

## THE CHOCOLATE OLIGARCH

AS TOLD BY THE GIRL WHO WAS IN  
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING HER

**M**y father was a gallant falconer, a goat herder and the eldest storyteller of the oasis I grew up in. His life had no luxury; it was nothing but sand, shrubs, tales, mirages. He was the richest man I've ever known.

'Say yes, Oksana,' he would often say. 'Say yes and the world will dazzle you.'

My mother wove carpets and was a storyteller too.

'Oksana, you are elegant,' she would say, hands twirling as she wove. 'Elegance is your most potent weapon. It shows that you have strength, as well as self-possession. Use your elegance not for seduction, but for power.'

I have since learned that this world has nothing in it more seductive than power. My elegance has bestowed me with power beyond belief.

My brother milked goats, loved soccer and spent

his downtime crafting figurines of players from his favorite teams with plant fibers he would splice together from the infrequent vegetation of the steppes. He would watch drones, jets, dragonflies and choppers fly over our oasis and say, 'Someday I'm going to be a pilot.'

And I'm Oksana, daughter of dreamers, a girl born into a village that had never heard of chocolate, who one day, in the not-too-distant future, will build a chocolate empire.

Our yak-hide yurt was one among few surrounding a watering hole that was visited no more than four or five times a year by bands of tribesmen, migrating herds and disparate ghost-like caravans whose standard fare consisted mostly of nuts, dehydrated fruit, tea and occasionally, opium. In seasons in which no visitors arrived, we ate nothing but goats and pomegranates. Delicacies such as chocolate were not a part of desert life.

Technology, in any form, was another thing we'd never seen or heard of, until one day, when I was around nine or ten years old, a tradesman passed through our oasis with a television strapped to his donkey's saddlebag. Having no concept of what a television was, we asked him: 'Sir, what is this thing you travel with?' The man replied that it was a '*story-telling apparatus*'; a box that we should practice caution with, for it was extremely dangerous. 'Some people,' the man said, sharpening his sword, 'once they set their eyes upon it, can never look away. They

die with their eyes wide open, staring into it.' My brother gave the man every last one of his plant fiber figurines in exchange for the television. He then spent the next several months attempting to make it function, making no progress at all, until at last there came an evening when a caravan passed through our oasis with a gasoline powered generator of which my father offered to trade them for a price that they could not refuse: sixty goats. My brother plugged the television into the strange machine, and finally, he got its screen to flicker on, but all it showed was static.

Later that same year, on an evening when the sun was hanging so low on the horizon that each shrub and rut and grain of sand was casting its own long, violet shadow, I watched my father walk out to greet an approaching traveler. I couldn't hear them, but I could see their silhouettes as my father stood before his nine-hundred goats and the lone traveler stood before his single camel.

I imagined their conversation went something like this:

'From where are you coming, thirsty traveler?'

'From that way.'

'To where are you going?'

'That way.'

'Come, have water. Sleep. Eat. We'll make a fire. You can press onward tomorrow.'

The traveler then offered my father something from his camel's saddlebag. After my father accepted

the object, both figures covered their hearts and bowed respectfully. The traveler then climbed onto his camel and rode west into the setting sun (which, that evening, the clouds had painted a most arresting shade of purple). This was a highly unusual thing for a traveler to do without first stopping to replenish at our oasis.

‘Doesn’t he need water?’ I said when my father returned.

‘It was a *she*,’ my father said, running a hand through his long, thin, bone-white hair. A thought then swept across his mind that he decided to keep private. ‘I insisted she stop, have water, sleep, eat and that we’d make a fire, but she said that she had urgent matters to attend to.’

‘Where?’ I said. ‘There’s nothing that way for at least four hundred miles.’

‘I’m not sure,’ my father said. And then, on impulse, with a sense of urgency, he placed his withered hands upon my shoulders and proceeded to examine the deepest contours of my face, looking at me, through me, into me, around me at various depths and dimensions. As he did this, his gray eyes smoldered like embers among ash. I could feel them burn.

‘Yes,’ he said, releasing me at last. ‘She reminded me of you.’

This intrigued me.

‘Why won’t she come share with us her stories?’

