

a hypothesis

THERE WOULD BE TIMES, particularly at first, when Regan would attempt to identify the moment things had set themselves on a path to inevitable collision. Moments had become intensely important to Regan, more so than they had ever been. Considering it was Aldo who had altered the shapes and paths of her thinking, it was probably his fault that she now considered everything in terms of time.

Her own hypothesis was fairly elementary: There was a single moment responsible for every sequence thereafter. Regan wasn't the science enthusiast Aldo was—and certainly not the genius he was, either—but her view of causality was methodical enough. Everything was a consequence that rippled out from some fixed point of entry, and it had become a game of hers (probably stolen from him) to expose the genesis from which everything else had sprung.

Had it begun the moment Aldo met her eye? Was it when he said her name, or when he told her his? Had it been the moment she'd told him Get up, you can't sit there, or did it have nothing to do with him at all? Could even that moment have been the product of something begun days, weeks, even lifetimes prior?

With Regan, everything came down to sacredness. She liked, in the time between docent tours, to wander her favorite parts of the Art Institute, which she typically selected to match the religiosity of her moods. Which was not to say she gravitated to religious art specifically; more often she aimed to match her private longings with the god (who was sometimes God, but not always) being

worshipped through a polished frame. In early Catholic paintings, she looked for awe. In modern work, for sleekness. In contemporary, the vibrancy of dislocation. Deities themselves had changed over time, but the act of devotion had not. That was the torment of it, of art, and the perpetual idolatry of its creation. For every sensation Regan could conjure, there was an artist who had beautifully suffered the same.

The wandering was a foregone conclusion—a constant, as Aldo would say—but the armory, that day, was not. When Regan had chosen to visit the armory in the past it had been because it stood for the sacredness of purpose: there was no frivolity here. Instead there was the irony of peace; empty shells of weaponry, garish red walls, fossils of conquest. It reminded her of a time when people still committed their violence eye to eye, which gave her a paradoxical sense of gratification. It was intimate because it was not. It was religious because it was not. It was beautiful because, at the heart of it, it was twisted and soulless and ugly, and therefore it mirrored something masochistic in Regan herself.

Her choice of the armory that day implied Significance; it had the ripple effect of Consequence, cosmically so. But then what had been the cause? Had she met Aldo there because fate had willfully intervened, or because they already possessed such similar forms of rumination? Was it inevitable, god descending from machine, or was it because she had been vacant where he was vacant, and therefore both would inevitably seek to be filled?

Did it matter where it started, and would it matter where it would end? Either yes, it mattered very much, because everything was a consequence of something and therefore what became of them was somehow predetermined, or no, it did not matter at all, because beginnings and endings were not as important as the moments that could have happened or the outcomes that might have been. Either it was everything to know the whole story, to look back and see the shape of it while standing along its periphery; or it was nothing, because things in their entirety were less fragile and therefore less beautiful than the pieces within the frame.

By the end, Regan would know the answer. Having turned a corner from where she'd been, she would come to recognize that it was less a question of when everything had happened and more a surrendering to when there had been no turning back. It was always a matter of time in the end, just as it had been in the beginning.

Because for once, in a moment that was either everything or nothing, there would be someone else in Regan's universe, and from there everything would be as it was, only very slightly different.