



Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Fall 2022 Debut Fiction Sampler

EXCERPTS FROM NEW VOICES TO WATCH



What Will You Read Next?



THESE ARE UNCORRECTED PROOFS.
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
YOU CHECK YOUR COPY AGAINST THE FINISHED BOOK.

Excerpt from *When We Were Sisters: A Novel*
© 2022 by Fatimah Asghar

Excerpt from *The Lemon: A Novel*
© 2022 by S. E. Boyd

Excerpt from *Central Places: A Novel*
© 2023 by Delia Cai

Excerpt from *The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern*
© 2022 by Rita Zoey Chin

Excerpt from *The Old Place*
© 2022 by Bobby Finger

Excerpt from *Bad Cree: A Novel*
© 2023 by Jessica Johns

Excerpt from *The House in the Pines: A Novel*
© 2023 by Ana Reyes

Excerpt from *The Bandit Queens: A Novel*
© 2023 by Parini Shroff

Excerpt from *Sweet, Soft, Plenty Rhythm: A Novel*
© 2022 by Laura Warrell

All rights reserved.

First published by Doubleday, Ballantine Books, G. P. Putnam's Sons, Dutton, Viking, Pantheon and One World, which are divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Melville House.

First Printing, 2022
First Printing, 2022

Copyright 2022
Copyright 2022

All rights reserved



REGISTERED TRADEMARKS

Printed in the United States of America.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

These are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third party Web sites or their content.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Fall 2022

Debut Fiction Sampler

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

[When We Were Sisters: A Novel](#)

Fatimah Asghar..... 3

[The Lemon: A Novel](#)

by S. E. Boyd..... 17

[Central Places: A Novel](#)

by Delia Cai..... 47

[The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern](#)

by Rita Zoey Chin..... 79

[The Old Place](#)

by Bobby Finger..... 91

[Bad Cree: A Novel](#)

by Jessica Johns..... 111

[The House in the Pines: A Novel](#)

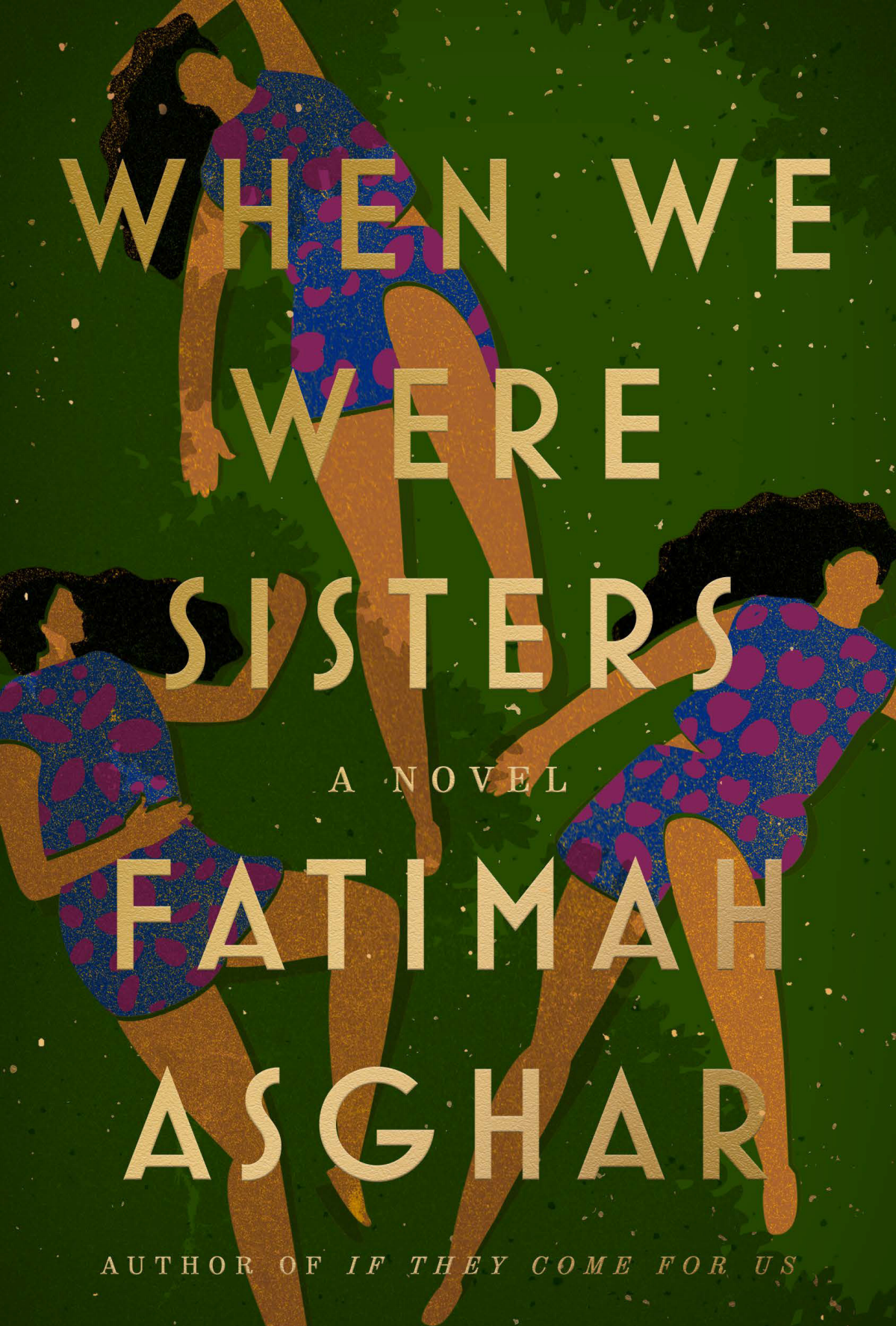
by Ana Reyes..... 129

[The Bandit Queens: A Novel](#)

by Parini Shroff..... 149

[Sweet, Soft, Plenty Rhythm: A Novel](#)

by Laura Warrell..... 161



WHEN WE

WERE

SISTERS

A NOVEL

FATIMAH

ASGHAR

AUTHOR OF *IF THEY COME FOR US*

This is a book of fiction. It's not a memoir, it's not an autobiography. It is art, it exists in the space of the imaginary. All characters, places, incidents, and events in this book are the product of the author's imagination and used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Fatimah Asghar

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

ONE WORLD and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Asghar, Fatimah, author.

Title: When we were sisters: a novel / by Fatimah Asghar.

Description: First Edition. | New York: One World, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022004574 (print) | LCCN 2022004575 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593133460 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593133484 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3601.S46 W48 2022 (print) |

LCC PS3601.S46 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022004574>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022004575>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

oneworldlit.com

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

In a city, a man dies and all the Aunties who Auntie the neighborhood reach towards their phones. Their brown fingers cradle porcelain, the news spreading fast and careless as a common cold. Ring! [] is dead. Ring! Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un. Ring! How sad. Ring! Only a few years after his wife. Ring! And his daughters? Ring! Three of them, yes. Ring! Alive. Ring! Ya Allah. Ring! [] is dead.

A man dies in a city he was not born in. Murdered. In the street. (Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un.) A man dies in a city he only lived in for a handful of years. (How lonely.) A man dies in a city that his children were born in, but a city that will never be theirs, in a country that will never be theirs, on land that will never be theirs. (Ya Allah.) A father dies and the city and his children keep on living, the lights twinkling from apartment building to apartment building. All around the city, breath flows easily. All around the man, breath slows to a stop. The sky, who sees everything, looks down at him. And the moon, who is full, shines her milky dress on his dead body, bedded by the cement street.

In a city, a man dies. In a suburb in a different state, the man's brother-in-law celebrates by adding an extension to his family's house. A new deck spills out into their backyard. The man's brother-in-law renovates the basement: old moldy carpet pulled up and Moroccan marble tiles put in its place. The brother-in-law pores over them at the Home Depot, comparing prices, how happy it will make his wife, white, who he married when he first came to America. *A gorra?*² his mom asked, the brown women in his family looking at each other, confused. *She found Islam because of me!* he explained, exasperated, not understanding why people couldn't see how he was going to earn extra points to heaven, his love enough to make someone convert. *You went to America and fell out of love with us,* his mom sighed, dramatic, as usual.

But brown women were so plentiful. He knew he could have them. White women found every simple thing he did exciting. It opened him. The lota in the bathroom, a marvel. Basic fruit chaat, the spiciest thing they'd ever tasted. How interesting he could become. *A gorra?*² his cousins in Pakistan echoed in disbelief, some whispering *mashallah* as others turned away from him. Yes, a gorra. His gorra, her slender nose, all her features pulled towards it, her voice fast like lightning. When they first married, she'd take him around to her American friends. Him: so exotic and fun. They had two sons: brown, but fair. For a while it was good. Or maybe never fully good, but bearable. But when the quiet arrived it stayed. Rooted into his bones. The coldness between them, rattling his chest on every inhale. He still gets to see his sons on weekends, lives in an

apartment on his own. Her American friends, their selfishness, filling her head with ideas of a divorce.

I divorce you. I divorce you. I—

All the things he's done to keep her from saying it a third time. Divorce. Ya Allah, what people would think. Divorce. He can't even bring himself to think it a third time in a row. So American it bursts his skin to hives, so American it bows his head when he walks by the Pakistani men at the masjid who mutter about his failed business practices: the roofing scheme he tried to start, the gardening venture, the haraam liquor store. His failure: a reputation that clings to him. That clings to his wife. That clings to his sons. Even when he boasted about the great family he comes from. What they were back in Pakistan. Their name, their honor, what they contributed. People would be polite, they listened and nodded. Then they got tired. They would look away. If only he could make more money. Maybe he could see his sons more. Maybe he could see her more. Maybe she'd walk next to him as he entered the masjid.

When his little sister was alive, when they were kids, she looked at him like he could do no wrong. Her eyes big and full of wonder. *Bhai*. No one else had ever looked at him like that. She grew up and got married, had kids, made her own life. And then she stopped looking at him that way. When she died he buried the pain deep in his stomach. Tried to convince his sons to love him while their mom called him a useless sack of shit behind his back.

It's not until his sister's husband dies that his stomach begins to bubble. He realizes how much he's missed that look from when they were kids, how she was the only one who believed he could do anything. How much he missed someone believing that about him. How, through her eyes, he believed it too.

It's sad business, his nieces orphaned a few states away. Sad business, their girlness. Sad business there was no boy among them. Sad business his wife can barely muster an *Inna lillahi* for. Sad business she doesn't think about as she combs the hair of her two sons, getting them ready for school. Sad business, their dead dad's money up for grabs, the promise of a government check following the orphans until they turn eighteen: 161 checks that could come through for the youngest, 139 for the middle, 120 for the eldest—420 checks total, if they survive.

I don't want them staying with me, his wife says, lounging on the couch. One of their sons is upstairs coloring, the other son beside her watching TV, absorbed in a show where a badly drawn white boy with a large nose, three strands of hair, and an oversized green sweater vest is supposed to be eleven years old. Her two sons are in private school. Her manicured lawn. The Tupperware meal plans for all of them stacked in her fridge. Everything so orderly. Neat and separate—a blessing. Her failure husband is in his own apartment, away from them except for weekends.

When she met him in college, he was brimming with potential. All her friends said he'd make a lot of money. Be an entre-

preneur. She loved the stories he would tell; of places she'd never been. How close his skin felt to everything, like he was part of the world and not outside of it. His deep belly laugh, full of fireflies.

It was a gamble, sure, marrying a brown man. But it made her edgy, something she never had been before. She always felt so outside of everything. Like she couldn't even feel the grass under her feet. And then he came, so eager. Her veins started to open. She could feel more, the sun on her arms. His fingers, blending into the soil. A gamble. Even when she stood in front of the Imam, reciting *there is no God but Allah*, removed like she was observing herself, her eyes wandering to the different faces of the men in the mosque, wondering what her life would have been like if she'd met any one of them first. Here, people adored her. They welcomed her, doted on her even. The more she felt how easy it was to be adored, the more her husband's need disturbed her. The more space she wanted. Separate, clean and distinct, a fence around her. And then his mom died. And his sister. Death, how cold it made him. She never fully understood that coldness, both her parents still alive, but so separate from her. He started to become that too: separate. No longer the man that was part of the world, the man she fell in love with, the man she used to envy. He became fenced, lining the walls of his own apartment with boxes like he was cushioning himself against destruction. So no one could get to him. But she couldn't care less, loving how foreign she felt in this new community, how exotic. Her own parents, flabbergasted by her decision. But she had wanted to leave them as soon as she had left for college. Promised herself she would never go back. And now, here she was, in her own house, with her own

kids. Her pristine little life. The one she had to claw out for herself. The three orphans, threatening to dirty it.

It'll be like they never existed, the Uncle says, sweaty, as though it's his body placing the marble tiles on the floor, as though he's lifted a finger.

ARZOO

I wanted to be her: her straight hair framing her thin face, her high cheekbones and slender nose, her dark brown skin, her long eyelashes calling towards the sky. I would stay up just so I could see her face right before she fell asleep, the moonlight on her cheeks. And when I was sweet, when I smiled just right, she would let me sleep next to her. *My little radiator*, she called me, and so I was: little, radiator, curled to her like a cat waiting to be touched.

God of the playground. God of the eyelashes. God of the cheekbones. And like any good God deserves, I followed her, teetering, calling her name when she walked. *Noreen, Noreen, Noreen*. And unlike most Gods, she answered. She pulled me towards her, balancing me in the air with her feet pressed into my stomach, our fingertips touching as I floated.

She asked for a bunk bed the day our father disappeared for good, when they made us all wear white and all the Aunties came to our house crying. I loved crying. It's what I did best. *Crybaby, crybaby*, Noreen and Aisha would say, and I would cry more. *I'm not a crybaby*, I yelled, my eyes burning, but I knew I was and I hated myself for it. But now, it was okay to cry. I cried, delighted in the crying, and the adults who saw me cried harder, and so I cried harder still because I knew I was a good crier and no one could out-cry me.

Your father is gone.

The house filled with the women from the neighborhood, the women who we call Aunty: the one with her round face and thin nose with the gold loop glinting from it, her dimples pressed gentle into her cheeks. Another Aunty, who always smells like badaam and cinnamon. Then the Aunty with the spider hands, skin thin and crackled. And the last Aunty, with yellow teeth and hairs on her toes, who always has caramels in her bag. My father familyless in America except for us girls. But my father familial by the Aunties who picked up the phones and activated the Aunty Network.

Today they crowd our living room as though it is the basement of the masjid, the Aunties holding the tasbihs in their hands, fingering each bead, rocking back and forth.

Your father is gone. What can we do? The Aunties beat their hands into their chests.

Their wails scatter throughout the entire house, frothing the windows, filling the stove, painting the walls. Their wails everywhere, turning our house into a House of Sadness.

A bunk bed, Noreen demanded, dry-eyed, standing in front of me and Aisha. Arms crossed in front of her chest; bully of the playground. *You can get us a bunk bed.* Behind her, me and Aisha tried our best to look tough. Puffed out our chests. *Yeah, a bunk bed*, Aisha mimicked, as I nodded in agreement.

A bunk bed in exchange for a father.

What idiots. He was our father. We should have asked for more.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *WHEN WE WERE SISTERS: A NOVEL* by Fatimah Asghar.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).

THE LEMON

A
N
O
V
E
L



S. E. BOYD

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2022 by The Christmas, LLC

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Boyd, S. E., author.

Title: The lemon : a novel / S. E. Boyd.

Description: [New York] : Viking, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022012113 (print) | LCCN 2022012114 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593490440 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593490457 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Humorous fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.O9329 L46 2022 (print) |

LCC PS3602.O9329 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220318

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012113>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012114>

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Set in Dante MT Pro

BOOK DESIGN BY [TK]

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

JOHN DOE

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

Sunday, June 30, 2019, 8:44 p.m.

It started with the potted herring. The herring was from Ardglass, they pointed out. And there was potato apple bread from Armagh, eaten in the home of an ex-IRA bomb maker with one arm (“Not a top bomb maker,” joked a producer). Then a beef pasty supper with a former Ulster Defence Association man. Not to be confused with the former Ulster Freedom Fighters man with whom John Doe shared an Ulster fry, or the Real IRA man who’d given him a fifteens cake, and something called champ, which seemed like it was just mashed potatoes and onions, but one didn’t want to be rude.

Doe had also sat across from a former officer commanding of the Irish National Liberation Army and shared a vegetable roll, which, true to the backward logic of Northern Ireland, was basically a circular meat loaf that included very few vegetables. They’d done home visits in places like the Falls and the Shankill, in shitty little flats

with big, beautiful sectarian murals. And once he'd spoken with enough twitchy-eyed "ex"-militants to understand that the current state of politics in Northern Ireland was actually some sort of invisible-fence rodeo, likely to turn into Pamplona-style goring as soon as the bulls realized the fence wasn't real, he started in on the restaurants and bars.

There was a conversation with the chef at Deanes at Queens over lamb rump, ham hock, brie fritters, and cockles, plus wheaten bread served with Abernethy Butter. A fancy meal and B-roll of the River Lagan at OX. John Long's for fish and chips. Pints in a pub called Duke of York, which was blown up during the Troubles and rebuilt. And an interview with a locally born action-movie celebrity in one of the snugs inside the Crown Liquor Saloon, with its ornate stained glass and Italian woodworking.

At each stop, the makeup artist would make sure Doe was properly disheveled, and the sound guy would make sure his levels were excellent, and the first AD would run back through the outline and questions and possible conversation angles. The cameramen would make sure to get close-ups of the little details Doe liked—the places where you could see one mural had been painted on top of another, the contents of someone's bookshelf, the stray dogs (wherever they were, Doe wanted to capture images of the dogs).

When the camera was on, Doe was gracious and generous and thoughtful and giving but unafraid to ask hard questions, ensuring they were delivered with respect and enough runway. He could go on like this for hours at a time, and the way they filmed, that's what he did. But when the camera was off, Doe retreated back to a corner to smoke Raptors, which he had shipped in from Canada, with his PA and/or the director of photography, or to read, or to listen to Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* with over-the-ear, noise-canceling headphones.

Once filming had wrapped, and he'd carefully extricated himself from committing to any sort of social engagement with the locally born action-movie celebrity, who'd kept asking all the women on set if they "liked to get wet," Doe walked back to his hotel alone. He was recognized a few times, but mostly after the fact. One man wearing a red-and-white sweatshirt with George Best's face stenciled on the back asked him for a selfie and he complied. He watched a teenage couple kiss with an impressive amount of tongue, and a freckled boy, who would later be identified as twelve, drive by in a luxury car, which would later be identified as stolen.

Doe got to his hotel at nine p.m. In the lobby, he saw a blonde woman wearing a Barbour Acorn waxed cotton jacket sketching something on a napkin and drinking a gin and tonic. As she got up, she made eye contact with Doe.

"John."

"Lara."

He watched her walk out the door, then texted his friend Paolo and told him to meet him at a local pub called the Christmas at ten thirty.

The hotel he was staying at was called bandit, intentionally lower-case, for whatever e. e. cummings-fetishizing reason the external marketing agency hired to help with the name had come up with. The hotel's theme seemed to be loosely based on the idea that the lower part of Northern Ireland used to be known as Bandit Country, though clearly this external marketing agency failed to dig deeper into the meaning or they might've discovered that this was because the Armagh area had been a safe haven for the IRA. Either way, murals of County Armagh (created by local Catholic street artists!) adorned the walls, and the restaurant, Orchard (apparently Armagh is also known for orchards!), only used farm goods from Armagh.

The rooftop bar was made to look like an abandoned rural shed

surrounded by a high hedge which contained the “secret” entrance to the bar. Inside, you sat on reclaimed tractor parts and ordered craft cocktails made by bartenders wearing aprons sewn by Armagh artisans. The cocktail names played off small towns in the county (the Darkley and Stormy, for example) and the list was woven through with straw. Doe was staying at bandit because bandit was new and “boutique,” and new, boutique hotels had the best suites, and it was well-known that John Doe loved himself a great hotel suite.

His suite at bandit was actually three separate rooms, each showcasing a different part of the same mural of the Lough Neagh. There was a sitting room with a long, comfortable weathered leather couch, a library room filled with first editions from Northern Irish authors, a bedroom with a big blue leather headboard, and a bathroom featuring a claw-foot tub apparently reclaimed from a farmhouse once owned by the Earl of Shaftesbury.

Doe had reached a level of fame at which people assumed he needed things customized to his liking, and thus Doe made demands that things be customized to his liking. In his contract, it was stipulated that Doe needed a suite, and it was preferable that that suite had a California king-size bed (Doe liked to sleep across a bed with no pillow) and a bathtub (preferably claw-foot, though that wasn't a deal breaker). He needed a box of Ecrú #9 Embassy 96 lb. stationary cards with corresponding envelopes, alongside a Baronfig Squire rollerball pen, so he could write letters longhand, or at least entertain the romantic notion of writing letters longhand. And he needed a bowl of local citrus.

It was 9:09 p.m. when Doe got back to his room and found said bowl of artisanal citrus waiting for him. He was informed via a small handwritten card that the citrus, so rare in Ireland, was from a farm in Bannfoot, a small village in the townland of Derryinver, within, of

course, the County Armagh. After taking off his coat, he rolled up his sleeves and retrieved his knife bag. From it, he got out a cutting board and his R. Murphy Jackson Cannon bar knife. Created by a 150-year-old knife maker in Massachusetts, in collaboration with a local bartender Doe had worked for a long time ago, the bar knife was made from high-carbon stainless steel with a square tip to notch citrus and remove seeds. The handle was a durable tropical hardwood known as cocobolo. In total, Doe owned about a hundred of these knives, and he brought one with him wherever he went (though, much to the frustration of the network's sponsorship wrangler, he refused to publicize this fact).

At 9:13 p.m., he picked up several lemons and placed them next to the cutting board. He took one, felt along its mottled skin, and, barely looking, placed it down on the board and chopped off the ends. Then, with a cut side facing down, he halved it, flipped each half onto its back like an upside-down turtle, and made a clean slice through the middle without cutting all the way to the skin. Then he flipped it back over, made five clean, even cuts all the way through each half, picked the lemon slices off the board with his knife, and moved them to the side to start again.

Once he'd cut through six lemons, John Doe picked up the final slice and carried it with him into the closet in the front hall. In the closet, he found his old, weathered leather belt, looped it around his neck, popped the lemon slice in his mouth, and unbuttoned his pants.

When he stopped breathing, the clock on the bedside table next to a note from the manager regarding the origin of the locally bottled spring water said 9:26.

PART I

THE MAN



1.

CHARLIE McCREE

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

Monday, July 1, 2019, 8:13 a.m.

Charles Ulysses McCree—aka Smilin’ Charlie McCree—whistled down the hall of the top floor of bandit in a long-shot bid to conceal the fact that he was barely holding himself together. The pathways connecting his brain to his arms and legs and feet and fingers had been disrupted. Some of his extremities ached, while others were numb. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Not that he could see, anyway. Before Charlie came to work this morning, he had dropped a mug of tea in his kitchen. One moment he was holding it, the next he was not, and fucked if he knew what had transpired in the interim. Perhaps he was dreaming; perhaps a sinkhole had opened in his brain. But while some existing neural pathways had been severed, new ones had formed. His hair hurt, for example. So did his fingernails. Dead things brought to life by a record-breaking two-day blitz upon the City of Belfast.

His eyes may have lost the ability to focus properly, but he was still able to discern the form of a housekeeper as she emerged from the dark fog of the hallway before him. Her name tag read “Kitty.” Presented with this information, Charlie attempted to pass himself off not only as a human being, but as a human being who sings.

“‘Oh Kitty, my darling, remember,’” he intoned. “‘That the doom will be mine if I stay.’”

“Fuck off with ya, Charlie,” she said, brushing past.

The weekend had been bloody sensational. The festivities started in the dark among the mannequins at the Filthy Quarter on Dublin Road, as they always did, because the decor allowed the lads to simulate intercourse with insensate objects, a cherished pastime. Having achieved a suitable level of intoxication, Charlie and his mates then set out to sup from every pub in the center of the city—the Garrick, White’s, McHugh’s, the Bullitt Hotel bar, the John Hewitt—moving haphazardly from one to the next, becoming louder and more damaged, bouncing off of lorries and light poles and Proddies and Papes, mounting bold charges and beating craven retreats, and in time covering a significant swath of the city, like a robotic vacuum cleaner that generates mess instead of sucking it up.

Friday yielded to Saturday and, after an interlude of impromptu public sleep, Charlie and the lads hit the daylight like an enemy beachhead and fought well into the afternoon. As the hours passed and his mates began to show signs of wear, Charlie only gathered force. He was a hard man to keep pace with. Alcohol amplified his essential Charlie-ness and turned it into a matter of public concern. There was no hostility to it, however. Only joy. Only lust for living. At one point, Charlie acquired a bridal veil, presumably from a hen party in which he had temporarily embedded himself. This accoutrement, he was later informed, inspired him to attempt to kiss a police officer on the

mouth while speaking in a womanly voice and to steal a multitude of orange parking cones, which the lads subsequently used as megaphones to inform the masses about the many arcane toilet procedures favored by Her Majesty, the queen.

By Saturday afternoon, time had slipped from its skein and morale ebbed. By nine p.m., most of Charlie's mates had fallen away. Some had been decked, over women or for slights intended or unwitting. Others were sickened. One simply lost heart and skulked off. No matter: Charlie just replaced them with new friends. It was easy. When Charlie attained a certain state, he ceased to be a normal human trapped in body and status, limited by personal and moral inhibitions and the strictures of a class-based society. He became magnetic, magnificent. Charlie in his cups ascended to the rarified air. He became Prince Charlie of Belfast, friend to man and woman, leader in song, and the city lined up behind him.

And then came the hard light of Monday morning and Charlie did what any self-respecting man would do: he got up, pulled a strange bridal veil out of his pants, threw up, and went to work.

He had taken the job at bandit after his band, which fused Irish rebel music with ska, had been banished from most of the city's clubs for what he was certain was a mix of political reasons and personal jealousies. As Charlie temporarily paused his ascension to global stardom, he, like so many others who dreamed of artistic immortality, turned to the hospitality business. But unlike some of his fellow artists, Charlie loved it. He was a good talker, charming and presentable and not a bad-looking guy, all of which helped.

But he also had a hidden genius. Charlie could convey a sense of authentic Belfast-ness, while at the same time not laying it on so thick that the foreigners who stayed at bandit felt excluded or ill at ease. This was a delicate dance, to be certain. Success in hospitality in Belfast was

the product of relentless calibration. The sort of rich foreign tourist who stayed at bandit wanted an authentic Belfast experience. But they preferred it come at a safe remove. They didn't want to be made to feel guilty or uncomfortable while getting it. Charlie's genius was in walking that line. He was local. He could tell hair-raising stories. Sure, sometimes he took factual liberties, but he was so engaging that no one ever questioned him. And no matter how dark the tale, Charlie always took care to end it on a grace note: people can behave in terrible ways, but goodness prevails with faith and good works, and the visitors who come to this place are brave, and their attention means a great deal to his people. *Though we have suffered*, he implied with his every utterance, *fear not, we do not fancy ourselves superior to you*.

His friend Seamus accused him of running some kind of rank, Troubles-themed minstrel show—and, sure, there was an element of performance to it—but Charlie wasn't doing it out of cynicism. Perish the thought. He was the world's greatest optimist. He just wanted to make people happy. He just wanted to connect. To enter their lives and live on in their memories. That's why he loved performing music, after all. He could have been a hard man about dealing with these tourists as they walked around sticking their fingers in the wounds of his city, but his favored approach came as a great relief to his guests, particularly the Americans, and for it they tipped him lavishly.