‘Some people have no time for tales,’ my father

said, whistling for his falcon. ‘When I informed her she’d reached The Grand Storytellers Bazaar, she said couldn’t stop because her business requires her to be many places around the world simultaneously.’

I remember, then, this made no sense.

‘You can’t be anywhere but where you are at any moment.’

‘On that, you shouldn’t be so certain,’ my father said. ‘It wasn’t so long ago that we thought the earth was flat.’

A blast within. A white-hot flash. A glimmer beyond the edges of understanding.

‘And just what kind of business did this woman say that she was into?’ said my mother, beating the dust out of an old frayed rug that had been stained completely red with goat blood.

My father dug his hand into his leather pouch and retrieved a rectangular bar that was wrapped in purple paper. ‘This is what she gave me,’ he said. And as he turned the bar over in his hands, its interior pink-silver sleeve jutted out on either end, refracting iridescently. It was so tremendously beautiful — this bursting prism of pastels — that I had to look away. Instead, I slit my eyes and ogled westward, towards the woman, who had already rode her camel a great distance towards the sun.

‘What on earth is that?’ said my mother, taking a rare pause from her toiling. ‘Another strange machine?’

‘The woman called it... *chocolate*,’ said my father.

‘She told me she sells it all around the world. It’s some kind of dark gold that you can eat.’

My father’s falcon then landed on his forearm.

‘You can eat gold?’ said my brother.

‘She said to eat it soon or it will melt.’

‘What kind of fool would trek through the desert with something that would melt?’ said my mother.

‘She had contrived some way of keeping her saddlebags cool in perpetuity. She let me feel them.’

My mother whacked the rug so hard that she disappeared momentarily behind the rust-colored dust that had flung off it.

‘She told me that no matter where she goes, she always carries a chocolate in her pocket. She said that if we were to do the same, our lives would never know a day of sorrow again.’

With this, my father placed his falcon in its cage and sat the cage atop the television and then unwrapped the pink-and-purple paper and broke the bar in four. The dark gold began to melt the moment it came into contact with our skin, smearing like wet clay. We spread our fingers wide and licked them apprehensively. We then each bit into our respective chunks at once, interested in the new food form with a clinical curiosity. After several seconds, we all began to moan.

That was the first time I had chocolate.

The only other resident on our oasis was an older gentleman who had a thin and scraggly beard that hung down to his belly. He had arrived several years

prior with several yaks and still had never left. His eyes were always wild and crazy, as if he was constantly being startled by something no one else could see. When we tried to explain to him the taste of this newfangled food, we had no way to articulate the mountains inside us it had moved. It was full of contradictions: it was sweet, yet bitter; it was heavy, yet light; it was unobtrusive while at the same time all pervasive; it had at once whetted our appetites while somehow also fully satisfying our hunger; it was intimate, yet distant; it was vulnerable, yet guarded; it was seductive, elegant and powerful. Nothing like chocolate had ever entered our mouths before. It had lingered in our minds with an after-taste that had assumed a life of its own, having formed within us something of which revealed to us all the things in life we didn't know that we were missing.

Our neighbor wanted nothing of our new insidious obsession:

'The only way you can be happy while you're sad,' he said, 'is if this dung you speak of comes from the droppings of something diabolical.'

And so he sacrificed a yak.

A few months later, after the initial cravings had lost their lethal edge, life on our oasis had become quite dull. With no more chocolate than the single bar we'd shared, our best days, in my opinion, were behind us. My brother was downtrodden, too. He had grown tired of the television. Up until that point,

this '*extremely dangerous box*' had displayed nothing but mind-numbingly monotonous static. This, to all of us, was not worthy of watching unto death. We attempted a return to our daily habits: weaving, herding, gazing at the stars, awaiting the arrival of the next wayfaring traveler; but nothing was the same as before we'd tasted chocolate. Having sampled the divine glory that is possible, our minds became obsessively, myopically focused on what it was we lacked.

