

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Magicians

Lev Grossman

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About the Book

In a secret world of forbidden knowledge, power comes at a terrible price ...

Quentin Coldwater's life is changed forever by an apparently chance encounter: when he turns up for his entrance interview to Princeton he finds his interviewer dead - but a strange envelope bearing Quentin's name leads him down a very different path to any he'd ever imagined.

The envelope, and the mysterious manuscript it contains, leads to a secret world of obsession and privilege, a world of freedom and power and, for a while, it's a world that seems to answer all Quentin's desires. But the idyll cannot last - and when it's finally shattered, Quentin is drawn into something darker and far more dangerous than anything he could ever have expected ...

About the Author

Lev Grossman was born in 1969, the son of two English professors, and grew up in a suburb of Boston. He graduated from Harvard with a degree in literature and went on to the Ph.D. program in comparative literature at Yale, although he left after three years without finishing a dissertation.

After Yale Grossman worked for a string of dot-coms while writing freelance articles about books, technology and culture in general for numerous magazines, newspapers and websites, until he was hired by *Time* in 2002 and became the magazine's book critic as well as one of its lead technology writers.

He is also the author of the international bestseller *Codex*.

ALSO BY LEV GROSSMAN

Codex
Warp

The
MAGICIANS
LEV GROSSMAN



arrow books

FOR LILY

*I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.*

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

BOOK I

BROOKLYN

QUENTIN DID A magic trick. Nobody noticed.

They picked their way along the cold, uneven sidewalk together: James, Julia, and Quentin. James and Julia held hands. That's how things were now. The sidewalk wasn't quite wide enough, so Quentin trailed after them, like a sulky child. He would rather have been alone with Julia, or just alone period, but you couldn't have everything. Or at least the available evidence pointed overwhelmingly to that conclusion.

"Okay!" James said over his shoulder. "Q. Let's talk strategy."

James seemed to have a sixth sense for when Quentin was starting to feel sorry for himself. Quentin's interview was in seven minutes. James was right after him.

"Nice firm handshake. Lots of eye contact. Then when he's feeling comfortable, you hit him with a chair and I'll break his password and e-mail Princeton."

"Just be yourself, Q," Julia said.

Her dark hair was pulled back in a wavy bunch. Somehow it made it worse that she was always so nice to him.

"How is that different from what I said?"

Quentin did the magic trick again. It was a very small trick, a basic one-handed sleight with a nickel. He did it in his coat pocket where nobody could see. He did it again; then he did it backward.

“I have one guess for his password,” James said. “*Password.*”

It was kind of incredible how long this had been going on, Quentin thought. They were only seventeen, but he felt like he’d known James and Julia forever. The school systems in Brooklyn sorted out the gifted ones and shoved them together, then separated the ridiculously brilliant ones from the merely gifted ones and shoved *them* together, and as a result they’d been bumping into each other in the same speaking contests and regional Latin exams and tiny, specially convened ultra-advanced math classes since elementary school. The nerdiest of the nerds. By now, their senior year, Quentin knew James and Julia better than he knew anybody else in the world, not excluding his parents, and they knew him. Everybody knew what everybody else was going to say before they said it. Everybody who was going to sleep with anybody else had already done it. Julia—pale, freckled, dreamy Julia, who played the oboe and knew even more physics than he did—was never going to sleep with Quentin.

Quentin was thin and tall, though he habitually hunched his shoulders in a vain attempt to brace himself against whatever blow was coming from the heavens, and which would logically hit the tall people first. His shoulder-length hair was freezing in clumps. He should have stuck around to dry it after gym, especially with his interview today, but for some reason—maybe he was in a self-sabotaging mood—he hadn’t. The low gray sky threatened snow. It seemed to Quentin like the world was offering up special little tableaux of misery just for him: crows perched on power lines, stepped-in dog shit, windblown trash, the corpses of innumerable wet oak leaves being desecrated in innumerable ways by innumerable vehicles and pedestrians.

“God, I’m full,” James said. “I ate too much. Why do I always eat too much?”

“Because you’re a greedy pig?” Julia said brightly. “Because you’re tired of being able to see your feet? Because you’re trying to make your stomach touch your penis?”

James put his hands behind his head, his fingers in his wavy chestnut hair, his camel cashmere coat wide open to the November cold, and belched mightily. Cold never bothered him. Quentin felt cold all the time, like he was trapped in his own private individual winter.