CHARLIE CONTINUED DOWN the hallway, listing slightly, performing a quick check of his vital systems. In the seconds since being cursed by Kitty the housekeeper, something had gone wrong with his foot. It felt abraded, like the top of the inside of his shoe had been lined with sandpaper. Charlie couldn't figure out what it was, but it hurt. Then it hit him: the tea. The scalding liquid must have landed on his foot. It

had just taken a couple of hours for the signal to arrive at his brain, like a lorry through a checkpoint. *Jesus fuck*, he thought, *I am the most bombed-out individual in the most bombed-out city in Ireland.*

When he'd arrived at his post at the front desk an hour earlier, Charlie had become convinced that his body would at any moment void in all directions in front of a mass of horrified guests, like a great green fountain of sick. He needed to mobilize. He picked up a phone and pretended a guest was speaking to him.

"Yes sir," he said. "Two pillows. Fluffy ones. Right away, sir."

He'd then obtained two pillows from a room behind the desk and set out on his travels, even though the pillows were incredibly fucking hard for him to carry in his present condition. These aimless travels took him down hallways, into stairwells, and throughout the facility for some thirty minutes before he found himself on the top floor, passing a suite whose door was slightly ajar, from which a faint mewling sound was heard.

What is this, then? Charlie wondered. He first knocked gently. "Hello? This is Charlie from the front desk?"

When no one came, Charlie gently pushed the door until it stopped against something soft and heavy. Charlie craned his neck around and that's when he saw them: two men by the closet. One was on his knees. Charlie took measure of the man. He didn't look like he should be on his knees. There was something about his skin, his hair, his clothing. He was preternaturally neat and composed. He looked like he'd never been on his knees in his life. And yet he was. That was interesting.

The other man was hanging from the closet rod with a belt around his neck, boxer briefs and jeans around his ankles, and a lemon wedge in his mouth. Charlie had delivered those lemons to this room himself and written a little note explaining that they came from a farm in

Bannfoot, a small village in the townland of Derryinver, within the County Armagh. *Quite a turn for that humble fruit*, Charlie thought. *Sure, life is nothing but surprises.*

Charlie was ready to turn and walk right back down the hallway. The protocol in situations such as these was to see little, say less, and then wait until the local police were summoned by an odor. But before he fled back to the front desk, Charlie noticed something: a Patek Philippe Nautilus on the kneeling man's wrist. It must have cost twenty thousand quid. And there was a Rolex Daytona on the dead man's wrist, probably worth about the same. Charlie had read about these items on the internet. These were very nice items, he'd learned: items that indicated the presence of real money. Which meant that humble Charlie had suddenly found himself in the intimate company of both death and money. Which was quite interesting when you really thought about it.

The man bowed his head, closed his eyes, and took a breath. He stood up, smoothing his shirt and pants. His movement caused a slight breeze that found its way to Charlie's crooked nose. *Yer man smells fucking great*, Charlie thought. *Jesus, what a brilliant-smelling man. What kind of life produces that kind of smell?* he wondered. *What kind of money?*

The man took another breath and composed himself.

Intoxicated by the rich musk, Charlie leaned slightly into the door. It creaked.

The man looked up and saw Charlie. And so shaken was he that he simply stared as if trying to figure out whether Charlie was real.

"Can you help me?" he said quietly.

Fascinating, Charlie thought. *How thrilling was life! Endless surprises! A man of this caliber wanting help from the likes of your man Smilin' Charlie.* Charlie had always assumed that the rich just knew how to handle

situations like this on their own, that they had people on call to lavish favors upon those who could keep their mouths shut and to shoot the rest. But here was this great man, asking Charlie McCree for help. The universe had shifted. Almost undetectably so. But it had. For once, Charlie was not the subordinate. He was an equal. Even more than that: he was sort of frankly pretty fucking superior when you really thought about it.

“This,” the man said. “This is a very important man. And a good man.” He swallowed. “I don’t know what to do.”

A good man, Charlie thought. It’s so rare in life that one encounters a good man. We all fall, we all sin, none of us is perfect. Not even your man with the Rolex, evidently. But we cannot let our sins define us, nor should we try to define others by their sins. It was Jesus himself who said it. And Jesus was a good man too. Well, half a man, anyway. Or a third of a man? Which part was the ghost? He could never get the math right. Anyway, let us be remembered by our good deeds, Charlie mused. That’s the only fair thing, the only just thing. Charlie wanted to be on the side of goodness.

Also, by now he’d noticed the dead man’s penis sticking out. And there was only one thing to do when a man came upon such a scene. “You need to make it so it looks like yer man . . .” Charlie gripped his throat and stuck out his tongue. “Instead of . . .” Charlie released his throat and gestured to the man’s crotch. “Otherwise, there will simply be no end to the laughter.”

The man swallowed and glanced down at the dead man. He couldn’t get a word out. Charlie’s proposal expanded, filling the air. The man mustered a small nod.

“I will do everything in my power to help you, sir,” Charlie said to the man’s watch. “I am at your disposal.”

“Have you had any experience with this before, working in the hotel?”

“Oh, loads,” Charlie said.

He hadn’t, but what was experience, really?

“Okay, so, what do you suggest we do now?” the man said.

“Well, for starters, sir, take out the lemon.”

“Right, okay,” the man said. He leaned over and, with visible distaste, carefully removed the lemon. He looked for a trash bin to throw it in.

“No, sir,” Charlie said.

The man stared at him blankly.

“Evidence, sir.”

Do the very rich not watch television?

The man understood.

“Right,” he said. “So, what? We throw it out the window?”

This man was testing Charlie’s patience.

“If we throw it out the window, sir, it could hit someone, and if they collect it and call the police, the police might take it to the lab for testing,” Charlie said. “Trust me, I am from Belfast.”

Charlie put the pillows down and grabbed the plastic liner from the small bin by the desk.

“Just give it to me,” he continued. “I’ll take care of it.” Charlie gestured for the man to drop it in the bag. He did, and Charlie carefully tied the bag up and placed it in his pocket. “We’ve an incinerator downstairs,” he explained. “Now the pants, sir.”

The man nodded and got on his knees, and he carefully pulled up the dead man’s boxer briefs, then his black jeans. This was difficult, as rigor mortis had set in. As he struggled to pack the man’s unit back in behind the button fly, Charlie could see it was all becoming real for the other man now, the finality of it. Charlie had observed this before, the initial wave of panic giving way to acceptance that the unnatural stillness that had overtaken the person in question was, in fact, death.

He was deeply moved, and thus offered a silent intercession for the soul of the dead man, and for the living one as well. And in that silence, there was the click of a camera phone.

The man turned around and saw Charlie standing there, holding the phone. Charlie didn't even know why he'd done it. *What a silly thing to do!* he thought. *Taking a photo at a moment like this.* He smiled and slipped the phone back into his pocket. The man stared at him. There was a look of fear on his face. No doubt it was the fear stirred in every man when he comes face-to-face with the only true thing in life: that death will have us all. Charlie, hoping to distract the poor man from his sorrows, filled the silence with action.

"We're not out of the wood yet," he said, employing an idiom he'd heard on television. "Now, here's what we're going to do." Jesus, Charlie loved giving orders to a man wearing a watch like that. "I'm going to leave this room," he said. "I'm going to go have a wee nap in the stairwell. And then I'm going to return to the desk and I'm going to tell my manager that a man has taken his own life here. I'm going to say you were here when I walked in, and that I stayed a moment because you were upset and I didn't know what to do. And that is all I am going to say. Do you understand?"

The man kept staring at him, unsure.

"This is Belfast," Charlie said. "I wouldn't last long here if I didn't know how to keep a secret."

"Okay," Paolo said. He took a breath. "Thank you."

Charlie stuck out his hand. He was pleased to find it fully operational. He squeezed the kneeling man's hand and found it both muscular and soft. *Money*, he thought. *It was money that made your hands like that.*

"Well, best of luck, sir," he said.

"Thank you . . . ?"

Charlie straightened his posture.

“The name is Charles Ulysses McCree,” said Charlie. “But my friends call me Charlie.”

“Thank you, Charlie.”

“My pleasure, Mr. . . . ?”

“Cabrini. Paolo.”

There it was.

“The famous chef, is it?”

“That’s right.”

“My pleasure, Chef.”

“Paolo, please.”

Charlie maintained his grip on Paolo’s hand. They looked at one another, eye to eye, man to man, and Charlie’s whole being hummed. In spite of himself, he saw in this hastily improvised union the seeds of a partnership, and from those seeds he foresaw the sprouting of alternate futures: a future in which Charlie coolly and unselfconsciously worked side-by-side with this man, and other such men, solving thorny problems and advancing his own interests by protecting theirs, until one day, he simply became one of them. But Charlie already felt himself changing. This situation had alerted him to a capability within himself he didn’t know existed. It had expanded him somehow. What an adventure, this existence! All his life had been defined by borders, by limits. Many of the people he’d grown up with loved those borders. They defined themselves by those borders, they took great comfort in them. But not Charlie. Charlie had no interest in containment. He regarded the man, his mind aswarm with possibility. Here it was: the future, and only days before his thirty-seventh birthday.

“Oh,” said Paolo. “Let me just— For your trouble.”

Paolo removed his wallet from his back pocket and opened it. He rifled through a mass of receipts and ticket stubs. His face turned red.

He rifled more. He looked embarrassed. *Poor devil*, Charlie thought. He was flattered that such a great man felt so comfortable being vulnerable with him like this. But then the man removed a single note, a tenner, and handed it to Charlie using an arm from which dangled a watch that cost more than Charlie would make that year.

“I’m sorry,” Paolo said. “I don’t . . . I usually have cash.”

“Quite all right, sir,” Charlie said. Three seconds passed and neither man moved.

“And, look, if you’re ever in New York,” Paolo said, “I want you to look me up. You can come to my restaurant and be my guest. It’s the least I can do, Charlie. I’d love to host you. I really would.”

The coldness disappeared. “I’d like that a great deal. Paolo,” Charlie said. “Good luck.”

He turned, opened the door, stepped out, closed it, and walked back down the hallway, refreshed and aglow. Charlie’s brain was firing away now, clean and clear, his eyes seeing, his limbs working in concert, and his foot hurting only a little. *What a top man*, he thought as he strode down gray-blue carpet toward the elevators and into the future, feeling the lemon in his pocket with every step.

2.

CHEF PAOLO CABRINI

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

Monday, July 1, 2019, 9:01 a.m.

There were three chefs in the world more famous than Paolo Cabrini, all of whom were French and two of whom were dead. Paolo had cooked for five presidents, four kings, three prime ministers, two chancellors, and One Direction, which he learned was a pop band. He spoke six languages fluently, personally oversaw a staff of two hundred, and had once both officiated and cooked for a billionaire friend's wedding on an active volcano.

Paolo had been in kitchens for forty years, and kitchens were cauldrons of crisis, and yet he'd always thrived. Other chefs used to call him the Iceman (until he discovered that was also the nickname of a notorious mob assassin) for the way nothing fazed him. One (less famous) chef who'd worked with Paolo put it best: "If the pilot dies, Paolo is the one you want to land the plane."

And yet, as he lay weeping in a giant, empty claw-foot tub once owned by the Earl of Shaftesbury twenty feet from where his best friend had just died, running back through his CV didn't help. He just kept thinking about the click.

Paolo had heard it just as he was struggling to pull up Doe's boxers. Which meant that that black-haired Irishman had a picture that made it look like Paolo was touching his dead and arguably even more famous best friend's privates. And, for his silence in the matter, Paolo had given this man, what? Ten pounds. He smacked himself on the forehead. Stupid!

Maybe he could go downstairs and take out money from the cash machine in the lobby. But how much? Five hundred pounds? A thousand? Ten thousand? Would a lot more money make it look like a bribe? What was the legality of all of this? If this picture came out, would he be arrested? Charged with a crime?

He'd only agreed to the man's plan because he wanted Doe to have dignity in his death. He wanted his friend to be remembered for all the truly remarkable, world-changing things he'd done. The way he'd touched millions of people all over this planet. For his cynicism about the shit you should be cynical about, and his unfettered curiosity and earnestness about the other stuff. For his passing to not become a punch line.

Paolo remembered when the wife of a line producer on Doe's show died a few years before, leaving the man to raise a six-year-old boy by himself. The producer told him that Doe stayed at their shitty Brooklyn apartment for two months, sleeping on the couch, cooking for them, and playing with the boy for hours on end while the producer grieved. One day, the producer walked by the kitchen while Doe was making the boy breakfast and heard Doe telling him in urgent tones

that life wasn't all sadness and loss. It could be beautiful, and exciting, and hilarious—you just had to stay open, and to do that you had to be strong, and you had to be brave, and you had to be kind.

“Little buddy,” he said, “there are just so many adventures to be had.”

The producer told Paolo that, upon hearing that, he'd sobbed loudly in the hall. Doe never mentioned a thing.

Thinking that he was doing all of this for that man momentarily steeled Paolo. That sort of man should not be found dead self-pleasuring. That sort of man deserved to die a hero. And so Paolo got out of the tub. As he took the dress shirt he'd meticulously folded and placed beside its ornate claw feet and began to put it back on, he tried to figure out his next steps.

He needed an advisor.

He realized, with some amount of trepidation, he needed to call Nia Greene.

Paolo picked up his cell phone and found her number. But then he realized that though he needed to call Nia, he also needed to lie to Nia so as not to implicate her in any of this shit. And Nia was not a person you lied to. She would eat his craven heart with a glass of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. He put down his phone by the tub and walked over to the bathroom sink. Paolo looked at himself briefly in the mirror, carefully avoiding his own eyes, then walked back to the tub and regarded the phone.

Call.

Just call.

Just hit the button.

Call.

In the distance he thought he heard the faint whine of a siren.

3.

NIA GREENE

NEW YORK, NY

Monday, July 1, 2019, 4:07 a.m.

It was a Tuesday in the year 2000 when Nia Greene discovered her boss had been weighing his own feces.

She was, at the time, a junior agent at AAE—Artists Are Everything—a mid-tier talent agency in Los Angeles, working under Ken Buber, a feared agency head. Nia had served as Buber’s assistant for two years, dealing with his tantrums, his paranoia, his exacting nutritional requirements, and his cruel errands. She’d been hit by four water bottles, a waffle, and a chair. Only the latter occasioned a meeting with an HR person, who subtly employed the language of healing to threaten Nia to keep her mouth shut.

The job was challenging on all fronts. Nia had been made to literally scream her enthusiasm for her job in front of colleagues. She was forced to multitask to the nth degree—dealing with the intricacies of

the business, managing the relentless day-to-day, and coping with the unique psychology of each client. As an assistant, she was completely powerless but she was also the person people had to talk to when they wanted their money, which made her an irresistible target for pissed-off clients. If a client managed to bypass her and scream directly at her boss, her boss would be out five minutes later loudly threatening disembowelment and termination. All the while, Nia was forced to fend off the other assistants' ceaseless attempts to sabotage her and get her job. It was savage, exhausting, and not a little exciting, and Nia had survived it all and become an agent.

More specifically, she became an agent who one day rushed into Ken Buber's private bathroom after a client's Saint Bernard threw up on his carpet in the middle of a meeting. Nia intended to get toilet paper or tissues to sop up the mess. But when she slid open the door, something else caught her eye: a custom toilet with a little plateau in the center, and on that little plateau, a little digital scale. Nia looked to the right, and there was a notepad and a pencil on a small table. The notepad contained two columns of figures in Ken Buber's handwriting. *What the fuck?* she thought, before a small, rough hand belonging to a mute and reddened Buber violently pulled her out of the bathroom.

But it was too late. Nia had seen the scale and Buber knew it, and she knew that he knew it, which was wonderful, and the natural order was suddenly altered. You could see each of them in that moment calculating what they had gained and lost. He wondered: *What will I have to give her to keep her quiet about my scale? What damage can she do? What would people say if they knew?* And she in turn wondered: *What can I get in exchange for my silence? What damage can he do, knowing that I know about the scale? What damage can I do?* It was all good fun and it happened on Tuesday, July 18, 2000.

Nia Greene remembered because that was the day she met and signed John Doe, the day that she embarked on the greatest adventure of her life—an adventure that ended at 4:07 a.m. New York time, the moment Paolo Cabrini called from Belfast to tell her that John had killed himself.

LOVE IS ALL well and good, but if there's one thing Nia Greene knew about handling PR, it was that if you're not a master compartmentalizer, you're dead. You needed to cultivate a kind of functional sociopathy in this business that allowed you to turn off normal human feeling and dedicate yourself wholly to achieving a desired result. That was how you succeeded. So that's what Nia did when she got the call from Paolo Cabrini. After absorbing the initial shock wave of grief, she started in.

"Paolo, I'm going to be an asshole to you, but it's not because I don't care. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said.

"Tell me what happened."

"He hanged himself. With a belt. In a closet here."

"Here as in . . . ?"

"At the hotel."

"Who found him?"

"I did. This morning."

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"We were supposed to meet last night and he didn't show up. I figured, you know, he was just . . ."

"Being John."

"Yeah. We always meet for breakfast, so this morning I went to his room and found him. In the closet."

“How did you get into his room?”

“He always gives me a key.”

“Was there a note?”

“No.”

“Did he seem off to you at all the last few days?”

“No. Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“In the room, did you see anything unusual? No one else had been in there? Nothing seemed strange?”

Paolo paused. “No,” he said. “Nothing strange.”

“Belfast can be a pretty touchy town. He didn’t piss anyone off or anything?”

“No.”

“Any signs of struggle in the room?”

“No.”

“So. Suicide,” she said, almost to herself.

Paolo paused. “Yes. Definitely.”

“Okay. Am I the first person you told?”

The line went quiet again.

“Paolo?”

“Yes, Nia. You are.”

Nia paused.

“Paolo, are you sure you’re telling me everything?”

Nia heard breathing on the line, interrupted by the odd sob. A breeze rustling the leaves through an open window. A clock ticked.

“Are you telling me everything?” she asked again, more softly this time.

More breathing.

“No,” Paolo finally said.

Nia leaned back and sighed. She rubbed her eyes. “Was it what I think it was?”

“Yes,” Paolo said.

“Fuck.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I know everything about him, Paolo,” she said.

“Right.”

“Is he still . . . the way you found him?”

“No, I couldn’t leave him like that.”

“Okay.”

Since she was a kid, Nia had had this gift. It wasn’t quite composure, though it was related to it. And it wasn’t quite instinct, though it was related to that too. While some kids, when caught doing something, would instinctively lie or fess up, Nia’s mind would go past both lie and truth to the second, and third, and fourth links in a chain reaction. When she got to the end of the line, she made her decision. And sometimes, after her mind spidered along all the trajectories this story could follow, she found the lie was the move.

“Okay. Here’s what we’re gonna do: You tell the front desk. But don’t talk to anyone else. And if you have to talk to someone else, you know what to say. Keep it simple.”

“Okay.”

“Otherwise, don’t talk to anyone. Everything comes through me until I say otherwise.”

“Okay.”

Nia took a breath. She heard Paolo breathing on the other end of the line.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Are you?”

“No,” she said. “I love you, buddy. With all my heart.”

“I love you too.”

“I’ve got to get to work.”

She hung up.

Nia allowed herself exactly five minutes to think about her years with John Doe. She actually set a timer. A mourning timer. In that time, she briefly allowed herself the luxury of grief. And then the timer went off and she got to work.

IT WAS 4:22 a.m. This was good. Reporters in New York and LA would all be asleep. There was still time. The problem was the UK. It was the start of business there, and reporters would be doing morning rounds, calling sources, calling cops. It was going to break. Realistically, Nia had only a couple of hours to define John Doe's legacy forever, so it was imperative that the first story be the right story.

Stage two: After compartmentalization, the key to being a good agent or a publicist—and Nia served as both for John—is relationships. Everyone says this, of course, to the point where it's been bled of all meaning. But Nia saw it a little differently. It wasn't relationships per se—not like normal people define relationships. It was something more akin to ritualistic gift-giving between hunter-gatherer bands. She'd studied this in college when she was considering going to grad school for anthropology. When one group visited another, they would always come bearing gifts. I'd come visit and give you an obsidian dagger, say. And when you came to visit me, you'd give me something of equivalent value, and so on and so forth. These exchanges kept the relationship alive—the obligation to give and the expectation of receiving in kind. That held people together, gave them a reason to see each other, created trust, and laid the groundwork for alliances and friendships. If someone didn't reciprocate a gift, there could be hostility. If someone responded to a gift by giving something of five times more value, that could wreck the relationship too. Balance was everything.

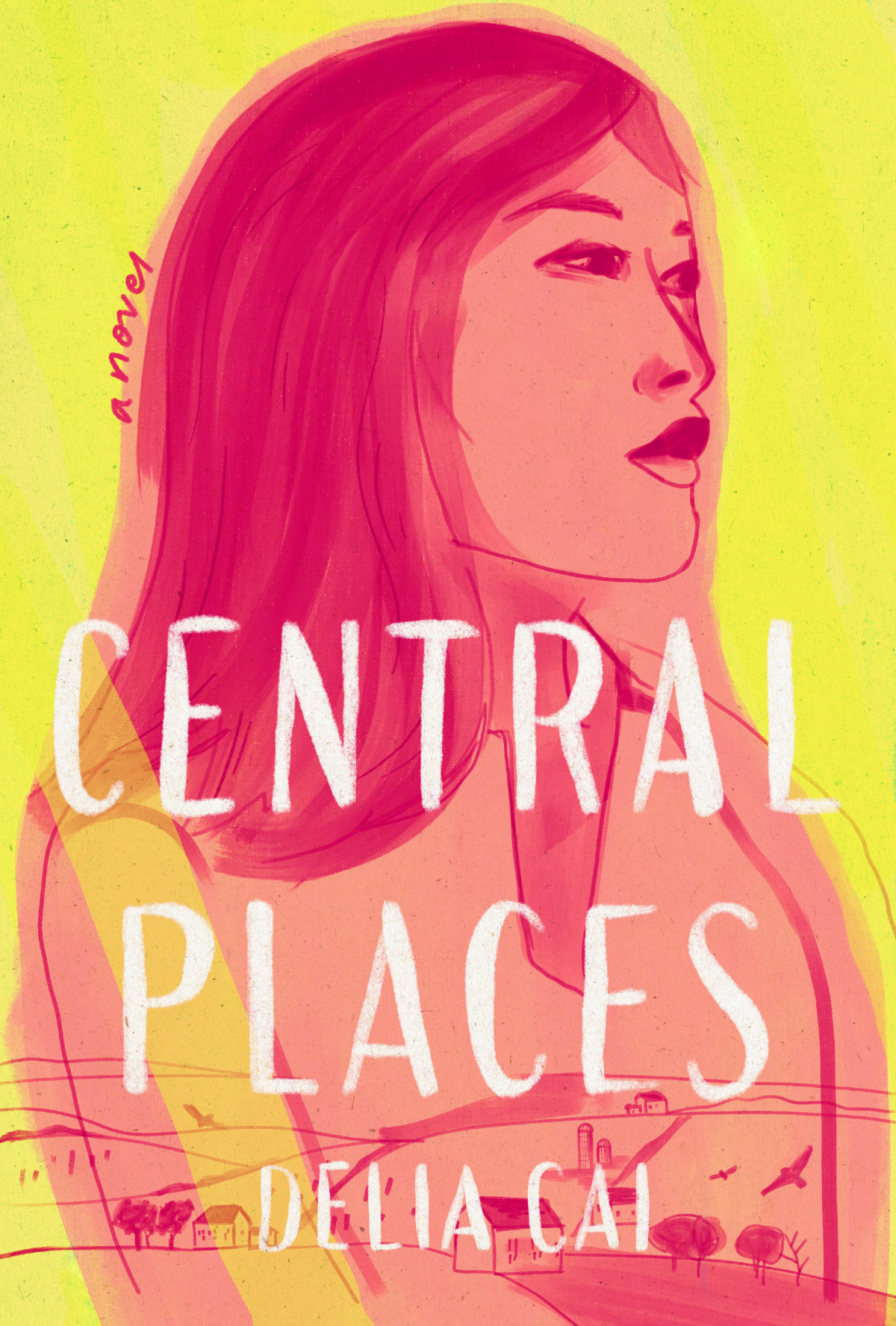
We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE LEMON: A NOVEL* by S. E. Boyd.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).

a novel

CENTRAL PLACES

DELIA CAI



Central Places is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Delia Cai

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

BALLANTINE is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Cai, Delia, author.

TITLE: *Central places*: a novel / Delia Cai.

DESCRIPTION: First edition. | New York: Ballantine Books, [2023]

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022003012 (print) | LCCN 2022003013 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593497913 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593497920 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCGFT: Novels.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3603.A37866 C46 2023 (print) |

LCC PS3603.A37866 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220302

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003012>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003013>

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Title-page art by robin_ph © Adobe Stock Photos

Book design by Sara Bereta

I have always treated English as a weapon
in a power struggle, wielding it against
those who are more powerful than me.
But I falter when using English
as an expression of love.

—Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*

CHAPTER

1

The baby in first class is drooling all over his mother's sweater. It's probably rude to watch this happen without saying anything, but the thought of leaning over and telling a total stranger that her kid is ruining her cashmere while we're hurtling at cruising altitude somewhere above Lake Erie feels like an overreach. Besides, it's not worth disturbing the quiet hum of the plane, not when this baby—I think it's a boy—has been asleep since we left New York, and there's still another hour to go before we hit the Midwest.

So instead, I keep staring, likely thanks to that predictable late twenties biological pull, but also out of envy as I try to think of the last time I felt that untroubled, that indifferent to space and time and turbulence. At least the baby is one of those objectively cute ones: fat cheeks weighing down that soft, milky-pale face, lips scrunched in a rosebud, two ghostly eyebrows suggesting a strain of ancestry that my mother would be able to geo-locate immediately, in the way Chinese women always can, even when afforded only a glimpse through the rearview of whoever might be waiting behind us in the McDonald's drive-through with the same telltale nose bridge. It happened rarely enough in central Illinois that those moments of recognition always resembled a special occasion. From the folds of the baby's blanket toddles one thick leg, tightly furled like a drumstick wrapped with a little gray sock. Next to me in the

window seat, Ben yawns awake from his grown man's nap. He follows the direction of my stare and nudges me.

"Hey," Ben says with a grin. "One thing at a time."

I roll my eyes, moving my gaze off the baby and down to Ben's great-grandmother's ring, which I slide up and down my finger again. It's turning into a bad habit. Ben had it resized over Thanksgiving, but I swear it's still loose, and I can't decide if I should tell him or wait until we're back in the city and take it to a jeweler myself. Either would be more useful than endlessly testing the drag of the band against my skin, as if I'm expecting the white gold to shrink down now that it's making itself at home. Even Zadie noticed this new tic the other day, when we were splitting the twenty-dollar hummus plate at brunch and bitching indulgently about how Williamsburg always got so overrun with German tourists for the holidays. "Stop messing with it," she chided, and then picked at her bangs so she could avoid looking directly at the diamond, like she still couldn't believe that the big *E* happened to me first. Here, inside the fluorescent interior of the 737, the ring wiggles over my knuckle with what feels like a promising amount of effort. But wasn't there some scientific explanation about how the cabin pressure makes your fingers swell or something?