Inadvertently, as my brother had been doing his chores one stiff-aired afternoon, he'd leaned his spear against the television. That evening, as soon as he got the television's screen to flicker on, the falcon jittered in its cage. There were sparks, there was smoke, and then finally, there was an image. But the image was grainy, and we couldn't tell exactly what it was. There was a woman talking to a man. (I think.) The man was confused, perhaps frustrated. The woman threw things at him. Large things. Sharp things. Things that shattered when they hit his head. The scene was very violent. The man cried. He and the woman made love. And then another woman appeared and shot them both. (I think.) Though it all was very fuzzy, my brother and I screamed. This was the only type of program that the television played for weeks. I later understood these programs to be soap operas. My brother watched them uncontrollably. He lost weight, lost chunks of hair and his eyes steadily lost their youthful luster. Our neighbor



thought he'd lost his soul; that the very evil box had extracted it and left nothing but a drooling mass behind.

And so he sacrificed another yak.

Late one night, a few weeks after this (during a rerun of an episode we'd each already memorized verbatim), my brother became possessed by an idea. There was a long, thin, metal rod that a silversmith in a passing caravan had some time ago discarded. It was lightweight, malleable, unruined. My brother sprung from where he'd been sitting transfixed for the past few weeks to retrieve it. He fastened the rod to the top of the falcon's cage so that it extended like a silver beam into the sky and then adjusted it until the television's signal came in clearly, without static. The television transformed at once, like a traveler parched of water when they finally reached our well. Immediately, my brother found a way to access channels that were not just soap operas. He found talk shows, game shows, court TV, nature documentaries with scenes of vast seas I had no idea existed. As soon as my brother began his quest into this new infinity, a dark cloud passed over the moon. My mother rose and cast her eyes into the night.

'Did you see that?' she said. 'There's something moving over there.'

'It's the desert,' my father said. 'There's something moving everywhere.'

Shadows, shuffles, gestures. The goats stirred. A draft of cold, crisp wind then blew through our oasis.

A moment later, our neighbor's two remaining yaks then fled into the night, kicking up a cloud of sand and dirt behind them that caused a wispy wake to rise. As our neighbor trailed them with his Bronze Age sword, the Milky Way coursed timelessly above like a great white tide. It appeared as if the trio were on their way to becoming a constellation of their own.

'Look at that,' I said. And by *that*, I meant the incredible wasteland that surrounded our oasis. 'I have never seen the world so alive and beautiful.'

'At night, the desert always comes alive,' said my father, slipping into his storytelling voice. 'That is why it's beautiful. It gets cold, and when the moon is bright, all gets covered with a faint blue light; but tonight, we only have a crescent moon, the type on which the fisherman sits, so the desert is but dimly—'

'What he's saying, Oksana dear,' my mother said, her eyes still scanning the darkness, 'is that we can only see a fraction of what is out there.'

My father climbed to the top of his favorite storytelling mound and motioned to a distant dune where it looked as if the sand itself was shifting.

'Do you see that?' he said.

I looked to where he was pointing but I saw nothing.

'Do you see that band of marauding tribesmen? Do you see them hunting, killing en masse?'

I squinted with great ambition and surveyed the

entire general direction he was pointing, but I could see nothing of interest save the dark void of night and the stars above that made that darkness quiver.

‘Do you see them approaching our oasis, perhaps to plunder us, perhaps to come and listen to this tale about them that I tell?’

‘I see nothing but goats and sand.’

‘Look harder,’ said my father. ‘Don’t just perceive the world before you. Actively generate it. What you see comes as much from inside you as it does from the outside in.’

I strained my eyes to such extent that I began to feel a searing pain boring from the base of my skull out through the center of my forehead. But still, I could see nothing of interest save the staggering beauty of the desert beyond our oasis.

‘If you imagine nothing,’ said my mother, ‘then nothing will be your mirage.’

My father pointed to the east, where I thought I saw a spark.

‘Do you see that caravan of wanderers, troubadours and merchants slithering towards us like a great long snake? Do you see their torches swaying side to side in synchrony?’

I could see, faintly, a single flame dancing far afield. Also, I thought I could hear singing. A sad and rhythmic chant.

‘Did you see that falling star?’ my father said in awe.

I didn't. I must have just missed it. My disappointment was immense.

'Imagine, for a moment, if you could see the truth of all that's here.'

