

# The Ellipsis

## Chapter 1

### Ordinary man, Although I am

It starts with a love story, because things like this always start with love stories. Archetypal myths of predestination and dramatic irony. He is a reporter and she likes to plant carnations, and I say this because that's how you can remember them. See, if I start to talk about their appearance or their personality you'll forget about them right away, but I tell you a girl's favorite flower and that's all you need to make a cozy little image in your head.

But yeah, it starts with a love story and Reporter Man and Carnation girl are in love. But then they disappear. Sometimes love does that to people; makes them go away, I mean. You ever been in love? Oh. Sorry I asked.

Anyway, they do come back, eventually, but not at the same time, and they only show up again once people forget to ask about them.. By the time she comes back, he's already dead. She gets to meet her great-grandchildren, and she can see bits of him in their eyes, or the ones that she can remember, anyway.

You ever stop to think about your ancestors? Like, when you were at school and the teacher told you to make a family tree, and you went so far back that you found relatives that you never knew you had. Maybe you just wrote down their names, maybe not. But did you ever stop to think that they had lives? They went through things. They weren't automata whose only purpose was to reverse engineer the miracle that is you.

Lots of time passes after that, and there are more love stories, and tragedies, and comedies, and stories that are a bit of all of those things, and you can never really tell where one of them stops and the other begins.

*But they have to start somewhere.* Soft breezes carry the scent of saltwater from the ocean to a small tent that is somewhat further inland. The breeze has meandered a bit between its maritime midway station (for its place of origin is unknown), and its terminus, and by the time it reaches the tent it's been through trees, over sand, and around crabs and birds. Its travels have let nature impregnate this slow, refreshing breeze with invisible stamps of itself, perfectly immaterial packets of condensed memory and smell particles, and by the time this silky strand of air reaches the olfactory organs of a human nose, it smells pungent and slightly rotten.

The nose in question belongs to Ruperta Maas, age 27, assistant researcher to Dr. Tyrone Pynchon, director of the Department of Archaeology at Hong Kong University. She is just now emerging from the sweaty, delirious stupor that passes for sleep around these parts. The smell of saltwater and bird feces pops into her nose, and she finds herself wishing for a hot shower and clean clothes. This exact same moment has happened roughly forty-seven times, roughly once for every day or Ruperta's island *séjour*.

Trying to rub the saltiness out of her hands is useless, but she does it anyway, hoping against hope that the tropical climate of this island will take pity on her and shift this island a few dozen degrees of latitude over *yonder*. Even Hong Kong, which is nearly unbearable on a bad day and merely sweltering on a good one, is preferable to this, because at least Ruperta can find somewhere with air conditioning in Hong Kong. The only

air conditioning here comes from the sea and smells like all of the things that die in it every single day.

Rupertia leaves the safety of her tent and stands, arms akimbo, facing the ocean. She whistles a few bars of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, Movement 2, and to her it's as if the music coming out from between her lips has drowned out the sound of the waves and is now the only sound in the world. She switches to "Good Morning Good Morning" while she handles her morning ablutions, which consist of slathering herself with deodorant and sunblock and pretending that they actually do some good instead of making her stickier and more miserable.

It is half past eight by the time she reaches the dig site. Rupertia is surprised to find that she is the last one to arrive. The Gu brothers are busy taking pictures of something at the very bottom of the pit they've been digging for two weeks, while Paula Youngtown stares. Freddy "Four-side" Macintosh and Teddy Tatsunoko are busy bottling up soil samples. Her boss, Dr. Pynchon is shouting up at the Gu brothers from the bottom of the pit.

"How much did you zoom in on those pictures?"

Gu brother #1, Apple, looks to Gu brother #2, Orange, before answering.

"All the way, I think," he says, doubtfully.

"No good," says the disembodied voice of Tyrone Pynchon who is in a ditch.

