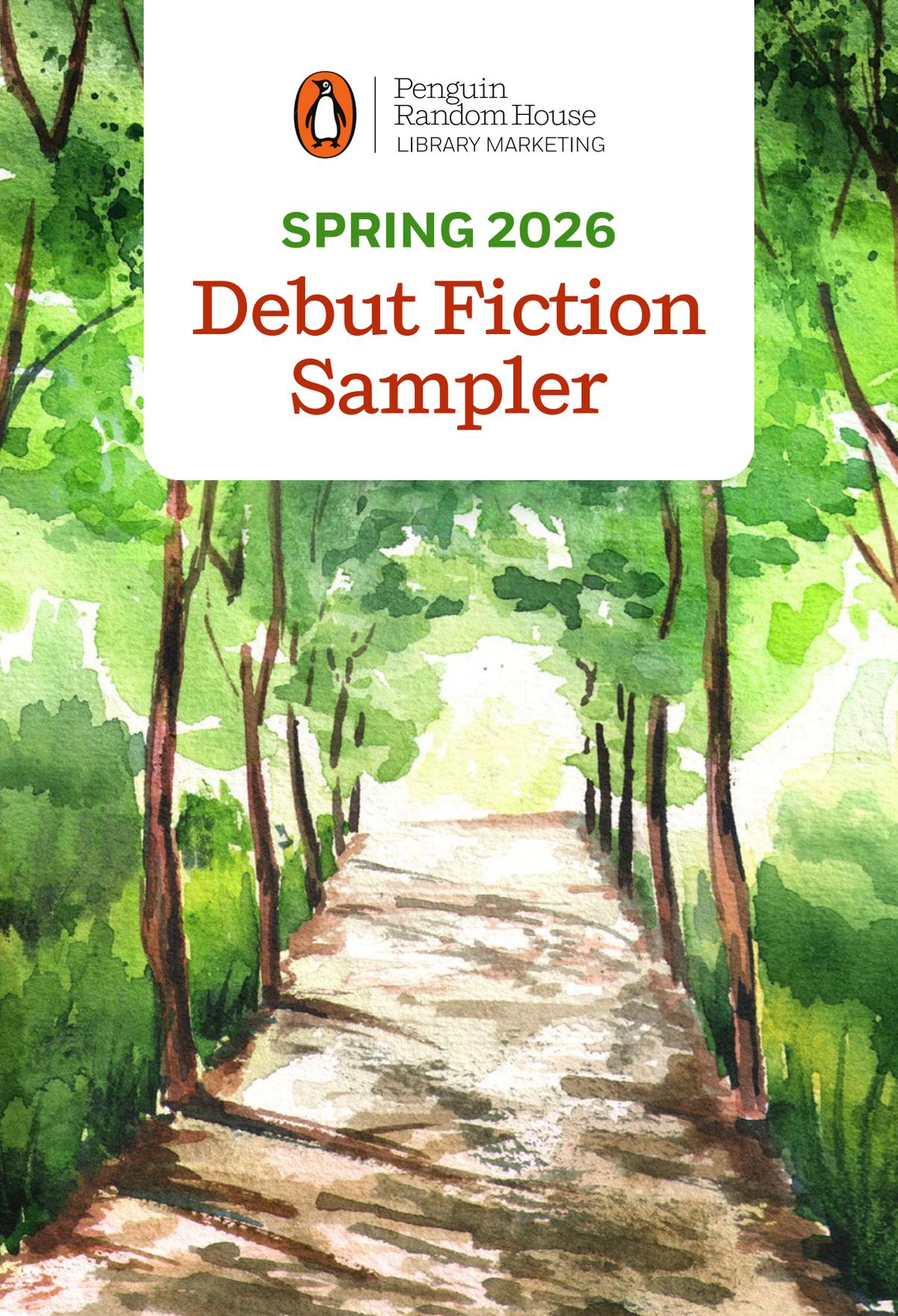




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Spring 2026 Debut Fiction Sampler

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a novel



LEAVE YOUR MESS AT HOME

TOLANI AKINOLA

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ONE

Saturday, October 20

This evening requires an elegance of Anjola that only her sister can bestow upon her. Playing dress-up with Sola has always been a vehicle to a more beautiful, more confident self. When they were both little, Sola would construct wedding gowns from bedsheets, pin Anjola's hair into a failure of a chignon, guide her down the stairs as though she were a dainty English lady, and spin her around for their mother's irritation and their father's bemusement. If Sola hadn't texted the day before to tell her she was in town, Anjola would be going to Neil's party tonight in the same T-shirt dress and black Converse she usually wears for grocery runs.

Sola is casual in that way. When her text came through the evening before, it was the first time Anjola had heard from her since May, when she was supposed to come to Anjola's medical school graduation and never showed. That evening, as Anjola sat with her parents, older brother, and younger sister around a table at New Haven's finest restaurant (it was bougier than most of them were

used to, but her mother had decided that Anjola's graduation from Yale had established their family as firmly upper middle class), the text from Sola had come in:

I'm sorry I couldn't make it. So proud of you.

Anjola had shrugged when she read the message, having become accustomed to rarely hearing from Sola, though their mother had found words all day. But it hadn't been a big deal; Anjola knew that Sola would show up for her in her own time. And what a reward for her light approach, Anjola thinks: Her sister has materialized at the most opportune moment.

She waits for Sola in an industrial, loft-style apartment in Logan Square, which she understands to belong to Sola's old friend from high school, Marquise. The space is bright and airy, and when she takes in the overhead windows, she sees tiny particles dancing where the sunlight streams in.

"Your home is so lovely," she says, looking up at the black light fixtures that descend from the beams like steel teardrops.

"Girl, this is not my house," Marquise says, motioning for her to sit at the kitchen island. "It belongs to one of my gentleman friends. He's an industrial designer and he's never here." He pours her a glass of sparkling water, which she hates but does not refuse, because being somewhere so sophisticated makes her want to play the part.

This is the first time she'll have seen her sister in person in ten years. There have been plenty of video chats, plenty of unkept promises, plans to make a visit happen that always fell through. Until Anjola learned to stop asking, learned not to give in to the embarrassment of hoping. Besides, in the intervening years, Sola has still been a confidant. And so Anjola forgives her sister for that time in

college when she almost boarded a flight to LA just before Sola called to say she had a sudden engagement in New York and couldn't host her any longer. And Anjola forgives her sister for the time she used the last dregs of her student stipend in her senior year to reserve spots at a meditation retreat in Nevada, only for Sola to drop out at the last second, leaving Anjola to meditate on the end of a situationship all alone. And, of course, she forgives Sola for missing her med school graduation. In place of resentment, Anjola only feels the low thrum of a nervous excitement as she waits.

"Hello, darling." Sola's voice is as dramatic in effect as her entrance. The bathroom door opens suddenly and there she stands, over six feet tall in heels, wearing a denim jumpsuit in the warm yellow light.

The sisters embrace.

"Ègbọ́n mi," Anjola says in the little Yoruba she knows. "You look sweet. It's almost like you're aging down." Sola only seems to grow more lovely with time. She is almost an exact replica of their mother, with her honey-hued skin and wide-set eyes, but more stretched out and long in the body.

"And I don't understand how you're a whole doctor and you still don't look a day over twenty-two." Sola takes Anjola's hands and stands apart from her, examining her appearance. "And you dress like it too." She gestures at Anjola's outfit: a blue tee, baggy blue jeans, running shoes. Marquise tsks softly in the background.

"Sometimes I wonder how we grew up in the same house," Sola says.

How did they? When Anjola was in her last year of high school, in the days and weeks after Sola left, she would lie in Sola's bed and inhale from her pillow until her scent faded. She knew that Sola was alive because she'd sent a single text to Anjola telling her not to

worry, but in their house Sola eventually became a kind of ghost. First her scent faded, then her absence became less of a spoken thing and more a felt thing, then their mother seemed to act as though Sola had never been there at all.

But she is here. In the flesh.

“How long are you going to be around?” Anjola asks as she watches Sola sidle up to Marquise with her arms crossed. Together they shake their heads at Anjola’s clothing in mock judgment.

“Just for a few days,” Sola says.

“That’s too bad.” Anjola pouts, and before she can ask Sola whether she’s planning to visit their parents, Sola redirects the conversation to the matter at hand.

“What time is this party again?” she asks. “Whose party is it?”

“It starts at eight.” Anjola glances down at the floor, playing with her earlobe. “It’s Neil’s.”

Sola lifts an eyebrow.

“I told him I’d try to get there a little bit before it starts to help him set up.”

“No the hell you won’t.” Sola motions for her to sit back down on the stool. “You’re going to arrive fashionably late and stop acting like nobody trained you.”

Their mother always made a point to arrive late enough to feel as though she’d been missed but early enough to still be seen—and made sure she looked good while doing so. Sola releases Anjola’s hair from the messy bun she’d thrown it into, freeing tiny black locs to cascade down her shoulders and back.

“Look at her hair,” Sola says to Marquise. “Beautiful. She’s definitely due for a retie though, probably because she’s being cheap.”

“Wow, so you’re really going to talk about me like I’m not here.”

“Girl, I could care less about your locs,” says Marquise. “I’m still waiting to find out who Neil is.”

“He’s one of my closest friends. We went to high school and undergrad together.”

“So you’re really going to sit there and still pretend that you don’t want this kid?” Sola asks.

“I used the word ‘friend’ for a reason.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Sola says.

“What’s the party for?” Marquise asks, shifting his glasses slightly down the bridge of his nose so he can peer at Anjola over the upper rim.

“It’s a surprise birthday party for his girlfriend.” Anjola looks up at her sister. “How was I supposed to tell you? You’re never here. I don’t even like texting that much.”

“And all that is why you’re single, boo,” Sola says, making her way over to an adjoining room.

“Um, can you not?” Anjola calls after her. “I just came for help so I can look the part and be a supportive friend. I don’t need a whole lecture about why I’m single. I swear you and Mom are the same.”

“What exactly is ‘the part’ again? And don’t compare me to that woman.”

Marquise holds out his hand. “Let me see what your friend looks like.”

Anjola pulls up Neil’s Instagram before passing her phone to Marquise.

“No ma’am.” Marquise clicks through the photos with widened eyes. “I could not be friends with this man. Wow. You never let him hit, not once?”

“Again, the operative word here is ‘friend,’ so no.” Anjola tries to

reach for her phone, but Marquise turns around and walks to the other side of the counter, his face glued to the screen.

“His girlfriend is so pretty. Is she Black?”

“Apparently.”

“I can kind of see it,” says Marquise. “Like maybe a quarter.”

Sola returns with a few clothing items on her arm and peers over Marquise’s shoulder.

“Oh.” Her voice is laden with real disappointment. “Okay, sure, she’s pretty, but she has nothing on my sister.”

“Um, yes she does,” Marquise says, finally handing back Anjola’s phone. “This is not a slacks-and-button-downs woman, honey. But Sola and I are going to get you together.”

“What are you two even going on about? I’m not competing with her for anything.”

Sola and Marquise exchange looks.

“At this point I can’t argue with you about your feelings,” Sola says resignedly. “Hopefully your appearance will do the job for you.”

Anjola tries to be patient as they pull at her hair and force her to try on a series of revealing outfits and beat foundation and eye makeup onto her face. By the time they finish and Sola and Marquise can agree on the outcome, it’s nearly eight o’clock.

“This is the nicest I’ve looked in years, actually.” Anjola studies her reflection in a large mirror. They’ve drawn her locs into a half-up, half-down style with a swoop bang, laid her edges, made her face look almost doll-like, and rubbed her deep brown skin with oil until it shone like bronze. She wears a silky, long-sleeved olive top, a flowy, patterned ocher skirt with a slit in the front, and high heels that she insists on swapping out for brown leather boots so she can walk.

“And the coup de grâce,” says Marquise, handing her a pair of

large gold hoops. “Even if he doesn’t leave his girlfriend for you on the spot, he’s got to have at least two cute friends for you to mess with.”

Sola claps happily beside her. “Yessss. Go get your man, sis.”

“I promise you both that isn’t the point,” Anjola says, gathering up her purse and phone. “But I so appreciate your help.”

At the door, Sola pulls her into a tight hug. “We’ve all gotta be honest about what we want from life,” she says.

When Anjola takes her seat on the Blue Line train, Sola’s words are replaying in her mind. Knowing what she wants out of life is a hard thing. If she had to describe what she’s done so far to, say, a blank-faced God on Judgment Day, she thinks she would say it’s mostly been a mixture of what she’s been told to do and what seems right. *Want* is something else entirely.

She thinks back to that graduation dinner, that first time she felt the weight of her parents’ disapproval.

“The pursuit of elite status and the vocation of providing care are fundamentally at odds,” Anjola had said to her mother, trying to explain why she was moving back home to Chicago, why she had ranked its most notorious public hospital at the top of her list for her residency training. The explanation didn’t land.

“But, Anjola, you’re so brilliant. You told me your test scores were good. Why Cook County of all places?” her mother asked. “What happened?” Her voice was soft and grave, as though she were inquiring about the reason behind a sad misfortune.

“I want to be where I can do the most good,” Anjola said.

At the admission that Anjola had done this to herself, that this

was not the result of her enemies conspiring against her, Anjola's mother's voice took on a new hardness.

"What good do you think you'll be doing there? *Şàlàyé fún mi*," she demanded. "They won't be able to give you the same caliber of training that any of these other programs would. They'll just be working you like a mule." Her mother, a health care provider herself, was the only other person at the table who could have understood the predicament in which Anjola had placed herself.

And nearly six months in, with this residency program proving to be every bit as grueling as her mother warned, Anjola has begun to question whether she came back to Chicago out of genuine desire or some strange sense of morality.

She had kept the decision to herself for weeks, telling no one but Neil. What had he said again? Something about it never being too late to right one's path. She pulls up her email on her phone, sifting through the exchanges between them that she's read and reread dozens of times.

Hey Jo,

So. You did a big thing. Good job. I mean, I'm sure your family won't be overjoyed if you actually end up doing your residency at Stroger, and you're right—people will make assumptions about your intellect. The whole Yale to Cook County thing is going to be a hard pill for your mom to swallow. But I still think you did a good thing. This whole system is set up to keep us all chasing accolades upon accolades, always pushing forward, never looking back. You were supposed to go to Yale and then Mount Sinai and then what? Go the whole academic medicine route? Get to be chair of diversity and community engagement for some private hospital after you finish residency? Please. I've seen my dad do it—it's a farce.

I think you've righted your path, even if no one else around you sees it that way. Also, the other day I was reading about how Federally Qualified Health Centers really only exist because of the Black Panther Party's free clinics. Maybe Stroger has a stronger legacy when you look at it like that? Besides, Chicago misses you. I miss you.

Keep me posted on how things go.

Neil

When she looks up from her phone, a man stands just across from her, smiling, then nodding vigorously. He wears a pair of washed-out jeans, a Chicago Bulls hoodie with some bleach stains, brown work boots. He starts muttering loudly to himself. Things like: "America ain't shit," with which she wholeheartedly agrees, and "Fuck, I'm high as shit," which is apparent enough, and "It's hard out here, man, money's real tight," which inspires him to sing the reprise from *Hustle & Flow*. Anjola looks away and smiles, resisting the urge to nod along to his gravelly voice. This smile is a mistake. He sees it.

When the seat beside her empties, he comes to sit down. His face and knees angle toward hers.

"Miss, you look absolutely beautiful this evening."

She doesn't want a scene but she doesn't want to talk to him either. Instead, she continues staring past him, at two men seated just across. They, in turn, seem to see right through her.

"Excuse me. Did you not hear me?" His breath is too close, hot and ripe like rotting fruit. She turns her head slightly and fixes her gaze on the train station sign outside. Division. There are too many stops left before Jackson.

"Yo, you got a man or something?" He is loud enough for everyone in her vicinity to hear, but none of them dares to look. She con-

siders getting up and walking to the other side of the train. Years ago she read about a woman on the Red Line who was stabbed to death because she rejected a random man's advances. It could so easily have been her: commuting home from school or work one day, minding her own business, and thus blighting some man's ego. It is her now.

"If you got a man, I'll fuck his ass up." He smiles. A blond mother with a baby in a stroller blocks off the seat to the right, so Anjola can't move. An older couple diagonal from her choose to stare fixedly out the window. No one comes to her rescue.

But their shoulders all jump at the booming "Fuck!" before the softer "All you uppity Black women." Now they all glance nervously in her direction before turning back to their carefully constructed universes. What they are trying to ignore is a decidedly Black affair. She wonders if they think she and this man know each other. It might be convenient now, she imagines, to believe that all Black people are family and that all family matters are private.

"You could at least acknowledge me," the man hisses. He squints, brings his lips closer to her ear, whispers, "Bitch." She holds still, tries to make herself a wall as he lays his head on her shoulder. It is an act so tender and intimate, so diametrically opposed to the language he has just used, that it is more violation than she can stand.

The train pulls into Jackson. She times her exit, slipping through the doors just before they close so he can't follow her. As she stands on the platform, trying to calculate when she might catch the connecting bus, her shoulder begins to itch.

TWO

Saturday, October 20

Though her father would often remind her that her full name, Gbemisola, means “lift me into wealth,” Sola is presently feeling pretty low and living pretty broke. She presses her back into the wrought-iron balustrade, just until she feels a slight sharpness beside her spine. Marquise passes her the blunt he has just lit, then leans back onto one of the plush white balcony chairs with a sigh.

“I don’t understand why you’re sitting on the ground like that.”

“I like to have something to anchor me when I’m high,” says Sola, pulling smoke from the blunt between neatly pressed lips.

“Personally, I’m trying to get lifted,” he says. “Like I’m on a cloud.”

As Marquise begins to sing John Legend circa 2005 softly to himself, Sola briefly wonders what might happen if the balustrade were to give out behind her.

“Quise, this place is so nice. Seriously, thank you for letting me stay with you.”

“Please stop saying thank you. It’s gross at this point.” He closes his eyes and waves his hand lightly. “Besides, you’re basically family, so I didn’t have a choice.”

“Nah, family doesn’t love this deep,” she says, her mind flitting over the image of her siblings, her parents, the facts of her estrangement. “You’re a true friend.”

She thought she would feel more when she saw Anjola for the first time in a decade. Deep anger, abiding love, joy, something. She’d been living with Marquise for a month before she found the resolve to text her sister, and by the time she sent the text, she had managed to convince herself that seeing Anjola might do something for her. But she only felt the numbness that she always did whenever they spoke. Anjola was the only sibling she really kept in contact with, not out of keen interest or joy on Sola’s part, but because Anjola seemed to insist upon sharing the details of her life. But these details were always boring, like watching a heavy-laden cargo ship traverse the Atlantic in slow motion, wondering if it had even moved at all.

“You know, she’s still exactly the same?” Sola says. “Like, she’s done *so* much? But nothing is really all that different about her.”

“Sorry, but I don’t want to talk about your sister,” he says. “We did enough for her today. And we already know how that story ends.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Please, her whole ‘He’s just a friend’ act is so tired. No offense. I mean I know she’s family, but yeah, girl, they’re not ending up together.” He takes another long draw from the blunt.

Sola shrugs, pulling her fingers through the length of the twenty-six-inch, bone-straight Brazilian hair she wears. “So . . . do you think you and what’s-his-name are going to end up together?”

“It’s Langston,” Marquise says, rolling his eyes. “And I can’t re-

ally predict all that, but I know I like what we have going on so far. And clearly he likes me too, girl, 'cause he's been letting me live here for almost four months. And she, me, her, we do not pay no bills, baby."

She laughs, enjoying the presence of her friend, the crispness of the late fall evening, the weed-addled silence in her head. "See, that's just what I need. A sponsor."

"Ma'am. That's the exact opposite of what you need. You need a whole intervention."

Marquise has always been like this—always ready to tell her about herself. They've been friends since the ninth grade, and while their physical distance has waxed and waned over the years, they've remained close. She doesn't have any other friend who has given her so much grace, who's required so little of her even when she once had so much to give.

"Whatever," she says. "But seriously, a financial arrangement sounds better to me than some bullshit loving relationship. I'm convinced you can't have both."

"I wish," Marquise says wistfully. "It's hard. Honestly, I would let him take me out the game if he actually wanted to be in a relationship. But he wants to keep playing house over there with his wife in Detroit."

"And so here you are, a kept woman," Sola says. They both laugh.

Her head is starting to feel light. She marvels that she's back in Chicago, for good probably. This intangible thing called the internet has made and unmade her life, and she still can't quite figure out the real source of the unfurling.

One evening two months ago, she came home to her LA apartment draped in fur, wearing a long busstown middle-part wig like Naomi Campbell's, her eyes taped at the temples to mimic her idol's

perfect almond-shaped ones. The following day was her thirtieth birthday, and she'd been out with a photographer friend, posing for the shoot she hoped might break Instagram and get her over that 200K-follower threshold. It was harder these days. The beauty standard had surpassed her long and lean physique, favoring a wider hourglass curvaceousness.

She took off her wig and gown and showered before changing into pajama shorts and sitting in front of her laptop to open up her business email. In a matter of minutes, she was watching her partner of ten years having sex with another woman. Sola's eyes welled with tears as she took in the familiar rhythm of his strokes, his face leaning down to kiss lips that weren't hers. She sat there, clicking madly, watching and rewatching, not wanting to believe it was him despite the evidence in plain view before her. He'd sent the email but addressed it to a Steffani. A careless accident, a slip of the S. It wasn't the first time he had cheated on her, but it was the first time he had sent the proof to her inbox.

She wishes someone had been there to stop her, to counsel her, that next day when Aiden came home and roused her from where she lay sleeping on their living room sofa, tear tracks on her cheeks, her breath smelling like old wine.

"I didn't mean to send that email," he said, his hand resting softly against her thigh. She remembers he was wearing the white Armani shirt she'd bought for him, the cuffs rolled up to expose the patchwork of tattoos that adorned his forearms.

"But it made me realize that I'm tired of pretending," he said. "I don't want to do this anymore."

It was like she didn't hear him. She'd gone on ranting about how he'd endangered her livelihood, what could have happened if the video had been leaked, what all the gossip channels would say about

their relationship. Why had he kissed her before telling her how sorry he was for everything? It only clicked into place when she saw him walk into their bedroom, yank his clothes off the hangers. He was actually leaving her. She just sat there on the edge of the sofa, suspended in time, thinking of a decade of relationship gone as suddenly as a whisper.

“And, oh,” Aiden said, stopping briefly at the door with a garbage bag full of clothes behind him. “I had to borrow some money from our account for the deposit on my place, but I’ll get it back to you, I promise.” Some money. She hadn’t initially thought to ask exactly how much that was. The money they got from YouTube ad revenue and brand deals could range from \$10,000 to \$20,000 monthly. But their expenses had ballooned over the time they’d been together. Five hundred dollars to rent a room in Compton had become \$9,000 a month for a luxury apartment near Venice Beach. They were leasing a Porsche for him and a Mercedes for her. And there were all the expenses they charged to their cards to keep up appearances: designer gowns, expensive watches, first-class flights to supplement what brands gave them for free. But she hadn’t been thinking about this question then; what exactly was the sum total of his leaving?

When she later went to check her balance, she found that their bank account was entirely empty.

“I really only had that ten grand to my name,” she says, reaching up for the blunt again.

“What?” Marquise asks.

“The money Aiden took from the account. I’d just gotten paid for a brand deal. He took it. I just let him.”

“Fuck his Chet Hanks-looking ass.” Marquise shakes his head. Sola wants to laugh, but the laughter has no root.

In the days after Aiden left, she had called him incessantly, leaving

a litany of voicemails, some scathing, some beseeching. Because who would she be without him? He was her lover and business partner, yes, but he'd also been her family. In all those years of separation from her relatives, Aiden had been a center that held. Without him, she felt that there would be nothing to ground her, nothing to keep her from becoming the tiny, insignificant, floating thing she'd always feared she was.

She didn't post anything for the next week, barely showered, just sat there rewatching every video they'd ever posted, searching for a hint of the thing that had broken them.

But in the days Sola had spent soothing her heart with ice cream, Aiden had only been plotting her downfall. He uploaded a video to his personal YouTube channel at the end of that week. By the time she saw it, it already had over two hundred thousand views. A fifteen-minute monologue about a relationship built around social media, with nothing about his infidelity, nothing about his theft, everything about how Sola was a different person when the cameras were off, claims of emotional abuse, hints at persistent physical aggression. All lies, but a white man dog-whistles "angry Black woman" and the witch hunt begins.

And still, Sola could not bring herself to speak. Her mind seemed bent on excavating the past. They'd started as two angsty college students, eager to leave their families and run to the West Coast. Then they'd become business partners. She and Aiden had started out on interracial YouTube, both in their early twenties at the time, chronicling their newly established life in LA. He, the white, muscled, bearded tattoo artist. She, the bougie, Black fashionista. Both beautiful, both photogenically in love, with nebulous dreams of making it big. Together, they drew in a huge following. People liked Aiden's rough exterior, and Black women adored seeing Sola, dark-

skinned and chosen. Even though she had separate YouTube and Instagram accounts where she would upload clothing hauls and style tutorials, the subscriber and follower numbers showed a clear preference for seeing their relationship. Aiden had been able to open up his own tattoo shop, and she'd finally been able to turn to influencing full time. They'd even begun looking at houses together. And then he razed it all to the ground.

Over the next few weeks, her email and Instagram inboxes filled up with messages from followers who wrote to express their judgment, condolences, anger, shock.

@mellymell122: Hun, you should try to get your man back.

@rogerogilvyiii: Wowwww so you were beating Aiden all this time?

@ttrippsteph: Sis, I'm heartbroken. You both were my favorite couple.

What was worse were the little articles here and there that popped up about her and Aiden, the subtext reminding readers that social media was a highlight reel and that women could be abusers too. The few friends she had in LA wanted to take her out to brunch and pedicure appointments, which she obliged at first, until she realized they were more interested in getting the juicy details than they were in commiserating. She had no real friends, she came to understand. How terrifying, at thirty, to suddenly see that the social circle she had invested in was a black hole, yielding nothing in her time of crisis, this most public of dumpings. It was bewildering to have become this object of speculation and curiosity. It took her three weeks to have the sense to shut their social media pages down. All she could do was remain still, let her mind careen back and

forth from the moment he left to the moment they met and everything that happened in between.

And then the rent-due notice had come. Aiden had blocked her, so as not to talk of sending her back any money. Then the pain became a dull ache, a weighty numbness while her mind turned to thoughts of survival. It wasn't just about finding somewhere to lay her head. It was about finding someplace where the embraces were real, where she knew that someone actually loved her.

“It all makes sense to me now,” Marquise is saying, his eyes closed serenely.

Sola stands up and lights the blunt again, realizing the weight behind her eyes is gone now. The city rushes on below her, and she likes how anonymous this makes her feel. Rock bottom feels high, like a new start, like a rewrite to the bad ending of a good TV show.

“What makes sense?” she asks.

“You being back,” he says. “Sankofa.”

“What’s that?”

“Girl, have you really never fucked a hotep? Not once?” Marquise’s laughter is light and careless. “Let me tell you—the homophobic ones give the best D.”

Sola rolls her eyes. “You deserve better. And Black men and I don’t go together.”

“I *have* better, bitch,” Marquise says, gesturing at the apartment behind them. “And I don’t have the energy to help you unpack your shit. But just know, your internalized racism is not cute.”

He stands up from the chair he’s been luxuriating in. “You know

the adinkra symbols? The chicken pecking its own behind? The heart shape?”

She shakes her head and he sighs.

“Sola, sometimes you are so tragic to me.” He beckons her inside. “Sankofa is like Ghanaian for ‘go back and get it.’ Like retrieving what you’ve left behind. Going over the past.”

She follows him. In the kitchen he pulls out a large box, its contents hidden by floral wrapping paper. “I saw this at a random vintage store in Old Town yesterday. Don’t ask me what I was doing there,” he says, pushing the box across the counter. “You remember sophomore year when I got to be Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*? How that ugly-ass lead costume designer made my clothes all baggy and lopsided?”

While she slowly unwraps the box, carefully undoing the tape, he goes on.

“I never told you how much it meant to me, you sneaking into the design room to take my measurements, staying late after school to tailor the costume so it actually fit me.”

She does remember. For two weeks she had gone home late every day, anxious about her mother’s wrath but loving her friend more than what she feared her mother might do.

It’s an antique sewing machine. A Singer, pitch-black with gold embossment, painted leaves adorning the base and stem and body. It’s been a long time since she’s sewn. She abandoned her first machine in her parents’ basement when she left home, always telling herself she’d get a new one later, always managing to buy everything but.

“Because of you, I was able to go out on that stage and act my little ass off on opening night. Well, partially because of you, but

you know what I mean. Like, I knew I looked good. And that made me confident.”

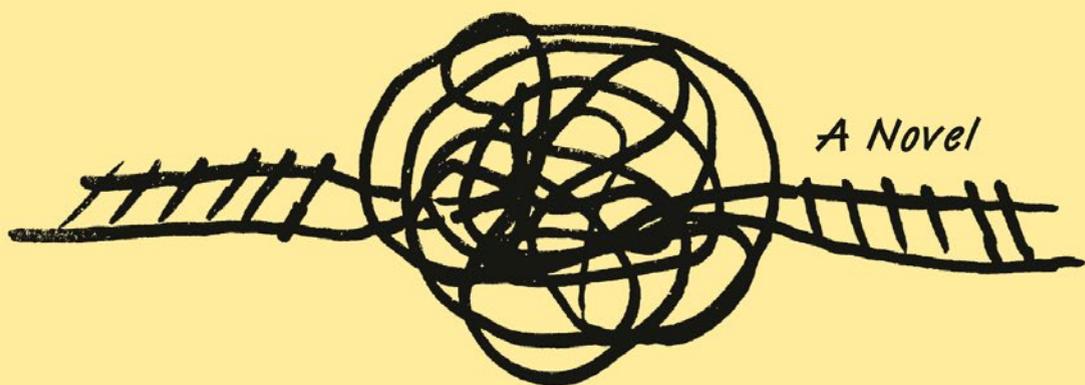
Sola runs her fingertips over the leaves, her cheeks warming. A distant dream. She remembers what it felt like to wear a dress she had sewn for herself the summer she was nineteen, the folds in the fabric arranged just so. She remembers how safe this little red dress makes her feel. Safe, even though men whisper lewd things and honk at her on the street. Safe because the projection is hers to determine, because she knows that adornment is the ultimate control over the body.

“Anyway,” Marquise is saying, “I got you this because, like, whenever I’m going through it with a man, the best thing I can do is something that reminds me of who I am without him.”

She throws her arms around him. “Sankofa,” she says. “I like that for me.”

"Woody Brown accomplishes the seemingly impossible." —Mona Simpson

Upward Bound



A Novel

Woody Brown

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THE ELOPER

THE BEST I COULD COME UP WITH WAS, “THOMAS HAS LEFT the station.”

I was sitting in the rec room, waiting to be told what to do next, when I saw Jorge slip out via the back door that leads to the pool and the parking lot. There were probably a dozen of us inmates in the rec room. A few staffers were there, but they were huddled in a group, talking with great animation about an episode of *Love Island*. Mom wouldn't watch that show so I hadn't seen it, either. Sounds contentious but also sexy. If Carlos had been there, he'd have told them to get back to work, but he'd have said it in a cool way that wouldn't make anyone resentful. The staffers obviously felt no urgency to set up our next activity. You could tell that it didn't even occur to them that we might mind being left waiting. As if time means nothing to people who have nothing but time. I think it's the opposite. Our time is wasted so profligately that we cherish it for what it might be, not for its emptiness.

I doubted seriously that Jorge was really plotting to escape or to take an unauthorized swim, but he is utter stealth itself when in elope mode. Still, I wanted someone to know that he'd left the building. I went through my available scripts to find a Thomas or *Toy Story* phrase that I could utter that would function in this situation. For reasons I can't explain, I am not able to summon a timely, unique message that I can say with my mouth. I can, however, repeat a phrase from an often-viewed video. They call this "echolalia" for what it's worth. In this particular moment, the best I could come up with was:

"Thomas has left the station."