I tried, but it was very difficult since I didn't know exactly what to look for. I looked up to the little hook moon. I imagined a little fisherman sitting in its crook. I imagined him casting his line across the sky and hooking himself a star and reeling that star in but having trouble with it and losing it but not before he'd completely rearranged the cosmos. All around our oasis, things I'd never noticed started to appear: large boulders, a stretch of terraced sand, a small tree beside our well. How could I have never noticed such things before? These things had always been here... That fisherman in the crook of the moon, I was sure, wasn't really there, but these rocks were. How could a thought of something so fantastic have enhanced the world around me into such a higher resolution? My perceptions had been heightened, as if before, I'd had some filter blocking half of all experience. I'd grown so accustomed to seeing this land according to its usefulness that I'd become oblivious to its details. The more I saw that I'd never seen before (moon-flowers, geologic rifts, the skeletons of misbegotten animals), the more obvious it became to me that there was more here that I could not sense.

My father stood before me with his staff, the same man and yet transformed. There were wrinkles

in his face of which until that instant I'd never noticed. He seemed old and young at once, expressing the whole of his vitality in one immortal moment.

'Imagine you could see all that time conceals,' he said.

I imagined. And as I concentrated as hard as I could, my father unwrapped his sandals, which were strapped up to his shins. A gentle west blown wind then whispered through our oasis. Soon my father's feet were covered ankle deep in sand that once was stone.

'The desert is beautiful,' he said, making a grand gesture with his arm, 'not because it is still, but because of the motion it conceals. And there is beauty in motion, even when that motion is unseen. In fact, there is nothing more beautiful than when something makes its presence known when at first it appears that it is absent. What is subtle to the point of being imperceptible, while at the same time achieving to leave the mark of its essence, is the most beautiful possible thing.'

My mother put it more bluntly:

'Our every moment is filled with mysteries that only the heart can detect.'

All the while, my brother stood expressionless in front of the television, his profile half lit with a phosphorescent glow. He'd found a soccer match of which he was watching on silent since he hadn't

figured out yet how to increase the television's volume.

My father then signaled for no one to speak or move.

'Something's rousing the goatherd.'

'What is it?' my mother said, cupping a hand around her ear.

The smell of fresh leather filled the air. It was terrible, but somehow still pleasant.

'Release the falcon,' my father said.

I did as he said at once, careful not to interfere with the contraption my brother had set up to capture the television's spirit from the wind. As I did, my father's goatherd began to grunt together in a massive cacophonous symphony.

'Who's there?' my father said, his voice at once hospitable and hostile. 'Come closer so we can see you.'

I, too, could sense the presence of someone (or something) out there in the dark.

'If you reveal yourself this instant there will be no harm,' my father said.

It couldn't be the neighbor, I thought. He'd chased his yaks the other way. But then again, he could have circled back around. Could it instead have been a cougar? Or a pack of wild dogs? Could it have been a leopard? Or perhaps a wandering ox?

'Maybe it's hyenas,' my mother said, similar in her thinking.

'This is no animal predator,' my father said. 'In

all my years as shepherd, my goats have never made that sound.'

As soon as my father uttered these words, his goats ceased grunting. Slowly, the herd began to part in order to let a woman who was riding atop the tallest camel I'd ever seen stride divinely through them; a woman who was dressed from head to toe in fine white tailored silk. Though it was already late into the night, the woman wore sunglasses, which, to me, seemed like two big black gleaming battle shields upon her unknown eyes.

'Welcome back, traveler,' my father said. 'We are humbled and made prosperous by your presence.'

The woman lifted a slender silk-gloved hand and removed her sunglasses. When her eyes were finally exposed, I felt a familiar feeling seep into my bones. It was as if she was someone, that, at some point in my life, I had dearly known.

'You mentioned the last time I saw you that this is The Grand Storytellers Bazaar?'

'That is correct,' my father said.

The woman held herself with stately poise, emanating certainty and power.

'I have come to trade a story for a story.'

My mother bowed.

'May our oasis be your home as long as there are stories in this world to tell.'

My father helped the woman dismount her enormous camel. He then offered the woman a drink of water from our well, which she declined.

