Proserpine, she left, and then my own phone buzzed—an iPhone, at last!—the calendar telling me to make my way to the dining hall for orientation.

I followed the signs down unfamiliar corridors. The main building dated from the early nineteenth century, but much of its interior had last been renovated in the 1960s, at peak linoleum. According to my parents, it was smaller than most of the other Oxford colleges and lacked their gothic grandeur, but the hall was cosy and welcoming.

The smell of roast beef greeted me as I entered. A pleasant-faced woman with better teeth and a clipboard ticked a box and directed me to table seven, where tent cards with our given names in a light san serif font had been arranged. Table seven consisted of myself and three others, including cigarette girl, whose name card said “Catherine”, but that had been crossed out with a thick marker and “Kat” written in its place.

"Huckleberry?" She beamed at me, flicking a lock of dark hair from her cheek. "Seriously? That's your name? Well, do join us." She turned to our companions. "Please allow me to introduce you to"—she angled her head to read the other cards—"Mei and …" She frowned and then shrugged. "And this gentleman."

"Tshombe," he introduced himself, rising to shake my hand. "Think the first part of 'church' and the latter part of 'Bombay'."

"Actually, I think they prefer it to be called 'Mumbai' now," said the other girl at our table, pushing a pair of rimless glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "Not that you," she hastily continued, "not that you need to change the way you pronounce your name." She closed her eyes for a full second, then opened them again as if entering the room for the first time. "I'm Mei," she said brightly, standing to shake hands. Like Kat and Tshombe, she wore the black wristband, though she kept it over the sleeve of her blouse.

"Huck," I replied. "Are you, like, Chinese? Your English is really good." Then it was my turn to cringe.

If she was offended, she did not show it. "I'm from Singapore. Your English isn't bad either, for an American."

Fair enough, I thought.

Tshombe straightened his tent card. "Don't worry," he grinned at me, reading my uncertainty. "I am indeed African—Zambian, to be precise. Huck, eh? Yes, that is better than Huckleberry. A nice strong name. And probably one that you do not need to spell out three times when you speak on the telephone."

Kat flicked her hair again. “Now, isn’t this chummy. But where are my manners. You’ve all come from thousands of miles away and I’ve come from Basingstoke. I’m also the only Warneford veteran at the table, so I suppose that makes me your host. Come, then, let us feast on soggy potatoes, overdone roast beef, and peas boiled within an inch of their lives.”

Other diners were heading toward a lunch counter and we joined the line—the queue. The other students wore wristbands also, holding them up to a sensor that issued a low beep before they collected their lunch.

“So, your parents are big Mark Twain fans?” Mei asked.

“Just pretentious,” I replied, a little testily. “Plus, with a surname like Jones, my parents thought it would make me ‘distinctive’.”

“Huh,” she said. “Sometimes I’m glad my name is so common. Sometimes it’s nice to be anonymous. Maybe if your parents had named you Jacob you would have been happier.” She squinted at the roast beef that was about to be dropped on her plate. “Excuse me,” she addressed the server. “Is it possible to get a piece that’s not entirely fat?” He looked at her blankly, the slice of meat landing on her plate with a slap. “Fine,” she said under her breath. “I’ll cut it off myself.” She accepted some vegetables and returned to the table.

“So, American.” Tshombe pounded me on the back. “What brings you here?”

Good question, I thought. Why the hell am I here? But I could hardly tell him that. “Oh, the same as everyone else. Also, I’m considering studying psychology one day.”

"I see, yes." He nodded, and then shook his head. "But not the same as me. It was my father who brought me here. 'Time to grow up, son,' he said. 'Time to be a man.'" He sighed.

The server at the beef station put a piece of meat on each of our plates. Tshombe was a good head taller and probably thirty pounds heavier than me. He hesitated, plate in mid-air, and the server looked up at him, before placing a second slice of beef on his plate. A ladle duly drowned the beef in sauce, threatening to drip over the edge as he carried it across the hall.

When we returned to the table, Mei was pushing a small mound of peas around half a potato.

"Not hungry?" I asked.

"The cooks here seem more interested in punishing food than cooking it. I swear I can't taste anything." She reached into her bag and produced a small bottle with a red cap, tapping a few drops onto her beef.