Ben's leaning over me now to get a better view of the baby across the aisle. Then, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully, he turns back to me.

"Ours would be like that, right?"

"Like what?" I give him a look. "Asian?"

Ben pretends to be offended. It's part of our ever-running gag, because of course he isn't making this about *that*. "No," he says, smiling impishly. "Quiet."

This makes me laugh. I say that I hope so, and Ben takes another glance.

"And a *little* Asian," he adds, completing the punch line. Because of course, he's a white guy and I'm the Chinese American girlfriend—well, fiancée—so actually, it's always about that.

I indulge Ben with an eye roll and watch him settle back into his nap with a contented grunt, like a whale surfacing long enough to

gather oxygen and consult the scenery before returning to the depths. Of course Ben is unbothered enough to joke about babies and drift back off to sleep while I'm still gaming out all the possible scenarios for what happens when we touch down in Illinois, when the protective spell of our life together in New York disappears and he finally meets my parents. He's always been like this, not so much unconcerned by the nuisance of cramped seats and roaring jet engines and the future's greater mysteries as he is drawn to any open flame. Even the apartment Ben had back when we first met, the one right next to the aboveground train, recast adventurously in his eyes: When the J went clattering by, he had the nerve to emit these long, happy sighs about how it proved we were "New Yorkers, baby." After three years together, it shouldn't surprise me how different we are in that way: Ben has always been the seasoned ranger, fully at home in the city and its ever-present potential to turn any day into a personal sitcom episode; a hopeful romantic, buoyed by a belief in a welcoming universe; and the kind of guy who smooths a tense exchange in the Whole Foods line into one of those odd New Yorkian friendships in under twenty minutes. It's probably what makes him such a good photojournalist. Meanwhile, I'm the one who notices the noise and the disorder, the crooked picture frames and the monstrous train barreling by just a few feet away from where we slept—the trail greenhorn who catastrophizes for sport. The other night, I ran this self-assessment by Ted, my boss, when we were working late at the *Current* office, and he said he agreed. "But it's what makes you a brilliant sales rep, Audrey," he added. "You're ready for anything." Ted said this nicely, like my ability to anticipate even the most demanding client's whims without choking on the existential indignities of professionally asking people for money is the most impressive personality trait he can think of.



The only times I've ever seen Ben genuinely upset were during occasional incidents like the one earlier this morning, when we were

waiting by our gate at LaGuardia. A young white couple asked if we would watch their bags while they hunted down the restroom, which I guess was supposed to be flattering, a coded acknowledgment passing among the four of us as we perched between a family chattering in Farsi and a group of retirees clutching monogrammed luggage. When the couple came back, Ben went off to stretch his legs and locate his daily iced coffee, like it wasn't late December, like the looming enormity of the coming week now speeding toward us wasn't enough to jolt him into consciousness by force. Whether out of reflex or the need to fulfill an ancient feminine custom, I struck up a conversation with the woman, who introduced herself as Erin. She seemed pleasant enough as she unleashed a steady clip of opinions about the morning's traffic, the line at the Terminal B Starbucks, how glad she was to be getting out of the city for the holidays. As she spoke, she kept rustling her unopened magazine, which I realized with a flush of pride was the latest issue of *The Current*. I wanted to ask her what she thought of the big opioid crisis cover story, or at least watch her flip through the inside foldout ad, which I'd spent half of last quarter negotiating for the premium placement and right paper stock. Instead, Erin set the magazine down and began worrying over how the flight would dry out her skin.

"Well, *your* skin is absolutely stunning," she said with a sigh. "I'm jealous."

I could almost hear Erin's neurons whirring as she looked at me, and I waited for the clues she'd been gathering—the shape of my face, the crease above the eyes, the unambiguous black hair—to finish processing. I knew that look well. This was another attempt at classification, not unlike the guessing game my mother used to play in the McDonald's drive-through, or the one I received in greeting when I started kindergarten at Hickory Grove Elementary and the ESL aide materialized unbidden to introduce herself at top volume. By this time, Ben had returned, slightly agitated because he hadn't found coffee that met both his standards for taste and fair-trade certification.

"If you don't mind me asking," Erin finally said as she propped

her black ankle boots up on the seat across from the three of us, “where are you from?”

Even though I’d known this was coming, the words bottlenecked at my throat. It had been awhile since anyone in the tristate area asked me this, and I tried to think of the last diversity training they made us undergo at work as I searched for language that felt efficient yet polite. Erin seemed perfectly nice, someone whom I’d bump into while waiting for matcha lattes or ask, as we waited in line for the bathroom at a bar, where she got those booties. It was important to not embarrass her for no reason. But Ben spoke up first.

“Audrey is from the Midwest,” he said, leaning over. Ben’s face, usually so handsome with that aquiline geometry, darkened. “She grew up in Illinois.”

Erin made a *hmm* sound that I wasn’t sure if we were meant to hear.

“Hickory Grove?” I offered in my most neutral voice, more so to calm Ben down than to smooth over the creases bunching across Erin’s forehead. “It’s a small town, outside of Peoria. Pretty much in the middle of nowhere.”

Erin frowned, like I’d just ripped into her in rapid-fire Mandarin. *Jesus Christ*, I remember thinking as I waited for her to piece it together already. Ben put his hand over mine and held the woman in the laser beam of his glare.

“If you’re wondering what kind of Asian she is,” he clarified, “that’s really none of your fucking business.”

The muscles in Erin’s face jumped as her neck colored into a pink smear. I glanced at Ben and tried to catch his eye, to hint that it was okay, he was doing too much; that 10:00 A.M. was a little early for avenging racism. Down, boy.

“Wait,” Erin said quickly. “That’s not what I meant.”

It was satisfying to see her look over to her husband, who was actively not listening under the guise of his earbuds and podcast. Erin drilled her eyes at him asking for backup, but he only retreated further inside the depths of the NYU hoodie that, an hour ago, he

and Ben had been trading undergraduate memories over. I could sense Ben simmering next to me, but the annoyance I felt stemmed primarily from the knowledge that I was definitely not getting Erin's ankle boot recommendations now. I'd been in New York long enough to know plenty of people like her, who belonged to produce co-ops and book clubs that reread Ta-Nehisi Coates every February, but who, at the first crack in the snow globe, revealed the white-knuckled grip they've had on everything all along. And I knew from the last three years that the fact that I was with Ben, an Ellis Islander's dream in cheekbones and blue irises, only reinforced whatever fuzzy ideas of bonhomie these Erins propped under their worldview. If someone like me was with someone like him, then it was all good and fine, right? The basic fact of my relationship with Ben implied that we'd moved beyond "that stuff," that we really were all the same leaves stemming from one great kohlrabi. It was all subtler, at least, than what I was used to growing up in Hickory Grove, where there usually wasn't a skincare preamble leading up to the questioning.

To Erin's obvious relief, the gate agent interrupted just then to call for group one to board. I almost laughed at the way she vaulted out of the seat and dragged her husband into line in one fluid motion. Honestly, I didn't blame her. The Illinois thing threw everyone for a loop. In fact, that was what Ben said he found most foreign about me when we started dating: my status as a real non-Chicago, Laura Ingalls Wilder-adjacent midwesterner. Once, as proof, I showed him an old picture from a second grade birthday party where Kristen Anderson and I stood in her backyard, bean bags for cornhole in hand and our matching BFF necklaces glinting in the light. Behind us, you could see the neighboring grain elevator, its steel bins lined up like a row of supersized sugar jars. Ben couldn't stop joking about it. "My little country mouse," he loved to tease, until we spent a weekend in that J-train apartment besieged by actual rodents. *New York, baby!* After we gave up on the no-kill traps and finally broke out the glue pads, I told him to never call me a mouse again.

●

Over the intercom now, the pilot announces the start of our descent. I watch Ben snore as I brush tendrils of hair out of his face. He says he needs to get it cut, but I like it shaggier like this. It reminds me of when we first met, back in 2014, and the immediate impression he made at Zadie's Thanksgiving potluck: all those curls and the charisma of a New York lifer. When we met, I'd been in the city for almost two years, but my days at *The Current* kept me too busy to explore much of anything outside of midtown. Ben's intimate familiarity with the city was like touring Neverland under Peter's close supervision. He knew everything about every neighborhood: the best cafés for people watching, the barbershops with the underground speakeasies, the hole-in-the-wall pho joint personally consecrated by Anthony Bourdain. Before Ben Stear, I could count on one hand the number of celebrities I saw walking around in New York—I still wasn't used to living in the center of the world like that. But when I was with him, the city was our personal movie set: On our third date, at the Broadway premiere of his friend's play, I turned to my left and accidentally jostled one of Cynthia Nixon's icy elbows. Meeting Ben's parents had a similarly dazzling effect. Ann and Clement Stear were both Columbia professors, fluent in both Latin and the lingua franca of the Upper Both Sides. They invited us to monthly dinners in their Washington Heights brownstone, where they fed me things like coq au vin, fussed unironically over the neighborhood, and asked lots of questions about how I spent my entire day at *The Current* convincing advertisers to buy a full spread instead of a single page, four-color instead of black and white, in order to finance the type of magazine that in turn paid people like their son for their photographs and journalism. It was easy to like Ben's parents and both of his lawyer sisters, even though I found their family unit intimidating: a comprehensively educated clan of murky Anglo-Saxon origins, the type who would find DNA tests entertaining if they didn't already have a family tree detailed in Great-Grandma Stear's Bible.

The summer after Ben and I met, Ann and Clement invited me to spend August with them upstate, where, like many New Yorkers of a certain lineage and income bracket, they owned a cabin in the Hudson Valley. I was terrified of asking for that much time off at *The Current*, but when I mentioned the A-frame lodge in Beacon to Ted, he waved me off and told me to enjoy myself. “*Everyone* goes away for August,” Ted said, glancing at me with what I would later understand as a kind of welcome. Every morning that month, Ben and I would take the family’s matching set of clueless retrievers for a hike along the riverfront, and every afternoon, we’d come back to find Ann and Clement arranging an elaborate dinner spread and singing along to the radio, or rubbing aloe on each other’s sunburns. Sometimes I tried to picture them screaming at each other in front of the TV, or throwing things out car windows in fury, as an exercise to remind myself how different other people’s parents could be. Over the ensuing summers and long weekends, I could feel myself changing into the type of person who picked blueberries, wore L.L.Bean, and entertained her boyfriend’s dreams of photojournalistic acclaim while we rolled out pie crust together in his parents’ house upstate.

This past summer, our third together, Ben and I spent almost every weekend at the Beacon house. It had been rainy and muggy all season, and as we worked our way through a stack of puzzles and the HBO catalog, we talked about our plans for the coming year. Now that we were halfway through 2017, the reality of the new presidency was finally sinking in, so even though our lease on Bedford Avenue wasn’t up until early 2018, there was an urgency about this upcoming move, as if we had to prove to ourselves that whatever happened to the rest of the country, we’d still be fine. More than fine, in fact, after Ann and Clement drove up to join us for the back half of August and, after taking us aside one night, offered to help with a down payment for a real place of our own. A few days later, Ben’s sisters came up, too, for Labor Day. Surrounded by his family and the buzzing Hudson River mosquitos, Ben presented me with the family ring at dinner. The moment I said yes, the humidity felt wrung from the night air. Everything, even breathing, suddenly felt

easier. “He adores you, and so do we,” Ann said later that night when she and I were drying dishes in the kitchen. She smiled, and her approval felt as obvious as a full moon.



I put off telling my parents about the engagement until we were well into October. It wasn't hard, since I called only every few months to check in, and these conversations were always curt, half-hour exchanges of information relating to promotions and apartments and how much rain New York was getting lately. It was all surface-level stuff I designed to be unimpeachable, which is how all conversations involving my mother had been since college, when I'd announced the night before graduation that I wasn't going to stay and get my MBA after all, that I was looking at my chance to soak up more of that red-blooded American education my mother always worshipped and turning up my nose, because it “wasn't for me.” “How could you?” my mother hissed that night, once she realized the final stage of her daughter-project would never be fully realized. We'd been taking a stroll around the University of Chicago campus in anticipation of the ceremony the next day, and my mother became so furious that she turned and walked away from my dad and me, leaving us to follow her all the way back to the hotel, where she'd dead-bolted the door to the room and left my dad scrambling to book another when it was apparent she wouldn't let either of us in until graduation was over. It took months before she would even speak to me; it had now been years since I'd given her a real piece of news. So when I called about the engagement, my mother grew quiet on the phone. She knew I had a boyfriend but had never actually met Ben, so I didn't know if she found my news surprising, or if she was adding it as evidence to her unifying theory of how disappointing I continued to be. When she finally asked if there was a wedding date set already, I said no and laughed out of surprise that this was the only question she seemed to have about the whole thing. That was when the phone was passed over to my dad. He

knew only slightly more about Ben than my mother did; the last time he'd visited me in New York, Ben was conveniently out shooting a refugee camp in Greece. But my dad had seen our shared apartment and understood the meaning of Ben's various shoes interspersed with mine outside our door. Telling my dad about our engagement on the phone, though, meant explaining the Stears' cabin upstate and how I was already planning to spend another Thanksgiving with them there. My dad paused, then asked, if that were the case, would I think about coming home to Hickory Grove for Christmas. "It would be nice to meet Ben," he said.

I told him I would think about it, and later that night, as I relayed the conversation to Ben while we picked over an extra-large rainbow roll—I left the piece with the eel, his favorite, for him—he brightened.

"Of course we should go," Ben said. "I still haven't met your parents. Or, like, any of your childhood friends."

"I'm not really close with anyone back home."

"Well, I need to get to know your mom and dad at least. We just got engaged, remember?"

I knew Ben would want to go, that he found my reluctance confusing, but I got irritated all the same and said that he didn't know what it was like to even think about going back to Hickory Grove after eight years away. I reminded Ben that he'd technically never left his hometown, that he was a guy who'd spent his whole life on this one cluster of islands. Okay, Ben said, but didn't the year he spent backpacking in Thailand count? In response, I stabbed at a piece of salmon and pretended it was an issue of timing: My dad had suggested that we visit for the whole week leading up to Christmas. That was too long for a trip home, right? But Ben shrugged and said his calendar was clear; he was still looking for his next project, and it wasn't like *he* had an office job to answer to in the meantime. That was when I knew I was out of excuses.

Ben has always known that my relationship with my parents, especially my mother, is complicated. When we started dating, it took me more than a year to fill in any real detail beyond the bullet

points of my parents' immigrant success story and the resulting Chineseness that still seeped out at the edges of my personality, like when I'd insist on keeping our bedroom window closed at night, no matter the season. "Bad chi," I'd say with a dark expression that wasn't entirely exaggerated, and he was never quite sure how seriously to take me. I liked it that way and wanted to preserve this film of mystery between us for as long as I could, because it meant my life with him in New York was that much more removed from my childhood in Hickory Grove. Of course, Ben tried asking questions: Why didn't I ever go home? Why didn't I talk to my parents more than a few times on the phone every year? Why wasn't I fluent in Mandarin even though I could understand when the nail salon ladies were talking shit about my cuticles? These questions reached a fever pitch right after the election, when self-flagellation over what everyone had gotten wrong about the people from places like Hickory Grove was the thing to do. And I would just try to be funny about it. Once Ben asked me what I wanted to be as a kid, because obviously no one grows up dreaming of slinging ad space for a dying industry, and I'd joked, "Anything that wasn't a farmer or a disappointment." What else was I going to say? How do you explain a former life that's anything less than Rockwellian to a guy whose parents laid out rows of gleaming silverware for Sunday dinners on Riverside Drive? While Ben was being a regular tween roaming New York on his skateboard under Ann and Clement's loose dictates, I was working my way through ACT prep books in the stuffy computer room, or, once I finally got my license, forever gunning it home at eighty miles an hour to beat whatever arbitrary curfew I was under that week that made it impossible to do much of anything in between studying and sleeping and fighting with my mother.

"My parents aren't anything like your parents," I warned Ben that night over sushi in a last-ditch attempt to scare him off the trip. He patiently reminded me that this was a normal next step for us, as necessary as getting the Stear family ring sized properly. Once we took care of this, we could start seriously thinking about apartment

hunting and what we wanted to do about the actual wedding. “But we should do this first,” he said gently that night. Later, I phoned home and told my dad that it was all settled. Ben and I would spend the week in Hickory Grove for Christmas. Things at *The Current* would be slow enough by the end of the year that Ted wouldn’t mind that I was going “off the grid,” as he said, like I was heading into the Alaskan bush. Last night, as we were packing and I was agonizing over whether I’d need five-inch leather boots in Illinois, Ben said he was proud of me and that we’d do something fun for New Year’s Eve when we got back, like he could already see that I was tensing up for the whole ordeal, like I was a toddler who needed an incentivizing cookie dangled into view.

“You’re sure you’re up for this?” I asked him again as he shut his suitcase with a satisfied click.

“Of course,” he said, never one to turn down an adventure or to consider there could be a place on earth, much less the continental United States, that could ever feel inhospitable.

Objectively, I knew that Ben was charming and likable and a generally aware white guy, so it was silly to worry about introducing him to my parents. But this wasn’t a gap year adventure to a far-off locale. This was visiting my tiny midwestern hometown to meet my very impossible-to-impress, very Chinese parents, whom *I* had struggled to get along with my entire life. What if he met them and saw what they were like—and what Hickory Grove was like—and then never saw me the same way again? And what would they think of him, the first guy I’d ever brought home? On his own, my dad would be easy to win over: Ben would deploy his most gleaming smile and accompany him for a round of golf and it would be a done deal, the dowry of approval forked over with little hesitation. But my mother would be a different story. After a lifetime of reminding me of everything I’m not *enough* of—not grateful enough, not obedient enough, not loyal enough to live closer to home or smart enough to do the things she thought America was for—what would she think of Ben? Would she find Ben as inscrutable as everything else I’d chosen for myself, or could he actually be *enough* for her: a successful white

mei guo ren from a family of professors and lawyers who was proof that I could get at least one thing right? What Ben knows about my mother are the basics: that she's strict, exacting, judgmental; that she came to America to accompany my father on an engineering scholarship and made it as far as the associate manager level at the downtown department store before giving up on her own all-American career altogether. I always made sure to talk about her in loose platitudes, letting his rewatches of *The Joy Luck Club* and long-form articles about tiger moms color in the lines for me. There was no way to prepare him, anyway; things never went smoothly where my mother was concerned. I remind myself now, as the plane engine rumbles slightly, that no matter what happens, it'll only last a week. We'd get in, check the filial piety box off our to-do list, and get out with plenty of time to spare before the new year. And if we wanted, we'd never have to come back again.



The plane begins to circle Chicago. I watch Ben sleep with his head tilted back, cradling his camera bag between his feet. Crammed into the window seat, he resembles an overgrown teenager, his still-gangly arms and legs threatening to unfurl at any moment. I smooth out the collar of his shirt and tighten his seatbelt with a tug so it's no longer draped like a suggestion over his lap. The baby across the aisle stirs and I look back over. This time, I study the mother. She's in her early thirties, beautiful and clearly assured of it, with the same sleek bob a lot of the young international crowd wear around SoHo. She's asleep, too, one hand resting on the back of the baby's head, the other wrapped around her husband's arm, whom I can't see all that well but who I can tell is Asian, likely a Chinese national, too. Even if they weren't sitting in first class, I'd know they were definitely rich. Before I moved to New York, I couldn't always tell the difference between the types—new versus old, Wall Street cash versus Pilgrim money—but I feel pleased recognizing the father's wool slip-ons from a subway ad, which meant, first class

notwithstanding, this was a family still upwardly mobile enough to be susceptible to glossy marketing. Good for them, I decide, in order to head off the less generous thought that crosses my mind about how this baby would probably grow up to be any kind of asshole he wanted to be. He'd never have to fight about college majors or business school; he'd never end up doing the mental math on every life decision just to figure out how quickly he could enter the workforce to start paying it all back, while also stockpiling both savings and fealty for the more complicated decades to come with his parents. Because that was the other, realer reason for the visit. Secretly, I'd known the decision was already made the minute my dad hesitated on the phone and explained the additional motive he had for having us home for the holidays. "I have to have a procedure," he admitted. He said something about stress ulcers, which he dismissed right as I noted how weary his voice sounded. I asked if it was expensive, if he needed help paying for it. He ignored that and let a heavy pause import meaning into what he said next, about how it would be nice to have me around. "To help your mom around the house," he lied. What he didn't say was *So I don't have to be alone with her*. I googled *ulcerative colitis* on my phone and frowned. I tried not to think about how it was exactly like my dad to put himself last like this, both in the cadence of our phone conversation and as a line item on the calendar year's health insurance.

"Plus," he added, "it's been a long time since you've been home." *Eight years*, he could have reminded me, but didn't.

The plane shudders briefly and begins its gentle tilt downward. The pilot's voice crackles over the intercom as he promises beautiful weather ahead. I fish around in my purse for my little spray bottle of rosewater, which I spritz shamelessly over my face. Racist or not, Erin was right: The flight *was* dehydrating. Ben loves this stuff, so for good measure, I give him a light spritz on the face as he snores and then wonder if, in the last moments of this flight, before the protective barrier around our life gets peeled back, I should wake him and ask one more time if he's sure we should be doing this. Because what I really should have said when we first discussed the

visit over sushi, or maybe years ago at the beginning of our relationship, was that the Audrey Zhou he knew—the confident, polished girlfriend who had the intense job and perfect skin and was always down for whatever adventure he was concocting—she wasn't anything like the Audrey Zhou who grew up in Hickory Grove, the pathetic teenage wallflower whom I thought I'd long since disassembled and left behind in some forgotten storage unit of my mind. And I didn't know which Audrey to expect once we were back in Illinois.

As the plane shudders again, I clutch the armrest and lean over Ben to gaze out the window, where the brown-gray patchwork of fields and subdivisions blur into the gray pane of Lake Michigan. I take a few deep breaths and then look over across the aisle again. This time, the baby is awake, and he's staring back evenly.

CHAPTER

2

Outside the entrance for Terminal B, Ben and I scan the lanes of traffic whizzing by for my dad's SUV. It's just under fifty degrees, barely colder than it was in New York, and the heavy down coat I changed into preemptively in O'Hare is making me sweat. With his camera bag dangling from his left shoulder, Ben hoists my duffel over his right, and I can hear the watery contents shift. Last night, when we were packing, he made fun of me for bringing the entire contents of our bathroom counter, but I was too tired to explain to him that the supply chain for my favorite rice water foam cleanser did not extend into Peoria County, or that if I was facing my mother for a week, I needed to present the most poreless, faultless version of myself. He doesn't say anything about the bag now, and I rub his shoulder blade in thanks. The metaphor of Ben carrying it for me is not lost on either of us.

Now that we're actually off the plane and breathing in the damp Chicago air, the stakes of this entire trip settle like a weight that sinks further into my chest with every passing minute. As we wait for my dad to pick us up, I remind myself to give Ben more credit for simply being here, with a sliver of memorized Mandarin under his belt and a watchful concern that he lets slip when he thinks I'm not looking. Last night, when I reminded Ben that I haven't been back home in Hickory Grove since I left for college, he'd been so shocked. "But you've, like, *seen* your parents, right?" he asked. I shrugged and

said they visited occasionally, but it didn't feel important to detail these rare, strained visits, where my mother always managed to find fault with everything from the restaurant noise level to the overplucked arch of my eyebrows. Anything to telegraph her continued displeasure with my choice to be a sales rep—a barely glorified version of the annoying white women she worked with at the downtown Bergner's for a decade before getting laid off—and a definite waste of the University of Chicago degree she spent my childhood preparing me to secure. "We're just not that close," I'd told him.

"And now your dad's sick?"

No, I said quickly: It was an endoscopy. People got those all the time.

Ben seems like he wants to say something else now as we crane our necks to survey the traffic, but he knows not to press. Instead, he squeezes my hand.

"You know I'm proud of you for doing this," he says again.

"You're the one who wanted to come," I say, as part of another long-running gag where we know who's really doing the favor here.

Ben jokes that I can count this as his Christmas present as a blue Ford Escape, abrupt in its familiarity, pulls up. I see my dad waving at us through the window. He puts on his emergency flashers and hops out, giving me an awkward half hug and releasing me before I can decide whether I should lean into it and make it a real one. As my dad strains to heave one of my bags into the trunk, Ben leaps forward and lifts up the other end easily. I realize I'm holding my breath to see if Ben's going to do it, if he's going to go through and say *ni hao* like I heard him practice while shaving this morning, but he changes course at the last minute and flashes the same smile that's made him the lead image on our dentist's Instagram.

"Here, Mr. Zhou, I've got it," he says instead, pronouncing our last name so it rhymes not with *zoo* but *joe*, the way it's supposed to, although he hasn't quite mastered getting his teeth into the *zh* sound. Still, his effort impresses my dad, and I am slack with relief.

"Call me Feng," my dad says, obviously sizing Ben up for a beat.

“Dad, this is Ben,” I say unhelpfully, absorbing how surreal it is to see my fiancé, a six-foot-one white guy wrapped in a brushed wool peacoat, towering slightly over my Chinese father, who looks like he’s on his way to the office, all khakis and wrinkled collared shirt. They shake hands briefly. Then my dad slaps the side of the SUV like it’s a dependable Thoroughbred. “H Mart?” he proposes.

I get in the passenger seat and give what I hope is a reassuring nod at Ben in the back, where he sits with his camera bag between his knees. As my dad pulls out of the drop-off lane, hazards flashing—I’ll have to remind him later—I turn to get a better look at him, curling and uncurling my fingers inside my coat sleeves even as I tell myself that this is the easy part, that my dad has gone his entire life being accommodating, so why should he be any different when it comes to Ben? Now that I’m sitting next to my dad again, I can’t decide if he seems older or younger than his fifty-five years. His beard is speckled white now, one silver strand that he missed while shaving quivering on his left cheek. He seems both wider and skinnier; baggier, maybe, than when I saw him last year, when he was in New York for work, and Ben was in Greece, and I was supposed to take a client out to a baseball game. But when my client bailed, I convinced my dad to play hooky for the first time in his life to spend the afternoon in box seats at Yankee Stadium. I remember we said a dozen words to each other the whole game. When it was just the two of us, things felt at least peaceful.

My dad casually asks me to text my mother on his behalf of his safe arrival, so she knows he didn’t get into some apocalyptic crash on the interstate, which apparently remains high on the list of things that she obsessively fears, right up there with having a useless, mutinous daughter who moved far away, probably. I do so while avoiding reading too much into the existing text conversation between him and my mother, which is filled with sparse, misspelled texts in English about who noticed they were out of Lactaid and who was going to pick up more of it. Then my dad hands me the dashboard GPS and a jumble of cords. I’m almost positive it’s the same Garmin we used when he’d drop me off at marching band events in high

school a whole decade ago. “It doesn’t stick to the windshield anymore,” he grumbles.

I tell him it’s okay and pull up my phone, which feels ludicrously sleek next to the GPS in my other hand. “The H Mart on Grand Street, right?”

Ben leans forward, already fully briefed on the pit stop I knew my dad would insist on making, since the drive up to Chicago remained such a rarity for my parents and there were few Asian supermarkets below Cook County.

“It’s Whole Foods, but for Asian people,” I explained last night of my parents’ favorite go-to grocer.

“I *know* what H Mart is,” Ben reminded me. “There’s one by Astor Place.”