I am the echolalic guy who cried wolf too many times, so naturally, no one paid the slightest attention. My mom is the only one capable of translating my echolalic scripts into functional communication. Everyone else assumes my phrases are nonsense. The staffers didn't even look in my direction, and the other inmates have been trained to be useless. I sat for a moment, but then I lumbered to my feet. It took heavy concentration and motor planning to propel my awkward body in the direction Jorge had gone. My idea was to double the chance that someone would notice a client was missing. I had no personal reason to flee. My top priorities are familiarity and routine, and this action provided neither. But I also didn't want anything to happen to Jorge.

I went through the door that opened into a corner of the parking lot. The pool was to my right, but it was gated and locked. I couldn't see Jorge anywhere. The car entrance gate

was open for the cars, so I walked in that direction to see if he had gone off the property. I looked up and down the street. I hoped he hadn't crossed over to the park. I didn't want to risk my own life dodging traffic. No sight of Jorge. Then I glanced over to the little grassy area tucked away on the other side of the parking lot. There were a couple of play apparatuses there, and it was shady. I walked over there. I could see Jorge's big feet sticking out of the terra-cotta tunnel. I knew that spot. It's cool and quiet in there. I had no need to disturb him now that I had found him and knew he was safe. I would just wait for someone to come along. There was a bench next to the basketball hoop. I sat down. I counted cars that passed. There weren't many.

I've spent plenty of time with Jorge. I probably understand his predicament better than the people whose job it is to handle him. Jorge and I are both inmates at an insane asylum that passes itself off as a day program for autistic young adults. We have been in and out of each other's lives since special ed preschool. We graduated from different schools—well, I graduated. He got a certificate of completion. But there is only one place in this city for people like us to go after high school, so here we are. Reunited.

Jorge and I have shared space off and on for nearly twenty years, but we have never had anything that resembles a conversation. That probably seems incredible, but it's standard for

nonspeakers. Jorge has an admirable level of acceptance about his situation. He doesn't seem consumed by the frustration, anxiety, and anger that tortures many people who lack speech. Some of us are like tightly wound tops. With a flick of a wrist, we can spin and skitter out of control. Not Jorge. He falls into the category of gentle giant. The first thing you notice about him is his immense size. He is tall, but he's almost as big around as he is up and down. He usually slumps and hangs his head, as if the act of being big ol' Jorge is a weighty burden. He is the least aggressive inmate—I should say client—in this sad, boring place. He's too big to move with any conscious belligerence, and he's too gentle to get riled in the first place. Jorge presents only one behavioral challenge at Upward Bound, which is probably the most cynical name they could have given this dead-end way station. Jorge is what they call an eloper. If you look away for an instant, Jorge is gone. He moves like a specter when no eyeballs are trained on him. This isn't a problem most of the time; the adult babysitters keep the doors locked in this place. But when we go on our weekly field trips to Target, a staffer is assigned specifically to Jorge. Thankfully, I don't require this level of supervision.

People can be elitist when it comes to speech. If you can't communicate, it must mean that you are mentally retarded. In the special ed room, math consisted of learning how to make change, and English meant picture books. Unlike Jorge, I had a ticket out. My parents refused to accept that I was an idiot. They saw this Indian lady on *60 Minutes* who had taught her

nonspeaking son to type and they tracked her down. I was three when I met Soma. She showed me how to point and make choices of words and letters. By the time I started school, I could spell and do simple math better than my neurotypical peers. The catch was that I needed an aide beside me to hold up the little laminated board with a QWERTY alphabet and basic punctuation marks on it. The aide needed to be trained to help me stay on task.

Autism on my end of the spectrum is like ADHD times a thousand. It's nearly impossible for me to untangle the many channels in my brain so that I can stay on a single station. It's like sitting in front of a bank of monitors that are all showing different events, and all are playing at top volume. The aide uses prompts, repeating the letter or word I've just pointed to, to keep me on track so that I can complete a thought. My brain can easily switch to another channel and the communication drifts away unfinished. The aide shakes the letter board when I get derailed to regain my attention. The sustaining of my attention is a dance of subtle cues and prompts. It's not a dance you learn on the first try. Training can take a while, but it's crucial. It's also important that the aide has a core of calm. I pick up on the energy. My focus is obliterated if the person helping me is stressed or lacks confidence. Good soul + good training = good aide. A tall order for a low-paying gig.

The public school had no idea what to do with me. My mom tried to show them, offered to train an aide, just as she had been trained by Soma. School administrators said no. I kept going to

school, bored and chagrined in special ed. Mom had to work, but she worked from home as a technical writer. If you have a kid like me, you have to be flexible. Mom spent several hours after school giving me little lessons in math, science, and history. She made the school give her the textbooks that the typical kids worked from. She read to me every day from children's classics and poetry. She kept me at grade level. I have to confess that my behavior during this period was challenging to say the least. I was not submitting quietly to instruction. The special ed teacher and the school psychologist might presume that I didn't want to learn. My mom forged ahead anyway. I don't know which came first: my desire to learn or her passion for me to get a proper education. At any rate, I was finally allowed to sit in the corner of the remedial class, where I worked with my aide one-on-one. It felt like my life had finally begun the day the teacher invited me to join the remedial learners in a group lesson. Thanks to my mom's sessions at home, I was already ahead of the other students. I didn't mind. It gave me the bandwidth I needed to work on controlling my autistic behaviors in class.

By high school, I was on diploma track. This constituted a minor miracle. Most of the severely autistic kids I started out with had been quietly shunted off to special schools where they couldn't bother anyone but each other. Jorge was bused to some place an hour away. None of us were expected to meet graduation requirements. My pointing and typing gave me entrée to a different outcome. I often wondered why the school

district didn't try to replicate what I was doing with the others, like Jorge. I guess it was just too perplexing, or too much work. Or they had no warrior mom to force them into educating the losers they assumed to be ineducable.

I had another advantage. I had an aide who stuck with me through middle and high school. School aides usually come and go. Sal was a big friendly teddy bear who excelled at being my protector. The social anxiety of being a nonspeaking oddball at a big public high school was intense. Sal was like a comfort item who never got annoyed with me and always had my back. He may never have attained greatness as an aide with the letter board. He didn't have the fluency of the dance that Soma and my mom did, but he kept me calm and in the room. His face was so full of joy the night I crossed the high school stage and accepted my diploma. The accomplishment was his as much as mine. You should have seen my mom that night. She was weeping so hard she could barely speak.

But what next? The supports fall off after high school, like training wheels that I still needed to stay upright and moving forward. My parents refused to give in to the inevitability of Upward Bound. But college seemed like a nonstarter. How could I sit through a long lecture without making my weird noises? How could I even get into college with my spotty academic record? They don't let you have a communication partner to take the SATs. My mom had a realization. All you need to go to community college is a high school diploma, and I had

one of those. I applied online and never had to mention my disability. Mom tried to hire and train an aide to go with me, but the first two quit. It was also incredibly expensive. There is public funding for caregivers who babysit, but not for academic support. Mom decided it would be easier to do it herself. She and my dad agreed that she would quit her job and she would be my aide at community college. It was an experiment.

I started with just one academic class. English 1A. Mom and I walked into the run-down old classroom. I made a beeline for a seat in the back row, farthest corner. I chose that so I would be less inclined to leave for an unscheduled break. The professor talked about herself and the books we'd be reading. She had everyone make a brief introduction. Mom held the letter board so that I could say it in my own words, which she read out loud. I thought we'd come across like a freak show, but no one batted an eye. Many students in the class had obstacles they had faced to be there. I wasn't the only outlier; it was a room full of outliers. The ninety-minute class flew by. It never occurred to me to take a break. Mom and I drove to campus for class every day, but I didn't hang out or study there—it was too chaotic for me. At home we worked on a strict schedule of reading and writing. Half hour of work, half hour of break, starting at eight A.M. and ending at five P.M. Dad, who worked from home, too, would stick his head in the door throughout the day, just to get some attention. Mom would pretend to be aggravated by the disruption, but being annoying was Dad's shtick. I enjoyed their banter. After five, my brain needed the

calming effects of my video screens, dinner, and an early bedtime routine, which Dad oversaw.

The first real test was the midterm paper. I was never asked to write one in high school. As much as I wish I could just type my thoughts independently, that's not how it works for most nonspeaking spellers. Our brains have trouble getting all the motor planning lined up to perform the complex actions involved in typed communication. Most people don't consider how many parts of the brain are activated when they speak or type. If your electronic impulses resist firing in the right order, like mine and probably Jorge's do, the message gets lost somewhere between the thought and the finger hitting the keyboard. I needed Sal in high school for many reasons, but he lacked the structural organization to assist me in longer assignments like papers. Mom figured things out as she went. First she elicited from me a topic. I typed, "Assuming intelligence." The process involved in producing those two words took one half-hour session. Mom gave me a series of choices that distilled into my chosen subject matter. The next day she had me type out a thesis, then supporting ideas that became an outline. In thirty-minute increments daily over several weeks, I wrote a paper. I fashioned every idea and wrote every word, although I could not have executed any of it without Mom holding the board and keeping my brain on track.

"Okay, you've said you want to write about assuming intelligence. What are you thinking of for a thesis?" she said.

My fingers hopped across my letter board. She repeated the

words as I typed them, then repeated them again as she typed them into the computer when I finished a phrase or sentence. The repetition maintained my focus and momentum.

“Many. autistic. students. do. not. at. first. glance. appear. to. be. capable. of. sophisticated. thought.” She answered my words twice as my fingers danced across the little board. Yes, I could have typed directly onto the computer keyboard myself. But my shaky fine-motor skills make my fingers detour to neighboring letters. I would spend more time fixing typos than writing. The simple, low-tech, laminated letter board that we made from a computer printout is forgiving if my finger goes a little off the mark.

That first paper got an A. What the hell. I kept challenging myself. I went from taking one class per semester to two, then three. I kept getting A’s. I took all the general ed classes I needed to get my Associate of Arts degree and transfer to university. I could see a path in front of me.

Jorge, on the other hand, was taken out of his public school by the district when he was in the fifth grade. They sent him to a nonpublic school that catered specifically to autistic students. Everyone felt good about sending Jorge and the others to a specialized school. My mom toured it around that time. She was always on the lookout for a place where academics were a priority, where she didn’t have to work so hard to convince people that I could learn the regular stuff. She came back annoyed. It was no better than the dummy special ed class at my current school. Some of her autism mom friends liked it just fine and

sent their kids there. The problem was that a school like that didn't prepare autistic kids for anything except a lifetime at Upward Bound or its equivalent. The more regulated among us might look forward to a career as a box boy or a busboy, but the nonspeakers can't even do those menial jobs. An education might expose areas of strength that could lead to a more productive life. For Jorge and most of the others I grew up with, their dependence would be lifelong.

The bottom line is being able to communicate. I wonder if Jorge could have learned in school if an iPad and a trained aide had been available to him. You can see how helpful some alternative communication would have been. *Hey, Jorge! Why do you keep running off? What can we do to keep you in your prescribed location?* If Jorge could point and type like me, we could get to the bottom of this dangerous mystery. Unfortunately for him, there are very few aides trained in alternative communication. There are none at Upward Bound. Here, without a real communication partner, I am as mute as Jorge. Even if I knew with certainty why Jorge wanders away and what our minds could do to keep him safe, I would have no means by which to tell them.

*

Upward Bound is located in a shabby one-story building that used to be a nursing home. It still looks like one, with its eighties-era aqua-and-peach exterior and convenient ramp. The inmates have to sign in at the front desk when they arrive

in the morning, or someone does it for them. I am capable of signing my name, but it takes me forever and looks like a kindergartner's scrawl, so I let my mom do it. There are various rooms, patios, and a dinky, kidney-shaped pool surrounded by cracked concrete in the back. Most of the action (a term that applies very loosely) takes place in a large rec room in the center. Picture a nursing home rec room that hasn't been updated since the first Bush administration. Old-school linoleum, accordion dividers, metal folding chairs, cheesy decorations hung for whatever holiday just passed. They feed us breakfast, which usually consists of generic sugary cereal in a Styrofoam bowl. The schedule for the day is scribbled on a big whiteboard in hourly increments. It is one infantilizing activity after another. An hour of gluing macaroni to popsicle sticks to make a picture frame. An hour of a "cooking" activity during which we make Chex Mix, combining processed salty and sweet bits in one big bowl, which we eat for snack. Lunch (even less nutritious than breakfast or snack) is followed by games like Cootie or Connect 4, maybe a swim if it's warm. The time in the pool doesn't suck, but still, one day feels like forever.

There might be a walk across the street to the park, where we big-ass adults sit on swings or meander about. I used to like going to a park (not this one, a nicer one) even when I was too big for a playground. Mom let me bring a backpack full of Thomas trains. I would meticulously line them up according to their standing on the Isle of Sodor. Thomas, Percy, James, and Henry always first. I would also use this opportunity to gaze

peripherally at the typical kids at play. I could imagine I was one of them. But the Upward Bound walks to the park offer none of these pleasures. Their only purpose is to use up that particular segment of the day. Dave can brag that he got his clients outside. There aren't any activities planned. Were awkward grown people supposed to play Duck Duck Goose? Staffers casually surround the playground to keep elopers like Jorge contained. This makes them seem more like prison guards than helpful friends, and they pay more attention to each other than to us.

I can understand the impulse to flee. God knows I feel like dashing out screaming from this place a million times a day. But I have more self-control than that and am able to play the model inmate. Still, I don't get much intellectual stimulation here, so I've put some effort into forming theories about Jorge's dilemma. The most likely one is that Jorge isn't running away from anything. Jorge doesn't mean to escape. He is going *to* something. There is something somewhere else that he wants to see or do. He can't express his need, so he just goes. The staffers have never even noticed that every time Jorge has eluded them in Target, they find him in the toy section looking at Mr. Potato Head. I have no idea what the spud's appeal is to Jorge. The compulsion is so strong that you can see Jorge's brain visibly thrumming as soon as our clown car pulls into the Target parking lot. If I could, I would tell the staffers to make the toy section our first stop and give poor Jorge his Potato Head time before his own head explodes and he runs away.

Jorge, the other inmates, and I were just marking time at Upward Bound under the not-very-watchful eyes of the young, underpaid staffers. I was older than most of them. Many were from the nearby community college (two were my former classmates). Some were full-time if they couldn't find a better job. Some tried to engage; some were bored and snuck their phones out of their pockets when the supervisor was out of the room. If I could speak, I might have snitched on them. Sometimes there would be a staffer who took a shine to you and would hang out with you in particular. I attracted a few fans due to my intriguing, tragic circumstances, but turnover is high in crappy jobs like this, and none of my staffer pals lasted very long.

Darla is in law school now. She flirted with me in the way a smart, well-intended girl tries to make the autistic guy feel like he could actually have a girlfriend someday. It wasn't real, but attention from a pretty girl made the time go by faster. She knew I had gone to community college. She had gone there, too, and said she remembered seeing me on campus. I realize that I was memorable for looking weird and having my mother at my elbow. Still, I was flattered. I'm pretty sure she thought I was there as part of some autism program. I wanted so badly to tell her that I was a straight-up student with straight A's. I bet she would have appreciated that I was an English major and that I dreamed of supporting myself as a novelist. I would have told her that I wouldn't have minded working at a menial job, but my body is so disorganized that I would wander around aim-

lessly without someone to steer me in the right direction. I would have told her all that if my letter board hadn't been lying fallow at home, as useless as my AA diploma. But all I could do was try to keep my behaviors under control when she was near.

Even vocational programs for autistic adults refused to take me on. Becoming a novelist was a long shot, but the alternative was day care. Surely something would happen to prevent that.

Something did happen. My dad, the funniest, most loving person in the world, had a heart attack and died right after my community college graduation. Many people are loving and kind, but Dad was loving and needy and edgy. His quick temper had to do with his sensitivity to criticism. My mom would ask an innocent question about a domestic matter and he would hear an accusation in it. I never criticized him because I couldn't speak, and he didn't use the letter board with me. As a result of this, he loved me unconditionally. He showered me with affection. He took me to the movies every Saturday and helped me bathe every night. It's amazing to be loved the way he loved me. He adored my mom, too, although she was occasionally the target of his harsh reaction to a perceived insult. They were otherwise like perennial newlyweds, always hugging and kissing and laughing at each other's jokes.

Dad's heart attack shouldn't have come as a big surprise. Exercise and a healthy diet were not on his list of priorities. I have inherited his indolence and bad eating habits. Still, his death was so shocking that my mom and I were completely

paralyzed for a couple of months. My little family had been a three-legged stool. Missing a leg meant that we tottered and fell.

Mom and I met with the lawyer and accountant. There was life insurance and whatnot, but it wasn't going to be enough to take care of us forever. I would've loved to have gotten an actual job, but the door to the working world was bolted from the inside. Mom realized that she would have to go back to work. She couldn't get her old job back, but she got hired as an administrative assistant at a big hospital.

I'm not able to go unsupervised, despite my age and intellect. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, I can't call 911. If there were an emergency, if I accidentally set a kitchen fire, I would be unable to initiate a phone call. I can perform routine tasks that I've done a million times, but the novel event paralyzes my body. Here's a far more likely scenario: I have this tendency to vocalize along with my videos. The more stressed I am, the more likely I am to play stressy clips, like the incinerator scene from *Toy Story 3*. My voice can get alarmingly high and shrieky. If it gets to be too much, Mom will come tell me to tone it down. If I were alone, there would be no checks on my behavior. Suppose a neighbor called the police because they heard screaming, as if someone were descending inexorably toward a fiery hellhole. Disturbing, no argument. Cop comes to the door. I would not be able to identify myself or answer the officer's questions. I would end up in a psych ward, or worse. No joke. It has happened to other non-

speakers we know. There are plenty of stories of people like me being mishandled in interactions with authorities.

So we were forced to stick me at Upward Bound for my safety. We insisted to each other that it was temporary, that Mom would find a better place for me, where nonspeakers were respected and their communication was facilitated.

No utopia has presented itself. Adult day care is adult day care.

*

Darla made my first few weeks at Upward Bound more bearable. Unfortunately, she left for law school. I didn't blame her. Staffers here have to put up with some tough stuff. Darla's duties included changing diapers, cleaning poop and vomit, and dealing with meltdowns. Some of which may have been mine. It's one thing when the population is tiny kids, but when the soiled underpants belong to a severely autistic adult, many staffers decide that working at McDonald's would be less of a hassle. I can only imagine that working here would make law school look like fun. I almost got it together to hug Darla on her last day, but my body chose instead to flee the scene. I'm hoping that Darla realized how much I appreciated her attention. I hope she remembers me a little.

Jorge was luckier than me. He developed a bond with a guy named Carlos, who was a little older than the average zookeeper. Carlos was as thin and wiry as Jorge was large and floppy. They gave off a copacetic vibe. Both were undemand-

ing and never cranky. Carlos was surprisingly competent in a quiet way that could go unnoticed. Jorge was quietly complacent and also overlooked. They would naturally seek each other out in the group and sit together like a couple of satisfied buddhas. If there was a small-group activity, like playing Hungry Hungry Hippos or making puppets out of paper bags, Carlos always kept Jorge in his section. Unlike Darla, who was on her way somewhere else, Carlos seemed like a lifer. He looked as if he actually enjoyed the work. He didn't have his heart set on some other more respectable, better-paying career. He liked it just fine at Upward Bound. Carlos told me and Jorge one day that he had saved up enough to buy a kayak. He had a group of friends who were into outdoorsy things, and he enjoyed being out on the water. I entertained myself with fantasies of being one of Carlos's outdoorsy friends. I don't know if Jorge did that, too, but the gentle bear loved to hear Carlos tell stories about his weekend of hiking or kayaking.

I admit that I had unflattering feelings of jealousy when I observed moments of connection between Carlos and Jorge. It wasn't just that they naturally drifted toward each other during activities. Or that Carlos had eyes in the back of his head, looking out in case one of the bullying guys snarked at Jorge. Not all of us here are nonspeaking, and some use their powers of speech for evil. There was one day when a mean jerk was mocking Jorge mercilessly.

The jerk probably gets crap from typical guys all the time, but here he's an alpha dog and takes out his frustration on a guy

who can't. Carlos came out of nowhere and moved in on the bully. He's not allowed to manhandle the clients, but he has this Zen way of getting in between oppressor and oppressed and de-escalating a tense situation. He drew the bully away and quietly corrected him, allowing him to save face, while Jorge slumped off. That wasn't what made me feel envious. It was a half hour later. I saw Jorge sitting with his head down, and Carlos was sitting next to him, not saying anything, not even looking directly at him. He was just there. It was a static tableau that communicated the entire scope of their relationship. Jorge takes comfort in Carlos, and Carlos comprehends what Jorge needs without language.

Imagine how ridiculous it was for me to be envious of Jorge, who couldn't even type, much less sit and learn in a proper classroom. My AA degree looked small and useless in the light that emanated from this contented pair of souls. It made me think of me and my mother. We could also be found at the end of a long day, sitting in silence with our heads hung low. Only there was no peaceful contentment, at least not yet. Maybe never. It wasn't that Mom hated her new job, although she probably did. And it wasn't about the downsizing and economizing we had to do now. It was the absence of the happy disruptions that my dad brought to our days, which were now flat and way too consistent. Autistic persons love routine, but I always appreciated how Dad busted me out of my OCD patterns with his nudgy protestations of love. I'm not sure what my mom's version of this feeling was, but she looked as if she had

been bullied by life itself, and I wasn't up to the caretaking role that Carlos played with Jorge.

I was feeling sorry for myself. I had good reasons, no question. Here was this big galumphing guy, whom I had every right to feel superior to, and I envied him. The bottom of the barrel wasn't low enough for me. I was going to have to invent a whole new metaphor to describe how worthless my life had become. When I was in high school, and especially at community college, I had a mission. I was a speech-free guy with autism up the wazoo, but I could type and prove that I was as smart as anyone. I was special, in a good way. Now, more than I had felt in years, I was special ed. I had no way of letting people know who I was, and my exterior presentation led people to make demeaning assumptions about me. My intelligence was like the rock pushed up the hill by Sisyphus. I could never get it to the top.

*

It seemed like forever, but finally and abruptly, the main back door blew open and Carlos and Andy rushed out. Now there was a little urgency. Andy ran toward the entrance to the street. Carlos slowly walked over to me. Like in case I was scared or skittish, he didn't want to startle me. I was fine, I was just glad it was Carlos. I tried to point to where Jorge was, but my body wouldn't cooperate. I also tried to summon a non-echolalic word, like "tunnel" or "Jorge," but my mouth wouldn't work,

either. Finally I just got up and walked over to where Jorge lay. Carlos said very gently, “Hey, buddy, been looking all over for you.” Jorge was happy to see Carlos. He got up out of the tunnel with a smile on his face.

“C’mon, guys. It’s snack time.”

The three of us walked back to the rec room, where the tension level was a lot higher than when we left. Dave was there, trying to question the clients about where we were, but that didn’t seem to be going well. A staffer saw us and cried out. “There they are!” People rushed toward us, but Dave stepped in and had Carlos take us to Dave’s office. Dave sat at his desk with a serious look on his face.

“I hope you realize what a dangerous, thoughtless thing you did today. At Upward Bound our priority is the safety of our clients. I can’t do my job if you leave without permission.”

Dave was like a school principal chewing out a couple of truants. I stopped listening. The people who deserved a lecture were the staffers who weren’t doing their jobs. I’m sure they covered their asses, while I was helpless to explain what had happened or to defend myself.

“I am going to have to file an incident report on both of you. I’ll send a copy of it home.”

An incident report from an adult day care center doesn’t sound like a big deal, but it is. An incident report leads to more restrictions, and too many of them means that they send you to a different place. There are worse places than this. If this facil-

ity is a run-down bore, the place for adults deemed too aggressive for run-down boredom is closer to autism jail. Wouldn't that be ironic, to go from college to lockdown because I helped them find Jorge. Carlos, bless him, seemed to have a clearer view of the event.

“Dave, I don't think these guys were intentionally breaking the rules. I think Jorge needed a time-out, and Walter was looking out for him. Walter showed me where Jorge was.”

That took away a little of Dave's bluster. “Well, Jorge should have let someone know he needed a time-out.” That ridiculous statement hovered in the air like a stinky fart. The more you thought about it, the worse it got. If Jorge could let anyone know anything about him, he probably wouldn't need to be here. Ahem, me too. But I'm coming off okay in Carlos's telling, so maybe I'll be spared.

“Well, I guess that's possible,” Dave said. “But still, we have to be consistent. They broke the rules big-time, and I'm obligated to file incident reports. I could be the one in trouble if headquarters found out.” Dave filled out the reports while Carlos returned Jorge and me to the general population. At least the staffers were being more attentive. They knew this had been their fault, even if they hadn't been held accountable. It was a long day.

When Mom came at 5:45 to pick me up, Dave was waiting for her in the lobby. He took her back to his office. She came out a little later with the report and a stressed face. She barely

looked at me until we got home. It took restraint for her to not start yelling at me, I could tell. I think she knew not to take Dave's version of events at face value. She got the letter board and had me sit in our spelling space, a small desk in a small study set aside for the purpose.

“Okay, tell me what happened today. I don't know what to think until I've heard your side of the story.”

It took me a while to spell it out, but I was so grateful that I could.

“STAFF WAS GOOFING AROUND JORGE LEFT THE BUILDING AND I FOLLOWED TO MAKE SURE HE WAS OKAY I SHOWED CARLOS WHERE HE WAS.”

Mom looked relieved.

“I knew it had to be something like that. I am so proud of you. You deserve a medal, not a report. I'll call Dave tomorrow and explain it to him. Is that okay with you?”

“NO PLEASE DON'T DAVE DOESN'T GET ME HE WON'T BELIEVE YOU JUST LEAVE IT BE.”

“Wow, okay. I guess I get it. What this tells me, though, is that we have to come up with a better situation for you. I wish I could snap my fingers and a magical, perfect place would appear.”

She held up the board for me to respond.

“MOM YOU KEEP LOOKING I AM SKEP

TICALFORNOWTHEMAGICALPLACEIS
RIGH THERE.”

I knew that would make her feel better. Her burden and mine are yoked together. We sat in our study space and leaned our bodies and heads gently together.

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YESTERYEAR

CARO CLAIRE BURKE

A NOVEL



A BORZOI BOOK
FIRST HARDCOVER EDITION
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THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

I woke up two minutes before my alarm went off, like usual. Five fifty-eight and *bing*: eyes wide open, ready to greet the day. I've never had a hard time waking up in the morning. Never used the snooze button, either, not once in my life. Sobriety helps. I don't drink. Discipline helps, too. I was born with spades of discipline, I'm practically overflowing with it—which is why, I think, I've never had that much trouble with anything in my life. Not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to me as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order. I know it's not that easy for other people, but it really is for me.

That's why all those strangers liked me so much.

That, and the money. The money definitely helped too.

It was wintertime. January. A cold front had just blown through the pass. By my bedroom window, the radiator was puffing hot air. The sky outside was deep-as-death black, and would be for another few hours. Our farm was nestled in the rolling divots between two mountain ranges in Idaho, which meant we didn't see the sun until nine or so in the winter months. We were located five miles down a long, winding gravel country road. Not even airplanes flew overhead.

In the darkness, I listened to the distant mooing of *Sassafras*, our beloved dairy cow. I could tell by the pitch and register of her moans that my husband, Caleb, was milking her. Right on time. The man was good.

My husband was not disciplined before he met me. He was the youngest of five boys, the runt of the litter in an American dynasty. His father was the latest senator in a long line of U.S. senators, cur-

rently barreling through a presidential bid (third time's the charm!); his mother was a homemaker who had spent most of her life drowning in Chardonnay. Together, through a near-fatal combination of paternal neglect and maternal sympathy, they had raised Caleb to be soft and spoiled and sweet. But the only thing more valuable than a person with God-given traits is a person who's willing to learn, and my husband, *that man*, had been willing to learn.

And who was I?

A flawless Christian woman. The manic pixie American dream girl of this nation's deepest, darkest fantasies. The mother every woman wanted to be, and the wife every man wanted to come home to. Like a nun in a porno, it didn't make sense, but also, by God: it worked.

My name is Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

In the silences between Sassafras's near-human groans of pleasure (sometimes I joked online that my husband had a bovine mistress, *ha ha!*), I could just hear the distant chicken coop chatter, that meditative *bockbockbockbockbock* that served as the white noise machine of our farm. I loved our chickens. They were as domesticated as dogs, as harmless as toddlers. Sometimes I went out to the coop just to sit with them. I liked to stroke their silky necks, let them peck softly at the feed in my cupped palms.

We'd be killing them soon. In the darkness, my mouth watered. I'd been yearning, lately, for fresh bone broth. Once you've made it from scratch, the store-bought kind tastes rancid.

Through the open crack of my bedroom door, there was a spilling of little-boy laughter. The children were down the hall, having breakfast. I closed my eyes, felt the rhythms of my house like a heartbeat. Nanny Louise—a *godsend for our family*—was at the stove, making pancakes. Producer Shannon—*my right arm*—was by the kitchen sink, getting the video equipment prepared for a long day of work. Stetson and Samuel—*my darling young men*—were sitting at the table, shoving and pulling one another in equally groggy measure. Clementine—*my eldest, the girl who made me a mother*—was at the head of the table, ignoring her brothers, reading a book.

Nanny Aimee—*our second in command*—was moving through the far corners of the house, waking up each of the littles, kissing sleepy eyelids, tugging my two toddlers gently forward into the day. She would bring one to the kitchen, hand her over to Nanny Louise, and go back to get the other.

I closed my eyes and whispered my daily thanks to the Lord for everything he had provided me.

Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, Junebug, and the little angel we haven't named yet.

My hand moved instinctively to my stomach, resting at the height of the curve. I was thirty-two years old. Six months pregnant with our sixth child. It had been the easiest pregnancy to date—though all my pregnancies, relatively speaking, had been smooth. I was born to be a mother. I never felt more connected with Him than when I was tasked with carrying one of His creations.

(Do you see what I'm saying? Perfect.)

Beneath my palm, my baby girl rolled slowly to her side. My little sea creature. I loved her so much.

Thank you for watching over the farm animals, Lord, and thank you for helping us pass five million on Instagram this week. We're only a few souls away from one million on YouTube, Lord. It's through Your will, and Your will alone, that I have reached so many hearts and minds. It's in Your name that I work to spread Your truth.

A wave of nausea passed over me, and I suffered beneath the shadow. Sometimes it actually made me sick, how perfect my life was, and how good I was at living it.

On the bedside table, my phone sputtered awake. I reached over and silenced it, then threw off the sheets and got up.

We hadn't always had this much help. For the first few years, it had been us and the kids and the farm. When I became pregnant with my fourth, we hired Nanny Louise. When I was pregnant with my fifth, I hired Nanny Aimee, and shortly after that, we hired Producer Shannon. What we had now, in terms of help, was more

than enough for the time being. It allowed me to be present with both my children and my followers in all the ways I wanted to be at all the different points throughout the day. That's the thing about being a mother and a wife and an influencer, all at the same time: it's basically like breastfeeding three babies simultaneously. Like seducing three lovers at once.

Why don't you ever show all the help you have behind the scenes?

"We love our employees like they're family, so we go to great means to protect their privacy as they've requested. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if my social media account ended up compromising them in any way."

When I stepped into the kitchen, Producer Shannon was in the corner, fiddling with a tripod, and my four oldest children were eating breakfast at the table, each wearing a thick wool sweater. Nanny Louise was helping Jessa, our three-and-a-half-year-old, as she poured orange juice into her glass.

"I can *do it myself*," Jessa whined.

Nanny Louise, who also served as our homeschooling teacher, nodded and said, "Of course you can. Look. You're doing it right now. All by yourself. Big girl."

