# Celebrated Stories of 2016

# Excerpt Sampler

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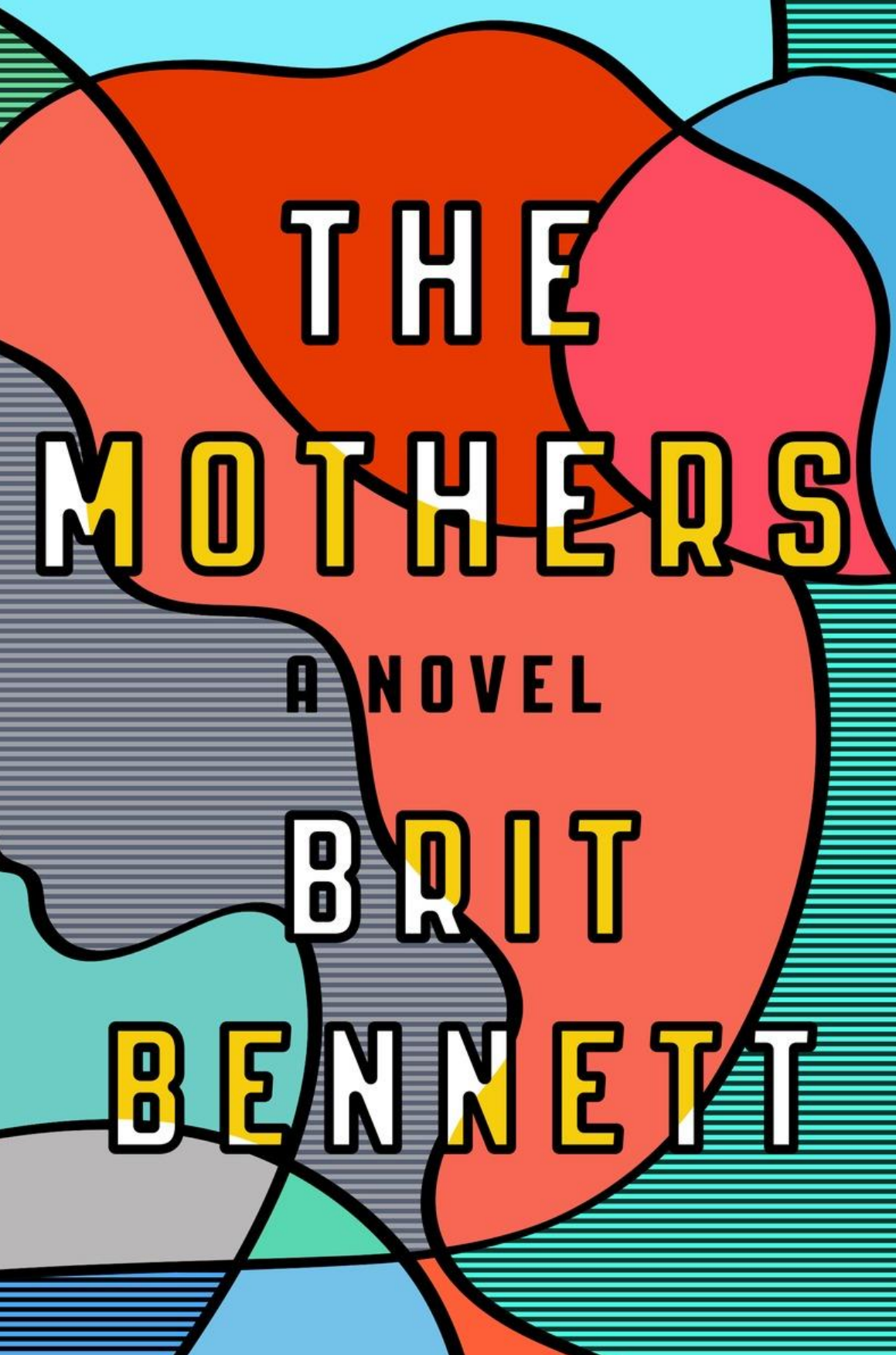
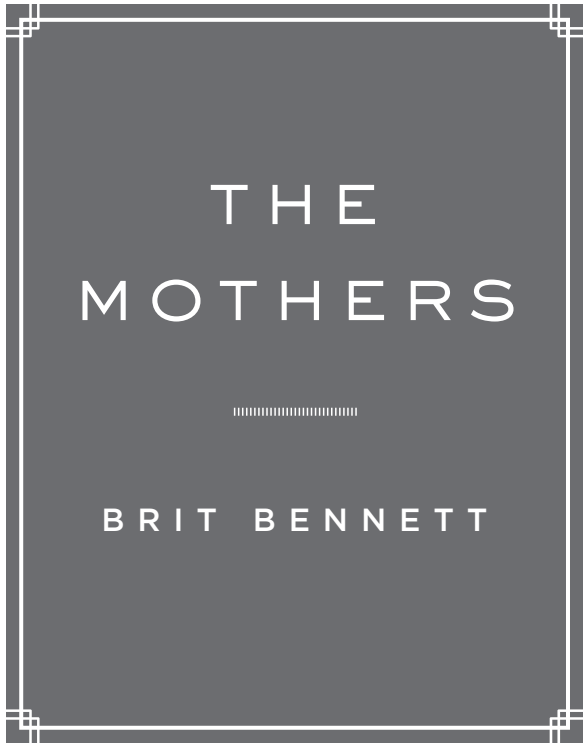
# CELEBRATED STORIES OF 2016
# EXCERPT SAMPLER

*Table of Contents*


THE
MOTHERS
A NOVEL
BRIT
BENNETT

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*For Mom, Dad, Brianna, and Jynna*

# THE MOTHERS

# ONE

We didn't believe when we first heard because you know how church folk can gossip.

Like the time we all thought First John, our head usher, was messing around on his wife because Betty, the pastor's secretary, caught him cozying up at brunch with another woman. A young, fashionable woman at that, one who switched her hips when she walked even though she had no business switching anything in front of a man married forty years. You could forgive a man for stepping out on his wife once, but to romance that young woman over buttered croissants at a sidewalk café? Now that was a whole other thing. But before we could correct First John, he showed up at Upper Room Chapel that Sunday with his wife and the young, hip-switching woman—a great-niece visiting from Fort Worth—and that was that.

When we first heard, we thought it might be that type of secret, although, we have to admit, it had felt different. Tasted different, too.

All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret, a secret that began the summer Nadia Turner got knocked up by the pastor's son and went to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it.

She was seventeen then. She lived with her father, a Marine, and without her mother, who had killed herself six months earlier. Since then, the girl had earned a wild reputation—she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her prettiness. And she was pretty, beautiful even, with amber skin, silky long hair, and eyes swirled brown and gray and gold. Like most girls, she'd already learned that pretty exposes you and pretty hides you and like most girls, she hadn't yet learned how to navigate the difference. So we heard all about her sojourns across the border to dance clubs in Tijuana, the water bottle she carried around Oceanside High filled with vodka, the Saturdays she spent on base playing pool with Marines, nights that ended with her heels pressed against some man's foggy window. Just tales, maybe, except for one we now know is true: she spent her senior year of high school rolling around in bed with Luke Sheppard and come springtime, his baby was growing inside her.

Luke Sheppard waited tables at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, a restaurant off the pier known for its fresh food, live music, and family-friendly atmosphere. At least that's what the ad in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* said, if you were fool enough to believe it. If you'd been around Oceanside long enough, you'd know that the

promised fresh food was day-old fish and chips stewing under heat lamps, and the live music, when delivered, usually consisted of ragtag teenagers in ripped jeans with safety pins poking through their lips. Nadia Turner also knew things about Fat Charlie's that didn't fit on a newspaper ad, like the fact that a platter of Charlie's Cheesy Nachos was the perfect drunk snack or that the head cook sold the best weed north of the border. She knew that inside, yellow life preservers hung above the bar and kelp, dark and crispy, dripped from the ceiling, so after long shifts, the three black waiters called it a slave ship. She knew secret things about Fat Charlie's because Luke had told her.

"What about the fish sticks?" she would ask.

"Soggy as shit."

"The seafood pasta?"

"Don't fuck with that."

"What could be so bad about pasta?"

"You know how they make that shit? Take some fish that's been sitting around and stuff it in ravioli."

"Fine, the bread then."

"If you don't finish your bread, we just give it to another table. You about to touch the same bread as some dude that's been digging in his nuts all day."

The winter her mother killed herself, Luke saved Nadia from ordering the crab bites. (Imitation crab deep-fried in lard.) She'd begun disappearing after school, riding buses and hopping off wherever they took her. Sometimes she rode east to Camp Pendleton, where she watched a movie or bowled at Stars and Strikes or played pool with Marines. The young ones were the loneliest, so she always found a pack of privates, awkward with their shorn heads and big boots, and by

the end of the night, she usually ended up kissing one of them until kissing made her feel like crying. Other days she rode north, past Upper Room Chapel, where the coast became frontier. South, and she hit more beach, better beaches, beaches with sand as white as the people who lay on it, beaches with boardwalks and roller coasters, beaches behind gates. She couldn't ride west. West was the ocean.

She rode buses away from her old life, where after school, she'd lingered with her friends in the parking lot before driver's ed or climbed the bleachers to watch the football team practice or caravanned to In-N-Out. She'd goofed around at Jojo's Juicery with her coworkers and danced at bonfires and climbed the jetty when dared because she always pretended to be unafraid. She was startled by how rarely she had been alone back then. Her days felt like being handed from person to person like a baton, her calculus teacher passing her to her Spanish teacher to her chemistry teacher to her friends and back home to her parents. Then one day, her mother's hand was gone and she'd fallen, clattering to the floor.

She couldn't stand to be around anyone now—her teachers, who excused her late work with patient smiles; her friends, who stopped joking when she sat down at lunch, as if their happiness were offensive to her. In AP Government, when Mr. Thomas assigned partner work, her friends quickly paired off with each other, and she was left to work with the other quiet, friendless girl in the class: Aubrey Evans, who skirted off to Christian Club meetings at lunch, not to pad her college resume (she hadn't raised her hand when Mr. Thomas asked who had turned in applications) but because she thought God cared if she spent her free period inside a classroom planning canned food drives. Aubrey Evans, who wore a plain gold purity ring that she twisted around her finger when she talked, who always attended

service at Upper Room by herself, probably the poor holy child of devout atheists who was working hard to lead them into the light. After their first time working together, Aubrey had leaned closer to her, dropping her voice.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," she said. "We've all been praying for you."

She seemed sincere, but what did that matter? Nadia hadn't been to church since her mother's funeral. Instead, she rode buses. One afternoon, she climbed off downtown in front of the Hanky Panky. She was certain someone would stop her—she even looked like a kid with her backpack—but the bouncer perched on a stool near the door barely glanced up from his phone when she ducked inside. At three on a Tuesday, the strip club was dead, empty silver tables dulled under the stage lights. Black shades pulled in front of the windows blocked the plastic sunlight; in the man-made darkness, fat white men with baseball caps pulled low slouched in chairs facing the stage. Under the spotlight, a flabby white girl danced, her breasts swinging like pendulums.

In the darkness of the club, you could be alone with your grief. Her father had flung himself into Upper Room. He went to both services on Sunday mornings, to Wednesday night Bible study, to Thursday night choir practice although he did not sing, although practices were closed but nobody had the heart to turn him away. Her father propped his sadness on a pew, but she put her sad in places no one could see. The bartender shrugged at her fake ID and mixed her a drink and she sat in dark corners, sipping rum-and-Cokes and watching women with beat bodies spin onstage. Never the skinny, young girls—the club saved them for weekends or nights—just older women thinking about grocery lists and child care, their bodies

stretched and pitted from age. Her mother would've been horrified at the thought—her in a strip club, in the light of day—but Nadia stayed, sipping the watery drinks slowly. Her third time in the club, an old black man pulled up a chair beside her. He wore a red plaid shirt under suspenders, gray tufts peeking out from under his Pacific Coast Bait & Tackle cap.

"What you drinkin'?" he asked.

"What're *you* drinking?" she said.

He laughed. "Naw. This a grown man drink. Not for a little thing like you. I'll get you somethin' sweet. You like that, honey? You look like you got a sweet tooth."

He smiled and slid a hand onto her thigh. His fingernails curled dark and long against her jeans. Before she could move, a black woman in her forties wearing a glittery magenta bra and thong appeared at the table. Light brown streaked across her stomach like tiger stripes.

"You leave her be, Lester," the woman said. Then to Nadia. "Come on, I'll freshen you up."

"Aw, Cici, I was just talkin' to her," the old man said.

"Please," Cici said. "That child ain't even as old as your watch."

She led Nadia back to the bar and tossed what was left of her drink down the drain. Then she slipped into a white coat and beckoned for Nadia to follow her outside. Against the slate gray sky, the flat outline of the Hanky Panky seemed even more depressing. Further along the building, two white girls were smoking and they each threw up a hand when Cici and Nadia stepped outside. Cici returned the lazy greeting and lit a cigarette.

"You got a nice face," Cici said. "Those your real eyes? You mixed?"

"No," she said. "I mean, they're my eyes but I'm not mixed."

"Look mixed to me." Cici blew a sideways stream of smoke. "You

a runaway? Oh, don't look at me like that. I won't report you. I see you girls come through here all the time, looking to make a little money. Ain't legal but Bernie don't mind. Bernie'll give you a little stage time, see what you can do. Don't expect no warm welcome though. Hard enough fighting those blonde bitches for tips—wait till the girls see your light-bright ass."

"I don't want to dance," Nadia said.

"Well, I don't know what you're looking for but you ain't gonna find it here." Cici leaned in closer. "You know you got see-through eyes? Feels like I can see right through them. Nothin' but sad on the other side." She dug into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled ones. "This ain't no place for you. Go on down to Fat Charlie's and get you something to eat. Go on."

Nadia hesitated, but Cici dropped the bills into Nadia's palm and curled her fingers into a fist. Maybe she could do this, pretend she was a runaway, or maybe in a way, she was. Her father never asked where she'd been. She returned home at night and found him in his recliner, watching television in a darkened living room. He always looked surprised when she unlocked the front door, like he hadn't even noticed that she'd been gone.

In Fat Charlie's, Nadia had been sitting in the booth toward the back, flipping through a menu, when Luke Sheppard stepped out of the kitchen, white apron slung across his hips, black Fat Charlie's T-shirt stretched across his muscular chest. He looked as handsome as she'd remembered from Sunday School, except he was a man now, bronzed and broad-shouldered, his hard jaw covered in stubble. And he was limping now, slightly favoring his left leg, but the gimpiness

of his walk, its uneven pace and tenderness, only made her want him more. Her mother had died a month ago and she was drawn to anyone who wore their pain outwardly, the way she couldn't. She hadn't even cried at the funeral. At the repast, a parade of guests had told her how well she'd done and her father placed an arm around her shoulder. He'd hunched over the pew during the service, his shoulders quietly shaking, manly crying but crying still, and for the first time, she'd wondered if she might be stronger than him.

An inside hurt was supposed to stay inside. How strange it must be to hurt in an outside way you couldn't hide. She played with the menu flap as Luke limped his way over to her booth. She, and everyone at Upper Room, had watched his promising junior season end last fall. A routine kick return, a bad tackle, and his leg broke, the bone cutting clear through the skin. The commentators had said he'd be lucky if he walked normal again, let alone played another down, so no one had been surprised when San Diego State pulled his scholarship. But she hadn't seen Luke since he'd gotten out of the hospital. In her mind, he was still in a cot, surrounded by doting nurses, his bandaged leg propped toward the ceiling.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

"I work here," he said, then laughed, but his laugh sounded hard, like a chair suddenly scraped against the floor. "How you been?"

He didn't look at her, shuffling through his notepad, so she knew he'd heard about her mother.

"I'm hungry," she said.

"That's how you been? Hungry?"

"Can I get the crab bites?"

"You better not." He guided her finger down the laminated menu to the nachos. "There. Try that."

His hand curved soft over hers like he was teaching her to read, moving her finger under unfamiliar words. He always made her feel impossibly young, like two days later, when she returned to his section and tried to order a margarita. He laughed, tilting her fake ID toward him.

"Come on," he said. "Aren't you, like, twelve?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh fuck you," she said, "I'm seventeen."

But she'd said it a little too proudly and Luke laughed again. Even eighteen—which she wouldn't turn until late August—would seem young to him. She was still in high school. He was twenty-one and had already gone to college, a real university, not the community college where everyone loafed around a few months after graduation before finding jobs. She had applied to five universities and while she waited to hear back, she asked Luke questions about college life, like were dorm showers as gross as she imagined or did people actually stick socks on door handles when they wanted privacy? He told her about undie runs and foam parties, how to maximize your meal plan, how to get extra time on tests by pretending you had a learning problem. He knew things and he knew girls, college girls, girls who wore high heels to class, not sneakers, and carried satchels instead of backpacks, and spent their summers interning at Qualcomm or California Bank & Trust, not making juice at the pier. She imagined herself in college, one of those sophisticated girls, Luke driving to see her, or if she went out of state, flying to visit her over spring break. He would laugh if he knew how she imagined him in her life. He teased her often, like when she began doing her homework in Fat Charlie's.

"Shit," he said, flipping through her calculus book. "You a nerd."

She wasn't, really, but learning came easily to her. (Her mother used to tease her about that—must be nice, she'd say, when Nadia

brought home an aced test she only studied for the night before.) She thought her advanced classes might scare Luke off, but he liked that she was smart. See this girl right here, he'd tell a passing waiter, first black lady president, just watch. Every black girl who was even slightly gifted was told this. But she liked listening to Luke brag and she liked it even more when he teased her for studying. He didn't treat her like everyone at school, who either sidestepped her or spoke to her like she was some fragile thing one harsh word away from breaking.

