

Chapter 1

Les Halles

There was this restaurant off Park Avenue that reopened sometime after The Blue Summer, dried out of booze and tartines and French things the rich ate in those days and converted to accommodate the after-school tween kids who got picked up late. Coffee and pastries and little workspace nooks and whatnot. *Les Halles*. A name from long ago resurrected as an unserious café lacking the gloss of adulthood. But trying. To be serious, that is. To capture some semblance of what it once was with a brighter, more efficient—not efficient exactly, but purposeful—role in 2045 New York City life. The past be damned. Who in God’s name had the time? The future was king.

Kushner sat on a high-back swivel chair at the brass and mahogany bar, a restored relic this new clientele would never, could never, appreciate, his backpack slung by one strap over a hook attached to the underside of the bartop. No longer tending to his homework (which he had finished, incidentally, over a half hour ago), he stole intermittent glances at the auburn-haired girl beside him. Another 13-year-old. Probably. Most of the kids who remained at Les Halles this late on a Thursday, now pushing five in the evening, were middle graders. And besides, she was doing upper-level math a notch above what 6th and 7th graders were learning. And not very well, as the erasure marks, nearly rubbing a hole in the scratch paper, proved to Kushner. She’d write a formula, input the answer on her mobile screen, see a blur of red corrections, and return to her scratch paper, trying to find the error by hand. Why she was using a pencil and paper at all was amusing, at best. Embarrassing, at worst. Kushner found it quaint. A throwback from an old soul,

Commented [ED4]: I already love this narrator. The coherent rambling is a GREAT juxtaposition with such fancy French Things.

Commented [ED5]: Why is this striking such a good chord? I don’t know but tells me you KNOW this narrator’s voice and you’re leaning into it. I have never read this sentence or anything like it in my life. That doesn’t happen a lot so whatever you were doing with this first paragraph KEEP TRUSTING THOSE INSTINCTS. FOLLOW THAT NARRATOR.

Commented [ED6]: I was just pushed out of this story given the timelines and raw emotion associated with one “Jared Kushner”. Not a deal breaker but did interrupt my reading flow. If that is intentional—GREAT! If not, a name change is an easy fix. Heck, Even Kutcher. Or Kilch.

Commented [ED7]: I was JUST about to say that I had no idea how old Kushner is yet, but I need to know sooner, because RIGHT HERE it sounds like Kushner IS one of those 13 year olds. So if he’s not, the semantics would need clarification.

Commented [ED8R7]: That could be as simple as the narrator saying something like: “Not only 13 year old. Those rugrats were everywhere” which positions Kushner as an adult.

But if Kushner is a tween, that clarification could look like “Another 13 year old. Probably in the class ahead of him.” which positions him as a tween, etc.

which, let's be frank, meant she'd be a real slog to talk to. Someone who bought vinyl and actually listened to it.

"Hey," he said.

Either she didn't hear, or ignored him. Likely the former. Math is hard.

She laid her head on the bartop, defeated, facing the back café wall away from Kushner.

"Hey. Miss?"

Miss?

The girl flipped her head in his direction, still laid down, peeking at him half through her now-empty coffee glass, which her sister would reprimand her for later. She wasn't allowed coffee on weekdays, let alone weekday evenings.

"Yeah?" she said, curiosity piqued but unenthused.

"What's your name?"

"What's my *name*?"

He nodded. Was she hard of hearing? Like a lot of the kids in his grade? A Blue Summer side-effect some parents passed down to their children?

"Orla?" she said.

A question. Not about her name, she knew her name, but about the surprise—the audacity!—of someone talking to her at Les Halles. Where if you were a kid entrenched in homework, no one bothered you. If you were a kid by yourself, no one bothered you. If you were a kid whose friends hadn't been picked up yet, no one bothered you (because you were with your friends). This was downright impolite.

"Orla," he echoed, with more flair than her monotone. "Do you go to Colbert?"

"Saint Philomena."

Commented [ED9]: This is getting really vovyer-y and pedofile-adjascent. If that's what you're going for. GREAT! If not, the narrator may be going a little too deep in the weeds for Kushner's POV. PULL BACK!