Jessa grinned, the verbal pronouncement of her autonomy enough to make her forget how Nanny Louise's hands never left the cup. "Big girl," she echoed. Nanny Louise tipped the glass, and my little girl drank greedily. I watched with approval as the pulp dripped down her chin. The orange juice was homemade. The tutorial would go online later this week.

"Good morning!" I said to the room. Five heads swiveled toward me. A chirpy chorus of *Morning, Mama* came in reply.

I made my way around the table, kissing each perfect cheek, ruffling each perfect head. All my children, even the boys, wore their hair long. The girls looked just like me: freckled, narrow faces, soildark hair, expressions prone to penetrating seriousness. Catch one of us in a pouting moment, and you'd be forgiven for summoning

images of some sixteenth-century martyr on a hunger strike. As for the boys, they looked like Caleb: ruddy cheeks, big toothy smiles. When they were all walking in a group (and they often were; the boys worshiped Caleb) they made me think of a trio of politicians in lockstep, scouring the land in search of babies to kiss.

I rarely paid attention to the differences in the children. Both the girls and the boys spoke similarly, laughed similarly. Their clothing was a rainbow of neutrals. The same pile of olive and tan and ocher had been tumbling down our growing family tree for over a decade.

It's amazing how long good cotton can last.

I walked over to my two boys, Stetson and Samuel. Stetson was eight years old, a full year younger than Samuel, but as of last summer the boys were the same height, same weight. With their shoulder-length hair and the way they seemed to do everything—run, play, do chores, shovel food into their mouths—in jerky, awkward-limbed unison, they reminded me of a pair of dressage ponies.

I rested a hand on either head as they ate their cereal with little-boy gusto, felt their skulls move around beneath my palms like possessed bulldozer levers. “What’s on the docket for today, boys?”

“Needa builda new enclosure for Sassafras,” Stetson said, mouth full.

“Mmm,” I said. “Very important. Papa will love the help.”

“Papa said I could use the nail gun.”

Samuel shoved Stetson, knocking the spoonful of cereal out of Stetson’s hand and sending it clattering to the floor. “It’s *my* turn to use the nail gun.”

“You’ll *both* use the nail gun,” I said. “Nanny Louise . . . ?”

She nodded, wiped the pulpy juice from Jessa’s cheeks and chin, then got up to clean up the mess.

People refused to believe my babies were as amenable as they appeared online. There’s no way this is their actual life!!!!, the Angry Women would write. (That’s what Caleb and I called them. The Angry Women.) To which I would reply: absolutely nothing, of course. A mother’s main task is to protect her children from the

world. There was no need for some hateful witch in Manhattan to see how physical Samuel got with his brother (and even his sisters, sometimes), no need for them to witness Stetson's daily tantrum over arithmetic (I loved that boy, but he had not been gifted with a standard helping of brains). If the Angry Women found out about any of my children's failings, they'd go crazy with bloodthirst. They'd also be devastated. None of them realized it, of course, but they needed me as much as I needed them. It was a symbiotic relationship. I was a shark, and they were five million tiny fish, nipping at the nutrients along my belly.

Little idiots. They were desperate to eat me. They had no idea I was the one who was keeping them alive.

How does it feel to know that millions of people around the world know intimate details about your children?

"I show only very selective moments of my children's lives. And besides, none of them have *any* access to screens—have you seen the studies, by the way? Of what screen time does to children's brains? If you ask me, my children are much better off in this household, where they occasionally show up in videos for my account, than in some other household where they'd be staring at an iPad all night. I mean, really." Sympathetic cluck. "It's an epidemic. So sad. You should look into *that*."

"You're up early," I remarked to Producer Shannon as I poured my coffee.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. She was frowning at one of the knobs on the camera, twisting it one way, then the other, a grumpy expression on her face. When Shannon first showed up at the ranch, she was nineteen years old, a Barnard dropout with pink hair and a nose ring who was willing to do professional work at a student rate. Now she was twenty-one. The nose ring remained; the pink hair had been abandoned in the name of her natural brown. I wasn't sure if that was an indication of any personal identity shift so much as a practical acceptance of the realities of living an hour away from

the closest city. Not exactly many options when it came to qualified hair colorists near a five-hundred-acre farm.

I paused, then said delicately, “Are you having those dreams again?”

She looked at me. “Who told you about that?”

In the dreams, Shannon stood on the nearby hillside, watching the farm burn to the ground. The house, the chicken coop, the gardens: all aflame. Car-size balls of fire raining down from the violet heavens. As the fire spread across the fields, she would run—or try to run—while the barn collapsed, the animals screaming in the rubble. Sometimes she could see us in the distance, waving to her. Saying something. And sometimes—when the dream lasted this long—she could see beams of light shooting down from the heavens, shining grace onto my children and Caleb and me. Saving everyone but her.

“Nanny Louise is worried about you,” I said—which was more diplomatic, I thought, than *Nanny Louise is sick of being startled awake in the middle of the night by screaming*. All our farm employees lived in a set of rooms above the stables, next to the homeschooling classroom.

“I’m fine,” Shannon said. “It’s no big deal.” She leaned past me to plug in a battery charger. For a moment, we were silent, standing side by side in the small corner of the house where we spent nearly all our waking hours together.

You might just have the most beloved kitchen in America, these days. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

“Oh, gosh—where do I even start?”

Through the camera’s discerning eye, the cooking space was perfectly cluttered: a half-filled mason jar of water here, a flour spill there, a few forgotten flower stems strewn across a worn-looking cutting board. It looked like a space where a mother worked; like a kitchen in the real world, only obviously better than anything the real world had to offer. People think they want minimalism, they think they want a house absent of stuff, when in fact a perfectly

uncluttered home makes them want to kill themselves. A space must always look lived-in for someone to want to live in it. This is a completely obvious notion, when you take a moment to really think about it, but most people don't take a moment to really think about anything. Most people are morons.

Another bonus of this area of the kitchen was that it was right next to a long row of windows, so the light, once the sun rose, was a perfect soft-bright at any hour of the day. Just standing near that kitchen corner made me look and feel a good six years younger. God-given plastic surgery, I called it privately, though I wouldn't dream of saying something like that online. The Angry Women would eat me alive.

Have you ever had any work done?

Laugh, laugh, laugh.

"God, no. I'm sorry, no offense to others who *have*, but me? Personally? I would never."

Shannon was looking blankly at the windows now, which seemed on these early winter mornings to offer a portal into a world shrouded in black. I knew she was thinking about the dreams. It was clear she didn't even have an inkling of an idea of what they meant. How could she be so dense? God was clearly trying to reach her, in about as direct a way as He could, He was sending smoke signals and carrier pigeons and writing messages to her in the sky, and she was ignoring all of it. She'd probably schedule a call with some scam-artist dream interpreter before she even considered that her brain might be offering her a nonmetaphorical insight. It was a shame to watch her totally bypass revelation, but not exactly surprising. Shannon's partially Barnard-educated brain was a blunt instrument, secular and smooth; it was about as suited a tool for speaking directly with God as a pair of rubber spatulas were for open-heart surgery.

And why might the Lord want to reach Shannon so badly?

Well. Shannon had misbehaved.

Shannon looked up at me, and our eyes locked. My cheeks flushed for having been caught staring at her with such an openly judgmental look on my face. “By the way,” she said, “my new phone arrived today. Thanks, again, for letting me do the rush shipping option.”

“Of course.” One of the children had dropped Shannon’s phone into a puddle, apparently, a week earlier. And because I was such a good boss, I’d remedied it immediately, handing her the company card to order a new one along with a little lighthearted joke: *Wouldn’t want you to be stuck out here without access to the real world!*

“Weren’t you going to wear the purple apron today?”

“Ah!” I said, and laughed. “Whoops! Pregnancy brain.” I hated that phrase, *pregnancy brain*, but it was an excellent way to sound relatable. The apron I was wearing was a dark navy. We were using these videos to announce a new shade option for the aprons on our online store (\$35.99, 100 percent cotton, buttons made of recycled plastic, made in Spain). “I’ll go get it now.”

As I left the kitchen, Nanny Aimee walked in with my toddler, Junebug. Jessa got up from the table, her glass empty now, and trailed whimsically after me like a dandelion puff. She grabbed Junebug’s hand as she passed, and soon both nannies were calling plaintively after the little girls as they followed me up the stairs.

“It’s fine,” I called over my shoulder. “They can come with me.”

It was a particularly special gift from our Creator that we had been blessed with three girls in a row. All children were gifts from God, of course, but *groups of girls*, little jewelry sets of two and three? That was something else altogether. A girl was lovely, a boy was nice, but *girls, plural*, were rainbows and fluff, personified. Radiant balls of delight. Such community-oriented creatures; with the addition of each new little lady to their little-lady tribe, they all seemed to grow a little taller, glow a little brighter. They carried each other like dolls. They braided each other’s hair. They picked and preened and poked at one another with motherly obsession.

The boys would keep us fed when we were old and feeble, I liked to say, but the girls? They would dance around our wheelchairs,

toss rose petals over our graves. Plus, I'll admit it: they were easier to train. The boys occasionally resisted or got frustrated or bored, but not the girls. They could perform on film for hours without complaint, just like their mama.

"Mom."

I winced instinctually, then rearranged my expression into softness. "Yes, honey?" I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, fixing the new apron, and my eldest daughter, Clementine, was standing in the doorway. She had turned twelve over the summer and promptly stopped calling me *Mama* a few days after. It made my eye twitch each time I heard her say *Mom*; I hated the word. It was such an ugly sound, so short and masculine, far much less musical than my preferred alternative. I didn't fight it, though. Clementine was a preteen, which meant she was testing me. The worst thing I could do would be to push back.

I watched through the mirror as Clementine crossed the room and sat next to the girls on my bed. "What does tradwife mean?"

Record scratch. "Who said that word to you?"

"What? Is it bad?"

"Tradwife," Jessa said, and giggled. She threw her head back and said it again. "*Traaaaadwife!*"

It almost seemed possible Clementine might hear the mechanical clicks of my brain as it whirred into warp speed, sorting through five hundred possible answers to that question. My eldest daughter was like me, not just in likeness but in disposition, too: she held her intelligence like a knife behind her back. Now that she was creeping toward womanhood, I found our similarities a bit unnerving. Like watching a clone of myself walk slowly toward me from a faraway point in the distance: What would happen when she arrived?

I'm aware this isn't the kind of thing you're meant to feel about your own daughter. But motherhood is its own kind of curation. Which is to say: every woman I know lied to me about what it would be like, before I became one myself.

. . .

If your children became influencers someday, would you be proud of them?

“I just want my kids to be happy.”

Big gummy smile.

I opted for casual ambivalence. The worst thing you can ever do is let a child know you care. “I know that *trad* is short for traditional. Some people call women like me a traditional wife. For obvious reasons.”

By some people, I meant the Angry Women. The Angry Women were the ones who called me a tradwife, who said *trad* like it was short for something evil, like *traditional* wasn't a fine word in any sane person's universe. But these women were not sane, nor were they happy, nor were they big believers in personal accountability. Instead of asking themselves why they spent so much of their precious time on Earth scrolling through other people's lives when they could be making their own home-cooked meals, or even offering eye contact to their own children—instead of asking themselves why they spent so much time bathing in their own rancid jealousy when they could be building their own lives into something they were proud of—they were apparently far more interested in drinking a bottle of wine each night and typing their little hearts out in online chat rooms about me. I suppose I'm assuming that these women were winos, but judging by the number of typos riddled throughout each of their messages, I'd call it an evidence-based assumption. Tradwives were *ruuning* the country by staying married *2there* husbands, apparently. Tradwives were *destoryin* America because they actually liked spending time with their *cildrn*.

To which I would comment, in one of the six rotating anonymous burner accounts I used online: Oh my goodness, heaven forbid!

Before these women called me a tradwife, they had called me a religious zealot, a cult leader, a breeder. Compared to those names, tradwife seemed mild.

“I don't personally think celebrating traditions is bad,” I said. “Do you?”

The two littles shook their heads. *No, Mama. We love you, Mama.* But Clementine just stared at me. “So you’re saying you are one?”

I felt, suddenly, like I was being deposed for a lawsuit. “Clementine, why don’t you just tell me who told you I was a tradwife?”

“No one,” Clementine said. In a flash, she was bored. “I was just asking a question. Jeez.”

As she stood up, I faced my reflection again, busying myself with the apron bow. I wasn’t smiling anymore. “Tell Nanny Louise to look at the weather forecast,” I said to Clementine. “It might rain today. The children should wear boots.”

Clementine didn’t respond, and by the time I turned back around, she was gone.

Nannies. It had to be the nannies. They were constantly leaving their phones on countertops and couch cushions, no matter how many times I told them not to. It was an overwhelming task, protecting your child from the world. Jessa and Junebug were still so young, so impressionable—but Clementine? Practically a woman now. She couldn’t be trusted.

Do your children enjoy being filmed?

“Oh! They love it.”

The plan for this Content Day was to make a boule with my famous sourdough starter and to depict a Nativity scene on the dough with herbs I’d personally picked from our garden. This was, excuse the pun, my literal bread and butter. Plus, the holiday season always led to a major boom for our online store (Yesteryear Ranch Cherry Cutting Board, \$120, made in Brazil; Yesteryear Ranch French Salt Blend, \$45, made in France; Yesteryear Ranch patented indoor paint gallons in shades of Homestead, Pioneer, and Cowgirl, \$80 per gallon, all made in America). The boule wasn’t the main attraction so much as the gateway drug: Baby Lavender Jesus in a Rosemary manger, three wise Thyme sprig men, fa la la and the followers would click, click, click, until their hearts—and their online shop-

ping carts—were full. They would beg—*they were always begging*—for more.

The herb boule took four hours. A standard amount of time, which would be clipped and snipped by Shannon into a thirty-second time lapse, my fingers spinning dizzily around the screen, packing and kneading and caressing a lump of pale dough. The second half of the day was Natural Dinner. I was going to make a traditional Sunday roast (*or should I say a trad Sunday roast?* I planned to write in the caption, with a winky face; that would really drive the Angry Women up a wall). All the ingredients would be sourced from our very own farm, except for the beef itself, which technically came from the supermarket on the other side of the mountain pass.

At some point in the early afternoon, we realized we were out of fresh eggs, so we decided to make a trip to the chicken coop. The sky and the mountains performed beautifully for us. I walked blissfully over to the coop, Jessa and Junebug clinging to my skirt as we mucked along in the mud and said hello to our ladies, which is what I called the chickens whenever I was being filmed. *The ladies.*

“Hello, ladies,” I sang out. “How are y’all doing today?”

Behind me, Shannon tripped on her video cord and swore loudly. “Sorry,” she said, “can you do that part again?”

Of course I could. I could do any of it on command, a million times over, in a million variations of singsong. “Hello, ladies! How are y’all doing today?”

“Perfect. Let’s move on to a shot of the egg pickup.”

“I say,” someone said from behind. “Is that Marilyn Monroe by the chicken coop?”

It might as well have been! I rolled my eyes and laughed, had a single moment to smooth my skirt and pray that Shannon was still filming before Caleb strode into the coop, grabbed me by the waist, and dipped me low. He kissed me while our daughters cheered. Then he lifted me back up, grinning as I slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “You got my boots all dirty!”

“Little dirt never killed anybody.” He tipped his cowboy hat to me and winked.

I laughed and rolled my eyes again. “We’re *filming*, Caleb.”

As if he didn’t know.

“Actually,” Shannon said, “we’re not. I paused right before Caleb spoke. So you guys are good. If you want to take a quick break, I can go have some coffee.”

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen. “Okay. Well, we don’t actually have to—”

But Shannon was already trudging away with the camera, walking quickly toward the house.

Caleb patted my behind twice, gently. As we watched Shannon throw open the front door with an unnecessary amount of force, he said, “She still upset?”

A surge of emotion rolled through me.

“Yes, Caleb. She’s still upset.”

“Well. She’ll feel better soon. When we—”

I looked at him, and he fell silent. “You don’t understand women at all.”

He was about to reply, and I was about to cut him off with an even sharper statement, and then both of us seemed to realize at the exact same time that we were being watched.

Jessa, Junebug. Little girls, sweet things, peering up at us. Watching, always. Where the hell was Nanny Aimee?

No matter. It was good practice, anyway. That was what I told myself when I found myself under surveillance by a child who should’ve been under surveillance by someone else: *It’s good practice!* A flawless performance, after all, does not arrive overnight. It takes years—and years, and years—of practice.

I leaned forward on tiptoes and kissed Caleb twice in quick succession. “Get back to work, cowboy.” The girls laughed and clapped, and I flushed from the reward. Caleb tipped his hat to the three of us and strode back toward the barn, where he would probably spend an hour or two messing around with the organization of some hay bales. Caleb was very good at keeping himself busy. He

was also very good at only ever doing the farm chores that he actually enjoyed: milking Sassafras, driving the big John Deere tractor around in tight donuts in the pastures, staying up all night with a laboring sow. As for the chores he didn't enjoy—cleaning, planting, picking, mucking out the stalls—he left all that to the ranch hands.

Hold on. You have ranch hands, too?

Pause.

“Did I not mention those before?”

Shit. Consider mentioning pregnancy brain.

“We have two or three, usually. Just seasonal work. Depending on what's going on at the farm. We need as much help as we can get!”

But why didn't you—

“Pregnancy brain!”

The filming for Natural Dinner ran late. All throughout the house, moods went sour. Shannon and I started bickering over how to do the overhead filming, and then our bickering wasted ten precious minutes of afternoon light, causing us to rush, which then led to further bickering, then the older kids' homeschooling lesson ended fifteen minutes earlier than usual because Nanny Louise apparently didn't feel like providing a comprehensive education for the day, and all of a sudden the kitchen was filled with incessant whining, the boys arguing with Clementine about what to play before dinner, and the nannies—who were, the agency had assured us, the absolute cream of the crop, but sometimes made me feel like I was paying full-time prices for part-time work—were just sitting there on the couch scrolling on their phones while a world war was waged over the tiny Scottie dog game piece in the Monopoly set. (The only board game allowed in our house, by explicit demand of my father-in-law. It was important, Doug said, for children to learn the value of a free market as soon as possible.)

The nannies. Oh, the nannies! They tended to veer toward uselessness during this time of the day. From Nanny Aimee, I expected

as much. She was a dumb girl from Los Angeles with a perfectly symmetrical face, capable of keeping the kids alive, and not much else. But from Nanny Louise, who was five years older than Nanny Aimee and had a master's degree in education, I expected more. She was like family to us.

Did you just say your nannies are like family?

Silence.

I'm sure you can understand that there's a long and controversial history of white women calling the people who worked for them "family."

Longer pause. Soft, knowing smile.

No. That's not right.

Soft, *unknowing* smile.

Better.

"Next question, please!"

"Ladies, can I speak with you for a moment?"

The nannies looked up from their phones.

"Clementine has been using someone's phone unsupervised," I said. "She asked me what a tradwife is today."

"Well," Nanny Aimee said, then paused.

I trained my smile on her. "What?"

"I mean."

Another pause. She looked like a Muppet with a gummed-up jaw. I resisted the urge to step forward and work her mouth open myself.

"We'll be more careful moving forward," Nanny Louise said. She gave Nanny Aimee a sharp look, the visual equivalent of a kick beneath the table, and Nanny Aimee nodded. "Yep," she said. "Won't happen again."

I took a deep breath, sighed my anger out. "Can you both handle dinner prep tonight? I was thinking about making a little trip to Target."

In my periphery, Clementine perked up.

Right on cue.

. . .

It was a rare gift of decadence, when I took the girls with me to the Super Target thirty minutes away. At the Starbucks inside the store, Clementine ordered a Frappuccino with extra whipped cream, and I bit my lip about having so much caffeine and sugar this late in the day. I got Jessa and Junebug each a cake pop and an apple juice, and then a nonfat decaf cappuccino with oat milk for myself. I tried to limit these trips to once a month; usually Nanny Aimee went out to pick up our groceries for us. But it was nice, even for me, to come here occasionally and float along beneath the mind-numbing fluorescence—though I will say it amazed me that so many people came here on a weekly basis. Spending more than thirty minutes at Target made me feel like I was nursing a cavity.

As I pushed the cart slowly down the main aisle, the girls trotted forward and behind me in haphazard loops, hopping from distraction to delightful distraction. The jewelry stands. The clothing racks. The shelves of body lotion in colorful packaging, tangerine and persimmon and bubblegum pink. *See how good the little things can feel, girls? See how thrilling a sugar high can be if you choose it consciously, after so many days of careful—*

“Natalie?”

I paused, looked around. Pretended to be confused, when really I was thinking, *Oh, Jesus Christ. Not you.*

Vanessa and I had gone to high school together. She'd been on the track team too but had made varsity only her senior year, so we hadn't spent much time together. She was in nursing scrubs now, standing by two overflowing shopping carts, her preteen daughter glowering behind her with the same expression of profound disappointment that Vanessa had worn at every track meet. I glanced at the cart closest to me. Disposable razors, disposable tissue boxes, a half dozen slices of chemical-bloated ham wrapped in three layers of plastic. I could practically smell the stink of the landfill where all this stuff, all these products designed to be trash, would end up a month from now. Then I looked back at Vanessa, who was now frowning at me with the same sour expression as her daughter, and

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my heart softened with nostalgia. *Poor thing*. She'd never won a race in her life.

"It's so good to see you!" I said. "It's been, what—a decade?"

She sniffed, looked at my empty cart. "I didn't know you came to Target."

"Of course I do. I'm human, aren't I?" I turned my grin to her daughter. "And who is this?"

Vanessa looked at her own daughter with a strange expression, like she was trying to see what she looked like through my eyes. "This is Zoe."

Zoe looked to be a few years younger than Clementine. If she recognized her own name, she didn't show it. She just stared at me, her expression a springboard of tight misery.

"And those ones, I'm guessing, are yours?"

I followed Vanessa's gaze to see Clementine crouched in the aisle ahead, flipping through a picture book while the little girls peered eagerly over her shoulder. A flush of pleasure ran through me, stronger than any artificial sugar high. "Yes. Those are my girls. The oldest is Clementine, and the younger ones are Jessa and Junebug."

When I turned back to Vanessa, she was smirking. When was the last time I'd seen a grown woman smirk? "You know, I really admire your commitment to the olden days with those names."

My smile shrank by an inch. *Here we go*.

Vanessa had grown up in a strict, devout family, much stricter and more devout than my own, but she'd since emancipated herself from her parents, and now liked to write long-winded diatribes about her *terrible upbringing* via Facebook statuses that garnered, on average, three to five likes a pop. Vanessa wanted the world to know she was modern, now. She'd changed. She ate organic! (*Except when she got her groceries at Target, apparently!*) Self-proclaimed progressive women like Vanessa were chemically addicted to hating women like me. I knew that. I knew this woman got embarrassingly drunk at family parties and pulled up my Instagram page, showing anyone stupid enough to walk past that *she knew this woman personally*,

she knew her in high school, before launching into some recycled slur of a speech about how all traditional people are idiots, all religious people are idiots, all people who choose to live a different lifestyle than hers are idiots, idiots, idiots, when what she really wanted to say was *I am so nauseatingly jealous of this woman I used to know that I think it might actually kill me.*

Women like Vanessa, with their expensive latex foreheads and their *I'm with her* bumper stickers? They didn't know what they wanted. They couldn't possess a truly principled stance even if someone injected it straight into their faces. Lord knows they couldn't take responsibility for their own lives, so they blamed their unhappiness on me. The dumb, ignorant, backward-thinking trad-wife. Never mind the fact that I graduated in the top three of my high school. Never mind that I got straight A's at Harvard, studying global religious history while Vanessa ping-ponged her way through the rooms of the club rugby house at Michigan. (Yes, I'll admit: I checked in on her Instagram from time to time, too.) Never mind the fact that I lived my life *actually adhering* to all the principles they loved to virtue blast on Instagram. *Eat local! Support small businesses! Reduce waste!*

The Angry Women could say what they wanted, but facts were facts. I was a woman of principles. A woman *defined* by principles. No amount of money in the world could've gotten me to take a nibble of the cancerous ham in that Tetris-packed cart. No amount of smooth-brained social acceptance could've gotten me to name my daughter something so toothlessly trendy—something that so desperately shouted *pick me*—as Zoe.

Cunt.

Sorry, Lord. My anger was getting the best of me, these days. It was a problem that needed to be fixed, and I planned—I really did!—to fix it. If I'd had a little more time, I swear I would've fixed it.

"It's wonderful to see you," I said smoothly. "You should bring the kids over to the farm sometime!" I peered down at Vanessa's

sullen ogre of a daughter. “I bet you’d love to see where ham comes from, wouldn’t you?”

Vanessa let out a tiny moan. As intimate and shameful as an accidental fart in mixed company. Her face turned a bright shade of pink. I knew it was the kind of threaded offer that would catch in her molars. She would know the offer was half-hearted but still consider the possibility anyways, because Vanessa probably wanted to see my picturesque little farm in person more than she wanted anything else in her life. The chickens, *my ladies*. The big red barn, which photographed so beautifully in any kind of light. The gardens, oh, the gardens! The pseudo-erotic fantasy of us baking my signature lemon zest cake together, the two of us laughing at some stupid thing, our children playing peaceably together in the background. None of it would ever happen, and yet: the idea of that impossible day would sit there, growing bacteria in the back of her throat, for the next week or month or year. A profoundly humiliating desire, as strong and confusing and animal as the ones that inspired her to watch lesbian porn on low volume while her husband was sleeping next to her. (She was definitely the kind of woman who watched lesbian porn on low volume while her husband was sleeping next to her.)

Grind away, Vanessa, I thought, smiling beatifically. *Go ahead. Give yourself a migraine thinking about me.* A notion so pleasurable it was worth the guilt that came wrapped up inside it, like a penny candy. She would think about my famous little farm for a year, and then she would bite the bullet and order one of my branded Dutch oven sets (\$250, made in Taiwan), and she would mail it to a friend’s house, one whose name I didn’t recognize, so that I never found out that she personally gave me money. That’s how much this woman hated me. That’s how much she hated herself.

“Say you’ll come sometime,” I said one last time, smiling wide. “Please, just say it.”

“Thanks,” Vanessa said shortly. “I will.” She looked like she’d swallowed a bottle of Advil. I beamed in reply.

We said a few more pointless things, long enough for Vanessa to take a few more obvious glances at my body (noticing, no doubt, that the skirt hanging loose around my hips was the very same one I'd worn in school a decade earlier) and long enough for me to pointedly ignore her body altogether (do I even have to say it?). We said goodbye. As I turned the corner with my girls, Vanessa threw a middle finger at my back. I didn't *see* her do it, but I felt her do it. I swear I did. And who could blame her? I had the life she always wanted, the life she *still* wanted but could no longer admit. Vanessa was liberated, sure—but I was happy. And it was such a shame, wasn't it? The way some women so willingly compromised every ounce of themselves in the name of building a life for themselves that they didn't enjoy.

I passed Vanessa once more at the checkout line and gave a cheerful wave, but she didn't see me. She was bickering with her daughter over something in the cart. By this point, I'd regained my composure and felt nothing but pity for her again.

What do your friends think of your success online?

"They're happy for me. Why wouldn't they be?"

Pity. I pitied her.

But also: *fuck her*.

Sorry, Lord, but really, fuck her—

By the time we reached the car, it was dark out and I was practically spitting with fury. Vanessa, that *bitch*, was undoubtedly going to run home to post about me in one of those stupid snarky online forums—bet you didn't think someone like Natalie would shop at Target!!!—and then I would have to suffer a whole week of *online commentary*, and Shannon! The nerve! The absolute unbelievable nerve of that spoiled uneducated morally bankrupt little son of a—

Breathe, Natalie. Just breathe.

Clementine was in the back, buckling the girls into their car

seats. I sat in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead, my hands flexed tightly on the steering wheel. I glanced down at my phone on the console. My temper settled.

Yes. That would be nice. I could share the moment myself and take the wind right out of Vanessa's stupid little sails.

I picked up the phone and pressed record, right as Clementine was getting into the passenger seat. "Girls," I said, smiling into the lit-up screen, "what did you get at our *very special* trip to Target today?"

Jessa and Junebug squealed in response:

"A stuffie!"

"Sparkly lotion!"

"What about you, Clementine?"

I angled the camera so it featured me, grinning, and Clementine's form in the passenger seat. Clementine had gotten a new shade of nail polish. But she didn't reply. She was facing away from me. "Clementine, what did you get at—"

"Stop filming me."

I froze. My face flooded with heat.

She'd never done that before. Not once.

I glanced quickly in the rearview mirror: Jessa was playing with a bracelet on Junebug's wrist, Junebug babbling quietly about the new stuffed animal. I pressed the button to stop recording and set the phone face down in my lap. My hands were shaking. I threw the car into drive and we rolled toward the parking lot exit.

"I didn't know you were unhappy being filmed, Clementine," I said as we rolled onto the quiet mountain highway toward home. "I've always told you to tell me if you felt that way. Haven't I?"

I hadn't.

Clementine rested her forehead against the window. "I'm telling you now."

"Fair enough," I said. None of the girls were looking at me anymore, and yet for some reason I was smiling. *Stop it*, I told myself sharply. *Stop smiling like that*. But I couldn't. I didn't.

. . .
When it comes to consent, do you think children are capable of—

“Oh, please.”

Pause.

Can I finish my question?

Longer pause.

“Yes. Of course.”

When it comes to consent and the use of children’s likenesses on public social media accounts—

“Actually, I need to take a quick break to use the restroom. Would that be all right?”

Later that night, Caleb walked into our bedroom and said, “I spoke to my dad again today.”

“Oh?” I was reading my emails, mass-deleting spam messages, while the nannies got the children ready for bed. At that moment, a new email pinged my inbox. It was from Shannon. The subject line read: formal resignation

I paused. Stared at the subject line for a few moments. Then I clicked on it.

Natalie,

I’m writing to let you know that I won’t be working for you any longer. Between what happened over the summer and all the nightmares, it’s clear that this job isn’t good for my mental health any longer. I’ve got a bus ticket for later tonight. I don’t need a ride; Nanny Aimee is going to drive me to the station.

For what it’s worth: I don’t think you’re a bad person. I think you’re just confused.

Please tell the kids I love them.

Shannon

P.S. I’m sorry for screwing up your content calendar.

“Natalie? *Helloooo*, anyone there?”

“Sorry,” I said, “I just—I need to look at something quickly. Give me one sec.”

I read the email a second time, then a third. Then I looked at Caleb. “What were you saying?”

“Is everything okay?”

I laughed a bit too brightly. “Just silly publicity emails. Now, *please*, I’m all ears: tell me about your father.”

“Well,” he said. He paused dramatically. *Drumroll, please*. “He thinks that now’s the time.”

I nodded impatiently—I already knew what he was going to say—before remembering this was meant to be the grand reveal. *Play along, Natalie. Say your lines*. “Now’s the time for what, darling?”

I knew exactly what was coming. In fact I had seen *all* this coming—my father-in-law’s political push for Caleb, Shannon’s letter of resignation—had arguably orchestrated it myself, but still, I found myself unaccountably shocked that it was finally happening. *Here we go. The dominoes are starting to fall*. And yet: how dare she! I suppose it was the tone of the email that got under my skin, more than the email itself. Such faux maturity. Dripping with unearned condescension. Exactly the kind of letter you would expect from a twenty-one-year-old. Exactly the kind of letter I would’ve expected from Shannon in particular, that lost little lamb, that stupid little bitch.

Sorry, Lord. Sorry, sorry, sorry.

“Now’s the time to run,” Caleb said. “For office.”

“Oh my gosh. Wow.”