"Is that Tabasco sauce?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, would you like some?" She offered the bottle to me. I shook my head, but Tshombe accepted it and sprayed some liberally on his beef. "Be careful," she observed. "It's a little hot."

"What about you, Huckleberry?" Kat inquired, reaching over to spear a piece of my carrot with her fork. "How do you find the cuisine?"

"My parents lived here twenty years ago, so I was warned about warm beer and lousy food."

She took another piece of carrot but paused when it was an inch from her lips. "So, what did attract you to England?"

On my left, Tshombe took a bite of his meat and coughed.

"I don't know." I tried the peas, most of which had been reduced to a green slime but tasted quite good if you avoided looking at them. "I always liked English history—King Arthur and all that. The rise and fall of Empire."

"You mean you find our fading status quaint?" Kat inquired, reddening slightly. She put the fork down on the table. "You like the fact that we're more comfortable reliving past glories than facing the future?"

"That's not what I said." I put my cutlery down also, hoping to avoid a scene.

Beside me, Tshombe was dabbing at his mouth and forehead with a handkerchief.

"She's only pretending to be irritated," Mei interjected through a mouthful of potato. "If you look at her eyes, you can tell that she's playing with you."

Kat gave Mei a curious look, evaluating her somehow. Then she picked up her fork and took a last stab at my carrots before addressing her own plate.

By this point, beads of sweat were appearing on Tshombe's brow and he drained the glass that was on the table before him.

Mei stood up. "I did warn you," she said. "Let me see if I can get you some milk." Tshombe smiled through watering eyes.

"Have you met the head of the programme yet?" Kat asked, the irritation washing from her face like a retreating wave.

"Professor Cholmondeley?" I said, pronouncing carefully

the name I had copied into my diary from the welcome note in my room.

Kat stared at me and then burst out laughing. It was a curiously high-pitched sound, equal parts jolly and mocking. “Chol-mon-de-ley,” she mimicked, in a rough approximation of an American accent. “It’s pronounced ‘Chumley’, doofus.”

I had only ever seen the name in writing and there was no indication that half the letters had been added in a bid to trick the unwary. “And to think you English still complain about how Americans had to clean up the way you spell,” I said, cutting a piece of beef and popping it in my mouth.

Well, that’s not quite true. To be honest, what I said was “Oh.” Then I cut the beef and ate it.

Mei returned with a small bowl of ice cream and placed it before Tshombe. “This should help.”

He took a large spoonful into his mouth and sat back in relief. “Thank you,” he whispered, a thin trail of melted vanilla running down his chin.

Kat leaned toward the centre of the table. “Let me fill you in on a little secret about our beloved director: Dr Cholmondeley was almost fired last year.”

“For what?” Tshombe, fortified by the ice cream, had resumed his meal, painstakingly cutting pieces of beef not touched by the Tabasco sauce.

“Two students died,” said Kat quietly. “The official version is that it was accidental, but there were lots of reasons to be suspicious.”

“How did they die?” Mei asked, taking her seat.

Kat looked around the hall, as if reassuring herself that no one else was listening. "They fell. From the clock tower."

The tower was far older than the college itself, the remnant of a medieval church that had been incorporated into the nineteenth-century design. It rose above the rest of the buildings and was visible from miles away. When we arrived, we had been told that it was a site of some historic interest, but strictly off-limits to students as the structure was unsafe. No longer maintained, its hands were stuck permanently at eight minutes past eight.

"From your tone, you clearly don't believe that they fell on their own," Mei said. "Were they boys?"

"Why is that your first question?" Tshombe now seemed fully recovered.

"Statistically, men choose more violent methods for suicide," Mei replied. "Alternatively, two men are more likely to have been fighting or showing off and plunged to their deaths."

"It was a boy and a girl," Kat said. "And it was never clear what happened. One morning, the students arrived to find a police tent set up in the courtyard below the clock tower."

"So, why was Professor Cholmondeley—I'm sorry, *Chumley*—blamed for this?" I asked.

"She runs the camp and they were in her tutorial group." Kat lowered her voice even further, so that we all had to lean in to hear her. "She was the last person to see them before they died. The story is that she was arguing with them about something. Other students saw them outside her office. Cholmondeley said that the argument was about a disciplinary matter, that the boy had been drinking. The

one part of the argument that other students overheard was the boy—Chester—yelling at Cholmondeley: 'You lied to us. This whole thing is a lie!'