One February night, Luke drove her home and she invited him inside. Her father was gone for the weekend at the Men's Advance, so the house was dark and silent when they arrived. She wanted to offer Luke a drink—that's what women did in the movies, handed a man a boxy glass, filled with something dark and masculine—but moonlight glinted off glass cabinets emptied of liquor and Luke pressed her against the wall and kissed her. She hadn't told him it was her first time but he knew. In her bed, he asked three times if she wanted to stop. Each time she told him no. Sex would hurt and she wanted it to. She wanted Luke to be her outside hurt.

By spring, she knew what time Luke got off work, when to meet him in the deserted corner of the parking lot, where two people could be alone. She knew which nights he had off, nights she listened for his car crawling up her street and tiptoed past her father's shut bedroom. She knew the days he went to work late, days she slipped him inside the house before her father came home from work. How Luke wore his Fat Charlie's T-shirt a size too small because it helped him earn more tips. How when he dropped to the edge of her bed without saying much, he was dreading a long shift so she didn't say much either, tugging his too-tight shirt over his head and running her hands over the expanse of his shoulders. She knew that being on his

feet all day hurt his leg more than he ever admitted and sometimes, while he slept, she stared at the thin scar climbing toward his knee. Bones, like anything else, strong until they weren't.

She also knew that Fat Charlie's was dead between lunch and happy hour, so after her pregnancy test returned positive, she rode the bus over to tell Luke.

"Fuck" was the first thing he said.

Then, "Are you sure?"

Then, "But are you *sure* sure?"

Then, "Fuck."

In the empty Fat Charlie's, Nadia drowned her fries in a pool of ketchup until they were limp and soggy. Of course she was sure. She wouldn't have worried him if she weren't already sure. For days, she'd willed herself to bleed, begging for a drop, a trickle even, but instead, she stared at the perfect whiteness of her panties. So that morning, she rode the bus to the free pregnancy center outside of town, a squat gray building in the middle of a strip mall. In the lobby, a row of fake plants nearly blocked the receptionist, who pointed Nadia to the waiting area. She joined a handful of black girls who barely glanced up at her as she sat between a chubby girl popping purple gum and a girl in overall shorts who played Tetris on her phone. A fat white counselor named Dolores led Nadia to the back, where they squeezed inside a cubicle so cramped, their knees touched.

"Now, do you have a reason to think you might be pregnant?" Dolores asked.

She wore a lumpy gray sweater covered in cotton sheep and spoke like a kindergarten teacher, smiling, her sentences ending in a gentle

lilt. She must've thought Nadia was an idiot—another black girl too dumb to insist on a condom. But they had used condoms, at least most times, and Nadia felt stupid for how comfortable she had felt with their mostly safe sex. She was supposed to be the smart one. She was supposed to understand that it only took one mistake and her future could be ripped away from her. She had known pregnant girls. She had seen them waddling around school in tight tank tops and sweatshirts that hugged their bellies. She never saw the boys who had gotten them that way—their names were enshrouded in mystery, as wispy as rumor itself—but she could never unsee the girls, big and blooming in front of her. Of all people, she should have known better. She was her mother's mistake.

Across the booth, Luke hunched over the table, flexing his fingers like he used to when he was on the sidelines at a game. Her freshman year, she'd spent more time watching Luke than watching the team on the field. What would those hands feel like touching her?

"I thought you were hungry," he said.

She tossed another fry onto the pile. She hadn't eaten anything all day—her mouth felt salty, the way it did before she puked. She slipped out of her flip-flops, resting her bare feet against his thigh.

"I feel like shit," she said.

"Want something different?"

"I don't know."

He pushed away from the table. "Let me get you something else—"

"I can't keep it," she said.

Luke stopped, halfway out his seat.

"What?" he said.

"I can't keep a baby," she said. "I can't be someone's fucking mother, I'm going to college and my dad is gonna—"

She couldn't bring herself to say out loud what she wanted—the word *abortion* felt ugly and mechanic—but Luke understood, didn't he? He'd been the first person she told when she'd received her acceptance e-mail from the University of Michigan—he'd swept her into a hug before she even finished her sentence, nearly crushing her in his arms. He had to understand that she couldn't pass this up, her one chance to leave home, to leave her silent father whose smile hadn't even reached his eyes when she showed him the e-mail, but who she knew would be happier with her gone, without her there to remind him of what he'd lost. She couldn't let this baby nail her life in place when she'd just been given a chance to escape.

If Luke understood, he didn't say so. He didn't say anything at first, sinking back into the booth, his body suddenly slow and heavy. In that moment, he looked even older to her, his stubbled face tired and haggard. He reached for her bare feet and cradled them in his lap.

"Okay," he said, then softer, "okay. Tell me what to do."

He didn't try to change her mind. She appreciated that, although part of her had hoped he might do something old-fashioned and romantic, like offer to marry her. She never would've agreed but it would've been nice if he'd tried. Instead, he asked how much money she needed. She felt stupid—she hadn't even thought of something as practical as paying for the surgery—but he promised he'd come up with the cash. When he handed her the envelope the next day, she asked him not to wait with her at the clinic. He rubbed the back of her neck.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "Just pick me up after."

She'd feel worse if she had an audience. Vulnerable. Luke had seen her naked—he had slipped inside her own body—but somehow, his seeing her afraid was an intimacy she could not bear.

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The morning of her appointment, Nadia rode the bus to the abortion clinic downtown. She had driven past it dozens of times—an unremarkable tan building, slunk in the shadows of a Bank of America—but she had never imagined what it might look like inside. She stared out the window as the bus wound its way toward the beach, envisioning sterile white walls, sharp tools on trays, fat receptionists in baggy sweaters herding crying girls into waiting rooms. Instead, the lobby was open and bright, the walls painted a creamy color that had some fancy name like *taupe* or *ochre,* and on the oak tables, beside stacks of magazines, there were blue vases filled with seashells. In a chair farthest from the door, Nadia pretended to read a *National Geographic.* Next to her, a redhead mumbled as she struggled with a crossword puzzle; her boyfriend slumped beside her, staring at the dark insides of his sunglasses. He was the only man in the room so maybe the redhead felt superior—more loved—since her boyfriend had joined her, even though he didn't seem like a good boyfriend, even though he wasn't even talking to her or holding her hand, like Luke would have done. Across the room, a black girl in a clingy yellow dress sniffled into her jean jacket sleeve. Her mother, a heavy woman with a purple rose tattooed on her arm, sat beside her, arms folded across her chest. She looked angry or maybe just worried. The girl looked fourteen, broad-shouldered like a swimmer, and the louder she sniffled, the harder everyone tried not to look at her.

Nadia thought about texting Luke. I'm here. I'm okay. But he'd just started his shift and he was probably worried enough as it is. She flipped through the magazine slowly, her eyes gliding off the pages to the blonde receptionist smiling into her headset, the traffic outside,

the blue vase of seashells beside her. Her mother had hated the actual beach—messy sand and cigarette butts everywhere—but she loved shells so whenever they went, she always spent the afternoon padding along the shore, bending to peel shells out of the damp sand.

"They calm me," she'd said once. She'd clutched Nadia on her lap and turned a shell carefully, flashing its shiny insides. In her hand, the shell had glimmered lavender and green.

"Turner?"

In the doorway, a black nurse with graying dreadlocks read her name off a metal clipboard. As Nadia gathered her purse, she felt the nurse give her a once-over, eyes drifting past her red blouse, skinny jeans, black pumps.

"Should've worn something more comfortable," the nurse said.

"I am comfortable," Nadia said. She felt thirteen again, standing in the vice-principal's office as he lectured her on the dress code.

"Sweatpants," the nurse said. "Someone should've told you that when you called."

"They did."

The nurse shook her head, starting back down the hall. She seemed weary, unlike the chipper white nurses squeaking down the hallways in pink scrubs and rubber shoes. Like she'd seen so much that nothing surprised her anymore, not even a girl with a sassy mouth wearing a silly outfit, a girl so alone, she couldn't find one person to sit with her in the waiting room. No, there was nothing special about a girl like this—not her good grades, not her prettiness. She was just another black girl who'd found herself in trouble and was finding her way out of it.

In the sonogram room, a technician asked Nadia if she wanted to see the screen. Optional, he said, but it gave some women closure.

She told him no. She'd heard once about a sixteen-year-old girl from her high school who'd given birth and left her baby on the beach. The girl was arrested when she doubled back to tell a cop she'd seen a baby and he discovered that she was the mother. How could he tell, Nadia had always wondered. Maybe, in the floodlights of his patrol car, he'd spotted blood streaking the insides of her thighs or smelled fresh milk spotting her nipples. Or maybe it was something else entirely. The ginger way she'd handed the baby over, the carefulness in her eyes when he brushed sand off its downy hair. Maybe he saw, even as he backed away, the maternal love that stretched like a golden thread from her to the abandoned baby. Something had given the girl away, but Nadia wouldn't make the same mistake. Double back. She wouldn't hesitate and allow herself to love the baby or even know him.

"Just do it already," she said.

"What about multiples?" the technician asked, rolling toward her on his stool. "You know, twins, triplets . . ."

"Why would I want to know that?"

He shrugged. "Some women do."

She already knew too much about the baby, like the fact that it was a boy. It was too early to actually tell, but she felt his foreignness in her body, something that was her and wasn't her. A male presence. A boy child who would have Luke's thick curls and squinty-eyed smile. No, she couldn't think about that either. She couldn't allow herself to love the baby because of Luke. So when the technician swirled the sensor in the blue goo on her stomach, she turned her head away.

After a few moments, the technician stopped, pausing the sensor over her belly button.

"Huh," he said.

"What?" she said. "What happened?"

Maybe she wasn't actually pregnant. That could happen, couldn't it? Maybe the test had been wrong or maybe the baby had sensed he wasn't wanted. Maybe he had given up on his own. She couldn't help it—she turned toward the monitor. The screen filled with a wedge of grainy white light, and in the center, a black oval punctuated by a single white splotch.

"Your womb's a perfect sphere," the technician said.

"So? What does that mean?"

"I don't know," he said. "That you're a superhero, maybe."

He chuckled, swirling the sensor around the gel. She didn't know what she expected to see in the sonogram, the sloping of a forehead, maybe, the outline of a belly. Not this, white and bean-shaped and small enough to cover with her thumb. How could this tiny light be a life? How could something this small bring hers to an end?

When she returned to the waiting room, the girl in the yellow dress was sobbing. No one looked at her, not even the heavy woman, who was now sitting one seat over. Nadia had been wrong—this woman couldn't be the girl's mother. A mother would move toward a crying child, not away. Her mother would've held her and absorbed her tears into her own body. She would've rocked her and not let go until the nurse called her name again. But this woman reached over and pinched the crying girl's thigh.

"Cut all that out," she said. "You wanted to be grown? Well, now you grown."

The procedure only takes ten minutes, the dreadlocked nurse told her. Less than an episode of television.

In the chilly operating room, Nadia stared at the monitor that

hung in front of her flashing pictures from beaches around the world. Overhead, speakers played a meditation CD—classical guitar over crashing waves—and she knew she was supposed to pretend she was lying on a tropical island, pressed against grains of white sand. But when the nurse fit the anesthesia mask on her face and told her to count to a hundred, she could only think about the girl abandoning her baby in the sand. Maybe the beach was a more natural place to leave a baby you couldn't care for. Nestle him in the sand and hope someone found him—an old couple on a midnight stroll, a patrol cop sweeping his flashlight over beer cases. But if they didn't, if no one stumbled upon him, he'd return to his first home, an ocean like the one inside of her. Water would break onto the shore, sweep him up in its arms, and rock him back to sleep.

When it was over, Luke never came for her.

An hour after she'd called him, she was the only girl still waiting in the recovery room, curled in an overstuffed pink recliner, clutching a heat pad against her cramping stomach. For an hour, she'd stared into the dimness of the room, unable to make out the faces of the others but imagining they looked as blank as hers. Maybe the girl in the yellow dress had cried into the arms of her recliner. Or maybe the redhead had just continued her crossword puzzle. Maybe she'd been through this before or maybe she already had children and couldn't take another. Was it easier if you already had a child, like politely declining seconds because you were already full?

Now the others were gone and she had pulled out her phone to call Luke a third time when the dreadlocked nurse dragged over a metal chair. She was carrying a paper plate of crackers and an apple juice box.

"Cramps'll be bad for a while," she said. "Just put some heat on 'em, they'll go away. You got a heat pad at home?"

"No."

"Just heat you up a towel. Works just as fine."

Nadia had hoped she might get a different nurse. She'd watched the others swish through the room to dote on their girls, offering smiles, squeezing hands. But the dreadlocked nurse just shook the plate at her.

"I'm not hungry," Nadia said.

"You need to eat. Can't let you go until you do."

Nadia sighed, taking a cracker. Where was Luke? She was tired of this nurse, with her wrinkled skin and steady eyes. She wanted to be in her own bed, wrapped in her comforter, her head on Luke's chest. He would make her soup and play movies on his laptop until she fell asleep. He would kiss her and tell her that she had been brave. The nurse uncrossed, then recrossed her legs.

"Heard from your friend yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, but he's coming," Nadia said.

"You got someone else to call?"

"I don't need someone else, he's coming."

"He's not coming, baby," the nurse said. "Do you have someone else to call?"

She glanced up, startled by the nurse's confidence that Luke would not show, but even more jolted by her use of the word *baby*. A cotton soft *baby* that seemed to surprise the nurse herself, like it had tripped off her tongue. Just like how after the surgery, in her delirium, Nadia had looked into the nurse's blurred face and said "Mommy?" with such sweetness, the nurse had almost answered yes.

# TWO

If Nadia Turner had asked, we would've warned her to stay away from him.

You know what they say about pastors' kids. In Sunday School, they're running around the sanctuary, hollering, smearing crayons on the pews; in middle school, a pastor's son chases girls, flipping up their dresses, while his sister smears on bright lipstick that makes her look like a harlot; by high school, the son is smoking reefer in the church parking lot and the daughter is being felt up in a bathroom stall by the deacon's son, who is quietly unrolling the panty hose her mother insisted she wear because ladies don't show their bare legs in church.

Luke Sheppard, bold and brash with wispy curls, football-built shoulders, and that squinty-eyed smile. Oh, any of us could've told her to stay away from him. She wouldn't have listened, of course. What did the church mothers know anyway? Not how Luke held

her hand while they slept or played with her hair when they cuddled or how after she'd told him about the pregnancy test, he'd cradled her bare feet in his lap. A man who laced his fingers through yours all night and held your feet when you were sad had to love you, at least a little bit. Besides, what did a bunch of old ladies know?

We would've told her that altogether, we got centuries on her. If we laid all our lives toes to heel, we were born before the Depression, the Civil War, even America itself. In all that living, we have known men. Oh girl, we have known littlebit love. That littlebit of honey left in an empty jar that traps the sweetness in your mouth long enough to mask your hunger. We have run tongues over teeth to savor that last littlebit as long as we could, and in all our living, nothing has starved us more.

Twelve years before Nadia Turner's appointment, we'd already made our first visit to the abortion clinic downtown. Oh, not the way you're thinking. By the time that clinic was built, we would've laughed like Sarah at the thought of having babies, unwanted or otherwise. Besides, we were already mothers then, some by heart and some by womb. We rocked grandbabies left in our care and taught the neighborhood kids piano and baked pies for the sick and shut-in. We all mothered somebody, and more than that, we all mothered Upper Room Chapel, so when the church started a protest out front, we joined too. Not like Upper Room was the type of church to fuss at every little thing it didn't like. Shake fists at rated-R movies or buy armloads of rap CDs just to crush them or write letters to Sacramento to ensure the state's list of banned books stayed long and current. In fact, the church had only protested once before, back in the seventies,

when Oceanside's first strip club was built. A strip club, minutes from the beach where children swam and played. What next, a brothel on the pier? Why not turn the harbor into a red-light district? Well, the Hanky Panky opened and even though it was a blight to the community, everyone agreed that the new abortion clinic was much worse. A sign of the times, really. An abortion clinic going up downtown just as easy as a donut shop.

So the morning of the protest, the congregation gathered in front of the unbuilt clinic. Second John, who had driven the carless in the church van, and Sister Willis, who had instructed her Sunday School students to help color in the protest signs, and even Magdalena Price, who could hardly be bothered to do anything around Upper Room that required her to step out from behind her piano bench, had come down to the protest to, as she put it, see what all the fuss was about. All of us had circled around the pastor and the first lady and their son—a boy then, kicking dirt clods onto the sidewalk—while the pastor prayed for the souls of innocents.

Our protest only lasted three days. (Not because of our wavering convictions but because of the militants who joined us, the type of crazed white people who would end up on the news someday for bombing clinics or stabbing doctors. The last place any of us wanted to be was near the scene when one went off the deep end.) All three days, Robert Turner drove downtown at six a.m. to deliver a new batch of picket signs from the church. He and his wife were not the protesting type, he told the pastor, but he'd figured that transporting the signs was the least he could do, truck and all.

This was ten years before he would become known around Upper Room as the man with the truck, a black Chevy pickup that had become Upper Room's truck because of how often Robert was seen

driving from church, an arm hanging out the window, the truck bed filled with food baskets or donated clothes or metal chairs. He wasn't the only member with a truck, of course, but he was the only one willing to lend his at any moment. He kept a calendar by the phone and whenever anyone from Upper Room called, he carefully scheduled them in with a tiny golf pencil. Sometimes he joked that he should add the truck to his answering machine greeting because the truck would earn more messages than he did anyway. A joke, although he wondered if it was true, if the truck was the only reason he was invited to picnics and potlucks, if the true guest was the truck, needed to haul speakers and tables and folding chairs, but no one minded if he tagged along too. Why else would he receive such warm greetings when he stepped into Upper Room each Sunday? The ushers clapping his back and the ladies at the welcome table smiling at him and the pastor mentioning, once, in passing, that he wouldn't be shocked if Robert's good stewardship landed him on the elders board one day.