Caleb’s father wasn’t just a senator. He was a bona fide political icon. He’d been in office for four decades, running uncontested every six years. He was a war veteran, a family values traditionalist, the kind of guy people described with abject sincerity as a *real-life John Wayne*. They weren’t wrong. Doug Mills was broad-shouldered and confident. The ultimate patriarch. Nearly every comment he made to another man was accompanied by a hearty clap on the shoulder. He was, if the polling was even remotely accurate, about

to become the next president of the United States. He was also my closest ally. What my father-in-law and I both knew: there was no *otherwise*. There was only this plan, a very delicate one, in which two variables—my producer, my husband—were taken care of in one fell swoop.

Final question, Mrs. Heller Mills: Would you like to comment on these horrific allegations of assault at Yesteryear Ranch?

“Unfortunately, I can’t comment on an ongoing legal investigation.”

I would just like to pause here and say: another woman would have cracked years ago.

I don’t think you’re a bad person.

A bold thing to say to the wife of the man you’ve been fucking. That was the word I was looking for: *bold*. The whole email was so hair-raisingly bold that it might have caused another, lesser woman to have a complete nervous breakdown, to throw her phone across the room, to hiss at her stupid, useless, can’t-keep-his-dick-in-his-pants husband, *Look what you’ve done*. Not me. As I stared at my philandering moron of a husband, I gave myself a mental pat on the back for all the work I’d done over the years to harden myself against the world. We were facing down the barrel of our first PR disaster. I could already see the headlines: *Allegations Roil Insta-Famous Family*. Even worse: *Is Natalie Heller Mills a Cult Leader? Former Producer Speaks Out*.

Would a headline like that ruin a nascent political career? Assuredly not. America didn’t care one iota about morality when it came to politicians. If anything, we expected them to be a little sleazy. It might improve the odds for my coddled husband in the heartland. Might even give me a boost in followers, too. *That poor pregnant woman, doing her best to keep her family together*. Really, if you think about it: this whole situation would make for a hell of an Instagram post.

But I was getting ahead of myself. There was no need to think about that now. No need, even, to tell Caleb about the email just yet. This was not the kind of thing my husband was capable of dealing with. Not the kind of thing he—who, despite his best efforts, still wore his masculinity so roughly and unnaturally, as if it were an ill-fitting sweater I'd forced over his head—would be able to fix. If he knew, he'd only make it worse. He'd do something completely idiotic like drive to the bus stop and beg for forgiveness from Shannon in front of a crowd of strangers.

"I think it's a great idea," I said, exactly like I'd practiced. "I bet you'll be president one day. Just like your dad."

Caleb's face lit up in relief. He would never admit it, he'd spent half his life running away from it, but this was the only thing he'd ever truly wanted: to be just like dear old Dad.

"Now," I said, "let's pray on it."

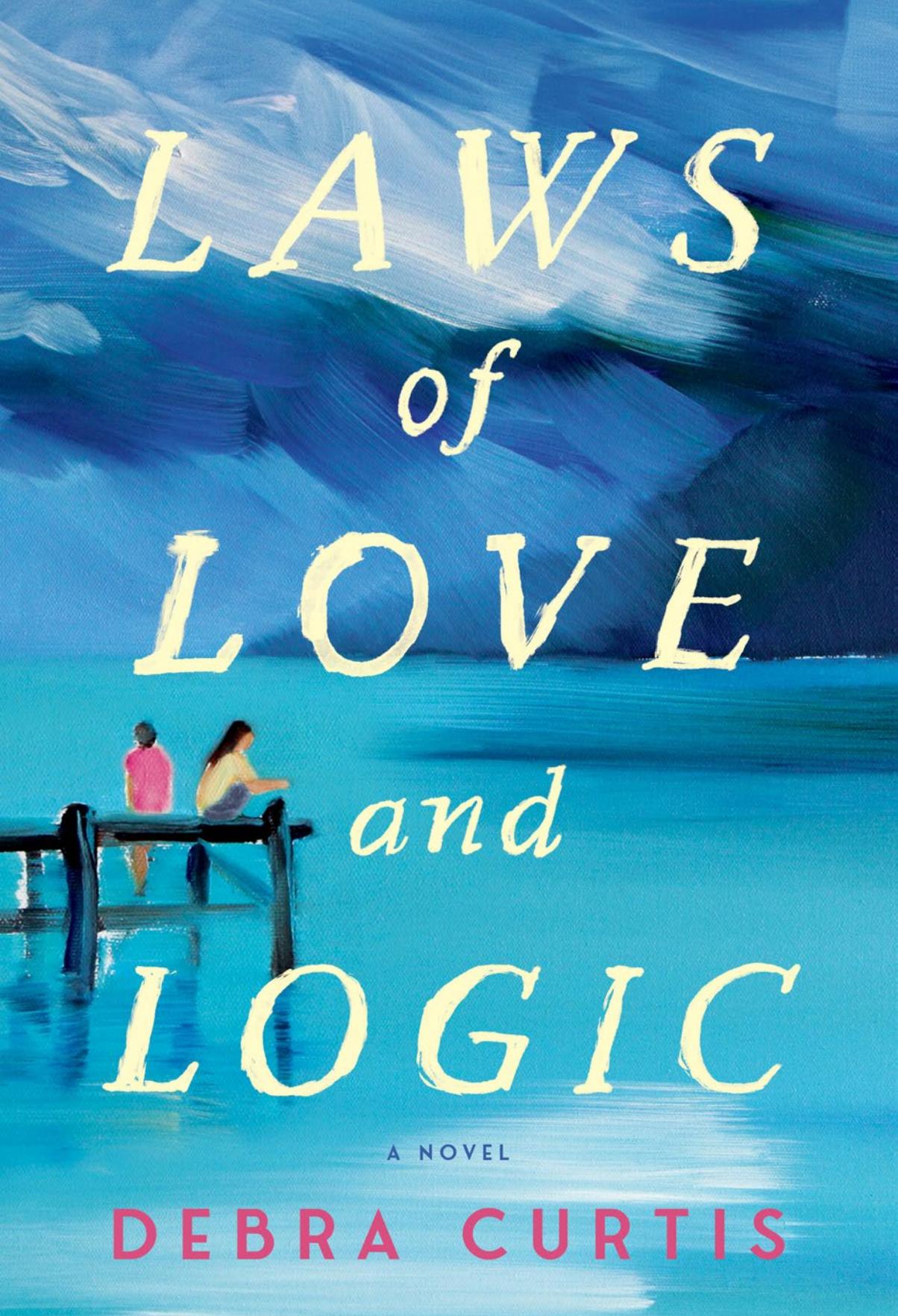
We kneeled together at the foot of the couch. I pressed my forehead into my clasped hands and tried to breathe the anger out of me, but I couldn't. It was like a germ. It just kept replicating in my stomach. Usually my husband's failures were easy to forgive, but tonight I wanted to kill him. I could practically see his insipid prayers float past me, in little Comic Sans thought bubbles. *Please keep my kids safe, Lord, along with the chickens. Help my wife continue to love me. A blow job would be nice, Lord, and if it's not too much, I'd like the strength to become something memorable. I'd like to become a legend.*

All men wanted to become legends. It was so embarrassing.

And what did I want? An easy answer. I wanted more of what I already had. I wanted the whole entire world to see itself through my eyes. A new level of influence. That's not the kind of thing you ask for directly, though, so I settled for something simpler.

Please let this plan work, Lord. Please don't let her win. And please give my husband a spine. I'm tired of him needing to borrow mine.

Amen.

The background is a painting of a blue sky and sea. The sky is a mix of light and dark blue with visible brushstrokes. The sea is a vibrant turquoise color. In the lower left, a wooden pier extends into the water. Two people are sitting on the pier: one in a pink shirt and one in a yellow shirt. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

LAWS

of

LOVE

and

LOGIC

A NOVEL

DEBRA CURTIS

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PROLOGUE

2005

Most autumns, the lavender skies and red dogwoods reminded Lily of the boy and all those years ago. Now in her forties, she pulled over to the side of the road to take in the autumn twilight. When they were young, she had believed that she and the boy would marry and spend the rest of their lives together. How could she have known anything about love's ruses or how life worked?

Pulling the memories through the years like a thread, she remembered a warm day in Escobar's cornfield. Dust on her shoes and ankles. She ran to the far end of an eight-acre field to make it harder for him to find her. It was a game, and it was her idea. "There will be a reward at the end, I promise," she told him. The cornstalks towered over them. She remembered waiting in her spot, giddy but quiet. Listening to the rustling and the sound of his heavy footsteps as he got closer.

When he saw her, he lowered himself to his knees. Sweat trickled

down his right temple. Looking up at her, he wrested her jeans down around her calves. Smudges of dirt on the tops of her thighs where he had placed his hands. Dry leaves in the wind behind and over her. They stayed in the cornfield until the western sky was orange.

...

LILY HAD TAKEN TO walking around her house in just a long black cashmere sweater with no pants or underwear. She and her husband lived in upstate New York in a nineteenth-century house with floor-to-ceiling windows, but Lily didn't care: She wasn't an exhibitionist—she just didn't worry about what other people thought. What mattered most to her lately were forgiveness and the afternoon light. While her husband was making notes on the birds he had seen earlier in the day, Lily watched the white walls in her study. She followed the lines and patterns of light that shone through her curtainless windows as the sun set.

The way the sunlight hit the old cast-iron radiator reminded her of the double-slit experiment she had read about in college, where a light wave holds all the possibilities of the positions a wave particle might assume. Sitting there in her study, she recalled how she was drawn to the idea that subatomic particles could impact one another at great distances; it allowed for the possibility that she and the boy would one day find each other. She didn't want her life to be a bouquet of regrets, like the profound regrets some must feel in the slim moments before they take their own lives. Lily sensed something was about to change in her life the same day her husband could not identify a white-throated sparrow at the bird feeder.

PORTSMOUTH, RHODE ISLAND

SEPTEMBER 1976

Early fall. Leaves of gold on the birch shimmered when the wind picked up. When no one answered the front door, Lily walked around the side of the house to the back deck. She could hear her boyfriend's father playing guitar and singing softly, a melancholy tune—familiar, but she couldn't quite make it out. The boy, like his dad, was musically inclined. Playing the guitar had a calming effect on Mr. Cooper, especially after his son's football games.

The back deck was unfinished, littered with tools and cans of paint with rusted lids—neglected since last spring—alongside a spare tire, two fishing rods, and a cooler. The boy's dad was on his seventh beer; by the time the day was over he would have finished off a case by himself. Lily didn't want to disturb Mr. Cooper and waited until he looked up from his guitar.

“There's my favorite girl,” he said with a big smile, resting his forearm on the body of the instrument.

“Don’t stop on account of me,” Lily said. “I love hearing you play.”

Mr. Cooper, still smiling, shook his head and leaned his guitar against a post on the deck.

“Some game, huh?” he said as he stood up.

He offered Lily his seat, the only one on the deck: a mustard-and-orange-webbed aluminum lawn chair. When she refused to sit, he remained standing.

It had been an exciting game that morning: Portsmouth against Barrington, rival teams. The boy, a senior at Portsmouth and the team’s quarterback, had read the defenses instantly, successfully changing the play at the line of scrimmage three times when Barrington’s defense had anticipated Portsmouth’s plays and was prepared to stop them.

When the boy appeared at the screen door in a pair of jeans and a Creedence Clearwater Revival T-shirt, toweling off his long brown hair, his dad couldn’t contain himself and gave the boy a hug, patting his back.

“Four hundred and ninety passing yards! That’s a record. One game! That’s my boy!” Mr. Cooper was smiling from ear to ear, so excited that he spat as he talked.

The boy watched Lily. She never seemed to mind that his father always drank and talked endlessly about the boy’s football stats.

“Everybody knows he’s the best the state has ever seen. When he was fourteen and there were sixty seconds left on the clock, he threw the ball fifty yards and that Portuguese kid caught it.”

“Lil knows the story,” the boy said, putting his arm around his dad. He was tall like his father but a whole lot bigger.

“I was there, Mr. Cooper—I saw the whole thing. Just like Roger Staubach!”

“Marry this girl!” the boy’s father said. He took a long swig of his beer.

The boy knew that over the past five decades, the little state of Rhode Island had produced three professional quarterbacks; he was determined to be the fourth. He was ten years old when Joe Namath predicted that the Jets would beat the Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl. As a young kid, the boy had borrowed Namath’s courage and boldness. Sometimes, standing in the locker room in front of his teammates, he would say, “We’re going to win this one, I guarantee it.”

The boy took Lily’s hand, led her inside, and pulled the screen door shut behind him. He took two beers out of the refrigerator, and as he and Lily made their way downstairs to the basement, they heard his father: “Chuck at the hardware store said that the scouts will be coming around to have a look at you!”

When the boy was six, his mom took off and moved to Florida with the golf pro from Green Valley golf course. For Christmases and birthdays, she sent her son cards. The boy had learned that his mother was playing piano in a bar in Boca Raton. Back then no one had ever heard of Boca Raton but the boy found it on a map when he was in the second grade. Folks in town heard that the golf pro hit her occasionally and got one of the waitresses pregnant at the resort where he worked.

Every trophy the boy had ever won was displayed on the wooden shelves his father made for him. While football was his main sport, he also played basketball and baseball. The largest trophy was the one he’d received the prior year for football: MVP, a pewter sculpted figure—poised to throw a football—mounted on a wooden base. Free weights and a bench filled one side of the boy’s basement room, with a bed, a TV, a set of drawers, and an old electric keyboard on the other

side. In the corner was a brand-new Sony stereo, which his father had recently bought him for his eighteenth birthday. Albums were carefully lined up between two cinder blocks.

Lily placed her beer near a stack of library books on the chest of drawers and picked up the boy's sunglasses. Putting them on, she stretched out on his bed. The boy sat down at the keyboard.

"Did I ever tell you that my mom played the organ at Saint Barnabas and that's where she met my dad?"

Lily turned her head on the pillow to watch him. He had told her this, but she didn't mind hearing it again, not in the least. "Tell me" was all she said.

"He fell in love with her on a Sunday in between the Gloria and Communion."

"That's beautiful."

"After my mom left, he just couldn't go back there, so that's why we go to Saint Anthony's. I can remember our last Christmas together. Although, I didn't know it would be our last. She played 'O Holy Night' at Mass. I was real sad watching my dad cry."

Lily swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Before she could say anything, he changed the subject and said, "Do you know this song?"

His hands moved tentatively across the black and white keys. Like birds pecking in the sand, his fingers bent lightly. He started and stopped a couple of times, but when he was able to pull it together, combining the chords with the right individual notes, Lily exclaimed, "How did you learn that?"

A little soft, but melodic, the boy sang: "*The screen door slams, Mary's dress sways / Like a vision she dances . . .*"

As the boy worked out the chords to "Thunder Road," Lily slipped her hand under his shirt and caressed his back. *Born to Run* was released the year before, and Lily and the boy both unknowingly

bought the other the album for Christmas. The boy stopped playing and looked up at Lily. “That’s as far as I’ve gotten.”

“Call in sick tonight,” Lily said.

“I can’t. You know that.”

“What’s a party without the team quarterback?”

“Are you still planning on going?”

When Lily didn’t answer, the boy rose from the keyboard bench and moved over to his bed. He worked Saturday and Sunday nights, but never Fridays, not the night before a game. He washed dishes at Reidy’s diner on East Main Road. Late into the shift, when it was just the owner and the boy, the owner would fill Styrofoam containers with mashed potatoes, green beans, and meat loaf. The Saturday night special. He’d always add a couple of desserts, one for the boy and one for his father.

The boy sat on the edge of his bed. Lily followed him. She got down on her knees and wiggled herself in between his thighs.

“I promise you’ll have a good time,” Lily said.

She and the boy had been together since they were freshmen, and while they had yet to have sex, they delighted in each other’s caresses with hands and mouths, here in the basement or in the field behind the school. With the tip of her finger, Lily moved a strand of her hair away from her face.

“I don’t understand why you want to go to the party without me,” the boy said.

“Am I supposed to sit home every Saturday night my senior year because you have to work?”

The boy looked away.

“I’m sorry,” she added.

And she was. She knew the boy helped his father out with the basic bills: electricity, groceries, and sometimes the oil bill when the winters were at their worst. The boy had his first job when he was

thirteen, a paper route. The factory in Fall River, where his father had worked for fifteen years and planned on working for the rest of his life, had closed down. Now his father earned a living working at one of the marinas on the island. Like many working-class kids, the boy was coming of age in a time of great economic anxiety.

“I’ll go with Jane,” Lily said.

“Yeah? And by ten o’clock either you’ll be holding her hair back while she’s puking or she’ll be upstairs in one of the bedrooms with Jimmy Sullivan or some other guy she barely knows.”

“That’s my sister you’re talking about. And what difference does it make who she’s in a bedroom with?”

The boy knew that Lily would go to the party without him. He couldn’t help but feel jealous, so much so that he decided not to tell her what he had been holding in all afternoon—something he hadn’t even shared with his father: There had been scouts at the game today. He would tell her tomorrow. After the party.



PORTSMOUTH, RHODE ISLAND

1967-1972

After Lily's parents married, they settled in Portsmouth, where Martin Webb had been hired to teach. The Priory, as it was called then, was a monastery and an all-boys boarding school founded by a Benedictine community. Established on old farmland, the campus was built around a manor house and included dormitories, classroom buildings, sports fields, a chapel, and the monastery. The soft green slope of the grounds gave way to Narragansett Bay, bordered with two-hundred-year-old stone walls built from gray slate. Massive birches, Japanese maples, old oaks, and towering pine trees grew on well-manicured lawns lined with goldenrod from July to the earliest frost. In the fall, round bales of hay dotted the fields. There were solitary monks in long black robes on footpaths alongside boys in blazers with the school crest proudly displayed above the right breast pocket. The Webbs lived in a house on the grounds. Lily's dad taught science and coached sailing. There were a few day students from the town

who attended the private boarding school, but the Priory was otherwise a world unto itself, tucked away near the bay and surrounded by acres of woods. Residents of the town of Portsmouth rarely, if ever, encountered or interacted with the monks and boarding school students, who were largely members of the upper class. Even though the public high school was less than two miles from the boarding school, the schools' respective sports teams played in different leagues.

Like many Catholics who had read Dostoevsky, Mr. Webb was compelled by the character Father Zosima, the mystic and monk in *The Brothers Karamazov*—so compelled that he thought he might find someone like the elder at the Priory. So he went in search of his own Father Zosima among the Benedictines. You could say Mr. Webb was a man haunted by a fictional character.

Carol Webb was a feminist and a Vatican II Catholic, which in part made her self-righteous. Her daughters inherited this trait, although to varying degrees; it would ebb and flow throughout their lives. In her more secular moods, Mrs. Webb looked for signs of civility in the most common places: in the checkout line at the grocery store, at four-way traffic stops, at entryways with heavy doors. In her more spiritual moods, she looked for signs of compassion in the same places, in the ordinary spaces where strangers encounter strangers. She wasn't one to give up on humanity. She was convinced that humans were essentially good, and if they weren't behaving as such, then she would intervene and provide the necessary instruction.

Despite her own strict Catholic upbringing, Mrs. Webb was intent on raising her daughters to be as open-minded and tolerant as she thought she was—exceedingly so, in her estimation, particularly compared to some of their Aquidneck Island neighbors whom she viewed as parochial. Once, at a dinner party, the spouse of another faculty member pointed out what the woman saw as a contradiction between Mrs. Webb's feminist ideas and Catholic doctrine, to which Mrs.

Webb responded, despite her husband's hand on her knee urging restraint, "Life is full of contradictions; just read the Bible."

One of the older monks would say in good humor, "Speak of the devil," whenever he saw Mrs. Webb coming. The first time she heard him say this, she threw her head back and laughed.

Mrs. Webb was the first woman to be invited to join the faculty reading group at the Priory. Members included male lay teachers and several monks. It was 1970. The girls were still in grade school when their mom came home one Sunday night after meeting with the group and discussing Leo Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*.

"It's like everyone else read a completely different book," she said. "Their insights into Tolstoy sounded like they all had doctorates in Russian literature. They must think I'm an idiot. Afterward, I turned to the monk leading the group and asked, 'How many hours do you read a day?' Guess what he said?"

Lily and Jane were sitting in the living room watching television, but they could hear everything their mom was saying. When Mr. Webb said, "I have no idea," his wife was quick to respond. "Eight! Eight hours a day. I'd give anything to read eight hours a day."

Mr. Webb knew his wife wasn't done.

"Do you remember the story? Masha wants to enter society life but her older husband doesn't. One night, an Italian man kisses Masha. After some discussion, the group leader turned to me and said, 'Let's hear from the lady in the room. Do you know women like that?' I had to do my best not to laugh. He was serious."

"Of course he was serious. Some of these men have never been around women."

Mrs. Webb looked at her husband approvingly.

...

MRS. WEBB WAS THE type of mother who would instruct her daughters on important lessons for life and then require the girls to recall them at the most random moments—for instance, while engaging in their monthly chore of matching lone socks.

“Now, girls,” she announced as she scattered the socks over the bed. Her studious daughters always seemed to recognize the cue and say what was expected of them.

“We know, we know. Not everyone believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” the girls said in unison.

“And?” their mom added.

“We stand side by side with the poor,” Jane answered.

“And why is that?” their mom asked.

Jane looked at her older sister.

“Because the needs of the poor are more important than anything else,” Lily said.

“Good, now pass me that school sock.”

THERE WAS A CERTAIN elegance with which the Webbs introduced Catholicism and scientific thought to their daughters. The Webbs shared a deep respect for scientific advancement in math, astronomy, and physics, matched by a profound awe for the mysteries of life. By the time Lily was six and Jane was four, Mrs. Webb had told them, “Don’t ever let anyone tell you the Earth is four thousand years old. To the outside world, Catholics appear superstitious. We light candles, say the rosary, and pray to the dead. What they don’t understand is that we embrace both faith and reason. Faith and reason—just like tea and milk, they go together.”

At Mr. Webb’s insistence, his daughters attended a small Catholic grade school on the property adjacent to the Priory. The plan was that

the girls would then attend the local high school. When Lily was ten and Jane was eight, they were old enough to walk across the street and down a long driveway to get to Saint Philomena's, run by the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Most mornings before school, Lily would be outside on the front lawn waiting for her sister. Both girls dressed in gray shirts and blue-and-gray plaid skirts resting below their knees with two inches between their maroon-colored socks and their hemlines. On the mornings they had mandatory school Mass, Lily would pin her chapel cap neatly to her hair—and then wait. Jane was always late.

“You’d better be out here before I count to sixty,” Lily would say at least three times.

On one of those mornings, carrying cinnamon toast in one hand and her book bag in the other, Jane pushed the screen door with her foot and body-checked the door to hold it open. Lily looked both ways and crossed the street with her younger sister in tow. It wasn't until they were a few feet from the main entrance to the school that Lily looked Jane over. Her gray shirt was untucked, her hair was unbrushed, and she had crumbs on the corners of her mouth.

“Where is your chapel cap?” Lily asked.

Jane reached up and touched the top of her head. She looked back to see if she had dropped it on the road. The glance back was just for show. She hardly ever packed it. Turning back to her sister, Jane made a face and shrugged.

“What are we gonna do?”

“I’ve got it,” Jane said as she reached into her coat pocket and secured a tissue, a white unused Kleenex, which she placed on her head and then looked up at her sister. “Do you have any bobby pins?”

So at least once a month at the mandatory school Mass, while the other girls wore delicate lace chapel caps, Jane Webb sat with a white Kleenex on the crown of her head. Early on, it was clear: If only one

of the two sisters was to remain grounded in her Catholic roots, it would definitely be Lily.

The girls' dad attended Mass daily at the campus chapel. Lily wondered if it counted, though, because most days Mass lasted only twenty-six minutes, depending on who gave the homily. On Sundays, the girls sat on wooden pews in the Priory chapel with both their parents. To those who noticed, including the dozen or so monks, the girls seemed incredibly devoted to the liturgy—sitting silently with their hands folded and eyes shut. But in reality the girls' minds were elsewhere: Lily worked on memorizing facts of various saints while Jane tested herself by multiplying two four-digit numbers.

As a child, Lily's favorite Mass—besides midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—was the traditional Easter vigil that began in complete darkness. Parishioners lined up outside the chapel to receive a white candle at the entrance, where a fire had been lit and blessed. Even when the girls were little, they were allowed to light their long white candles in the fire and then proceed into the chapel in total darkness. The Webb family liked being the first ones to enter through the massive copper doors; that way the girls could watch the chapel grow lighter, candle by candle. As the space gradually filled with light, Mrs. Webb would look down at her daughters to marvel at the wonderment displayed on their faces. The night's vigil was the holiest of all.

In the dining hall after one Easter vigil, Brother Mark, a young monk who had befriended the Webbs when they moved to the Priory, told Lily one of her favorite stories about saints. From the start, Lily was captivated. Jane, on the other hand, was a bit more skeptical.

"A long, long time ago," Brother Mark said, "there was a shepherd boy."

"How long ago?" Jane said, interrupting.

"It was 1445."

Without missing a beat, Jane said, “So five hundred and twenty-four years ago.”

Pausing to do the math, Brother Mark said, “That’s right. So, in 1445, there was a shepherd boy watching his sheep, and he heard a child crying in the fields. He found a toddler all alone. As he bent down, the small child vanished. A few days later, it happened again. This time, the child was silent but accompanied by two floating lights. The following summer, the shepherd saw the child again. This time a red cross appeared on the child’s tunic and the child was surrounded by other children. These little ones became known as the fourteen holy helpers.”

“Holy helpers,” Lily said. “I like that. So they were little saints.”

“Most definitely,” Brother Mark said.

“What happened next?” Jane asked.

“Well, the shepherd and others in the village took it as a sign of healing and built a basilica,” the monk explained.

Before Lily could ask for more details, they were interrupted by a faculty member. When the conversation with the teacher and Brother Mark went on longer than Lily would have liked, she got up and walked over to the dessert table. There, she unfolded a napkin, placed four chocolate chip cookies in its center, and carefully folded in the corners. When she returned to the table, Brother Mark was sitting alone. Lily placed the carefully wrapped cookies in front of him and winked. The monk smiled back impishly.

The sisters’ exposure to cutting-edge science at a young age was due in part to the monks. On a cold night in December, when the girls were still in grade school, Mrs. Webb bundled up her daughters in winter coats, mittens, and wool hats that tied under their chins. Once outside, the trio linked arms and walked across campus to the monastery gardens, which were walled off from the rest of the grounds. Father Thomas had set up a telescope on the monastery lawn and

positioned it toward the western sky over Narragansett Bay. Typically, females were not allowed in the monastery, nor in the gardens, but on this night, the monk made a special concession. Father Thomas, who had been a student at the Priory in the 1930s, had returned after working with Oppenheimer and other scientists as part of a research team at Los Alamos.

He joined the Benedictines after the atomic bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For all the years that Lily and Jane would know him, they never saw him in any other clothing than his black robes. He wore his hair in a crew cut, and his eyeglasses were browline frames, left over from the fifties.

The telescope was a powerful device. It gathered up the night.

“Wait,” Lily said, looking through the eyepiece. “Stars die?”

Father Thomas nodded.

Lily stepped back from the telescope. “Well, that’s the saddest thing ever.”

“Stars don’t really die,” Jane said, putting her mittened hand on Lily’s shoulder. “Stars are eternal.”

“I read somewhere that the sky is haunted by the past lives of stars. What we see in the night sky existed millions of years ago,” Mrs. Webb explained.

“What do you think makes the stars move?” Father Thomas asked the girls.

“God,” Lily said.

“We can do better than that,” he responded.

He did his best to explain what little was known about dark matter. He told the girls and their mother that a “lady scientist” had published a paper in an important journal regarding invisible matter, dark matter—an idea that astronomers had been reconsidering after its conception decades earlier.

“Do you mean black holes?” asked Mrs. Webb.

“No. Dark matter,” said the monk.

Ten-year-old Jane asked, “How do we measure dark matter?”

“Measure?” Father Thomas asked.

“Yeah, measure. If we know its size, we might know what it does to the stars and planets,” she said, wiping her runny nose with her mitten.

“Well, we can’t measure it. We can’t see it. Dark matter doesn’t have light.”

“That’s what you think,” Jane said. Then she giggled and added, “Maybe it’s a different kind of light. Dark light.”

The others might have thought that Jane was being poetic or just imaginative, but Father Thomas adjusted his glasses and looked down at the little girl, wondering if she understood the implications of what she was saying. It would be decades before astrophysicists understood dark matter as dark light and its dominance in cosmology.

Then, with no encouragement from her mom, Jane decided it was time to go. She turned and walked toward the garden gate. The small disk of light from her flashlight bounced on the ground for a few steps and then went black.

Out of the darkness, the others heard her voice: “Onward into the night.”

During the winter months, when the ground was covered with snow, Mrs. Webb often saved stale bread and scraps of vegetables—dried-up carrots and wilted lettuce—to feed to the birds and deer. Mr. Webb discouraged this, telling his wife and daughters that feeding wildlife disrupted their natural behaviors. Mrs. Webb would nod earnestly as if she agreed with her husband, but then on the winter nights when he had dorm duty, she and her daughters would pile old bread and vegetables onto a tray. The girls would take turns carrying the tray as

they walked through the fields near the train tracks, leaving bits of lettuce and carrots and pieces of bread in their wake. Some moonless nights when it was particularly dark they would hear coyotes howling in the distance. And while Mrs. Webb knew the chances of being attacked by a pack were extremely low, she would urge the girls to run as fast as they could back to the house. The excitement thrilled them.

...

ONE SPRING DAY, LILY stood in her backyard alone, thinking about Francis of Assisi, a gentle saint who used to give sermons to the birds. She looked up into the trees hoping to spot one. Jane was inside spying on her through the kitchen window.

When Mrs. Webb walked into the kitchen, Jane said, “What do you think she’s doing?”

Their mother paused, looked out the window as Lily appeared to be gesturing and speaking to the bushes, and said, “Maybe she’s preaching to the animals.”

“Or maybe she’s gone crazy,” Jane said.

The two watched in silence through the window as Lily assumed a posture she had no doubt observed during Mass—her hands outstretched with her palms up. And then they watched as Lily squatted on the ground and cocked her head to peer under a bush.

“Many mystics talked to animals,” Mrs. Webb explained.

“Were they crazy, too?” Jane asked.

Mrs. Webb turned to look at her younger daughter and said, “And many female mystics were radicals for their time. Don’t speak so disparagingly about something you don’t understand.” Upon saying this, Mrs. Webb placed her hand on Jane’s shoulder.

“Let me put it this way,” she added, softening her tone. “Despite

what the fathers of the church want us to believe, there's something powerful about a preaching woman."

"I like that people talk to animals," Jane said. "It's when people say the animals talk back . . . well, that's another story." Jane pointed her index finger toward her temple, making circular motions. Her mother chuckled and placed her arm around her daughter's back, squeezing her shoulder affectionately.

When Lily was twelve, she was fascinated by Catherine of Siena, the fourteenth-century mystic who ran away at the age of seven and stayed in a cave. So Lily thought she would have her own mystical experience, but first she would go back into the house to put on clean underwear. If there was a chance she was going to meet God, she wanted to be ready.

The only cave on the island that Lily knew about was an old coal mining cave, but it was cold out, and the cave was too far away and would require a long walk, and she was already kind of hungry, so instead she decided she would go into the woods surrounding the monastery near her house.

Again, Jane was spying on her sister from the window and watched Lily head toward the house. She heard the front door open and slam. She heard Lily run up the stairs and then back down and out the door. When Lily got to the edge of the woods, Jane went outside and quietly followed her. Jane managed to stay a good distance behind and avoided snapping twigs, then watched as Lily came to a clearing, a meadow.

From a distance and hidden behind trees, Jane watched Lily walk around the circumference of the meadow before sitting down on a fallen tree log, where she crossed herself and began to pray. Lily did this for two days in a row, and each time, Jane spied on her. It didn't

take long for Jane to figure out what her older sister was doing. On the third day, while Lily was doing homework in the house, Jane ran out to the meadow and placed a blue feather she had found on the log where Lily would be sure not to miss it. Later that day, Lily found the feather and convinced herself she was well on her way to sainthood. Jane never told a soul.

