

## JAKOB

## READING THE SIGNS

Jakob rides the El in to work, same as he does every day, one more body in the current that flows downtown in the mornings. The El is crowded. There's no real room to maneuver, and so there's nothing really to do with his hat and his gloves and his thick down coat other than to just leave them on. He stands there, looking hilariously fat in his puffy garb in the same way that toddlers do, as though he might tip over helplessly onto his back if you gave him enough of a nudge.

He grips a pole for balance and he reads what he can of other people's newspapers and magazines. He hates being the guy who reads over other people's shoulders—when he spots other people doing it he feels actual *contempt* for them—but as soon as he catches even a glance of what someone else is reading some channel opens in the air and locks his gaze in place. It doesn't matter if what he's looking at is something he'd normally be interested in or not. Today, for instance, he is examining a photo of the catcher's-mitt face of Bruce Willis.

(It's the same way with TV, he's noticed. He doesn't have a TV, so he's come to find them perversely intriguing—if he goes somewhere where there's one on, a bar or a sandwich shop or whatever, he falls into a trance the second he looks at it; he can't tear himself away from the endless stream of stupid shit funneling towards him, cars and meadows and bras. More than once Freya has had to wave her hand in front of his face and say *Hello?* in order to snap him back to this plane.)

Someone is reading the 'Cheers and Jeers' section of the *TV Guide*. He can't make out the text but he can see an image of a child sitting at a dining room table with his hands up. Maybe it's just because he hasn't had any coffee yet but the image seems meaningful somehow, it seems to symbolize the zeitgeist in a way that he can't articulate. What are we all if not just children making a perpetual gesture of surrender? No. Something.

He feels like something is going on in the world. A trend, or a secret, something that could be said in a single sentence of great magnitude. The key to it is everywhere. Everything points to it. He looks at the news. Wizards lose MJ and key game. Someone is reading a program for the European Union Film Festival. Outside graffiti rolls by: the French flag painted on the side of a building, along with the words *Thanks for showing some balls! Vive La France!* He imagines oracles of the past,

spreading out signs before them. Join any random assortment of items and the design that connects them will contain a larger design. That—the grand design—is what he feels like he might have been after with Thomas—this summer they put together five MiniDiscs full of sounds of the city, and thinking back on that now it is hard not to feel like they were making an attempt to accumulate some kind of totemic power.

He should give that guy a call sometime soon. Just to check in. It's been a long time since they've gotten together, and he worries that that friendship, tentative and awkward even at its best, might have completely fallen into disrepair. (His friendship with Fletcher seems to be doing the same thing.) These thoughts abruptly ground him, humble him, and he smirks—he's standing here trying to figure out some Secret of the World but in reality he's some guy on the subway, sweating beneath his coat, unable even to read the signs of what's going on in his own life.

Like with Freya. After he talked to her about what happened on New Year's Eve she eventually placated him by saying *the only reason I did it was because I've been feeling more and more serious about you, more and more like I'm settling down. And being serious scares me. Sometimes I want to run from it, and New Year's Eve I ran from it, I did, just for a minute I did. But the fact that I'm scared—you should take that as a positive sign. Because we're serious enough for me to be scared, and nobody else has ever gotten that far with me before. Nobody.*

*You should take that as a positive sign.* He decided he would. Freya kisses someone else—positive sign. Check. And a week after she told him to take it that way he asked her what she thought about living together. She seemed agreeable to the idea—that's a positive sign, too, it has to be, although he's not sure what to make of the blunt pragmatism that characterizes the conversation they had about it. It was all, *well, it would save us some money.* There was no pretense that the idea was, well, romantic.

They've stopped having sex. He's not sure what to make of that, either. They haven't had sex since the conversation. They still spend nights in the same bed, but he now finds himself uncertain of how to approach her: her body has become an unfamiliar landscape. He lies there and thinks about reaching out to touch her. And he lies there, and he thinks, and he does nothing. He thinks *she's going through a transition at work right now, a lot of stress with this new position. He thinks this will sort itself out.* But he can't help but feel like he's missing an important sign; he can sense it, right there in front of him, an inch away from his fingertips, untouchable, unreadable.

The train descends into darkness. —This is Division, its recorded voice says. —Doors open on the left at Division.