James sang, to a tune somewhere between “Good King Wenceslas” and “Bingo”:

*“In olden times there was a boy
Young and strong and brave-o.
He wore a sword and rode a horse
And his name was Dave-o ...”*

“God!” Julia shrieked. “Stop!”

James had written this song five years ago for a middle-school talent-show skit. He still liked to sing it; by now they all knew it by heart. Julia shoved him, still singing, into a garbage can, and when that didn’t work she snatched off his watch cap and started beating him over the head with it.

“My hair! My beautiful interview hair!”

King James, Quentin thought. *Le roi s’amuse*.

“I hate to break up the party,” he said, “but we’ve got like two minutes.”

“Oh dear, oh dear!” Julia twittered. “The duchess! We shall be quite late!”

I should be happy, Quentin thought. I’m young and alive and healthy. I have good friends. I have two reasonably intact parents—viz., Dad, an editor of medical textbooks, and Mom, a commercial illustrator with ambitions, thwarted, of being a painter. I am a solid member of the

middle-middle class. My GPA is a number higher than most people even realize it is possible for a GPA to be.

But walking along Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn, in his black overcoat and his gray interview suit, Quentin knew he wasn't happy. Why not? He had painstakingly assembled all the ingredients of happiness. He had performed all the necessary rituals, spoken the words, lit the candles, made the sacrifices. But happiness, like a disobedient spirit, refused to come. He couldn't think what else to do.

He followed James and Julia past bodegas, laundromats, hipster boutiques, cell-phone stores limned with neon piping, past a bar where old people were already drinking at three forty-five in the afternoon, past a brown-brick Veterans of Foreign Wars hall with plastic patio furniture on the sidewalk in front of it. All of it just confirmed his belief that his real life, the life he should be living, had been mislaid through some clerical error by the cosmic bureaucracy. This couldn't be it. It had been diverted somewhere else, to somebody else, and he'd been issued this shitty substitute faux life instead.

Maybe his real life would turn up in Princeton. He did the trick with the nickel in his pocket again.

"Are you playing with your wang, Quentin?" James asked.

Quentin blushed.

"I am not playing with my wang."

"Nothing to be ashamed of." James clapped him on the shoulder. "Clears the mind."

The wind bit through the thin material of Quentin's interview suit, but he refused to button his overcoat. He let the cold blow through it. It didn't matter; he wasn't really there anyway.

He was in Fillory.

Christopher Plover's *Fillory and Further* is a series of five novels published in England in the 1930s. They describe the adventures of the five Chatwin children in a

magical land which they discover while on holiday in the countryside with their glamorous, eccentric aunt. They aren't really on holiday, of course—their father is up to his hips in mud and blood at Passchendaele, and their mother has been hospitalized with a mysterious illness that is probably psychological in nature, which is why they've been hastily packed off to the country for safekeeping.

But all that unhappiness takes place far in the background. In the foreground, every summer for three years, the children leave their various boarding schools and return to Cornwall, and each time they do they find their way into the secret world of Fillory, where they have adventures and explore magical lands and defend the gentle creatures who live there against the various forces that menace them. The strangest and most persistent of those enemies is a veiled figure known only as the Watcherwoman, whose horological enchantments threaten to stall time itself, trapping all of Fillory at five o'clock on a particularly dreary, drizzly afternoon in late September.

Like most people Quentin read the Fillory books in grade school. Unlike most people—unlike James and Julia—he never really got over them. They were where he went when he couldn't deal with the real world. Which was a lot. (The Fillory books were both a consolation for Julia not loving him and also probably a major reason why she didn't.) And it was true, there was a strong whiff of the English nursery about them, and he felt secretly embarrassed when he got to the parts about the Cozy Horse, an enormous, affectionate equine creature who trots around Fillory by night on velvet hooves, and whose back is so broad you can sleep on it.

But there was a more seductive, more dangerous truth to Fillory that Quentin couldn't let go. It was almost like the Fillory books—especially the first one, *The World in the Walls*—were about reading itself. When the oldest Chatwin, melancholy Martin, opens the cabinet of the grandfather

clock that stands in a dark, narrow back hallway in his aunt's house and slips through into Fillory (Quentin always pictured him awkwardly pushing aside the pendulum, like the uvula of a monstrous throat), it's like he's opening the covers of a book, but a book that did what books always promised to do and never actually quite did: get you out, really out, of where you were and into somewhere better.