"Get one that shows the glove I put on the ground next to it. Better yet, just take a picture of me next to it. We need to show a sense of scale, got that? People need to be able to tell the exact size of this...thing."

Archaeology is, by its very nature, a speculative science. When it doesn't involve sifting through the fossilized detritus of ancient peoples, archaeology is about finding things that are very old and figuring out what the hell they are. It is the second point that is of primary concern. An archaeologist will very often attempt to describe his or her findings in modern terms, so they'll show a picture of an object made of stone and claim that it is a stone-age rolling pin used by late neolithic man in order to make grain, because it is shaped vaguely like a rolling pin, and rolling pins can be used to make grain, but he or she will be wrong, and he or she will know it. The reason this is wrong is because, even if someone were to know, conclusively, what an ancient artifact is, they would be at a loss as to how it was used and how people felt about it. And this is the true aim of archaeology: understanding the people of the past. The ruins and the ancient tools and the manuscripts written in dead languages are merely tools, means to an end. Archaeologists are like people who try to guess at a person's personality by analyzing the footprints left behind by their shoes.

The disembodied voice of Tyrone Pynchon (who is in a ditch) knows all of this. Therefore, instead of trying to identify what he does not recognize, and possibly creating an epistemological, observer-modifying-the-observed polylemma that would make Heisenberg spin in his grave, he prefers to refer to things simply as things. This is useful in the long term, but annoying to Rupertia, who has yet to get close enough to the ditch to see what the fuss is about.

The brothers Gu, who chose as their "western names" whatever word happened to suit their fancy at that particular moment (just like all mainland Chinese), notice her approach and say their greetings. They show her the pictures they've taken so far, and then show her the subject of the pictures itself.

It's a big rock. She slides into the ditch and says as much to her boss.

"I was not aware that your expertise in archaeology exceeds mine."

"I'm not claiming anything about archaeology," says Rupertia, "but I know a thing or two about big rocks. Enough to know that this," and here she thrusts a hand into the air and makes a palm-facing-downward-this-is-yea-high gesture, "is a big rock."

“True and not true, which is why I repeat what I was implying earlier, namely that I am an experienced archaeologist and you are not. School is in session. Come with me.”

Ruperta follows her boss, mentor, and erstwhile paternal figure around the oddly-smooth lapidarian sphere, to the side of it that is facing away from the *Gu xiongdi* and the Youngtown girl. She notices the spots where Teddy Tatsunoko and Four-side Macintosh laid down grids of string and sticks and took out soil samples. The soil here is dark and moist, betraying the island’s geological past as a place of fertility, before it became just another nowhere island.

By her calculations, which, Dr. Pynchon’s contempt notwithstanding, are actually quite accurate, three quarters of the rocky thing have been dug out, and they’re about 2 meters below ground level. The only way to dig down this far, this fast, is to ignore all pretense of scientific rigor and plow away at the ditch with shovels. Normally, archaeologists scrape away at layers of earth with trowels, one centimeter at a time, and document everything laboriously; Dr. Pynchon willingly violated this principle of archaeological good practice, so he was either desperate, inspired, or on some sort of local mushroom, the kind that makes people feel strange and walk backwards when they actually mean to walk forwards.

Dr. Pynchon points at a spot on the sphere, close to the ground. Ruperta can tell that they dug a little further down in that one spot, and with good reason: there’s a marking there, a sort of elliptical rust spot with two vertical, parallel slits. It reminds Ruperta of the many Qin dynasty vases that she and her boss have had to examine, the ones where a flat dragon figurine made of copper is incrustated in the bronze body, and later polished to make it look like it had been painted on. If it’s anything like that, and Ruperta isn’t admitting this for a second because she knows that it is just a big rock, then it’s impressive handiwork, like the spheres of Costa Rica but with an added bit of flair.

“We had to scare off a few moles while we were digging,” says Dr. Pynchon while Ruperta examines the oval-outlet-stain thing. “Five of them. Or at least, I believe they were moles.”