The truck, Robert believed, had turned things around for him. But there was also his daughter. People are always tenderhearted toward single fathers, especially single fathers raising girls, and folks would have cared for Robert Turner still, even if that terrible thing hadn't happened with his wife, even if she had just packed a suitcase and left, which to some, it seemed like she did anyway.

That evening, when her father pulled his truck into the garage, Nadia was curled in bed, clutching her twisting stomach. "The cramps might be bad," the dreadlocked nurse had told her. "Expect them a few hours or so. Call the emergency number if they're severe." The

nurse didn't explain the difference between bad cramps and severe ones, but she'd handed Nadia a white bag curled at the top like a sack lunch. "For the pain. Two every four hours." A clinic volunteer offered to drive Nadia home, and when she climbed into the white girl's dusty Sentra, she glanced out the window at the nurse who watched them drive off. The volunteer—blonde, twentyish, earnest—chatted nervously the whole drive, fiddling with the radio dials. She was a junior at Cal State San Marcos, she said, volunteering at the clinic as part of her feminist studies major. She looked like the type of girl who could go to college, major in something like feminist studies, and still expect to be taken seriously. She asked if Nadia planned to go to college and seemed surprised by her response. "Oh, Michigan's a good school," she said, as if Nadia didn't already know this.

That was two hours ago. Nadia clenched her eyes, passing through the cold center of the pain into its warmer edges. She wanted to take another pill even though she knew she should wait, but when she heard the garage door rumble, she shoved the orange canister into the white bag, everything inside her nightstand drawer. Anything unusual might tip her father off, even that nondescript bag. Since she'd discovered that she was pregnant, she'd been sure that her father would notice something was wrong with her. Her mother had been able to tell when she'd had a bad day at school moments after she'd climbed in the car. What happened, her mother used to ask, even before Nadia had said hello. Her father had never been that perceptive, but a pregnancy wasn't a bad day at school—he would notice that she was panicking, he would have to. She was grateful so far that he hadn't, but it scared her, how you could return home in a different body, how something big could be happening inside you and no one even know it.

Her father knocked three times and nudged her bedroom door open. He wore his service khakis today, which seemed like a second skin, how naturally he fit within sharp pleats, a row of badges across his chest. Her friends used to be surprised that her father was a Marine. He didn't seem like the boys they'd grown up seeing around town, cocky and buff and horsing around in front of the Regal, flirting with passing girls. Maybe her father had been like that when he was younger but she couldn't imagine it. He was quiet and intense, a tall, wiry man who never seemed to relax, like a guard dog on his haunches, his ears always perked up. He leaned in her doorway, bending to unlace his shiny black boots.

"You don't look so good," he said. "You sick?"

"Just cramps," she said.

"Oh. Your . . ." He gestured to his stomach. "Need anything?"

"No," she said. "Wait. Can I use your truck later?"

"For what?"

"To drive."

"Where are you going, I mean."

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Ask where I'm going. I'm almost eighteen."

"I can't ask where you're taking my truck?"

"Where do you think I'm taking it?" she said. "The border?"

Her father never cared about where she went, except when she asked to borrow his precious truck. He spent evenings circling the truck in the driveway, dipping a red velvet square into a tub of wax until the paint shone like glass. Then as soon as someone from Upper Room called for a favor, he jogged out the door, always running to his truck, as if it were the only child, needy and demanding of his

love. Her father sighed, running a hand over the graying hair she cut every two weeks, the way her mother used to, her father sitting in the backyard with a towel draped around his neck, her hands guiding the clippers. Cutting his hair was the only time she felt close to him.

"Downtown, okay?" she said. "Can I borrow your truck, please?"

Another wave of cramps gripped her, and she flinched, pulling her blanket tighter around herself. Her father lingered in the doorway a moment before dropping his keys on her dresser.

"I can make you some tea," he said. "It's supposed to—your aunts, they'd drink it, you know, when—"

"You can just leave the keys," she said.

The day after she was accepted into Michigan, Luke brought Nadia to the Wave Waterpark, where they rode inner tubes down the Slide Tower and the Flow Rider until they were soaked and tired. At first, she'd worried that he'd suggested a water park because he thought she was childish. But he had as much fun as she did, yelping as they splashed into pools, or dragging her to the next ride, water beads clinging to his chest, his wet sideburns glinting in the sun. After, they ate hog dogs and churros at the tables outside Rippity's Rainforest, where kids too small for the slides padded in floaties. She licked cinnamon sugar off her fingers, sun heavy and happy, the type of happiness that before might have felt ordinary, but now seemed fragile, like if she stood too quickly, it might slide off her shoulders and break.

She hadn't expected a gift from Luke, not when her father had barely congratulated her. Look at that, he'd said when she'd showed him the e-mail, offering her a side hug. Then he'd passed her in the

kitchen later that night, eyes glazing over her as if she were a once-interesting piece of furniture he'd since tired of. She tried not to take it personally—he wasn't happy about anything these days—but she still teared up in the bathroom while brushing her teeth. The next morning, she awoke to a congratulations card on her nightstand with twenty dollars folded inside. *I'm sorry*, her father had written, *I'm trying*. Trying what? Trying to love her?

She stretched her legs across Luke's lap and he kneaded the smooth skin near her ankles while he finished his corn dog. He'd never seen her like this before—hair wet and kinky, her face clean of makeup—but she felt pretty as he smiled at her across the table, touching her ankle, and she wondered if his gentle touch meant more, if he might even be in love with her a little bit. Before they left, she tried to take a picture of the two of them but Luke cupped his hand around her phone. He wanted to keep their relationship a secret.

"Not a secret," he said. "Just private."

"'That's the same thing," she said.

"It's not. I just think we should be low-key about this. That's all."

"Why?"

"I mean, the age thing."

"I'm almost eighteen."

"'Almost' ain't eighteen."

"I wouldn't get you in trouble. Don't you know that?"

"It's not just that," he said. "You don't know how it is. You're not a pastor's kid. The whole church in my business all the time. They'll be up in your business too. Let's just be smart, that's all I'm saying."

Maybe there was a difference. You hid a secret relationship out of shame, but you might keep a relationship private for any number of

reasons. All relationships, in some way, were private—why did anyone else need to know as long as you were happy? So she learned how to be private. She didn't reach for his hand in public or post photos of them online. She even stopped going to Fat Charlie's after school every day, in case one of his coworkers began to wonder about them. But after Luke had left her at the abortion clinic, she forgot about being private and drove her father's truck to Fat Charlie's. She knew he closed on Thursday nights, but when she arrived, she didn't see him on the floor. At the bar, she waved down Pepe, a burly Mexican bartender with a graying ponytail. He glanced up from drying a glass with a brown rag.

"Go ahead and put that cheap-ass fake away," he said. "You know I ain't serving you."

"Where's Luke?" she asked.

"Hell if I know."

"Doesn't he get off soon?"

"I ain't in charge of his schedule."

"Well, have you seen him?"

"You okay?"

"Did you see him earlier?"

"Why don't you just call him?"

"He's not answering," she said. "I'm worried."

It wasn't like Luke to disappear like this, to not answer his phone, to promise he'd be somewhere, then not show. Especially on a day like today when she needed him, when he knew she needed him. She was worried that something bad had happened to him, or even worse, that nothing had. What if he had abandoned her at that clinic because he'd simply chosen to? No, he would never do that—but she thought about him at the water park, clamping his hand over her

phone, that brief moment when she had felt safe and loved right before Luke had pulled away.

Pepe sighed, setting the glass on the bar. He had four daughters, Luke had told her once, and she wondered if this was why Pepe always refused her fake ID, always shooed away men who hit on her, always asked her how she was getting home.

"Look, hon," he said. "You know Sheppard. Probably just wanted to go out with his buddies. I'm sure he'll call you tomorrow. Just go home, won't you?"

New York Times bestseller

# The Girls

a novel

Emma Cline

# THE GIRLS

*A NOVEL*

EMMA CLINE

*RANDOM HOUSE*
*NEW YORK*

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



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I LOOKED UP because of the laughter, and kept looking because of the girls.

I noticed their hair first, long and uncombed. Then their jewelry catching the sun. The three of them were far enough away that I saw only the periphery of their features, but it didn't matter—I knew they were different from everyone else in the park. Families milling in a vague line, waiting for sausages and burgers from the open grill. Women in checked blouses scooting into their boyfriends' sides, kids tossing eucalyptus buttons at the feral-looking chickens that overran the strip. These long-haired girls seemed to glide above all that was happening around them, tragic and separate. Like royalty in exile.

I studied the girls with a shameless, blatant gape: it

didn't seem possible that they might look over and notice me. My hamburger was forgotten in my lap, the breeze blowing in minnow stink from the river. It was an age when I'd immediately scan and rank other girls, keeping up a constant tally of how I fell short, and I saw right away that the black-haired one was the prettiest. I had expected this, even before I'd been able to make out their faces. There was a suggestion of otherworldliness hovering around her, a dirty smock dress barely covering her ass. She was flanked by a skinny redhead and an older girl, dressed with the same shabby afterthought. As if dredged from a lake. All their cheap rings like a second set of knuckles. They were messing with an uneasy threshold, prettiness and ugliness at the same time, and a ripple of awareness followed them through the park. Mothers glancing around for their children, moved by some feeling they couldn't name. Women reaching for their boyfriends' hands. The sun spiked through the trees, like always—the drowsy willows, the hot wind gusting over the picnic blankets—but the familiarity of the day was disturbed by the path the girls cut across the regular world. Sleek and thoughtless as sharks breaching the water.

1969

# 1

It was the end of the sixties, or the summer before the end, and that's what it seemed like, an endless, formless summer. The Haight populated with white-garbed Process members handing out their oat-colored pamphlets, the jasmine along the roads that year blooming particularly heady and full. Everyone was healthy, tan, and heavy with decoration, and if you weren't, that was a thing, too—you could be some moon creature, chiffon over the lamp shades, on a kitchari cleanse that stained all your dishes with turmeric.

But that was all happening somewhere else, not in Petaluma with its low-hipped ranch houses, the covered wagon perpetually parked in front of the Hi-Ho Restaurant. The sun-scorched crosswalks. I was fourteen but

looked much younger. People liked to say this to me. Connie swore I could pass for sixteen, but we told each other a lot of lies. We'd been friends all through junior high, Connie waiting for me outside classrooms as patient as a cow, all our energy subsumed into the theatrics of friendship. She was plump but didn't dress like it, in cropped cotton shirts with Mexican embroidery, too-tight skirts that left an angry rim on her upper thighs. I'd always liked her in a way I never had to think about, like the fact of my own hands.

Come September, I'd be sent off to the same boarding school my mother had gone to. They'd built a well-tended campus around an old convent in Monterey, the lawns smooth and sloped. Shreds of fog in the mornings, brief hits of the nearness of salt water. It was an all-girls school, and I'd have to wear a uniform—low-heeled shoes and no makeup, middy blouses threaded with navy ties. It was a holding place, really, enclosed by a stone wall and populated with bland, moon-faced daughters. Camp Fire Girls and Future Teachers shipped off to learn 160 words a minute, shorthand. To make dreamy, overheated promises to be one another's bridesmaids at Royal Hawaiian weddings.

My impending departure forced a newly critical distance on my friendship with Connie. I'd started to notice certain things, almost against my will. How Connie said, "The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else," as if we were shopgirls in London instead of inexperienced adolescents in the farm belt of Sonoma

County. We licked batteries to feel a metallic jolt on the tongue, rumored to be one-eighteenth of an orgasm. It pained me to imagine how our twosome appeared to others, marked as the kind of girls who belonged to each other. Those sexless fixtures of high schools.

Every day after school, we'd click seamlessly into the familiar track of the afternoons. Waste the hours at some industrious task: following Vidal Sassoon's suggestions for raw egg smoothies to strengthen hair or picking at blackheads with the tip of a sterilized sewing needle. The constant project of our girl selves seeming to require odd and precise attentions.

As an adult, I wonder at the pure volume of time I wasted. The feast and famine we were taught to expect from the world, the countdowns in magazines that urged us to prepare thirty days in advance for the first day of school.

Day 28: Apply a face mask of avocado and honey.

Day 14: Test your makeup look in different lights (natural, office, dusk).

Back then, I was so attuned to attention. I dressed to provoke love, tugging my neckline lower, settling a wistful stare on my face whenever I went out in public that implied many deep and promising thoughts, should anyone happen to glance over. As a child, I had once been part of a charity dog show and paraded around a pretty collie on a leash, a silk bandanna around its neck. How thrilled I'd been at the sanctioned performance: the way I went up to strangers and let them admire the dog, my

smile as indulgent and constant as a salesgirl's, and how vacant I'd felt when it was over, when no one needed to look at me anymore.

I waited to be told what was good about me. I wondered later if this was why there were so many more women than men at the ranch. All that time I had spent readying myself, the articles that taught me life was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you—the boys had spent that time becoming themselves.

That day in the park was the first time I saw Suzanne and the others. I'd ridden my bike there, aimed at the smoke streaming from the grill. No one spoke to me except the man pressing burgers into the grates with a bored, wet sizzle. The shadows of the oaks moved over my bare arms, my bike tipped in the grass. When an older boy in a cowboy hat ran into me, I purposefully slowed so he would bump into me again. The kind of flirting Connie might do, practiced as an army maneuver.

"What's wrong with you?" he muttered. I opened my mouth to apologize, but the boy was already walking off. Like he'd known he didn't need to hear whatever I was going to say.

The summer gaped before me—the scatter of days, the march of hours, my mother swanning around the house like a stranger. I had spoken to my father a few times on the phone. It had seemed painful for him, too.

He'd asked me oddly formal questions, like a distant uncle who knew me only as a series of secondhand facts: Evie is fourteen, Evie is short. The silences between us would've been better if they were colored with sadness or regret, but it was worse—I could hear how happy he was to be gone.

I sat on a bench alone, napkins spread across my knees, and ate my hamburger.

It was the first meat I'd had in a long time. My mother, Jean, had stopped eating meat in the four months since the divorce. She'd stopped doing a lot of things. Gone was the mother who'd made sure I bought new underwear every season, the mother who'd rolled my white bobby socks as sweetly as eggs. Who'd sewn my dolls pajamas that matched mine, down to the exact pearly buttons. She was ready to attend to her own life with the eagerness of a schoolgirl at a difficult math problem. Any spare moment, she stretched. Going up on her toes to work her calves. She lit incense that came wrapped in aluminum foil and made my eyes water. She started drinking a new tea, made from some aromatic bark, and shuffled around the house sipping it, touching her throat absently as if recovering from a long illness.

The ailment was vague, but the cure was specific. Her new friends suggested massage. They suggested the briny waters of sensory deprivation tanks. They suggested E-meters, Gestalt, eating only high-mineral foods that had been planted during a full moon. I couldn't be-

lieve my mother took their advice, but she listened to everyone. Eager for an aim, a plan, believing the answer could come from any direction at any time, if only she tried hard enough.

She searched until there was only searching left. The astrologer in Alameda who made her cry, talking about the inauspicious shadow cast by her rising sign. The therapies that involved throwing herself around a padded room filled with strangers and whirling until she hit something. She came home with foggy tinges under the skin, bruises that deepened to a vivid meat. I saw her touch the bruises with something like fondness. When she looked up and saw me watching, she blushed. Her hair was newly bleached, stinking of chemicals and artificial roses.

"Do you like it?" she said, grazing the sheared ends with her fingers.

I nodded, though the color made her skin look washed by jaundice.

She kept changing, day by day. Little things. She bought handcrafted earrings from women in her encounter group, came back swinging primitive bits of wood from her ears, enameled bracelets the color of after-dinner mints jittery on her wrists. She started lining her eyes with an eyeliner pencil she held over a lighter flame. Turning the point until it softened and she could draw slashes at each eye, making her look sleepy and Egyptian.

She paused in my doorway on her way out for the

night, dressed in a tomato-red blouse that exposed her shoulders. She kept pulling the sleeves down. Her shoulders were dusted with glitter.

"You want me to do your eyes too, sweetheart?"

But I had nowhere to be. Who would care if my eyes looked bigger or bluer?

"I might get back late. So sleep well." My mother leaned over to kiss the top of my head. "We're good, aren't we? The two of us?"

She patted me, smiling so her face seemed to crack and reveal the full rush of her need. Part of me did feel all right, or I was confusing familiarity with happiness. Because that was there even when love wasn't—the net of family, the purity of habit and home. It was such an unfathomable amount of time that you spent at home, and maybe that's the best you could get—that sense of endless enclosure, like picking for the lip of tape but never finding it. There were no seams, no interruptions—just the landmarks of your life that had become so absorbed in you that you couldn't even acknowledge them. The chipped willow-print dinner plate I favored for forgotten reasons. The wallpaper in the hallway so known to me as to be entirely incommunicable to another person—every fading copse of pastel palm trees, the particular personalities I ascribed to each blooming hibiscus.

My mother stopped enforcing regular mealtimes, leaving grapes in a colander in the sink or bringing home glass jars of dilled miso soup from her macrobiotic cook-

ing class. Seaweed salads dripping with a nauseating amber oil. "Eat this for breakfast every day," she said, "and you'll never have another zit."

I cringed, pulling my fingers away from the pimple on my forehead.