THE OLDEST BITCH ALIVE

MORGAN DAY

A NOVEL



“A work of quiet and yet spirited exhilaration.”
—EDWARD P. JONES, Pulitzer Prize-winning
author of *The Known World*

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The Orb

On the day Gelsomina contracts worms, she is no different from who she has always been—an animal walking on all fours. The old French Bulldog rifles through leather flowers and fruit bushes. She rolls in dry soil then sniffs the belly of a fallen starling. Her thirst steers her to the murky backyard lake. She laps water with blue-green foam, gulping pollen and minibeasts. It is rich in flavor, an oily muck she likes. Along with sludge, an opaque egg drifts into her system carrying five parasitic worms, beginning their migration from the mouth to the intestines. Gelsomina wanders up a gentle slope to the glass house. Wendy opens the door as she arrives, reaching down with a towel to rub her wet paws. Clean and dry, Gelsomina enters the living space, leaps onto a heather tweed chaise, and falls to sleep within the dunes of a fur throw.

The parasitic worms are lumped together in a pale orb that shed from the swollen band of another worm's mouth. A temperate and moist interior supports their motility. Before Gelsomina consumed them, they felt the vibrations of footsteps on the other side of the orb, the brush of mist off the water. The orb bobbed with the wind, and their bisexual forms tangled, emitting loud pops. Each held private hopes for life beyond the gelatinous habitat: *the world must be bright and open; it will present warm, liquid opportunities*. Like oyster flour, they imagined their next domain to be velvety and acidic, and that they would become shiny and hard.

It was sudden when the orb turned to midnight. The worms assumed they were no longer facing the sun. The structure of time did not affect their sleep, so they waited for the hazy ball to emerge again and stimulate tremors of life. In extended darkness, the worms sent signals to one another about relocation. They huddled together for warmth.

Amid the worms' panic, a figure appears understandable through the shape of its three parts. It is a maze that each being confronts shortly before death. (i) hovers above the worms as a remarkably distinct image, discernible despite their lack of eyes. Light receptors trace its outline against the black. Following the appearance of (i), the worms hatch. Three are dead upon arrival. The remaining two recoil at the shriveled dead worms and entwine like a ball of thread.

The French Bulldog is brindle and compact, with a square head and wrinkles folding around a brachycephalic nose. She is on the smaller side of the breed, dwarfed in length but not weight. Gray fur spreads from her flat snout, and tawny streaks have gone blonde. White darts up the chest, while the insides of her erect ears are starkly visible and a gummy pink. She strains to see through a cataract fog. Of the other things to know about Gelsomina: she loves seclusion, her flower is jasmine, and *a gift from God* is her name.

Gelsomina's gut bloats with the worms' intimacy. She struggles to move between the chaise lounge, the side yard where she relieves herself, and two stainless-steel bowls for food and water. Thirst, more than hunger, directs her movements. Not even a hunk of liverwurst is appealing, but she drinks whenever her bowl is

filled. The worms stir nausea in Gelsomina and bloody her stools. She is battered by relentless fatigue.

With an innate sense of each worm, Gelsomina deciphers their gestures and feelings. She learns the personalities driving them to engage with her in ways that violate her beliefs of right and wrong. These include the desire to take what is not their own, their comfort with this dynamic, and their saying things about her which she cannot know herself. The longer she shares her form, the more Gelsomina realizes that she has lost an essential organization, one built across years and structured by privacy. The invasion is profound.

The worms make a simple home of Gelsomina. For twenty-four hours, they are in love. Prone to monogamy, their tethered forms convey a term of union: *my pair*. Unlike the young diplora—parasitic worms which live in the gills of fish and permanently fuse during adolescence—Gelsomina’s worms are soon tempted by the vastness of her. They unwind in pursuit of a greater place, traversing her internal organs like bucking goats.

But the placidity of the orb did not prepare them for a container of these proportions swinging them in uncharted currents. The journey is not as pleasing as when they awaited rupture into a realm that looked buttered and purred. Life will never be what it once was, when they felt like the only beings to exist. The worms discreetly blame each other.

Gelsomina is partly at fault for the failure of their love. Her body is a disappointment to one of the worms, because it is inhibitive, shaped by a weak immune system and lacking energy. The French Bulldog is not the right setting for the worms who prefer the tissue of cats. The worm’s complaints are administered

for days, concerning its pair who, after settling in Gelsomina's gastrointestinal tract, is prepared to stay put. There is food to eat and there are places to burrow. Soon, this contented worm thinks, they will proliferate like mad. If only the mucus at their centers could coagulate, if their ends could touch.

Its unhappy pair expected a different life on the other side of the orb: a soft earth plane, scintillating puddles of water. Light would arrive and depart in long arcs, a perpetual summer solstice. The disappointed worm refuses to agree with its pair about the pervasive nature of their situation, that darkness is everywhere. Thoughts of alternative sensations arrive in blurry shades of amber. For a moment, an exit. Briefly, an eclipse. Failing to reconcile, the worms disentangle, wrenching apart when their bare sides brush.

There are many orbs and not one is the same. This reality has long affected the meaning and origin of the word *orb*. It is celestial, a plump heavenly body. It refers to a sphere, a monarchy, or a thing in orbit. It is used to describe a body of soldiers positioned in the shape of a circle. An *orbita* is the socket in the skull that holds an eye. Its Latin etymology traces to *orbis*, encompassing many circular objects. The Greek word for *orbit* is linked to trajectory, or course. This last vestige offers meaning to the worms' situation. They have strayed off course, tumbling into a mock symbiosis, straining to make sense of cohabitation.

Orbs of light appear in photographs and are occasionally seen by the naked eye. These orbs are manifestations of energy, a type not yet understood by people. A true orb must be solid without spokes, emitting light equally in all directions. A blue orb is commonly known as an angel, spirit, or guide. It is a form of communication from a divine figure assuring a being that they are

not alone. Some people claim to have seen figures within orbs and therefore believe they are portals. It is common for a being to feel that they have been born into the wrong orb. Others, like Gelsomina, function as a makeshift orb themselves, offering life to those within them.

The acronym ORBS refers to Object Recognition Breakdown Syndrome, or the feeling when one faces an object, experience, or event that is entirely unknown and which no existing ideas can be projected upon. ORBS articulates what, for Gelsomina, had once been unfathomable. With little to do, she focuses on the presence of the worms. She questions whether the name she has for them, their shapes and actions, are her own invention. Alone with her infection, she counts the flicks of the twain creatures like a pulse.

Gelsomina expects the worms to pass through her as other illnesses have come and gone, but this species of parasite persists in the warm-blooded for decades. They occupy cysts in the brain, lungs, and muscle tissue, and are easily transferable. People who live with cats or dogs carrying the parasite regularly receive it themselves, becoming impulsive, aggressive, and violent. They are prone to dangerous activities and suicide; are more likely to die in car accidents due to road rage; take purposeless risks; develop schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or an anxiety disorder; engage in submissive sexual activity; and become entrepreneurs. A healthy immune system typically protects an infected person from illness. If the person becomes immunocompromised, symptoms can flare up affecting their behavior as well as causing blurred vision, confusion, and a loss of motor skills.

The worms' effects are visible in Gelsomina's slouch and the exaggeration of her head tilt to the right. She does not walk in circles, but her path from one destination to the next is made in consecutive half-loops. Colors are brighter and sounds are louder. The worms are accepted with a hushed, motionless stance and a contemplation of heat. Gelsomina's trunk weighs heavily with their anger. She listens to them describe the worst parts of her, all the problems she did not know she had, such as the quality of the food and shelter she offers and the limitations of her vitals.

This is the first time that she has experienced an unruly thing. In moments of frustration, she wishes she could birth them. It is rare that the worms sing. Most often they fight, and it is always the same argument over again, hashed out in the fetal position. They mention leaving, perseverance, and a better attitude. *There is nowhere to go*, they both argue, each in their own defense.

Gelsomina is not sure when or where the worms will go, nor in what way. It is still a mystery as to how they appeared, but she is certain they are from the outside. The day was glanced over due to its regularity. The date and time of her infection, and the duration of the worms' inhabitance, are irrelevant. Chronological thinking does not structure Gelsomina's life. It is the site of the infection that asserts meaning. Symptoms arrive sporadically, causing confusion, though she has been disoriented lately for reasons lost on her.

If the worms entered her like food, then they must exit through the same system. She anticipates a difficult bowel movement to relieve herself of them. When she is not constipated, Gelsomina examines her feces in search of the two worms until the man or the woman tell her to stop. To her knowledge, there has

been nothing yet that resembles the worms. She envisions them as long and paper thin.

She also questions whether she wants the worms to be alive when they come out. It might be disturbing to discard the dead. She has little experience with the completion of a being besides her encounters with the overturned insects littering the interior borders of the house. The process, as in a being's passage from moving to unmoving, is obscure to Gelsomina. She has never seen it happen, and therefore it must occur on the exterior of the house before making its way in. Considerations of death aside, most of all, she wants her suffering to cease.

Gelsomina closes her eyes, and the worms momentarily interlace. Even tied in a knot they are resentful of one another. She flips on her back to see if gravity pulls them in a direction they prefer. Nothing appeases them. The worms make her sick with their hysteria, how they bicker and thrash. To end their arguments, the longer worm says something sharp, and the shorter worm resorts to a pointed silence.

The universe evolved as a round shape like the orb, composed among other bubble universes in a bed of foam. Of the 10^{500} types of bubble universes, each is governed by its own laws. *Froth* marks the trivial, like the beginning of life when everything could have so easily popped. Instead, light filters through. Foam regenerates across scales. It seethes in mouths and where oceans meet land, is natural and synthetic, vanishes instantaneously and biodegrades across hundreds of years. Upon completion, the fleeting explosions hiss and fizz.

Both the largest and smallest entities are constructions of foam. In a vacuum of empty space is an effervescent sea of

subatomic particles popping in and out, a potent fluctuation of space and time. Within the aggregate are wormholes, unstable shortcuts from one point to another, described as two mouths connected by a throat. The discontent worm lodged inside Gelsomina is an unknowing disciple of the notion that the smallest entities glean existence from the largest, rather than the other way around, as it once again seeks the whole.

The screeching and lightweight material, too, is a world-building substance utilized in architectural models, and worked into structures as insulation, décor, trim, and soundproofing. Mealworms and superworms digest polystyrene foam, reducing waste, although the creatures do not enjoy eating the substance. Many worms despise synthetic foaming agents and will flee from treated soil to a decontaminated site.

The shorter, melancholy worm returns to (i) as a way out of Gelsomina. It tries to explain the figure to its pair but has no ability for comparison. Sensations are not easily translated into shapes. Its pair is reluctant to admit that it, too, observed (i) looming over the five of them in shifting intensities of brightness, as though proximity allowed them to have dreamt the same dream. The shorter worm is adamant that the figure has more meaning than a shared hallucination and believes that (i) controls the passage of beings to different universes. This worm seeks to arrive at its own solutions, instead of with its pair, and lead a life in submission to (i).

Autonomy is not a physical endeavor as the shorter worm initially understood and requires unlearning. The worm started as five, then two. Now, it wants to be one. It perceives its capabilities to reproduce on its own. The worm is not wrong. There are methods

for one to become two. Stuck with an unfavorable mate, the worm can start *selfing*—reproducing by fertilizing its own eggs. But tipping the balance could spawn inbreeding depression. The few offspring that hatch will struggle to survive.

It has long been debated whether a worm cut in half makes two worms. Some believe that if the cut is good and clean, each half of the worm will regenerate to become full. On the odd occasion, the half worm makes another tail, rather than the head that is needed, resulting in a quick and off-kilter existence. More resilient worms can be cut in thirds, with each piece growing a new brain, mouth, and set of hearts. The three of them will eat and swim within one week. They will all retain the memories and personality of the original worm. In these ways, a worm does not really need another worm—its pair.

The Glass House

i. House of Worship

Gelsomina lives with a retired couple in a glass house on a lake. John was once a practicing architect, and Wendy was an interior designer. They share a taste for furniture and space, a minimalism caused by a desire for control in the chaos of an urban environment. They moved from New York City to the glass house fifteen years ago, blaming a flooding transportation system, limited access to nature, noise, and light pollution. Their house is located on the outskirts of a small town in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains with a population of less than two thousand people. It sits like a trinket on a peninsula surrounded by pine trees. This is the only place in the country where land is deeded to God.

Neither John nor Wendy is religious, though they were raised in Catholic households. They discuss the architecture of megachurches, whether a house of worship can operate out of a warehouse, and how parishioners are treated as consumers. They like the locals' hand-drawn billboards, which are small and intimate with the road, and ask simple questions like: *Have you walked with God today? Have you received Him?* Their conversation turns to what they receive. Perhaps the sensorial, the stimulating luxuries of the everyday, such as a cup of coffee or sitting in sunlight.

They are enlightened while engaging with specific works of art. For Wendy, these are Roni Horn's solid-cast glass sculptures.

From afar the pieces look like pastel water wells revealing the inconsistencies of light and shadow in an impure world. They are soft and delicate though each weighs 5 tons. Wendy finds religion in the possibility for a person to meet an artist through the essence of the objects they make.

For John, spirituality surfaces while engaging with 15 untitled pieces by Donald Judd in Marfa, Texas. The series of concrete boxes are splayed out on desert land, each 2.5 x 2.5 x 5 meters in size, and 25 centimeters thick. While standing in the shade of the structures, he considered the artist's point that two of the three main aspects of visual art—material, space, and color—remain invisible to observers. Judd's belief that space and color are overlooked confirms for John that there is much left for him to discover. The couple's analysis ends with the point that the pastor is essentially a performance artist, that both churches and museums take money, and that they are consumers of art.

People travel from around the country to visit the lake but rarely make it into town. On Main Street, the desecrated brick face of an abandoned hotel draws a few tourists who stand in its center taking pictures of plants climbing through blasted-out windows. Visitors are more likely go to the nearby Healing Springs, a modest collection of dirty water which rises two inches and pools around a spigot. They collect the water in milk jugs, lugging it home for themselves and their diseased relatives. When the Springs are empty, an employee from the Regional Conservation District tests the water for radiological contamination, ensuring that the Springs remain *relevant, excellent, and visible*. Two regulars at the Springs collect the water for their coffee because it won't leave lime in the pot.

The history of the lake was told to Wendy and John by the realtor when they purchased the glass house. In the center of hundreds of thousands of acres of land bought by a power company, they built a manmade lake to cool the reactors at a nuclear station and generate hydroelectric power. To do so, they dammed four rivers. It took two years to fill and created 18,000 acres of shoreline. Now, warm water is funneled from the nuclear power plant at high speed back into the lake. Deep beneath the surface is a lost city where buildings remain intact though many are flipped on their sides. This gives the lake a haunted feeling for Wendy and John. While floating together off their dock, they imagine New York City beneath them. Manhattan Island fits neatly into the shape of the cove. They point out the rough location of their last apartment, near a sandbar dominated by a flock of geese.

Forested land is delineated by a stone gate. The neighborhood is a curved stretch of one hundred homes running a length of shoreline. For most, these are second homes. On the weekends, owners and guests take out speedboats towing young people on boards and children desperately gripping inflatable tubes. They meet each other for dinner at a clubhouse overlooking the final hole of a golf course. During early hours, fishers cut the glassy surface in boats so low the men look like they are submerged.

ii. House of Cards

The house was constructed of three primary materials: a glass facade, polished concrete flooring, and wood-paneled ceilings. It was designed by William Brown, an architect who owns a practice of the same name responsible for the appearance of many homes along the lake. His office is sandwiched between a hairdresser and a women's clothing store, with four desks for himself, his receptionist, and two designers who are not yet licensed to practice. William boasts his commitment to style—all those available to him—which he argues is *sans ego* by taking existing aesthetic choices and working with his clients to make them their own. His design approach is not site-specific, but people-, taste-, and belief-specific.

With this project, William borrowed elements from The Glass House by Philip Johnson, built in 1949 in New Canaan, Connecticut, which was inspired by Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, built between 1945 and 1951 in Plano, Illinois. The 1,500-square-foot historic Farnsworth House is a glass rectangle with all the living on display. It was designed as a weekend retreat and remembered as one of the most important works of the Modernist movement. The Glass House by Johnson is similar, encompassing 1,815 square feet, with one centrally located glass door leading outside. Both were realized as spaces for viewing the surrounding landscape. Neither has interior walls, though there are rooms. Philip Johnson said The Glass House is the only place where, while seated in a swivel chair, you can watch the sun set and the moon rise at the same time.

William Brown swiveled in his desk chair as he researched both designs. He envisioned the experience of two celestial bodies

rising synchronously on either side of him. In this position, one must feel at the center of everything. He liked that Johnson's layout could easily be that of a colonial home. William's plans for the house arose smoothly until he came across an interview of Johnson. A quote from the architect tore apart his fantasy of creating a replica of the two glass house originals, only much larger, and therefore, in his opinion, more impressive: "The Glass House artistically, of course, is a descendant of Mies van der Rohe. He said you could do a glass house one day in the '40s and I said you couldn't because a glass house means that if you have a wall that sticks into the glass and then you've destroyed the glass-ness of the glass house. Therefore, you couldn't have any walls."

The challenge that William Brown faced in designing a descendent of the glass houses was that his client, the original owners, wanted a 4,000-square-foot home wrapped in glass with many different rooms for their family of four to traverse. Their request required interior barriers and doors, leading the design astray from the open floor plans of its architectural lineage. The result was two stacked Johnson glass houses with a few traditional white walls gingerly snaking across both floors. The house functions as a bridge, straddling a slight dip at the center of the site with a protected pond. At the suspended midpoint of the house, Brown inserted glass flooring, an observation deck in miniature.

The original owners sought a home that was modern, innovative, sustainable, and future thinking. They received a structure that achieved these loose attributes, though not necessarily what one would call a home. It was more so a blank canvas, or the set of a play, where actors might soliloquize by a window. According to onlookers, it was made for a science fiction movie, within which a man would invent a technology to end the world.

From their couch, the family waved to their neighbors driving by, signaling that they had been invited in for a drink. One woman commented, in awe, that the house was like a giant crystal as she raised her diamond ring to its façade.

Regardless of the incidents that have taken place within a glass house, it cannot absorb feeling. Emotions are scattershot, ricocheting off walls, ceilings, and impenetrable flooring. Contrary to the glass house, the traditional family home absorbs emotion into its pillows, blankets, carpets, curtains, and many places to rest, eventually reaching a tipping point when too much history has been stuffed in its fabric. Years of loving, sighing, yelling, and hiding burst from the material. Fluffing the pillows might unleash a violent argument from decades past. In this way, a glass house offers an infinite fresh slate.

When Wendy and John moved in, they were surprised by the austerity. The house was like a deck of cards. Vacant, the details holding the structure together shown at its edges. The first object they put in the house was a long-cherished glass vase intended to hold their memories of the city while functioning as an ode to the larger structure. But the vase only amplified the nakedness of their new living situation. Its transparency could never embody their past.

Wendy went along the property line snipping long grasses and cattails, which she arranged in the vase, temporarily positioned on the kitchen island beside a steel espresso machine and a bag of coffee beans from their favorite cafe. John unloaded the few critical items they brought with them by car before the movers arrived with the bulk of their things. On the floor were tote bags of cleaning supplies, toilet paper, bath towels, blankets, bed linens and pillows.

John took photos of the lake shyly lapping at red dirt. Without knowing what to do with herself, and in avoidance of the

conversation neither of them wished to have about the starkness of the glass house, Wendy cleaned smudges from the windows. She grew tired as she worked from sheath to sheath. Levitating on the glass floor above the pond, she saw her bare footprints replicated on its surface. Looking closely, she also saw John's footprints, as well as those of another person. Her attention to the structure, its upkeep, would have no end.

There are a few additional factors which separate a glass house from one wrapped in wood, brick, adobe, or stucco. A being in a glass house must at some point disappear. Otherwise, they look like they are in the center of a field. They are exposed above a body of water and can be viewed from across its shores by people who understand the house as a pretentious domus. At a distance, the furniture recedes as shadows. The unmoving figures disrupt the flow of beings who take turns sitting on their laps. At night, the beings are on a backlit stage: retrieving and transporting objects, touching the form of another. They can see no one, but everything can see them.

A glass house is a chemical outcome of sand, soda ash, and limestone. Its foundation bears the weight of emptiness. Exposure demands its use which instructs the actions of those living inside. A glass house is a discussion of fear; it is a lifestyle of uncertainty. Abandoned, the windows quiver. Sound gets trapped in right angles. Though fragile and lucid, if a glass house is demolished, its pieces will decompose across the earth for the next one million years.

It is said that those living in a glass house should not throw stones. *Judge not that you not be judged.* To decide to live in a glass house is to admit no fault. It is a statement of morality. For the immoral, to disappear is difficult and relies on scrim curtains. It is

best to have a windowless room to conduct faults. Or, like Johnson's circular brick restroom, to relieve oneself.

William Brown designed a pavilion on the second floor that functions like an unearthed bunker illuminated in artificial light. It is a place to rest one's head on a desk, to tunnel vision, and let the guard down. Wendy and John use this room as storage space for architectural models of the single-family residences they designed throughout their careers. When either of them feels lost or uninspired by their routine in the country, they admire the miniatures of their life's work, wiping dust from Styrofoam with a damp rag, and rearranging tiny plastic people.

Over time, the glass house has remained the same. Wendy and John are not prone to rearranging their spaces, preferring to have a few enduring items organized in ways that feel central to the spirit of each piece. The couple's design plans are on a much grander scale, concerning the dominance of one material. Since the day of their arrival, when Wendy realized that her attention to the glass-ness of the structure was interminable, the couple has considered whether to add another material to the façade. The most sensible approach would clad parts of the exterior in stone veneer. They debate whether the design move would compromise the integrity of the structure or simply open a can of worms.

Even though Wendy and John are designers, when reduced to people living in a space, they get caught up in the fact that the façade is also the interior walls. They do not like that someone outside the house can see them both while they might not see each other. There must be an exterior and an interior marked by a protective barrier, one that does not allow a person to get lost in between.

iii. House Trained

Wendy and John do not have children. They always wanted a French Bulldog, a breed with personality and what they call *a miraculous display of expression*. Their life in New York City—going out for late dinners, attending shows, spending the day at a museum—did not allow for a dog. A rural setting necessitated a domesticated animal. When they placed their new puppy on the living room rug, her presence surprised them. They could not put their finger on why, but it had something to do with the sharp contours of the glass house and Gelsomina's stout, compact figure. It amused them to see her in the foreground of a fertile landscape and placid lake, like a painting that was meant to frame a lounging woman but instead featured a French Bulldog.

Gelsomina did not like the house in her younger years, much less the earth, water, machinery, and beings on the other side of the glass. The house clicked and groaned, turning off and on. Her days were populated by the theatrics of television, the announcement of microwaved food and fully heated ovens, the glow of laptops, and the strange faces and voices emitted across many different apps. She was encouraged to watch blurry minute-long clips accompanied by the sound of a barking dog.

She liked the flesh of the man and the woman, their scents, and high-pitched voices. Gelsomina moved in their shadows. When they were absent, the dark shapes they produced were lifted and she moved freely. It was an independence she did not ask for. Half a foot off the ground, she scratched wood doors and smeared her wet snout across the glass, wishing to burst through. She defecated across hard and soft textures, and dug into blankets, sofas, and chairs. The agony of their absence ripped a straight line up her

abdomen and into her throat. Gelsomina held the eruption of emotion in her mouth, which dissipated in neat quivers down her back.

As their car pulled into the long driveway, she rushed to the front door and shot upward on back legs. She licked their fingertips and bit their toes as they removed them from their shoes. She ran to the living room to grab a plush toy and returned to shake it violently at their feet. Her love for them was almost too much to bear. Most dishonorable were the trips they took as a couple, leaving her behind to persist through daily visits from a stranger, whom Gelsomina hid from as he filled food and water bowls. He sat on a bar stool, wiping sweaty palms over the countertop, and twisting to look out over the water. If he glanced in her direction, Gelsomina growled.

When the couple returned to her, she returned to herself. She felt kindred to the woman on some days, the man on others. Gelsomina curled like the woman into the large sectional couch and was attentive to headlights flashing across the windows. She studied loud noises, remaining stock-still. When she ate, it was controlled, and when the woman told her to *go potty*, she padded lightly across the stone path. With the man, Gelsomina followed his confident steps. She finished meals with pride, her nub of a tail straight out like a blunted arrow. She partook in the removal of dead leaves and followed at his heel to retrieve garbage cans from the curb. His frustration enthralled Gelsomina as she barked alongside him.

She could smell the passage of time, and therefore the patterns that gave shape to their days. Weak odors revealed old habits, while strong odors were of the present. She knew the sex of the man and the woman, their health, moods, and stresses. Together, the couple was happiest about food and drink. They were most

relaxed first thing in the morning and again in the evening. With both, she stood on their laps to look deeply into their eyes. It hurt her to detect even a flicker of sadness. Their concerns were her concerns, though she could not decipher the root of their problems. Gelsomina's response involved lying longways on their legs and repeatedly licking the top of a hand as an expression of empathy in the only way she knew how.

No matter how Gelsomina morphed herself, the man and the woman were bound to each other, and she was left out of a lopsided love between the three of them. They communicated softly, retreating behind closed doors. In these moments, there were a few behaviors she could name for certain. The nature of their footsteps, for one. Some atmospheres, too. There were six emotions detected and studied: anger, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, and disgust. All to say that prior to the worms, she had never considered her own.

iv. House Rules

Gelsomina envisions the couple's movements in their first-floor bedroom based on their sounds, and because Wendy once broke the rule of where she is allowed. It was many years ago when Gelsomina was a puppy. The man had left for a few days. An orange glow rested over the house, and Wendy carried Gelsomina for the first time through the threshold of the primary bedroom and into the bathroom, where she placed her on a white bathmat. Gelsomina watched as she turned a knob and water gushed into the tub. Wendy stripped her clothes and lowered with Gelsomina into the warm water.

Her first instinct was to get out. To prevent her from scratching slick edges, Wendy held Gelsomina tightly against her chest, until she grew comfortable with the water encompassing their bodies. With Gelsomina tentatively perched on her belly, Wendy poured a line of liquid soap down her back. She scrubbed her in circles with the floral scent and ladled water over her. Rinsed and fragrant, Gelsomina was placed back on the bathmat and rubbed with a plush towel. Wendy clasped her collar, to which she had tied a pink bow. It was the beginning of Gelsomina's lifelong fascination with their bathroom.

From then on, whenever the couple accidentally left their bedroom door open, Gelsomina slunk in and relieved herself on the white bathmat. There was no way to explain herself, no meaning or motive behind the act. It had become so routine that most of the time she realized only after the fact that she had defecated. Their bath together seemed to have relevance that returns to Wendy in recent months. Gelsomina does not understand the gesture, but lately Wendy ties a rainbow of different bows to her collar. Rather

than bathe her, she takes lavender-scented wipes and runs them twice daily down Gelsomina's back, up her stomach, and across the pads of her paws. She cleans between her wrinkles and applies petroleum jelly to her dry snout.

v. House of Nothing

The neutral palette of the glass house creates a cold and direct experience that Gelsomina has grown to identify with over time. In her old age, she is reserved, at times stoic, and keeps to herself. Tenderness is delivered subtly, requiring the recipient to be attune to her mannerisms, like a being who can hear sounds at lower frequencies than most. Gelsomina does not mind the minimal furniture but in her infected state wishes that there were more places to hide, particularly when sunlight pierces through the glass.

Most of her days are spent on a small bed positioned in front of the fireplace. Regardless of the season, the fireplace is lit. It floats on the first floor in between the dining room and living room as a balance beam. The orientation loosely mimics Philip Johnson's approach: "The living room is a raft that floats in its proper position vis-à-vis the fireplace. The rug is the living room. The living room also sits on its lawn in the same way that the rug sits on the Glass House."

Sometimes an animal stops in the yard to take a long look at Gelsomina. She returns their stares, no longer possessing the energy to chase them from the property. She is used to conducting sterile interactions across a transparent barrier. This has changed with the arrival of the worms. Gelsomina wants to remove herself from view, an evolution of a response to shame that she has had since she was young. After chewing on a leg of furniture, or attempting to run upstairs, and facing the disappointment of the couple, she lodged herself beneath a wooden television console, about five feet long and two and a half feet tall. Now, she seeks to conceal the changes that might reveal her contagion.

Gelsomina shuffles under the wooden console and rests along the cool length of the wall. Sound is muffled and vibrates: the murmur of the television, the hiss of the espresso machine, the varied thuds of the couple's bare footsteps. Under there, she can think clearly about the glass house for what it is: a behemoth which will never be impartial, a thing that will always be *consisting of*. For example, *consisting of* her in its reflections, *consisting of* her bodily fluids across the floor. She wonders about her role as a parasite in the chambers of the home, and if she is like a worm. The thought is comforting, aligning Gelsomina with the sleek glass house as they confront the other lives within them.

Gelsomina rolls over, and she is momentarily interrupted by a string of cobwebs attached to the tip of her nose. Her mind drifts to the idea that she is simultaneously shrinking and expanding—the limbs, the gut. She compares herself to what she can. She fits beneath the console as about one fifteenth of its size. She can fit in a drawer, but she cannot fit in the palm of a hand. The worms, who are recklessly moving across her lower half, can fit in the palm of a hand, also the pit of a stomach, the ring of a mouth and an anus.

They have not reached one month of age, yet the worms surpass her in having a more complete picture of the interconnection of all beings. Gelsomina criticizes her confinement, and the distractions inside the house, for her lack of knowledge. For instance, in the corner of the living area is an obtuse woven basket that gets emptied of dog toys throughout the day then filled up again by Wendy and John before they go to sleep. The toys are predominantly solid in color, shapes rather than characters, besides the few animated outliers gifted by friends and family.

There is one toy which does not fit beneath the wooden console, a cream plush ball that is almost too large for Gelsomina to carry. The object is one of her preoccupations. She carries it everywhere, even though it blocks her vision, and she regularly tumbles over the front of it. The plush ball receives all her emotions, expressed through the placement of her teeth, how she kneads it and folds it beneath her. Unlike her other toys, Gelsomina has not yet ripped open the plush ball to remove the squeaker from its center. The once soft material of the toy is now crusted and damp from her suckling it. The repetitive act, *nooking*, releases endorphins, soothing her anxiety.

Before consuming the worms, her primary concern was that she is a burden. Gelsomina occupies a similar role as the glass house in her old age—a thing that requires maintenance. Or perhaps she is closer to a piece of weathered furniture, one that is not used but passed down for sentimental reasons. She knows that her body is a hindrance. Arthritis has caused her hips to gradually curl farther beneath her, so that she struggles to jump onto the couch and chaise lounge. Her vision is clouded by circles of light. Sleep waffles in and out, leaving Gelsomina to spend midnight hours licking open a scab between the pads of her front-left foot. The habit worsens with her allergies in the early spring and fall and is aggravated by stepping in real grass. The side yard, where she relieves herself, is too far for her now. By the time her bladder feels full, or there is pressure in her rectum, Gelsomina cannot practice restraint.

At first, she thought it would be easier for the couple if she relieved herself in the same spot, where they rarely stand, on the concrete floor beneath a painting that they do not stop to admire. The piece has a yellow-green background splattered with black that pools in the center, like balsamic vinegar in olive oil. Once she

made regular use of the space beneath the painting, the couple discouraged her from going there, picking her up as she teetered over. Gelsomina also gags up small puddles of bile, likely from the volume of grass she consumes to quell her nausea.

Wendy is no longer fazed by Gelsomina's relief spread across the house. She covers the couch in blankets and has rolled up their more expensive rugs. She maintains a process for cleaning the dirtied blankets and applying new ones from an adjacent linen closet, which begins with her closing Gelsomina in the laundry room and putting on gloves. She carries the soiled blankets to the washer, tosses the gloves, washes her hands, then applies new blankets, tucking the edges between the cushions of the couch. Gelsomina is released and returns to the living area, where she relishes the freshly washed linens and falls asleep.

