

PROPHET
OF
BONES

A NOVEL

TED

KOSMATKA

PART I

*If this is the best of all possible worlds,
what are the others like?*

—VOLTAIRE

The Prophet set his nine-millimeter on the kitchen counter.

He leaned forward, bleeding hard into the sink, the only sound a rhythmic tap of blood on stainless steel. The blood struck in little dime-sized drops, bright red, gathering into a pool on the metallic surface. He hit the knob with the back of his hand and cold water swirled down the drain.

Behind him, feet crunched on spent shell casings as two men entered the room.

“My disciples,” the Prophet said. He did not turn. “I knew you’d find me here.”

But his disciples, for their part, remained silent. They pulled chairs out from the table and sat. They cocked their weapons. First one, then the other, making a point of it.

Somewhere in the house a TV blared daytime talk, or something like it—intermittent applause, and a deep male voice saying, *She a damn lie, that baby don’t look nothing like me*, and the crowd hooting and hollering its approval.

The Prophet splashed cold water on his face, trying to clear the blood from his eyes. Head wounds bled like a bitch. They always looked worse than they were. *Well, not always*, he thought. He remembered the guard

at the lab and clenched his eyes shut, willing the image away. Sometimes head wounds were exactly as bad as they looked. Sometimes they fucking killed you.

The Prophet peeled loose his tattered white sweatshirt, revealing a torso lean, and dark, and scarred. Tattoos swarmed up both arms to his shoulders—gang symbols across his deltoids, a crucifix in the center of his chest. He wiped his face, and the shirt came away red. The Prophet was not a big man, but wiry muscle bunched and corded beneath his skin when he tossed his stained shirt across the room. He was twenty years old or a thousand, depending on who you asked. Who you believed.

The Prophet turned and regarded his faithful. A smile crept to his lips. “You look like you could use a beer.”

He walked to where the dead woman lay against the refrigerator. He kicked her body out of the way enough to open the door. Glass bottles clinked. “All they have is Miller,” he said, a kind of apology. Blood trailed across the yellow linoleum. Not his blood, he noted. Not this time. He carried three beers back to the table and collapsed into a chair.

His faithful did not smile. They did not reach for their beers. They sat in their dark suits and black sunglasses; they sat perfectly still and watched him. The first was young, blond, baby-faced. A white scar ran diagonally across his upper lip where a cleft lip had been surgically corrected in childhood. If anything, the scar made him more boyish. The one imperfection in an otherwise perfect face. He held his gun casually, arm resting on the table. His white shirt collar was open at the neck, black tie loosened. The second man was older, darker—all jaw, chin, and shoulders. The hired muscle of the pair. But Babyface was still the one to watch. The Prophet knew this at a glance.

“What’s your name?” he asked the blond.

“Does it matter?” the blond answered.

The Prophet shook his head. “I guess not.” Babyface was right after all. In heaven there would be no need for names, for all are known to the eyes of God.

“We’ve been looking for you for a long time, Manuel,” Babyface said.

The Prophet leaned back in his chair and took a long swig of beer. He spread his hands. “My followers,” he said. “You have found me.”

“You’ve cost a lot of money,” the blond continued. “Which is some-

thing our employer could forgive.” He took off his sunglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He looked up, and his eyes were a bright baby blue. “But you’ve also caused a lot of trouble, which is something he cannot.”

“I never asked forgiveness.”

“Then we’re agreed on the issue. None asked. None given.” The man’s pale eyes bore into him. He leaned across the table, pitching his voice low. “Tell me something, Manuel, just out of curiosity, between you and me, before this thing goes the way it’s gonna go—what the fuck were you thinking?”

The Prophet wiped a runnel of blood from his face. “I was called for this. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, I suspect you got that right.”

The Prophet sipped his beer.

“So then where is it?” Babyface snapped, seeming to lose patience.

The Prophet didn’t answer.

“Come on, Manuel. We came such a long way. Don’t give us the silent treatment now.” He tapped the muzzle of the gun on the table.

“Our most holy is resting.”

“Most holy?” Babyface laughed and shook his head. “You know, I thought that most holy bullshit was a joke when they told me.” He turned to his partner. “You hear this shit?”

But the muscle only stared, jaw clenched tight. Babyface turned back around. “Or maybe this is all just some game you’re playing. Some elaborate con that didn’t work out the way you wanted. I heard you’re one to play games.”

“No game,” the Prophet said.

“So you believe it?”

“I do.”