The world Martin discovers in the walls of his aunt's house is a world of magical twilight, a landscape as black and white and stark as a printed page, with prickly stubblefields and rolling hills crisscrossed by old stone walls. In Fillory there's an eclipse every day at noon, and seasons can last for a hundred years. Bare trees scratch at the sky. Pale green seas lap at narrow white beaches made of broken shells. In Fillory things mattered in a way they didn't in this world. In Fillory you felt the appropriate emotions when things happened. Happiness was a real, actual, achievable possibility. It came when you called. Or no, it never left you in the first place.

They stood on the sidewalk in front of the house. The neighborhood was fancier here, with wide sidewalks and overhanging trees. The house was brick, the only unattached residential structure in a neighborhood of row houses and brownstones. It was locally famous for having played a role in the bloody, costly Battle of Brooklyn. It seemed to gently reproach the cars and streetlights around it with memories of its gracious Old Dutch past.

If this were a Fillory novel—Quentin thought, just for the record—the house would contain a secret gateway to another world. The old man who lived there would be kindly and eccentric and drop cryptic remarks, and then when his back was turned Quentin would stumble on a mysterious cabinet or an enchanted dumbwaiter or whatever, through which he would gaze with wild surmise on the clean breast of another world.

But this wasn't a Fillory novel.

"So," Julia said. "Give 'em Hades."

She wore a blue serge coat with a round collar that made her look like a French schoolgirl.

"See you at the library maybe."

"Cheers."

They bumped fists. She dropped her gaze, embarrassed. She knew how he felt, and he knew she knew, and there was nothing more to say about it. He waited, pretending to be fascinated by a parked car, while she kissed James good-bye—she put a hand on his chest and kicked up her heel like an old-timey starlet—then he and James walked slowly up the cement path to the front door.

James put his arm around Quentin's shoulders.

"I know what you think, Quentin," he said gruffly. Quentin was taller, but James was broader, more solidly built, and he pulled Quentin off balance. "You think nobody understands you. But I do." He squeezed Quentin's shoulder in an almost fatherly way. "I'm the only one who does."

Quentin said nothing. You could envy James, but you couldn't hate him, because along with being handsome and smart he was also, at heart, kind and good. More than anybody else Quentin had ever met, James reminded him of Martin Chatwin. But if James was a Chatwin, what did that make Quentin? The real problem with being around James was that he was always the hero. And what did that make you? Either the sidekick or the villain.

Quentin rang the doorbell. A soft, tinny clatter erupted somewhere in the depths of the darkened house. An old-fashioned, analog ring. He rehearsed a mental list of his extracurriculars, personal goals, etc. He was absolutely prepared for this interview in every possible way, except maybe his incompletely dried hair, but now that the ripened fruit of all that preparation was right in front of him he suddenly lost any desire for it. He wasn't surprised. He was

used to this anticlimactic feeling, where by the time you've done all the work to get something you don't even want it anymore. He had it all the time. It was one of the few things he could depend on.

The doorway was guarded by a depressingly ordinary suburban screen door. Orange and purple zinnias were still blooming, against all horticultural logic, in a random scatter pattern in black earth beds on either side of the doorstep. How weird, Quentin thought, with no curiosity at all, that they would still be alive in November. He withdrew his ungloved hands into the sleeves of his coat and placed the ends of the sleeves under his arms. Even though it felt cold enough to snow, somehow it began to rain.

It was still raining five minutes later. Quentin knocked on the door again, then pushed lightly. It opened a crack, and a wave of warm air tumbled out. The warm, fruity smell of a stranger's house.

"Hello?" Quentin called. He and James exchanged glances. He pushed the door all the way open.

"Better give him another minute."

"Who even does this in their spare time?" Quentin said. "I bet he's a pedophile."

The foyer was dark and silent and muffled with Oriental rugs. Still outside, James leaned on the doorbell. No one answered.

"I don't think anybody's here," Quentin said. That James wasn't coming inside suddenly made him want to go inside more. If the interviewer actually turned out to be a gatekeeper to the magical land of Fillory, he thought, it was too bad he wasn't wearing more practical shoes.

A staircase went up. On the left was a stiff, unused-looking dining room, on the right a cozy den with leather armchairs and a carved, man-sized wooden cabinet standing by itself in a corner. Interesting. An old nautical map taller than he was took up half of one wall, with an ornately barbed compass rose. He massaged the walls in

search of a light switch. There was a cane chair in one corner, but he didn't sit.

