

LBRIS

We know
books

**Ríoghnach
Robinson**

BAD WORDS



HarperCollins *Publishers*

Chapter One

Parker Navarro

I arrived home on a crisp October morning to find my roommate, Arthur, heralding disaster.

He was sitting in our apartment's front room, typing so furiously at the dining table that the laptop's keystrokes ran together like a snare roll. This was the first warning sign—not so much the frenetic typing as the fact that he was out of bed. The clock had just hit 10 AM, and Arthur Leung was the kind of borderline nocturnal computer person who never crawled into the sunlight before eleven except for emergencies.

The second red flag: his full-body twitch when I opened the door. Cat meets spray bottle. His head jerked up, and for a moment, he didn't move.

Then he shook back his hair and declared, in the voice of someone whose kidnapper has told them to act natural, "Oh, hey, Parker! What's up! How was"—his eyes lit on the bags in my hands—"the grocery store!"

"Um," I said, toeing off my shoes on the doormat. "The store was normal."

"You were going to get yogurt, right? Did you get yogurt?"

"I did." I paused. "Was the yogurt an urgent thing for you?"

"No! It's fine, it's all good."

I set the bags on the kitchen counter, still watching Arthur. In an interrogation room the guy would have folded like wet cardboard. He avoided my eyes, his foot bouncing so that reverberations went through all six foot three of him. Within seconds, a pale sheen had developed on his forehead.

“So,” I said slowly. “What’s going on, man? Is everything okay?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Before I could ask if his friends and family still had all their limbs, he slammed his laptop shut and said, “Don’t go online.”

My concern shriveled into a hard pit of dread. “Arthur. What happened?”

But I already knew the answer.

I knew that somehow, despite the emails I’d sent to my publisher begging them to prevent this exact scenario, Selina Chan at *City Magazine* had gotten hold of an advance copy of my second novel.

Four summers ago, you couldn’t get within spitting distance of the publishing industry without hearing about my debut novel. The book was called *These Extraordinary Times*, and three days after I’d started pitching it to literary agents, Bill Owens of the legendary Owens Agency had flown out to me in the Bay Area, plied me with hundred-dollar sushi, and told me—almost flippantly—“Oh, this book will be huge. I’ll see to that.”

A week later, he’d sold the manuscript for \$1.2 million in a nine-publisher auction.

That month blurred with celebrations. Texts poured in from friends I hadn’t spoken to in years: holy shit dude just saw your instagram thats so sick lol!!! Emails arrived from my college professors: Dear Parker: I was pleased to read the good news about your novel. Many happy regards from the department. Best, Elias.

I could barely believe it—that after years of scraping rare minutes to write, of agonizing over every page, this dream I’d had since childhood was about to be realized.

These Extraordinary Times had sold to Lauren Nilsen, a seventy-year-old industry veteran at Coronation Books who spoke in long, elegant sentences over the phone, like she’d lifted her lines out of Daphne du Maurier. By January, a velvety-covered advance copy was commanding lines out the door at bookseller conventions, and by May, I was sitting for overwhelming interviews in which I tried to talk about the book and interviewers insisted on talking about me. Three months from publication, *These Extraordinary Times* was set to be the book of the year.

Then, on the morning of June 11, a critic named Selina Chan published her review in the online edition of *City Magazine*. It was my first major review.

This was its kindest paragraph:

These Extraordinary Times is a stupefying misfire, ten thousand fine sentences that heroically join forces to say nothing. Hardly does a scene begin to take shape when it’s blasted to pieces by some post-modern pyrotechnic—six pages of footnotes! an interlude told in the form of an Excel spreadsheet!—as though Mr. Navarro were embarrassed to catch himself engaging in that pedestrian work of the author: writing a paragraph that might interest a reader.

Within hours, the review was gaining traction, cross-posted everywhere online with gleeful commentary:

@wolvescandlesfelt: So glad publishers are spending \$1.2 million on Baby’s First MFA Workshop Project, starring lines like “Through the delicate skin of her eyelid the organ itself felt grapelike.” Vomit :)

@servingkant: only two directives remain in contemporary literature, if indeed our modern letters can still be termed literature, which are to eagerly plumb new depths of the facile and to blithely elevate muck dredged from the collective artistic nadir

@sierrasnax: Lol this is why I hate when Asian authors write books aimed at white people . . . the self-hatred is strong with this one

@Patriot27Max: Don't you love to see the left eat itself? This is what publishers get for selling out to woke novelists!

@LanaLanaLand: Okay but like, are we shocked? Yale is right there in his bio. What IS publishing if not watching rich, talentless straight men make millions living off their family's money and using Ivy League connections to get their execrable books on shelves?

"But I didn't *make* any publishing connections at Yale," I sputtered to Bill over the phone. "My family doesn't have—look, can I just reply to say—"

"Absolutely not."