“Then you’re out of your mind after all.”

The TV droned on, filling the silence, the deep male voice cohering again from out of the background noise—*I told you she was lying about it. I told you.*

“Where is it?”

The Prophet lowered his eyes. “I laid him upstairs on the bed. It’s peaceful up there.”

Babyface nodded to his partner. The second man stood. “You don’t

mind if we check, do you?" Babyface asked. The second man turned and disappeared up the stairs, taking them two at a time. His footfalls crossed heavily above them as he moved from room to room.

Babyface stared from across the table, his blue eyes deep and expressionless. The gun never wavered, held casually in a soft, pale hand.

The footfalls stopped.

The Prophet took another long pull from his beer. "I fed him every three hours, just like I was supposed to."

"And did it matter?"

The Prophet didn't respond. In the distance, the TV broke into applause again. Theme music, end of show. The footfalls crossed above them, slower this time, coming down the stairs. A moment later, the second man was back, carrying a dark form wrapped in a blanket. The bundle didn't move.

The blond man flashed his muscle a questioning look.

"It's dead," the big man said. "It's been dead."

The blond turned to him. "It's not your fault, Manuel," he said. "Most of them die in the first few weeks. Sometimes their mothers eat them."

The Prophet smiled. "He will rise again."

"Perhaps he will," Babyface said. "But I'd like to see that trick." He raised his gun.

The Prophet took a final, cool swallow, finishing his beer. Blood dripped from his forehead and fell to the stained Formica table. He glanced around the room and shook his head. He saw broken dishes, stained wooden cabinets, dirty yellow linoleum. He looked at the dead woman, resolute in her silence. "Nothing good will come of this," he prophesied.

"That's where you're wrong," the blond man said. He smiled, and the old surgical scar curled his lip slightly. "This part will make me feel a whole lot better."

"Though you strike me down, there will be other prophets after me. I won't be the last."

The muscle placed the body on the table, and the blanket opened at one end. A small, dark arm swung free of the blanket—a tiny distorted hand. A hand not quite human.

“I’ve got a secret for you,” Babyface said. “God hates His prophets. Always has.”

“God cannot hate.”

“That’s blasphemy,” the blond man said. He lifted the gun to Manuel’s face. “God is capable of all things.”

He pulled the trigger.

Paul liked playing God in the attic above his family garage.

That's what his father called it, playing God, the day he found out. That's what he called it the day he smashed it all down.

Paul built the cages out of discarded two-by-fours he'd found under the deck and quarter-inch mesh he bought from the local hardware store. He gathered small scraps of carpet, odds and ends of plywood, a bent metal bracket that used to belong to his mother's old sewing machine table.

Paul drew the plans out carefully on graph paper during the last week of school.

Two weeks into summer break, his father left town to speak at a scientific conference. "Be good while I'm gone," he father warned him as they stood in the foyer. "Keep studying your verses."

"I will."

Paul watched from the window as the long black car backed down the driveway.

Because he wasn't old enough to use his father's power tools, he had to use a handsaw to cut the wood for the cages. He used his mother's sturdy black scissors to snip the wire mesh. He borrowed hinges from old cabinet doors, and nails from the rusty coffee can that hung over his father's unused workbench.

That evening his mother heard the hammering and came out to the garage.

“What are you doing up there?” She spoke in careful English, peering up at the rectangle of light that spilled down from the attic.

Paul stuck his head through the opening, all spiky black hair and sawdust. “Nothing.”

“You’re doing something; I can hear you.”

“I’m just playing around with some tools,” he said. Which was, in some sense, true. He couldn’t lie to his mother. Not directly.

“Which tools?”

“Just a hammer and some nails.”

She stared up at him, her delicate face a broken Chinese doll—pieces of porcelain reglued subtly out of alignment.

“Be careful,” she said, and he understood that she was talking both about the tools and about his father.

The days turned into weeks as Paul worked on the cages. The summer wore on, Lake Michigan humidity cloaking the region like a veil. Because the wood was big, he built the cages big—less cutting that way. The cages were enormous, overengineered structures, ridiculously outsized for the animals they’d be holding. They weren’t mouse cages so much as mouse cities—huge tabletop-sized enclosures that could have housed border collies. He spent most of his paper-route money on the project, buying odds and ends he needed: sheets of Plexiglas, plastic water bottles, and small dowels of wood he used for door latches. While the other children in the neighborhood played basketball or wittedandu, Paul worked on his project.