Dad pulls the SUV onto the highway, and I look out the window at the gray-green expanse of warehouses and strip malls we drive past and the black tree branches dividing like blood vessels into the chalky sky. It’s not quite home—Hickory Grove is still 170 miles away—but the suburban silhouettes are comforting while also being far enough removed that I know I won’t see anything, or anyone, too familiar. Ben leans forward from the back seat to ask my dad what he thinks of the Cubs’ chances next season, a line I know he prepared based on the intel I’d given him about the mystery of Zhou Feng, whose interests primarily rested on following organized sports and forever attempting to keep the peace. I lean my cheek against the familiar tautness of the seatbelt and close my eyes, listening to Ben and my dad talk. Ben’s being his sweetest and most charismatic self, taking care to slow down his speech from his usual manic New Yorker clip. He makes a joke about a pitcher that goes completely over my head, but my dad laughs and asks if Ben would want to hit the golf course with him while we’re here sometime, as long as the weather stays this warm.



When Ben and I first met three years ago, I’d just gotten promoted at *The Current*, which meant I could finally leave the loft I was

splitting in Bushwick with three wannabe writers for a slightly smaller railroad apartment I only had to share with one girl and her Roomba. Most of the time, I was at Zadie's place anyway. Zadie was my first friend in the city: As undergrads, we both interned at the same Chicago PR firm one summer and kept in touch after college, and now that I lived only three subway stops away, she took care to introduce me to her deep network of Brooklyn contacts and, more eagerly on her part, single guy friends. That November, Zadie had scored her first reporting job and moved in with her architect boyfriend. They were throwing a Friendsgiving feast for all of us who were stuck in the city (or, in my case, unwilling to go home) to celebrate their new, successful lives and their shiny, broker-scouted apartment in Clinton Hill. We'd only recently hit our mid-twenties, so for the rest of us, it was our first glimpse inside what we decided was a real adult apartment: one with a dark, skinny stretch of a hallway and no working buzzer, sure, but then the hallway opened up to a cavern of a living room kitted out with built-in shelves, a trash receptacle divided for four types of recycling, an enormous potted monstera, and a real leather sectional.

"Secondhand," Zadie said about the couch with a demure eye roll when I gave the place an appreciative once-over, hoping my compliments made up for the fact that I was an hour late from handling a last-minute work emergency and wearing my usual midtown uniform. Upon scanning Zadie's living room, where everyone was wearing thrifted sweaters and decisively ugly jeans, I felt like a kid playing dress-up in my work blazer and try-hard heeled boots. Everyone else was already chin-deep in the mounds of potatoes and salad and some extreme overachiever's homemade bread, so I stood at the edge of the hallway as Zadie took my coat. In the kitchen, her boyfriend was giving a detailed recap of his turkey roasting technique. I darted toward the bar cart and made myself a drink. It had been a long day, and I was hoping I could manage to eat quickly and slip out without having to talk to too many of Zadie's media friends. When a guy in a Penn sweatshirt—the subject of Zadie's latest Austenian scheme for me, I immediately knew—came over and started

telling me about his summer abroad in Beijing, I stifled a groan. He asked me where I was from, and when I said Illinois, he stared at me blankly. “Chicago,” he reasoned after a pause, and kept talking. I started scanning the room in search of rescue, which is how I landed on Ben, who was sitting on the rug next to Zadie’s giant houseplant, his head poking out between two of the enormous fronds. He was staring right back at me, looking as bored as I did, as he pretended to listen to a girl with a shaved head, whom I vaguely recognized as Zadie’s college roommate—Jasmin something? I remember thinking then that Ben seemed out of place within the staid domestic coziness of the evening even though his entire body was positioned in all the right angles to appear deeply interested in the Twitter dramatics everyone on the sectional was discussing. He was even skinnier then, basically a stack of bones under a barely contained dark mop of hair. In his hands, he fiddled with a camera, some old-fashioned model that I could tell still used actual film, but the full weight of his gaze was on me. He held eye contact for a moment, then glanced down at my boots and back up at me, and let a small grin unfurl across his face. I realized then that everyone else had taken their shoes off at the door, and Zadie must have been too polite to say anything. *That* embarrassed me, so I busied myself making a plate of food and then carefully spent most of the rest of the night on the other side of the living room, dodging Beijing’s Number One Fan and thinking about how my mother would die if she knew I’d forgotten to leave my shoes at the door of someone’s party. When Zadie’s boyfriend went to check on the pies, I took his place in the conversational ring around her and quietly asked who the guy with Jasmin was.

“Ben Stear? He and Jas went to high school together.” Zadie swiveled her head over to the couch with such immediacy that I winced. “You know, that arty one on the Upper West Side?” So even then I’d known Ben was a New York native. Zadie studied my reaction and tacked on a fact about how Ben only recently moved back to New York after backpacking in Thailand. I’d made a face at this, thinking of the Penn guy openly leering across the room, and Zadie laughed.

“No, Ben’s great. He’s just always up for whatever. And cute, right?” she said without missing a beat.

At the end of the night, the dozen or so people gathered in the living room clamored to take a group photo. I had gone to make another drink and returned as Ben, camera in hand, was trying to art direct everyone into place. “If you’re going to always be carrying that thing around,” Jasmin was saying, “you know we’re going to put you to work.”

It didn’t seem fair that he, a newcomer to the group, was automatically the odd one out for the photo, so I told Ben that I could take the picture if he wanted to be in it. Zadie waved from her spot on the couch and told me to stand over next to her, that I should let Ben do his work because he was a “professional.” I looked at Ben, only able to make eye contact with the column of his neck. “You’re a photographer?” I asked.

“Well, I’m working on it,” he said proudly, which felt refreshing. It made me think of the sad little desk in midtown I’d just left, so I said something about how it sounded like a meaningful thing to do. At this, he beamed a little and pretended to check the framing of the group. So far, he said, it was a lot of weddings. I stared at his hands, narrow and elegant around the body of the camera.

“You should get in, though, over by Zadie’s right,” Ben said. “It’ll put you in the center.”

I grimaced, not wanting to upstage Zadie. It was her party, after all, and she cared about these kinds of things. Then Ben leaned over to me and said it so quietly and quickly that I barely processed it:

“First rule of photography,” he said, throat bobbing. “You put the gorgeous girl in the middle.”

I choked on my drink. “Jesus,” I said. “I don’t even know you.”

He jutted his chin out at me in challenge. “But I think you want to.”

I forced myself to swallow and said it was nice to meet him, and then I practically bolted over to Zadie to take the picture. If it had been anyone else who said it, I would have found the line cheesy and condescending. But Ben was simply that sure about himself, I

could see already as I watched him crack a joke and make the entire room laugh. And he seemed just as sure about me. I was twenty-four, and no one had ever used that word, *gorgeous*, for me before. Ben waved his hand to get everyone to look at him for the shot, and I was too glad for the excuse.



I must have dozed off during the drive to H Mart, because I have to peel my cheek off the seatbelt when we park. The grain of the belt has left a patch on my cheek. My dad offers to let me stay in the car to sleep, as if I'm still the little kid he's carting around between errands, back when we'd make a game of how long we could stay out of the house. "No, no," I tell him, "I'm fine." I zip up my coat and get out of the car, and the three of us troop into the grocer together, Ben trailing with his camera slung over one shoulder like a quiver.

Inside, the instant confrontation with ninety thousand square feet of food laid out under a battery of flashing screens and fluorescent bulbs and plastic holly makes me want to stop and massage my temples a little. Ben snaps a few pictures. My dad observes Ben with a bemused expression. "He's very good," my dad remarks to me, as if he can tell just by the way that Ben glides through the produce aisle, even though I am sure that Ben is the first photographer, and journalist, and photojournalist, that my dad has ever met in his entire life. I take the shopping cart from my dad and follow him around as he gradually loses interest in watching Ben and then revs into grocery mode, picking out crates of Asian pears and fat persimmons and twelve whole cartons of the soft tofu on sale for ninety-nine cents each. Ben takes a few pictures of a bin overflowing with bok choy before putting his camera away, which I'm relieved about.

"It's a lot," I apologize as my dad bobs ahead of us in the produce aisles. I think about what else I should preemptively say that I'm sorry for, amid the strangeness of trailing after my dad in this random Chicago suburb H Mart, but Ben squeezes my hand and tells me to stop.

“You’re so stressed out.” He chuckles, and ordinarily this would be all it takes to make me roll my eyes and nod along, but I’m watching my dad closely so we don’t lose him in the soy sauce aisle. “Breathe,” Ben reminds me. “Everything is going great, okay?”

He takes the cart from me and gestures for me to climb onto the end. I want to humor him, so I do, and he steers the cart past rows of Spam and cellophane noodles, his eyes softening with satisfaction as I try to tell him to slow down but start laughing instead. Maybe this *was* a good idea, bringing my chronically starry-eyed fiancé home. If anyone could handle this trip, it was going to be Ben, Mr. Up for Whatever, and as long as I had him with me, that made me the soon-to-be Mrs. Up for Whatever. And that meant I was truly coming back to this place as a different person than the one who left. How stupid it was to worry about Ben on this trip when being slightly out of place, I realize, has always been his natural element.



The morning after her potluck, Zadie, who always knew when a story was afoot, called and demanded to know what I thought of the whole night before casually bringing Ben up.

“Jasmin said he asked a lot of questions about you,” she said finally. “Like, if you’re single.”

I was glad she couldn’t see me redden over the phone. “And?”

“I said you’re married to *The Current*.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“It’s true. You work like a crazy person. *I* never get to see you.”

I said something back about how that wasn’t entirely my fault; she was too busy plotting how to get her boyfriend to propose.

“So?” Zadie sniffed. “How about you hurry up and get together with Ben, and then we can be boring Brooklyn gentrifiers together?”

I made a noncommittal sound, allowing myself to think back to Ben calling me gorgeous in the middle of a crowded living room.

“Anyway, he asked for your number, and I gave it to Jasmin.” She sighed, clearly unimpressed with the response she was getting from

me. "He's very good-looking. And Jas said he interned for Annie Leibovitz once."

"Zadie, I'm not trying to hire the guy."

"I'm just *saying*. He's impressive."

Later that night, after coming home from a run around the park, I got a text message from a number with a 917 area code asking if I was free for a movie on Friday. I opened my calendar on my phone and dragged open a new box, typing in *Date with B?* as if I couldn't believe it could really be that easy. When Friday rolled around, I considered canceling on Ben because there was an outing with the other sales reps on my floor, and I knew that a night spent sucking up to Ted and the rest of management would be infinitely more practical than going to an obscure art house film with some guy, as cute and probably even funny as he was. Work I could always count on; people, less so. But Ben sent me a text at lunch to confirm the movie time and ask what kind of snacks I liked; he even specified where we should meet out in front of the Angelika. The idea that someone was thinking through this category of details for me, after I'd spent the entire week smoothing over a battery of egos at work, felt irresistible. So at seven on the dot, I met him out on the theater's front steps, where he surprised me immediately with a kiss on the cheek.

"You look nice." Ben smiled. "I'm glad you wore those boots again."

I was pleased that he'd noticed. He was wearing a corduroy jacket and jeans and sneakers that matched only in degrees of studied shabbiness, but he was so handsome that it somehow balanced out the way we fit together as he led the way into the theater, holding a tub of popcorn against his chest and taking my elbow to guide me down the aisle. The movie was this indulgent nostalgia trip where the timeline was all jumbled up and the effect was supposed to be purposefully scattering, which I hated, so I spent the whole film watching the light from the scenes change on Ben's face. He was utterly engrossed and didn't speak at all until near the very end, when the credits were rolling and we were sitting quietly in the

emptied theater, and then he leaned over and asked if he could kiss me. We made out until they turned the lights on. I couldn't stop blushing, but Ben thought it was the funniest thing in the world, and I remember walking out the door holding hands slicked with popcorn grease, feeling so pleasantly dissociative that I wondered if this was what Zadie meant when she talked about doing ketamine.

It was raining outside the theater, and Ben produced an umbrella instantly, like he'd planned this detail, too. I was still considering how much more impressive that was than any prestigious photography internship when an unshaven man stopped us to ask for a dollar. "Hey, man," Ben said, as casually as if he were greeting a former classmate. For a minute, Ben leaned over to chat—I couldn't hear about what—and then gave the man our umbrella. Before I could say anything, Ben held his jacket heroically over my head and we ran down Houston to find the nearest bar, almost running right into traffic because of the way every atom of our bodies was tilted toward each other.

It was funny how quickly everything happened after that, though it wasn't as if I had a lot of romantic history for comparison. Before Ben, I had Ted and my clients; there wasn't time for anything else. Before New York, college was a string of aimless miscommunications. And before all that, there was high school, and high school revolved around one person, one particular unrequited mess that I made myself stop thinking about a long time ago, since maybe the minute I left Hickory Grove and at last saw my warped memories of all those long drives down Route 91 and locker run-ins for what they were: humiliating and useless and oddly forgettable as soon as I'd breached the county line. With Ben, everything was clear. One night, a few weeks after that movie date, we were cooking dinner at his apartment, and he looked up as he was dicing onions and said, "You know we're good together, right?" Just like that. I was thrilled by this, how he spoke things into being, like God. So I didn't think twice about always picking up the dinner tab or letting him stay with me when his J-train building got condemned at last. We both knew I was making twice as much just on commission as he was,

especially when he cut back on the wedding photography and started applying for photojournalism grants in earnest, so we quickly came to an unspoken agreement. Over that first year together, Ben did the cooking and the cleaning, the optimizing of weekend plans, the Black Friday strategizing when it came time to buy a new TV, all while remaining unembarrassed about letting me be the breadwinner. My work friends, who'd all been a little skeptical about the economics of dating a freelance photographer, signed their full letter of support when one of Ben's pictures from the migrant camps in Greece landed on the front page of *The New York Times* and kicked up chatter as a Picture of the Year contender. In short order, Ben had his pick of magazine assignments, which made it possible for us to move to a one-bedroom in Williamsburg, where we've lived ever since.



Farther into the bowels of H Mart, my dad holds up a shrink-wrapped packet of pork belly and asks if I still like hong shao rou. I nod and push the cart over to where he's evaluating a few bloody cuts of meat and checking them against a list on his phone. He asks what I think about doing pork tomorrow, brisket Saturday, and maybe a hot pot later in the week, and I tell him we don't have to decide it all now. "I was hoping they'd have lamb," my dad says with a sigh, tucking his phone back into his belt holster. "They don't always have it in stock, but I wanted to do something special since you're home, finally."

Pretending not to notice how his voice bent on the last word, I take the pork belly off his hands and set it in the cart. "You know I'm trying not to eat that much meat anyway," I say.

"Why? Meat is good for you," he replies indignantly, the way I knew he would.

We continue to the seafood section, where the open tanks of king crabs, lobsters, and what looks like an entire school of trout jostling for space are. I instinctively steel myself for Ben to register the smell,

but instead he examines the smaller blue crabs crawling on a metal tray nearby and takes a picture. My dad walks over to show Ben the thick brown paper bags stacked nearby and launches into a story about the rare summer when the tiny Asian grocer in Peoria, before it went out of business, had stocked live crabs. This was back when I was maybe seven or eight, and my dad describes how freaked out I was to sit in the car next to the bag of crabs scabbling against one another all the way home. Ben and my dad share a good laugh over this, and then my dad asks if we should get a few for tonight. I realize he isn't searching for my approval so much as Ben's, so I watch as they crouch around the tray like excited kids, my dad using tongs to coax each reluctant crab into the bag Ben is holding. When one falls to the floor and tries to scuttle away, Ben leans down, picks it up with his hand, and drops it in the bag without hesitation. My dad turns and gives me this obvious look that says, *Okay, I love this guy*. I feel my shoulders lower.

An hour and two overloaded carts later, Ben and I wheel over to the checkout, where a handful of local teenagers stand snapping their gum and arguing over which K-pop act is playing on the speakers. My dad reappears with a few bags of watermelon seeds, his greatest vice, and winks at me as he sets them on the conveyor belt. I glance at the teens. We're still too far out from Hickory Grove to accidentally lock eyes with anyone I might know, so I relax and take my place at the end to bag everything. Ben joins me. Even though he doesn't say anything, I know he's disappointed by all the plastic, and I make a mental note to remind my parents to use those reusable grocery totes I'd sent them a few years ago, at least for the week Ben and I are around.

In the car, my dad and Ben share a bag of watermelon seeds, spitting the shells out into an empty Kleenex box. I turn around and mouth "Thank you" at Ben, and he just gives me that reassuring grin. Then we all settle into the comfort of the SUV for the three-hour drive down the spine of Illinois, where we watch the suburbs and strip malls dematerialize into muddy fields. By now, it's almost five, and the gray December night has already settled in. I sit with

my hands in my lap, twisting my ring. From the rearview mirror, I watch Ben observing the smudge of the horizon. He seems thoughtful, and I think back to all the times when he asked me about where I was from and I'd deflected with a quip. I could have made more of an effort. Soon we'll be entering Hickory Grove, and it will be impossible to write off the reality of living under my parents' roof and driving around the same roads and possibly even running into people who wouldn't even recognize me anyway, not after eight years, not after all the pains I've taken to scrape and buff away the remaining edges of the person no one ever totally understood anyway. And even if anyone did recognize me, what better way to go into those encounters than with Ben alongside to help tamp down the old Audrey and offer living proof that the new Audrey, the *real* Audrey, has been doing great.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *CENTRAL PLACES: A NOVEL* by Delia Cai.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).

THE
STRANGE
INHERITANCE
OF LEAH
FERN

A NOVEL



RITA
ZOEY
CHIN

"A bittersweet and achingly tender novel . . . in which magic, loss, and possibility change not only the characters but the reader, too."

—KELLY LINK, AUTHOR OF
GET IN TROUBLE

The Strange Inheritance of Leah Fern

First published in 2022 by Melville House

Copyright © Rita Zoey Chin, 2022

All rights reserved

First Melville House Printing: October 2022

Melville House Publishing

46 John Street

Brooklyn, NY 11201

and

Melville House UK

Suite 2000

16/18 Woodford Road

London E7 0HA

mhpbooks.com

@melvillehouse

ISBN: 978-1-61219986-3

ISBN: 978-1-61219987-0 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022938608

Design by Patrice Sheridan

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress



IT WAS APRIL 4, 1984, in the Alabama fields of the Blazing Calyx Carnival, and Leah had just blown out the six candles adorning a chocolate-covered mound of fried dough. Her wish was the same wish she wished each time she saw the first star appear in the sky: to meet a real live elephant. “Did you wish for elephants again?” her mother asked, tapping her cigarette against the rim of the ashtray. Leah plunged her fingers into the melted chocolate. She didn’t answer because Perilous Paul had told her that you should never tell a wish if you want it to come true. Her mother reached across their little fold-up table and stroked Leah’s cheek. Her eyes

went shiny as they sometimes did when she felt what she called “a little love spell” coming on. “When you were born,” she said, “right here, in this very trailer, I had no idea what to call you. You were such a sensitive baby. I could tell right away you were different.” Leah watched the tip of her mother’s cigarette glow orange as she pressed it between her lips and was mesmerized by how the cigarette changed before her eyes, just like one of her mother’s magic tricks. “You were always looking around with those big eyes of yours as if you already knew everything there was to know, secret things. And you never wanted to sleep. That summer, when you were only a few months old, you’d stay up all night just looking, not making a sound. And I thought of a legend I once read about, how if you find the seed of a fern in bloom on a midsummer night, you get special powers.”

“Powers?” Leah asked, pushing a handful of dough into her mouth.

“You become invisible, and then only will-o’-the-wisps can see you.”

“Will-o’-the-wisps?”

Jeannie nodded slowly for emphasis. “Yep, that’s right. Will-o’-the-wisps. Spirits made of light. And when you find them, they lead you to hidden treasures that no one else can see.”

“What kind of treasures?”

“I don’t know,” said Jeannie, pulling hard enough on her cigarette to make it crackle. Her voice crackled, too, when she exhaled. “You’ll have to tell me when you find the seed.”

Leah smiled. “I’ll take you with me,” she said, “to the treasure.”

“Nah, I’ll always be just a person,” she said pensively, tapping her ash and looking out at a distance Leah couldn’t see. “But you,

Miss Fern, are different. That's why you're not named after a person. You're named after magic."

"Did your mama name you Jeannie Starr because she knew you'd be a magic star?"

Leah's mother stubbed her cigarette out in a small orange ash-tray. "My mama never knew anything about me."

"Why not?"

She reached for Leah's face again but stopped midway, as suddenly as if something had bitten her hand. "You just eat your sweets, okay? That was a long, long time ago."

Leah thought for a moment. "Do I have a dad?" she finally asked.

Leah's mother laughed the kind of laugh that isn't really a laugh. "Ah, your daddy," she said, "could have been any one of a few handsome cowboys."

LATER THAT DAY, Leah's two favorite friends—Her-Sweet, the Bearded Lady, and the Rubberband Man, the carnival's contortionist—arrived bearing gifts. Her-Sweet presented Leah with a book called *The Almost Anything You Might Ask Almanac*, and the Rubberband Man unveiled a crystal ball with a wooden stand, thereby tapping Leah on the top of her head with one spindly finger and declaring her The Youngest and Very Best Fortuneteller in the World. Leah didn't know if he was serious or joking, but she liked the way the sphere turned everything upside down when she peered into it.

Jeannie bent down to get her own look inside the crystal. "I keep telling you, I think she's too young," she said, exhaling a fresh stream of cigarette smoke that swirled over the crystal.

But the next day, the Rubberband Man sat Leah down in a tent at a small round table adorned with her new crystal ball and a white egg timer. Four black pillar candles burned on slim wooden tables, one in each corner of the tent. From a small cassette deck Romani music played in the background, while on a poster on the wall opposite Leah, an elephant charged toward her. Jeannie had sent her off that morning wrapped in one of her magic capes—a diaphanous crimson silk edged with purple velvet and silver sequins—that hung to the floor on Leah. “You’re gonna tell people their fortunes,” the Rubberband Man explained as they walked toward the tent, while Leah tripped every few steps on the velvet edge of the fabric. “With those eyes of yours, and those smarts, people will listen to anything you say.”

Leah fidgeted in her dazzling cape. “But I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell ’em something about themselves. Whatever you feel.”

“What if I don’t feel anything?”

“Then tell ’em one of your stories. Or tell ’em something that might happen to ’em—best to make it nice, though. Or just tell ’em something you know.” And as he stepped out of the tent, he turned back. “Just do what comes natural. And remember, hit the timer when they sit down!” Within seconds she could hear the Rubberband Man’s voice rollercoasting outside the tent. “Step up, step up! Get your fortune told by the World’s Youngest and Very Best Fortuneteller! This six-year-old marvel will blow your mind!”

She went along with the Rubberband Man’s idea not because she understood what she was supposed to be doing, or even what a “fortune” really was, but because she loved him. What she loved most, besides his gentle nature and his smooth bald head, which always

smelled faintly of cloves, was that being with him was like opening a treasure chest filled with mysterious things. Sometimes the mysteries came when he pointed up at the night sky and described event horizons or when he talked about the phenomenon of frog rain or when he showed her a phantom inside a piece of quartz: “If you look into the crystal,” he showed her, holding it up to the light, “you can see how it’s grown. You can see the ghost of what it used to be.” But other times the mysteries glowed inside him, still unrevealed, and Leah liked simply knowing they were there.

“It’s love, I tell ya. It’s all love!” he sang. “This child will *enlighten* you! She will *enliven* you! She will *resurrect* you!” And with that, Leah’s first client, a soft-bellied woman in a shirt patterned with peacock feathers, entered the tent. Leah pressed the button on the timer the way the Rubberband Man showed her, but she had no idea what to do next. So she sat calmly, radiant in her mother’s crimson, and watched the woman. The woman, who appeared to be in her sixties, stood at a distance, holding up one skeptical eyebrow.

“Would you like to sit down?” Leah asked.

The lady smoothed the fronts of her slacks in flat, measured strokes. “I don’t really believe in this,” she started. “And look at you. Such a wee thing. You should be off playing hopscotch, not sitting here pretending you know things you don’t know.”

Leah touched the top of the crystal ball nonchalantly with her fingertips. “I’m not pretending,” she said. “I know a lot of things.”

“Like what?” asked the woman. She took a few steps toward the table. “What do you know?”

Leah clasped her hands on the table. “I know about elephants.”

“What do you know about elephants?”

“Pretty much everything. I know their herds are led by females.” Leah scratched her forehead. “They’re called cows.”

“Cows, huh? I didn’t know that. The woman took another step toward Leah. “What else do you know?”

“I know you didn’t tell the truth.”

“I beg your pardon?” The woman stepped back and folded her arms across a row of peacock feathers.

“When you said you don’t believe. That wasn’t true.”

The woman half exhaled, half laughed. “How do you know that?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you *don’t* know?”

“No, I know. I just don’t know *how* I know,” Leah corrected.

“You have pretty eyes. Do you know that?”

“Do you want to sit down?” Leah asked again, reaching her hand out in a sweeping gesture, the way she’d seen her mother do when she invited someone onto the stage before sawing them in half.

“All right.”

The lady approached the empty chair and lowered herself onto the flimsy seat without taking her eyes off Leah. “So, what do you know about my future?”

Leah knew a lot about elephants, about their diet and behavior, about how their bodies worked. She knew a little about magic tricks, mainly that the trick is to make people look where you want them to look, not where they want to look. She knew how to read books meant for older children, including science books. She knew that sprites are patterns of red lightning over thunderheads and that snowflakes form from specks of dust. She

knew that birds evolved from dinosaurs, that we're made from the explosions of stars, and that one can make a smoke bomb for a magic show by combining sugar, baking soda, and potassium nitrate. She knew how to count to one hundred in Spanish, and she knew her mother was the most beautiful woman in the carnival. But what any of that had to do with her own future, let alone the future of this now eager-eyed stranger sitting across from her, she didn't know. So Leah simply asked the woman to put her hands on the crystal ball.

"Like this?" the woman asked, tentatively cupping both palms around the sides of the crystal.

Leah nodded as if she'd done this a thousand times before. Then she placed her small hands over the woman's hands. But before she could even close her eyes, she felt a weight on her chest that took her breath. Leah drew her hands back and, in doing so, startled the woman.

While Leah was used to knowing how people around her were feeling at any given moment—she knew from across the room, for instance, when Her-Sweet was sad, even if she was smiling; she knew by the pitch of Hank's voice when he'd be paying a visit to their trailer to see her mother; and she knew from the moment her mother opened her eyes in the morning whether she'd dreamed good dreams or bad—an ability that had always been intensified by physical contact—she had never felt an awareness of another person in her own body as powerfully as she did now. Did the crystal ball actually work? Was it her mother's magic cape?

The woman looked at Leah anxiously. "What is it? What did you see?"

The Rubberband Man had told her to say something nice, but he also told her to do what came naturally, so Leah sat frozen, not knowing which to do.

“Is it bad?” the woman asked. “It’s something bad, isn’t it?”

“Your heart isn’t smooth,” Leah confessed.

“What do you mean it isn’t smooth?” demanded the woman in a shaky voice.

“It’s a little bit bumpy. Kind of like the Peppermint Punch roller coaster.” Leah reached out and touched the lady’s hand once more, this time for comfort. “But it’s a good heart. It’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure,” the woman asked, tears filling her eyes, “that it’s a good heart?”

Leah sensed that something had shifted, that now they were having a different conversation. “Yes.” Leah nodded purposefully. “It’s a very good heart.”

“Thank you,” said the woman, pulling a tissue from her purse and dabbing at her eyes. “I wasn’t sure. I was never sure.”