‘I understand that you neither give nor receive charity,’ the woman said. ‘The story I have tonight is a rare one. A tale of genuine quality. In order for me to share it with you, I expect an equally fine one in return.’

‘Rest assured,’ my father said. ‘We have more fine stories here than Scheherazade herself.’

This seemed to please the woman.

My father then instructed my brother to start a fire, but my brother didn’t move. He instead continued to stand motionless in the spotlight of the television, as if he were in the process of being abducted. My mother started the fire for him, lighting it with an ember from the kiln, some bramble and a broken ox-cart wheel. Once the fire was sparkling and blazing, my father told the woman that first we would eat, exchange gifts and commence trading stories in an hour.

In the time that passed, I watched the woman closely. After a while, I began to mirror her graceful movements, adjusting my hair into a tight side ponytail that sheened beneath the moon with an almost ruby brilliance just like hers. After this, I slipped into our yurt and put on my best tunic, something I’d been saving for an occasion such as this. When I reemerged, I felt a vital and sincere self-satisfaction that stretched my spine until I stood significantly taller. The deepest inmost truths of my existence were being welded into form. For the first time in my life, I thought of myself not as a girl, but as a woman.



‘Come here,’ the woman said.

And it seemed she did not so much as summon me as strum my newborn soul.

‘I have a gift for you.’

The woman led me to her camel where it was hitched beside the well. There, she lifted a hefty saddlebag with the slightest flick of her forefinger. The way she moved, so effortless — like a candle-flame — she made me feel at once at ease and ready to ignite. In the place where I ended and she began, our edges smoothly blurred.

‘I understand that you are a chocolate lover,’ the woman said, retrieving a thin bar wrapped in purple paper. She placed it in my hand. ‘Always keep this in your pocket. It will help you in times you least expect.’

In her eyes, I could see my own reflection shimmering in stillness, the same way I would see myself at the bottom of our well. But this was no mere reflection. In her, I saw myself.

‘The story I have to tell tonight is yours,’ she said. ‘Promise me that once you hear it you’ll live out every detail as if every word I say is true; for if you do, you’ll become me, because I am your future you.’

I felt a delightful crack inside of me. A distinct snap. A clean and wondrous opening.

‘But if you are me, and I am—’

‘There are as many versions of your future you as there are grains of sand and stars in view. I am only one of them. In many years, you will look back

upon your life and your most potent memories will be the ones that were just like this, when you were caught in a moment of introspection wondering who your future-self would be. These will be your most unforgettable moments because your future-self indeed is, was and always will be taking form within you. You are a timeless, formless entity who is constantly being signaled forward with sparks of love and joy, with passion, with bursts of energy and flow, and with blunders, which in fact are really not blunders at all, but rather *ripples* in the roaring river of your life. I will be right here with you, always, in every mundane, wonderful and undetected experience that you will not know you've had; and once — if — you are able weave the fabric of your life into something that someday resembles or perchance is precisely me, then you'll come to a single crystalizing moment many years from now when you'll look back to instances such as this and realize that I was not a dream, but a real thing; something that all along was hiding in the depths of your every moment. Remember me. I will be the beam you see within a set of eyes that pulls you forward, or the glint that tells you something's not quite right. I will be the tremor within an object that beckons you towards it inexplicably. I will be the explosion you feel inside of you when you do something that you love and do not know exactly why. Listen to that feeling. That feeling is your future you. I am your future you. And I am warring

with the multitudes to render you into who you will someday become.'

The woman's eyes, at their core, were of the deepest caramel blossom. And at their circumference, they steamed with an audacious, hissing steam of hazelnut. Her eyes were just like mine.

'Everyone gather,' my father said. 'It's story time.'

'Come,' the woman said. And then this most beautiful possible image of my future-self offered me her hand and led me to the fire.

'That means everyone,' said my father, nudging my brother with his staff, who'd gone stiff as if he'd turned into a pillar.

I wanted to be as near this woman as I could, but I still felt many mirrors from her removed. If she would have let me, I would have occupied the same blissful space in which she stood. But she wouldn't let me, yet.

'Would you like to go first?' my father said. 'It's your choice since you're our guest.'