"But if I just—"

"Parker! No. You don't say anything to these people."

"But they have no idea who I am! They're making up this idea of who I am!"

"It doesn't matter. This is beneath you. There's always been an element of complete idiocy in the culture. Repeat after me: It doesn't matter."

I splayed my hand against the wall of my apartment, the fresh paint squeaking under my fingertips. The response of the reading public seemed to matter a lot, actually. It mattered because I'd bought an apartment in North Brooklyn three weeks ago, when I was confident I'd have a steady income from writing, instead of, potentially, no writing

paychecks for the rest of my life. It mattered because people were making assumptions about my parents, who had felt embarrassed enough when I'd paid off the mortgage on my mother's house, and then on the soup-stained one-bedroom where my father had lived in the two decades since their divorce. That was the truth about my "family money," and the truth, as far as I was aware, mattered.

"It doesn't matter," I said, keeping my voice low and controlled.

"Correct," said Bill. "Look, Parker, in some ways you're lucky. These things are essentially unserious, but they can get nasty."

"Nasty? And this is, what, fun and enjoyable?"

"No, of course not. But one critic who doesn't like your style? You have to expect that if you write anything remotely interesting. What counts is that she didn't go *ad hominem*."

"I'll write her a thank-you card."

Bill barked out a laugh. "It's tough, I know, but you've got to ride this out."

So I sat back and watched the *City* review smash its way into the far corners of the internet. That was the Selina Chan effect. Two years ago, one of her raves in *City* had skyrocketed a future Booker Prize winner out of obscurity. On the flip side, her vicious pans induced this sort of instant backlash, like the recoil on a shotgun. You'd have thought she was some longtime titan of criticism, but in reality, she was only a couple of years older than me.

I began to feel a furious clench in my stomach at the sight of her headshot, an unrealistically flattering picture that some photographer had probably tweaked for hours in Photoshop: Chan with her arms folded on an enormous desk, wisps of black hair escaping from an artfully messy topknot, dark eyes set deep above high cheekbones, her mouth exactly symmetrical and unsmiling.

And, one by one, the rest of the critics followed her lead. "Bloated and exhausting," they said. "Fails to justify its own existence." In the

end, the book I'd labored over for six years became a once-in-a-century flop, sinking in at number eighty-seven on the *USA Today* bestseller list for a single week before disappearing. I'd cost my publisher millions.

Still, I had two things that most writers didn't: time and money. When I'd finished spending full days in bed and half joking about jumping in front of a train, I opened a new journal, and two years later, Lauren bought my next manuscript, *High and Dry*, for fifteen thousand dollars.

Obviously I'd asked Coronation not to send a copy to *City*. Still, sometimes, in weak late-night moments, I'd imagined Selina Chan reading *High and Dry*. I pictured her sitting in a Chesterfield armchair in some underlit mansion, turning pages with that uncrackable expression. I imagined her realizing that, to her shock, she loved what she was reading.

I fantasized about the rave she'd write, whose cool, precise sentences would admit how wrong she'd been about me. She'd write that I was in fact a once-in-a-generation talent, possibly a genius.

Then I reminded myself that I had better things to do than fixate on one smug, overpowered member of the literati, and I went back to loathing every atom of her being.

"Parker?" Arthur said. "You okay?"

I barely heard him. I'd sat down on our sofa and was staring through the window, watching the park across the street with its laughing families. The autumn light suddenly felt thin, as though each sunbeam were gliding down the length of a spiderweb.

"Hey."

The concern in Arthur's voice brought me back to myself. One look at the way he was approaching me, edging along the border of our rug with slow, cautious steps, and I knew he was mapping out strategies for

the next weeks, shortlisting friends to invite me out, planning tactful questions about whether I'd taken my medication. He might even try to cook for us, a sign of real catastrophe.

"Yeah, no, I'm okay," I said quickly. "Thanks."

"You sure? Don't get depressed over this, Park. She's not worth it."

"I'm not depressed. I'm just . . ." Outside, the yellowing oak leaves trembled. I pushed myself to my feet. "I'm kind of pissed off."

"Really?" Arthur sounded pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah." I strode to the kitchen and began wedging groceries into our overfull fridge. "I mean, she didn't have to do this. She—she could have ignored the book. Right?"

"Right."

"So *why* is she still punching down at me?" The freezer wailed as I forced in a sleeve of plant-based burgers. "Did I murder her in a past life?"

"Bro, this is exactly what I've been saying for three years! My theory is that she hates all books now. Like, she's read too many of them and can't feel things like 'enjoyment' anymore, so she has to take out her bitterness on the nearest target."

"Maybe. I don't know . . . Her other pans don't feel the same." I shut the freezer door and pressed my forehead against its cool surface, my frustration flickering out as quickly as it had kindled. "God, what am I going to do? Bill's never going to sell anything else I write. I have a mortgage to pay."