Leah gave the crystal ball a quick peek, to see if maybe something would be revealed to her in it, but nothing appeared.

“What else do you know?”

Leah thought for a moment, running the cape’s edge through her fingertips. “One way to tell the difference between an Asian elephant and an African elephant is that an African elephant’s ears are shaped like Africa.”

“That’s wonderful, dear. But what about my future? What else about my future?”

Leah looked up at the elephant poster behind the woman. “That is your future,” she said.

“Yes,” said the woman, nodding gravely, as if she had just been handed the answer to her life. “Yes, of course.”

And at that moment, as if by design, the timer buzzed.

“Please exit to the left,” Leah instructed.

And so began Leah’s first job. She was an instant success, sitting calmly, sage-like, unlike most children her age, as she placed her hands on people’s hands and told them what she felt, told them elephant facts, told them stories: “And Ozzy, the peanut-shaped elephant—elephants don’t actually *like* peanuts, so he would have rather been shaped like a banana—had a special gift none of the other elephants had: he could speak. He knew three sentences: ‘I am Ozzy,’ ‘Some winds lift me,’ and ‘I love you.’”

And that, she quickly learned, was what people cared about the most—that they were loved. Sure, people asked about jobs, health, childbearing, lifespans, but the questions, no matter how uncomfortable it made people to ask them, almost always led back to love. The question of love came in all tenses—*was I loved, am I loved, will I be loved*—and varied measures—who loves me, whom do I love, how much I am loved, does person X love me more than person Y, what makes love love, am I truly lovable, and so on. Yes, Leah told them again and again. *You are loved.*

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE STRANGE INHERITANCE OF LEAH FERN* by Rita Zoey Chin.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

"I loved being inside this skillful novel . . . and in the heads
of some wonderfully tangy old Texan ladies."

—EMMA STRAUB, author of *ALL ADULTS HERE*

THE OLD PLACE

A NOVEL



BOBBY FINGER

PUTNAM

— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2022 by Robert Finger

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission.

You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Finger, Bobby, author.

Title: The old place: a novel / Bobby Finger.

Description: New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [2022] | Identifiers:

LCCN 2022019072 (print) | LCCN 2022019073 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593422342 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593422359 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Pastoral fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3606.I53378 O43 2022 (print) |

LCC PS3606.I53378 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220422

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022019072>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022019073>

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Title page art: Linen background © Limolida Design Studio / Shutterstock

Book design by Alison Cnockaert

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

1



MARY ALICE ROTH WOKE UP AND STARED AT THE BIG OLD trunk, which may as well have been a reflection. Unmoved for years, the hunk of carved, glossy hardwood sat under the window in her bedroom because she'd lost the only people strong enough to lift it somewhere else. At her age, the number of able bodies in a household doesn't tend to change, and neither does the way you sleep, which meant Mary Alice—the sole inhabitant of 4 County Road 1818 for over ten years and a left-side sleeper since she was in a crib—knew that for the rest of her life, the first thing she'd see in the morning would be a hideous antique trunk she hated more than just about anything else in the world. And now she couldn't get rid of it even if she tried, unless she wanted to throw out her back and spend hours moaning on the floor hoping someone would knock on the door and check on her. It was that sort of terrible, bottomless pit of a fact that made her wish she were dead. But she wasn't, not today at

least. So she silenced the buzzing clock and began another week of living. What else was there for her to do, anyhow?

For most of her sixty-three years, Mary Alice held a grudging respect for mornings and the way they provided a solid foundation to the structure of her busy days, but lately they'd felt absurd. Starting a new day knowing you had nothing to make or do was utterly ridiculous, maybe even sinful. Monotony was only acceptable if imbued with some sort of greater purpose—like providing for a family or teaching math to the bright-eyed youth of small-town America—and Mary Alice hadn't figured out her new one yet. But a tiny, if fading, speck of hope that she would eventually sort out this stage of her life remained, so she flipped off the covers with a grunt and twisted her tall, bony body out of the four-poster. Seated, feet on the floor, she kept her eyes on that trunk as she offered the house a single droning sigh, a reminder that she was still here, and stood. Her joints were old, but they didn't creak. Her body was tired, but it didn't ache. Frailty would have been a welcome excuse to let herself wallow horizontally a little longer, but like all the women in her family, who had been growing old in this part of Texas since arriving from Germany some 150 years ago, she was cursed with good health and a revulsion to wasted time.

Today was the first day of classes at Billington Independent School District, a sprawling complex of small-to-smallish redbrick buildings and rusty tin just off the old highway, which itself was just off the new highway—the past butt up against the present. Had this been a normal year, Mary Alice Roth would have been among the scores of other employees, getting there early to memorize a handwritten seating chart she hid in the locked top drawer of her matte green metal desk, drinking warm coffee out of a thick mug stamped

with a faded BHS logo, and basking in the light from the wall of windows she refused to obscure with decorations. But today, Mary Alice was exactly where she'd been for the past three months. She was home.

Earlier that summer, a few weeks into her district-mandated exile—or compulsory leave, or forced retirement, or whatever flowery term they ultimately chose to call it once that Josie Kerr swooped in and took over her old classroom—Mary Alice confronted two fundamental things about herself. The first was that she hated doing nothing. The second was that, without a job, she had nothing to do. That her next-door neighbor, Ellie Hall, happened to call at the very moment of her epiphany one June morning was lucky for the both of them, as the friendly check-in—one of their long-standing regular chats that was comforting, if superficial and always the same—quickly became an even friendlier standing invitation.

Here's how it happened: Ellie asked about Mary Alice's summer plans now that she was unemployed, and Mary Alice laughed. Mary Alice asked about Ellie's work, knowing full well that she hated talking about work, and Ellie laughed. So they did what Texans always loved to do, though they may deny it if asked: they complained about the heat. This led to complaining about the new priest, which eventually transitioned into gossiping about the family who moved into Margaret Rose's old house. He was a former Billington High School prom king, she was a city girl he dragged back home along with their son, and they must have gotten a great deal because Margaret Rose smoked at least a pack a day in that living room for eighty years. That place didn't just need a coat of paint, they decided. It needed new walls. Every old house comes with ghostly memories of its former inhabitants, but Margaret Rose's walls were a sickly yellow with tar

caked onto every surface. Billington got noticeably quieter the day she died, they agreed just before their chatter began to wane. They'd never expected to miss the sound of her wheezing cough.

After even considerable time spent apart, the best of friends can usually start back up again as though only seconds have passed, but there was more than just time between Mary Alice and Ellie's last long chat. There was loss, too much of it. But this morning meant something, Ellie decided, so she tried her best to regain momentum, and there was no better way to do so than with gossip. She asked if Mary Alice had heard the news about the wife. No, Mary Alice had *not* heard that the wife had been hired at BHS; she'd deliberately avoided all news about that den of cowards and thieves masquerading as educators, and her casual acquaintances knew better than to say anything that might cause her ruffle-hungry feathers to as much as twitch. Ellie didn't need to explicitly mention that the wife was given Mary Alice's old job; it was obvious in her anxious delivery and confirmed by the silence that followed. And Mary Alice knew in that empty moment that Ellie regretted bringing it up and was about to say goodbye, so she blurted out, "Would you want to come over for coffee tomorrow morning?"

"You know the last time I had coffee at your place?"

"No, I don't."

"That's 'cause it's never happened before," Ellie said with a hearty laugh that made Mary Alice smile so big she got nervous someone might see. When was the last time anyone else had been in her house?

"Well, I'm sorry for being such a crummy neighbor all these years. How about I make it up to you tomorrow morning. All you have to do is show up."

“Well,” Ellie said, with a hesitation that made Mary Alice’s smile fade.

“Does seven-thirty work?”

Ellie said it did, surprising both of them.

THE NEXT MORNING, Ellie pushed open the gate on the south side of Mary Alice’s house, its rusty hinge casting out a piercing squeak, and followed a short trail through the bushes onto her back patio, a covered, polished concrete rectangle with tiers of potted plants on wrought iron shelves in every corner and two large white Adirondack chairs in the center, facing the fenced backyard. A plastic side table was between them, with just enough room for the hot plate and coasters Mary Alice brought out from the kitchen. She removed her glasses and started filling two mugs as soon as the hinge squeaked.

“What, no eggs and bacon?” Ellie said as she stepped into the shade.

“Coffee’s enough breakfast for me,” Mary Alice said.

“I’m only pickin’ on you.” She sat and faced the pale yellow cornfields that began just past the fence and stretched all the way to the horizon. Mesquite trees dotted the edges of their view, jagged reminders of the land’s fraught history. The tinkling from the wind chime came to an abrupt stop, as if the wind realized it was interrupting something momentous.

Mary Alice’s mind raced. Another person on her patio! Was Ellie here out of pity or loneliness? Would it happen again or was it just going to be today? She used her own voice to drown out her thoughts. “You don’t take milk, do you?”

“Heavens no.”

“It’s ‘hell no’ in this house, you know that,” Mary Alice said. “So the coffee’s good then? Tastes fine?”

“Better than what they’ve got at the hospital,” Ellie said. “And even if it weren’t, I’d drink every drop anyway.”

And with that, after twelve years of awkward pleasantries, they were friends again. Not just neighbors, but actual friends. Friends who met face-to-face, who made each other laugh, and who could be happier than they’d been in years simply by sitting side by side in silence. All it took was a phone call and a pot of caffeine. Mary Alice turned her gaze to Ellie, eager to change the subject. She looked her friend up and down and squinted, craning her neck over the hot plate as she examined the pattern covering Ellie’s body. “I never see you in your scrubs. What’s all over those? Kittens?”

“Puppies.”

Mary Alice’s eyes narrowed even further, then popped wide open. “Oh, I see now.”

“Kittens are Tuesdays.”

They laughed a gentle, early-morning laugh and looked back to the sky, which had gotten a little brighter, as the dawn sky always manages to do. Thirty minutes later, Ellie was gone. Three hours after that, Mary Alice finished her book—a meandering experimental novel about a beloved radio host preparing for his final shows—wrapped the cord around the hot plate, and went back inside. Every time this new version of their friendship began to excite her and feel like something that could become permanent, Mary Alice snuffed out all flickers of optimism from her mind. She would enjoy their moments together as she was in them but would not yearn for more than Ellie was willing to give. She would distract herself from intrusive thoughts with another book, something propulsive and surprising.

She would keep tabs on her neighbors, which was easier than keeping tabs on herself. Avoiding disappointment was a full-time job, and her schedule had just opened up.

Two beams of light burst through the living room window that night as Mary Alice stabbed her fork into the final piece of steamed broccoli resting on her plate. Ellie was home from work. Not ten minutes later she phoned Mary Alice to tell her about a child with a broken arm who thought her scrubs were kittens, too, isn't that funny? And then, to suggest that they have coffee again tomorrow.

A week of mornings later, Ellie said she'd bring the coffee the following day; all Mary Alice needed to do was turn on the hot plate and bring out the mugs. At some point, an egalitarian schedule just sorted itself out without too much talking, the sort of thing that marks a friendship as true, even if it took a decade or more to get there. Mary Alice would make the coffee on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; Ellie would take Tuesdays and Thursdays, transporting her own carafe the two hundred feet or so from her back door to her neighbor's. "It takes thirty days to create a habit," Mary Alice often told her son, Michael, when confronted by his unmet potential. Turns out she'd been wrong. Sometimes it took just under ten.

Every morning since their meetups began some two months ago, Mary Alice walked downstairs into the kitchen, removed the hot plate from a drawer beneath her old coffee maker—whose once white plastic had aged into a pale sepia—and grabbed two mugs from the cabinet above it. Then, as she walked to the sliding door, the saying came to her as it always did. *Every morning I wake up alive*, she thought. *I celebrate with coffee.*

Twenty-four years earlier, she and her husband, Samuel, had driven two hours, plus a miserable hour-long detour, to take Michael

to SeaWorld, which he didn't enjoy as much as they wanted—or needed—him to. In his defense, though, the park *was* a little awful. Overcrowded, overpriced, and impossible to navigate without overheating. Lines for its few rides, if you could call them that, were an hour long apiece; all three of them got sunburned. And the main attraction—the show with the poor, imprisoned orca who seemed thrilled in all the commercials—was cut short when an employee tripped on the stage, knocked his head on a fake rock, and rolled into the tank. They soon found out that the giant cloud of blood made his injury seem worse than it was, but the show was still canceled for the remainder of the day for draining and cleaning. “Blood,” Samuel said, covering his own eyes along with Michael’s. “I can’t look at the blood.”

They stopped for a late lunch on the way home at a Cracker Barrel near the park. Every other Shamu fan must have had the same idea because the line for a table was endless and the waiting area-cum-gift shop smelled like chlorine and SPF 50. Mary Alice didn't even want to bother putting their name on the list, but Michael was hungry and Samuel very sternly reminded her that they wouldn't be home for at least two more hours anyway. “We’re not going to get him addicted to chicken nuggets and French fries,” he said as a closer. Mary Alice almost argued that a place like this was just as unhealthy as fast food, only more expensive, but knew it would only make things worse. Plus, Michael was more excited by the kitschiness of the restaurant than any of the animals at SeaWorld, and she liked seeing him happy. Seeing him happy was the whole point.

She and Samuel ambled through the crowded aisles behind Michael without saying a word to each other as he darted from display to display, first zoning in on the cheaply made plastic toys in one

corner, then transitioning to home decor. He picked up one sign and stammered through its factory-printed message word by word. "If . . . Momma . . . a . . . uh . . . a-need . . ."

"Ain't," Mary Alice said. "That's OK, it's a new word. A confusing word, too. 'Ain't' means 'is not.'"

"If Momma ain't hap . . . py . . . ain't no . . . body happy!" He lowered the sign and looked up at his mother, searching her eyes for praise.

"What do you think that means?"

His face dropped. The excitement, gone in a poof. "It means," he said, lingering on the thought for a few more seconds, "if you're happy, then me and Daddy are happy."

"That's right," she said, hoping that would be the end of it. But Michael was an inquisitive child, his head permanently swimming with questions, and Mary Alice knew one was liable to jump out and bite the silence between them at any moment.

"Are you happy?"

It was one of the most dreadful things she could think of, being asked that question by her own child, even if he didn't mean to upset her. The hum of despair she'd felt all day—no, longer—calcified in that moment, and she imagined herself scooping Michael up into her arms and running out of the restaurant, running all the way back home, running for a hundred miles and not stopping until she was lying beside him in his bed, making sure he was asleep, and hoping he'd forget he'd ever asked her such a dreary, unanswerable thing. But then again, maybe she was overthinking it, as usual. Maybe nothing was as awful as it seemed—not his question, not the park, not this godforsaken gift shop. She remembered the blood of that

SeaWorld employee, and how it looked so much worse than the injury itself. He was probably at home by now, touching the bandage on his forehead and feeling like a fool for slipping in front of all those people.

“Of course I’m happy,” she said before pointing at a sign beside it. “Now, can you read me this one?”

“Every morning I . . . wake up . . . alive,” he said, sounding out each word before committing to it, “I celebrate with coffee.”

“What do you think that means?”

“It means,” he said, fingering the words once more as if scanning them for clues, “you don’t drink coffee if you’re dead.”

Mary Alice laughed for the first time that day and wrapped her arm around Michael, who beamed at her delight. “Can we buy it?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think we’re the kind of people who put that sort of thing on their walls.”

A woman to her left, who was just about her age, overheard and snipped back, “And what kind of person is?”

Mary Alice looked down and noticed the woman was holding the sign about dead people not drinking coffee, along with plenty of other items with similar sentiments. “Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“If you didn’t mean what you said,” the woman growled, “you shouldn’t have said it so damn loudly.” She marched off toward the cash register.

Mary Alice yearned to tell her to wait, so she could explain herself. But what would she have said? How could she have convinced this angry stranger of how embarrassed she would be if people could

read all the tchotchkes filling up the walls in her head? The ones she'd never dream of hanging in her home, where everyone could see them? She couldn't. So she just shouted back, "Just so you know, I love coffee!" People turned their heads at the noise, and then turned back. The incident had lasted mere seconds, but Mary Alice knew her whimpering retort would haunt her for years. Or maybe she just decided that it ought to.

"Why are you fighting with that lady?" Michael asked.

"We weren't fighting," Mary Alice said. "She just wanted to remind me that sometimes people think things that they shouldn't say out loud. Have you ever thought a thing and not said it out loud?"

Michael nodded, clearly out of confusion. Mary Alice could see him unpacking the entire confrontation inside that still-growing brain. At this age, he seemed to be getting smarter by the minute. He wasn't just noticing things, he was processing them—taking them apart, examining the pieces, and reassembling them. She wondered how long he would have to process this moment with the stranger in a Cracker Barrel. She wondered whether it would affect the way he communicated, or even *felt*, long-term. She wondered whether it would be a story he'd tell in therapy twenty years from now. But maybe, she tried to hope, he'd forget it by tomorrow. Maybe! Maybe. Oh God, but maybe not. She was spiraling now, debating between the value of saying one more thing and just shutting up. She had to stop; he was still looking at her. So she picked him up and said the first thing that came to her. "But you should *never* be ashamed by something that you feel." That must be the right lesson, she thought. How could it be the wrong one?

Over time she came to appreciate that moment of public embarrassment and private existential panic as a piece of herself that

would never go away. So many things had left her over the years, almost all of them by choice, but those memories were hers forever. She would respect them, even if they brought her pain. And remembering that moment in the gift shop was part of her morning routine, just like showering or getting dressed or plugging the hot plate into the extension cord that snaked across the patio or reading as much as she could before Ellie arrived.

That morning, the heat radiating from the plate had only begun hitting her shoulders when she heard the familiar squeak from her left. She dog-eared the paperback in her hand, placed it on her lap, and turned to the bushes as Ellie shuffled toward her. Ellie tripped after stepping up on the patio, catching herself in time to prevent a fall but not before a few splashes of coffee sloshed out of the carafe and onto her scrubs, turning a few of the taxis and pedestrians on the cartoon cityscape pattern brown. Mary Alice bolted up.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Just clumsy and in a hurry.”

“I only read seven pages. That must be a record or something.”

“Sorry, I just need to be out of here by seven-forty-five today.”

Ellie filled the two mugs and gently placed the carafe on the hot plate before inhaling deeply, smoothing out her scrubs, and landing on the chair with a slow, forceful exhale. Her eyes were closed. Ellie was Mary Alice’s age, down to the Libra sign, but looked at least a decade younger. Her hair, which had eased into a warm gray after a lifetime on the dirtier side of blond, was pulled back in her work-mandated ponytail, which kept her face taut and knocked off another five years. Everything about her face was kind, but in a practiced way. That was one of Mary Alice’s favorite things about her: there was an edge to Ellie’s charm that made you know she worked at it. Ellie’s

very presence usually tended to lower a person's blood pressure; Mary Alice knew this for a fact. But not today. Today there was something missing. Or maybe there was an extra piece. Ellie was the only person in town Mary Alice could never quite figure out, even now, with their friendship finally rekindled. Ellie was an "only" kind of woman in a lot of ways. The only person in her family to move away from Houston, which made her the only city slicker in Billington, where she was the only person in town who worked in healthcare—such an interesting, metropolitan job—not to mention the only woman who'd ever been divorced—which was the only "only" that Ellie ever had a hard time believing. "It's true," Mary Alice had assured her so long ago. "You'd be surprised by how many people are happy to choose misery over divorce. Especially here."

And now, as the only person invited to sit on this porch in at least twenty years, she was the only thing on Mary Alice's mind. "You sure you're OK?"

"I said I'm OK." She opened her right eye and pointed it at her friend. "Are you?"

Mary Alice scoffed. "I'm not the one who nearly fell into scalding-hot coffee and shattered glass."

"But you *are* the one who's home on the first day of school for the first time in, what? A hundred and two, a hundred and three years?"

"Forty," Mary Alice interrupted. "And yes, I'm OK. Thank you for your concern." She took another sip of the coffee.

"Bull."

"Fine, I'm miserable. No, I'm furious. You know she's putting in a pool?"

"Who?"

The muscles in Mary Alice's shoulders went limp. "You know who."

“Josie Kerr? You have to leave that poor woman alone. Haven’t you done enough to her already?”

“Her stomach issues are not my fault,” Mary Alice said with a sly smile.

Ellie’s head shook with disapproval, but her smile suggested otherwise. The wind chime took its cue and played a few delicate chords as Ellie processed this information. “So is Miss Queasy’s pool above-ground?”

Mary Alice smiled. “In.”

Ellie snapped back into sternness and raised her hands up, palms toward the rising sun. “You know what, I don’t want to be involved in your gossip. Not about her, anyhow. If she wants to sink money into digging a hole in that yard, that’s none of your business and it sure as hell isn’t any of mine. That pool’s for Josie and Josie’s family to swim in, so it should be between Josie and Josie’s family to worry about.”

“Josie’s family and their bank. You know how expensive it is to break through limestone?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“Tommy said it’s costing her near forty-one thousand for the whole damn thing. It’s why Samuel and I never put one in.”

“Forty-one?” Ellie nearly wretched, then composed herself. “I said I don’t want to get involved! And more importantly, I don’t want to know how you or Tommy Lutz got that number so easily. She can spend her money however she wants. You know Travis probably does well for himself anyway; smart, handsome thing like that. Maybe Faye even chipped in.”

“Travis’s doing more than fine, but I still think she comes from it.”

“Comes from what?”

“What do you think? Money.”

“Ha! You don’t know anything about that woman. You’ve spoken to her, what? Once? And I wouldn’t exactly call those circumstances fair.”

“Fair? She stole my classroom. Though I guess rich people don’t steal, they just take.”

“She was *given* your classroom because she’s a bright young woman. And she took it because she’s a bright young woman with a family to take care of and a brain to use,” Ellie said. “This wasn’t a conspiracy, Mary Alice. And you’re not gonna find peace until you acknowledge that as the truth, because that’s what it is. The truth.”

Mary Alice wanted nothing more than to soak this into her pores, to accept it as the obvious truth that she knew it was, but she couldn’t. “I don’t have to be happy.”

“You’re crazy not to be,” Ellie said, shaking her head as she looked back at the cornstalks in the distance, swaying left and right as if listening and unable to pick a side to agree with.

“I’m what?!”

“You are crazy for not being happy.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mary Alice snipped with a near-laugh. “Never did.”

Ellie scooted her chair to face Mary Alice directly. “No more phone calls or unscheduled house visits with angry moms and dads? Not to mention phone calls with the stupid ones. No more conversations with Will and Gina and Laurie and all those other fools you used to spend all your time arguing with in the teacher’s lounge? No more filling in for a sick bus driver because you were dumb enough to get certification?” She took a breath, and then another sip, but she wasn’t finished. Something lit up inside her. This was no longer one of Mary Alice’s silly complaints, it was an affront to her own life. “You think I’d still be working if I could help it?”

"I know you wouldn't."

She pointed at an old oil drum in the far corner of Mary Alice's yard, to the right of her woodshed. "You think I wouldn't throw these scrubs in that burn barrel and light them on fire if someone told me I'd have a pension and benefits until I'm dust in the wind?"

Mary Alice turned away and pursed her lips. "OK, I get it."

"Good." She laughed, knowing one push was enough. "Now, will you enjoy this gift you've been given? Because that's exactly what it is. A gift. Don't you forget that."

"I will *try* to enjoy my time as a"—she stopped and shuddered—"retiree . . . But I will never refer to it as a gift. You hear me? Not now and not ever. Is that good enough for you?"

"I guess." They both took another sip of coffee, despite neither of them wanting more. "What're you getting into today while I'm out saving lives?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

They sat in silence for a moment, until a thought hit Ellie like an arrow. She darted her eyes toward Mary Alice, who immediately felt her gaze. "You're planning on going to that school again, aren't you?"

"No," Mary Alice said. "I mean, I'd considered it. But no."

"What would you do there? Think about it. What would you actually accomplish besides killing your own time and getting on everyone else's nerves?"

"Isn't killing time enough when you're retired?"

"I'm serious."

"It's certainly better than killing myself," Mary Alice said, regretting the words even before she could hear them.

Ellie turned cold. “Don’t,” she said, the word piercing the air as her mug slammed down on the table. “Don’t you do that.”

Mary Alice flinched at her own bad joke, some combination of the sound and the memory roiling inside her, but straightened her back and put the moment behind her. “To answer your question, I’d let them all know that I’m still here,” she said. “I’d let them know that I will not—no—that I *refuse* to be forgotten.” She had had the thought countless times that summer, but she’d never said it out loud. And it felt different now. As a thought it was empowering. As a confession to a friend, it felt self-aggrandizing and pathetic, and she cowered in her chair immediately after saying it.

“No one could forget you,” Ellie said. If Ellie was a church mouse, Mary Alice was the cracked bell roaring over her head. “How could they? You’re too damn loud.”

Ellie was right. But so was Mary Alice. This was one of the keys to their friendship: they were never wrong together. So many people in this town had a way of bringing Mary Alice down, letting her wallow in her wrongness, but never Ellie. She refused to let commiseration become a hobby. Arguments, she thought, were key to making friendships work, which is why theirs had lasted so long—to varying degrees—since Ellie arrived in town. Ellie had surprised both Billington and herself by moving in. There was no family connection. No husband who dragged her kicking and screaming from the city. There was only a good job in Trevino, and an affordable house fifteen miles away in Billington. That she happened to move in next to another single mother with an eleven-year-old boy was pure luck, though she took it as a sign that she’d made the right choice.

Though the Halls proudly inserted themselves headfirst into the

community—attending mass even though Ellie despised the church, signing Kenny up for all the sports but football so he'd have a shot at making friends, and volunteering at the modest senior center in the middle of town—few expected the two Halls to stay long. Billington wasn't a place you arrived in, it was a place you never left. But against all odds they sprouted roots on Mary Alice's whisper of a county road, and Kenneth and Michael's instant and overwhelming friendship nourished the one between their mothers.

"I'll call you tonight," Ellie said, empty carafe in hand. "Hope you're not too miserable today."

"So you'd be fine if I were only a little miserable?"

Ellie was already in the bushes, but she turned back. "Everyone's a *little* miserable," she said. "Bye now."

Mary Alice waved, missing her already.

With no coffee left, she had nothing else to do but think. Staring out at the horizon, where the sun was high enough to make her feel like she ought to be busy, she went over the beats of their friendship. Ellie and Kenny moved in. Kenny and Michael became friends. In time, so did she and Ellie. And when they lost the boys, one right after the other, of course their friendship changed. Whose wouldn't? An acute understanding of the other's misery prevented either of them from resenting their sudden estrangement, but over time their grief transferred itself from their sons to their friendship. They'd lost the boys, but why did that mean they had to lose each other? Now, more than ten years after the accident, Mary Alice was glad she had finally decided to try a little harder. And every morning she watched Ellie step up onto the patio, she was certain, absolutely certain, that it wasn't only because she had nothing better to do.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE OLD PLACE*
by Bobby Finger.