The woman deferred.

'I'll tell my story after yours.'

My father threw a special distillate into the fire. This made its every flame, tip and spangle glow with soft pale shades that ranged from lavender to coral.

'Come one, come all,' my father said, calling out into the night. 'All ye who are among us, your presence here is welcome.'

His heavy feathered falcon then landed on his shoulder and looked me dead in the eye.

‘Stop, look and have a listen to this sand spread out before you,’ my father said, raising a peacock feather to indicate his story had begun. Then he dropped the feather. ‘Do you see space stretching out in all directions, as if a giant pause?’

His opening was followed by a scintillating silence in which time stood still and the peacock feather hung suspended near his kneecap. The fire’s flames were frozen mid-whip, like in a photograph, but real.

‘Though everything you see is palpable and living, nothing in the desert appears to move in the direction your eyes are cast. The only motion that occurs is in periphery, like how you can only see a cluster of stars out of the corner of your eye. When you look here, why is it you can only sense something moving over there? Look there. Why is it that by the time you twitch your eyes that something’s gone? It’s as if this world is filled with phantoms.’

I could feel the heartbeat of the woman beside me. It sounded like a drum.

‘In the desert, footprints often fill in before the next step falls. Look there. Too late. Now here. Do you feel your every moment being ever swept away? It’s as if all we are is apparitions. Could it be we’re all just the projections of our past and future selves? Could it be we’re nothing other than the stories about us that they tell?’

The feather then fell to the ground, disturbing ten thousand grains of sand, and time resumed,

rapidly, as if to mend the gap my father caused. The television's screen was flickering from dim to blinding bright. I could hear the far-off murmur of innumerable voices. They sounded miserable. And I felt miserable as well. A vacancy had formed within me, the shrill feeling that my heart had been removed and would be gone forever if I were to close my eyes.

As my mother stoked the fire, making its flames rise higher, a hooded dervish slowly rendered in its flames, like a holograph, from the hooves of his donkey up. I could not see his face. My father then made a gesture with his arm and a band of sixteen tattered tribesmen materialized from the cold, dry sand. They whipped up in a frenzy of dust devils, each draped in so much fur that I could not see a single patch of skin. They were followed by a caravan of nomads, troubadours and merchants, each of whom presented themselves as if born upon the breeze. And they were veiled as well, this group with the latest trends and fads of desert fashion wear, all of which bared nothing but their eyes.

A sensation of acceleration was escalating from within me, like a force throwing me backwards as I was being thrust forwards despite the fact that I was standing stationary in the whirling winds of time.

'Unveil yourselves!' my mother said. 'At this oasis, we show our faces!'

In harmony, as if one, they all dropped their

hoods, undid their headwraps and removed their horrific masks of fur. To my great astonishment, none of them were men. They were me — all of them — at various ages; each an embodiment of a future iteration of my life. Each had the same hair, eyes and subtle signature movements of the woman who'd rode in on her camel dressed in white; the woman who, in that moment, I could not find. Several of these future versions of myself looked ravaged. Some stood tall, looking strong and well refined. Many looked as if the flame in them had been extinguished. Some looked wanton in their ways. Others I perceived had followed paths to modest fortune. Though many appeared happy (in a hedonistic sense), many looked sad, as if they'd died too young. Together, they made up a wide, divergent spectrum of my future possibilities.

'We are Oksana,' they said together. 'We are the future versions of yourself. And we are warring.'

They all began to speak at once, this great multiplicity of my life spread out before me. They rumbled into a great babel, some voices rising, some dominating, drowning others out, increasing the probability that they would be the me that would prevail.

'I am Oksana, talented ceramics craftswoman, collector of rare silk scarves,' said one.

'I am Oksana, mother of three,' said another. 'Do not mistake my homeliness for weakness. My heart is an anvil of steel.'

'I am Oksana, leader of an infamous tribe of cannibals.'

I scanned the crowd to try to find the Oksana who had given me the chocolate. She was the me who I most desired to become.

'I am Oksana, spice merchant, stepmother of four.'

'I am Oksana, wife of a spice merchant, stepmother of fourteen children, six of whom are older than me.'