Arthur settled against the counter next to me. "Good thing the first one made you an overnight millionaire, right?"

I didn't answer.

"Hold on," Arthur said. "*Hold* on. Parker. Please tell me you didn't secretly gamble your whole advance on fantasy football or something."

"No, no. It's . . ." I sighed. "So, my agent's cut was fifteen percent, and forty percent of the rest went to taxes, right?"

“Right.”

“Then I paid off my parents’ places, and zeroed out my sister’s student loans, and—”

“Wait, for real? Elena or Christi?”

“Elena. Christi and my brothers paid theirs off already.” I gestured to the apartment. “And then there’s this place. I did a thirty-five percent down payment to save on interest.”

Arthur had never asked how much our apartment had cost, but he knew as well as anyone else that in this part of New York, a million dollars was pocket change. I could see him doing the math, realizing that my bottomless windfall would be gone within a couple of years.

“I’m so stupid,” I muttered. “What was I thinking?”

Arthur recovered. “Hey. Come on. You didn’t want your family drowning in debt, and you’ve wanted to live in New York your whole life. That’s what you were thinking.” When I didn’t speak, he shook me by the shoulder. “The *City* thing is going to blow over, okay? The book comes out in . . . January?”

“February.”

“February! Nobody’s going to remember this in February. Selina Chan is a professional name-caller. You can’t let her get to you.”

Despite everything, the righteous set to Arthur’s chin made me smile. He was a righteous person in general, a perennial activist who could never quite turn off the air of canvassing you for something. I’d always envied his certainty.

Arthur and I had met in a writing seminar at Yale. We’d both been working on irredeemable short stories revolving around “shocking” coincidences, which would have shocked no person with a working prefrontal cortex. He was a book publicist at Macmillan now, and he always managed to discover weird little novels I wound up half in love with. As long as Arthur liked what I was writing, I could cling to my self-respect.

He was still looking at me expectantly.

"Thanks," I said. "Yeah. Maybe nobody will care."

"There we *go*." Arthur clapped me on the back and looped his shaggy hair into a ponytail. "We're going to go to that cocktail thing tonight and not even think about it, all right?"

I let out a tired laugh. Arthur had been invited to a party celebrating the hundred-year anniversary of a publisher called Maynard-Roth Editions, and he'd been angling all week for me to join him. Right now, I felt about as sociable as a Carthusian monk, but if I'd learned anything from the last go-around, it was that sitting at home and marinating in self-pity wasn't actually a useful coping mechanism.

"Okay," I said. "I'm in."

Then I retreated to my bedroom, pulled up the *City Magazine* website, and braced for the worst.

In Parker Navarro's Sophomore Effort, a Search for Meaning in a Bus Driver's Daily Route

BY SELINA CHAN

Life is full of punishing routine. Parker Navarro's new novel, *High and Dry*, reminds us of this inescapable fact, though likely not in the way he intended. Over these six hundred pages, Navarro invites readers into the life of Dave Hernandez-Gretzky, a Houston bus driver who circles a single route, morning to night. When forty days of rain hit Texas, Dave holds fast to his preestablished patterns, retracing his assigned streets even while the water level climbs across the city.

A fertile enough premise . . . [U]nfortunately, the Parker Navarro writing *High and Dry* is very much the same writer who, three and a half years ago, perpetrated *These Extraordinary Times*, that paean to hysterical realism that felt plucked from the trenches of the early 00s. Navarro would like to use Dave's routine to skewer the absurd circularity of the way we live. Instead, he winds up doing what he does best: subjecting the reader to hundreds of pages of shapeless musings . . . [a] maddeningly oblique, non-confrontational approach to what should be vibrant, dramatic

material. . . . [I]f a writer can't look uncomfortable realities in the eye, how can he satirize them? How can he expose the absurdity of life if he's palpably frightened that people might call him absurd? How, most mysteriously, can Navarro write so much and communicate so little?

In one memorable scene, a lost seven-year-old boards Dave's bus . . . [a] humane moment cut short by—and I wish this were a joke—the boarding of a mutant alligator who's acquired the power of speech. Readers of *These Extraordinary Times* will remember this tic: the way Navarro subverts every promising moment, displaying a kind of miserable hypervigilance that makes even a skilled stylist painful to read. Possibly, if *High and Dry* were less desperate to make neurotic apologies for its own contents, it could adequately explore any of the thousands of thoughts that fly pell-mell through its shallow and obnoxious protagonist's head.

With its unforgivable length and wild tonal inconsistencies, this is another novel in search of an idea from an author who mistakes bombast for wit. The most punishing routine of all might be opening a new book by Navarro, still wondering if he's found something to say.