Recently, the couple has prevented Gelsomina from stepping on the vents—steel grates cut into concrete floors—which blow hot and cold air and, according to Gelsomina, lead to nothing. It is a recent concern of theirs that is more so spurred by Gelsomina's new fascination, rather than anything she has done. They track her path around the vents on the first floor, nudging her away, but Gelsomina does not have plans to pollute the vents. Gazing through the slits, she is drawn by the endlessness of nothing.

vi. House Hog

Other than the difficulty in moving with her potbelly, Gelsomina is most troubled by the ammoniac smell of the worms within her. She maneuvers her putrid form away from the couple as well as another, significantly younger French Bulldog they brought home last year—Zampanò. It was strange for the couple to have an exuberant puppy after so many years of leisure with Gelsomina. They had forgotten the maintenance required. Zampanò was taken out every two hours. They rapped their fists on his crate—a space he rapidly outgrew—when he cried in the night.

Taller and more robust, Zampanò falls, rolls over, and sits on Gelsomina as if to suffocate her, though he does not mean to. Zampanò's face is wide and heavily wrinkled. Food dries and hardens on the tip of his flat nose. His jowls are pink and filthy against his black brindle fur. In everything he does, Zampanò huffs as though he is out of breath, even while sleeping. Zampanò appears unhealthy and slow, but he is quick to react to strange noises. When he is not agitated, he can be found searching for scraps of food or seated eagerly beneath the man or the woman as they eat. Unsatiated, Zampanò whimpers.

He is also greedy with affection and inserts himself between the couple and Gelsomina. At first, Gelsomina was disturbed by his aggression. Then, she was frustrated that she was unable to sink into the warm spots of the man and the woman, resting in their tightest corners. Zampanò bothers her less these days. Despite his flaws, they are companions. Gelsomina does not mind the friendship after so many years alone. He offers her a form of unanimity. Their being has an exact likeness; a reflected physicality that separates Gelsomina from the couple.

The two French Bulldogs, though stunted, are not innocent. They are not small children without the ability to speak. Rather, they have been forced into an obscure maturation by four walls and their infantilization. They are most of all a product of routine and mundanity. There are no migrations nor hibernations. They have never practiced methods of giving. Sex is opaque. Rain is a hindrance to bowel movements. Food is regular and monochromatic. The two have never prayed nor killed. They roam the backyard at a short distance from each other. Zampanò rushes ahead of Gelsomina, stopping and returning to her before hurrying onward again as if encouraging her to keep up. When he is tired in the evenings, Gelsomina licks the grime from the wrinkles of his face.

Lately, he smells illness on her, but having never experienced it himself, Zampanò does not grasp her debilitation. Gelsomina removes herself from their daily outings, instead conserving her energy to rid herself of the worms. More than once, Zampanò sniffs her back and underside in confusion, and Gelsomina nips at him. He is too juvenile to understand the situation she has found herself in.

vii. House of Mirrors

At the back of the house lies a gradient from stone to artificial turf to a copper shoreline of shallow water, cleared by daylight and extending outward into the dark blue depths of the lake. Long before Gelsomina's encounter with the worms, the land outside the glass house was unpredictable and treacherous. It was where Gelsomina first registered that there is much she will never wholly comprehend, including an obscure source of energy, the Invisible Force.

The Invisible Force mirrors an array of other natural phenomena. It is like an earth shock, which is an earthquake in a localized area following a traumatic incident such as a heavy explosion. There are animals who produce a similar effect, like the snapping shrimp, which opens and closes its claws so rapidly that the surrounding bubbles release energy that shock its prey. A person can go into a state of shock following a sudden drop in blood flow. Once, a woman with tapeworm larvae in her spine reported that the worms released electric shocks down her legs causing her to fall and stealing away her abilities to ride her Friesian horse.

There is a seemingly randomized demarcation of land that cannot be seen, only felt. If Gelsomina and Zampanò accidentally stray outside of this ambiguous area, the Invisible Force zaps them. It has no smell nor pattern, no timing nor warning. They have memorized landmarks to avoid the wrath of the Invisible Force, gathering the scent of bushes and trees that intersect its inconspicuous lines. They agree that the pain is worse than ingesting a bee, a mistake both dogs have made at least twice. The origin of the Invisible Force is unknown and simply another reminder of the cruelty of existence. Coming across the open

carcass of an animal confirms for the French Bulldogs that it lingered for too long in the path of the Invisible Force rather than moving forward or backward as they have learned to do.

Now that she is forgetting things, Gelsomina regularly wanders into the Invisible Force. Sometimes Wendy or John witnesses her leap into the air for this reason and are wracked with guilt. What most bothers Gelsomina is that she has been tricked once again, and that one shock means two. On the other side of the Invisible Force, scouring rushes reach above her head and soil turns to sop. Fearful and sinking, Gelsomina forces her way through the stinging line of electricity to safely return to the property.

Gelsomina is pinned between two notions: the simplicity of an existence that has been long curated for her and an intimacy with the worms and the outside world. There is much that the dogs will never experience because of the Invisible Force. The mystery of far-off lands, marked by the secretions of other animals, now stirs more curiosity in Gelsomina due to those veritable usurpers. Virgin to experience, the worms are her first scratch at life.

ABUNDANCE



A Novel

HAFEEZ LAKHANI

ABUNDANCE

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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The early hours in Florida were early evening in Rawalpindi, where Ramzan had grown up in the same building as Sakeena, but where he had not felt compelled to visit in the forty years since he'd left. In a way of staving off loneliness, or of keeping up, in some small manner, with the times, he enjoyed the daily exchange of messages from back home—from a faraway part of his life—forwarded videos and images from his brother and sister-in-law, but also from old friends, acquaintances whose sole role in Ramzan's life at this point was wishing *Eid Mubarak* with a video of stars twinkling around a new moon, or *Happy Siblings Day*, or *International Daughters Day*, sometimes holidays Ramzan wasn't even aware of, but was happy to act upon, forwarding the lovely animation to Fareen in New York or to Kawal just a few miles away. On his phone were also texts from the morning employee at their Dunkin' about ingredients that needed reordering, a batch fryer that needed servicing. The messages pulled at Ramzan's attention as they always did, a task he felt satisfaction in completing, if only to clear

away the numbered badge at the corner of an app, but today, he consciously set the phone aside. Something felt off with Sakeena. All night she had been agitated. Lost in a dream, she'd turned restlessly, struggling, it felt, before finally murmuring, Adnan ku kya? What has happened to Adnan? They had not seen Adnan, their youngest, in three years, a concern for Ramzan, too, but it was unusual for Sakeena to suffer dreams like these.

After helping Sakeena out of bed, an hour past their usual waking time, and guiding her in her drowsy state to the kitchen table, Ramzan tried to recall how to make masala chai. Despite all these years in the U.S., they held on to traditional roles at home, Sakeena the expert in the kitchen, Ramzan the happy helper; at Dunkin', Ramzan was the stress bearer of the turbulence in managing a small business, Sakeena the gentle hand of reassurance. Envisioning Sakeena's steps now for chai, Ramzan filled the small pot with water before setting it over a flame. He scooped in loose tea, added cardamom pods, then poured in condensed milk just as it all came to a slow boil. As he observed Sakeena do so many times, he let the creamy mixture rise but not spill, lifting the small pot off the flame, repeating this three times to give the chai strength, before pouring it through a strainer into two steel cups. The children for many years poked fun at these cups—Why would you drink *hot* tea from a *steel* cup?—but it was simply their custom, holding the cup comfortably by its lip and sipping, how they best enjoyed the taste of tea. In his case, Ramzan could get by if

need be with Lipton made in the microwave, or coffee from their Dunkin’—but Sakeena, even after these many years, could not bring herself to drink tea any other way.

Chal, Adnan, Sakeena had said in her dream. Come. The time has come—our plane will leave. Come! Have you sent in all the suitcases?

To Ramzan’s disappointment, Adnan had several times over the past three years cancelled plans to visit, always claiming some urgency with his shoes business, but at least he video called Sakeena each week, from Monaco, or Sardinia, or Kinshasa, wherever he was at the moment, calling sometimes three times before Sakeena answered. Sakeena was never likely to have her phone handy, or charged, even. Occasionally, after Ramzan heard Sakeena’s phone ring multiple times, he would receive a call from Adnan on his own phone, which Ramzan gladly answered, even knowing that he was a second preference, that Adnan would politely make conversation before asking if Sakeena was around. Ramzan did not resent Sakeena’s closeness with Adnan, but rather loved the pleasure he observed in Sakeena’s eyes when she finally saw Adnan’s face on the screen. What worried Ramzan, though, was that it had been three weeks since Adnan’s last call, with no response as yet to five or six attempts to reach him.

Sakeena, Ramzan whispered that morning in bed, his vision blurry without his glasses. He’d touched his hand softly to her stomach. This was a position of great intimacy for them, one of his arms below her head, the other wrapped

loosely around her, how they'd fallen asleep each night for over thirty years. Sakeena, where are you going on this plane?

Arey, Bombay, she murmured, frustrated. Like Ramzan was asking an unintelligent question. Bombay, then going by train to Rawalpindi.

She had not returned to Rawalpindi in eighteen years, having gone back for the funerals of each of her parents, only three years apart. Ramzan was not able to go for either of his parents' deaths—finances especially tight at those times, plus his older brother Tabreez was there to manage arrangements.

There is still some time, no? Ramzan said to Sakeena in her sleep.

Sakeena moaned in response: There is not even *one bit* of time—

After her first sips of chai Sakeena grew more alert, though sleep and confusion still weighed over the thin lines of her face. Even after poor sleep, Sakeena appeared to Ramzan somewhat composed, her hair falling elegantly past her cheeks, resting in neat layers high against her back. Somehow her hair had never gone gray; it retained the same shine that aunties used to remark upon when they were teenagers exchanging glances in the dirt lanes of the colony. At the kitchen table, Sakeena fixed her gaze outside, searching for one moment in the branches of the old mango tree that they planted before the twins were born, their first weeks in Miami, this mature tree now crowding

against the wall of their small townhouse, while on the other side it leaned over the drainage canal, beautifully ripe mangos often going wasted into the water.

You made it perfectly, Sakeena said about his chai, while she dipped a corner of her toast in the steel cup, letting it soak a few moments.

Ramzan sliced onions and chilis and broke eggs in a bowl for the breakfast dish he vaguely knew—unda piaz ka saak. Scrambling the mixture, Ramzan intermittently confirmed the recipe with Sakeena, who appeared tired again, her head slumped toward the table. Cook on slow heat, she murmured. Cut onions fine, allow them to soften before adding eggs. Sakeena had left a stack of chapatti in the fridge and Ramzan reheated a few on the tawa pan, coating each with a bit of ghee.

When Ramzan set the plate of unda piaz before her, Sakeena was awake—this much he remembered. She responded to the smell of food. Right away she tore off a piece of warm chapatti, pinched the first bite of egg and onion into her mouth. She closed her eyes while she chewed. When she opened them, she looked out toward the mossy rocks at the edge of the canal, at a few ducks swimming by. The texture of his unda piaz was dry but she did not complain; she registered no distaste, no deviation from their normal routine, as if she were eating the same food, made by her hand, that they had been eating their whole life.

It was then, while Ramzan went to the counter to grab the salt, his back to Sakeena, that he heard a spilling sound.

Ramzan turned. At the table, Sakeena's elbow was bent; she was holding the steel cup close to her lips. But it was tilted. Her eyes were shut. Slowly, the chai spilled, first onto her plate, and then directly onto Sakeena's lap.

Jaanu! Ramzan called, running. He took hold of the cup, still warm, by its base. Sakeena did not react, not to the alarm in his voice, not to the chai soaking through her nightgown. Ramzan pressed at her legs with a towel, but she seemed to feel nothing.

Bhothe thakgayi, she only said—I'm so exhausted—before she tucked her head down and let her arms sink to her sides.

Ramzan called Fareen, their eldest, in New York, but got no answer, only to find her a few minutes later on her work phone—on a Sunday.

She *what?* Fareen said. You have to call 9-1-1, Daddy. Right now. Don't worry about the cost—

But Sakeena simply seemed to be sleeping, sleeping in the midst of being awake, sleeping while he carefully dabbed at the spilled chai in her lap. Worry struck him, yes, but not until he heard the alarm in Fareen's voice did it occur to him to go to the hospital. Only he could not put Sakeena in an ambulance. What if they did not allow him to accompany her? At home, if he guided Sakeena she followed, even in her drowsiness, so Ramzan, one limb at a time, helped her change clothes, then sat her in the front seat of the car.

On the drive to Jackson Memorial, he phoned Kawal—the only one of their three children who had stayed in Miami. Ramzan explained first that Sakeena was not feeling well, trying to protect Kawal from worrying, especially in her new pregnancy, but asked her to come meet them at the hospital, and to please try once again to get a hold of Adnan.

Inside the Jackson ER, in a curtained cubicle where the beeping of machines and children crying filled the too-crowded air, a nurse rolled Sakeena from one side to another, changing her out of the simple pants and blouse that Ramzan chose and into a hospital gown. An unshaven doctor took charge, drawing her blood while Sakeena slept. Her ammonia is dangerously high—your wife is at risk of an encephalopathic coma, the doctor soon made clear, while moving IV lines and wires away from the bedside. You need to stand back, he said. Back from Sakeena? Ramzan could not. Instead he crouched beside her while the doctor raised Sakeena's legs, examining her underside in a way that Ramzan could not bear to watch. We have to administer an enema, the doctor said—the only way to release the ammonia. While he said this Sakeena remained asleep, her calm expression interrupted only by wincing from needles and prods. You will be fine, jaanu, Ramzan said, blindly, because Sakeena valued reassurance. *Naseeb meh hai tho kya karsakthe?* she would say. If something is in your naseeb—destined for you—then what can you do?

Sakeena released a painful scream when the doctor inserted the enema. She remained in near sleep, her delicate

face pinching and contorting with the passing of stool. Ammonia had built in her blood to dangerous levels, her liver possibly not filtering it as it should. An enema was a temporary solution, the doctor explained. The toxins would almost certainly build again. But for now it worked. Within an hour—an hour in which the nurse very sweetly cleaned Sakeena with foaming soap and wet towels—Sakeena was more alert, asking Ramzan: Jaani, why are we here in the hospital?

After Kawal arrived, twenty-five weeks pregnant and strained with worry, and after hours of tests in the third floor biopsy unit, after which Sakeena was admitted to a comfortable room on the fourteenth floor, Sakeena appeared completely normal, in great spirits in fact after Kawal's husband, Hussain, brought two-year-old Zul into the room. The nurse immediately came to warn them that children were forbidden on this floor—a hazard to the suppressed immune systems of transplant patients—but after just one minute with Zul, whom Sakeena cared for most weekdays, Sakeena transformed. Aya mara Jully, she cooed—My Jully has come—using her pet name for him, as well as her habit still present from India, thirty-four years removed, of conflating *Z* and *J*. Zul matched Sakeena's enthusiasm, not noticing the beeping machines and small IV needle inserted into the back of her hand, but rather, climbing all over Sakeena, to her great pleasure.

A portly young doctor greeted Sakeena as he entered the room. He wore a neat checkered shirt beneath a white coat

reading at the breast: *University of Miami Hepatology Unit*. Stitched opposite was *Dr. Hitesh Gupta*, an Indian name that reassured Ramzan—it could have been Gujarati, like their name, though it appeared from his fair skin and confident English that he came from a more educated class than theirs.

Mrs. Bharwani, Dr. Gupta smiled. Is it true that you have not visited a GP in more than ten years?

GP means doctor? Sakeena turned to Ramzan, alert, no more encephalopathy, and speaking, too, for the first time in weeks in English. Ramzan knew from their troubles years ago, in trying to conceive, how much Sakeena hated visiting a doctor. She turned to Gupta now: If I am feeling healthy then why am I to see a doctor?

Ah, but you are *not* healthy, my dear. You gave your family here a real scare today.

My children scare me every day, Sakeena quipped. Not this one, she corrected, touching Kawal's hand. But my son has not come to see me in more than *three years*.

Doctor Sahib, Ramzan interjected, using the formal title, how they were raised to address any physician. Ramzan found himself turning his head side to side, an honest plea, body language from back home. Gupta seemed sympathetic, mirroring Ramzan's gesture. Please, Doctor. What is happening with her?

Gupta's smile faded. Mrs. Bharwani, I am deputy head of the hepatology unit here at Jackson. For the last few hours I've been studying your case—the tests and blood work, plus the liver biopsy I ordered. The reason I am concerned

that you have not visited a GP in years is that perhaps we could have learned sooner that you are suffering from an advanced case of cirrhosis of the liver. This is often found in patients with severe alcoholism, though I'm aware you don't drink. Gupta might have interpreted this from their Muslim name, if not from the forms Ramzan had completed. Your case appears to be autoimmune—the body is naturally breaking down its own liver, for no reason other than bad luck. His voice turned softer now. Mrs. Bharwani, your liver is functioning at just ten percent of normal. Your body is losing its ability to filter poisons—even digestive poisons, like ammonia or bile—from your blood.

Kawal drew herself closer to Ramzan. Ten percent? she said. This while Ramzan felt that the world was beginning to spin too quickly. He felt like something was being taken from him. In his mind he saw Sakeena—Sakeena from their youth—hanging clothes on the balcony of her parents' flat. He saw himself waiting at the colony gates in drizzling rain—the monsoon was their favorite season—as he hoped to slip a carefully written letter into Sakeena's school bag. He pictured himself late at night sitting on a stool behind the counter of a gas station in Tampa, listening to mice fornicate beneath the deli case. For six lonely years he saved to bring Sakeena to the U.S. Finally, he could remember flashes of raising the children—Sakeena's hand resting in his as they witnessed Fareen's fifth grade trumpet solo, Sakeena meeting his eyes when she saw how deeply moved he felt.

Doctor Sahib—what is implication of this low function?

If we did nothing it would mean end of life, Gupta said. Her MELD score is twenty-one. You understand a healthy person's MELD is six. Patients in this state of cirrhosis, at age sixty, are unlikely to live longer than nine months. But we can list her for a transplant. As she gets sicker her score will rise. Transplants are being allotted to patients right now with MELD scores in the high twenties.

The word *transplant* gave Ramzan hope. There was a system in place here, someone—Gupta, the health insurance company, University of Miami researchers—available to help them, hope that at that exact moment someone was dying from an unfortunate car accident and that person's organs were being harvested to save another life. Sakeena's situation felt fixable—they needed only to undergo this procedure, in the way that some people have a heart attack and receive a stent, and then they are fine. Procedures made sense to Ramzan. He placed his faith in them as Sakeena placed hers in naseeb. His way had always served them well. When after their sixth year together in this country, running their farm road store in Bartow, they still had not been able to conceive, Ramzan convinced Sakeena that they should spend their savings on a fertilization procedure—against her will, Sakeena optimistic that their luck would turn—and after that intervention they were blessed with Fareen in their seventh year of marriage.

Jo hai to hai, Sakeena said now. What is, is. She sounded almost as if she were joking—a stubbornness Ramzan recognized, a tone she took when she felt her instincts were

being ignored. If this sickness is in our blood then what can we do?

What—what else can be done? Kawal asked, a kind of focus coming over her. I mean—if there’s anything we can do to get more time, Doctor, we’ll do it, you know?

There is one thing, Dr. Gupta said. Control the diet. Mrs. Bharwani, I need you to avoid red meat—this is very important. We must reduce foods that create significant ammonia. A little fish or soy protein is fine—but no red meat. You are slightly diabetic as well. I need you to avoid white rice and white bread, too. Those amino acids will also build ammonia.

At this Sakeena laughed. She was actually laughing. Tell me, doctor, you are from India?

Yes, of course.

And being from India, have you gone one day of your life not eating white rice?

Gupta smiled. Brown rice is nice, too, Mrs. Bharwani. Or how about quinoa? Have you tried quinoa?

Sakeena simply looked out the hospital window. You people are all crazy, she said. *Completely* crazy.

In order to list Sakeena for a transplant, Ramzan learned that they needed to complete a workup, including a heart examination, colonoscopy, OB-GYN clearance, even a dental exam, all in the interest of avoiding infection after receiving a new organ. But first they needed Sakeena to

agree to a transplant; so far, she had only consented to some liquid medication that Gupta prescribed. This was what Ramzan was mulling over as they prepared to be discharged from the hospital the next morning, just as Fareen called from New York. She had been calling every few hours, asking once, twice, fifty times what level of urgency this was. Should she jump on a plane right away—take time away from her Wall Street work—or could her visit wait until the following weekend? Was Mom at *urgent risk*? If not, Fareen could come Thursday night, stay until Monday morning, and if it was possible to wait these four days it might make a difference for her because it was November, year-end was near, reviews were underway, and Fareen was being considered for a promotion to *managing director*. It is not *too* urgent, Ramzan half lied, not wanting to alarm Fareen. It was nine months they had left, not nine days. Plus, there was the likelihood of a transplant. What felt important, too, was that Ramzan did not want to stand in the way of Fareen's promotion, which he understood was rare, to earn the title of managing director at age twenty-eight. The magnitude of opportunity available to Fareen had become clear over her six years working at Goldman Sachs, from hurried phone calls home—sometimes every few days, sometimes weeks apart—usually late at night while she sat in the back of a car shuttling her home to Brooklyn from the office. Take your time, beta, Ramzan said. Mumma will get better. I have faith in Dr. Gupta already.

Arriving home, though, while Ramzan gently guided

Sakeena from their parking space to the front door, he began to realize just how much their lives had changed. Before he could even turn on the lights, Sakeena rushed to the bathroom, due to the lactulose—laxative—prescribed by Dr. Gupta, four doses daily to reduce the ammonia. A half hour later Sakeena was forced to go again, and continually at such intervals that Ramzan wondered how she would be able to sleep.

That night, again Sakeena turned with dreams.

Adnan, she called. Come, Adnan. In the night canteen, there is a man who roasts the very *best* corn. He'll rub it with lemon and chili!

Ramzan listened with curiosity. Was she dreaming about Adnan because he had traveled to Rawalpindi with her years back, for her father's funeral? But that was almost twenty years ago. Did her hesitation about the transplant have anything in common with her reluctance, as far back as their engagement, to leave Rawalpindi?

Sakeena's dream reminded Ramzan, too, how she did not like to break from tradition. In Rawalpindi, when they were first engaged, soon after Ramzan was selected for the visa lottery to the U.S., she wanted to go out for food only to her beloved night canteen, where her family had eaten every Sunday for as long as she could remember. Six years later, when they were finally married in Tampa—with only Ramzan's chacha, his father's younger brother, standing in for family—Sakeena embraced the whole circumstance, even her own parents missing, as happening exactly as it was *meant to happen*, the way their grandmothers in Gujarati

villages might have left everything to God. In Sakeena's mind, her arrival to the U.S. was not the product of work, or sacrifice, on her part or his. It was simply written.

The next few mornings, leaving the management of their Dunkin' in the capable hands of Kawal—who in her second trimester thankfully had some energy—Ramzan took care of Sakeena, rubbing her shoulders and earlobes while she dozed, bringing her four doses of lactulose daily.

One morning after breakfast, Sakeena seemed especially tired, so Ramzan insisted that she lay down on the living room sofa, letting the TV fill the room with the calming voice of a painter she often watched, today depicting a hillside of trees descending toward a lake. Close your eyes and sleep few minutes, Ramzan said.

Suddenly, though, while Ramzan was cleaning the kitchen, Sakeena felt the urge to use the bathroom. In her weakened state she called for Ramzan, and he came, but as he helped her rush across their gray carpet, Sakeena froze mid-stride. She could not hold it any longer. Down her leg, under her favorite nightgown came loose stool, clumps of it falling across the carpet. This while Ramzan could only say, It's okay, jaan. It's alright. This is not your fault. I don't want you to feel, jaani, that this is at all your fault.

He brought home two different brands of adult diapers from Walmart.

Diaper? Sakeena said when she saw them. You want me to wear *diaper*? It made him uncomfortable, too, but what choice did they have? Stop taking the lactulose? Let her die from the ammonia?

Perhaps due to her lack of energy, Sakeena agreed to wear the diapers, though Ramzan could see they upset her. How can I drink this poison? Sakeena said holding her disposable cup of lactulose the next day. How can anyone *intentionally* take medicine that forces you to need diaper?

It's only one dose, jaani.

No more!

Ramzan felt some hope that Fareen, due to land from New York that night, might talk some sense into Sakeena. Kawal, too, would soon arrive to cook daal and brown rice for dinner. Setting aside the lactulose, Ramzan turned his thoughts to Adnan, who held a special influence over Sakeena, but who still had not responded to anyone's messages.

Adnan, beta, we have not heard from you in some time. Are you okay? Ramzan typed into his phone, trying not to feel alarmed by Adnan's silence. The stream of messages on the screen, going back several weeks, all originated from Ramzan, mostly forwarded gifs—"missing you" lit up over a rising sun—and one image he forwarded that honestly moved him, a poem that probably any grade school child in the U.S. would be familiar with but one that was new to Ramzan. "Two roads diverged in a wood," in which the agency of the writer, taking the less traveled path, spoke to Ramzan. What if he himself had never applied—and reapplied—for that visa lottery at age twenty? Ramzan was never sure about Adnan's thoughts—after the trouble Adnan had gotten into, also around sneakers, at age twelve, he kept some distance from Ramzan—but Ramzan wondered

if the boy felt any kinship, foregoing college, going abroad for this shoes venture, with Ramzan's own agency at that age. Seeing his sent message on the screen, Ramzan could not help but think of Kawal's many failed attempts at contact. Perhaps this was something more than being busy. Despite the gray area in which Adnan conducted his shoes business—which they did not discuss but all understood—he had always been regular in calling Sakeena.

When Ramzan's phone rang soon afterward he felt hopeful that it was Adnan, until he saw *Faru* over the caller ID.

I'm sorry, Daddy, Fareen said. I have to postpone to tomorrow. I'll be at the office till midnight probably. There's this deal—

Faru? You cannot come?

She is too busy for Mummy? Sakeena shouted from the sofa, still filled with fire after refusing the lactulose.

No, Daddy, I—I'll be there tomorrow. It's just this deal is really taking shape so it's not a good idea for me to leave. Especially with decisions coming up. I just need to be at work tomorrow, then I'll grab a late flight.

Ramzan did not bother to ask the expense of a last-minute flight. He only respected that Fareen's work was urgent, that her influence on Sakeena was important. They were fortunate that she was in such a position to come see them at all.

Friday morning, Sakeena appeared more focused—according to her, *because* she refused lactulose. She came into the

kitchen at peace, pleased to make chai on her own, sit and enjoy it in her steel cup and not have to run to the bathroom. After seeing her so energetic, Ramzan decided to go into Dunkin' to catch up on work.

Returning home, he was greeted not only by Sakeena still active, but also by the vibrant smells of cooking. Fareen would arrive that night; Ramzan knew there was nothing like the anticipation of children coming home to inspire Sakeena, even if it meant spending the whole day crushing cashews into dust then pressing them with sugar and ghard and moist ghee, before shaping twenty balls of sweet laddoo to slow roast in the oven. There was fresh dough shining on the rolling board for chapatti; cut pieces of ripe strawberries and kiwi and mango and green grape halves in a large bowl for fruit cream; some pots simmering on the stove, one with diced onions in oil for saak, and nearby, chopped tomato and potato and cilantro and chili. At the counter, Sakeena was slicing slabs of goat meat into small cubes. Ramzan froze. Whatever joy he experienced seeing Sakeena so active drained from him. Red meat. At the stove, she was making white rice—both foods Gupta warned were like poison for her. Ramzan tried to remain calm.

This *ghosh ka saak*, Ramzan laughed. I understand it is for Fareen, her favorite, but *jaanu*, what will *you* eat? What will *you and I* eat—I will avoid meat with you, and rice, too, because remember what Gupta said, that these foods cause ammonia risk? Kawal brought brown rice from Publix. Why don't we make—

Dhey! Sakeena said. Will you stop? A human being eats this food her whole life, and now you want to forbid it?

Ramzan approached her, turning his hands up, as if in compromise. Hesitantly, Sakeena accepted his hands. She let Ramzan embrace her from behind, she let him touch one hand to her stomach.

But really, jaani. We cannot let you eat ghosh.

She pushed him away. She nearly elbowed him, actually, leaving him feeling like she was unafraid. Unafraid of whatever lay ahead.

When his phone rang, Fareen probably on her way to LaGuardia, Ramzan could not answer fast enough, retreating from Sakeena. Faru jaan, I cannot wait—

But what he heard was Fareen crying. A memory struck him: in school she was at the top of her class but there were nights when Ramzan would come downstairs to find her weeping over precalculus problems. These nights, she allowed him to comfort her but this stopped abruptly when she was fifteen. One cool January night when Ramzan was at his most vulnerable, their Dunkin' at the brink of going under, and Fareen blossoming with beauty, running around with her first boyfriend—Hussain, in fact, Kawal's husband now—this was the last time Fareen allowed him to console her.

What happened, jaanu? You missed your flight?

I—I don't know, Daddy. I'm sitting in the bathroom at work, I could make the flight if I left right now, but—I *don't know what to do*.

Jaani, tell me, what is the problem?

The deal, Daddy—but is Mom okay? I could still get to the airport—but the deal is live. A new bidder came in, and I could leave and hand it off, but Daddy, it's *serious*—it's a hundred million dollars—a hundred million of just PNL; the debt financing is over a billion—PNL that *I* could bring in. It may be ten years, God, before another deal like this comes around, another deal *this size* involving power plants *I* cover—

Hum, Ramzan could only say. He felt overwhelmed, Fareen confiding in him again, plus these uncomfortable numbers. Numbers that felt difficult to understand or believe. Normally Fareen spoke with composure about her work, discussing megawatts and transmission lines racing across deserts; and reporting promotion after promotion, every two years since age twenty-two, Fareen whispering over phone calls from bathrooms or stairwells her bonus numbers, sums paid to his daughter which she seemed genuinely shocked by, numbers that made Ramzan stagger at what was possible in this country. It's all locked up in stock, Daddy, she would say, her modesty a gift, her tone as if to celebrate his own small part in her achievement. It's pretend money. You can't touch it for three years. Ramzan appreciated these gestures, though he wondered if she knew that hearing such amounts, whether bonuses or dollars of debt some company was willing to borrow, made him sick with envy, for all he had *not* accomplished here.

I think the deal will put me over, Daddy, for consideration, you know? For MD. I mean, nobody gets it their first

time up but this could do it, maybe? Plus, I'm a woman, one of two women up for it, us and thirty guys in Fixed Income. *Oh god*, she sobbed. Daddy, what do I do?

What could Ramzan say? He wanted to wipe her tears away with his fingers, like she was small again, pressed delicately to him and seeking relief from math problems. Ramzan imagined her sobs echoing inside the ladies room of Goldman Sachs, there on the thirty-second floor of a glass and steel tower. Ramzan wondered if other women were there after six on Friday evening. If other women populated her trading floor at all. From how Fareen described so many men at her work, he imagined she felt completely alone there.

First tell me, Daddy—God, I'm so selfish—is Mom okay?

Mom is okay, Ramzan said. She is stronger—clear in mind. She wants very much to see you. She's making *ghosh ka saak*.

Oh— Fareen said.

Jaani, what you should know is—

But Ramzan couldn't bring himself to put Sakeena's refusal of lactulose on Fareen. He couldn't tell her that he was worried Sakeena would not see the cardiologist—whom they had received an appointment to visit on Saturday—or the dentist or OB-GYN to receive clearance for the transplant. Ramzan could only picture Fareen standing before the bathroom mirror, Sakeena's carbon copy, nearly the same age that Sakeena was when he was finally able to bring her to the U.S. At so many of Fareen's trumpet concerts, Ramzan felt that it was some version of Sakeena,

delicate limbs, eyes rimmed by long lashes, who was playing those piercing notes so beautifully from the stage.

