

# ANALECTA XVI

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## Wes Andersen

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### Let

She was stroking her forearms in front of Asian History.

Gerard stared from the end of the aisle. Her hair was cut short and tucked beneath a headband with blue printed hieroglyphs, four scarabs and a horse. He took one quick step (as if cutting open a snakebite) and said, "May I help you find something?" He balanced with his chin the top book of a stack to be shelved.

"I don't think so."

"Undecided?"

"Pretty much."

"Browsing and so forth?"

"Yeah."

"I see." His face turned white as he backed around the corner and strode down Travel. The belt on his apron (ankle-length and plaid) snapped in half. He stood, for a moment, at the end of the aisle, in a shadow, clutching his books, straps dangling. He set the stack on the floor and placed three Guides Rouges Damascus onto the shelf, face out. (The Middle East was sparse.) He knelt and grabbed a copy of *Let's Get to Those Falklands, Oscar*. He stared at author Oscar Orson Reed: a commando tourist in tortoise shell frames, breezing through customs with a jade-eyed idol in his camera bag. Gerard was inspired and instantly resolute. He tucked the book under his arm and crossed over into Asian History (sweeping his elbow dangerously close to a fragile display for Touch Me, Indonesia!). There was no one there and he walked to the back. He checked the magazine racks, stared down the center aisle, and began a sweep to the front. He took slow, even steps, scanning left and right without slowing down. He ignored a cold stare from a sprinting associate, who caught the phone on the sixth ring. And then there she was, standing among bestsellers, skimming jackets. Gerard pulled off his apron.

"Look," he said to her.

She looked and said, "Yes?"

He tied a plaid knot. "Wait a second."

She closed the book. She was waiting and Gerard was suddenly possessed of an image: he was tumbling over a balcony railing, sailing into space, head first and out of control. "OK. Never mind." His weight shifted into the heel of his left foot and he began to turn away. She touched his apron with her fingernails.

"Hold on." She grasped one of the broken straps. She shook her arm once at her side, throwing three metal bracelets from forearm to wrist. (They banged against bony knuckles.) "Say what you were going to say."

"Which is what?"

"I don't know."

Gerard glanced at her eyes and looked away. Several seconds passed (his gaze on *Trevino: A Portrait on the Green*) before he knew this: they were hazel. He shrugged: "I can't remember." Leaning slightly away from the girl, he shoved Oscar's book into a space between copies of *The Satanic Verses*.

*Gerard wakes up and sees the car in the rain. It's a Jaguar and water beads on the paint. The guy takes out his camera and goes into the house. The guy's name is Mitch and Gerard*

*remembers this scene from the nine-fifteen showing. He remembers disliking this scene. He remembers that he was on the verge of walking out of this movie and yet he is somehow still here. He rubs his eyes and looks at his watch. It's after one and there is a Twizzler stuck to his shirt. He picks up his Coke. The ice is melted. He steps into the aisle and staggers three steps. He walks quickly looking straight ahead and squinting. He stops at the door and watches for a second (the dog barks and Mitch blinds him with the flash) and then walks into the lobby. The ushers are relaxing behind the concessions stand. Gerard walks outside and sits on the curb. He watches some cars go by. He pushes his hair out of his eyes. He tugs his jacket tighter around his chest. He pulls the Twizzler off his sleeve and takes a bite.*

They were sitting in lawn chairs on the Book Stash loading dock.

Gerard gave her half his sandwich and a bag of Cheetos. She put on sunglasses and her fingers were orange. They drank ice water. "God, what happened?" she said. The leg of Gerard's trousers was soaked with blood down the shin.

"That's a shame, isn't it? These are seersucker."

"How did that happen?"

"I don't know. Look, hang on." He took a sip of water. "Look, my break is virtually over at this point. I'm flat out of time here. So maybe why don't you tell me who you are, your name, that kind of thing. I'm Gerard."

"I'm Brooke." They shook hands and then Gerard checked his watch.

"Yeah, break's definitely over now. Got no time left to kill." He shook his head and looked at a map of Sicily on the back of Brooke's shirt. The shirt was white and thin and he could see her shoulder blades very clearly. Palermo was on her spine. He looked at his watch again. "Hey, Brooke," he said, "I don't suppose you have a car, do you?"

She did. It was a Fiat. They drove fast down Lantern Lane. The top was up and wind came loud through a rip in the canvas. He was thinking about how much gas you need to drive to Mexico. He took out his wallet and counted nine dollars. He looked at Brooke and then he watched the road. No signs for Mexico. Those are only way down south. He touched his leg and there was blood on his fingers.

*Breaking free of a curve, Gerard shifts up and leans over the handlebars. He touches the shoulder. Gravel skips across the road. He reaches behind his ear and adjusts the strap on his goggles. His hair floats and he says, "Woah, that's close."*

*A car thrusts past him, sucking away a huge volume of air. Gerard brakes lightly. The Vespa screams. He is on the shoulder. Dirt surrounds him and gets in his shirt. Bits of gravel are projectiles and they sting his skin. He slides over the edge of the shoulder and into the grass. Mud flies across his goggles. He cuts through tangled weeds and he is no longer struggling: he just hangs on. The Vespa dives over a ditch and into a white-washed horse fence. The fence doesn't give. The Vespa is deflected. Gerard sees it spinning back into the ditch as he takes casual flight well over the top of the fence and into a soft green meadow littered with large rocks.*

It was quarter to four and she dropped him off at the Book Stash.

He shoved open the door and walked through the lobby (among new releases and lingering eyes), toward the staff room. The beeping sounds of electronic cash registers paused. Gerard pushed aside a velour curtain and stood beside the punch clock. He scanned the rack for his card and felt something brush against his shoulder. He grabbed it and turned around. He was holding in his fist the left hand of senior associate Franklin Rose, who said, "Don't punch in, Gerard."