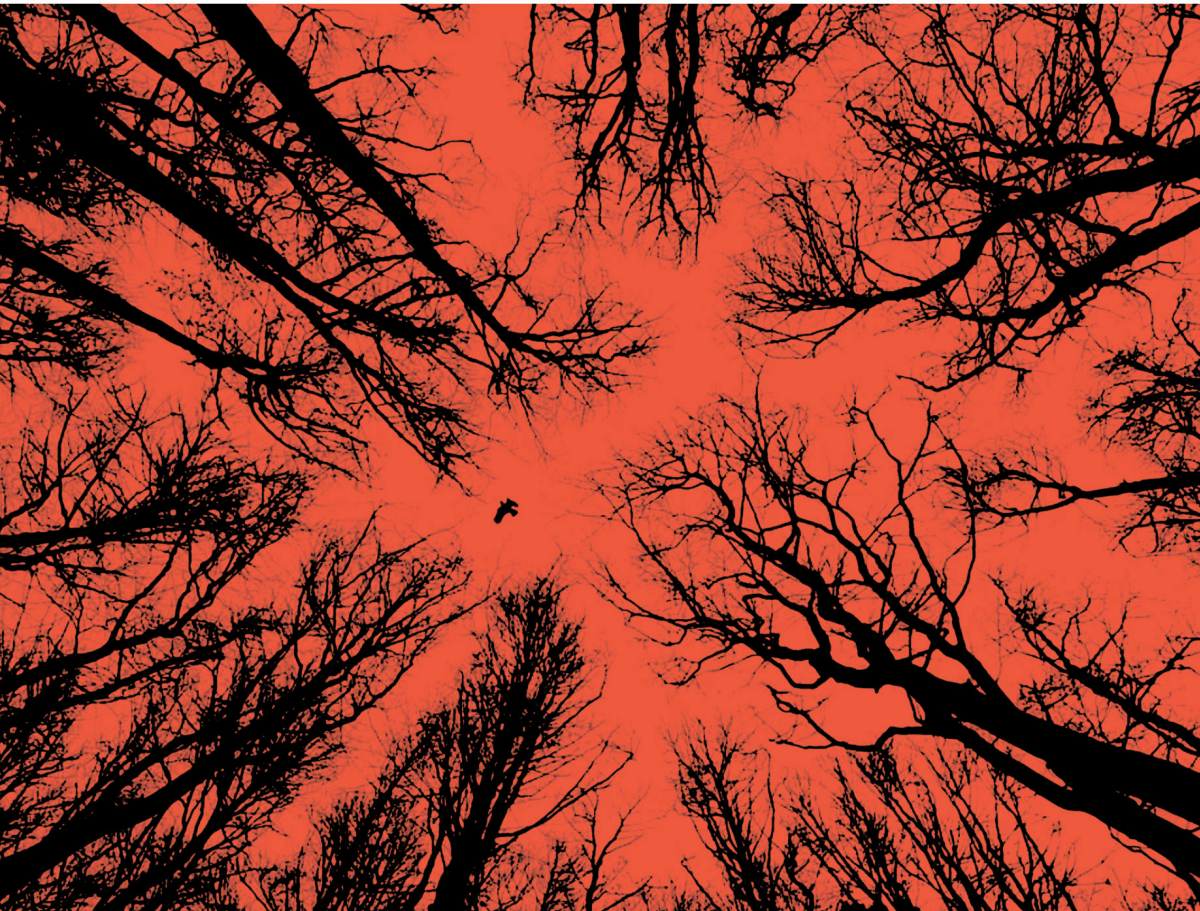
For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).

BAD

a Novel

CREE

JESSICA JOHNS





Before I look down, I know it's there. The crow's head I was clutching in my dream is now in bed with me. I woke up with the weight of it in my hands, held against my chest under the covers. I can still feel its beak and feathers on my palms. The smell of pine and the tang of blood sting my nose. My pillow feels for a second like the cold, frozen ground under my cheek. I yank off my blanket, heavy like I'm pulling it back from the past, and look down to my hands, now empty. A feeling of static pulses inside them like when a dead limb fills with blood again. They are clean and dry and trembling.

Shit. Not again.

I step gingerly out of bed, as though the world in front of me might break, and turn on the light, wait for my eyes to adjust. It illuminates my blanket on the floor, the grey sheet kicked into a clump. Every breath I take is laboured, and when I blink, my dream flashes onto the back of my eyelids. Running through the woods. The snow glistening in the clearing. The crows covering Sabrina's body.

Heart thumping in my chest, I kneel next to the bed, how I imagine I might if I ever were to pray. "Come on," I plead into the covers. "Where are you?"

I feel across the bedsheet for anything: blood, feathers, twig-small bones. My fingers shake and search by touch in between pillows, into every crease and wrinkle of the fitted sheet. I turn on the flashlight on my phone and use it to look into shadows, but I find nothing. My shirt, when I bring it up to my nose, smells like the outside in winter, like pine trees and sharp cold.

“You son of a bitch, come on.” I kick the blanket to the side and put my cheek to the floor, scanning underneath the bed and bedside table. Dust and crumbs sit forgotten in dry corners. An old plate, mould forming along the ridges, lies next to holey socks. I close my eyes. My awake mind is trying to fog the dream over, shake it away, but I hold onto it. I know it was there, in my hand. As real as the floor still against my cheek, I was holding a crow’s head when I woke up. I can still smell the blood in the bedroom air and feel where its beak pressed into my palm, right above my heart line. Throbbing and hot.



I think of the dream while I shower. I lather shampoo into my hair and rinse, watch the brown strands circle the drain. This is the third dream in three weeks. The third time I’ve brought something back with me.

In the first two dreams, I brought back branches. I broke them off the trees as I was running through the woods in a panic. The first time it happened, the branch disappeared as soon as I woke up and looked down at it. The second time, the moon was big and full outside, and I caught a glimpse of the flimsy stick gripped between my palms. That time, I held on tight, but it still disappeared. I had hoped that if I held on hard enough, I would understand how I could have a pine bough in my hands when the last pine tree I’d seen was a thousand kilometres away in Alberta.

I close my eyes and let the warm water stream against my

face, but I'm still shivering against the memory of last night. In my dream, I was in the middle of the winter woods, wearing only what I wore to bed that night: an old T-shirt and sweats. I cursed at myself for not following my idea after the last dream to wear shoes and something warmer to bed. At least it was better than the first dream, when I went to sleep naked.

I was surrounded by bone-thin pine, spruce, and balsam trees, browning at the base up to their torsos, sparse with white snow near the top. I let out a small gasp of surprise to find myself in the same woods again, my breath forming in front of me in an icy puff. There were no footprints in the fresh snow around me, as if I blinked into existence in that exact spot.

The wind whipped hard, carrying an icy whistle past my ears. In the moonlight, the trees cast shadows so tall they swallowed the land whole. My breath caught in my throat and the urge to run itched across my spine.

"Shit," I whispered to myself as I stepped in place, giving each foot a second's break from the freezing ground. The whistle from the wind, quiet at first, grew louder, until it was shrieking. This had happened in the two dreams before, too. A scream, like someone was on fire, came from a trail opening in the brush that snaked between the trees behind me.

I pulled my arms tighter around myself and crouched in place, trying to conserve my body heat. My arms were starting to redden, the frigid slap of the wind already working its way through me. I pressed my chin into my collarbone and squeezed my eyes shut. "One, two, three . . ." I tried my old trick of closing my eyes and counting to wake myself up from nightmares, but I knew it wouldn't work. It hadn't the last two times either.

When the screaming started to get closer, I turned toward it and found myself facing the trail. Even though I was terrified, I knew I had to try something different. In the other dreams, I

had run in the opposite direction, away from the sound, wading in snow through the woods. But last night, I walked the trail toward the sound, my feet crunching in the snow, the scream getting louder with every step.

The trail ended abruptly, opening into a circular clearing lined by pine trees. Icicles weighed down the branches, shaping them into clawed hands. And finally, I saw the sound's source: a body splayed on the ground in the middle of the clearing. Dark shadows blotted it like a moving Rorschach. The shadows grew and shifted, and I saw flashes of hair and limbs, but then, in a blink, they were covered again. It took me a second to realize I wasn't looking at shadows, it was crows. A whole murder of them moving over the body.

I open my eyes under the streaming showerhead and let the water sting them. My chest pounds with an ache and I sit down, the slightly clogged drain making the tub begin to fill around me.

Okay, wake up now, I had thought to myself in the dream. The crows' caws started to rumble deep, drowning out the body's long, endless scream. As they fluttered, I caught sight of the face and gasped. Horror crawled up and planted itself in my throat. My sister Sabrina lay unmoving, her open mouth unleashing the shriek that had been reaching deep inside my gut.

The shock that gripped me in place suddenly loosened, and I ran to her, my feet slipping on the frozen ground. I yelled as I got closer, startling the birds just enough for me to reach out and touch her face.

Sabrina looked like she'd been long dead. Her once-brown skin was now white, drained of all blood. Her hair was grey and stuck to the snow under her head. Her eyes were slightly open and milky white, looking past me. Her dry lips frozen into a perfect O. Her skin, too, was ice cold. Her clothes, a flannel shirt and jeans, were dishevelled and torn.

The crows were cawing so vehemently around me, it sounded like battle cries. They beat their wings in my face, trying to push me back, but I batted them away. Sabrina's scream never stopped, not even for a breath.

"Get away from her!" I yelled, tearing at the crows with such ferocity that feathers flew into the air and stuck to my sweating skin. Black barbs leaked between my fingers as I swatted and grabbed at the crows, their small bodies thrashing and pecking at my hands. I was losing myself in a swarm of black, but no matter how many I threw off her body, more seemed to materialize in their place.

And then, I saw it. A hole as big as my fist just below Sabrina's collarbone. The bone-white of her sternum glistened against blood. A crow, perched on Sabrina's chest, was tearing at the sides of the wound, its beak coming away with skin and veins. I screamed and kept swiping at the crows, until some finally started to fly away.

Sabrina's heart, exposed to the world, beat and beat and beat. The crow finally stopped its pecking to look at me. Its dark eyes reflected the moon above us, another hole in the chest of the world. Before more crows came back, I grabbed it around the neck, its feathers short and sharp in my hand, and with rage pulsing through my body, I bent its head backwards in one quick motion, breaking its neck.

The snap of bone splitting in two rang through the air as I pulled the head from the crow's body, blood covering my hands. Sabrina's scream stopped, and the few birds that were left took off like dust being blown back into the air. When I looked back down, Sabrina's face had gone slack. Her eyes and mouth were closed like a zipper.

I dropped the crow's body from one hand and reached toward her, but then I felt a tug against my spine, like an invisible rope

pulling. Before I could touch her, the rope tugged again, harder, and I was back in my bed. The crow's head, its beak pressing into my palm and its warm blood on my skin, still in my hand.

At the thought of Sabrina, a cave I've tried to keep hidden somewhere deep in my body opens up. Her unrelenting scream echoes through me, stretching back in time. I sob into the bathtub, wet hair clinging to my cheeks.

After a few minutes, I grab the bar of Ivory soap and lather it between my palms. A stinging in a cut I can't see starts in the bed of my hand and travels through my arm, inches into my armpit, slides into my heart. I reasoned away the first two dreams. I told myself I was still dreaming when I thought I was awake. That it was all in my head. Now fear settles in me like sediment at the bottom of a lake. I can't reason this away anymore. The hurt is still in my palm even if the crow's head isn't.

I get out of the shower and slowly dry off. Take my time putting on clothes, an old band T-shirt and faded jeans, trying to slow my breath. It only kind of works. I hear a caw from outside my apartment window. When I pull back the curtains, I see three crows sitting on the telephone pole, easing into the backdrop of Vancouver spring.

That's something else about the past three weeks. The crows. All of a sudden, they're everywhere I look. They've started showing up on the telephone pole in my alleyway. Every morning, I wake up to their caws. I swear they're watching me. Through the windows, I can see their heads turn to follow me as I move across the apartment. A rush of guilt heats my neck as I remember the feeling of a spine snapping in my hands.

I skip breakfast and rush out. My body vibrates with adrenaline, but all that's around me are flowers and a breeze carrying the smell of the ocean a couple of blocks away. I jog to Whole Foods,

passing old heritage houses that have been converted into fourplexes and apartments. It's my day off, but I know Joli is working and I want to see someone familiar, ground myself in reality again. When I walk into the store, I spot them at the far till. Their back is to me, their thick, dark hair straight and loose. They are ringing through an elderly couple wearing matching visors when they look back at me, like they could feel it when I walked in.

"Mackenzie!" they yell across the long rows of tills, startling the couple into a jump. They laugh and it comforts me like a blanket. I exhale a breath I hadn't noticed I'd been holding and walk over to them. "You're not even here this early when you're scheduled to be," they say, arching their eyebrows.

When I first moved to Vancouver, Mom reached out to Joli's mom, Dianne, a friend of a cousin who worked as an instructor at the Native Education College. "So you aren't alone," Mom said, but I knew it was more for her peace of mind than for me. Cree people aren't great at being subtle.

As soon as she met me, Dianne wrapped me in a hug so tight I forgot myself for a minute. She helped me find a small bachelor apartment—not an easy thing to do in Vancouver, where homes are empty and unaffordable and the cost of living is triple what it is in my hometown. But she knew a landlord renting a place for extra cheap since they started the SkyTrain construction next to it. Any maintenance on the building had stopped since it would be torn down eventually anyways, so I try to live as small and quietly as I can in hopes they forget I'm there.

Dianne also got me to volunteer when she needed help at the college for a while. Best of all, though, was that she introduced me to Joli. Joli was my age, early twenties, and tall with a round face that drew in light like the moon draws in the tide. They and Dianne are Squamish. Joli reminds me of my older twin sisters,

Sabrina and Tracey, though they're nothing like either of them. It's funny what our minds will parallel when we want something bad enough.

For the first couple months in Vancouver, I spent almost every night having dinner with Dianne and Joli. Dianne lives halfway between Vancouver and Squamish, and Joli has a place in Vancouver with four other roommates. They moved out of their mom's house when they started doula training at Vancouver College. I ate a lot of meals at Dianne's house, laughing with the two of them. They are both so loud. Could call across the ocean and still be heard, I'm sure of it. But the loud comforts me. I know I'll never worry about losing them anywhere.

I walk up to Joli as they're handing off brown bags of groceries to the couple. They flip their hair and look me up and down. "That band hasn't played a show since the early 2000s."

I shrug. "Guess that makes them a classic."

Joli smirks and looks at me a little closer. "Everything all right?" Their eyes flit around me knowingly.

When I first got my place, Joli and I walked the back streets of Kitsilano together, looking for furniture. Rich people throw out perfectly usable things. As we sifted through chipped lamps and coffee tables next to recycling bins, they told me about their family, filling alleyways with the echo of story. They also showed me all the good pubs, the Vancouver bands to care about and the ones to ignore. They could read the city like my kokum used to read the land. Could tell from the cracks in the sidewalk how far we were from their favourite queer bar. Where to avoid because of cops. When I moved into my place, they gave me sage and an abalone shell. Said even if I didn't smudge, it was always good to have it just in case.

"It happened again, didn't it?" They can read it on my face. My fear must be etched all over. I nod, rub my palms together.

After the second dream, I told Joli about what had been happening. They are the only person who knows. “This time it wasn’t a branch. It was a head. A crow’s head.”

“Hello, is this till open?” A customer has walked up to Joli’s till, plopping his organic peaches down onto the conveyor belt.

“A head?” Joli whispers, their eyes widening. They ignore the customer behind them.

“The same thing happened as the last two dreams when I woke up,” I continue. “As soon as I looked down—”

“Excuse me?” Peaches guy clears his throat. Joli doesn’t turn around and instead keeps staring at me, waving a hand over their shoulder as if they were buzzing away a fly.

I look over their shoulder and shake my head. “I’ll tell you everything after work. If you’re caught ignoring a customer again, you’re going to get fired.”

Joli rolls their eyes and tsks. “Fine, but I’m calling you as soon as I’m done.” They give me a squeeze on my arm before turning back to the till. I feel a wave of comfort at their touch. “Thank you so much for waiting,” they say in their customer service voice. “Do you need a bag?”

I turn to head out the doors, looking back once more as I leave the comfort of Joli. I had planned on doing some errands today. Filing my taxes—late for the third year in a row—and getting groceries, but I feel exposed, an open wound walking around. I go back to my apartment instead. Inside, the exposed feeling doesn’t go away. I prop my laptop on the counter and put on an old playlist, a mix of emo songs I’ve been listening to since high school, and start deep cleaning my fridge.

Since I moved in, the apartment has never been silent. I thought, at first, I’d love the quiet. My parents’ house was always full of people and noise. Somebody was always in my business. I thought breaking away from that would be a relief. It wasn’t, not

even for a day. There was something about the absence of sound and the acute feeling that I was really, truly alone that left me on edge. Maybe my body wasn't at home in quiet. Maybe it needed the rumble and movement of voices and people.

Now I have playlists for every task, and I listen to audiobooks when I try to fall asleep at night. The books themselves don't matter, either. What matters is that I'm never alone, not for a second. Not even when I do eventually drift to sleep and could not possibly be aware of how alone I am anymore.

While I fill the sink with soap and hot water, I throw out old vegetables, shrivelled up ginger at the back of the fridge, cans of half-eaten beans, a mouldy piece of cheese. But Sabrina's face, frozen and unseeing, keeps flashing across my mind. Her hair splayed against the white snow. Her sharp jaw angled to the sky. When the sink is half full, I start cleaning the dirty dishes that have piled up on my counter. The lemon dish soap can't mask the smell of winter and trees still fresh in my mind. I blink and see the crows again, covering Sabrina's body. Suffocate for a moment under the feeling of fluttering wings against my face. The feel of her frozen skin. The perfect O of her mouth while she was being torn open. I shake my head to dislodge the memory. When the dirty dishes are done, I pull out the clean ones from the cupboards and scour them, too. I wash every cup and plate I own until my knuckles are rubbed raw.

By the end of the day, I've cleaned most of my apartment. Everything smells like lemon and the artificial orange of Lysol. The three crows on the back-alley telephone pole are still perched watching me, cawing low to each other. The place looks cleaner than when I moved in. But my body still hasn't scabbed over.

Just after six, Joli calls. I pick up on the second ring.

"What's going on over there? It sounds like you're having the saddest party ever."

I turn down the music and dry my hands on a dirty tea towel. “Just doing some cleaning.” I sit on my bed, grabbing my blanket from the floor. From here, I can still keep an eye on the crows outside. There’s a beat of silence and I hear the jingle of their keys. They’d be walking to their car after their shift.

They stay silent, waiting for me to continue. I sigh and tell them everything that happened in the dream.

“Oh,” they breathe out, and there’s no mistaking the sympathy in their voice. “And that’s the first time Sabrina has been in the dreams?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Isn’t it the anniversary—”

“This isn’t some unresolved trauma shit,” I cut in. “This is something . . . else. I woke up with a dead crow head in my hands, Joli.”

“Okay,” they say. “I have to say it again. You need to call your mom.”

I sigh and pull the blanket up over my knees. When I first told Joli about the dreams, this was their suggestion. The thought of it makes my stomach clench.

“Or at least tell your Auntie Doreen or Auntie Verna,” they rush on.

“I don’t want to worry anyone,” I say. I smooth the blanket across my legs. Calling mom’s younger sisters was a better option than calling my mom, though.

“Look, I don’t know much about you Crees. But if these visions are—”

“They’re not visions,” I interrupt.

“You keep saying what they aren’t. So what are they?”

“I don’t know,” I say, gripping the phone tighter.

“All the more reason to call someone. Are the crows still following you?”

I glance outside. “Yeah. Creepy bastards.”

“Hey, don’t go around cursing crows over here. Besides, you did decapitate one of their friends.” They’re quiet for a moment, and I hear their car rumble and start. “You call an auntie, or I need to talk to my mom.”

“Don’t tell Dianne,” I say. Whether I tell my aunts or Joli’s mom, it’ll get back to my mom eventually. I sigh. “I’ll call someone.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. Get off the phone and focus on the road.”

“Go back to your sad music. Damn sentimental Crees.”

I laugh and hang up, let the ease of talking to Joli sit in my chest. I close the living room curtains, even though the sun is only just starting to dip low in the sky, casting the world in a deep orange. I don’t want to feel watched anymore. I stare at my phone for a few minutes before finally calling Auntie Doreen.

“What’d I tell you about calling on Thursdays, Mackenzie?” she shouts into the phone when she answers. I can hear the bingo caller’s voice echo in the background. I look at the time again. It’s an hour ahead in High Prairie. “Shit, sorry, Auntie. Bingo night. I forgot. This is important though.”

“More important than a ten-thousand-dollar dual dab? I don’t think so.” She hangs up, and I wait for her to call me back, because I know she will. There is concern in her voice. Even though we talk at least once a week, I know never to call on bingo nights.

“I was two numbers away and starting to sweat,” she says when I answer her call a half hour later. “What are you calling for, my girl? Text me like a regular person.”

“I’ve been having some weird dreams,” I say. “Really, really weird dreams.”

She laughs. “That’s a bit vague.”

I swallow into the phone. “This is going to sound fucked up

but stay with me.” I sigh and blink, see the flash of pine boughs in front of me, and hear the crunch of snow under my feet. “I had a couple dreams where I was running through the woods, grabbing at tree branches and shoving them aside, trying to get through. But when I woke up, I was still holding onto sticks. Like I brought them back from the dream world. When I blinked, they disappeared.”

She’s quiet for a while, and I almost think she’s hung up again when she sighs. “I see.”

I pace my small apartment, lapping the entire space in a few steps.

She’s quiet and I hear the flick of a lighter, quiet talking and laughter from her end of the phone. She must be outside the Friendship Centre, smoking during the bingo break. I imagine her thin fingers pulling out a cigarette in the parking lot and lighting it. Smoke curling around her face and shoulder-length, permed hair.

“That’s not all.” My voice is quiet.

She inhales deeply. “Creator, what else?”

I tell her about what happened in the dream the night before. The crow’s head and seeing Sabrina.

She’s silent again and I listen to her puff on the cigarette. “And did you think I’d have an answer?” she says finally.

It’s my turn to be silent now.

“My girl, I might be an old Indian, but I’m not a goddamn dream oracle. That’s all really fucked up.” She laughs her loud laugh and I laugh with her, feel the weight of the day lift off my body.

We’re quiet again for a moment. “Auntie, do you believe me?” I ask.

She clicks her tongue and exhales, and I imagine her rubbing at her jaw, the way she does when she’s thinking. “As a kid, you

used to freak me out. Sometimes when you and your sisters would have sleepovers at my place, you'd wake up in the morning and your eyes wouldn't see me. Like they hadn't left the dream yet."

I suck in a sharp breath. Study my palm as I let what she's saying settle. "I can still feel the beak, Auntie. It's like a cut is underneath my skin."

The background noises start to slow and quiet. Auntie's every inhale is deeper than the last. Her short frame is probably leaning against the outside walls of the building, strong enough to hold it up if she needed to, nodding at her friends and enemies as they head back inside.

I keep pacing my apartment and glance to the closed curtains. "Also, this might be unrelated. But some crows have started following me around."

Auntie laughs again. "Unrelated? Crows are following you and then you murder one in your dreams. Keep your eyes on them."

"Joli called them visions," I say. I think about the dreams. The panic in my stomach as I ran. A feeling, deep somewhere, that I was missing something. "But they feel almost like memories."

"Are they?" Auntie asks.

"No," I say. "I think I'd remember Sabrina being attacked by a murder of crows. Or killing one with my bare hands."

"I need to think on this some more," Auntie says. "You should call your mom."

The back of my neck burns at the mention of Mom again, and I keep pacing. She and I haven't spoken in months. "Yeah, I've been getting that advice lately."

It's been three years since I moved away from High Prairie. Mom didn't like that I moved in the first place. Before I left, she came out to the back of the house to find me putting soil into a bottle. She shook her head and watched me. "Your body carries home just as much as the land."

I sat in the dirt and looked up at her, feeling small, a child again. “I know.”

I watched her walk back into the house, her short, greying hair catching sunlight. Now here I am, far from home with a bottle of prairie soil still on my nightstand. It’s the worst kind of loss for a Cree mom, splitting apart from her child. For her, it turned out to be the first nightmare of many.

“Well, if you don’t call to tell her this, call to check in,” Auntie says, her voice higher than usual. Trying to be casual. I nod into the phone, knowing she can’t see me.

“I gotta go back in, my girl. Stella will steal my good dabber if I’m gone for too long.”

We laugh again and it’s all the medicine I need. I hear the scraping of her foot against concrete, stamping out her cigarette.

“Kisâkihitin,” she says. “I’ll call you soon. And tell me if it happens again.”

“I love you, too.”

When we hang up, she sends me a praying hands emoji and a shooting star. I respond with a thumbs-up.

I eat a couple of old chips in my cupboard for dinner, not hungry enough for anything more. When it gets late and I can’t put it off anymore, I take my time getting ready for bed, scared of where sleep might take me. I slide my jeans off slowly. Pull my shirt over my head and hold the cotton in my hands. Rub it across my palms, soothing the faint burn under my skin. I stare at my hands until they blur before pulling on a thick sweater and sweatpants, a double pair of socks. In case the dreams take me again. I leave the light on when I get into bed and pull the covers up under my chin. It’s only then I realize I’d been getting ready in complete silence, no music or audiobook playing. Outside, a crow caws.

I don’t want to fall asleep for fear of where I’ll end up. I think back to my conversations with Joli and Auntie Doreen. I know

they believe me, but the way their voices changed when I mentioned Sabrina makes me doubt. They know as well as I do that in six weeks, it'll be a year since Sabrina died. I wish I'd fought harder through the crows, ran faster, got to her earlier. Something crumbles inside me and I sob into my pillow. Not even in my dreams could I save her.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *BAD CREE*:
A *NOVEL* by Jessica Johns.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).



**THE
HOUSE
IN THE
PINES**

A Novel

ANA REYES



DUTTON

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2023 by Ana Reyes

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

DUTTON and the D colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Reyes, Ana, 1982– author.

Title: The house in the pines: a novel / Ana Reyes.

Description: New York: Dutton, an Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, [2023] |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022019074 |

ISBN 9780593186718 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593186725 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction). | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3618.E9377 H68 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022019074>

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

BOOK DESIGN BY ELKE SIGAL

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

PROLOGUE

Deep in these woods, there is a house that's easy to miss.

Most people, in fact, would take one look and insist it's not there. And they wouldn't be wrong, not completely. What they would see are a house's remains, a crumbling foundation crawling with weeds. A house long since abandoned. But look closely at the ground here, at this concrete scarred by sun and ice. This is where the fireplace goes. If you look deeply enough, a spark will ignite. And if you blow on it, that spark will bloom into a blaze, a warm light in this cold dark forest.

If you come closer, out of the cold, the fire gets stronger, blows smoke in your eyes, tumbling smoke with a burning-pine smell that sweetens to the smell of perfume, then softens to the smell of your mother's coat. She's murmuring in the next room. Turn around and here come the walls, shyly, like deer emerging from the trees. Frozen concrete becomes

an area rug. Take off your shoes, stay a while. Outside the wind is rising, and there comes a clacking, a close, rapid chatter. It must be the windows in their sashes. A light snow sifts from the sky, blanketing this cozy home. Tucking it in for the night. “Goodnight little house, and goodnight mouse.” Remember? For once, there is no reason to get up, no one to chase or run away from. From the kitchen comes the smell of home, the sounds of a sauté. This is how the world was once, before the first colic, the first scald, the first getting lost. And this is why you do it. “Goodnight nobody, goodnight mush. And goodnight to the old lady whispering ‘hush.’”

Get a good night’s sleep, because when you wake, this house will be gone.

ONE

Maya didn't know it yet, but the video had already begun to circulate on social media. A grainy six-minute stretch of security footage that was strange and unsettling enough to garner several thousand views the day it went up, but not quite lurid enough to go viral, not ghastly enough to inspire repeat viewings. Not for most people, anyway. But for Maya, its existence would upend all that she'd been building for herself these past few years, this sometimes sloppy but mostly solid life that she shared with Dan, who snored quietly beside her in bed.