There had been many late-night planning sessions between my mother and Sal, the older woman she had met in group. Sal was endlessly available to my mother, coming over at odd hours, impatient for drama. Wearing tunics with mandarin collars, her gray hair cut short so her ears showed, making her look like an elderly boy. My mother spoke to Sal about acupuncture, of the movement of energies around meridian points. The charts.

"I just want some space," my mother said, "for me. This world takes it out of you, doesn't it?"

Sal shifted on her wide rear, nodded. Dutiful as a bridled pony.

My mother and Sal were drinking her woody tea from bowls, a new affectation my mother had picked up. "It's European," she'd said defensively, though I had said nothing. When I walked through the kitchen, both women stopped talking, but my mother cocked her head. "Baby," she said, gesturing me closer. She squinted. "Part your bangs from the left. More flattering."

I'd parted my hair that way to cover the pimple, gone scabby from picking. I'd coated it with vitamin E oil but couldn't stop myself from messing with it, flaking on toilet paper to soak up the blood.

Sal agreed. "Round face shape," she said with authority. "Bangs might not be a good idea at all, for her."

I imagined how it would feel to topple Sal over in her chair, how her bulk would bring her down fast. The bark tea spilling on the linoleum.

They quickly lost interest in me. My mother rekindling her familiar story, like the stunned survivor of a car accident. Dropping her shoulders as if to settle even further into the misery.

"And the most hilarious part," my mother went on, "the part that really gets me going?" She smiled at her own hands. "Carl's making money," she said. "That currency stuff." She laughed again. "Finally. It actually worked. But it was my money that paid her salary," she said. "My mother's movie money. Spent on that girl."

My mother was talking about Tamar, the assistant my father had hired for his most recent business. It had something to do with currency exchange. Buying foreign money and trading it back and forth, shifting it enough times so you were left, my father insisted, with pure profit, sleight of hand on a grand scale. That's what the French language tapes in his car had been for: he'd been trying to push along a deal involving francs and lire.

Now he and Tamar were living together in Palo Alto. I'd only met her a few times: she'd picked me up from school once, before the divorce. Waving lazily from her

Plymouth Fury. In her twenties, slim and cheerful, Tamar constantly alluded to weekend plans, an apartment she wished were bigger, her life textured in a way I couldn't imagine. Her hair was so blond it was almost gray, and she wore it loose, unlike my mother's smooth curls. At that age I looked at women with brutal and emotionless judgment. Assessing the slope of their breasts, imagining how they would look in various crude positions. Tamar was very pretty. She gathered her hair up in a plastic comb and cracked her neck, smiling over at me as she drove.

"Want some gum?"

I unwrapped two cloudy sticks from their silver jackets. Feeling something adjacent to love, next to Tamar, thighs scudding on the vinyl seat. Girls are the only ones who can really give each other close attention, the kind we equate with being loved. They noticed what we want noticed. And that's what I did for Tamar—I responded to her symbols, to the style of her hair and clothes and the smell of her L'Air du Temps perfume, like this was data that mattered, signs that reflected something of her inner self. I took her beauty personally.

When we arrived home, the gravel crackling under the car wheels, she asked to use the bathroom.

"Of course," I said, vaguely thrilled to have her in my house, like a visiting dignitary. I showed her the nice bathroom, by my parents' room. Tamar peeked at the bed and wrinkled her nose. "Ugly comforter," she said under her breath.

Until then, it had just been my parents' comforter, but abruptly I felt secondhand shame for my mother, for the tacky comforter she had picked out, had even been foolish enough to be pleased by.

I sat at the dining table listening to the muffled sound of Tamar peeing, of the faucet running. She was in there a long time. When Tamar finally emerged, something was different. It took me a moment to realize she was wearing my mother's lipstick, and when she noticed me noticing her, it was as if I'd interrupted a movie she was watching. Her face rapt with the presentiment of some other life.

My favorite fantasy was the sleep cure I had read about in *Valley of the Dolls*. The doctor inducing long-term sleep in a hospital room, the only answer for poor, strident Neely, gone muddy from the Demerol. It sounded perfect—my body kept alive by peaceful, reliable machines, my brain resting in watery space, as untroubled as a goldfish in a glass bowl. I'd wake up weeks later. And even though life would slot back into its disappointing place, there would still be that starched stretch of nothing.

Boarding school was meant to be a corrective, the push I needed. My parents, even in their separate, absorbing worlds, were disappointed in me, distressed by my mediocre grades. I was an average girl, and that was the biggest disappointment of all—there was no shine of greatness on me. I wasn't pretty enough to get the grades

I did, the scale not tipping heartily enough in the direction of looks or smarts. Sometimes I would be overtaken with pious impulses to do better, to try harder, but of course nothing changed. Other mysterious forces seemed to be in play. The window near my desk left open so I wasted math class watching the shudder of leaves. My pen leaking so I couldn't take notes. The things I was good at had no real application: addressing envelopes in bubble letters with smiling creatures on the flap. Making sludgy coffee I drank with grave affect. Finding a certain desired song playing on the radio, like a medium scanning for news of the dead.

My mother said I looked like my grandmother, but this seemed suspicious, a wishful lie meant to give false hope. I knew my grandmother's story, repeated like a reflexive prayer. Harriet the date farmer's daughter, plucked from the sunburned obscurity of Indio and brought to Los Angeles. Her soft jaw and damp eyes. Small teeth, straight and slightly pointed, like a strange and beautiful cat. Coddled by the studio system, fed whipped milk and eggs, or broiled liver and five carrots, the same dinner my grandmother ate every night of my childhood. The family holing up in the sprawling ranch in Petaluma after she retired, my grandmother growing show roses from Luther Burbank cuttings and keeping horses.

When my grandmother died, we were like our own country in those hills, living off her money, though I could bicycle into town. It was more of a psychological distance—as an adult, I would wonder at our isolation.

My mother tiptoed around my father, and so did I—his sideways glances at us, his encouragements to eat more protein, to read Dickens or breathe more deeply. He ate raw eggs and salted steaks and kept a plate of beef tartare in the refrigerator, spooning out bites five or six times a day. "Your outer body reflects your inner self," he said, and did his gymnastics on a Japanese mat by the pool, fifty push-ups while I sat on his back. It was a form of magic, being lifted into the air, cross-legged. The oat grass, the smell of the cooling earth.

When a coyote would come down from the hills and fight with the dog—the nasty, quick hiss that thrilled me—my father would shoot the coyote dead. Everything seemed that simple. The horses I copied from a pencil drawing book, shading in their graphite manes. Tracing a picture of a bobcat carrying away a vole in its jaws, the sharp tooth of nature. Later I'd see how the fear had been there all along. The flurry I felt when our mother left me alone with the nanny, Carson, who smelled damp and sat in the wrong chair. How they told me I was having fun all the time, and there was no way to explain that I wasn't. And even moments of happiness were followed by some letdown—my father's laugh, then the scramble to keep up with him as he strode far ahead of me. My mother's hands on my feverish forehead, then the desperate aloneness of my sickroom, my mother disappeared into the rest of the house, talking on the phone to someone in a voice I didn't recognize. A tray of Ritz crackers and chicken noodle soup gone cold, sallow meat breaching

the scrim of fat. A starry emptiness that felt, even as a child, something like death.

I didn't wonder how my mother spent her days. How she must have sat in the empty kitchen, the table smelling of the domestic rot of the sponge, and waited for me to clatter in from school, for my father to come home.

My father, who kissed her with a formality that embarrassed us all, who left beer bottles on the steps that trapped wasps and beat his bare chest in the morning to keep his lungs strong. He clung tight to the brute reality of his body, his thick ribbed socks showing above his shoes, flecked from the cedar sachets he kept in his drawers. The way he made a joke of checking his reflection in the hood of the car. I tried to save up things to tell him, combing through my days for something to provoke a glint of interest. It didn't occur to me, until I was an adult, that it was strange to know so much about him when he seemed to know nothing about me. To know that he loved Leonardo da Vinci because he invented solar power and was born poor. That he could identify the make of any car just by the sound of the engine and thought everyone should know the names of trees. He liked when I agreed that business school was a scam or nodded when he said that the teenager in town who'd painted his car with peace signs was a traitor. He'd mentioned once that I should learn classical guitar, though I had never heard him listen to any music except for those theatrical cowboy bands, tapping their emerald cowboy boots and singing about yellow roses. He felt that his

height was the only thing that had prevented him from achieving success.

"Robert Mitchum is short too," he'd said to me once. "They make him stand on orange crates."

As soon as I'd caught sight of the girls cutting their way through the park, my attention stayed pinned on them. The black-haired girl with her attendants, their laughter a rebuke to my aloneness. I was waiting for something without knowing what. And then it happened. Quick, but still I saw it: the girl with black hair pulled down the neckline of her dress for a brief second, exposing the red nipple of her bare breast. Right in the middle of a park swarming with people. Before I could fully believe it, the girl yanked her dress back up. They were all laughing, raunchy and careless; none of them even glanced up to see who might be watching.

The girls moved into the alley alongside the restaurant, farther past the grill. Practiced and smooth. I didn't look away. The older one lifted the lid of a dumpster. The redhead bent down and the black-haired girl used her knee as a step, hoisting herself over the edge. She was looking for something inside, but I couldn't imagine what. I stood to throw away my napkins and stopped at the garbage can, watching. The black-haired girl was handing things from the dumpster to the others: a bag of bread, still in its packaging, an anemic-looking cabbage that they sniffed, then tossed back in. A seemingly well-

established procedure—would they actually eat the food? When the black-haired girl emerged for the last time, climbing over the rim and slinging her weight onto the ground, she was holding something in her hands. It was a strange shape, the color of my own skin, and I edged closer.

When I realized it was an uncooked chicken, sheened in plastic, I must have stared harder, since the black-haired girl turned and caught my glance. She smiled and my stomach dropped. Something seemed to pass between us, a subtle rearranging of air. The frank, unapologetic way she held my gaze. But she jarred back to attention when the screen door of the restaurant banged open. Out came a hefty man, already shouting. Shooing them like dogs. The girls grabbed the bag of bread and the chicken and took off running. The man stopped and watched them for a minute. Wiping his large hands on his apron, his chest moving with effort.

By then the girls were a block away, their hair streaming behind them like flags, and a black school bus heaved past and slowed, and the three of them disappeared inside.

The sight of them; the gruesomely fetal quality of the chicken, the cherry of the girl's single nipple. All of it was so garish, and maybe that's why I kept thinking of them. I couldn't put it together. Why these girls needed food from the dumpster. Who had been driving the bus, what kind of people would paint it that color. I'd seen that they

were dear to one another, the girls, that they'd passed into a familial contract—they were sure of what they were together. The long night that stretched ahead, my mother out with Sal, suddenly seemed unbearable.

That was the first time I ever saw Suzanne—her black hair marking her, even at a distance, as different, her smile at me direct and assessing. I couldn't explain it to myself, the wrench I got from looking at her. She seemed as strange and raw as those flowers that bloom in lurid explosion once every five years, the gaudy, prickling tease that was almost the same thing as beauty. And what had the girl seen when she looked at me?

I used the bathroom inside the restaurant. *Keep truckin'*, scrawled with a marker. *Tess Pyle eats dick!* The accompanying illustrations had been crossed out. All the silly, cryptic marks of humans who were resigned to being held in a place, shunted through the perfunctory order of things. Who wanted to make some small protest. The saddest: *Fuck*, written in pencil.

While I washed my hands, drying them with a stiff towel, I studied myself in the mirror over the sink. For a moment, I tried to see myself through the eyes of the girl with the black hair, or even the boy in the cowboy hat, studying my features for a vibration under the skin. The effort was visible in my face, and I felt ashamed. No wonder the boy had seemed disgusted: he must have seen the longing in me. Seen how my face was blatant with need,

like an orphan's empty dish. And that was the difference between me and the black-haired girl—her face answered all its own questions.

I didn't want to know these things about myself. I splashed water on my face, cold water, like Connie had once told me to do. "Cold water makes your pores close up," and maybe it was true: I felt my skin tighten, water dripping down my face and neck. How desperately Connie and I thought that if we performed these rituals—washed our faces with cold water, brushed our hair into a static frenzy with a boar-bristle brush before bed—some proof would solve itself and a new life would spread out before us.

# 2

*Cha ching*, the slot machine in Connie's garage went, like a cartoon, Peter's features soaked in its rosy glow. He was eighteen, Connie's older brother, and his forearms were the color of toast. His friend Henry hovered at his side. Connie decided she had a crush on Henry, so our Friday night would be devoted to perching on the weight-lifting bench, Henry's orange motorcycle parked beside us like a prize pony. We'd watch the boys play the slot machine, drinking the off-brand beer Connie's father kept in the garage fridge. Later they'd shoot the empty bottles with a BB gun, crowing at each glassy burst.

I knew I'd see Peter that night, so I'd worn an embroidered shirt, my hair foul with hairspray. I'd dotted a pimple on my jaw with a beige putty of Merle Norman, but it

collected along the rim and made it glow. As long as my hair stayed in place, I looked nice, or at least I thought so, and I tucked in my shirt to show the tops of my small breasts, the artificial press of cleavage from my bra. The feeling of exposure gave me an anxious pleasure that made me stand straighter, holding my head on my neck like an egg in a cup. Trying to be more like the black-haired girl in the park, that easy cast of her face. Connie narrowed her eyes when she saw me, a muscle by her mouth twitching, but she didn't say anything.

Peter had really only spoken to me for the first time two weeks before. I'd been waiting for Connie downstairs. Her bedroom was much smaller than mine, her house meaner, but we spent most of our time there. The house done up in a maritime theme, her father's misguided attempt to approximate female decoration. I felt bad for Connie's father: his night job at a dairy plant, the arthritic hands he clenched and unclenched nervously. Connie's mother lived somewhere in New Mexico, near a hot spring, had twin boys and another life no one ever spoke of. For Christmas, she had once sent Connie a compact of cracked blush and a Fair Isle sweater that was so small neither of us could squeeze our head through the hole.

"The colors are nice," I said hopefully.

Connie just shrugged. "She's a bitch."

Peter crashed through the front door, dumping a book

on the kitchen table. He nodded at me in his mild way and started making a sandwich—pulling out slices of white bread, an acid-bright jar of mustard.

"Where's the princess?" he said. His mouth was chapped a violent pink. Slightly coated, I imagined, with pot resin.

"Getting a jacket."

"Ah." He slapped the bread together and took a bite. He watched me while he chewed.

"Looking good these days, Boyd," he said, then swallowed hard. His assessment knocked me so off balance that I felt I had almost imagined it. Was I even supposed to say anything back? I'd already memorized the sentence.

He turned then at a noise from the front door, a girl in a denim jacket, her shape muffled by the screen. Pamela, his girlfriend. They were a constant couple, porous with each other; wearing similar clothes, silently passing the newspaper back and forth on the couch or watching *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Picking lint off each other as if from their own selves. I had seen Pamela at the high school, those times I'd ridden my bike past the dun-colored building. The rectangles of half-dry grass, the low, wide steps where older girls were always sitting in poor-boy shirts, pinkies linked, palming packs of Kents. The whiff of death among them, the boyfriends in humid jungles. They were like adults, even in the way they flicked the ashes of their cigarettes with weary snaps of the wrist.

"Hey, Evie," Pamela said.

It was easy for some girls to be nice. To remember your name. Pamela was beautiful, it was true, and I felt that submerged attraction to her that everyone felt for the beautiful. The sleeves of her jean jacket were bulked at her elbows, her eyes doped looking from liner. Her legs were tan and bare. My own legs were dotted with the pricks of mosquito bites I worried into open wounds, my calves hatched with pale hairs.

"Babe," Peter said with his mouth full, and loped over to give her a hug, burying his face in her neck. Pamela squealed and pushed him away. When she laughed, her snaggletooth flashed.

"Beyond foul," Connie whispered, entering the room. But I was quiet, trying to imagine how that would feel: to be so known to someone that you had become almost the same person.

We were upstairs, later, smoking weed Connie had stolen from Peter. Stuffing the space below the door with the fat twist of a towel. She kept having to pinch the rolling paper shut again with her fingers, the two of us smoking in our solemn, hothouse silence. I could see Peter's car out the window, parked awry like he'd had to abandon it under great duress. I'd always been aware of Peter, in the way I liked any older boy at that age, their mere existence demanding attention. But my feelings were suddenly amplified and pressing, as exaggerated and inevitable as

events seem in dreams. I stuffed myself on banalities of him, the T-shirts he wore in rotation, the tender skin where the back of his neck disappeared into his collar. The looping horns of Paul Revere and the Raiders sounding from his bedroom, how he'd sometimes stumble around with a proud, overt secrecy, so I would know he had taken acid. Filling and refilling a glass of water in the kitchen with extravagant care.

I'd gone into Peter's bedroom while Connie was showering. It reeked of what I'd later identify as masturbation, a damp rupture in the air. All his possessions suffused with a mysterious import: his low futon, a plastic bag full of ashy-looking nugs by his pillow. Manuals to become a trainee mechanic. The glass on the floor, greased with fingerprints, was half-full of stale-looking water, and there was a line of smooth river stones on the top of his dresser. A cheap copper bracelet I had seen him wear sometimes. I took in everything as if I could decode the private meaning of each object, puzzle together the interior architecture of his life.

So much of desire, at that age, was a willful act. Trying so hard to slur the rough, disappointing edges of boys into the shape of someone we could love. We spoke of our desperate need for them with rote and familiar words, like we were reading lines from a play. Later I would see this: how impersonal and grasping our love was, pinging around the universe, hoping for a host to give form to our wishes.

. . .