All the blinds were drawn. The quality of the darkness was less like a house with the curtains drawn than it was like actual night, as if the sun had set or been eclipsed the moment he crossed the threshold. Quentin slow-motion-walked into the den. He'd go back outside and call. In another minute. He had to at least look. The darkness was like a prickling electric cloud around him.

The cabinet was enormous, so big you could climb into it. He placed his hand on its small, dinged brass knob. It was unlocked. His fingers trembled. *Le roi s'amuse*. He couldn't help himself. It felt like the world was revolving around him, like his whole life had been leading up to this moment.

It was a liquor cabinet. A big one, there was practically a whole bar in there. Quentin reached back past the ranks of softly jingling bottles and felt the dry, scratchy plywood at the back just to make sure. Solid. Nothing magical about it. He closed the door, his face burning in the darkness. It was when he looked around to make absolutely sure that nobody was watching that he saw the dead body on the floor.

Fifteen minutes later the foyer was full of people and activity. Quentin sat in a corner, in the cane chair, like a pallbearer at the funeral of somebody he'd never met. He kept the back of his skull pressed firmly against the cool, solid wall like it was his last point of connection to a sane reality. James stood next to him. He didn't seem to know where to put his hands. They didn't look at each other.

The old man lay flat on his back on the floor. His stomach was a sizable round hump, his hair a crazy gray Einstein half-noggin. Three paramedics crouched around him, two men and a woman. The woman was disarmingly, almost inappropriately pretty—she looked out of place in

that grim scene, miscast. The paramedics were at work, but it wasn't the high-speed clinical blitz of an emergency life-saving treatment. This was the other kind, the obligatory failed resuscitation. They were murmuring in low voices, packing up, ripping off adhesive patches, discarding contaminated sharps in a special container.

With a practiced, muscular movement one of the men de-intubated the corpse. The old man's mouth was open, and Quentin could see his dead gray tongue. He smelled something that he didn't want to admit was the faint, bitter odor of shit.

"This is bad," James said, not for the first time.

"Yes," Quentin said thickly. "Extremely bad." His lips and teeth felt numb.

If he didn't move, nobody could involve him in this any further. He tried to breathe slowly and keep still. He stared straight ahead, refusing to focus his eyes on what was happening in the den. He knew if he looked at James he would only see his own mental state reflected back at him in an infinite corridor of panic that led nowhere. He wondered when it would be all right for them to leave. He couldn't get rid of a feeling of shame that he was the one who went into the house uninvited, as if that had somehow caused the man's death.

"I shouldn't have called him a pedophile," Quentin said out loud. "That was wrong."

"Extremely wrong," James agreed. They spoke slowly, like they were both trying out language for the very first time.

One of the paramedics, the woman, stood up from where she was squatting by the body. Quentin watched her stretch, heels of her hands pressed to her lumbar region, tipping her head one way, then the other. Then she walked over in their direction, stripping off rubber gloves.

"Well," she announced cheerfully, "he's dead!" By her accent she was English.

Quentin cleared his clotted throat. The woman chucked the gloves neatly into the trash from across the room.

"What happened to him?"

"Cerebral hemorrhage. Nice quick way to go, if you have to go. Which he did. He must have been a drinker."

She made the drinky-drinky gesture.

Her cheeks were flushed from crouching down over the body. She might have been twenty-five at most, and she wore a dark blue short-sleeved button-down shirt, neatly pressed, with one button that didn't match: a stewardess on the connecting flight to hell. Quentin wished she weren't so attractive. Unpretty women were so much easier to deal with in some ways—you didn't have to face the pain of their probable unattainability. But she was not unpretty. She was pale and thin and unreasonably lovely, with a broad, ridiculously sexy mouth.

"Well." Quentin didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she said. "Did you kill him?"

"I'm just here for an interview. He did alumni interviews for Princeton."

"So why do you care?"

Quentin hesitated. He wondered if he'd misunderstood the premise of this conversation. He stood up, which he should have done when she first came over anyway. He was much taller than her. Even under the circumstances, he thought, this person is carrying around a lot of attitude for a paramedic. It's not like she's a real doctor or anything. He wanted to scan her chest for a name tag but didn't want to get caught looking at her breasts.