She hadn't yet seen the video because she was avoiding all screens, not wanting their blue light to keep her awake. She had tried everything to sleep: Benadryl, melatonin, counting backward from a hundred down to one. She had turned the clock around, taken a bath and some cough syrup, but none of it helped. This was her third sleepless

night in a row. She had moved in with Dan earlier this month and could easily draw from memory the shape of every water stain on the ceiling. The branching lines of every crack.

Turning onto her side, Maya reminded herself to get curtains. The space heater at the foot of the bed clicked on, a white noise she usually liked, but now the rattle of its metal grille grated on her. Kicking off the covers, she got out of bed and pulled on a flannel shirt over her underwear. The apartment was cold, the central heat only partially effective, but her skin was damp with sweat.

The chilled wooden floor felt good on her feet as she made her way down the dark hall, passing the second bedroom, empty now except for the exercise bike that she and Dan had bought off Craigslist. She'd never done much to decorate any of the apartments she'd shared with the various roommates she'd had since college—no posters, no pictures in frames, not so much as a throw pillow—but lately she'd begun popping over to T.J. Maxx after leaving work at Kelly's Garden Center just across the parking lot and heading straight for the home décor section. Buying end tables, area rugs, and other things she couldn't really afford.

Maya had plans for this place. She was determined for it to feel like home.

It was just before dawn, a gray, wintery light settling over other recent purchases in the living room: The coffee table to replace the one Dan's roommate had taken when he left. New shelves for the many books she had brought, added to all of Dan's. A new-to-them couch, dark green velvet. And hanging on the wall above it, the one decorative item

she'd brought with her, the only art she'd held on to for the past seven years.

A Mayan weaving about the size of a bath towel. A tapestry of red, yellow, green, and blue, threaded into interlocking rows of symbols resembling flowers and snakes. This was more than a decoration to Maya. She didn't know what the symbols stood for exactly, but she knew that somewhere in the mountains of Guatemala lived people who could read them. She passed by the tapestry in the dark on her way to the kitchen.

The sink held the night's dirty dishes, plates splattered with Bolognese. She loved cooking with Dan in their new kitchen, and the food had been fragrant with garlic and fresh tomatoes, but it hadn't tasted right. Or maybe she just wasn't hungry.

Or maybe her stomach had been clenched like a fist. Dan had asked if anything was wrong, she had told him she was fine, but she wasn't. Opening a cabinet, she pushed aside a few coffee mugs, tumblers, and wineglasses until she found what she was looking for. A shot glass, a single ounce. That's all she would have, she told herself, and the photo strip magnetized to the freezer reminded her why.

The photos were from last Halloween, taken in a photo booth at the bar where they'd spent the night dancing with friends. Maya had gone as "Fairy Witch," a character she'd invented while scouring Goodwill for a costume at the last minute. She wore a glittery pair of wings, a pointy black hat, a blue dress with sequins on the collar, and somehow this had landed her second place in the costume contest.

Dan was Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. It had been difficult to find a gray onesie large enough to fit his hearty frame, let alone one that was ethically produced, but Dan had started looking well in advance. Then he'd sewn a furry tail onto its seat and made himself a crown of recycled gold card stock.

The two of them looked like opposites in a lot of ways; she was petite and surprisingly athletic-looking for someone who'd never played sports, while he was tall and looked like he loved to eat, which he did. He was blue-eyed and fair with a short chestnut beard and glasses, while she was olive-skinned and ethnically ambiguous. People had always guessed that she was Indian, Turkish, Mexican, or Armenian. She was, in fact, half Guatemalan, a quarter Irish, and a quarter Italian. Thick black hair and high Mayan cheekbones met the round chin and upturned nose of the Irish on her face. She and Dan might have looked like opposites, but if you looked closely, you'd see that there was something in each of their postures—a slight leaning down on his part toward her, and an upward tilt to her stance as if to meet him halfway. They looked happy. And she looked drunk—not quite sloppy, but close.

She took out a bottle of gin from the freezer. White vapor swirled from its neck as she twisted off the cap and filled the tiny glass up to the brim, raised it—*Cheers!*—to their mugging faces, and made herself a promise: Tomorrow morning, she would tell Dan the reason that she hadn't been herself these past few days, the reason she couldn't sleep or

eat. She would tell him she was going through Klonopin withdrawal.

The problem was that Dan didn't know Maya had been taking Klonopin in the first place. When they met, she had already been taking it every night for sleep. No huge deal—once upon a time, she'd even had a prescription—why mention any of this to someone she was dating?

Prior to Dan, she hadn't dated anyone for longer than a month. But then one month with Dan stretched into three, and before she knew it, two and a half years had passed.

How to explain why she'd waited so long? Or why she was on it in the first place?

And what would Dan think if he knew that the pills came not from a pharmacy but from her friend Wendy?

Maya had rationalized her dependence in so many ways, telling herself it wasn't a lie, just an omission; that she kept the pills in an aspirin bottle in her purse for convenience, not to hide them. All along, she had planned to quit, and then, she assured herself, once her habit was safely in the past, she would tell him.

But now she had run out of the little yellow pills, and Wendy, a friend from college, wasn't returning her calls. Maya had tried a dozen times, texting, emailing, and finally calling. The two had remained close for a few years after graduation, largely because they'd both stayed near BU and both liked to party. They rarely saw each other during the day but drank together several nights a week. But now that Maya had cut down on drinking, they saw each other less

and less; looking back, she realized their monthly brunches had become literally transactional: fifty dollars for ninety milligrams of Klonopin.

Could this be why Wendy wasn't returning her calls?

As Maya's withdrawal got worse—insomnia, the fiery feeling in her brain, the sense of crawling ants on her skin—she wondered if Wendy had known just how hellish it would be.

Maya hadn't known. The psychiatrist who'd prescribed it to her seven years ago, Dr. Barry, hadn't said anything about addiction. He'd told her the pills would help her sleep, which they had—but only for a time. As the months passed, she'd needed more and more to achieve the same results, and Dr. Barry was always happy to oblige, upping her dosage with a flick of his pen—right up until Maya graduated college and lost her insurance. Once she could no longer pay for her sessions, she found herself cut off, and only then did she realize that she couldn't sleep anymore without pills.

Luckily for her, Wendy also had a prescription and didn't much trust the mental health establishment. She didn't take any of the meds her doctor prescribed, preferring to sell them or trade them for other drugs. Maya had been buying her Klonopin from Wendy for the past three years, ever since she graduated college. Telling herself all along that she would quit. She hadn't expected going off to be easy, but the severity caught her off guard, and Googling her symptoms hadn't helped. Insomnia, anxiety, tremors, muscle spasms, paranoia, agitation—she could handle those. What scared her was the possibility of hallucinations.

It took all her will to recap the gin and return it to the freezer. She went to the bathroom and took a swig of Ny-Quil, wincing as the syrup went down. Her reflection winced back at her, ghostly in the light spilling through the high frosted window. Her skin was pale and clammy, her eye sockets like craters. Withdrawal had taken her hunger, and Maya saw that she was losing weight, the bones of her cheeks and collarbones more pronounced. She forced herself to unclench her jaw.

In the living room, she sank into the couch and peeled off her sweaty flannel shirt. She turned on the reading lamp and tried to lose herself in a book, a mystery she'd been enjoying up until now, but found herself reading the same paragraph over and over. The quiet felt loud. Soon the street outside would ring with the voices of commuters to the Green Line, people getting into cars parked along the curb and doors slamming.

She heard footsteps and turned to see Dan emerging from the darkness of the hall. He looked half asleep, hair sticking up from his pillow. He'd been up late, studying for his third-year law school exams.

They were both twenty-five, but Dan was doing more with his life, or at least that's how it felt to Maya. Soon he would graduate, take the bar, and start looking for a job, tasks she didn't envy. What she envied was his faith in himself. He wanted to be an environmental lawyer, a goal he'd been working toward for as long as she'd known him, while she'd worked at Kelly's Garden Center, tending to customers and potted plants, ever since graduating from BU.

It wasn't that she thought the job was beneath her, but sometimes she worried that Dan did, or that he looked down on her apparent lack of drive. Early on in dating, she had told him that she wanted to be a writer, and he'd been supportive; he'd brought it up occasionally, asking when he'd get to read her work. But the truth was that Maya hadn't written anything since senior year of college.

And lately he'd stopped asking, as if he'd stopped believing she would ever follow through.

He squinted at her through the gloom. Maya sat on the couch in her underwear, while he wore sweatpants, wool socks, and a long-sleeved shirt. "Hey . . ." he said groggily. "You all right?"

Maya nodded. "I couldn't sleep."

But Dan wasn't stupid. He was, in fact, extremely smart—this was part of why she loved him. He knew something was wrong, and she wanted to tell him—she had promised herself she would—but now was obviously not the time. (Again.) Rising from the couch, she draped the itchy flannel around her shoulders and crossed the living room to lay a hand on his arm. "I was just about to go back to bed." She looked up into his tired eyes, then past him to the bedroom.

It was hard to say when the bedroom had gotten so messy. Neither of them was naturally tidy, but they managed to keep the living room and kitchen neat. As guests never had any reason to go into the bedroom, though, Maya and Dan left clothes on the floor and dirty mugs, wineglasses, and books strewn around, and lately it had gotten worse.

The mess had never bothered her, but now the room felt disturbingly like the inside of her head.

She lay down and closed her eyes, and Dan made a sound like he might say something. She waited. She waited until his breaths were slow with sleep.

The dream began right away. One moment Maya was listening to Dan's breath, the next she was on her way to Frank's cabin. Awake, she had forgotten this place, but asleep, she knew the way by heart: down a narrow path through the woods, then over a bridge to the clearing on the other side. The cabin was in the clearing, ringed by a wall of trees. Two rocking chairs sat empty on the porch. The door was locked, but asleep, Maya always had the key.

She went inside, not because she wanted to but because she had no choice. Some part of her—the part of her that dreamed—insisted on returning here night after night, as if there were something she was supposed to do here. Something she was supposed to understand. A fire crackled warmly in the tall stone fireplace. The table was set for two. Two bowls, two spoons, two glasses yet to be filled. Dinner simmered in a pot on the stove, some kind of stew. Cooked meat and rosemary, garlic and thyme—it smelled delicious—and she felt her body begin to relax, to slow down, even as terror sprouted in her gut and wrapped its tendrils around her heart.

It didn't feel like a dream.

She knew Frank was here. He was always here. The

stream gushed softly in the window, a peaceful sound, but Maya knew better. There was danger here, lurking just beneath the surface of things, woven into the fabric of this place. Danger in its coziness, its warmth. Danger even in the sound of the stream, its gentle gurgle—it was getting louder. The sound of water rushing over stones. Rhythmic and insistent, it grew louder and more pronounced until it seemed to be talking to her, words surfacing from the white babble but disappearing before she could catch them.

Maya listened, trying to understand, until she realized that it wasn't the river that was talking to her. It was Frank.

He was standing behind her, whispering in her ear. Every hair on her body rose. Her heart thrashed and terror shrieked in her ears as she slowly turned around.

Then she opened her eyes, drenched in sweat.

It was rare that she remembered her dreams upon waking, and when she did, the impression was usually vague, but in the days since she had taken her last Klonopin, her sleep had grown exponentially more fractured, and her dreams more vivid. They left behind a fog of dread. She reached for the clock and turned it to face her. 5:49. Careful not to wake Dan, she rose once more from the bed, grabbed her laptop from the desk, and tiptoed to the living room.

She pulled up a playlist of soothing nature sounds and her mom's German chocolate cake recipe. Tonight, she and Dan were driving the two hours to Amherst for his mom's birthday. Normally Maya would have looked forward to this—she liked his parents and had offered (before she ran out of pills) to bake his mom a cake—but now she wondered

how she would make it through dinner, just the four of them, without his parents realizing that something was wrong.

She wanted their approval. The first time she met them, Dan's father had thought it would be fun to speak to her in Spanish, which was awkward because Maya's Spanish was embarrassing. She sounded like any other English speaker who'd studied the language in high school, her vowels too long, her verbs the wrong tense, while Dan's father could roll his *r*'s. *Sorry*, she'd said to him in English; she'd been trying to redeem herself in Dan's parents' eyes ever since.

Like their son, Greta and Carl were smart. Intellectuals. She was a photojournalist, and he was a fifth grade teacher and multilingual poet. Maya wanted them to like her, but beyond that, she wanted to be like them. She didn't plan to work at Kelly's Garden Center forever. She wanted to tell them that her father had been a writer too, even if her mom worked in the kitchen of a luxury rehab center, baking bread.

But then Dan's parents might have wanted to know more about her father, who died before she was born. Telling people this always led to a moment of awkwardness as everyone searched for the right thing to say, and the last thing she wanted for tonight was more awkwardness.

She would simply tell them that she was feeling under the weather. This was true. She would cover up the dark circles beneath her eyes and try not to fidget. She would smile, not too widely or too small, and no one would know how little she'd slept.

Rubbing her temples, she tried to focus on the waterfall

sounds coming from her speakers. She wrote down the ingredients they needed. Shredded coconut, buttermilk, pecans. Then, lacking the attention span for a book, she went to YouTube and scrolled through the many channels she subscribed to. She needed something to distract herself from the craving gnawing on her brain, something designed to grab her attention and hold it.

But Maya wasn't on social media of any kind. Her friends saw this as an eccentricity, Dan claimed to find it refreshing, and she'd managed to convince even herself it was some kind of stance, some statement she was making. Maybe it was, to some extent, but the truth was more complicated and not the kind of thing Maya should be thinking about right now, her anxiety already at a ten.

She watched a short video about a cat who'd raised an orphaned beagle as its own, then one of a Boston terrier with a talent for skateboarding. She had no profile picture, no identifying information of any kind online, but of course that didn't stop her from receiving targeted advertising and recommendations.

Later she'd wonder if this was why the video popped up in her feed. "Girl Dies on Camera." Of course she clicked. According to its caption, the grainy, six-minute video was security footage taken from a diner in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Maya's hometown. Despite looking like it was from the 1950s, the diner must have been relatively new, as she didn't recognize it. A row of shiny booths, mostly empty, lined a wall of windows. It looked to be the middle of the day. The video was in color, but the quality was low, every-

thing washed out. The black-and-white checkerboard floors. Pictures of classic cars on the walls. The only customers were a family of four and two elderly men drinking coffee.

The camera was aimed at the front door in order to catch a criminal bursting in with a gun or running out with the cash register, but this wasn't what the camera caught. Instead, when the door opened, it showed what looked like an ordinary couple, a man in his thirties and a slightly younger woman. The woman looked a little like Maya, with a round, open face, high forehead, and wide, dark eyes.

The man was Frank Bellamy.

Of this, Maya had no doubt. She hadn't seen him for the past seven years, but there was no mistaking the small chin and slightly crooked nose. The easy walk and disheveled hair. The video erased any signs of aging on his face, making him look exactly as she remembered. As if no time at all had passed. She watched the couple seat themselves in a booth and pick up their laminated menus. A waitress came over with water and took their orders without writing them down.

What happened next looked like a normal conversation between Frank and the woman, except that Frank was the only one talking. The woman listened. She was tilted toward the camera, her face visible, while he was tilted slightly away, so that the camera saw only his right ear, cheek, and eye, and the edge of his mouth as he spoke.

Cold tentacles circled Maya's lungs.

A lot of viewers probably stopped watching at this point, as the video was five minutes in and almost nothing had

happened. Not even its clickbait title was enough to hold most peoples' attention beyond a certain point. Whoever had posted the video might have chosen to edit out this long, one-sided conversation that Frank had with the woman, but then maybe it was needed to show how what happened next truly came out of nowhere.

Maya leaned in closer to the screen, trying to read the woman's face. The woman appeared only vaguely interested in whatever Frank was saying, her face slack, providing no clue to her thoughts. Frank could have been telling her a story, one without humor, apparently, or any element of surprise. Or maybe he was giving her instructions of some sort. Or directions to somewhere far away.

She could have been a student at the back of a lecture hall on a drowsy summer day. Still in her puffy yellow coat, she focused her dark eyes gently on his face, resting her elbows on the table. Maya saw in the time bar that the video had only twenty seconds left. That was when it happened.

The woman rocked back and forth in her seat. She hinged forward at the waist, eyes wide open. She made no attempt to break her fall, forearms resting on the table as her face crashed down. The suddenness would have been comical in other circumstances, like a clown face-planting in a banana cream pie, only here there was no pie and no laughter. Just a slight, stunned pause before Frank rushed over to the woman's side of the booth, slid in beside her, and began to say something, probably her name. Now that he was facing the camera, it was easy to see his fear and surprise.

When he pulled her to him, the woman sagged with

dead weight over his arm. The video ended just as the waitress hurried over. But in the moment just before it ended, Frank's eyes rose up to the camera, directly into it, and it felt to Maya like he was looking right at her.

She closed her laptop with shaking hands.

The video had been posted less than three days ago and already had 72,000 views. Frank had every reason to think she would see it, which meant she had every reason to be afraid. After all, this wasn't the first time Maya had witnessed someone drop dead in his presence.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE HOUSE IN THE PINES: A NOVEL* by Ana Reyes.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).



THE
BANDIT
QUEENS

A NOVEL

PARINI SHROFF



The Bandit Queens is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Parini Shroff

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

BALLANTINE is a registered trademark and the colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shroff, Parini, author.

Title: The bandit queens: a novel / Parini Shroff.

Description: First edition. | New York: Ballantine Books, [2023] |
Identifiers: LCCN 2022004241 (print) | LCCN 2022004242 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780593498958 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593498965 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3619.H778 B36 2023 (print) |

LCC PS3619.H778 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022004241>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022004242>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition

Book design by Susan Turner

THREE

It was after ten when Geeta heard someone approach. Solar lantern in hand, she opened the door before Farah could knock. Without the lantern, it was as dark inside as it was outside. The scheduled power cuts (“power holidays” they called them, as if it were a rollicking party to grope in the dark and knock your knees on furniture) were increasingly longer and less scheduled. They’d all grown up with kerosene lamps and candles, but after many fires, NGOs came into their town with a rush of concern and gifts, like lanterns and the larger solar lights installed in the more trafficked portions of the village.

Farah stood in the dark, her thin elbow at a right angle, hand still lifted. “Oh, hi!” she chirped, as though they’d bumped into each other at the market. She had, Geeta noticed, a rather uncharming habit of finding amusement in everything, even premeditated murder.

Farah rubbed her hands together and a clean rasping sound filled Geeta’s home. “So what’s the plan?”

Which was exactly the question that had been squatting on Geeta’s head for the past few hours. Farah was counting on Geeta’s one-for-one score in the murder department, and Geeta had long ago

stopped protesting her innocence. Telling someone the truth was asking them to believe her, and she was done asking for anything from this village. Because Geeta saw no reason to reveal the truth now—how hard could it *actually* be?—her voice was fairly confident when she said: “It should be done at night. It should look like he expired in his sleep. No blood—too messy.”

Farah moved to sit on the floor in front of Geeta, who sat on her cot. “Well, how did you do it before? To Ramesh?”

“None of your damn business.”

“Fine.” Farah sighed. “So are you gonna come over to my place now or . . . ?”

Geeta narrowed her eyes. “I said I’d help you, I didn’t say I’d do it for you.”

“But you’re smarter than me. You’ll do it right, I know you will. I’d just mess it up.”

Geeta scoffed. “If you used this much butter on your food, you wouldn’t be so scrawny.”

“*Arre, yaar*, it’s not like that. I’m just saying you’ve already killed one, another won’t make a difference.”

“Your *chut* husband, your murder.”

Farah again winced at Geeta’s language but followed her and her lantern out into the night. They avoided the open water channels, walking along the sides of their village’s common pathways, where garbage aggregated. Farah covered her nose and mouth with the free end of her sari. Her voice muffled and miserable, she asked, “What are we doing here?”

Geeta doubled over, her head closer to the ground as she squinted. “Looking for a plastic bag.”

“Why?”

Geeta modulated her voice as though it should’ve been obvious: “Tie his hands and feet while he’s sleeping and then put the bag on his head. Smother him. He dies. You remove your nose ring; I keep my money. Everyone is happy.”

“Smart.”

It was almost sweet, the way Farah looked at her. Like Geeta's ideas were gold, like she could do no wrong. Despite herself, such adoration filled her with the desire to prove Farah's faith was well placed and to perform as best she could. Geeta imagined this was what having a child would've been like.

"I know."

"So, ah, is that how you did it?"

Geeta stiffened. She rolled her shoulders back to make her height more imposing. "If you want my help, you'll stop chewing on my brains with your questions. What I did is none of your damn business."

Farah looked chastised. She sucked her teeth, complaining, "*Bey yaar*, fine. What do I tell people? After, I mean?"

"Heart attack, he drank himself to death, anything you like. Just don't let them do an autopsy."

"Okay." Farah drew out the word slowly. "But if you smothered Ramesh, why didn't you just use a pillow? A plastic bag seems like a lot more work, you know?"

Geeta blinked. Dammit. That thought had not occurred to her. She covered her ignorance with ire. "I didn't say I smothered Ramesh."

Farah threw her hands up. "What? Then why are we here? Why not just do what we know works?"

"Oi! 'Even to copy, you need some brains.' Do you want my help or not?"

"What I want," Farah sulked, "is your *experience*, not your *experiment*."

"Forget it. Why should I break my head over your drama?"

"No! Sorry, okay?" She tugged on her earlobes in an earnest apology. "Let's keep looking, na?"

They walked along the more trafficked areas, where the lines of compost and trash thickened. Geeta toed aside torn packets of *mukhwas* and wafers. A few meters away were the public toilets the government had recently installed. There were two, designated by helpful yellow and blue cartoons of a card deck's king and queen. Though

she used the squat toilets daily, it'd never occurred to Geeta before now just how silly the drawings were.

Geeta's home didn't have a pit latrine like many others did, but she still saw men take to the fields. Despite all the recent clamoring about open defecation and sanitation issues, it didn't bother her; she'd grown up doing the same, they all had. Even those who had pit latrines declined to use them—after all, someone would eventually have to empty them and caste Hindus were quite touchy about polluting themselves by handling their own waste. Some tried to force such work onto local Dalits, an oppression that was technically illegal, though authorities rarely came around these parts to enforce the law.

But for women, the new installations, public and private alike, were wholly welcome. While men could take to the fields at their whim (Geeta had heard that in the West where there were clean facilities galore, men still *su-su'd* anywhere for the hell of it—nature of the beast and all), the women and girls could only make their deposits either at sunrise or sunset—otherwise they were inviting harassment. So they held it. Better to brave the scorpion than the horny farmer.

Around Geeta and Farah, the crickets' song swelled. It was difficult to hear Farah as she ambled along another line of rubbish, her attempts half-hearted. After picking up and immediately dropping a bag of chips with carpenter ants inside, she asked, her voice carefully casual, "How come Ramesh's body was never found?"

Acrid smoke filled the night air; the heat amplified the odor. Throughout the village, trash was being burned. "You're beginning to sound like one of those gossipy bitches from the loan group."

Farah cringed, but no longer from the stench. "Why do you curse so much?"

"Because you talk so much."

"It's not right for a woman to swear. And it doesn't suit you." After a few moments, she asked, "You and Ramesh—were you a love match or arranged?"

"Why are you asking?"

"No need to be so suspicious. We're on the same side." Farah sighed.

“You won’t talk about the end, so I thought maybe the beginning is less painful for you. Samir and I were a love match. My parents didn’t approve, but we eloped and I moved here.” Her smile was dreamy.

“Maybe you should’ve listened to your parents.”

Farah’s smile sank.

Unwelcome memories of Ramesh crashed into Geeta: the heat of his arm against her side as she’d burned the papadam. The gentle way he’d nudged her aside to fix her error. “Mine was arranged.”

“Oh.” Farah sniffed. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. The movement pulled up her nostrils, and Geeta saw the underwire of her nose ring. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. At least I can blame my parents. Your situation is your fault.”

“I guess.” Farah held up a pink bag. Red letters covered one side. “What about this one?” She put it over her head. A rip at the seam allowed her nose to poke straight through.

Geeta growled her disgust, smacking her forehead. “I swear, you can’t even count on the trash in India.”

Someone else spoke: “What’s going on?”

Geeta immediately recognized Saloni’s voice. Of course she’d turn up here, her radar for rumors—and therefore power—had always been finely tuned. Geeta turned with a deep breath, giving her back to Farah, who worked to yank the bag from her head. “Oh, *hi* there,” Geeta greeted with faux charm. “Ram Ram.”

Farah’s breathing fluttered. Geeta nearly groaned as she heard a whimpering, “*Kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi.*”

“Ram Ram.” Saloni stood a few meters away, her own solar lantern in hand. “Well?”

“*Kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi . . .*”

“Not now, Farah!” Geeta seethed.

Saloni squinted in the night. “What—is she saying *kabaddi*? Are you *playing*?”

“Uh . . .” Geeta started, but every conceivable excuse fell from her like clipped hair.

Farah, mantra apparently having worked, was calm when she said, “We were just looking for Geeta’s bag. She thought she dropped it here.”

Saloni nodded toward the torn, pink bag still in Farah’s hand. “That thing?”

Geeta cleared her throat. She grabbed the bag from Farah and pressed it to her chest. “Yes. It has, er, sentimental value.”

Saloni rolled her eyes. “As weird as ever, I see. You know, just because your name’s mixed with dirt, doesn’t mean you have to, like, *literally* mix with dirt.”

Geeta’s heart thumped in anger; being dubbed weird at thirty-five years of age should hardly sting, but it figured that Saloni wouldn’t let an opportunity slide, not when she could twist the blade instead. She thrived on spite, always had. Geeta’s voice was accusatory when she demanded, “What are *you* doing out this late?”

Saloni shifted her weight onto her other foot. “Not that it’s any of your business, but my son left his workbook at the school, so naturally I’m the one walking in the dark to get it.” She blinked. “But I’m happy to do it. It’s a small price to pay.”

“Because it’s so rewarding,” Farah said, nodding.

“Joys of motherhood,” Saloni added on automation, her eyes dragging heavenward. “I’m blessed. It’s exhausting, though. I sometimes think, ‘Saloni, how do you manage to raise those kids and run a business?’”

Farah gushed eagerly, “Yes, you’re practically a divinity.”

“Good god,” Geeta muttered.

“Stop.” Saloni flicked away the praise but then agreed solemnly. “Yes, I suppose I am. But it’s worth it. I always say, ‘Until you’ve brought forth the gift of life, you’re not complete.’”

Geeta guffawed.

When Saloni opened her viper mouth, Geeta braced for a bite, but instead Saloni narrowed her eyes at Farah. “I didn’t know you two were friends.”

“Like sisters,” Geeta said. “That’s why I call her *ben*.”

Saloni's brow folded like an accordion. "You call every woman *ben*."

"Not every woman, Saloni."

Saloni glowered at the pointed lack of suffix. The wind carried a small biscuit wrapper across her toes and she kicked it off. "If I were you, Farah, I'd spend less time pawing through trash and more time figuring out how you're going to pay back this week's loan. And Geeta of course."

Farah hung her head and Saloni, clearly feeling her work was done, left. Until now, Geeta had been too occupied with her own pariah status to notice Farah's. She crushed the plastic bag, imagining it was Saloni's fat head.