When I was young, I'd seen magazines in a drawer of the bathroom, my father's magazines, the pages bloated with humidity. The insides crowded with women. The tautness of mesh pulled across crotches, the gauzy light that made their skin illuminate and pale. My favorite girl had a gingham ribbon tied around her throat in a bow. It was so odd and stirring that someone could be naked but also wear a ribbon around her neck. It made her nakedness formal.

I visited the magazine with the regularity of a penitent, replacing it carefully each time. Locking the bathroom door with breathless, ill pleasure that quickly morphed into rubbing my crotch along the seams of carpets, the seam of my mattress. The back of a couch. How did it work, even? That by holding the hovering image of the girl in my mind, I could build the sensation, a sheet of pleasure that grew until it was compulsive, the desire to feel that way again and again. It seemed strange that it was a girl I was imagining, not a boy. And that the feeling could be reignited by other oddities: a color-plate illustration in my fairy-tale book of a girl trapped in a spider's web. The faceted eyes of evil creatures, watching her. The memory of my father cupping a neighbor's ass through her wet swimsuit.

I'd done things before—not quite sex, but close. The dry fumbles in the hallways of school dances. The overheated suffocation of a parent's couch, the backs of my

knees sweaty. Alex Posner worming his hand down my shorts in his exploratory, detached fashion, jerking away roughly when we heard footsteps. None of it—the kissing, the clawing hand in my underwear, the raw jumpiness of a penis in my fist—seemed in any way kin to what I did alone, the spread of pressure, like stairs going up. I imagined Peter almost as a corrective to my own desires, whose compulsion sometimes frightened me.

I lay back on the thin tapestry covering Connie's bed. She had a bad sunburn; I watched her rub cloudy skin loose from her shoulder and roll it into tiny gray balls. My faint revulsion was tempered by the thought of Peter, who lived in the same house as Connie, who breathed the same air. Who ate from the same utensils. They were conflated in an essential way, like two different species raised in the same laboratory.

From downstairs, I heard Pamela's tripping laugh.

"When I get a boyfriend, I'm going to make him take me out to dinner," Connie said with authority. "She doesn't even mind Peter just brings her here to screw."

Peter never wore underwear, Connie had complained, and the fact grew in my mind, making me nauseous in a not unpleasant way. The sleepy crease of his eyes from his permanent high. Connie paled in comparison: I didn't really believe that friendship could be an end in itself, not just the background fuzz to the dramatics of boys loving you or not loving you.

Connie stood at the mirror and tried to harmonize with one of the sweet, sorrowful forty-fives we listened to with fanatic repetition. Songs that overheated my own righteous sadness, my imagined alignment with the tragic nature of the world. How I loved to wring myself out that way, stoking my feelings until they were unbearable. I wanted all of life to feel that frantic and pressurized with portent, so even colors and weather and tastes would be more saturated. That's what the songs promised, what they trawled out of me.

One song seemed to vibrate with a private echo, as if marked. The simple lines about a woman, about the shape of her back when she turns it on the man for the last time. The ashes she leaves in bed from her cigarettes. The song played once through, and Connie hopped up to flip the record.

"Play it again," I said. I tried to imagine myself in the same way the singer saw the woman: the dangle of her silver bracelet, tinged with green, the fall of her hair. But I only felt foolish, opening my eyes to the sight of Connie at the mirror, separating her eyelashes with a safety pin, her shorts wedged into her ass. It wasn't the same to notice things about yourself. Only certain girls ever called forth that kind of attention. Like the girl I'd seen in the park. Or Pamela and the girls on the high school steps, waiting for the lazy agitation of their boyfriends' idling cars, the signal to leap to their feet. To brush off their seat and trip out into the full sun, waving goodbye to the ones left behind.

• • •

Soon after that day, I'd gone to Peter's room while Connie was sleeping. His comment to me in the kitchen felt like a time-stamped invitation I had to redeem before it slipped away. Connie and I had drunk beer before bed, lounging against the wicker legs of her furniture and scooping cottage cheese from a tub with our fingers. I drank much more than she had. I wanted some other momentum to take over, forcing action. I didn't want to be like Connie, never changing, waiting around for something to happen, eating an entire sleeve of sesame crackers, then doing ten jumping jacks in her room. I stayed awake after Connie passed into her deep, twitchy sleep. Listening for Peter's footsteps on the stairs.

He crashed to his room, finally, and I waited for what seemed like a long time before I followed. Creeping along the hallway like a specter in shortie pajamas, their polyester slickness stuck in the broody stretch between princess costumes and lingerie. The silence of the house was a living thing, oppressive and present but also coloring everything with a foreign freedom, filling the rooms like a denser air.

Peter's form under the blankets was still, his knobby man's feet exposed. I heard his breathing, brambled from the aftereffects of whatever drugs he'd taken. His room seemed to cradle him. This might have been enough—to watch him sleep as a parent would, indulging the privilege of imagining happy dreams. His breaths like the

beads of a rosary, each in and out a comfort. But I didn't want it to be enough.

When I got closer, his face clarified, his features completing as I adjusted to the dark. I let myself watch him without shame. Peter opened his eyes, suddenly, and somehow didn't seem startled by my presence at his bedside. Giving me a look as mild as a glass of milk.

"Boyd," he said, his voice still drifty from sleep, but he blinked and there was a resignation in the way he said my name that made me feel he'd been waiting for me. That he'd known I would come.

I was embarrassed to be standing like I was.

"You can sit," he said. I crouched by the futon, hovering foolishly. My legs already starting to burn with effort. Peter reached a hand to pull me fully onto the mattress and I smiled, though I wasn't sure he could even see my face. He was quiet and so was I. His room looked strange, as seen from the floor; the bulk of the dresser, the slivered doorway. I couldn't imagine Connie in the rooms beyond. Connie mumbling in her sleep, as she often did, sometimes announcing a number like an addled bingo player.

"You can get under the blankets if you're cold," he said, caping open the covers so I saw his bare chest, his nakedness. I got in beside him with ritual silence. It was as easy as this—I'd entered a possibility that had always been there.

He didn't speak, after that, and neither did I. He hitched me close so my back was pressed against his chest

and I could feel his dick rear against my thighs. I didn't want to breathe, feeling that it would be an imposition on him, even the fact of my ribs rising and falling too much of a bother. I was taking tiny breaths through my nose, a light-headedness overtaking me. The strident rank of him in the dark, his blankets, his sheets—it was what Pamela got all the time, this easy occupation of his presence. His arm was around me, a weight I kept identifying as the weight of a boy's arm. Peter acted like he was going to sleep, the casual sigh and shuffle, but that kept the whole thing together. You had to act as if nothing strange were happening. When he brushed my nipple with his finger, I kept very still. I could feel his steady breath on my neck. His hand taking an impersonal measurement. Twisting the nipple so I inhaled audibly, and he hesitated for a moment but kept going. His dick smearing at my bare thighs. I would be shunted along whatever would happen, I understood. However he piloted the night. And there wasn't fear, just a feeling adjacent to excitement, a viewing from the wings. What would happen to Evie?

When the floorboards creaked from the hall, the spell cracked. Peter withdrew his hand, rolling abruptly onto his back. Staring at the ceiling so I could see his eyes.

"I've gotta get some sleep," he said in a voice carefully drained. A voice like an eraser, its insistent dullness meant to make me wonder if anything had happened. And I was slow to get to my feet, a little stunned, but also in a happy swoon, like even that little bit had fed me.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# DARK MATTER

BLAKE CROUCH

A NOVEL

# Dark Matter

A NOVEL

Blake Crouch

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First Edition

# ONE

I love Thursday nights.

They have a feel to them that's outside of time.

It's our tradition, just the three of us—family night.

My son, Charlie, is sitting at the table, drawing on a sketch pad. He's almost fifteen. The kid grew two inches over the summer, and he's as tall as I am now.

I turn away from the onion I'm julienning, ask, "Can I see?"

He holds up the pad, shows me a mountain range that looks like something on another planet.

I say, "Love that. Just for fun?"

"Class project. Due tomorrow."

"Then get back to it, Mr. Last Minute."

Standing happy and slightly drunk in my kitchen, I'm unaware that tonight is the end of all of this. The end of everything I know, everything I love.

No one tells you it's all about to change, to be taken away. There's no proximity alert, no indication that you're standing on the precipice. And maybe that's what makes tragedy so tragic. Not just what happens, but *how* it happens: a sucker punch that comes at you out of nowhere, when you're least expecting it. No time to flinch or brace.

The track lights shine on the surface of my wine, and the onion is beginning to sting my eyes. Thelonious Monk spins on the old

turntable in the den. There's a richness to the analog recording I can never get enough of, especially the crackle of static between tracks. The den is filled with stacks and stacks of rare vinyl that I keep telling myself I'll get around to organizing one of these days.

My wife, Daniela, sits on the kitchen island, swirling her almost-empty wineglass in one hand and holding her phone in the other. She feels my stare and grins without looking up from the screen.

"I know," she says. "I'm violating the cardinal rule of family night."

"What's so important?" I ask.

She levels her dark, Spanish eyes on mine. "Nothing."

I walk over to her, take the phone gently out of her hand, and set it on the countertop.

"You could start the pasta," I say.

"I prefer to watch *you* cook."

"Yeah?" Quieter: "Turns you on, huh?"

"No, it's just more fun to drink and do nothing."

Her breath is wine-sweet, and she has one of those smiles that seem architecturally impossible. It still slays me.

I polish off my glass. "We should open more wine, right?"

"It would be stupid not to."

As I liberate the cork from a new bottle, she picks her phone back up and shows me the screen. "I was reading *Chicago Magazine*'s review of Marsha Altman's show."

"Were they kind?"

"Yeah, it's basically a love letter."

"Good for her."

"I always thought . . ." She lets the sentence die, but I know where it was headed. Fifteen years ago, before we met, Daniela was a comer to Chicago's art scene. She had a studio in Bucktown, showed her work in a half-dozen galleries, and had just lined up her first solo exhibition in New York. Then came life. Me. Charlie. A bout of crippling postpartum depression.

Derailment.

Now she teaches private art lessons to middle-grade students.

"It's not that I'm not happy for her. I mean, she's brilliant, she deserves it all."

I say, "If it makes you feel any better, Ryan Holder just won the Pavia Prize."

"What's that?"

"A multidisciplinary award given for achievements in the life and physical sciences. Ryan won for his work in neuroscience."

"Is it a big deal?"

"Million dollars. Accolades. Opens the floodgates to grant money."

"Hotter TAs?"

"Obviously that's the real prize. He invited me to a little informal celebration tonight, but I passed."

"Why?"

"Because it's our night."

"You should go."

"I'd really rather not."

Daniela lifts her empty glass. "So what you're saying is, we both have good reason to drink a lot of wine tonight."

I kiss her, and then pour generously from the newly opened bottle.

"You could've won that prize," Daniela says.

"You could've owned this city's art scene."

"But we did this." She gestures at the high-ceilinged expanse of our brownstone. I bought it pre-Daniela with an inheritance. "And we did that," she says, pointing to Charlie as he sketches with a beautiful intensity that reminds me of Daniela when she's absorbed in a painting.

It's a strange thing, being the parent of a teenager. One thing to raise a little boy, another entirely when a person on the brink of adulthood looks to you for wisdom. I feel like I have little to give. I know there are fathers who see the world a certain way, with clarity and confidence, who know just what to say to their sons and daughters. But I'm not one of them. The older I get, the less I understand. I love

my son. He means everything to me. And yet, I can't escape the feeling that I'm failing him. Sending him off to the wolves with nothing but the crumbs of my uncertain perspective.

I move to the cabinet beside the sink, open it, and start hunting for a box of fettuccine.

Daniela turns to Charlie, says, "Your father could have won the Nobel."

I laugh. "That's possibly an exaggeration."

"Charlie, don't be fooled. He's a genius."

"You're sweet," I say. "And a little drunk."

"It's true, and you know it. Science is less advanced because you love your family."

I can only smile. When Daniela drinks, three things happen: her native accent begins to bleed through, she becomes belligerently kind, and she tends toward hyperbole.

"Your father said to me one night—never forget it—that pure research is life-consuming. He said . . ." For a moment, and to my surprise, emotion overtakes her. Her eyes mist, and she shakes her head like she always does when she's about to cry. At the last second, she rallies, pushes through. "He said, 'Daniela, on my deathbed I would rather have memories of you than of a cold, sterile lab.' "

I look at Charlie, catch him rolling his eyes as he sketches.

Probably embarrassed by our display of parental melodrama.

I stare into the cabinet and wait for the ache in my throat to go away.

When it does, I grab the pasta and close the door.

Daniela drinks her wine.

Charlie draws.

The moment passes.

"Where's Ryan's party?" Daniela asks.

"Village Tap."

"That's your bar, Jason."

"So?"

She comes over, takes the box of pasta out of my hand.

"Go have a drink with your old college buddy. Tell him you're proud of him. Head held high. Tell him I said congrats."

"I will not tell him you said congrats."

"Why?"

"He has a thing for you."

"Stop it."

"It's true. From way back. From our roommate days. Remember the last Christmas party? He kept trying to trick you into standing under the mistletoe with him?"

She just laughs, says, "Dinner will be on the table by the time you get home."

"Which means I should be back here in . . ."

"Forty-five minutes."

"What would I be without you?"

She kisses me.

"Let's not even think about it."

I grab my keys and wallet from the ceramic dish beside the microwave and move into the dining room, my gaze alighting on the tesseract chandelier above the dinner table. Daniela gave it to me for our tenth wedding anniversary. Best gift ever.

As I reach the front door, Daniela shouts, "Return bearing ice cream!"

"Mint chocolate chip!" Charlie says.

I lift my arm, raise my thumb.

I don't look back.

I don't say goodbye.

And this moment slips past unnoticed.

The end of everything I know, everything I love.

I've lived in Logan Square for twenty years, and it doesn't get any better than the first week of October. It always puts me in mind of that F. Scott Fitzgerald line: *Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.*

The evening is cool, and the skies are clear enough to see a handful of stars. The bars are more rambunctious than usual, jammed with disappointed Cubs fans.

I stop on the sidewalk in the glow of a gaudy sign that blinks VILLAGE TAP and stare through the open doorway of the ubiquitous corner bar you'll find in any self-respecting Chicago neighborhood. This one happens to be my local watering hole. It's the closest to home—a few blocks from my brownstone.

I pass through the glow of the blue neon sign in the front window and step through the doorway.

Matt, the bartender and owner, nods to me as I move down the bar, threading my way through the crowd that surrounds Ryan Holder.

I say to Ryan, "I was just telling Daniela about you."

He smiles, looking exquisitely groomed for the lecture circuit—fit and tan in a black turtleneck, his facial hair elaborately landscaped.

"Goddamn is it good to see you. I'm moved that you came. Darling?" He touches the bare shoulder of the young woman occupying the stool beside his. "Would you mind letting my dear old friend steal your chair for a minute?"

The woman dutifully abandons her seat, and I climb onto the stool beside Ryan.

He calls the bartender over. "We want you to set us up with a pair of the most expensive pours in the house."

"Ryan, not necessary."

He grabs my arm. "We're drinking the best tonight."

Matt says, "I have Macallan Twenty-Five."

"Doubles. My tab."

When the bartender goes, Ryan punches me in the arm. Hard. You wouldn't peg him as a scientist at first glance. He played lacrosse during his undergrad years, and he still carries the broad-shouldered physique and ease of movement of a natural athlete.

"How's Charlie and the lovely Daniela?"

"They're great."

"You should've brought her down. I haven't seen her since last Christmas."

"She sends along her congrats."

"You got a good woman there, but that's not exactly news."

"What are the chances of you settling down in the near future?"

"Slim. The single life, and its considerable perks, appears to suit me. You're still at Lakemont College?"

"Yeah."

"Decent school. Undergrad physics, right?"

"Exactly."

"So you're teaching . . ."

"Quantum mechanics. Intro stuff mainly. Nothing too terribly sexy."

Matt returns with our drinks, and Ryan takes them out of his hands and sets mine before me.

"So this celebration . . . ," I say.

"Just an impromptu thing a few of my postgrads threw together. They love nothing more than to get me drunk and holding court."

"Big year for you, Ryan. I still remember you almost flunking differential equations."

"And you saved my ass. More than once."

For a second, behind the confidence and the polish, I glimpse the goofy, fun-loving grad student with whom I shared a disgusting apartment for a year and a half.

I ask, "Was the Pavia Prize for your work in—"

"Identifying the prefrontal cortex as a consciousness generator."

"Right. Of course. I read your paper on it."

"What'd you think?"

"Dazzling."

He looks genuinely pleased at the compliment.

"If I'm honest, Jason, and there's no false modesty here, I always thought it would be you publishing the seminal papers."

"Really?"

He studies me over the top of his black plastic glass frames.

"Of course. You're smarter than I am. Everyone knew it."

I drink my whisky. I try not to acknowledge how delicious it is.

He says, "Just a question, but do you see yourself more as a research scientist or a teacher these days?"

"I—"

"Because I see myself, first and foremost, as a man pursuing answers to fundamental questions. Now, if the people around me"—he gestures at his students who have begun to crowd in—"are sharp enough to absorb knowledge by sheer proximity to me . . . great. But the passing on of knowledge, as it were, doesn't interest me. All that matters is the science. The research."

I note a flicker of annoyance, or anger, in his voice, and it's building, like he's getting himself worked up toward something.

I try to laugh it off. "Are you upset with me, Ryan? It almost sounds like you think I let you down."

"Look, I've taught at MIT, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the best schools on the planet. I've met the smartest motherfuckers in the room, and Jason, you would've changed the world if you'd decided to go that path. If you'd stuck with it. Instead, you're teaching undergrad physics to future doctors and patent lawyers."