"I don't actually care about him, personally," Quentin said carefully, "but I do place a certain value on human life in the abstract. So even though I didn't know him, I think I can say that I'm sorry that he's dead."

"What if he was a monster? Maybe he really was a pedophile."

She'd overheard him.

"Maybe. Maybe he was a nice guy. Maybe he was a saint."

"Maybe."

"You must spend a lot of time around dead people." Out of the corner of his eye he was vaguely aware that James was watching this exchange, baffled.

"Well, you're supposed to keep them alive. Or that's what they tell us."

"It must be hard."

"The dead ones are a lot less trouble."

"Quieter."

"Exactly."

The look in her eyes didn't quite match what she was saying. She was studying him.

"Listen," James cut in. "We should probably go."

"What's your hurry?" she said. Her eyes hadn't left Quentin's. Unlike practically everybody, she seemed more interested in him than in James. "You know, I think this guy might have left something for you."

She picked up two manila envelopes, document-size, off a marble-topped side table. Quentin frowned.

"I don't think so."

"We should probably go," James said.

"You said that already," the paramedic said.

James opened the door. The cold air was a pleasant shock. It felt real. That was what Quentin needed: more reality. Less of this, whatever this was.

"Seriously," the woman said. "I think you should take these. It might be important."

Her eyes wouldn't leave Quentin's face. The day had gone still around them. It was chilly on the stoop, and getting a little damp, and he was roughly ten yards away from a corpse.

"Listen, we're gonna go," James was saying. "Thanks. I'm sure you did everything you could."

The pretty paramedic's dark hair was in two heavy ropes of braid. She wore a shiny yellow enamel ring and some kind of fancy silver antique wristwatch. Her nose and chin were tiny and pointy. She was a pale, skinny, pretty angel of death, and she held two manila envelopes with their names on them in block Magic Marker letters. Probably transcripts, confidential recommendations. For some reason, maybe just because he knew James wouldn't, Quentin took the one with his name on it.

"All right! Good-bye!" the paramedic sang. She twirled back into the house and closed the door. They were alone on the stoop.

"Well," James said. He inhaled through his nose and breathed out firmly.

Quentin nodded, as if he were agreeing with something James had said. Slowly they walked back up the path to the sidewalk. He still felt dazed. He didn't especially want to talk to James.

"Listen," James said. "You probably shouldn't have that."

"I know," Quentin said.

"You could still put it back, you know. I mean, what if they found out?"

"How would they find out?"

"I don't know."

"Who knows what's in here? Could come in useful."

"Yeah, well, lucky thing that guy died, then!" James said irritably.

They walked to the end of the block without speaking, annoyed at each other and not wanting to admit it. The slate sidewalk was wet, and the sky was white with rain. Quentin knew he probably shouldn't have taken the envelope. He was pissed at himself for taking it and pissed at James for not taking his.

"Look, I'll see you later," James said. "I gotta go meet Jules at the library."

"Right."

They shook hands formally. It felt strangely final. Quentin walked away slowly down First Street. A man had died in the house he just left. He was still in a dream. He realized—more shame—that underneath it all he was relieved that he didn't have to do his Princeton interview today after all.

The day was darkening. The sun was setting already behind the gray shell of cloud that covered Brooklyn. For the first time in an hour he thought about all the things he had left to do today: physics problem set, history paper, e-mail, dishes, laundry. The weight of them was dragging him back down the gravity well of the ordinary world. He would have to explain what happened to his parents, and they would, in some way he could never grasp, and therefore could never properly rebut, make him feel like it was his fault. It would all go back to normal. He thought of Julia and James meeting at the library. She would be working on her Western Civ paper for Mr. Karras, a six-week project she would complete in two sleepless days and nights. As ardently as he wished that she was his, and not James's, he could never quite imagine how he would win her. In the most plausible of his many fantasies James died, unexpectedly and painlessly, leaving Julia behind to sink softly weeping into his arms.

As he walked Quentin unwound the little red-threaded clasp that held shut the manila envelope. He saw immediately that it wasn't his transcript, or an official document of any kind. The envelope held a notebook. It was old-looking, its corners squashed and rubbed till they were smooth and round, its cover foxed.

The first page, handwritten in ink, read:

The Magicians
Book Six of Fillory and Further

The ink had gone brown with age. *The Magicians* was not the name of any book by Christopher Plover that Quentin knew of. And any good nerd knew that there were only five books in the Fillory series.