Commented [ED10]: POV JUMP: The narrator just slipped OUT of Kushner's POV into this 13 year old girl's. Dual POV can work great, but a rule of thumb is to stick with ONE character's POV for at least an entire scene, if not chapter.

Otherwise—revise to filter the narration through HIM again.

Commented [ED11]: Okay so IS HE A KID??? The narrator does NOT sound like they are talking about a kid which throws me off because now I need to go back and re-read with Kushner as a KID in my head.

Commented [ED12]: OKAY I AM INTRIGUED - I already know I want to keep reading to find out WHAT this is!

Commented [ED13]: Perfect.

Commented [ED14]: Correct, but not needed. Her tone, annoyance AND curiosity have already been shown so well.

Commented [ED15]: POV jump

“Oh. Wow. Saint Phil’s.”

“Saint *Philomena*.”

Commented [ED16]: LOL I love that she is not having it.

“I know a lot of the girls there. The nuns are cool.”

Commented [ED17]: LOL omg this is an amazing line.

He nodded to himself. To her? As if processing profound information.

“So can I walk you to school on Monday?”

Commented [ED18]: Ew. Creepy vibes. This went from 0 to stalker really quickly

Orla lifted her head as if it weighed a billion pounds and narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t sure, but was almost sure, she had never seen this boy before, and if she had, it was only in passing. Likely here, at Les Halles. Short, curly brown hair. Bold green eyes. Someone who would blend in with any of the million kids in the city, until he spoke to you. Few spoke to Orla with such bravado, such confidence. And, well, few spoke to Orla at all in those days.

Commented [ED19]: POV Jump AND Info-dumping. This is great behind-the-scenes info that you, Matt, the Author need to know. But it’s interrupting the play by play flow. Also—it’s kind of redundant because I already had a picture of her in my head.

“You can give me a guest clearance to walk with you. They have guest passes at Saint Phil’s, right?”

Commented [ED20]: Oh, I really need her to keep correcting him here. “Saint PHIL-OH-MEEN-UHS”

“Of course they do.”

“So can I?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t *know* you.”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry.” As if he had gone off-script, embarrassed for fumbling lines, he adjusted himself in his seat to face her directly, shoulders back. That singular bravado brimming. “So I’m Kushner Petit. Well, my friends call me Kushner, so I call myself Kushner. I go to Colbert. I’m in 7th grade. I live in Murray Hill with my parents. My real parents. We used to live in a walk-up but they just put in an elevator, and it’s stupid, it breaks down most of the time.

Commented [ED21]: Oh this is such a great name for a pedo. Please don’t tell me that he is one.

And . . .oh, my mom and dad own the Tropicana theater downtown. They work a lot. Mostly weekends.”

Orla gaped at him, open-mouthed. What an incredibly dull biography and a humble brag about his still-living parents, but expected. He was 13. Interesting things hadn’t happened to him yet.

“Do you know anything about bivariate measurements and how coincidences can be explained by data analysis?”

“I . . . do I what?”

Orla Dane. Saint Philomena. Student number 1-9-4-6.

The woman’s voice from the corner speakers saved Kushner from having to answer (he didn’t, for the record, know anything about bivariate data analysis and how coincidences could be explained by data analysis).

“I gotta go.”

With the speed of someone who’s packed up quickly many, many times at Les Halles, she gathered her things, zipped her backpack—more of a crossbody bag with her initials stitched on the front in multi-colored letters (it was a Christmas gift and very cute)—and hopped off her stool, signing her name on the digital device the server presented. She checked out of Les Halles and left the barista a \$5 tip. Though her and her sister were not wealthy anymore, by any stretch of Manhattan imaginations, Orla often over-tipped.

Good talking to him? A big waste of time and awkward espresso-laden energy? Orla couldn’t decide.

“Take care at Colbert.”

Commented [ED22]: This is good. And it could be great. Let him keep going down that rabbit hole. Let him tell her about the Tropicana. And why the bought it from that old guy who’s mother had a parrot who would always scream like children unless you gave it Cheetos but Kushner is allergic to cheese so he never had any and hey do you like riding bikes?

Commented [ED23]: No needed: “gaped” said it beautifully.