"Why not?"

"They'll tell you in the office."

"In the office? I'm not going to the office," he said and walked in backwards. He was seated in a grey flannel chair, between supervisors, across from the head manager (Ennio Sheffield, in two kinds of paisley). Gerard reclined: he was an illustration of poise. His legs crossed as if British. Fluorescent lights were humming and Gerard sat up. "Is that a folder?"

"It's a folder, Gerard."

"I thought so. That won't be necessary. I have a valid explanation."

Ennio papered the table with evidence. Events were recalled: cash registers short hundreds, never over, regularly left unlocked; charges unauthorized; the vacuum cleaner incident; all those lunch breaks extended to astonishing lengths. "Gerard, I'm not angry."

"You're just tired," Gerard said. "I can understand that. You're a busy man." He stared at Ennio and looked at the supervisors. They were seated around him like cannibals, not one even slightly interesting tie among them. Repps and solids. He went on: "I'm tired, too. I didn't get any sleep. I was walking around all night like an insomniac. And I'm not an insomniac. Never have been."

Ennio slid forward on casters. (They squealed.)

"Let me tell you something, Gerard: I'm well rested."

There were three quick knocks and a cashier in black was standing at the door. She received a greeting of frowns. "I have to ask you," she said to Ennio, "if I can give a discount on this. The binding's sort of loose." She looked at Gerard. She noticed the arrangement of chairs around the room. The book began to slip from her fingers: she gripped it.

"Ten percent."

"OK," she said, nodding, "All right."

"Go give them ten percent, Alva."

Gerard tried to unfasten his name tag ("Dave") from his shirt. He punctured his fingers repeatedly: tiny red domes appeared. With a calculated tug he ripped the pin through broadcloth and then he took out a quarter for the phone.

*He swallows a Coke bottle's last ounces and drops it through a grating in a storm sewer. He waits for it to crash and it doesn't. He looks down there. It's too dark to see. It's a sewer. He keeps walking. He cuts down an alley and leaves fall all around him.*

*A blue glow catches his eye. He climbs onto a high wooden fence, feet on a two-inch board, and looks over. There's a lit pool with a slide. It's a yellow slide and it curves. Large French windows dominate the house and he can see inside. There's only one light in there: the refrigerator door is open. Gerard raises himself over the fence and drops into a flowerless garden. Monkeygrass crawls across his legs. He waits and watches a white plastic disk hum along the surface of the water. It hits the side close to him and bounces away. He takes off his shoes and his shirt. He walks down the steps into the water.*

*"What are you doing?" A girl in a swimsuit, hair tied back with a scarf, is sitting on the cement at the edge of the pool. She stretches out her legs and sinks her feet. Gerard's hands grasp one another.*

*"I think I'm in your pool."*

*"Yes."*

*"I'm sorry about that." He notices something gripped around her neck: a blue cord. "I didn't think anybody was here. You left the refrigerator open."*

*She looks and sees it. "You're right. You're absolutely right." She slips into the water.*

*She moves toward Gerard, brushing her hands backwards. It's not a cord, it's a string of beads. She's standing beside him and she tilts her neck over her shoulder and dips the ends of her hair into the water. She tosses the wet hair sideways. The scarf slips off and falls in front of Gerard. It drifts on the surface. He watches it. He grabs it.*

They lost an hour at nine-fifteen and 30,000 feet.

Gerard handed Brooke a copy of *Puerto Vallarta on three Bucks Altogether*. (An indulgence: his ten percent discount had been cut off at the moment of the termination of his employment.) "You want something to drink?" he asked her. "I think we're in Mexico."

"Maybe a Coke."

He leaned into the aisle. A flight attendant walked toward him. She wore no wings. "Please," he said, noting the presence of a plastic name tag fastened onto a polyester/rayon blend of a burgundy shirt, "Pat: two Cokes."

The plane dipped. Gerard extrapolated (silently): "We crash into the jungle. And naturally, I brace myself. No, I strategically jump as we hit the trees. I dodge the fireball. I survive and I'm the only one. The engine's still running so I turn it off and take the keys. I crawl through a hole in the fuselage. It's quiet and all I can hear are the sounds of the rainy season. There's a macaw. I give him a nod and walk along the banks of the river. I don't use any techniques, no lean-to, no pocketknife, no compass. I use the stars and maybe I even eat bugs. It's a matter of choice. I'm calling the shots as they come to me. Spontaneously." Someone across the aisle flipped on and then off a tiny, overhead spotlight. Brooke was reading in the dark.

Gerard folded down a tray from the seat back in front of him and two Cokes in clear plastic cups (pressed with a pattern of little diamonds) were placed on its surface. He took a sip and looked past Brooke, out the window. Fragments of clouds were visible below only as they caught the light. He looked at Brooke, five earrings on this side, turning a page. He closed his eyes. The sound of the engines was louder and he could feel turbulence. He was thinking of events out of sequence: walking out the front door of the Book Stash, hands shaking, suddenly unrushed; picking gravel from the blood on his knee; tying blonde hair in a black scarf; sleeping on the roof.

Brooke was staring at him and said, "What do you want to do in Mexico?"

He opened his eyes. "Drinks at the hotel. Go for a walk. A little late night swimming. It's not set in stone. We'll cross that bridge while we're on it."

"So we have no actual plans."

"That's exactly right we don't." He closed his eyes and leaned his seat back into someone's knees. He lurched forward, hesitated, and spoke toward the ceiling: "Woah. Sorry." He sipped on his Coke, folded his hands in his lap, tilted his head backwards, and, eyes unfocused on the overhead luggage rack, drifting through the events of the day, waited for inspiration.