"We can't all be superstars like you, Ryan."

"Not if you give up."

I finish my whisky.

"Well, I'm so glad I popped in for this." I step down off the barstool.

"Don't be that way, Jason. I was paying you a compliment."

"I'm proud of you, man. I mean that."

"Jason."

"Thanks for the drink."

Back outside, I stalk down the sidewalk. The more distance I put between myself and Ryan, the angrier I become.

And I'm not even sure at whom.

My face is hot.

Lines of sweat trail down my sides.

Without thinking, I step into the street against a crosswalk signal and instantly register the sound of tires locking up, of rubber squealing across pavement.

I turn and stare in disbelief as a yellow cab barrels toward me.

Through the approaching windshield, I see the cabbie so clearly—a mustached man, wide-eyed with naked panic, bracing for impact.

And then my hands are flat against the warm, yellow metal of the hood and the cabbie is leaning out his window, screaming at me, "You dipshit, you almost died! Pull your head out of your ass!"

Horns begin to blare behind the cab.

I retreat to the sidewalk and watch the flow of traffic resume.

The occupants of three separate cars are kind enough to slow down so they can flip me off.

Whole Foods smells like the hippie I dated before Daniela—a tincture of fresh produce, ground coffee, and essential oils.

The scare with the cab has flattened my buzz, and I browse the freezer cases in something of a fog, lethargic and sleepy.

It feels colder when I'm back outside, a brisk wind blowing in off the lake, portending the shitty winter that looms right around the corner.

With my canvas bag filled with ice cream, I take a different route toward home. It adds six blocks, but what I lose in brevity, I gain in solitude, and between the cab and Ryan, I need some extra time to reset.

I pass a construction site, abandoned for the night, and a few blocks later, the playground of the elementary school my son attended, the metal sliding board gleaming under a streetlamp and the swings stirring in the breeze.

There's an energy to these autumn nights that touches something primal inside of me. Something from long ago. From my childhood in western Iowa. I think of high school football games and the stadium lights blazing down on the players. I smell ripening apples, and the sour reek of beer from keg parties in the cornfields. I feel the wind in my face as I ride in the bed of an old pickup truck down a country road at night, dust swirling red in the taillights and the entire span of my life yawning out ahead of me.

It's the beautiful thing about youth.

There's a weightlessness that permeates everything because no damning choices have been made, no paths committed to, and the road forking out ahead is pure, unlimited potential.

I love my life, but I haven't felt that lightness of being in ages. Autumn nights like this are as close as I get.

The cold is beginning to clear my head.

It will be good to be home again. I'm thinking of starting up the gas logs. We've never had a fire before Halloween, but tonight is so unseasonably cold that after walking a mile in this wind, all I want is to sit by the hearth with Daniela and Charlie and a glass of wine.

The street undercuts the El.

I pass beneath the rusting ironwork of the railway.

For me, even more than the skyline, the El personifies the city.

This is my favorite section of the walk home, because it's the darkest and quietest.

At the moment . . .

No trains inbound.

No headlights in either direction.

No audible pub noise.

Nothing but the distant roar of a jet overhead, on final approach into O'Hare.

Wait . . .

There's something coming—footfalls on the sidewalk.

I glance back.

A shadow rushes toward me, the distance between us closing faster than I can process what's happening.

The first thing I see is a face.

Ghost white.

High, arching eyebrows that look drawn.

Red, pursed lips—too thin, too perfect.

And horrifying eyes—big and pitch-black, without pupils or irises.

The second thing I see is the barrel of a gun, four inches from the end of my nose.

The low, raspy voice behind the geisha mask says, "Turn around."

I hesitate, too stunned to move.

He pushes the gun into my face.

I turn around.

Before I can tell him that my wallet is in my front left pocket, he says, "I'm not here for your money. Start walking."

I start walking.

"Faster."

I walk faster.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Keep your mouth shut."

A train roars past overhead, and we emerge from the darkness under the El, my heart rocketing inside my chest. I absorb my surroundings with a sudden and profound curiosity. Across the street is a gated townhome complex, and this side of the block comprises a collection of businesses that shutter at five.

A nail salon.

A law office.

An appliance repair shop.

A tire store.

This neighborhood is a ghost town, nobody out.

"See that SUV?" he asks. There's a black Lincoln Navigator parked on the curb just ahead. The alarm chirps. "Get in the driver's seat."

"Whatever you're thinking about doing—"

"Or you can bleed to death right here on the sidewalk."

I open the driver's-side door and slide in behind the wheel.

"My grocery bag," I say.

"Bring it." He climbs in behind me. "Start the car."

I pull the door closed and stow the canvas Whole Foods bag in the front passenger floorboard. It's so quiet in the car I can actually hear my pulse—a fast thrumming against my eardrum.

"What are you waiting for?" he asks.

I press the engine-start button.

"Turn on the navigation."

I turn it on.

"Click on 'previous destinations.' "

I've never owned a car with built-in GPS, and it takes me a moment to find the right tab on the touchscreen.

Three locations appear.

One is my home address. One is the university where I work.

"You've been following me?" I ask.

"Choose Pulaski Drive."

I select 1400 Pulaski Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60616, with no idea where that even is. The female voice on the GPS instructs me: *Make a legal U-turn when possible and proceed for point-eight miles.*

Shifting into gear, I turn out into the dark street.

The man behind me says, "Buckle your seat belt."

I strap myself in as he does the same.

"Jason, just so we're clear, if you do anything other than follow these directions to the letter, I'm going to shoot you through the seat. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes."

I drive us through my neighborhood, wondering if I'm seeing it all for the last time.

At a red light, I pull to a stop in front of my corner bar. Through the deeply tinted front passenger window, I see the door is still propped open. I glimpse Matt, and through the crowd, Ryan, turned around

in his stool now, his back to the bar, his elbows on the scuffed wood, holding court for his postgrads. Probably enthralling them with a horrifying cautionary tale of failure starring his old roommate.

I want to call out to him. To make him understand that I'm in trouble. That I need—

"Green light, Jason."

I accelerate through the intersection.

The GPS navigation guides us east through Logan Square to the Kennedy Expressway, where the indifferent female voice instructs me, *Turn right in one hundred feet and proceed for nineteen-point-eight miles.*

Southbound traffic is light enough for me to peg the speedometer at seventy and keep it there. My hands sweat on the leather steering wheel, and I can't stop wondering, Am I going to die tonight?

It occurs to me that if I do survive, I'll carry a new revelation with me for the rest of my days: we leave this life the same way we enter it—totally alone, bereft. I'm afraid, and there is nothing Daniela or Charlie or anyone can do to help me in this moment when I need them more than ever. They don't even know what I'm experiencing.

The interstate skirts the western edge of downtown. The Willis Tower and its brood of lesser skyscrapers glow with a serene warmth against the night.

Through the writhing panic and fear, my mind races, fighting to puzzle out what's happening.

My address is in the GPS. So this wasn't a random encounter. This man has been following me. Knows me. Ergo, some action of mine has resulted in this outcome.

But which?

I'm not rich.

My life isn't worth anything beyond its value to me and to my loved ones.

I've never been arrested, never committed a crime.

Never slept with another man's wife.

Sure, I flip people off in traffic on occasion, but that's just Chicago.

My last and only physical altercation was in the sixth grade when I punched a classmate in the nose for pouring milk down the back of my shirt.

I haven't wronged anyone in the meaningful sense of the word. In a manner that might have culminated with me driving a Lincoln Navigator with a gun pointed at the back of my head.

I'm an atomic physicist and professor at a small college.

I don't treat my students, even the worst of the bunch, with anything but respect. Those who have failed out of my classes failed because they didn't care in the first place, and certainly none of them could accuse me of ruining their lives. I go *out of my way* to help my students pass.

The skyline dwindles in the side mirror, falling farther and farther away like a familiar and comforting piece of coastline.

I venture, "Did I do something to you in the past? Or someone you work for? I just don't understand what you could possibly want from—"

"The more you talk, the worse it will be for you."

For the first time, I realize there's something familiar in his voice. I can't for the life of me pinpoint when or where, but we've met. I'm sure of it.

I feel the vibration of my phone receiving a text message.

Then another.

And another.

He forgot to take my phone.

I look at the time: 9:05 p.m.

I left my house a little over an hour ago. It's Daniela no doubt, wondering where I am. I'm fifteen minutes late, and I'm never late.

I glance in the rearview mirror, but it's too dark to see anything except a sliver of the ghost-white mask. I risk an experiment. Taking my left hand off the steering wheel, I place it in my lap and count to ten.

He says nothing.

I put my hand back on the wheel.

That computerized voice breaks the silence: *Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in four-point-three miles.*

Again, I take my left hand slowly off the wheel.

This time, I slide it into the pocket of my khaki slacks. My phone is buried deep, and I just barely touch it with my index and pointer fingers, somehow managing to pinch it between them.

Millimeter by millimeter, I tug it out, the rubber case catching on every fold of fabric, and now a sustained vibration rattling between my fingertips—a call coming in.

When I finally work it free, I place my phone faceup in my lap and return my hand to the steering wheel.

As the navigation voice updates the distance from our upcoming turn, I shoot a glance down at the phone.

There's a missed call from "Dani" and three texts:

> DANI 2m ago
> Dinner's on the table
>
> DANI 2m ago
> Hurry home we are STARVING!
>
> DANI 1m ago
> You get lost? :)

I refocus my attention on the road, wondering if the glow from my phone is visible from the backseat.

The touchscreen goes dark.

Reaching down, I click the ON/OFF button and swipe the screen. I punch in my four-digit passcode, click the green "Messages" icon. Daniela's thread is at the top, and as I open our conversation, my abductor shifts behind me.

I clutch the wheel with both hands again.

*Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in one-point-nine miles.*

The screensaver times out, auto-lock kicks in, my phone goes black.

Shit.

Sliding my hand back down, I retype the passcode and begin tapping out the most important text of my life, my index finger clumsy on the touchscreen, each word taking two or three attempts to complete as auto-correct wreaks havoc.

The barrel of the gun digs into the back of my head.

I react, swerving into the fast lane.

"What are you doing, Jason?"

I straighten the wheel with one hand, swinging us back into the slow lane as my other hand lowers toward the phone, closing in on Send.

He lunges between the front seats, his gloved hand reaching around my waist, snatching the phone away.

*Merge right onto the Eighty-Seventh Street exit in five hundred feet.*

"What's your passcode, Jason?" When I don't respond, he says, "Wait. I bet I know this. Month and year of your birthday backwards? Let's see . . . three-seven-two-one. There we go."

In the rearview mirror, I see the phone illuminate his mask.

He reads the text he stopped me from sending: " '1400 Pulaski call 91 . . .' Bad boy."

I veer onto the interstate off-ramp.

The GPS says, *Turn left onto Eighty-Seventh Street and proceed east for three-point-eight miles.*

We drive into South Chicago, through a neighborhood we have no business setting foot in.

Past rows of factory housing.

Apartment projects.

Empty parks with rusted swing sets and netless basketball hoops.

Storefronts locked up for the night behind security gates.

Gang tagging everywhere.

He asks, "So do you call her Dani or Daniela?"

My throat constricts.

Rage and fear and helplessness burgeoning inside of me.

"Jason, I asked you a question."

"Go to hell."

He leans close, his words hot in my ear. "You do not want to go down this path with me. I will hurt you worse than you've ever been hurt in your life. Pain you didn't even know was possible. What do you call her?"

I grit my teeth. "Daniela."

"Never Dani? Even though that's what's on your phone?"

I'm tempted to flip the car at high speed and just kill us both.

I say, "Rarely. She doesn't like it."

"What's in the grocery bag?"

"Why do you want to know what I call her?"

"What's in the bag?"

"Ice cream."

"It's family night, right?"

"Yeah."

In the rearview mirror, I see him typing on my phone.

"What are you writing?" I ask.

He doesn't respond.

We're out of the ghetto now, riding through a no-man's-land that doesn't even feel like Chicago anymore, with the skyline nothing but a smear of light on the far horizon. The houses are crumbling, lightless, and lifeless. Everything long abandoned.

We cross a river and straight ahead lies Lake Michigan, its black expanse a fitting denouement of this urban wilderness.

As if the world ends right here.

And perhaps mine does.

*Turn right and proceed south on Pulaski Drive for point-five miles to destination.*

He chuckles to himself. "Wow, are you in trouble with the missus." I strangle the steering wheel. "Who was that man you had whisky with tonight, Jason? I couldn't tell from outside."

It's so dark out here in this borderland between Chicago and Indiana.

We're passing the ruins of railroad yards and factories.

"Jason."

"His name is Ryan Holder. He used to be—"

"Your old roommate."

"How'd you know that?"

"Are you two close? I don't see him in your contacts."

"Not really. How do you—?"

"I know almost everything about you, Jason. You could say I've made your life my specialty."

"Who are you?"

*You will arrive at your destination in five hundred feet.*

"Who *are* you?"

He doesn't answer, but my attention is beginning to pull away from him as I focus on our increasingly remote surroundings.

The pavement flows under the SUV's headlights.

Empty behind us.

Empty ahead.

There's the lake off to my left, deserted warehouses on my right.

*You have arrived at your destination.*

I stop the Navigator in the middle of the road.

He says, "The entrance is up ahead on the left."

The headlights graze a teetering stretch of twelve-foot fencing, topped with a tiara of rusted barbed wire. The gate is ajar, and a chain that once locked it shut has been snipped and coiled in the weeds by the roadside.

"Just nudge the gate with the front bumper."

Even from inside the near-soundproof interior of the SUV, the shriek of the gate grinding open is loud. The cones of light illuminate

the remnants of a road, the pavement cracked and buckled from years of harsh Chicago winters.

I engage the high beams.

Light washes over a parking lot, where streetlamps have toppled everywhere like spilled matchsticks.

Beyond, a sprawling structure looms.

The brick façade of the time-ravaged building is flanked by huge cylindrical tanks and a pair of hundred-foot smokestacks spearing the sky.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"Put it in PARK and turn it off."

I bring the car to a stop, shift out of gear, and punch off the engine.

It becomes deathly silent.

"What is this place?" I ask again.

"What are your Friday plans?"

"Excuse me?"

A sharp blow to the side of my head sends me slumping into the steering wheel, stunned and wondering for a half second if this is what it feels like to be shot in the head.

But no, he only hit me with his gun.

I touch my hand to the point of impact.

My fingers come away sticky with blood.

"Tomorrow," he says. "What do you have scheduled for tomorrow?"

Tomorrow. It feels like a foreign concept.

"I'm . . . giving a test to my PHYS 3316 class."

"What else?"

"That's it."

"Take off all your clothes."

I look in the rearview mirror.

Why the hell does he want me naked?

He says, "If you wanted to try something, you should've done it while you had control of the car. From this moment forward, you're

mine. Now, take off your clothes, and if I have to tell you again, I'm going to make you bleed. A lot."

I unbuckle my seat belt.

As I unzip my gray hoodie and shrug my arms out of the sleeves, I cling to a single shred of hope—he's still wearing a mask, which means he doesn't want me to see his face. If he were planning to kill me, he wouldn't care if I could identify him.

Right?

I unbutton my shirt.

"Shoes too?" I ask.

"*Everything*."

I slip off my running shoes, my socks.

I slide my slacks and boxer shorts down my legs.

Then my clothes—every last thread—sit in a pile in the front passenger seat.

I feel vulnerable.

Exposed.

Weirdly ashamed.

What if he tries to rape me? Is that what this is all about?

He sets a flashlight on the console between the seats.

"Out of the car, Jason."

I realize that I see the interior of the Navigator as a kind of lifeboat. As long as I stay inside, he can't really hurt me.

He won't make a mess in here.

"Jason."

My chest is heaving, I'm starting to hyperventilate, black spots detonating across my field of vision.

"I know what you're thinking," he says, "and I can hurt you just as easily inside this car."

I'm not getting enough oxygen. I'm starting to freak out.

But I manage to say, breathlessly, "Bullshit. You don't want my blood in here."

When I come to, he's dragging me out of the front seat by my arms. He drops me in the gravel, where I sit dazed, waiting for my head to clear.

It's always colder near the lake, and tonight is no exception. The wind inflicts a raw, serrated bite on my exposed skin, which is covered in gooseflesh.

It's so dark out here I can see five times the number of stars as in the city.

My head is throbbing, and a fresh line of blood runs down the side of my face. But with a full load of adrenaline shotgunning through my system, the pain is muted.

He drops a flashlight in the dirt beside me and shines his at the disintegrating edifice I saw as we drove in. "After you."

I clutch the light in my hand and struggle to my feet. Stumbling toward the building, my bare feet trample sodden newspaper. I dodge crumpled beer cans and chevrons of glass that glitter under the beam.

Approaching the main entrance, I imagine this abandoned parking lot on another night. A night to come. It's early winter, and through a curtain of falling snow, the darkness is ribboned with flashing blues and reds. Detectives and cadaver dogs swarm the ruins, and as they examine my body somewhere inside, naked and decomposed and butchered, a patrol car parks in front of my brownstone in Logan Square. It's two in the morning, and Daniela comes to the door in a nightgown. I've been missing for weeks and she knows in her heart I'm not coming back, thinks she's already made her peace with that brutal fact, but seeing these young police officers with their hard, sober eyes and a dusting of snow on their shoulders and visored caps, which they shelve respectfully under their arms . . . it all finally breaks something inside of her she didn't know was still intact. She feels her knees liquefy, her strength giving way, and as she sinks onto the doormat, Charlie comes down the creaky staircase behind her, bleary-eyed and wild-haired, asking, "Is it about Dad?"