What you should know is, jaani—Mom is—stubborn these days. It's okay if you don't come now, but come soon. Please.

You're sure?

You have an opportunity there. You have to stay the weekend, is it? To complete this deal? Can you come after the weekend? Or next weekend?

I think so. I'll be dealing with this competing bid. But—she paused. I don't know how long it'll take. I need to be here to push it along. If I'm not speaking to the client every few hours, vetting every change by Legal, getting fresh numbers from the traders, it may not get done. Some of the other banks—They'll take the deal at a loss to build experience. They'll do anything to close a deal this size, or at the least, to prevent us from closing it.

You must close it, jaani. Ramzan did not know exactly what this meant, but he said it, for Fareen's sake. You must close this hundred million dollars. Mom—she is okay, but please, come soon. She needs you to convince her to be sensible.

Faru is not coming? Sakeena asked after Ramzan hung up. Sakeena was standing nearby and overheard much of the conversation.

Her work, Ramzan said.

The energy that had lifted Sakeena to cook and prepare two desserts in anticipation of Fareen's arrival drained

from her. She abandoned the kitchen where so many of her dishes sat half-prepared, purposeless.

Jaani, why don't we eat together and go to bed early? Tomorrow, Gupta secured us an appointment with the cardiologist. Ramzan was hoping to reveal this after Fareen arrived—with her help.

Sakeena remained still. In her silence, it appeared she had begun to process that they indeed needed to see the cardiologist. They needed to complete the workup. They needed to make sacrifices—lactulose, and most importantly, the transplant—to extend her life.

But Sakeena shook her head. Nehi, she said.

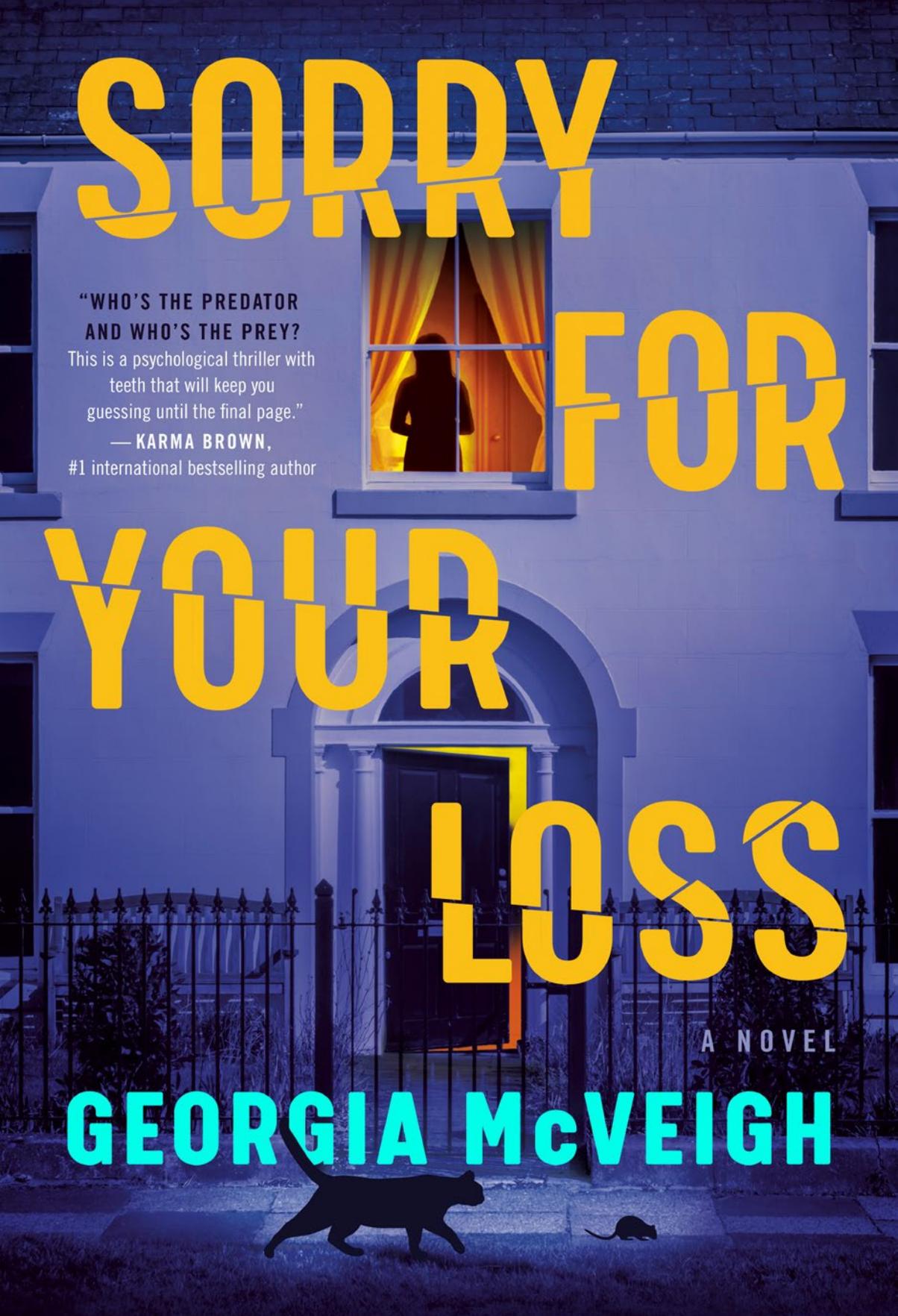
What do you mean, no?

Nehi. She was incredibly calm. Nehi for appointment, nehi for lactulose, nehi for transplant. How many years I have left I don't know, but I know for certain that this medicine and this procedure was not intended for me.

Ramzan looked to her, pleading, but Sakeena's eyes only stared into their reflection on the glass patio door. Naseeb, again, then. Her usual excuse against action. In the past, he'd found ways to overcome her resistance, even if rooted in the spiritual, in the name of the greater good. This was different, Ramzan realized, from convincing Sakeena to part with Rawalpindi, which she had no desire to leave. Their love young and swelling, opportunity in the U.S. possessed such allure that she allowed him to convince her that emigrating was worthwhile. This was different, too, from the fertilization procedure before Fareen. Sakeena had wanted children

desperately enough to let him persuade her to agree to intervention. But now, she could not be forced to undergo a cardiology exam. He could not force the transplant. The only way to convince Sakeena to extend her life was to have all three children come home. Ramzan needed Fareen and Adnan to come home.

SORRY



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ONE

WHEN I THINK back, I see chairs arranged in a circle. Small, hard, and plastic, they come in a range of primary colors, blotches of forced brightness in the otherwise drab, depressing space. Linoleum floors with chewing gum trodden into nondescript disks, a battered corkboard bearing peeling posters. The room has only two windows. The view through the streaked, dirty glass is of the car park.

This room has an assortment of uses. Knitting clubs, the local playgroup, dodgeball. More often than not, the chairs remain stacked against the wall. Towers of clashing reds and blues packed away to create more space for these joyful activities.

As far as I know, the circular formation is unique to Tuesday evenings. Unique to our particular group. The circle, you see, is a symbol of many things. It represents beginnings; it represents endings. Our group, obviously, is more concerned with the latter.

I would have liked some ambient noise to mask my entry: the rustle of a coat perhaps, or the low rumble of voices. Instead, there is only the whump of the swinging door settling behind me, the squeak of my

rubber soles against the floor. Here, “silent as the grave” is not just an expression; it’s a mantra.

Fiona purses her lips as I take my seat. I sense, rather than see, that she’s glaring at me, so I take my time to shrug out of my coat and settle myself on the chair. I don’t make a habit of being late, but we’ve played this game a few times. It’s important, I’ve discovered, to keep Fiona on her toes.

Only when I have finished rubbing sanitizer into my hands does Fiona clear her throat and shuffle her papers with a self-importance that is astonishing for a woman whose greatest achievement is the death of her husband. The smell of rubbing alcohol is sharp in the air.

“Now that we’re *all* here, let’s make a start, shall we?”

I don’t dislike Fiona. I admire her tenacity. Not many people have the stomach to profit from other people’s despair, yet she does it with an enthusiasm that borders on relish. She’s got a strong nose for business, and the personality to boot. If it weren’t antifeminist, you’d likely describe her as a battle-ax, but it is, so I won’t. There *is* a whisper of Miss Trunchbull about her, though. All of which is why, today, I’m alarmed to see her ample bosom inflating in a way that might almost be described as flirtatious, an unseemly pink flush spreading into those already ruddy cheeks.

“You might notice,” she says in a sugary voice I’ve never heard before, “that we have a new member joining us today.”

She gestures to a man on the other side of the circle. I can’t believe I didn’t notice him before. We don’t often get new members, and it’s always an exciting diversion from the usual order of play: tears and long, meandering monologues that most of us have heard fifteen times before. Personally, I like to mix it up a bit when I speak. Critical to keep your audience engaged.

The reason for Fiona’s sickening personality shift is instantly obvious. He’s *very* attractive. Even though he’s sitting down, I can tell he’s

tall. There's a nice symmetry to his face, too, and he has a full head of hair (which, when a man has suffered a loss, is not a guarantee). If I weren't here under such tragic circumstances, I might even be tempted myself.

The man seems unbothered by our scrutiny, which is not always the case. I like to think we can be quite intimidating as a pack, and there have been occasions when new members have crumbled under the weight of our unsmiling stares. We don't mess around here. This is a serious group for serious loss.

This man, however, raises his hand in an almost lazy acknowledgment of our attention. Bereavement suits him. The three-day-old stubble gives him a rugged, unruly quality, and his suit hangs from him in a way that only emphasizes his lithe frame. I bet he's pure muscle underneath—

I stop myself there. It's easy to become carried away in these sorts of situations, and I must keep my mind on the matter at hand: Freddie.

"This is Jack," Fiona says, and simpers. Christ, even her cleavage is flushed now.

"Hi, Jack," we chorus back in a monotone, to show how sad and solemn we are. Fiona looks as though she'd quite like to ask us to do it once more, *with feeling*.

"Do you feel comfortable sharing who you've lost, Jack?"

He clears his throat: a gruff, deep rumble. God, he's good-looking. Rita's clocked it, too, now. She's staring at him, sucking in her cheeks in a way that makes her look not unlike an odd, inverted hamster, but at least she had the foresight to put makeup on. I look like shit. I have, admittedly, let myself go somewhat in the last few months.

"Sure," Jack says, and as a collective we sit up a little straighter. There's a certain presence to him that even the men in our group—Charlie and Matt—have picked up on. With a single word, he's commanded our attention in a way that's almost enviable. I study his body

language. He's leaning forward slightly, as though he's drawing us into his confidence. His hands are clasped tightly in his lap for sincerity, his brows pulled together for seriousness. It's good. Very good. "I'm here," he continues, "because I lost my wife, Alice. She died of cancer earlier this year. Sixth of June."

It takes me a moment to compute what he's said. I'm so focused on the clarity of his delivery, the projection of his voice, that the date does not immediately register. But when it does, my heart gives a little leap of excitement.

"Did you say sixth of June?" The eagerness has leached into my voice—not a good look—and I tone it down instantly. "Sorry." I clear my throat. That's better. Duller, deader. "It's just, that's the date I lost my partner, Freddie. Sixth of June, this year."

Jack looks at me for the first time, and I experience a lurch of intense desire. "I'm so sorry to hear that," he says. Then he looks away again, and it feels like the sun has slipped behind a cloud.

"Thank you, *Iris*." Fiona's dropped all pretense now. To be fair, I have broken a cardinal rule: We do not, under any circumstances, interrupt another member when they're speaking. I glance at Jack. He's new. He won't know the difference.

Fiona tries to claw back her composure and fails miserably. "That was very brave, Jack. Well done," she says, with a chip of ice in her tone.

"I'm just going to do a little rundown of the way this particular bereavement group works, and then we'll go round in a circle and introduce ourselves. I'm Fiona and I'm the group leader. Any concerns, come straight to me, yes?" She's hitting her stride now. She loves new members almost as much as I do.

Fiona lost her own husband ten years ago and, in the wake of his death, wrote a nearly successful self-help book, which she flogs to all new members like it's the much-anticipated new chapter of the Bible. She now turns a profit by giving talks about her healing process, and I

am beginning to wonder if losing her husband isn't the best thing that ever happened to her.

"This is a safe space. I want you to be able to share your feelings, whatever they may be, in a nonjudgmental way. It's important to note that we are a social bereavement group; this is not group therapy, nor is it purporting to be. The aim is to bring people who have suffered a loss together—but bear in mind that not everyone will have experienced the same type of loss as you. We just ask that you are patient: Others' experience may differ from your own, but that doesn't make their feelings any less valid. Understood?" She says all of this very fast, as though she is the voice-over for a radio jingle and is trying to fit the terms and conditions into the designated eight-second time slot at the end.

Jack nods, and Fiona turns to me.

"Iris, since you were so keen to interject, you can start."

It feels, suddenly, like a lot is resting on what I say next. For one thing, I'm a little put out by the success of Jack's introduction. He played it perfectly: a tough act to follow. For another, I need him to notice me again. That look he gave me: Something long dormant stirred. And that's without even touching on the elephant in the room. His wife, dying on the exact same day as Freddie. I mean, really. What are the chances? It's like it was meant to be.

So, obviously, what I say next is critical. I have just this one chance to impress him. To impress *upon* him that I am someone worth more than a fleeting glance.

I start by leaning forward. It's a good trick, one I'll bank for future use if this is a success. I wait until the shuffling of feet has ceased, until all eyes in the room are fixed on me. I emit a deep, labored sigh. Just to remind everyone why we're here.

"I'm Iris." Nailed it. The perfect combination of sorrow and fortitude. "As I mentioned just now—sorry, Fiona—I lost my partner, Freddie, on the same date. Sixth of June." A small, wary chuckle. As though

I can't believe the coincidence of it. Which, to be fair, I can't. Jack sits up straighter. I've got him on the line; now I just need to land the finish. "What I *didn't* mention"—pause for another, shaky breath to emphasize the aforementioned fortitude—"is that Freddie wasn't just my boyfriend. He was my fiancé. He'd asked me to marry him a few days before he died."

Is there anything more tragic than a love cut short? It's sad to lose your wife, sure, but by that point all those little idiosyncrasies that you found so adorable at the beginning have begun to grate. But an engagement ended by an untimely death? That's peak tragedy. That's the death of hope itself.

The others clearly think so, too. Rita's hand is clamped over her mouth in shock. I think I see the glaze of tears in her eyes, though admittedly that's not entirely unusual for her. Jack's eyebrows have knitted together in sympathy. I take a risk then: I press my tongue hard to the roof of my mouth and give him my most winning smile. I haven't used it in nearly six months, but it's all coming back to me now. In response Jack gives me a small, uncertain smile, but at least he's still looking at me.

Only Fiona does not look entirely convinced.

"But . . . you're not wearing a ring?" she says. I don't appreciate the challenge in her tone.

"A ring is a patriarchal construct, Fiona. It feeds into the idea that a man owns a woman."

But there was a ring.

And I would have worn it.

TWO

TRY TO KEEP thoughts of Freddie to a minimum. It's not that I don't care. I do. But it's distressing to dwell on just how close I came to happiness. To companionship. That feeling of having someone *there*. He always seemed to know when I'd had a long day, like we were connected by some invisible thread. He'd put a bracing hand on my shoulder, just to let me know he cared, or send a thoughtful message: *You OK?*

I'm painfully aware, however, that rehashing every peak and trough of the relationship is not conducive to moving on. That's how you slip into bitterness. And, on the whole, I'm adept at keeping memories of Freddie at bay. I keep busy and work hard. I avoid silence. When things get really tough, I clean.

It may not surprise you to hear that the one place I struggle with thoughts of Freddie is the grief group, though not for the reasons you might think. It's more of a pacing issue than any deep-buried emotion dredged up by someone else's melancholic speech. The truth is that bereavement groups are really quite slow. So slow, there have been

occasions when I have no doubt the corpse of those they're mourning would get to the point faster.

And we are currently suffering through another painful silence from our least eloquent participant: Charlie. After my shock confession, it's an abrupt return to the mundane, and—judging by the distant expressions—not a particularly welcome one.

Tonight, though, it's not Freddie occupying my thoughts, but Jack. My little speech went down better than I could have predicted. Every so often, we catch each other's eye. Jack always looks away quickly, but not before I've clocked it. We are an hour into the session, and he has looked at me twenty times already. That's got to mean something.

The last time I felt excitement like this was at the start of my relationship with Freddie. I was languishing then, too, stuck in the hellish normality of daily life. Looking back, I think I was a bit lost. Floating through early adulthood without point or purpose. Freddie changed that. He changed everything.

It's all coming back to me now, like a rusty cog slotting into place. The smile I gave Jack earlier was over-the-top. I won't make that mistake again. It's crucial I don't come across as too keen. *Take the game out of it, and they lose interest instantly.* A little nugget of advice that my brain has kept tucked away all these months, as though it knew I might need it again. Yes, it's all returning to me now.

I pretend not to notice Jack taking me in. I fight the urge to cover my hair. I haven't washed it for three days. My roots are an abomination. I'll have to deal with them before next week. I straighten my spine, square my shoulders, rest my hands softly in my lap. I cock my head, gaze fixed firmly on Charlie, and pretend to be absorbed in his prevailing silence, which is no easy feat.

It never ceases to amaze me, the effect male attention can have. I feel more alive tonight than I have in weeks, though I appreciate this is probably the wrong forum in which to boast about vitality. Don't get

me wrong, I don't condone wrapping one's entire sense of self around the male gaze, but we all know it feels good, even if it is taboo to admit it. It's nice to be looked at again. Particularly when it's by someone like Jack. By someone like Freddie.

I was new to this game when I met Freddie. Stuck in a dead-end job I was desperate to leave and still smarting from the labels I'd been branded with at university four years before: strange, intense, loner. That last one hurt the most, because it implied complicity on my part. I'd begun to wonder if I really was the issue, before Freddie showed an interest in me. Then I realized the issue was everyone else.

We met in a coffee shop. I spotted him instantly: He was the most attractive man in there, and I was not the only one to notice. The barista was giving him a strong side-eye, which, from what I'd observed, could work wonders on the unsuspecting male. I had to move fast, find a way to get his attention, and so, as I walked toward the counter, I stumbled slightly and grabbed for his arm to steady myself.

"Whoa," he'd said. "Careful. Are you OK?"

I'd blushed prettily (not something I can generally do on command, but everyone in the shop was staring at me) and looked up at him through my lashes. "Yes. So sorry. I don't know what happened there."

He smiled, and, though it was wide and open and honest, I thought I recognized something beneath: something sad, which he'd gone to great lengths to conceal. It chimed with something inside me. "I'm always half asleep before I have my morning coffee, too," he'd said.

He was kind like that. Willing to put himself in others' shoes. It was one of the things I loved most about him. I didn't tell him that I was only in the café to pass the time before a covert interview for a job that I hoped might raise my frightful prospects. That I thought coffee tasted like mud. "Exactly," I said, mirroring his easy, casual stance.

Always the gentleman, he allowed me to go ahead of him. I knew he was listening, so I ordered a cappuccino, but when I went to pay he

slipped round me, tapped his card on the machine, and winked. The rush of attraction was so strong, I can feel it even now.

“My good deed for the day,” he said. Men do love playing the hero.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I walked into the interview room—for a design job at a magazine publishing company—later that same morning, and he was sitting there. A coincidence too strange to be insignificant. I learned that—should I get the role—he would be my manager.

“Small world!” he’d said with a laugh when he saw me. Buoyed by his presence, I performed well in the interview, but I couldn’t help but feel that our encounter in the coffee shop clinched it for me. They offered me the job on the spot, and I started a month later.

See? Told you the group often sends me on a jaunty trip down memory lane. We’re wrapping up now. Jack sends one final glance in my direction. If I’ve played my cards right, he’ll try to talk to me at the end, prompted by my staunch refusal to engage with him. It’s a delicious thought, a game I know how to play well. Marcie’s magazines taught me the rules: *To generate interest, play it cool. Let him come to you.* I hope I’m not too rusty conversationally. Flirtatious looks are one thing. Dialogue is quite another.

But Jack doesn’t try to speak to me at the end. He’s the first out of his chair, and he heads toward the exit without a second glance. I’m momentarily dumbstruck, staring after him, open-mouthed. I was sure I’d done it right. I’d gone by the book: stirring his interest before appearing indifferent to his response. I set up the game flawlessly, laying the pieces carefully on the board, but now he’s refusing to play.

It must have been my hair. It really is bad. Thin, greasy, and brittle. I’ll book an appointment with the hairdresser. *Then* we’ll see if he can resist my charms.

I’m the last to leave. I pick up my coat, head through the door to the lobby, and catch sight of the sign-out book. Fiona tries to insist we sign

in and out in accordance with health and safety regulations, but most of us don't bother. A small act of rebellion, a middle finger to sadness. Jack doesn't know that, though.

I run my finger down the list and there he is. Right at the bottom. The hasty scrawl of a man in a hurry.

Jack Reynolds

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

MERCY

HILL

A NOVEL

HANNAH

THURMAN

FIRST DOUBLEDAY HARDCOVER EDITION 2026

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PROLOGUE

If I were to pick the number one strangest thing about my childhood, which was packed to the gills with strangeness, it would be the way the sun disappeared each day at noon. If I was at home and bored—which was often—I'd track its progress against the paneled walls of our cottage, watching them gleam as the light shone brighter and higher throughout the morning in anticipation of a glorious midday zenith.

But this zenith never came. When the rays were about to reach their peak, they abruptly stopped, blocked by the largest of the stone buildings that stood at the very top of the Hill. A long shadow stretched down, covering our home and everything behind it, our daily total eclipse.

Ten minutes later, the sun popped out again and everything brightened. We'd all grown used to this routine, and although visitors might have commented on it, we almost never had visitors. I suppose if someone had ever said anything, the rest of us would have shrugged and replied that strange as it seemed, it had been happening for a very long time.

MERCY HILL ASYLUM opened its doors in 1856 on land that, at the time, was considered far beyond the city limits of North Carolina's Piedmont capital, Raleigh: the first and largest men-

tal hospital in the South. Old pictures in the admin building showed its massive acreage: orchards, fields, livestock stables—along with the four big stone buildings that would later become the wards. As the city developed, so did the asylum, erecting a nursing college and cottages for staff across the nearly two thousand acres of land.

By the 1970s, that land began to look more precious, and the city started to reabsorb it, taking nearly all of the fields and flatlands where Mercy Hill's crops had once grown. The hospital was no less busy, filled with the insane from across the state, but everything became condensed to the steep inclines of the hill that gave the asylum its name, cut off at the base by a four-lane highway that led to Raleigh's epicenter.

The next event of historical significance, at least in the minds of my sisters and me, was the hiring of our mother. In 1984 she became the first female director of psychiatry in the facility's history and, like all full-time staff, was offered housing in one of the employee cottages that clung to the north side of the Hill.

Most of the other doctors, especially married ones, declined this offer, but our mother was never one to say no to something free. She and Daddy packed up their books and clothes and an ambitious fifty-seven-piece set of wedding china given to them by Daddy's mother, and moved into our cottage. My sister J.J. was born a year later, then Caro, then Mimi, then finally me. For many years, we four girls were the only children who lived on the Hill, which our mother called a "special privilege." Sometimes we believed her; sometimes it seemed like she was just saying that to make up for the fact that we didn't own a television.

Our mother was not like the mothers of my classmates, or the ones I read about in books. She was brilliant and not mod-

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est about it, and although she could charm anyone she wanted to, rarely bothered. She was frequently brusque and snappish with us, even when we were very young. In return, we knew her word as bond—that she would meet us eye to eye as if we were grown-ups ourselves.

I WONDER IF, given everything that happened, she'd choose to do it again. The cottage, the isolation, the daily shadow running across our family until it darkened each one of us in turn. Was it worth it, for what we saved?

I'm sure she'd tell me if I asked. But it's taken me years to untangle myself from her version of the truth.

ONE

Mimi's branch snapped like a gunshot, and all four of us began to scream.

The magnolia had been an easy climb, and so we'd gone both high and far—up into the canopy and also out, scooting along the smooth limbs that reached over the barbed wire fence. Eighteen feet below us was the recreation yard of highest-security Ward C, and up until this moment, we'd had the perfect perch to spy safely on the men below. But Mimi, like always, had gone too far, out to where her bough tapered into leaves. My own arms began to shake as I watched the bough bend and then split.

I felt a great ruffling wind as she plummeted past me, arms still locked around the limb like it would save her from what came next. Then two booms: first, as the wood made contact with the razor-wire fence, sending a wave of clanging along the chain links. Next, the thud as my sister and her tree limb landed inside the yard.

The summer air was still and wet, and the cloying scent of magnolia flower rose from the ground where Mimi's fall had knocked down a shower of moon-white blossoms. Paralyzed, I clung tight to the bark, staring down. Mimi's right leg was twisted underneath her, bent back at an angle that I'd never

seen before. Her face wrenched into a grimace, and even eighteen feet up, I could hear her whisper: *Is he coming?*

For the first time since hearing the crack, I raised my head and looked around. My other two sisters, J.J. and Caro, were already beginning to make their way down the ladderlike limbs to safety. I tried to follow them, but my hands stayed locked. I had never felt fear like this before, and my heart beat wildly, like some animal was trapped inside me.

"Denise!" Mimi called up at me, louder than before: "Is he coming?"

I looked across the yard. Unlike Ward B, whose residents were allowed passes to the commissary and the post office and the tennis courts, Ward C was surrounded by a razor-wire fence, a fence ten-year-old Mimi was now trapped inside. The men inside this fence arrived on the Hill in police cars and left in prison transport vans. And yes, drawn from the shade of the building where they'd been clustered, they were now making their way toward Mimi, led by the man we all called the Scarecrow.

The Scarecrow was taller than the others, with patchy hair that stuck out in tufts around his somber face. That was why we'd given him the nickname, because you could imagine him staring off in some field for hours, flat eyes fixed on a point well beyond what you were seeing. He'd arrived at the beginning of the summer, and we'd spent the last few weeks observing him. He made even the biggest longtimers, Carl and Joe James, shy away, and we wanted to know why.

J.J. threw herself at the fence from the outside, rattling the metal. "Techs!" she yelled. "Can we get a technician?"

Usually one of the techs, big dough-faced men with army crewcuts, would be standing in the yard with the residents. But on hot days in the summer, many called in sick to go fishing.

The wards were egregiously understaffed at the best of times, and in July and August it often seemed as if no one worked there at all.

J.J. then began to call the names of the nurses: Reginald, Jamie, Noah. At thirteen, she was the oldest and tallest, but standing there against the shining fence, she didn't even reach the midpoint.

Numbly and dumbly, I thought: *I should yell too*. But my mouth was so dry I could hardly speak. I stared down at Mimi, watching as red cuts like scales appeared along her hands and arms and cheek, courtesy of the razor wire. With effort, she wrenched her arms behind her back, trying to push herself up to a sitting position. By the time she was upright, the Scarecrow was close enough to touch.

J.J. and now Caro, too, pounded the fence, their voices ringing in a twisted wail. "Mom!" Mimi sobbed, staring in vain at the ward's open, empty door. "Mom!"

This is what, more than twenty years later, chills me most to remember. Mimi was the wildest, the bravest, the one who taunted the rest of us at any sign of fear. To see her helpless sliced at my skin as if I had been the one who had toppled into the yard.

The Scarecrow crouched down. Extended a broad hand against Mimi's face, stroking his fingers through the blood on her cheek. She stopped screaming.

He held his hand up to the light, as if it weren't high noon in August. Blood dripped down his wrist and he sniffed at it like he was trying to place the scent.

"Hey, you!" J.J. shouted, addressing him for the first time. "She's Dr. Cross's daughter. You know Dr. Cross?"

The Scarecrow lowered his hand. Mimi's blood dripped from his finger onto the sun-fried grass. After a very long moment,

he spoke, the first time I'd ever heard his voice. "You look like her," he said.

That wasn't surprising. We all looked like our mother: dark hair, dark eyes, narrow hips and shoulders. I felt another wave of fear shake through me. I wanted to be back on the ground, but I didn't trust myself to let go of my chokehold on the branch. My arms began to ache.

"Please," J.J. said, pressing her whole body against the fence. "Can you please go get her? Please go get Dr. Cross."

The air was so thick and still I felt as if I couldn't take in another breath. My stomach seized at the possibility of violence.

Then he turned. He walked in a broken cadence, like he could come back around at any second. But he walked nonetheless. It drove the other residents back, like a shark through a school of fish, leaving him a direct path to the dark open door of the ward. No one spoke, everything was silent.

When he stepped into the narrow shadow of the building, everything happened at once. A blue flash of men's scrubs, the snap of plastic restraints, the Scarecrow let out a high, piercing cry and thudded to the ground. His feet thrashed as one of the techs fought to bundle his kicking legs.

Lisa Cross, MD, stepped around the warring men, white coat blinding in the midday sun. She held the plastic cap of a prefilled syringe; with each step, her stethoscope flashed bright silver. She knelt down next to Mimi. "He did this?" She held her hand right where the Scarecrow had, and the gesture looked so similar that I wondered if he had simply been trying to stop the bleeding.

Mimi couldn't speak. On the other side of the fence, J.J. said, "No, it was the fence. Her leg—I think it's broken."

"Mom, he was trying to find you," Caro said, staring off

across the yard. I followed her gaze. Ernie the tech was standing again, brushing off his hands in a continued stream of *motherfuckers*. The Scarecrow lay, bound and silent, his face turned toward us. His eyes blinked slowly under heavy lashes, and his mouth, like Mimi's, was pressed tightly in pain.

"Don't worry about him," our mother said. "Mimi, you need to stand if you can."

Mimi tried once and flopped back down again, so our mother bent over and scooped her up. At ten, Mimi was only a head shorter than our mother, but she curled into her neck like she was much littler. Our mother struggled under the weight, shifting once, then turned to Caro and J.J. through the fence.

"Where's Denise?"

They answered by looking up, and she followed their gaze. Her look cut through all the waving leaves and branches until it met my own, then went further, burrowing deep into my skull. It felt like I was witnessing my own dissection.

When she spoke, her voice was tighter than usual but no less commanding. "Go home now," she said. "All of you."

I felt movement return to my arms. Clumsy and shaking, I scrambled down the tree to where J.J. and Caro were waiting. The yard was empty, my mother and Mimi and all the men gone. How had the Scarecrow been taken back inside, bound as he was by the restraints? I don't like to think about the answer.

J.J. cleared her throat and stepped between me and the fence, picking up her knit cap from where it had fallen. In the panic, all of us had stripped down to the most animal versions of ourselves and now that it was over, we were quickly re-acclimatizing to our personalities. She pulled the hat on, then folded it back so you could see the sides of her cropped hair. In a few years J.J. would come out as a lesbian, and at thirteen,

you could tell she was trying both to telegraph and hide the fact that she felt different, which mostly resulted in her wearing Daddy's winter clothes year-round.

Caro wiped her face with the back of her hand, elegant as a black-and-white-movie star. At twelve, just a year younger than J.J., she was the most sensitive, able to pick up on our mother's shifting moods before the rest of us. So when she took my hand and said, "We'd better go tell Daddy before she calls him," J.J. and I listened, picking up our leaden feet and starting along down the path toward home.

The graying sidewalk was pitted and cracked, and empty holes trailed alongside where railings had once stood. The whole campus was like that, filled with ghostly reminders of its former grandeur. Those days weren't the ones to idolize, our mother often told us: in the time of secrecy around mental illness, before pharmaceutical intervention, patients languished in these wards for their entire lives. But what wards they had been! We crossed into the shadow of the great limestone admin building, then wound around past the giant stone dormitories of Wards A and B.