He bought tiny exercise wheels and cedar chip bedding. He pictured in his head how it would be once he finished: a mouse metropolis. Rodent utopia. The mice themselves he bought from a pet store near his paper route. Most were white feeder mice used for snakes, but a couple were of the more colorful, fancy variety. And there were even a few English mice—sleek, long-bodied show mice with big tulip ears and glossy coats that felt slick under his fingers. He wanted a diverse population, so he was careful to buy different kinds.

The woman at the pet store always smiled at him when he came in. She was in her sixties, with bright, bottle-red hair and a pleasant, chubby face. A bell above the door would ring as he stepped inside the shop, and then he'd walk to the back, bend low, and stare through the glass at all the mice for sale. He'd tap his finger on the glass. "That one," he'd say. "And that one over there—the brown one in the corner grooming itself."

"Those are good ones," she always said, no matter which mice he picked. "Those are good ones."

Then the woman would pop the lid and reach inside the cage while the mice ran in berserk little circles to avoid being caught. Catching the mice wasn't easy. Paul understood their fear. For most of them, when that hand came down, it meant death. It meant they were about to join the food chain. He wondered if they sensed this, if they sensed anything at all. He wondered if they thought the hand was the hand of God.

"It's okay," he whispered to them, willing them to be still. "Not this time."

The woman put the mice in little cardboard travel boxes so he could carry them home in his paper-route bag. Later in the evening, when no one was watching, he snuck them up to the attic.

While he worked on their permanent homes, he kept his mice in little glass aquariums stacked on a table in the middle of the room. He fed them scraps of food he stole from the dinner table—chunks of buttered bread, green beans, and Ritz crackers. During the last weeks of summer break, Paul stood back and surveyed all he'd created. It was good. The finished cages were huge, beautiful habitats. He'd heard that word, "habitats," when doing research about zoos. Paul understood that his cages weren't *natural* habitats; they didn't have plants and rocks inside them. But *Mus musculus* wasn't a natural animal, not really. Maybe for a mouse, a habitat didn't have to look like nature. Maybe it looked like this.

In the attic, Paul opened the lids on the aquariums and released his mice into their new enclosures one by one. The mice advanced cautiously, sniffing the air—the first explorers on a new continent.

That afternoon, to mark the occasion, he set out on his bike to the local grocery store, where he bought a head of lettuce as a treat for the mice. He brought along his pad of graph paper, stuffed into his

paper-route bag, and on the way back stopped at a park a few blocks from his house. The late afternoon sun slanted through the trees. The park was mostly empty. A few older kids hung out on the bleachers near the tennis courts. Kids his own age played near the swings.

Paul looked down at his graph paper and studied his designs. Already he could see ways in which the habitats might be improved. He put pencil to paper, bent over his work, and so didn't hear the footsteps behind him.

"What you doing?" The voice came from directly behind him.

Paul turned. It was Josh, a kid from his school, two grades older.

"I said, what you got there?"

"Nothing," Paul said. He knew Josh well. Knew his tactics from the schoolyard, all smiles and friendly until it turned bad.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me. Let's see."

Josh grabbed for the notebook and Paul jerked it away.

"Leave me alone."

The older boy slammed the pad out of Paul's hand and then kicked it, scattering the pages across the ground. He laughed. "I didn't really want to see it anyway," he said, and walked off.

Paul bent to pick up his drawings. The pad had split apart, and the papers were drifting away in the wind. On the bleachers, one of the older kids cackled. Paul had nearly gathered the last of his drawings when a sudden gust carried the final sheet toward the swings.

A narrow, sandaled foot came down on the paper, catching it.

"That guy is *such* a jerk," came a female voice.

Paul looked up from the sandal. A girl from the neighborhood. He'd seen her around but had never spoken to her. She didn't go to his school. He could tell by her long hair and dress that she went to Nearhaven. You could almost always tell Nearhaven kids that way. Just as they could tell the pubbies. And there beside her, on the swing, was a small boy. She bent, picked up the paper, and handed it to Paul.

"Thanks," he told her.

"You're as big as him. Why'd you let him do that?"

Paul shrugged. "He's older."

"I'm Rebecca, and this is my cousin Brian."

"Paul."

Rebecca turned and looked toward the bleachers. “We should go,” she said. Josh was talking to the bleacher group now, glancing meaningfully in their direction.