As we close in on the structure, two words reveal themselves on the faded brick above the entrance. The only letters I can make out spell CAGO POWER.

He forces me through an opening in the brick.

Our light beams sweep across a front office.

Furniture rotted down to the metal frames.

An old water cooler.

The remnants of someone's campfire.

A shredded sleeping bag.

Used condoms on moldy carpet.

We enter a long corridor.

Without the flashlights, this would be can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face dark.

I stop to shine my light ahead, but it's swallowed by the blackness. There's less debris on the warped linoleum floor beneath my feet, and no sound whatsoever, save for the low, distant moan of wind outside these walls.

I'm growing colder by the second.

He jams the barrel of the gun into my kidney, forcing me on.

At some point, did I fall onto the radar of a psychopath who decided to learn everything about me before he murdered me? I often engage with strangers. Maybe we spoke briefly in that coffee shop near campus. Or on the El. Or over beers at my corner bar.

Does he have plans for Charlie and Daniela?

"Do you want to hear me beg?" I ask, my voice beginning to break. "Because I will. I'll do anything you want."

And the horrible thing is that it's true. I would defile myself. Hurt someone else, do almost anything if he would only take me back to my neighborhood and let this night continue like it was supposed to—with me walking home to my family, bringing them the ice cream I'd promised.

"If what?" he asks. "If I let you go?"

"Yes."

The sound of his laughter ricochets down the corridor. "I'd be afraid to see what-all you'd be willing to do to get yourself out of this."

"Out of what, exactly?"

But he doesn't answer.

I fall to my knees.

My light goes sliding across the floor.

"Please," I beg. "You don't have to do this." I barely recognize my own voice. "You can just walk away. I don't know why you want to hurt me, but just think about it for a minute. I—"

"Jason."

"—love my family. I love my wife. I love—"

"Jason."

"—my son."

"Jason!"

"I will do *anything*."

I'm shivering uncontrollably now—from cold, from fear.

He kicks me in the stomach, and as the breath explodes out of my lungs, I roll over onto my back. Crushing down on top of me, he shoves the barrel of the gun between my lips, into my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat until the taste of old oil and carbon residue is more than I can stomach.

Two seconds before I hurl the night's wine and Scotch across the floor, he withdraws the gun.

Screams, "Get up!"

He grabs my arm, jerks me back onto my feet.

Pointing the gun in my face, he puts my flashlight back into my hands.

I stare into the mask, my light shining on the weapon.

It's my first good look at the gun. I know next to nothing about firearms, only that it's a handgun, has a hammer, a cylinder, and a giant hole at the end of the barrel that looks fully capable of delivering my death. The illumination of my flashlight lends a touch of copper to the point of the bullet aimed at my face. For some reason, I picture this man in a single-room apartment, loading rounds into the cylinder, preparing to do what he's done.

I'm going to die here, maybe right now.

Every moment feels like it could be the end.

"Move," he growls.

I start walking.

We arrive at a junction and turn down a different corridor, this one wider, taller, arched. The air is oppressive with moisture. I hear the distant *drip . . . drip . . . drip* of falling water. The walls are made of concrete, and instead of linoleum, the floor is blanketed with damp moss that grows thicker and wetter with each step.

The taste of the gun lingers in my mouth, laced with the acidic tang of bile.

Patches of my face are growing numb from the cold.

A small voice in my head is screaming at me to do something, try something, anything. Don't just be led like a lamb to slaughter, one foot obediently following the other. Why make it so simple for him?

Easy.

Because I'm afraid.

So afraid I can barely walk upright.

And my thoughts are fractured and teeming.

I understand now why victims don't fight back. I cannot imagine trying to overcome this man. Trying to run.

And here's the most shameful truth: there's a part of me that would rather just have it all be over, because the dead don't feel fear or pain. Does this mean I'm a coward? Is that the final truth I have to face before I die?

No.

I have to do something.

We step out of the tunnel onto a metal surface that's freezing against the soles of my feet. I grasp a rusted iron railing that encircles a platform. It's colder here, and the sense of open space is unmistakable.

As if on a timer, a yellow moon creeps up on Lake Michigan, slowly rising.

Its light streams through the upper windows of an expansive

room, and it's bright enough in here for me to take in everything independently of the flashlight.

My stomach churns.

We're standing on the high point of an open staircase that drops fifty feet.

It looks like an oil painting in here, the way the antique light falls on a row of dormant generators below and the latticework of I-beams overhead.

It's as quiet as a cathedral.

"We're going down," he says. "Watch your step."

We descend.

Two steps up from the second-to-highest landing, I spin with the flashlight death-gripped in my right hand, aiming for his head . . .

. . . and hitting nothing, the momentum carrying me right back to where I started and then some.

I'm off balance, falling.

I hit the landing hard, and the flashlight jars out of my hand and disappears over the edge.

A second later, I hear it explode on the floor forty feet below.

My captor stares down at me behind that expressionless mask, head cocked, gun pointed at my face.

Thumbing back the hammer, he steps toward me.

I groan as his knee drives into my sternum, pinning me to the landing.

The gun touches my head.

He says, "I have to admit, I'm proud you tried. It was pathetic. I saw it coming a mile away, but at least you went down swinging."

I recoil against a sharp sting in the side of my neck.

"Don't fight it," he says.

"What did you give me?"

Before he can answer, something plows through my blood-brain barrier like an eighteen-wheeler. I feel impossibly heavy and weightless all at once, the world spinning and turning itself inside out.

And then, as fast as it hit me, it passes.

Another needle stabs into my leg.

As I cry out, he tosses both syringes over the edge. "Let's go."

"What did you give me?"

"Get up!"

I use the railing to pull myself up. My knee is bleeding from the fall. My head is still bleeding. I'm cold, dirty, and wet, my teeth chattering so hard it feels like they might break.

We go down, the flimsy steelwork trembling with our weight. At the bottom, we move off the last step and walk down a row of old generators.

From the floor, this room seems even more immense.

At the midpoint, he stops and shines his flashlight on a duffel bag nestled against one of the generators.

"New clothes. Hurry up."

"New clothes? I don't—"

"You don't have to understand. You just have to get dressed."

Through all the fear, I register a tremor of hope. Is he going to spare me? Why else would he be making me get dressed? Do I have a shot at surviving this?

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Hurry up. You don't have much time left."

I squat by the duffel bag.

"Clean yourself up first."

There's a towel on top, which I use to wipe the mud off my feet, the blood off my knee and face. I pull on a pair of boxer shorts and jeans that fit perfectly. Whatever he injected me with, I think I can feel it in my fingers now—a loss of dexterity as I fumble with the buttons on a plaid shirt. My feet slide effortlessly into a pair of expensive leather slip-ons. They fit as comfortably as the jeans.

I'm not cold anymore. It's like there's a core of heat in the center of my chest, radiating out through my arms and legs.

"The jacket too."

I lift a black leather jacket from the bottom of the bag, push my arms through the sleeves.

"Perfect," he says. "Now, have a seat."

I ease down against the iron base of the generator. It's a massive piece of machinery the size of a locomotive engine.

He sits across from me, the gun trained casually in my direction.

Moonlight is filling this place, refracting off the broken windows high above and sending a scatter of light that strikes—

Tangles of cable.

Gears.

Pipes.

Levers and pulleys.

Instrumentation panels covered with cracked gauges and controls.

Technology from another age.

I ask, "What happens now?"

"We wait."

"For what?"

He waves my question away.

A weird calm settles over me. A misplaced sense of peace.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" I ask.

"I did not."

I feel so comfortable leaning against the old machine, like I'm sinking into it.

"But you let me believe it."

"There was no other way."

"No other way to what?"

"To get you here."

"And why are we here?"

But he just shakes his head as he snakes his left hand up under the geisha mask and scratches.

I feel strange.

Like I'm simultaneously watching a movie and acting in it.

An irresistible drowsiness lowers onto my shoulders.

My head dips.

"Just let it take you," he says.

But I don't. I fight it, thinking how unsettlingly fast his tenor has changed. He's like a different man, and the disconnect between who he is in this moment and the violence he showed just minutes ago should terrify me. I shouldn't be this calm, but my body is humming too peacefully.

I feel intensely serene and deep and distant.

He says to me, almost like a confession, "It's been a long road. I can't quite believe I'm sitting here actually looking at you. Talking to you. I know you don't understand, but there's so much I want to ask."

"About what?"

"What it's like to be you."

"What do you mean?"

He hesitates, then: "How do you feel about your place in the world, Jason?"

I say slowly, deliberately, "That's an interesting question considering the night you've put me through."

"Are you happy in your life?"

In the shadow of this moment, my life is achingly beautiful.

"I have an amazing family. A fulfilling job. We're comfortable. Nobody's sick."

My tongue feels thick. My words are beginning to sound slurred.

"But?"

I say, "My life is great. It's just not exceptional. And there was a time when it could have been."

"You killed your ambition, didn't you?"

"It died of natural causes. Of neglect."

"And do you know exactly how that happened? Was there a moment when—?"

"My son. I was twenty-seven years old, and Daniela and I had been together a few months. She told me she was pregnant. We were having fun, but it wasn't love. Or maybe it was. I don't know. We definitely weren't looking to start a family."

"But you did."

"When you're a scientist, your late twenties are so critical. If you don't publish something big by thirty, they put you out to pasture."

Maybe it's just the drug, but it feels so good to be talking. An oasis of normal after two of the craziest hours I've ever lived. I know it isn't true, but it feels like as long as we keep conversing, nothing bad can happen. As if the words protect me.

"Did you have something big in the works?" he asks.

Now I'm having to focus on making my eyes stay open.

"Yes."

"And what was it?"

His voice sounds distant.

"I was trying to create the quantum superposition of an object that was visible to the human eye."

"Why did you abandon your research?"

"When Charlie was born, he had major medical issues for the first year of his life. I needed a thousand hours in a cleanroom, but I couldn't get there fast enough. Daniela needed me. My son needed me. I lost my funding. Lost my momentum. I was the young, new genius for a minute, but when I faltered, someone else took my place."

"Do you regret your decision to stay with Daniela and make a life with her?"

"No."

"Never?"

I think of Daniela, and the emotion breaks back through, accompanied by the actual horror of the moment. Fear returns, and with it a homesickness that cuts to the bone. I *need* her in this moment more than I've ever needed anything in my life.

"Never."

And then I'm lying on the floor, my face against the cold concrete, and the drug is whisking me away.

He's kneeling beside me now, rolling me onto my back, and I'm looking up at all that moonlight pouring in through the high windows of this forgotten place, the darkness wrinkled with twitches of

light and color as swirling, empty voids open and close beside the generators.

"Will I see her again?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I want to ask him for the millionth time what he wants with me, but I can't find the words.

My eyes keep closing, and I try to hold them open, but it's a losing battle.

He pulls off a glove and touches my face with his bare hand.

Strangely.

Delicately.

He says, "Listen to me. You're going to be scared, but you can make it yours. You can have everything you never had. I'm sorry I had to scare you earlier, but I had to get you here. I'm so sorry, Jason. I'm doing this for both of us."

I mouth the words, *Who are you?*

Instead of responding, he reaches into his pocket and takes out a new syringe and a tiny glass ampoule filled with a clear liquid that in the moonlight shines like mercury.

He uncaps the needle and draws the contents of the vial up into the syringe.

As my eyelids slowly lower, I watch him slide the sleeve up his left arm and inject himself.

Then he drops the ampoule and the syringe on the concrete between us, and the last thing I see before my eyes lock shut is that glass ampoule rolling toward my face.

I whisper, "Now what?"

And he says, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

NATIONAL BEST SELLER

# SWEETBITTER

A NOVEL

STEPHANIE DANLER

# Sweetbitter

Stephanie Danler

ALFRED A. KNOPF
New York
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# I

YOU WILL DEVELOP a palate.

A palate is a spot on your tongue where you remember. Where you assign words to the textures of taste. Eating becomes a discipline, language-obsessed. You will never simply eat food again.

I DON'T KNOW what it *is* exactly, being a server. It's a job, certainly, but not exclusively. There's a transparency to it, an occupation stripped of the usual ambitions. One doesn't move up or down. One waits. You are a waiter.

It *is* fast money—loose, slippery bills that inflate and disappear over the course of an evening. It can be a means, to those with concrete ends and unwavering vision. I grasped most of that easily enough when I was hired at the restaurant at twenty-two.

Some of it was a draw: the money, the sense of safety that came from having a place to wait. What I didn't see was that the time had severe brackets around it. Within those brackets nothing else existed. Outside of them, all you could remember was the blur of a momentary madness. Ninety percent of us wouldn't even put it on a résumé. We might mention it as a tossed-off reference to

our moral rigor, a badge of a certain kind of misery, like enduring earthquakes, or spending time in the army. It was so finite.

I CAME HERE in a car like everybody else. In a car filled with shit I thought meant something and shortly thereafter tossed on the street: DVDs, soon to be irrelevant, a box of digital and film cameras for a still-latent photography talent, a copy of *On the Road* that I couldn't finish, and a Swedish-modern lamp from Walmart. It was a long, dark drive from a place so small you couldn't find it on a generous map.

Does anyone come to New York clean? I'm afraid not. But crossing the Hudson I thought of crossing Lethe, milky river of forgetting. I forgot that I had a mother who drove away before I could open my eyes, and a father who moved invisibly through the rooms of our house. I forgot the parade of people in my life as thin as mesh screens, who couldn't catch whatever it was I wanted to say to them, and I forgot how I drove down dirt roads between desiccated fields, under an oppressive guard of stars, and felt nothing.

Yes, I'd come to escape, but from what? The twin pillars of football and church? The low, faded homes on childless cul-de-sacs? Mornings of the *Gazette* and boxed doughnuts? The sedated, sentimental middle of it? It didn't matter. I would never know exactly, for my life, like most, moved only imperceptibly and definitively forward.

Let's say I was born in late June of 2006 when I came over the George Washington Bridge at seven a.m. with the sun circulating and dawning, the sky full of sharp corners of light, before the exhaust rose, before the heat gridlocked in, windows unrolled, radio turned up to some impossibly hopeful pop song, open, open, open.

SOUR: all the puckering citrus juices, the thin-skinned Meyer lemons, knobbed Kaffirs. Astringent yogurts and vinegars. Lemons resting in pint containers at all the cooks' sides. Chef yelled, This needs acid!, and they eviscerated lemons, leaving the caressing sting of food that's alive.

I DIDN'T KNOW about the tollbooths.

"I didn't know," I said to the tollbooth lady. "Can't I squeeze through this one time?"

The woman in the booth was as unmoved as an obelisk. The driver in the car behind me started honking, and then the driver behind him, until I wanted to duck under the steering wheel. She directed me to the side where I reversed, turned, and found myself facing the direction from which I had just come.

I pulled off into a maze of industrial streets, each one more misleading than the next. It was irrational but I was terrified of not being able to find an ATM and having to go all the way back. I pulled into a Dunkin' Donuts. I took out twenty dollars and looked at my remaining balance: $146.00. I used the restroom and rinsed off my face. *Almost*, I said to my strained face in the mirror.

"Can I get a large iced hazelnut coffee?" I asked. The man wheezing behind the counter masticated me with his eyes.

"You're back?" He handed me the change.

"Excuse me?"

"You were in here yesterday. You got that same coffee."

"No. I. Did. Not." I shook my head for emphasis. I imagined myself getting out of the car yesterday, tomorrow, and every day of my new life, pulling into the Dunkin' Donuts in motherfucking

New Jersey, and ordering that coffee. I felt sick. "I didn't," I said again, still shaking my head.

"I'm back, it's me," I said to the tollbooth woman, rolling the window down triumphantly. She raised one eyebrow and hooked her thumb into her belt loop. I handed her money like it was nothing. "Can I get in now?"

SALT: your mouth waters itself. Flakes from Brittany, liquescent on contact. Blocks of pink salt from the Himalayas, matte gray clumps from Japan. An endless stream of kosher salt, falling from Chef's hand. Salting the most nuanced of enterprises, the food always requesting more, but the tipping point fatal.

A FRIEND OF a friend of a friend, his name was Jesse. A spare bedroom for $700 a month. A neighborhood called Williamsburg. The city was in the grips of a tyrannical heat wave, the daily papers headlined with news of people dying in Queens and the outer boroughs where there were blackouts. The cops were passing out bags of ice, an evaporating consolation.

The streets were wide and vacant and I parked my car on Roebling. It was midafternoon, there wasn't enough shade, and every business seemed closed. I walked over to Bedford Avenue to look for signs of life. I saw a coffee shop and thought about asking if they needed a barista. When I looked through the window the kids on laptops were thin lipped, pierced, gaunt, so much older than me. I had promised myself to find work swiftly and unthinkingly—as a waitress, a barista, a whatever-the-fuck-job so I could feel planted. But when I told myself to open the door my hand objected.

The waterfront skyline was plastered with skeletons of high-

rises, escalating out of the low buildings. They looked like mistakes that had been rubbed out with an eraser. Creaking above an overgrown, abandoned lot was a rusted-out Mobil gas sign—all around me ambivalent evidence of extinction.

This new roommate had left the keys at a bar near the apartment. He worked in an office in Midtown during the day and couldn't meet me.

Clem's was a dark spot on a bright corner, the air conditioner rumbling like a diesel motor. It anointed me with a drip when I walked in, and I stood blinking in the airstream while my eyes adjusted.

There was a bartender leaning heavily against the back counter with his boots up on the bar in front of him. He wore a patched and studded denim vest with no shirt underneath. Two women sat in front of him in yellow print dresses, twirling straws in big drinks. No one said anything to me.