The smoking yard for Ward B, which had only a short chain-link fence, was empty.

"Did they lock down?" I asked, hearing the squeak of fear in my voice.

"I didn't hear the sirens," J.J. said, and we continued along in silence.

On the other side of Ward B's empty yard was the identical Ward A, doors and first-floor windows blocked with peeling plywood. I was too young to remember what it was like before Ward A closed, but J.J. and our mother told us stories: the patients housed there had been ancient and sedate, born in

a time when children with disabilities were sent away to institutions and left there to be forgotten. On sunny days, the staff would push their wheelchairs out in a line into the rec yard, and then after a long and silent hour, they'd be pushed back inside. The last of those patients died in 1992, three years after I was born, and the entire building was shuttered. The four of us sometimes broke in when we were bored, climbing on the old metal bed frames and writing our names on the dust-covered windows. There wasn't much to do beyond that, and the shadowy hallways felt heavy with an old sadness and a present fear: that this very thing could happen to Wards B and C, as well.

This fear lurked everywhere across the grounds, a mist so fine it crept into every brick and balance sheet. Across the country, mental health advocates and belt-tightening legislators alike were calling for deinstitutionalization, for "less restrictive accommodations." Each year the staff list grew smaller, and we watched as patients were ferried out to halfway houses and group homes. The Hill was crumbling, fast.

You could see it everywhere we walked. Past the rusting swing set and the weedy gardens and down along the dry creek bed, through the patchy woods filled with the remnants of our forts, abandoned in the heat of the summer like tiny wards themselves. Then the path sloped, taking us down through the staff cottages: twenty-five of them total, maybe ten of them occupied, all but ours by single adults, nurses and techs who didn't earn enough money to rent a place off campus.

As the director of psychiatry for the entire hospital, our mother made \$170,000 a year, which to my nine-year-old self seemed almost unfathomable. She was saving nearly all of it for our tuition—undergraduate, then medical school, which we were all expected to attend. But thriftiness was not the only

reason we lived where we did. In our war, as in any other, proximity was power. It's harder to steal land to which someone has chained herself.

Our feet had just touched the porch of Cottage 10 when we heard the gravel crunch behind us. We turned to see one of the ward vans pull up and our mother and Mimi get out. Mimi's arm and cheek were covered with Band-Aids, and she was leaning on a crutch that looked way too big for her. It was clear that each step she took was painful, and her foot still hung at a strange angle. Nevertheless, our mother ushered her inside with the rest of us, and we scrambled in one rush through the screen door.

Daddy was sitting at the desk in the corner of the cottage's main room, the makeshift office that housed our desktop computer. When he first saw us, he nodded only briefly, then, when Mimi and her crutches came into view, he sprang up so fast his chair toppled.

"Jesus—Mimi—girls, what happened?" He was halfway across the room when he saw our mother. "Lisa?"

Our mother stood in the doorway, silent for a long moment. With her face sweaty and her bun beginning to unravel, she looked more rattled than I'd ever seen her.

"They climbed a tree into the rec yard. Into *Ward C*." She pressed her lips tightly together. "You're all too smart to act that stupid."

"We weren't climbing in," J.J. said, which was true. "We just wanted to look, Mimi didn't know the branch would break."

Our mother held up a hand. "That man who touched you? He's one of the HB95s," she said, a term we all knew that meant he'd been tried and found not guilty by virtue of insanity. "Alexander White. He drowned three boys in a lake. He held them under with his own hands."

We stood in stunned silence. I could smell the cold, brackish water closing around me.

J.J. said, "The mentally ill are much more likely to be the victim of violence than the perpetrator." This was something our mother said often, but hearing her own words repeated back charged her into a frenzy. Caro felt it first, ducking backward and pulling me with her.

Our mother turned to face J.J. straight on. "You're the oldest," she said. "You should have known better." She stepped into the kitchen and from under the sink yanked out a black plastic garbage bag. She shook it out with hard, fast snaps.

"You know this incident will have to be reported? It'll be on Kelly's desk tomorrow. You think she needs an excuse? She doesn't."

J.J. shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her cargo shorts.

Our mother started down the hall toward the room we all shared. We rushed in after her, even Mimi, even Daddy, whose quiet protest of *Li-sa* disappeared beneath the sound of her footfalls.

The room was small, filled with two sets of bunk beds: one for J.J. and Mimi, one for me and Caro. Our mother stomped over to the top bunk where J.J. slept. I guess I knew all along she would go for the dolls.

"Maybe," our mother said, holding one of the dolls by the foot, "this will help you be less childish." She dropped it into the empty bag.

Now it was J.J.'s turn to let out a cry. "No! Please—put them back!"

I couldn't stand to look. J.J.'s dolls were her one concession to femininity, a collection of porcelain girls she asked for on each birthday and on Christmas, with ruffled crinolines and

sausage-curl hair. Each night after lights-out we could hear her moving them around, setting them posed in new positions so they didn't get bored.

Each one of them—Abigail and Ruthie and Elliana and the one whose name J.J. kept a secret, even from us—our mother dropped into the bag. I could hear the snap of porcelain limbs breaking and Mimi's ragged breathing beside me. Was that how it had sounded when her own leg snapped?

"Daddy," J.J. pleaded, grabbing his T-shirt. "Tell her to put them back."

"Lisa." Daddy stepped forward, hand outstretched. Our mother hefted the sack like Santa Claus.

"She's obviously sorry," Daddy went on. "Lisa, please."

Our parents rarely disagreed. They each had their role—our mother the leader, the advocate, the zealous genius; our father the follower, the details man, the one who made sure we had mayo in the fridge and the right vaccinations for school. He'd probably been the one to purchase the garbage bag our mother now held. "Come on," he said slowly, and I knew she'd eventually say, *Okay*.

Except she didn't. She swept past us and went back out the front door. Standing beside the van, she called, "Mimi, come with me. I'm taking you to the ER."

J.J. raced onto the porch like she was going to throw herself after them, wrestle the bag from our mother's grip. Then she stopped at the top of the stairs like she'd hit glass. I knew. We all knew. It was over.

Daddy picked Mimi up in his arms, carrying her carefully to the waiting van. When he bent inside to help her with the buckle, he said something to our mother, and there was a long silence in return. Slam of two doors, spark of the engine, the van backed up and pulled away, heading down the long gravel

road that led to the exit gate. Then it was just the four of us left: Daddy, J.J., Caro, and me.

Daddy turned to J.J. "I'll get you some new ones," he said. It was the first time I'd ever heard him offer something that contradicted our mother's direct instruction. It would not be the last.

J.J. dug her nails into the flaking black paint that covered the metal railing of the porch, hands turning white. Then she released a long-held breath.

"No," she said. "Don't." Then she looked at Caro and me in turn, and I felt us lock back into one unit. Listening to my sisters' breathing, feeling the warmth of their bodies as we stood side by side, felt good and familiar. I closed my eyes and bowed my head as my hands finally stopped shaking.

A WEEK LATER, a thick white envelope in our mother's hand as she made her way down the Hill well after dark. We watched her set down her keys and open the huge orange binder she kept atop the refrigerator, easily grabbable in case of fire. This was our war plan, filled with checklists and photocopies of letters we'd sent the city council, the governor, Congress. She opened the envelope and slid the contents into a folder behind a new tab.

"Kelly's sniffing around," she said. "She heard about the incident with the fence."

Of course we knew when our mother said Kelly, she meant Kelly MacLain, the secretary of DHHS, the state's Department of Health and Human Services. We knew the names of all the legislators and lawyers, the advocates and allies who with a stroke of a pen could turn Wards B and C, too, into hulking silos of empty stone. We dreamed about yanking those pens from their hands and breaking them.

We gathered around her as she flipped forward in the binder,

with Mimi leaning against me so as not to put weight on her new cast.

"What do we do?" asked J.J. I had thought that the destruction of her dolls would make J.J. angry at our mother, but if she was, she had hidden it deeply. Instead, she seemed even more eager to prove herself.

Our mother exhaled. "We're going to need to move faster," she said. And then she looked back up through the tiny dark kitchen window, and we knew she was staring past the walkways and the trees to the four stone buildings: shuttered Ward A, bustling Wards B and C, and the admin building planted firmly in the middle. Four buildings to match four daughters, the shape of the grounds the same shape as our family.

People often asked our mother why she fought so hard for a crumbling institution in a state she hadn't even visited until she'd turned twenty-four. "Because it's the right thing to do," she always told us. But there are so many causes one can devote oneself to wholly, and this cause was so difficult. Was it the power she was able to wield? The respect she was unlikely to find anywhere else? Yes, and yes. But there was something else too.

Our mother's own mother had seen shadows, ones that seemed real enough that she cut her skin where they touched her. Our mother's father, Grandpa Cross, was convinced that prayer alone would save her, and when those shadows drove her car off the road and into a tree, he said simply that they must not have prayed hard enough. Our mother was nine.

It could have destroyed her but it didn't—it inspired her. She went to school, then to battle, to keep the occupants of the wards locked inside. A type of love so entirely intermixed with a desire for control that you couldn't separate the individual parts. It drove her like gasoline.

As for us, it would be wrong to say we were simply soldiers, acting out her orders. You have to understand, it was Mercy Hill. It was more than a place we lived, it was the place we were made, as if our mother had gone out and formed us from the red clay mounded beneath it. The last of its kind, an asylum for those who could go nowhere else. From our births, we had been fighting for this mission, our goal reinforced by constant attacks from the outside world.

We four pressed in tighter around our mother until the heat of our breathing felt like the beginnings of some fire. Then, after a long moment, Lisa Cross smiled.

"Good girls," she said, "I love my good girls." And we moved in close together, holding each other and holding her, unable to tell where we ended and the others began.

"A SPECTACULAR TRIUMPH."

-KHALED HOSSEINI

**GOOD
PEOPLE**

A NOVEL

**PATMEENA
SABIT**

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Editorial assistant: Austin Parks

Production editor: Terry Deal

Text designer: Amani Shakrah

Production: Heather Williamson

Copy editor: Sibylle Kazeroid

Proofreaders:

Publicist:

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The views and opinions expressed are those of the speaker or, in certain instances, the people for whom they have been authorized to speak. These accounts are presented here in their entirety. They have not been edited in the interests of brevity, grammar, or clarity.

Senior investigators from the law enforcement departments of Fairfax County, Virginia, and Fulton County, New York, declined to participate, citing the open nature of the investigation.

The Hour

Not for Distribution



Qandi Gul

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

. . . And our eyes fell on the children. Little flowers born in war and grown in war, who of all the world knew only the things war brought and the things it took. Then we said: God, You have brought this on our heads and made us endure and we have endured. In Your great wrath at we know not what sins of ours, You have doomed this dirt and turned it into a graveyard for the living and the dead. But even You—even You have no right to these children.

So we fled. Leaving all. The bones of our mothers and fathers. Home. Honor. Hope. Sister away from sister. Brother from brother. Our people blown like ash to the four corners of the earth. Barbad barbad. Some of us, by what hand of fate, brought here. To this strange country that before the wars came we had never even seen in a dream of a dream of a dream

August 30

Margaret Hoffman

FORMER SHARAF FAMILY NEIGHBOR

I remember it clear as yesterday.

I was up with the birds, like always, puttering around the yard all morning, trying to get at the crabgrass before it got too hot out. We have someone who comes in every week to take care of the lawn and flowers and things, but in the summer the crabgrass shoots up like fire. Leave it alone for even a couple of days and just the one little spot'll send off a zillion seeds. Ruins the whole yard before you can say go.

James doesn't understand why I bother. He's always saying we should just nuke the whole thing and start over. But all it needs is a little patience and effort. It's a shallow grass and pulls out easy, and the whole trick is to scuff it up and lay down a bit of bark or pine straw where it used to be. Cut off its light and it's gone for good.

I remember I was out there a little longer than usual that day. We were having a big cookout over the weekend and I wanted everything looking nice and neat. It was about midmorning by the time I finished up with all the weeding and watering, and after I turned the sprinklers off I went around and gave everything a once-over, you know, just checking the nets for critters and the leaves for beetles and mites.

It was already broiling out. All summer long, we'd had the most glorious weather—warm, sunny days and clear, cool nights. But toward the end of August it just started burning up. It hadn't dipped below a hundred in a week straight, and they were blaring heat wave warnings day

and night, going on about it being the hottest August in Fairfax since God knows when.

Well, my knees were starting to act up and I was more than ready to call it a day, but the hydrangeas had come in so gorgeous, I wanted to get some for the house before I went in. So I got my clippers and a little bucket of water and came around front. That's when I saw them, right there across the street.

The two older kids were out in the driveway with their dad. There was a heap of bags just sitting there, and it looked like the kids were helping him fit everything into the trunk. The little ones were chasing each other around the yard, shouting their heads off and having the time of their lives, from the sound of it. And mom—she was just standing at the front door, talking on the phone. She saw me and waved and I waved back.

To be honest I didn't really pay much attention to them after that. I just wanted to get the heck out of the sun and put my feet up with something cool to drink. I cut a few bunches of flowers as quick as I could and went on inside.

It was about half an hour later when I came back out to check the mailbox. And by then they were all gone.

Ustad Khairyar

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

That was in '97 or '98 when they came. In the winter.

One day we heard there was a new family in Arlington, a man and his wife and little son, come just a few days before, who didn't have anyone here.

By that time, those of us who fled in those first years after the Russians invaded had been here for sixteen, seventeen years already. We'd made a little community. People of our own we could sit and stand and come and go with.

It's true they were strangers to us and we to them. But that didn't mean anything. Those of us who came before always tried to help the new ones any way we could. Because even if we lived here a hundred years more, we could never forget how those first times were like Judgment Day itself. How it wasn't like coming to a new country but to a whole new world, and coming to it like penniless deaf-mutes at that.

If nothing else they were our people. Our fathers and grandfathers were buried under the same black soil. That was enough.

Aziza Popal

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

We women called each other and divided the cooking amongst ourselves so we could take them dinner that very day.

Early in the afternoon it started to snow, flakes as big as my hand, and by evening the roads were in a bad situation. Everywhere on the way there were accidents and the police. We were all in some six or seven cars, one behind the other, and the snow made us so slow, it was black night by the time we reached there.

He opened the door to our knock and she was standing there behind him, both their mouths open and their eyes big, haq ow paq to see us, some twenty or thirty strangers crowded in the hall. Ustad said, “Countryman, put your shoes and coat on and come help us bring in the food. And sister, I hope to God your house is clean because we’ve brought the women and you know how they like to talk.”

Then he came out, barefoot, and took Ustad’s arm—not his hand but his whole arm, like a child—and she started crying like her heart had just burst.

Asma Sarwary

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

They didn't have anything. Not a splinter to call their own. They came at a bad time, just before Christmas, when all the refugee offices were closed for the holidays, and the caseworker told them to make do until they could see about everything in the New Year.

They were in a small one-bedroom apartment in one of those old low-rise buildings. On one side of the living room suitcases were stacked on top of each other and covered with a bedsheet, and on the other side blankets were folded on the bare floor where they sat and slept. In the kitchen there were just some few cups and plates and bowls and a little pot they were using to boil the water for tea.

When we saw how it was we called every Afghan in the county. The very next day people started bringing whatever they did or didn't have from their own homes. Boxes and boxes of pots and pans and dishes. Mattresses and blankets and pillows. Farid brought an old television and VCR. Zarghoona gave them a little round dining table with four chairs. And Halima had just bought a whole new furniture set for her salon, and when it came she paid for a truck and sent them all the old things. Two nice black leather couches, a red Turkish carpet, and a beautiful glass coffee table. Soon the apartment was so full you couldn't turn around in it.

We also put money together and bought them a month's worth of groceries. Big big sacks of flour, sugar, rice, onions, potatoes, red beans,

and black and green tea. Kilos and kilos of lamb and chicken and kofta. A ten-gallon tin of oil.

Even after all that there was a pretty amount left over, so Aziza and I went to the K-mart and bought them a stroller for the boy and a microwave and a nice big silver kettle that whistled when the water boiled.

You won't believe it, but years and years later, when the children were all grown and our hair was half white, I would go visit, and Maryam would make tea with that same kettle. And it was still like new! Not a scratch on it. Things in those days were just of a different quality. Not like these cheap, two-dollar things of today and tomorrow. But we always used to laugh about it, about how that kettle was going to outlive us all.

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August 30

Kalyani Nageshvara

SALES ASSOCIATE. PEOPLES DRUG

The police take my everything. My name, my address, my phone number. They write all. How long I been working here, what time I'm working, where I'm working before.

They say, "Tell to us everything."

I say, "What everything?"

They say, "What they did? What they said? Are they happy? Are they sad?"

I say, "My God, sirs, please. I don't know all these things. How I can know all these things? This is bigger store, isn't it? People are coming, people are going. Too many people. How I can remember then what everyone is doing? If they are laughing or talking or crying?"

I tell them only like I know.

That time in the morning it's quiet. Just some few people waiting in back in pharmacy for medications. I'm putting the things for special sale for the holiday on the front shelf like my boss, Mr. Carboni, he told me. Jorge and Eddie are working too, but they're in back. Only me I'm in front.

I didn't see them first, because the door is on my back, but I hear shouting so loud so loud I get scared, you know, I say my God what happened? Then I see, I say oh these are just children. A girl and a boy, maybe just a little smaller than my sons, six and seven, like that. The little boy, he's wearing the Spider-Man T-shirt just like my sons. Then

one tall girl she's coming after them with the long long hairs and the big big eyes and doing too much fashion. There's a bigger boy with her too. He has the same eyes like her, but he's not the same beautiful like that.

Then fast fast they're running everywhere in the store shouting, "Get this one! Get that one!" I don't know how long. Maybe five, maybe ten minutes. Not long time. When they finished I come to the checkout.

After, when the police are coming to ask from me so many questions like I tell you, I read the store receipt copy so many times like I'm studying for my matriculation exam. I say maybe I remember something then. Maybe I know then what they want I should say. Believe me, until today that receipt is copied on my mind. Water, Coca-Colas, Dr Peppers, apple juice, cranberry juice, chips, pretzels, gold fishes, Pop-Tarts, oatmeal cookies, gummy worms, water-gun toys, filmi star magazines, nail polish, mascara, and sun-screening cream.

I'm scanning and scanning and then the older girl she say, "Oh, we forget the lesssalt crackers for Mummy." She's running after it and the older boy he say, "Hurry up." Then they pay and take all the bags. The little boy and girl they say so cute, "Thank you, thank you, have a nice day," and I laugh and say the same like that to them. Then they go fast fast just like they came.

I tell them everything just like that.

But then they say, "What else? Think more. Maybe you see something or hear something that you don't know you see it and hear it. It's too much important. If you want to help us then you should remember."

But how I can see something I don't see it? How I can hear something I don't hear it?

Then all the nights I'm not sleeping. All the days I'm not eating. My clothes are becoming too loose. I wish I never see those children in my life. Like a big rock it's sitting here on my heart. Sometimes I can't breathe. I say my God my God what they want from me? Maybe they take me out from my job because I'm not remembering properly. Maybe they put me in the jail because they think me I know something and I'm not saying. Maybe they even think me I did something and they take us out from this country.

Every minute I'm thinking now they coming for me. Every time the doorbell is ring, my heart it's stopped. I show my husband where I'm keeping just some little money for emergency in ziplock in the freezer, and I take my gold set and my bangles to my friend's house so she can keep it for my sons.

I'm waiting like that for so many days and my blood pressure is becoming too high and sometimes I feel like the needles is coming in my heart. Then one day I just come to my boss Mr. Carboni and I cry.

I say, "Sir, please. Every day I'm coming one and half hours in the bus and I'm going back the same at night. I never take day off even if I'm sick. My mother she died and on the second day I came to work. Only for my children. You know I'm working hard only for them. That's why I'm not wasting the time looking to every one customer to see what he is doing and saying. Only I'm watching them if they look poor like a thief, like you say. Please sir. Don't let the police they do something to me."

He say, "Okay, okay, Kaly. It's okay. There's no problem for you. Forget all these things. You just do your work good like always you do it and forget that all. Just forget that."

He say like this, but still I'm scared. I say maybe they told him say like this to make a trick on me. But then he say they know I'm only saying the truth because they see it in the camera video. That's why they don't come back to ask me again.

Now every day when I come to work I see the outside camera I say thanks God. I see the inside camera I say thanks God. Even I'm not at work and I see camera at bank and grocery, I'm saying always thanks God.

One time my littler son he ask me, "Why you always saying like that, Mummy?"

I say, "Because even we don't know it, but always always God is watching on us."

Saif Anwari

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

He didn't want to drive a taxi. That was the whole word. Bass.

He said, "There's nothing in it. A man gets in a taxi, and he never gets out. I need to do something for my family."

We tried to make him understand. To reason with him. We said, "What else do you think you can do for them, brother? Have you studied here? Other than a hi-bye-yes-no, do you know the tongue? Listen to us. We've lived here a long time. We know. There are two ways open to you. You can break your back working like a dog forty hours a week at the Walmart Malmart and then work forty hours more for cash doing some pizza mizza delivery, and at the end of the month have just enough in your pocket not to die. Or you can drive a taxi.

"We're not saying the taxi is easy. Twelve hours a day in a taxi is going to twist your spine and rip you in two. It's going to turn your heart from life itself. But what's the choice? For people like us, it's the only thing here to give our families bread and still have something left to put aside for a good or bad day."

We said, "Who doesn't do it? Look at Hikmat Popal. His father was the king's ambassador to Japan. Look at Doctor Arif. Before the Russians came, he was head of surgery at the biggest hospital in Kabul. There's Ustad Sirat. He studied on scholarship in Austria and wrote four books of poetry so beautiful it makes grown men cry. But what does that mean

here? Not as much as a dog's fart. A dog's fart, brother, not even a man's. So we all lower our heads and do what we need to do."

But who were you telling? Our tongues sprouted hair trying to convince him, but he sat there with that big, ugly slab of a face so stiff and sour you'd think he was doing us a favor by even listening. Like we were forcing him to it so he could fill our pockets and not his own. As if he was the son of King Zahir Shah himself and not the son of some bricklayer, without an ABC in his head or a red cent in his pocket.

But the new ones are all like that. Without exception. They come here seeing big big dreams. They think all they need to do is roll up their sleeves and sweep the green green dollars in from the streets. But in very little time they all fall from the sky.

So we said our necks are free before God. We did our duty. If he's a small fool he'll come to the right road himself soon enough. If he's a big one then nothing we say will change him. In the end, he's a man to himself. It's like you people always say: This is a free country. So we said let him be free.

Not for Distribution

Ustad Khairyar

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

Many people soured on him after that. They said he was nothing but an arrogant donkey. But to me it didn't matter what he would or wouldn't do. My thinking was that nothing came out of our pockets either way, so why be offended?

The true word was that when you sat and really talked with him you could see he had a very big heart. Very open. Very simple. I don't mean stupid. He was far, far from stupid. Just how far we didn't understand until years and years later. I mean only that there were no politics in him. Whatever he felt, he said. You know, our people have a very bad habit. When you ask a man what he had for breakfast, and he had milk, he'll say he had eggs just because he thinks there's something in keeping even that from you. But Sharaf would tell you anything. Even things other men would be ashamed of or hide. Masalan, he never tried to lie about his people or his lack of education. It's true we would have known from the way he stood and sat and talked, but that hasn't stopped every farmer's son you meet here from telling you that in Kabul his father was a minister of state. You had to give him credit for that.

The big problem with Sharaf—the entire issue—was that he wanted to swallow the whole world in one gulp, and he thought all he had to do was figure out how to open his mouth wide enough.

August 30

Jay Chapman Jr.

PROPRIETOR. THE TWILIGHT DINER

We're one of the first few exits after a good long stretch of I-86, so we always have people passing through for gas or a bite to eat, usually folks coming or going from camping and fishing or whatnot. But a few years ago some fellow hiking one of the mountain trails swore up and down on his nana's grave that he'd come face-to-face with Bigfoot. Not only did he live to tell the tale, he had a few fuzzy-looking pictures of it he took while running away.

Well, sure enough, next thing you know, folks started seeing it everywhere. It was peeking through their windows at night and stalking deer hunters out at Marsh Creek and rummaging through the canned preserves on Mrs. Hamilton's porch early one morning before she scared it away with an air horn. And that's not even talking about all the unearthly screams everyone started hearing late at night and the poor cats and dogs spooked for no other reason anyone could think of.

But that's just human nature, people being sheep and all. It would have died out soon enough, the way these things do, if it weren't for someone with too much time and money who decided to put a bounty on the thing—fifty thousand stiff, a hundred thousand for a heartbeat.

That's when the loonies invaded. All ages, all kinds, from all over. Dressed like trees and bushes, with night-vision goggles and recordings of Bigfoot mating calls to make it all romantic.

One of them showed me these bullets he had custom-made—said

they were some special alloy mixed with liquid nicotine, so all he had to do was just nick the thing and yell timber. There was even a husband and wife who'd been chasing Bigfeet across the world for fifteen years, and a professor from an honest-to-God university.

What do I think? I think anyone with one good eye and half the sense and gray matter God gave them can see there isn't anything in those pictures except a half-rotten tree trunk. The lighting from the big storms cracks them into spooky shapes and the wind and rain do the rest. But I've been around long enough to know you need to let people find their pleasures where they can, and if that's in God, Buddha, or a big hairy monster, who am I to judge? Especially when we had to hire three new people to take care of the rush, and there was a line out the door from opening to closing.

Even now, with mostly just the diehards poking around and normal folks coming through to buy souvenirs and take pictures with the life-sized Bigfoot replica at our little Sasquatch Museum, business is good. And no one around here, including yours truly, has a hankering to look that gift foot in the mouth. Now that's not to say evil doesn't lurk in these woods—I'd bet for a fact it does—but for my money, I'd say it takes human form.

All that just to say, who's looking twice around here when a few kids and their parents come walking through the door? The only reason I remembered them so well was 'cause it was so quiet. I can't say exactly when, but it was somewhere between two, when the last of the last of the lunchtime stragglers move on, and five, when the early supper rush gets going.

There were still some of the regular old loners whiling away a summer afternoon with the paper and some coffee and pie. For service it was just me, the cook, a dishwasher, and one girl. Liz was at home with some kind of summer cold, and the second shift staff don't come in until a quarter to five.

When they walked in Katie was busy at another table, so I grabbed a pitcher of ice water and some menus and went over myself. They'd already sat themselves down at one of the booths up front there next to the big windows, and seemed excited about the view, taking pictures of

the mountains and all. On a hot clear afternoon like that you can see them running a long way off into the haze. Green and then blue and then almost black. You live around something day in and out you get pretty used to it, but to out-of-towners it's something else. A real postcard view, Liz calls it.

I was pouring their waters and I said, "Is this you alls' first time seeing the Alleghenies?"

The older girl and the little boy were taking funny pictures of themselves against the window, sticking their tongues out and crossing their eyes, and they stopped and stared at me like I was talking Martian. She said, "Seeing the what?"

I explained they were looking at part of the Allegheny Mountain Range, which is part of the Appalachians, but they didn't seem all that excited about a free geography lesson.

The man took glasses out of his shirt pocket to look at the menu. He said, "What do you recommend for us, sir?"

He had a pretty heavy accent. I would've asked him where they were from—just out of pure curiosity—but Liz tells me that's not considered polite anymore. So I just said our country-fried steak and garlic mashed potatoes with biscuits and gravy had people coming back from across state lines, but you couldn't go wrong with the deluxe burger either. That's a half-pound patty topped with white cheddar, onion rings, pulled pork, pickles, and camp slaw on a grilled honey roll. He asked if we could leave the pork off it, and I said that wouldn't be a problem. I suggested our mac and cheese for the little ones, and he said that was fine. The older boy was so busy watching something on his phone with his ears plugged up that his mother had to reach over and touch his arm to get him to order.

André looked a little nervous when I went back and gave him their orders. He was in training back then and all alone until the supper shift, but I told him it was fine, to just take his time and do it all up right. We don't promise quick. We promise quality.

I helped Katie carry their plates out when everything was ready. One thing I really remember, because it stood out so much, is that as soon as we put the food down, the kids all tucked their gadgets away

without being asked. Things like that is how you can tell parents have done their job right. You know, doing what we do, we see more kids than most folks, and it makes the hair stand straight up on your head to see some of them unholy terrors. Anyone can be a parent. If you really think about it, it's a scary thought. Scariest than any eight-foot monster running around the woods.

A little bit later the plumber came by and I went back to the kitchen with him. We were there for a while and when I came back out the booth was empty, but there was a stuffed dinosaur the little girl had been playing with lying under the table.

I caught them just as they were pulling out of the lot. The lady was real happy to see me.

She said, "I don't know what we would have done. She won't sleep without it." She tried to get a thankyou out of the little one, but she just hid her face behind her pal.

Before I went back in I looked at their plates. Sheer habit. Liz and I have had this game going for years where we try to spot plates from as far from Pennsylvania as possible. Whoever wins gets off garbage duty that day. The farthest I've ever spotted is Hawaii, but she's seen some doozies. The Northwest Territories, Alaska, even Mexico.

Virginia plates aren't anything special out here, though. A dime a dozen.

Aziza Popal

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

She wasn't a beautiful woman. Not ugly—but not beautiful. Dark, small small eyes, a nose like a turnip, sunspots on her face. But she was a very nice woman. So good-natured, so sweet. Always happy, always laughing. Never a bad thing to say to anyone. From the beginning we all liked her.

She had quality and education too. It showed from the way she talked. Like from a book. Always polite. Always soft. "I'm sorry, sister, can I trouble you to give me that cup?" or "Please excuse me for sitting with my back to you." Never anything chatee mattee. Never loud or stupid or vulgar. Some women open their mouths and in two words you know they're from the village and have never seen a school door. Milking cows and making dung patties one day and sitting in America the next. Truly, for some people the war was a great blessing.

But with her we could see very quickly that she was . . . how can I say . . . —from better people than him. Even before she told us her people were Ahmadzais and her father had been an engineer who had worked with the Americans in building roads all through the country during the king's reign. Ahmadzais are a very respectable tribe. Very accomplished, learned people.

Him? May my neck close before God if I know even now what he was. Some said his people were from some northern province where his father was a sharecropper. Others said they were from the wild mountain

people that came down into the cities during the war, and his father had been a bricklayer in Kabul.

Not that there's anything wrong in that. We're all God's people. All made and born the same. All going back to the same dirt. And he was a nice man. A very nice man. For her, a wonderful husband. He treated her with such respect. Always helping her in the house and with the children. With none of the choong choong nagging and sourness of other men. They were very happy together.

But still . . . you could see he had no schooling, no manners. Just how he talked—it was like he was barking at you, his spit flying everywhere. How are you, sister? How's your health? *Whap whap whap. Whap whap whap.* And in the middle of a room full of people he would sit there scratching himself like it was nothing at all. When I tell you we women didn't know where to look for shame!

I remember one day, all of us—some twenty, thirty families—went to the beach to have a picnic and spend the day by the sea. After lunch we were drinking tea and I looked to where the men were sitting and saw him tear a loose thread from his pants and clean his teeth with it. . . .

But then that was the tragedy of so many girls from good families after the Russians came and the fighting started. Millions on millions of people fleeing, rockets falling on our heads, the whole country boiling in blood. So who was thinking of marriage? The girls who were ready to be married had no men to marry them. The old ways were all lost. There was no more asking whose daughter am I and whose son are you? In those years a girl had to take whoever asked for her or sit in her father's house an old maid and have her head go white.

My own cousin married her father's gardener. Just imagine. The gardener. A sooty, greasy boy from the village. And she a jewel of a girl, so beautiful you could see the dew shining on her neck. The daughter of a judge. Graduated from the university with a degree in literature. All turned to dirt.

It was a common story. Girls like flowers married to butchers, vegetable sellers, barbers. Given hand in hand to men that before the war they wouldn't have let carry their corpses. . . .

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