When he turned the page a piece of white notepaper, folded over once, flew out and slipped away on the wind. It clung to a wrought-iron area fence for a second before the wind whipped it away again.

There was a community garden on the block, a triangular snippet of land too narrow and weirdly shaped to be snapped up by developers. With its ownership a black hole of legal ambiguity, it had been taken over years ago by a collective of enterprising neighbors who had trucked out the acid sand native to Brooklyn and replaced it with rich, fertile loam from upstate. For a while they'd raised pumpkins and tomatoes and spring bulbs and raked out little Japanese serenity gardens, but lately they'd neglected it, and hardy urban weeds had taken root instead. They were running riot and strangling their frailer, more exotic competitors. It was into this tangled thicket that the note flew and disappeared.

This late in the year all the plants were dead or dying, even the weeds, and Quentin waded into them hip-deep, dry stems catching on his pants, his leather shoes crunching brown broken glass. It crossed his mind that the note might just possibly contain the hot paramedic's phone number. The garden was narrow, but it went surprisingly far back. There were three or four sizable trees in it, and the further in he pushed, the darker and more overgrown it got.

He caught a glimpse of the note, up high, plastered against a trellis encrusted with dead vines. It could clear the back fence before he caught up with it. His phone rang: his dad. Quentin ignored it. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw something flit past behind the bracken, large and pale, but when he turned his head it was gone.

He pushed past the corpses of gladioli, petunias, shoulder-high sunflowers, rosebushes—brittle, stiff stems and flowers frozen in death into ornate toile patterns.

He would have thought he'd gone all the way through to Seventh Avenue by now. He shoved his way even deeper in, brushing up against who knew what toxic flora. A case of poison fucking ivy, that's all he needed now. It was odd to see that here and there among the dead plants a few vital green stalks still poked up, drawing sustenance from who knew where. He caught a whiff of something sweet in the air.

He stopped. All of a sudden it was quiet. No car horns, no stereos, no sirens. His phone had stopped ringing. It was bitter cold, and his fingers were numb. Turn back or go on? He squeezed farther in through a hedge, closing his eyes and squinching up his face against the scratchy twigs. He stumbled over something, an old stone. He felt suddenly nauseous. He was sweating.

When he opened his eyes again he was standing on the edge of a huge, wide, perfectly level green lawn surrounded by trees. The smell of ripe grass was overpowering. There was hot sun on his face.

The sun was at the wrong angle. And where the hell were the clouds? The sky was a blinding blue. His inner ear spun sickeningly. He held his breath for a few seconds, then expelled freezing winter air from his lungs and breathed in warm summer air in its place. It was thick with floating pollen. He sneezed.

In the middle distance beyond the wide lawn a large house stood, all honey-colored stone and gray slate, adorned with chimneys and gables and towers and roofs and sub-roofs. In the center, over the main house, was a tall, stately clock tower that struck even Quentin as an odd addition to what otherwise looked like a private residence. The clock was in the Venetian style: a single barbed hand circling a face with twenty-four hours marked on it in

Roman numerals. Over one wing rose what looked like the green oxidized-copper dome of an observatory. Between house and lawn was a series of inviting landscaped terraces and spinneys and hedges and fountains.

Quentin was pretty sure that if he stood very still for a few seconds everything would snap back to normal. He wondered if he was undergoing some dire neurological event. He looked cautiously back over his shoulder. There was no sign of the garden behind him, just some big leafy oak trees, the advance guard of what looked like a pretty serious forest. A rill of sweat ran down his rib cage from his left armpit. It was hot.

Quentin dropped his bag on the turf and shrugged out of his overcoat. A bird chirped languidly in the silence. Fifty feet away a tall, skinny teenager was leaning against a tree, smoking a cigarette and watching him.

He looked about Quentin's age. He wore a button-down shirt with a sharp collar and very thin, very pale pink stripes. He didn't look at Quentin, just dragged on his cigarette and exhaled into the summer air. The heat didn't seem to bother him.

"Hey," Quentin called.

Now he looked over. He raised his chin at Quentin, once, but didn't answer.

Quentin walked over, as nonchalantly as he could. He really didn't want to look like somebody who had no idea what was going on. Even without his coat on he was sweating like a bastard. He felt like an overdressed English explorer trying to impress a skeptical tropical native. But there was something he had to ask.