Farah turned, hand over heart, eyes and voice hopeful. "You think of me as a sister?"

Geeta groaned. "We should just kill *her* instead," she muttered. "Nosy bitch. Saloni, how do you manage to raise those kids *and* run a business? I dunno, could it be your rich husband?"

"What's the scene there anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"You two hate each other."

"So? No one actually likes Saloni, they just pretend to because they're scared of her."

"I'm not scared of her."

"Well, you've got a bigger bully to deal with."

"Oh, you're not so bad once you—"

"Not *me*," Geeta snapped. "Your husband."

"Oh. Right, right." Farah cleared her throat. "But what I meant was, like, there's regular hate, right? Which is really just dislike. Kinda like how you don't like . . . well, anyone. But that dislike disappears when you're not looking at them, 'cause you got other things going on. But you and Saloni hate-hate each other."

"What's your point?"

"Well, in my experience, that kind of hate comes with a good story."

“And?”

“And . . . I like good stories?”

“I’m not here to entertain you, Farah. We’re here for one reason only.”

Farah sighed. “I’m not your enemy, Geetaben, you don’t have to treat me like one. You’re doing me a huge favor—the biggest—and I’m just trying to make it easier. Friendship can make things easier, you know.”

“Saloni and I were friends,” Geeta admitted. “A long time back.”

Farah’s face turned supportive, encouraging Geeta to delve. “What happened? Was it a boy? It’s usually a boy.”

“I didn’t tell you so we could gossip, Farah. I told you to correct you: friendship doesn’t necessarily make anything easier.”

“I said it *can*. It didn’t work out with Saloni, I get it. But what—you’re just never going to have another friend again? That’s bogus.”

“Oh, fuck off, yeah? When were you ever interested in friendship before you needed me?”

“I—”

“After Ramesh, you lot couldn’t be bothered to look at me, much less talk to me. And that’s fine. But don’t stand there banging a *bhajan* about the importance of sisterhood.” Geeta let the bag fall to the dirt. “Forget it. Let’s go.”

Farah did not move. “But what about the plan?”

“Saloni saw us. It’ll be too suspicious if he dies tonight. She’s a nosy bitch, but not a stupid bitch.”

Farah released a one-note noise of admonishment. “The cursing!”

“Tell me she’s *not* a nosy bitch.” When Farah opened her mouth, Geeta added, “And remember lying is a worse sin than cursing.”

Farah’s jaw clicked shut.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE BANDIT QUEENS: A NOVEL BY PARINI SHROFF*.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).



Sweet, Soft, Plenty Rhythm

a novel by Laura Warrell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Laura Warrell

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

Pantheon Books and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Name: Warrell, Laura, author.

Title: Sweet, soft, plenty rhythm: a novel / Laura Warrell.

Description: First edition. New York: Pantheon Books, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021055170 (print) | LCCN 2021055171 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593316443 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593316450 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780375715396 (open market)

Subjects: LCSH: Jazz musicians—Fiction. Man-woman relationships—Fiction. Fathers and daughters—Fiction.

LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A864375 s64 2022 (print) |

LCC PS3623.A864375 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021055170>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021055171>

www.pantheonbooks.com

Jacket art by Alexandria Coe

Jacket design by Linda Huang

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

**Ready,
the
Heart**

*

Koko

“Does it hurt?”

The drag of the sewing needle’s point across Koko’s forearm left two tiny dots of blood and a sting, so she couldn’t tell which of the girls clustered around her on the school bleachers had asked the question. Koko glanced at the other freshman who’d gone first after Natalie De Luca and Kima Brooks asked who wanted their ears pierced or skin tattooed. The girl held a napkin over the freshly engraved miniature heart on the inside of her wrist, her lips parted as if she were secretly taking breaths from the chilled winter day to keep herself from being sick.

“It should hurt,” Natalie said, the tip of her tongue curled against her top lip. She sat two planks up on the bleachers, her long legs crossed at the knees. Teeth chattering against the cold, she rubbed at her bare thighs, goose pimples under the hem of her down coat. “So does it?”

Koko barely recognized the whispery sound of Natalie’s voice because Natalie, who’d been Koko’s best friend in the neighborhood until the older girl’s legs lengthened and breasts swelled three summers before, hadn’t asked her a question in years.

“No way,” Koko answered.

Straddled on the plank beside Koko, Kima lowered the point of the needle into the flame of her pink Bic lighter. “Where do you want it?”

Koko ran her finger over the inside of her arm beneath her elbow joint. “There. I guess.”

A yowl came from the track field yards away, where a group of boys were having a snowball fight, and all the girls on the bleachers turned to look. The captain of the basketball team—the Tower, everyone called him—swept flecks of snow from his jacket with his giant bony hands, cursing whoever had thrown the snowball. Koko watched him bend to the ground to craft another ball with the same precision and care her art teacher shaped molds of clay.

“What color you want it to be?” Kima asked.

The tip of Kima’s needle blackened against the flame. Koko bristled, imagining its drag across her arm, though a part of her wanted to feel it again, to see the white scratch of the needle on her dry brown skin, to feel the cut and watch the blood. She wanted the other girls to see.

“How are you gonna color it in?” Koko asked.

“Permanent marker.” Kima snapped a wad of gum Koko didn’t know she’d been chewing. “The color stays because of the slit.”

Millicent, one of the older girls, rolled a collection of permanent markers between her palms, and Koko listened to the strange crack of plastic. She had wondered all year how anyone with an old lady name like Millicent could be as popular as this girl was. But Millicent wore blue jeans that hung low on the angles of her womanly hips, and she had an accent all the boys made fun of, though Koko could tell they liked the sound.

“Why don’t you put, like, a gust of wind since your name is Bree?” Millicent stopped sorting through the markers and tilted her head. “You know, Bree like breeze.”

“That one’s Bree,” Natalie said, nodding toward the blonde freshman with the heart tattoo. “This one’s named Koko. But if

we're letting her hang around, which I haven't decided if we are yet, she needs a new name. 'Koko' sounds like a puppy."

Rolling her eyes, Millicent dropped the markers onto the plank. "I can't keep these little freshman girls straight."

Koko caught an aqua blue marker before it rolled to the ground as Millicent fluffed her hair, then bounced off the bleachers and headed toward the boys. The back-and-forth swing of her hips embarrassed Koko as if somehow the sight were too grown-up for her, like dirty movies or high heels. The boys flocked around Millicent, but only the Tower was taller than she was, and the two seemed to gravitate toward each other in a way that made Koko imagine they were dancing. She noticed that Bree, the other freshman, who now held a lump of snow over the fresh wound on her wrist, was watching, too.

"What do you want the design to be?" Kima asked.

"Maybe a butterfly?" one of the girls suggested. "Kima draws good butterflies."

"Get a bulldog," said another girl, drawing a black diamond on the back of her hand. "Then you'll never forget going to school here."

Kima spat her gum to the ground. "That's something I want to forget. Class of 2013, girl, this is the year I'm set free."

"Maybe she should get the Tower," Natalie said. "She stares at him enough."

Koko felt the soft kick of Natalie's foot against her back. When Koko turned, she hoped a look would pass between them that would tell her Natalie remembered the years they used to run through the neighborhood in their pajamas and make costumes out of their mothers' jewelry. Instead, Natalie blew a sarcastic kiss through her lips, slick with a purple lipstick she said was called Lilac Kitten.

"Circus," Koko said louder than she'd meant. "I want it to say Circus."

Kima arched an eyebrow. "You like clowns or something?"

“Circus is her dad.” Natalie slid her phone from her pocket, thumbing at the keys. “She’s obsessed with him.”

“No, I’m not,” Koko mumbled.

The other girls snickered as if cued by the roll of Natalie’s eyes. Bree looked up at Koko with a thin smile, her lips caught on the wires of her braces.

“Whatever,” Kima said, making another pass of the needle through the flame.

A giddy shriek sounded from the field, and all the girls turned just as Millicent latched her fingers through the belt loops of the Tower’s blue jeans and followed him across the snow-covered grass.

“Are they fucking?” one of the girls asked.

“Obviously,” Natalie said without looking up from her phone. “Millicent fucks everyone. Why do you think the boys love her?”

The Tower ran faster than Millicent could with her hands attached to him, so she tripped, which Koko thought mean until she realized the fall was meant to give him a reason to help her to her feet. Koko watched them cross the field, noting how the older girl had a way of putting all the prettiest parts of herself just out of reach of the Tower’s touch when she moved around him—the corners of her hips, her mouth, the flipped ends of her long black hair. Koko tried to see herself slinking around the boy the way Millicent did, but knew she didn’t have that kind of magic, not like Millicent, or Natalie.

They were both tall and raven-haired and delicately built. Even the other girls on the bleachers, including boyish Kima with her sleek frame and straightened hair, were lovely the way Koko knew girls were supposed to be. Their hair fluttered when the wind blew through it, unlike the bun of bristly curls knotted at the back of Koko’s head. Their faces were made up of squares and triangles, unlike Koko’s rounded nose and cheeks. They looked like girls in shampoo commercials, she thought, while Koko was sturdy and small, thick-thighed and busty. Sometimes Koko saw a pretty girl

when she looked at herself in the mirror, and she knew she had something because men in the streets stopped to whistle. But at school, she felt ugly—her eyebrows too bushy, her lips too plump, her brown skin too blotched.

“Would you do it with Tower, Nat?” asked the girl coloring the diamond on her hand.

Natalie looked up, the glint in her eye a tease at the younger girls. “I’d blow him.”

The girls laughed or agreed, and Natalie smiled to herself, Koko understood, because she liked imagining doing it. Koko, who’d never been kissed or touched by a boy, let her gaze fall from the Tower’s face to his shoulders to his knees, briefly gracing the lump in his blue jeans. She’d seen naked boys, but only hidden under the blankets of her bed, where she watched videos on her phone before falling asleep at night. As the Tower gripped Millicent by the wrists and pulled her to her feet, Koko quivered against the same sensations she felt under her blankets. Readiness, fear, and a light tickle between her legs.

“My boyfriend would die if I did that to another guy.” Natalie fixed her hair in the camera on her phone. “Older guys get wicked jealous.”

“The boyfriend we’ve never seen,” Kima said under her breath.

The younger girls glanced at each other as if expecting a fight, except for Bree who seemed as in the dark as Koko on the matter. Unruffled, Natalie took a quick scroll of her phone, turning it so the girls could see the photo on the screen of a white male torso, chest slim and hairless, his slanted purplish thing in his grip.

Koko turned her head before the picture could stick, but she wasn’t fast enough. She didn’t know which of the feelings in her body to allow—exhilaration, confusion, embarrassment, alarm—so she rolled her sleeve further up her arm in preparation for the tattoo as the other girls fought over the phone to have a closer look.

Natalie let out a cackle that sounded wild and sinful. “He sends me a dick pic whenever he wants me to come blow him. It’s like

the bat signal. Usually he gives me jewelry to thank me when I'm done, so it's a win-win." She stared at the screen, lying back on the plank of the bleachers as if falling onto the cushions of her sofa at home. "Just looking at this picture makes me want him in my mouth."

"Gross," Bree said, then gasped as if speaking were a mistake.

"Don't knock it till you try it," Natalie said.

"Why do you like it?" Bree asked.

Natalie unspooled her lipstick, smothering her mouth in violet. "I have all the power."

Koko turned her gaze back to the Tower, wondering what he looked like when he let his pants fall to his ankles, wondering if he ever made noises like the ones she heard the men in the videos make when women put their mouths and hands on them. The Tower was grinning at Millicent like he loved her, and Koko's heart hurt because she wanted to be looked at that way. As Millicent jumped onto the Tower's back and let him carry her across the field, Koko wondered what Natalie meant by power and if it made the older girls more exceptional than the younger ones. If it somehow made them prettier.

"Someone's thirsty," Natalie said, poking the pink tip of her tongue through her purple lips that reminded Koko of a bruise. "Do you want to have little Tower babies?"

"Hardly," she answered.

Natalie went on about the Tower and Koko's make-believe babies, speculating on whether they'd be tall or short, athletic or lazy. The other girls laughed, but Koko wasn't bothered. Even though she thought the Tower was cute, and even though she had once kissed her rolled fist imagining his mouth, she was no longer thinking about him because her truer love was making his way across the track field. Mr. O'Rourke, the English teacher, waved his hand at the girls while beside him the school guidance counselor, Mrs. Washington, stumbled through the snow in heeled boots.

“I should go,” Koko said, certain she knew why the teachers were coming and not wanting the other girls around to see.

“What about your tattoo?” Kima asked.

“Can I get it tomorrow?”

“We’re not doing them tomorrow,” Natalie said.

Just then Mr. O’Rourke called Koko’s name. All the girls turned their heads.

“My God,” said the girl with the diamond on her hand. “That’s who I want babies with.”

Kima hid the lighter and needle in the backpack between her feet as Mr. O’Rourke waved again, his wide mouth revealing a toothy grin. He’d always reminded Koko of a tree, with his lanky limbs knotted at the knuckles and knees, the way he loomed over her desk when he asked questions. Koko also thought of caricatures she’d watched drawn at birthday parties because his jawline was an inch too big, his nose bumpy and his brown hair a shaggy mop. “Goofy,” her mother had once called him after a parent-teacher conference. Still, he mesmerized Koko whenever she sat in his classroom or saw him in the halls, and she knew other girls felt the same.

“Your babies would have giant heads,” Natalie said and returned to her phone.

Mr. O’Rourke clapped his gloved hands together and said something to Mrs. Washington that made her laugh.

“How’s everyone doing this afternoon?” Mrs. Washington asked when the teachers arrived. All the girls mumbled an answer. “Pretty chilly to be outside, isn’t it?”

“They’re tough,” said Mr. O’Rourke, beaming at Koko.

“Maybe we should find some clubs for you all to join,” the guidance counselor went on. “There’s better things to do with your after-school time than loafing on the bleachers.”

“We’re bonding,” said one of the girls.

“Bonding’s good,” said Mr. O’Rourke in the bouncy way he said everything. “I hope you’re bonding over the Lucille Clifton

poems we talked about this morning. I bet that's what you're doing. Am I right?"

All the girls tittered except for Natalie, which seemed to bother Mr. O'Rourke. Koko could tell how much he liked making everyone around him smile. It was one of the things she loved most about him.

"Natalie," he asked, "you didn't like the Lucille Clifton poems this morning?"

She didn't answer at first and continued scrolling through her phone.

"Only the 'Dark Moses' one with the guy's rod twisting like a serpent," she said without looking at him.

"We didn't read that one," he said to Mrs. Washington as his cheeks reddened. "That's not one of the poems I assigned."

Mrs. Washington nodded, though she didn't seem to understand.

"Koko," she said, taking a step forward. "Are you busy, dear? We'd like to get your two cents about something."

The other girls looked at Koko like she was in trouble. She grabbed her backpack and followed the teachers across the field, answering vaguely when they asked about her classes and grades, whether she had plans for spring break.

When they stepped inside the school building, Mrs. Washington stomped the snow from her boots, and the sound echoed in the empty halls.

"Koko, dear," she started, "do you have any idea why we want to talk to you?"

Koko knew but shook her head. The two teachers glanced at each other like actors playing schoolteachers on a television show. Mr. O'Rourke flicked his head in the direction of his classroom, so Koko followed them down the hall, taking her favorite seat at the side of the room near the window. Mr. O'Rourke sat behind his desk and started flipping his fountain pen between his thumb and forefinger while Mrs. Washington opened one of the accordion files she'd been carrying.

“We found something of yours,” the counselor said.

From one of the sleeves of the file, she pulled out Koko’s journal, on which she’d plastered Day of the Dead stickers and drawn roses and slinky cats. For two days, Koko had been waiting for Mr. O’Rourke to come to her with the journal, which she’d planted on a bookshelf in his room two days before, knowing Mr. O’Rourke cleaned the room himself because he was too kindhearted to leave it to the janitors.

“Did I do something wrong?” Koko asked.

Mr. O’Rourke scooted to the edge of his chair. “Of course not.”

“We just have some . . . concerns about some of the things we read in your notebook,” Mrs. Washington said. “We weren’t trying to invade your privacy reading it. We just needed to see who the book belonged to.”

“What are you concerned about?” Koko asked.

Mrs. Washington sat on a corner of Mr. O’Rourke’s desk. “A couple of the poems you’ve written. They’re lovely, Koko. You’re a talented girl. We’re just concerned about the content. Whether what you’re describing in them is real or imagined. You understand?”

Koko had never liked the way Mrs. Washington spoke to everyone like they were little kids. It wasn’t Mrs. Washington she’d wanted to talk to anyway.

“I’m not comfortable,” Koko said.

The teachers glanced at each other again.

“Maybe I should leave you two alone,” said Mr. O’Rourke.

“No,” Koko said, her hands clenched beneath the desk, “I’m not comfortable talking to Mrs. Washington.”

The counselor recoiled. “Why not, honey?”

Koko ran her hands over the surface of the journal, picking at the edge of one of the stickers as she tried to come up with an answer that would make sense. “Mrs. Washington isn’t a poet. She won’t be able to understand my poems.”

“It’s not the craft we want to talk to you about, Koko,” she answered.

Koko pressed the edge of the sticker firmly against the cardboard cover. "I prefer talking to Mr. O'Rourke."

Mrs. Washington nodded, collected her accordion files, and left the room. After a prickly silence, Mr. O'Rourke stirred a bowl of paper clips on his desk with his fingers, took one, and bent it around his thumb.

"Are you having a good year?" he asked.

"I guess."

"What's your favorite class?"

She shrugged, embarrassed to say "English" now that they were alone. "Not math."

"Yeah." He chuckled. "I was never very good at math either. Tell you a secret?"

She nodded.

"I didn't even make it to algebra in high school. Too much of a knucklehead, I guess."

Koko fidgeted inside the strange sensation that came over her body, as if her leg had fallen asleep but the tickle were moving all over. She had never been alone with him, had never been alone with any boy she loved.

"How many books do you have in there?" she asked, nodding toward the tiny alcove attached to the classroom that Mr. O'Rourke had turned into a library.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You know, I haven't counted. A hundred? Two hundred? Like I said, I'm bad with numbers."

"Can I go in?" she asked, her stomach fluttering like it did when she daydreamed during class about Mr. O'Rourke leading her into the library, shutting the door, and kissing her.

"Koko, I think we should talk about your poems." He came around the desk and sat in the seat beside her. "May I?"

She shrugged, taking in the soapy scent of his aftershave. He took the journal and opened it to the first page, sliding his hand across the words she'd written purposely days before in hopes that he would read them and worry, that this very moment between them would come.

“It’s a beautiful poem,” he said, scanning the lines. “But when I read it, I feared . . .”

His voice trailed off, and he bit at his bottom lip, nervous, it seemed, about how to handle things. When he looked toward the door, Koko imagined he was wishing Mrs. Washington would return. She would know what to do.

“What’s wrong with the poem?” Koko asked.

Mr. O’Rourke kept his eyes on the page. He swallowed, and his Adam’s apple bounced. “Koko, are you . . . is this person . . .”

He struggled, and for a moment Koko was sorry for lying.

“Is what you wrote in the poem true?” he asked. “Your stepfather . . . he uses . . . are there substances in your house?”

For days, Koko had imagined this moment but hadn’t expected Mr. O’Rourke to bumble so awkwardly through it. The point of writing the poem had only been to stand out from the sea of faces he looked at every day. How easy it would be to tell him now that the poem was made up or was about a girl she could pretend to know, then seize their moment together and move it in a sweeter direction. But for some reason, Koko didn’t want to do that. He was struggling. He was struggling over her, and she’d made it happen. She wanted more.

“Yeah,” she answered.

Mr. O’Rourke fell against the back of the chair, letting out a long breath he seemed to have been holding in. He paged through the journal absently, not reading or even looking at the poems. “Mrs. Washington should handle this, Koko. She knows the proper channels, okay, the protocol. There’s a protocol. Why don’t you want to talk to her?”

Because I love you, she imagined saying. Instead she asked, “What’s to talk about?”

Mr. O’Rourke got up and paced the room, his hands in his pockets. He stood in front of a Walt Whitman poster as if he were getting some kind of guidance.

“I think I’m supposed to report this,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“Are you in any danger? I think I’m supposed to ask. Are you?”

Koko grabbed the journal and shoved it into her backpack. Her voice seemed stuck in her throat, cracked and sticky like she remembered feeling once when she had the flu.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is new for me.”

“Don’t tell anyone. There’s nothing to tell.”

He sat on the edge of his desk the way he always did when he was about to say something serious. Something else Koko loved.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I won’t say anything about this, not today. Go home. Think about it. I’ll do the same, and we’ll talk again tomorrow. Is that okay?”

She nodded, eager to get out of the room.

“Good, good.” He put on a smile. “Tomorrow we’ll see what happens.”

* * *

Koko climbed onto the city bus, rushing to the back for a seat, then huddling beneath her coat. She imagined herself in Mr. O’Rourke’s library the next day. She would tell him she’d made up the poem but hadn’t wanted to confess because he seemed so affected. She imagined him letting out the long breath he’d been holding in, saw him pat her knee, saw the relief in his eyes. He would ask to see her poems again, then open her journal to his favorite one, praising her images and metaphors. They would meet every day after, at first to talk about her poems. Soon they’d meet because they wanted to. Then Koko saw him in a different daydream. They were sitting in his library, where each day she would talk about an invented stepfather shooting up in the bathroom until the day she could say the man left. By then, Mr. O’Rourke would love her.

When Koko walked up the back steps of her porch, she noticed her mother’s car parked in the driveway. The dusting of snow on its surface meant she hadn’t driven it that day. Unlatching the

lock, Koko stepped through the door into the kitchen. The lights were out, the room quiet except for the drip from a leaky faucet down the hall in the bathroom. Her mother sat at the dining table, stretched across two wooden chairs, cradled by them, as she slumped against the chair's rails like a doll.

"You didn't go to work." Koko closed the door, slipping out of her boots and coat.

Her mother opened her eyes. Moments passed. The faucet in the bathroom dripped.

"I couldn't," she said.

The cigarette between her fingers had almost burned to its end, though the ashes had yet to fall. Koko tapped them into her own hand to keep them from dropping onto her mother's nightgown, the color of apricot and cream.

Patting the ashes into the sink, Koko asked, "Am I making dinner again?"

Her mother lifted herself in the chair, gazing up at Koko with dulled eyes, her upturned nose and soft bow of a mouth pinched. As a little girl, Koko used to tell people her mother—tall, slender, golden, with shimmering blonde hair—was Cinderella, though now she looked like a Cinderella who'd been scrubbing floors, her skin washed out and hair in tangles.

"I can't," she answered.

Koko opened the refrigerator, looking over the cartons and packages past their sell-by dates. "Macaroni salad or tuna casserole?"

"Tuna."

Koko pulled out the casserole pan along with a pot of sweet potatoes that had spoiled.

"What time is it?" her mother asked.

Koko tossed the potatoes down the garbage disposal, tapping the ashes from her mother's cigarette again as she passed. "Almost five."

With a groan, her mother got up and stretched. "I'm going to watch television."

“You want a drink?”

“My daughter shouldn’t be making me drinks.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t have any more vodka.”

Opening a cupboard, Koko found a bottle of cabernet and poured a glass. Her mother looked at it like she was doubting whether to take it. Then she did. “How was school, sweet girl?”

Koko settled against the counter, watching as her mother drank the wine as if every sip pained her. “This is a long one, Ma. I thought you were feeling better.”

“I’m just having an off day.” She cracked a smile, and for a second, Koko saw Cinderella at the ball.

“You said the same thing last week. Are you seeing that doctor again?”

“He didn’t know what he was talking about. It’s just a longer spell than usual. It’ll pass.”

“There are pills, you know.”

Her mother stamped out her cigarette in the sink. “I asked about school.”

Koko watched her push the crushed tip of the cigarette through the gray smudge of ashes as if she were painting the inside of the sink.

“This girl got in trouble for making up a poem in English class,” Koko said.

“What kind of poem?”

“She lied about some guy doing drugs in her house.”

“What’s the point of that?”

“There’s a boy she likes.”

Her mother caught her own reflection in the window above the sink and combed her bangs with her fingers. “That’s not a good reason.”

From a bag in the junk drawer, Koko scooped a handful of raspberry candies left from Christmas. “I guess she thought if this boy knew bad things happened to her, he’d like her, too.”

“What’s likable about bad things happening to people?”

"I don't know. Maybe he'd feel sorry for her."

"Well, that's dumb." Her mother took two candies out of Koko's hand. "The last thing you want a man to feel is sorry for you."

"What should she do?" Koko asked. "I told the girl she should tell her teacher the truth. Don't you think?"

Her mother finished chewing the first candy and popped the second into her mouth, her gaze growing emptier as she sucked and crunched. When she spoke again, the words seemed to drain out of her. "I don't know, Ko. I'm not the one to ask about making someone love you."

"I meant, what she should do not to get in trouble."

Her mother looked out the window at a squirrel twitching its tail in the trees. "It's so cold out there. Where do they go to stay warm?"

"I think they make dens in the trunks."

"I wish I had a den."

Her mother disappeared into the living room so Koko took the bag of candies and went upstairs to her bedroom. She did her math homework and struggled through a chapter of her biology textbook. Nearly two hours later, her phone chimed on the bedside table. A text message from her mother.

Is it time to eat yet? she'd typed.

Koko stuck out her tongue at the phone and placed it on her chest at the spot where she imagined her heart beating. She pictured a hand placed there, but not Mr. O'Rourke's. She saw her father's hand. He'd laid it there, she imagined, to comfort her. He'd been coming to mind lately, and Koko didn't know why. He'd moved out five years before, after she and her mother ran into him with a woman at a Market Basket in Somerville when he was supposed to be playing a gig in the Berkshires. At first, he visited a lot, but in the last few years, he'd come by only once or twice a year, phoned every so often. Koko couldn't remember the last time. Not that his leaving changed much. Circus had barely come home during the decade he'd lived with them in the duplex.

Still, she thought of him more now than in the years he'd been around.

I'm starved came another text from her mother.

Koko turned off the ringer and lay back on her bed, playing out scenes on the blank ceiling. Mr. O'Rourke in his library, sitting on the floor across from her, elbows balanced on his knees and hands linked between them as he listened to her. She watched him laugh, nod, then scrunch his mouth the way he did when someone told him a sad story. She imagined him patting her knee and running his hands down the inside of her thighs.

Shivering, Koko switched out the lights and stared out the window into the dusky sky. She rolled her tongue in her mouth and imagined him kissing her. But she couldn't see herself. She saw Mr. O'Rourke, saw his hands and shoulders. She could even smell him. She could see the books on the library shelves and the pattern of the braided rug on the floor. She could see her clothes. She couldn't see herself.

* * *

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *SWEET, SOFT, PLENTY RHYTHM: A NOVEL* by Laura Warrell.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#). And, for information about the audiobook, please click [here](#).

For information on more debuts reads, the inside scoop on our upcoming titles, giveaways, and more, visit us at PenguinRandomHouseLibrary.com and BorrowReadRepeat.com.

Join Our Network: /PRHLibrary



Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Re@
BORROW. READ. REPEAT.

Content in this sampler is excerpted by permission of Penguin Random House. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt booklet may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.





Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Fall 2022 Debut Fiction Sampler

EXCERPTS FROM THE SEASON'S HOTTEST BOOKS



What Will You Read Next?





Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Fall 2022 Debut Fiction Sampler

EXCERPTS FROM THE SEASON'S HOTTEST BOOKS



What Will You Read Next?