Commented [ED24]: POV jump

Commented [ED25]: ASS QUEEN. This is glorious.

Commented [ED26]: 100% love this snarky narrator. He’s talking about Kushner as if he’s his annoying little step-brother.

Commented [ED27]: POV jump

Commented [ED28]: POV jump

Commented [ED29]: POV jump. Note for ALL of the POV jumps: Unless otherwise indicated as “infodumping” the content, details, and information are great. You’ll just need to shift the POV back to Kushner. Simple as “It looked as though Orla couldn’t decide. Or even if she had, Kushner would have gone on an overthinking binge anyway.”

And she left in a flurry, cutting through the noisier central lounge and dodging the outstretched legs of a group of sophomore boys playing a card game, collectively, on their phone.

Commented [ED30]: POV JUMP - delete this ESPECIALLY because the narrator tells us in the next sentence that he's not even watching her at this moment.

Kushner didn't watch her go. Too focused on writing something in a small brown mock leather notebook, maybe moleskin, he had tucked in his inner jacket pocket. Also by hand. He was a bit quaint himself.

Commented [ED31]: Nice. Like an incompetent hockey announcer.

Orla knew this because she snuck a final glance, tripping over the persian entryway rug in the process, before exiting Les Halles and meeting her sister at curbside pickup.

Commented [ED32]: POV jump. Just give her her own chapter already!

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Commented [ED33]: NICE....THIS Can be Orla's time to shine! I'm guessing this is a scene break. GREAT. Now give the narrator ORLA-GLASSES to look through.

On the walk home, a paltry 35 blocks but at the height of rush hour pickup pedestrian traffic, Orla's sister Millie ticked off the boxes of her usual end-of-day question list.

Commented [ED34]: What the heck? Why does Millie get a spotlight here! I WANT ORLA!

How was school?

The narrator seems to REALLY want to tell ORLA'S side of this story as well as Kushner's so there are a few options here.

What did the nuns have to say?

If this is a DUAL-POV story, give Kushner and Orla alternating chapters.

What did Orla's friends have to say?

What's happening tomorrow?

If this is a MULTI-POV story. Give each character their own chapter in whatever order you like JUST SO LONG AS THERE IS A SUBTITLE TELLING THE READER WHO'S POV IT IS. If Michael Crichton can do it, so can you.

And what did Orla have for lunch (Saint Philomena had opened a new cafeteria that

rivalled most fine dining in the city, and Millie was jealous)?

Orla, an expert in the art of fielding questions, rattled off each in timely fashion—

Good. But math is confusing and makes no sense.

Sister Haddie was out last week with a stomach bug.

Nothing worth mentioning.

Tomorrow? Friday is seafood skewers in the cafeteria. Finally.

Sister Kate snuck in gelato from across the street. It tasted like mint toothpaste. But pretty good. If you like mint toothpaste.

—without missing a beat while dodging other kids on the way home with their guardians, or, for the lucky spaterrings here and there, their biological parents.

(For those who aren't students of history, a second, please, of exposition: at this time, in 2045, until the law was abruptly changed thanks to the unintentional actions of an accidental martyr—the national news it made. . . .—no child under the age of 17 was allowed in public spaces without a legal guardian, parent, or Certified Chaperone®, with the punishment so ostentatiously severe the perpetrators would have no choice but to move out of state to some other godforsaken city that would allow them residency. Like New Jersey. Or worse, Connetcicut. Excluding transfer to other states—California, Illinois, Texas, and some others I've forgotten—with similar mandates.)

They hadn't gone more than a block before Millie questioned Orla on her brevity. No long ramblings on the minutiae of the day? Was Orla sick? Had she caught Sister Haddie's stomach bug? Orla confirmed she was not, at all, sick. Just distracted.

[...]

changes like fashion and falls out of style every so often. Orla deliberated on this idea for another 10 blocks, boots silently crunching over wet leaves, before deciding Millie was wrong. Despite her age, 12 years Orla's senior at 25, Millie knew so much less about the world around her, according to Orla. It took another three blocks to convince herself she didn't really believe that at all—

Until they turned a final corner and found themselves home.