'I am not Oksana. This is a terrible mix up.'

(To be fair, this one did resemble the others.)

'I am Oksana... You don't want to know what I am.'

One by one, they each swept by me, around me, through me. They were each vying to be heard and fighting to be seen; every last one of them trying their own desperate tactic of persuasion:

'I am your fully maximized potential.'

'I am your outer life gone to waste, but your inner life at its sweetest possible existence.'

'I am your life spent in a brothel.'

'I am the most pious version of yourself here. All these other girls are harlots. I will never let a sliver of your sensual nature be exposed.'

'I am mediocre in every way, but I am content, and have never worried, too much, about a thing.'

'Which of us will remain illusions?'

'Which of us will you become?'

'It's not your choice, Oksana,' my father said. 'It's

not a choice for anyone. It's knowledge. The only choice you have is what you're going to do with it.'

Something began to happen within me that I did not have the means to comprehend, like a disintegration and re-amalgamation of my soul. What I had no hope to communicate in words began to reveal itself in whatever way it could: in a smile, in a teardrop, in an exhalation that gave heat to the wind. As everything familiar began to mix with the unknown, an awareness began to galvanize from somewhere deep inside of me that I was on my way to becoming something far greater than just one of the many forked paths that whirled before me. In a way, I would become all of them, and more. It was like I had not one, but an infinite number of existences, all of which were true. In that moment, as I stood in the center of my own expanse of possibility, I felt the full immensity of life, for I'd just realized I was limitless.

'What is going on?' said my brother, hitting the television.

Its volume had begun to increase without cause or intervention.

'Don't do that,' my father said. 'It's not broken.'

As the sound continued rising, the television began to roll through a sequence of different channels, pausing momentarily on each with progressively shorter time spans: first, a documentary on Genghis Khan, then another on Marco Polo. After this, a game show, a cooking show, a rocket launch and then a movie in black and white. This was



followed by a weather report (blizzard, somewhere I'd never heard of). Then the television stopped on what to me looked like a commercial. One with a woman who was standing on the observation deck of a magenta skyscraper. The woman was wearing white heels, white pants, a white blazer and big black gleaming sunglasses. It was her... It was me... My most treasured future-self. The frame collapsed in on her face.

'I am Oksana, The Chocolate Oligarch,' the woman said, removing her sunglasses.

The camera then inverted to show the world from her perspective, revealing all that she had conquered. At the sight of this, the many other versions of future-self recoiled. Together, they backed away into the night, becoming ever less illuminated by the fire. In the ghost light, I could see countless thousands, if not millions, of my future-selves scattered across the steppes. All at once, like buildings under demolition, they each crumbled with internal detonations into little mounds of sand. The television then zoomed into a large industrial factory that had been constructed with salmon-colored steel. Then the camera swept left to right across a horizon slathered purple with slender spires of which were perforating an array of clouds that looked like cotton candy before the screen returned to the woman on the skyscraper.

'Walk south, until you reach the coast,' she said. 'Then follow the shoreline east until you see a

wooden ship with sixty-three red sails. There, you'll meet a Rear Admiral who'll take you to the Ivory Coast, where you'll be greeted by a queen with a machete. Work for her six years as her slave. A headhunter will kill her. Seduce this headhunter with your intellect and never let him touch your neck. He will die. You will inherit a fertile land. On it, build a cocoa plantation. When merchants arrive, treat them like royalty but do not sell to them a thing until they've fully succumbed to your influence. They will become the foremost missionaries of your harvest. After you've come to know this land as if it were an extension of your own body, a scientist will approach you. He will ask you for permission to experiment with the unique strains of *Theobroma* on your land. Allow this man access to whatever it is he needs, then offer him half of the wealth you have at that point in your life amassed. He will find a secret alteration in the molecular structure of chocolate that harbors a manifold increase in the irresistibility of chocolate's organic form. This will open a whole kaleidoscope of flavors that no one ever suspected to exist. This scientist will tell you he is not concerned with the business end of things. Trust him, nonetheless. And reward him handsomely. He was sent by the gods. Chocolate is the food they feast on.'