"Is this—?" Quentin cleared his throat. "So is this Fillory?" He squinted against the bright sun.

The young man looked at Quentin very seriously. He took another long drag on his cigarette; then he shook his head slowly, blowing out the smoke.

"Nope," he said. "Upstate New York."

BRAKEBILLS

HE DIDN'T LAUGH. Quentin would appreciate that later.

"Upstate?" Quentin said. "What, like Vassar?"

"I saw you come through," the young man said. "Come on, you need to go up to the House."

He snapped the cigarette away and set off across the wide lawn. He didn't look back to see if Quentin was following, which at first Quentin didn't, but then a sudden fear of being left alone in this place got him moving and he trotted to catch up.

The green was enormous, the size of half a dozen football fields. It seemed to take them forever to get across it. The sun beat on the back of Quentin's neck.

"So what's your name?" the young man asked, in a tone that made sure that Quentin knew that he had no interest in the answer.

"Quentin."

"Charming. From?"

"Brooklyn."

"How old?"

"Seventeen."

"I'm Eliot. Don't tell me anything else: I don't want to know. Don't want to get attached."

Quentin had to take a couple of double-time steps to keep up with Eliot. There was something off about Eliot's face. His posture was very straight, but his mouth was twisted to one side, in a permanent half grimace that revealed a nest of teeth sticking both in and out at

improbable angles. He looked like a child who had been slightly misdelivered, with some subpar forceps handling by the attending.

But despite his odd appearance Eliot had an air of effortless self-possession that made Quentin urgently want to be his friend, or maybe just be him period. He was obviously one of those people who felt at home in the world—he was naturally buoyant, where Quentin felt like he had to dog-paddle constantly, exhaustingly, humiliatingly, just to get one sip of air.

“So what is this place?” Quentin asked. “Do you live here?”

“You mean here at Brakebills?” he said airily. “Yes, I guess I do.” They had reached the far side of the grass. “If you can call it living.”

Eliot led Quentin through a gap in a tall hedge and into a leafy, shadowy labyrinth. The bushes had been trimmed precisely into narrow, branching, fractally ramifying corridors that periodically opened out onto small shady alcoves and courtyards. The shrubbery was so dense that no light penetrated through it, but here and there a heavy yellow stripe of sun fell across the path from above. They passed a plashing fountain here, a somber, rain-ravaged white stone statue there.

It was a good five minutes before they stepped out of the maze, through an opening flanked by two towering topiary bears reared up on their hind legs, onto a stone terrace in the shadow of the large house Quentin had seen from a distance. A breeze made one of the tall, leafy bears seem to turn its head slightly in his direction.

“The Dean will probably be down to get you in another minute,” Eliot said. “Here’s my advice. Sit there”—he pointed to a weathered stone bench, like he was telling an overly affectionate dog to stay—“and try to look like you belong here. And if you tell him you saw me smoking, I will banish you to the lowest circle of hell. I’ve never been

there, but if even half of what I hear is true it's almost as bad as Brooklyn."

Eliot disappeared back into the hedge maze, and Quentin sat down obediently on the bench. He stared down between his shiny black interview shoes at the gray stone tiles, his backpack and his overcoat in his lap. This is impossible, he thought lucidly; he thought the words in his mind, but they got no purchase on the world around him. He felt like he was having a not-unpleasant drug experience. The tiles were intricately carved with a pattern of twiny vines, or possibly elaborately calligraphic words that had been worn away into illegibility. Little motes and seeds drifted around in the sunlight. If this is a hallucination, he thought, it's pretty damn hi-res.

The silence was the strangest part of it. As hard as he listened he couldn't hear a single car. It felt like he was in a movie where the soundtrack had abruptly cut out.

A pair of French doors rattled a few times and then opened. A tall, fat man wearing a seersucker suit strode out onto the terrace.

"Good afternoon," he said. "You would be Quentin Coldwater."

He spoke very correctly, as if he wished he had an English accent but wasn't quite pretentious enough to affect one. He had a mild, open face and thin blond hair.

"Yes, sir." Quentin had never called an adult—or anybody else—sir in his life, but it suddenly felt appropriate.

"Welcome to Brakebills College," the man said. "I suppose you've heard of us?"

"Actually no," Quentin said.

"Well, you've been offered a Preliminary Examination here. Do you accept?"

Quentin didn't know what to say. This wasn't one of the questions he'd prepped for when he got up this morning.