Commented [ED35]: I am trash for footnotes. If your Narrator is going to do this. Start it sooner. Like PAGE TWO sooner. See Johnathan Stroud's GOLEM series for how this looks and sounds. The unreliable narrator goes on delightful rants and tangents in the footnotes. It's outstanding. And feels a lot like this. I LOVE THIS.

Commented [ED36]: I'm finding myself scanning the upcoming paragraphs to get BACK to Orla's POV. Keep this as HER chapter....but she can be super obsessive about what her big sister might be thinking—and the Narrator would know that.

The once very tony residence of Viktor and Georgia Dane, until their disappearance in 2037 on Orla's fifth birthday. Millie asserted for a long time that when Orla was of proper age she would divulge the details of what happened, why they left, and why they wouldn't return. But over the years, it mattered less and less to Orla.

Commented [ED37]: Backstory. Interesting, but YOU THE AUTHOR need to know this. We don't.

The 19th century house was divided into separate units a few years back, and a couple rented the other half from Millie at a damn steal. Many had fled the city a decade ago, and while many more returned, the era of high real estate in Manhattan had ended. The rent allowed Millie to support her and Orla in what was still a cost-prohibitive neighborhood, without forcing Millie to find work out of state, somewhere like Virginia or DC, where the job market flourished and would continue to flourish for decades. She was satisfied working at Macy's six days a week in the men's department (suits and shoes, 4th floor) and wouldn't trade it for a bigger house and simpler lifestyle outside of Manhattan.

Commented [ED38]: Backstory/infodump

Detached, emotionally, as they were from one another some days, on this they agreed.

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Like every night, save weekends when they dined out, Millie and Orla ate dinner in the living room watching opera on ArtStation, the only streaming subscription they kept besides Netflix, which they rarely watched unless they were in a rare mood of reality show background noise. Or take a tour of some international gallery they'd never visited, or hadn't visited in a while, on the Oculus. Millie would read romance books. Orla would claim to read and instead draw in her notebook alone in her room, albeit she wasn't very good at art. A consumer, not a creator. Or, for at least an hour a night, text her group thread so she was up-to-speed on the ever-

changing drama of middle school. She couldn't recall a time when there was peace in the kingdom of Saint Philomena's.

Commented [ED39]: Backstory/infodump. Nicely written, not needed.

Millie had gone to sleep to wake up earlier than usual and cover the opening shift at Macy's.

Commented [ED40]: This seems to be the end of Millie's POV jump—so delete this, OR re-write from ORLA-VIEW. Millie can have her own book. I want more Orla.

Again, He promised he wouldn't dare light another cigarette anywhere near the building.

Commented [ED41]: LOL. She's like a blend of Hermoine and Paris Gellar.

He would break this promise often. Orla thought he would die from lung disease sooner than later and was ballsy enough to tell him so that evening. Mr. Dykes liked that. "History loves honest children." Orla would confide in acquaintances more so than friends, and Mr. Dykes was no exception. She told him she had two shots of espresso that evening, one with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, and that she'd never get to sleep, and that she likened it to smoking two packs a day. "Can you be addicted to coffee?" Mr. Dykes guessed you could, and branded Orla a hopeless addict. She took this to heart and understood then why he'd never keep his promise to quit smoking.

Commented [ED42]: Infodump. AND redundant because her actions and dialogue kind of already hinted at this. Trust your readers to trust your narrator.

They talked—well, Mr. Dykes talked—for upwards of an hour. Orla didn't interrupt nor gracefully exit the conversation. Didn't so much as make a paltry excuse or a dramatic "I must hurry along or my pot will simply boil over!"

Commented [ED43]: I am here for this narration. When I'm nodding, but losing focus in a conversation this is legit where my mind goes and what it sounds like. Nicely done.

So they sat on the outdoor steps (Orla careful to stay on the grounds inside the gate; the Guardian Patrols were lenient if you drifted a few yards off-property, but would still give you a very expensive ticket for the sake of giving you a very expensive ticket).

Commented [ED44]: AWESOME WORLD BUILDING. These asides from the narrator are GOLD. Especially when they are consistent with whose POV it is, like this.