The screen then wove through an action-packed preview of the many blessings and troubles this alluring quest contained. There were images of cobras, scorpions and several million goats; there

were heavily populated alleyways packed with carts of silks and textiles; there were bazaars with freshly butchered meats, talismans and carpets; and there were heaping drums of nutmeg, cinnamon, saffron and bright blue spices that soared sky high above pistachio trees and olive trees and the domes of mosques and minarets. The camera then swept over a most voluptuous curve of the earth — a perpetual curve; over a city built with spiral towers of jade, then through a great labyrinthine metropolis that was carved from lapis lazuli, and next along a chain of crystal islands before skimming bird-like somewhere near the speed of light over an emerald winding way that passed through all the homes and dwellings where my path would intersect with the myriads of whom would guide me as I found my way through this most tremendous maze.

‘Follow this thread,’ said the woman on the skyscraper. ‘It is the eternal nerve of your existence. Make rational decisions half the time; the other half, error only on what feels right in the moment. The truth is, you are not shot like an arrow through time, blind to the fate of your trajectory. Your wings are your future and your past. Now that you have this knowledge, you can fly.’

The screen then entered the world of chocolate, thereupon depicting scenes with whole jungles of cocoa trees. There were fields with cocoa pods stacked in colossal piles (each like Pyramid of Giza), warehouses stuffed to their ceilings with cocoa beans

in burlap bags (some bursting), ships transporting the bags in fleets (some sinking), and trucks delivering the bags to plants that were spread throughout every corner of the world. At the plants, the beans were being emptied onto assembly belts by assembly line workers. And the assembly belts were pouring the beans into vast mint-green vats where the beans were being ground into a powder before at last being melted into a flawless liquid gold.

‘Your fortune will be made in your manufacturing process, not your marketing strategy,’ said the woman. ‘What you make will be so brilliant that it will sell itself. Nevertheless, if there’s anything I can leave you with, it’s this: Become friends with Interpol, MI6 and the CIA. They will be the backbone of your dynasty. Also, ensure to cater to confectioners who moonlight as arms dealers, as well as mercenaries who double as renowned food critics. And finally, hire a nimble butler, one who is fluent in seven languages at least (as well as a security detail whose every member is well trained with a sword). More than one person throughout your life will die for you. Chocolate is a dirty business. You must know this. You will need to have friends in many places to survive.’

The television then displayed a static image of a single bar of chocolate, the same of which I still held in my hand. Like this, the commercial ended. All I could hear was the faint crackle of the fire, which by this point had diminished to the point of being

barely lit. Inside this bulb so sparse of sound, all suitors of my future-self had either fled or ceased existing. All who remained at our oasis was my family and my forever-self.

‘But what will become of each of you?’ I said.

‘Don’t worry about us,’ said my mother, pouring a bucket of water onto the remaining embers of the fire. ‘We will save our stories for another night.’

The embers went out with a hiss. I watched a thick white cloud of smoke rise out of them and spiral skywards. Directly overhead there was a new constellation taking form; one that resembled two behemoth yaks with an old man chasing after them with a machete.

The television then flashed on again and displayed the scene atop the purple skyscraper.

‘One last thing before we meet again,’ said my future-self. ‘I must remind you to never travel anywhere without a chocolate in your pocket. Do this and there will be nothing no matter who you wind up becoming that you will not be able to conquer.’

From within, I felt something like the sweet ascendance of a laugh. It was like a freefall, but instead of down, the feeling flowed outward, in all directions, like a supernova.

A furious sound then began to rip through the television’s speaker. It was a cyclical sound, something mimicking a swarm of angry dragonflies: *whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop*. And as the

camera panned out to show the topmost stem of the skyscraper, a helicopter edged down, very carefully, from the upper corner of the television's screen, until finally, without a wobble, it landed on the skyscraper's observation deck.

My brother jumped up, ascending towards his future just like me.

'Hey, that's me!' he said. 'Someday I'm going to be a pilot!'

'Maybe,' my father said. 'As long as you say *yes*. If you say *yes*, my children — to your future, to your dreams, to love, to growth, to change, to chance, to hope, to opportunity — then the world is sure to dazzle you.'