"And then they were gone."

Kat concluded at a moment when other conversations in the hall had also paused, leaving the room silent but for the occasional scrape of fork on crockery. I looked around at the other tables, a dozen of which were set up like ours. Fifty or so students, from the looks of it drawn from around the world. As voices restarted, I picked up a couple of American accents and some Spanish. Surely, if the deaths had happened last year and there were returning students like Kat then there was no need to whisper?

Mei's brow crinkled and she was about to ask her own question when a rapping noise from the other end of the hall drew our attention. In addition to the tables of students, a longer table had been set up for the adults who presumably ran the programme. In comparison with the diversity of the students, the faces on that table were mostly pale. Mom's comment that the English sun took the colour *from* your cheeks came to mind.

A stout woman in her forties stood up. Around four and a half feet tall, her head barely rose above those of the students seated near her. She banged once more on a table with the heavy silver ring on her index finger.

"Professor Cholmondeley?" I mouthed at Kat, who nodded.

"Welcome, welcome," the professor bellowed. "It is my great honour to welcome you to the Warneford family. You come from all over the country and, indeed, all over the

world. Here we shed those differences in the interests of growing as individuals, realising our potential, achieving our dreams."

Was this a camp about psychology or about leadership? The note in my room also went on about dreams, potential, and "holistic education". I looked at the faces of the other students, but it was the usual mix of attentiveness and boredom. A few fidgeted and a tall blond boy was playing some kind of drum solo on the table with his fingers.

"At Warneford," she continued, "we believe in holistic education. You will, I hope, learn much from my colleagues and me. But you will also learn from each other—as we will learn from each of you. At the same time, we aim to provide a supportive environment. If you need help, we are here." She nodded to the other adults sitting to her left and right, a few acknowledging her and looking around at the students also. "In my experience, however, it is often one's peers who first see signs of unhappiness. So, if you see a friend having a difficult time, perhaps not eating or sleeping as regularly as they should, please reach out to them. Ask how they are doing, if they need anything."

She paused, looking down. Was she thinking of the clock tower? "Such a helping hand can make all the difference."

A series of administrative announcements followed, essentially repeating information about mealtimes and curfews distributed on paper when we arrived. There was also a warning about staying away from the local pubs as a student from another college had apparently been stabbed during a fight. She concluded with yet another welcome to Warneford, which earned a polite round of applause.

Two more knocks of her ring on the table indicated the end of lunch. Students filed out of the hall, but she remained in place, bodies parting around her like a small rock in a shallow stream.

Then the rock began to move toward our table. Professor Cholmondeley nodded to Kat. “It’s good to see you again, Miss Evershaw. Is everything in order?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Kat’s head bowed as she said it.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?”

Kat looked at us. “This is Tshombe from Zambia, Mei from Singapore, and Huckleberry from New York.”

“Why, what a little United Nations you have gathered together,” said the professor, bringing her hands together and eyeing each of us in turn. “I do hope you will all be happy here and find whatever it is that you are looking for.” Her eyes lingered on me. “I remember corresponding with Mrs Sellwood about you, Mr Jones. A fine woman. I am sorry that we didn’t get a chance to meet.” She looked at her watch. “Oh dear, I’m late for an appointment. See you in class, I suppose.”

How did she know Mrs Sellwood? Professor Cholmondeley had a curious way of moving such that the upper part of her body remained still, gliding along while short legs propelled her forward. Less of a stone and more of a duck, I noted, as she paddled out of the hall, down a corridor, and out of sight.

Back in my room, I decided to send a quick email to Mrs Sellwood:

Dear Mrs Sellwood, I'm in Oxford! Sorry I didn't get to say goodbye before I left. I'll be sure to send you a photo of me punting once I figure out what that is. Professor Cholmondeley says she knows you. Small world!

Yours sincerely,
Huck

I hit send, but before closing the laptop a flashing envelope announced a new message in my inbox:

The e-mail address you entered could not be found. Please check the recipient's e-mail address and try to resend the message. If the problem continues, please contact your helpdesk.

I did check, and there was no mistake in the address. At the time, I assumed that Mrs Sellwood—who was something of a Luddite—had somehow misconfigured her email. At the time, I was wrong.