Paul followed Rebecca and her cousin out of the park, riding his bike slowly as they walked beside him. The cousin, it turned out, was a quiet, gap-toothed boy of seven who was staying with Rebecca’s family for summer break. Paul had no cousins, and he felt a momentary pang of jealousy. He had no family other than his parents.

When they arrived at her house, he was shocked to find how close she lived. On the other side of the street, one block down.

“We’re practically neighbors,” he told her.

Paul rode his bike up her driveway. The screen door squeaked as she opened it, but she didn’t step inside.

“Those papers,” she said. “What were you drawing?”

For a moment, Paul wasn’t sure how to answer. She must have sensed the hesitation. “You don’t have to say if you don’t want to,” she added.

Her saying that made it possible. So he told her.

“What do you mean, ‘cages’?” she asked. She let the screen door close and sat on the stoop.

He pulled the pad from his paper-route bag. “Here,” he said.

Rebecca took the papers, and her cousin leaned close.

“Construction plans, I guess you’d call them,” Paul said.

She flipped to the next sheet. This one showed his largest cage, drawn out in intricate detail.

“You built this?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t that hard.”

“It looks hard to me. Where is it?”

“In the attic over my garage.”

“Can we see?”

Paul glanced in the direction of his house. “No, I better not.”

Rebecca flipped the page and studied the final drawing carefully. “It must have taken you a long time to put all this together.”

“Months.”

“What are they for? I mean, if these are cages, what’s supposed to go inside?”

“Mice.”

She nodded to herself. “Mice,” she repeated under her breath, as if it made perfect sense. “Where’d you get the stuff? All the wood and nails.”

Paul shrugged. “Here and there. Just scraps, mostly. Other stuff I had to buy.”

The little cousin finally spoke: “My parents don’t let me have pets.”

“Neither do mine,” Paul said. “But anyway, the mice aren’t pets.”

“Then what are they?” the boy asked. He stared over his cousin’s shoulder at the drawings.

“A project,” Paul said.

“What kind of project?”

Paul looked at the graph paper. “I’m still working on that.”

The bell rang at two thirty-five.

By two forty-nine, school bus No. 32 was freighted with its raucous cargo and pulling out of the parking lot, headed for the highway and points south and east.

Paul sat near the back and stared out the window, watching the Grand Kankakee Marsh scroll by. Around him, the other kids talked and laughed, but only Paul sat silently, fidgeting with the large blue textbook on his lap, waiting for the road to smooth out so that he could read. As they crossed the bridge, he finally opened his life sciences book.

Today Mr. Slocam had gone over the study guide for the test.

Figure 73 showed two ellipses graphed like a crooked half-smile between an x- and a y-axis. The caption explained that the first slope represented the number of daughter atoms. The second slope represented the parent atoms. The point of intersection of the two slopes was the element’s half-life.

“You will need to know this for the test,” the study guide declared in bold heading, followed by a series of bullet-pointed facts.

The study guides were always like this.

Need to know this for the test. The common refrain of the public schools, where academic bulimia was the order of the day—and tests simple exercises in regurgitation. Paul knew the drill.

The bus made several stops before finally pulling to rest in front of his house. Paul climbed out.

His father was out of town again, at another scientific conference; so dinner that evening was a quiet undertaking. Later that night he went up to his room and copied his study guide onto a series of flash cards. Just before bed, he found his mother in the kitchen. "Will you quiz me?"

"Of course." His mother's doll face shattered into a smile.

They sat at the dining room table, and his mother flipped the first card, on which was drawn two crooked lines on an x- and y-axis. "Describe the point of intersection," she said.

"It's an element's half-life."

"Good," she said, flipping to the next card. "When was radiometric dating invented?"

"In 1906."

"Which method?"

Paul thought for a moment. "They used helium as an intermediate decay product of uranium. The results were rejected for years."

"Rejected by whom?"

"By evolutionists."

"Good." She flipped to the next card. "In what year did Darwin write *On the Origin of Species*?"

"In 1859."

"When did Darwin's theory lose the confidence of the scientific community?"

"That was 1932." Anticipating the next question, Paul continued: "When Kohlhorster invented potassium-argon dating."

"Why was this important?"

"The new dating method proved the earth wasn't as old as the evolutionists thought."

"When was the theory of evolution finally debunked completely?"

"In 1954, when Willard F. Libby invented carbon-14 dating at the University of Chicago."

"Good," his mother said and flipped another card. "And why else was he known?"

"He won the Nobel Prize in 1960, when he used carbon dating to prove, once and for all, that the earth was fifty-eight hundred years old."

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