



PART 1

1.

Maximillian Reisman can stand on his head for thirty minutes if he wants to.

Today he doesn't want to.

His head is too busy, for a start.

It is trying to recall some advice he was once given, about how to revive wilting lettuce leaves. At the same time, it is constructing an advertising campaign for organic oatmeal. It is composing a humorous speech to deliver at a colleague's farewell drinks; it is holding a cell phone underneath Maximillian's chin; and on that very chin, it is quietly growing a beard.

Maximillian kicks the fridge closed on the wilting lettuce leaves. He snaps his cell phone shut without leaving a message.

"*Tabernacle*," he says. This is a curse word. He says it because he has realised, abruptly, that he (and his head) are trying to do too much.

Maximillian is fifty-two years old. He is lighting a cigarette. He is walking to the window. He is opening the shutters, leaning out into the warm evening air. He is blowing smoke across Place d'Youville, watching it fade into the shadows of the Musée d'archéologie.

It is 6 P.M. on Saturday, August 22, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Maximillian is thinking.

A smile forms around his cigarette.

It's the beard! The growing of the beard! *That* is the thing that has taken him over the edge into too busy.

He heads to the bathroom to shave.

The heat wakes Sasha Wilczek, as it does every morning, with its weight and its feather lines of sweat.

It is 6 A.M. on Sunday, August 23, in Taipei, Taiwan.

Sasha's bedroom is not much bigger than Maximillian's bathtub.

Pale murmurs drift through the open door. The tap of a fingernail against a fan of cards.

Those are Sasha's flatmates. A boy and a girl, both American students. They play gin rummy through the nights.

"You have a dry sense of humour." That's the girl's voice, suddenly clear.

Sasha waits for the boy's reply.

"What does that mean?" he says eventually.

"It means your tone doesn't change when you're making a joke," replies the girl.

Sasha Wilczek is forty-nine years old. She is lying in a narrow bed. She is considering the girl's definition of dry humour, turning it over in her mind. She is looking at the dust-smudged bedroom window, at its criss-crossed patterns of masking tape ready for typhoons. She is looking through the dust into her mind, into her schedule for today.

She teaches an 11 A.M. Zumba class at a local gym. Also 2 P.M. Hip Hop and 3:30 P.M. Freestyle dance.

Outside her bedroom, the boy flatmate yawns and wonders aloud why he's so tired.

That boy does not have a dry sense of humour, Sasha thinks suddenly. He has no sense of humour at *all*. *That's* why his tone never changes.

Maybe she could recommend a 5 P.M. Sense of Humour class.

Monty Rickard is laughing so hard he has to fall down on the carpet.

It is four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, August 22, in Boise, Idaho, USA.

There are five people in the room. Two of them are laughing as they unplug a computer and lift its cords and keyboard into the air. The others, like Monty, are letting their laughter knock them sideways.

Everything could be lost! *Everything!*

It's not really that funny.

For the last six months, in their spare time, Monty and his friends have been designing a computer game. Gianni (one of the people falling about) is always going on about how they need to back it up.

Just now, Gianni spilled a can of Red Bull all over the computer.

There's no backup copy.

They're laughing so hard their throats are hurting.

Monty Rickard is eighteen. He has just started a dog-walking business. He chews his knuckles. He plays seven different musical instruments including saxophone, drums, and mandolin. He's not especially good at computer programming, but his friends are, especially Gianni.

A dog jumps onto Monty's stomach, not sure how else to join the hilarity. A guitar, leaning up against the wall, slips to the floor with a *twang* that makes the laughter rise an octave.

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In Berlin, Germany, it's midnight. Chimes are splitting Saturday, August 22, from Sunday, 23.

Ariel Peters is studying her new tattoo. It's on her arm. It's a dragon. Her room vibrates with the backbeat from the dance floor downstairs. There are sudden thudding footsteps outside her door, then they're gone.

Ariel is fourteen. She lied about her age to get the job behind the bar downstairs. Also, to get this room. Also, the tattoo.

It needs more. The dragon needs to breathe fire. It needs to be carrying a basket of eggs in its claws. A saddle so she can ride it. Maybe a cover for rainy days. An espresso maker.

She'll save up her pay and return to the tattoo parlour soon.

Finn Mackenzie, eight years old, is watching a snail climb a window.

Eight A.M., Sunday, August 23.

Beyond the snail is Avoca Beach, which is an hour north of Sydney, Australia.

Finn sees a couple walk along the beach. They're carrying their shoes, skirting seaweed. The woman wears a long woollen scarf. She crouches down to fold up her jeans, and the scarf drapes along the sand beside her.

Finn has solemn eyes and a head cold. He wipes his nose on the back of his sleeve. "You're heading in the wrong direction," he says. "Snails don't belong in the sky." He thinks he might watch *Toy Story 3* again today. He thinks that the colour of the woman's scarf is exactly like a raspberry slushy.

These small events across the world, you'll be wondering why they're here.

You'll be right to wonder: They are profoundly inconsequential.

Except for two things.

First:

Time slides around the world so strangely that all of this is happening at once. Summer dusk in Montreal is midnight in Berlin is winter breakfast time on a beach to the north of Sydney. Maximillian shaves while Sasha dusts her mind while Monty scratches behind his dog's ears. Ariel imagines a new tattoo just as little Finn raises the window and flicks the snail from the glass. He watches it fall into the garden.

Second:

Maximillian Reisman, Sasha Wilczek, Monty Rickard, Ariel Peters, and Finn Mackenzie are not, originally, from this world.

Those are not even their real names.

They all come from a kingdom called Cello.

They were brought here to our world against their will, through cracks that were sealed tightly behind them. Now they laugh, fry eggs, take showers, send texts — and sometimes even stand on their heads — in a world that, to them, is as strange as time itself.