“It’s an awful lot of trouble for--”

“A big rock. Yes yes, you’ve made your noble, if terribly misguided, argument. Fortunately for me, I’m still the boss here, and I say we’re taking it to the lab.”

This last part makes Ruperta cringe. Her hands start to tremble.

“This thing easily weighs a ton, at least.”

“Yes.”

“The boat that comes by once a week can’t carry something that heavy and the rest of us at the same time.” Now the arms shake too.

“It’s not going to.”

“What, just the rock?” Her voice cracks.

“No, just the rock and myself. The rest of you will catch the next boat.”

“A full week after you’ve gone.” Blood pressure rises.

“That is correct.”

Ruperta is briefly reminded of the many reasons why she really, really hates the human race in general, and, at this particular juncture, why she reserves an extra bit of vitriol for her boss specifically.

“I know that look. It’s the same look my ex-wife’s daughter gives me.”

“I wonder,” growls Ruperta through clenched teeth, “if it might have something to do with the fact that you’re going to strand your team in the deep darkness for a week. Maybe that’s it? I don’t know, you tell me.”

“It’s only dark at night.”

“You know what I mean, Tyrone!”

Dr. Pynchon puts up his hands defensively and backs away. Even he knows that it is not a good idea to enrage his assistant. The other kids know it too, and they crowd

around the ditch like gamblers at a cockfight. They're too shy and sycophantic to express their displeasure at being left alone for a week, so they're relying on Ruperta to do it for them.

"Look, I'm sorry, Ruperta. That's just the way it has to be. I'll see to it that the boat comes back as soon as possible. I wouldn't do this if it weren't important."

"As opposed to leaving it here and coming back for it later, like a normal human being."

"Like I said, it's important."

"*We're* important!"

Ruperta wishes very much that she could punctuate that phrase with any one of several disgusting epithets that are now swirling around before her eyes, but her rage has made her daring, not stupid.

The back-and-forth continues for several hours, and by the time they're done Ruperta is exhausted; sunstroke and anger have taken their toll on her. Dr. Pynchon ends it by declaring that he's leaving with the boat one way or another, and then orders his student-slaves to start digging again. The rock is empowering him somehow, and as Ruperta skulks away with her tail between her legs, she realizes that she cannot grasp the true form of that passion that compels Dr. Pynchon to make baffling decisions in the name of a higher intellectual calling. Deep down, she envies him, not just because he gets to leave in two days while she has to languish on the island for a week, but also because she wishes she could want something so fervently that everything else becomes background noise.

That evening, Orange Gu shows up at her tent, knocking at the entrance flap because he is hard-wired to be unable to do otherwise.

"It's about the moles."

Ruperta opens the flap slightly, but refuses to let him in.

"I don't care about your stupid moles."

"But I think you should know this. We've been finding them all over the place ever since we came to this island."

"I am aware of this, Mr. Gu. I arrived with you, remember?."

"Yes, but you didn't see them this morning, like we did. They were hostile. One of them bit my brother."

"So? It's an animal. Animals tend to do things like that."

"Five of them, though? At the same time. You'd think they were protecting diamonds."

Ruperta sighs and opens the flap on her tent all the way. She gives Orange Gu a look that convinces him that her aqueous humor is made up mainly of battery acid.

"Just what are you trying to say, Mr. Gu?"

"Nothing yet. I just...it's...well, you saw the way Dr. Pynchon reacted to that thing. Maybe it's doing something to him, just like it's doing something to the wildlife around here. That's all I came to say. Good night, Ms. Maas."

The elder Gu brother departs for his own tent. Ruperta watches the glow of his flashlight as it bobs back and forth, slowly making its way away from her. The flap closes up again, and within seconds Ruperta is back in her sleeping bag. She begins to shiver, but before she can figure out if it's due to anger or due to fear, she falls asleep.