"Keys, keys, keys," he said when I asked. In addition to his body odor, which hit me in the face on my approach, this man was covered in terrifying—demonic—tattoos. The skin of his ribs seemed glued on. A mustache as defined as pigtails. He pulled out the register, threw it on the bar, and rummaged through the drawer underneath. Stacks of credit cards, foreign change, envelopes, receipts. The bills fluttered against the clamps.

"You Jesse's girl?"

"Ha," one of the women said from down the bar. She pressed her drink onto her forehead and rolled it back and forth. "That was funny."

"It's South Second and Roebling," I said.

"Am I a fucking real estate agent?" He threw a handful of keys with plastic colored tags at me.

"Aw, don't scare her," the second woman said. They didn't

look like sisters exactly, but they were both fleshy, rising out of their halter necklines like figureheads on the prow of a ship. One was blond, the other brunette—and now that I was looking, their dresses were definitely identical. They murmured inside jokes to each other.

How am I going to live here? I wondered. Someone is going to have to change, them or me. I found the keys marked 220 Roebling. The bartender ducked down.

"Thank you very much, sir," I said to the air.

"Oh, no problem, madame," he said, popping up and batting his eyes at me. He opened a can of beer, pushed his mustache up, and ran his tongue around it while looking at me.

"Okay," I said, backing away. "Well, maybe I'll come in again. For like . . . a drink."

"I'll be here with bells on," he said, turning his back on me. His stench lingered.

Just before I stepped out into the heat I heard one of the women say, "Oh god," and then from that bartender: "There goes the fucking neighborhood."

SWEET: granular, powdered, brown, slow like honey or molasses. The mouth-coating sugars in milk. Once, when we were wild, sugar intoxicated us, the first narcotic we craved and languished in. We've tamed, refined it, but the juice from a peach still runs like a flash flood.

I DON'T REMEMBER why I went to that restaurant first.

I do remember—in perfect detail—that stretch of Sixteenth Street that gave away so little: the impersonal, midcentury teal

of Coffee Shop, the battalion of dumpsters between us and Blue Water Grill, the bodega with two small card tables where they let you drink beer. Always uniformed servers buying Altoids and energy drinks.

The alley where the cooks lined up to smoke cigarettes between services, the recesses of the alley where they smoked pot and kicked at the rats tearing through the trash. And just beyond our line of vision we could sense the outlines of the scrawny park.

What did the Owner gaze at when he built it? The future.

When I got there they told me a lot of stories. Nobody went to Union Square in the eighties, they said. Only a few of the publishing houses had moved down there. That city has been replaced by another city. The Whole Foods, the Barnes & Noble, the Best Buy—they got stacked right on top of it. In Rome, they dig for a subway and find whole civilizations. With all the artists, the politicians, the tailors, the hairdressers, the bartenders. If you dug right here on Sixteenth Street you'd find us, younger, and all the stale haunts, and all the old bums in the park younger too.

What did those original servers see when they went to the first interviews in 1985? A tavern, a grill, a bistro? A mess of Italy, France, and some burgeoning American cuisine that nobody really believed in yet? A hodgepodge that shouldn't have worked? When I asked them what they saw, they said he'd built a kind of restaurant that hadn't been there before. They all said that when they walked in, it felt like coming home.

BITTER: always a bit unanticipated. Coffee, chocolate, rosemary, citrus rinds, wine. Once, when we were wild, it told us about poison. The mouth still hesitates at each new encounter. We urge it forward, say, Adapt. Now, enjoy it.

I SMILED too much. At the end of the interview the corners of my mouth ached like stakes in a tent. I wore a black sundress and a pilled cardigan, which was the most conservative and professional thing I owned. I had a handful of résumés folded up in my purse, and my loose plan—if that's even the right word for the hesitant brand of instinct I forced myself to follow with a sense of doom—was to walk into restaurants until I got hired. When I asked my roommate where I should look for a job, he said the best restaurant in New York City was in Union Square. Within a minute of getting off the train I developed giant wet half-moons of sweat in the cardigan, but the top of my dress was too revealing to remove it.

"Why did you choose New York?" asked Howard, the general manager.

"I thought you were going to ask me why I chose this restaurant," I said.

"Let's start with New York."

I knew from books, movies, and *Sex and the City* how I was supposed to answer. I've always dreamed of living here, they say. They stress the word *dreamed*, lengthen it, to make it sound true.

I knew so many said: I came here to be a singer/dancer/actress/photographer/painter. In finance/fashion/publishing. I came here to be powerful/beautiful/wealthy. This always seemed to mean: I'm stopping here to become someone else.

I said, "It really didn't feel like a choice. Where else is there to go?"

"Ah," he said. "It's a bit of a calling, isn't it?"

That's all. *Ah*. And I felt like he understood that I didn't have endless options, that there was only one place large enough to hold so much unbridled, unfocused desire. *Ah*. Maybe he knew how I

fantasized about living a twenty-four-hour life. Maybe he knew how bored I had been up until now.

Howard was in his late forties with a cultivated, square face. His hair receded finely, emphasizing bulging eyes that told me he didn't need much sleep. He stood squarely on athletic legs, balancing a prominent belly. Judicious eyes, I thought, as he tapped his fingers on the white tablecloth and assessed me.

"You have nice nails," I said, looking at his hands.

"It's part of the job," he said, unswayed. "Tell me what you know about wine."

"Oh, the basics. I'm competent in the basics." As in I knew the difference between white and red wine and it couldn't get more basic than that.

"For example," he said, looking around the room as if plucking a question from the air, "what are the five noble grapes of Bordeaux?"

I pictured cartoon grapes wearing crowns on their heads, welcoming me to their châteaux—Hello, we are the noble grapes of Bordeaux, they said. I debated lying. It was impossible to know how much honesty about my ignorance would be valued.

"Mer . . . lot?"

"Yes," he said. "That's one."

"Cabernet? I'm sorry, I don't really drink Bordeaux."

He seemed sympathetic. "Of course, it's a bit above the average price point."

"Yep." I nodded. "That's totally it."

"What do you drink?"

My first instinct was to list the different beverages I drank on a daily basis. The noble grapes were back in my head, dancing, telling him all about my Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee.

"What do I drink when?"

"When you purchase a bottle of wine, what do you tend toward?"

I imagined myself purchasing a bottle of wine, not based on price or proximity to the checkout line, not based on what animal was on the label, but by an internal matrix of my own taste. That image was as laughable as my noble grapes, even if I was wearing a cardigan.

"Beaujolais? Is that a wine?"

"It is. Beaujolais, c'est un vin fainéant et radin."

"Yes. That."

"Which cru do you prefer?"

"I'm not sure," I said, batting my eyelashes forcibly, falsely.

"Do you have any experience as a server?"

"Yes. I've been working at that coffee shop for years. It's on my résumé."

"I mean in a restaurant. Do you know what it means to be a server?"

"Yes. When the plates are ready I bring them out and *serve* them to customers."

"You mean guests."

"Guests?"

"Your guests."

"Yes, that's what I meant." He scribbled on the top of my résumé. Server? Guests? What was the difference between a guest and a customer?

"It says here you were an English major."

"Yes. I know. It's generic."

"What are you reading?"

"Reading?"

"What are you reading right now?"

"Is that a job question?"

"Perhaps." He smiled. His eyes made an unabashed, slow circle around my face.

"Um. Nothing. For the first time in my life, I'm reading nothing." I paused and looked out the window. I don't think anyone, even my professors, had once asked me what I was reading. He was digging, and though I had no idea what he was looking for, I decided it was better to play. "You know, Howard, if I can call you that, when I was leaving for here I packed a few boxes of books. But then I really started looking at them. These books were . . . I don't know . . . totems of who I was. . . . I . . ."

My words had a point, I had just felt the point coming, I was trying to tell him the truth. "I left them behind. That's what I mean."

He rested his cheek on an aristocratic hand. He listened. No, he perceived. I felt perceived. "Yes. It's startling to look back on the passionate epiphanies of our youth. But a good sign perhaps. That our minds have changed, that we've evolved."

"Or maybe it means we've forgotten ourselves. And we keep forgetting ourselves. And that's the big grown-up secret to survival."

I stared out the window. The city passed on, obliviously. If this went badly I would forget it too.

"Are you a writer?"

"No," I said. The table came back into focus. He was looking at me. "I like books. And everything else."

"You like everything else?"

"You know what I mean, I like it all. I like being moved."

He made another note on my résumé.

"What do you dislike?"

"What?" I thought I'd misheard him.

"If you like being moved, what do you dislike?"

"Are these normal questions?"

"This isn't a normal restaurant." He smiled and crossed his hands.

"Okay." I looked back out the window. Enough. "I don't like that question."

"Why?"

My palms were damp. That was the moment I realized I wanted the job. That job, at that restaurant specifically. I looked at my hands and said, "It feels a little personal."

"All right." He didn't skip a beat, a quick glance at my résumé and he was on track. "Can you tell me about a problem at one of your last jobs? At that coffee shop, I suppose. Tell me about a problem there and how you solved it."

As if I had dreamed it, the interior of the coffee shop dissolved when I tried to recall it directly. And when I tried to remember punching in there, tried to remember the sink, the register, the coffee grinds, the objects faded. And then her fat, gloating, vindictive face appeared.

"There was this awful woman, Mrs. Pound. I mean it, she was insufferable. We called her The Hammer. From the second she walked in everything was wrong, the coffee scalded her or it tasted like dirt, the music was too loud, or her blueberry muffin had poisoned her the night before. She was always threatening to shut us down, telling us to get our lawyer ready each time she bumped into a table. She wanted scrambled eggs for her dog. Never tipped us a cent. She was dreaded. But then, this was a little over a year ago, she had her foot amputated. She was diabetic. None of us ever knew, I mean, why would we know? And she would wheel by in her wheelchair and everyone was like, Finally, The Hammer is done."

"Finally, what?" Howard asked.

"Oh, I forgot that part. We didn't have a ramp. And there were stairs. So she was finished, more or less."

"More or less," he said.

"But, the real part of the story. One day she was wheeling by, and she was glaring, I mean, hateful. And I don't know why, but I missed her. I missed her face. So I made her coffee and I ran after her. I wheeled her across the street to the park and she complained about everything from the weather to indigestion. From then on it was our thing. Every day. I even brought the scrambled eggs in a to-go container for her dog. My coworkers made so much fun of me."

The Hammer's swollen, varicosed legs. Flashing her stump at me from under her housedress. Her purple fingers.

"Does that answer your question? The problem was not having a ramp, I guess. The solution was to bring out the coffee. I'm sorry, I didn't explain it very well."

"I think you explained it perfectly. That was a kind thing to do."

I shrugged. "I really liked her actually."

The Hammer was the only impolite person I knew. She put me in that restaurant. I felt it then but didn't understand it. It was her niece's daughter who was a friend of a friend of my new roommate in Williamsburg. Our goodbye had been tearful—on my end, not hers. I promised to write her letters, but the weeks were eclipsing our small relationship. And as I looked at Howard and the perfectly set table and the tasteful hydrangea arrangement between us, I understood what he meant by *guest,* and I also knew that I would never see her again.

"Did you move here with anyone? Girlfriends? A boyfriend?"

"No."

"That's very brave."

"Is it? It's been two days and I feel pretty foolish."

"It's brave if you make it, foolish if you fail."

I wanted to ask him how I would be able to tell the difference and when.

"If you're hired here, what do you want the next year to bring you?"

I forgot that I was being interviewed. I forgot about my negative bank account, my pit stains, and the noble grapes. I said something about wanting to learn. About my work ethic.

I was never good at the future. I grew up with girls whose chief occupation was the future—designing it, instigating it. They could talk about it with so much confidence that it sounded like the past. During those talks, I had contributed nothing.

I had visions, too abstract and flat for me to hang on to. For years I saw a generic city lit up at night. I would use those remote, artificial lights to soothe myself to sleep. One day I was quitting my job with no sense of exhilaration, one day I was leaving a note for my father, pulling out of his driveway, slightly bewildered, and two days later I was sitting in front of Howard. That was the way the future came to me.

The vision that accompanied me on my drive was a girl, a lady actually. We had the same hair but she didn't look like me. She was in a camel coat and ankle boots. A dress under the coat was belted high on her waist. She carried various shopping bags from specialty stores and as she was walking, pausing at certain windows, her coat would fly back in the wind. Her boot heels tapped on the cobblestones. She had lovers and breakups, an analyst, a library, acquaintances she ran into on the street whose names she couldn't call to mind. She belonged to herself only. She had edges, boundaries, tastes, definition down to her eyelashes. And when she walked it was clear she knew where she was going.

As I thanked him and we reviewed my contact information, I didn't know what had transpired, whether it was good or bad. It took me a moment to even remember the name of the restaurant. He held my hand too long and as I stood, his eyes traveled down my body, not like an employer's, but like a man's.

"I dislike mopping. And lying," I said. I don't know why. "Those are the two that come to mind."

He nodded and smiled—what I wanted to call a private smile. The backs of my legs were damp with sweat and as I walked away I felt his eyes unabashedly on my ass. At the door, I rolled my cardigan off my shoulders, and arched as if stretching. No one knows how I got the job, but it's better to be honest about these things.

TASTE, Chef said, is all about balance. The sour, the salty, the sweet, the bitter. Now your tongue is coded. A certain connoisseurship of taste, a mark of how you deal with the world, is the ability to relish the bitter, to crave it even, the way you do the sweet.

# II

THE SPACE WAS aesthetically unremarkable, even ugly in places. Not ragged by any means—the paint fresh, the dust banished—but defiantly past its peak. The art was dated, gaudy, some of it honestly preposterous, purchased in the eighties or whenever. The dining room had three levels, as if it had been built during different periods and linked together as an afterthought. Tables cluttered on one side of the room, sparse on the other. The cumulative effect was like someone hadn't quite made up his mind, but insisted on having you over anyway.

THE OWNER TOLD ME at orientation, "There are many endeavors to bring pleasure to people. Every artist assumes that challenge. But what we do here is the most intimate. We are making something you take inside you. Not the food, the experience."

TWO AREAS OF the restaurant were flawless: first, three café-style tables in the front framed by a large window at the entrance. The tables were set in the day's changing light. Some people—I mean *guests*—hated to be next to the entrance, to be sectioned off from the main dining rooms. But some of them wouldn't sit anywhere

else. These tables were often held for the most poised guests—rarely a sloucher or anyone in denim.

The Owner said, "Running a restaurant means setting a stage. The believability hinges on the details. We control how they experience the world: sight, sound, taste, smell, touch. That starts at the door, with the host and the flowers."

And then, the bar. Timeless: long, dark mahogany, with stools high enough to make you feel like you were afloat. The bar had soft music, dim lighting, tinkling layers of noise, the bumps of a neighbor's knee, the reach of someone's arm by your face to take a glittering martini, the tap of a hostess as she escorted guests behind your back, the blur of plates being passed, the rattle of drinks, the virtuoso performance of bartenders slapping bottles into the back bar while also delivering bread, while also taking an order with the requisite substitutions and complications. All the best regulars came in and greeted the hostess saying, Any space at the bar tonight?

"OUR GOAL," he said, "is to make the guests feel that we are on their side. Any business transaction—actually any life transaction—is negotiated by how you are making the other person *feel*."

The Owner looked and spoke like a deity. Sometimes the *New York Post* referred to him as the mayor. Tall, tan, handsome with perfect white teeth, effortless articulation, and gorgeous gesticulation. I listened to him accordingly, with my hands in my lap.

Yet there was a tension I couldn't quite put my finger on. Something false about making guests "feel" that we were on their side. I looked around the room and suddenly everything looked like currency to me: the silver, the wooden beams, the regal floral arrangement crowning the bar. Jesus, I thought, you can get

rich by making people *feel* good about spending their money. We weren't on their side; we were on the Owner's side. All the emphasis on details, all the jargon—it was still just a business, right?

When orientation was over, I wanted to catch his eye and let him know that I got it. I wanted to ask someone how much of that money I would be taking home. Then I approached him at the exit and he looked me in the eyes. I stopped. He said my name though I hadn't told him. He shook my hand and nodded like he had already forgiven me for all my shortcomings and would remember my face forever.

He said, "We are creating the world as it should be. We don't have to pay any attention to how it is."

WHEN I GOT the job I didn't actually get the job. I got to train for the job. And the position was "backwaiter," which wasn't the same as being a server. Howard led me up a narrow spiral staircase in the back of the kitchen and deposited me in the locker room. He said, "You're the new girl now. You have a certain responsibility."

He left without clarifying what that responsibility was. In the corner of the windowless room sat two older Latino men and a woman. They had been speaking in Spanish but were now staring at me. A small electric fan shuddered behind them. I tried a smile.

"Is there somewhere I can change?"

"Right here mami," the woman said. She had unruly black hair, held back by a bandana. Rivulets of sweat made track marks down her face. She pursed her lips. The men with their outsized, destroyed faces.

"Okay," I said. I opened my locker and stuck my face into it, blocking them from my sight. Howard had told me to buy a white button-down shirt, and I put it on over my tank top to avoid

undressing. The shirt was as breathable as cardboard. Sweat ran down my back and into my underwear.

They began talking again, fanning themselves, walking to a small sink and splashing water on their faces. The room was stacked with chairs in the back, and along the walls were pairs of Crocs and clogs covered in white splotches, with heels worn down to nothing. There was no air, my chest contracted.

The door burst open and a man said, "Are you not hungry? Are you coming?"

I looked at the three in the corner to make sure he was talking to me. He had an adolescent, tame face, but was irritated, his brows narrowed together.

"No, I'm hungry," I said. I wasn't, I just wanted something to do.

"Well family is almost over. How much more primping do you have left?"

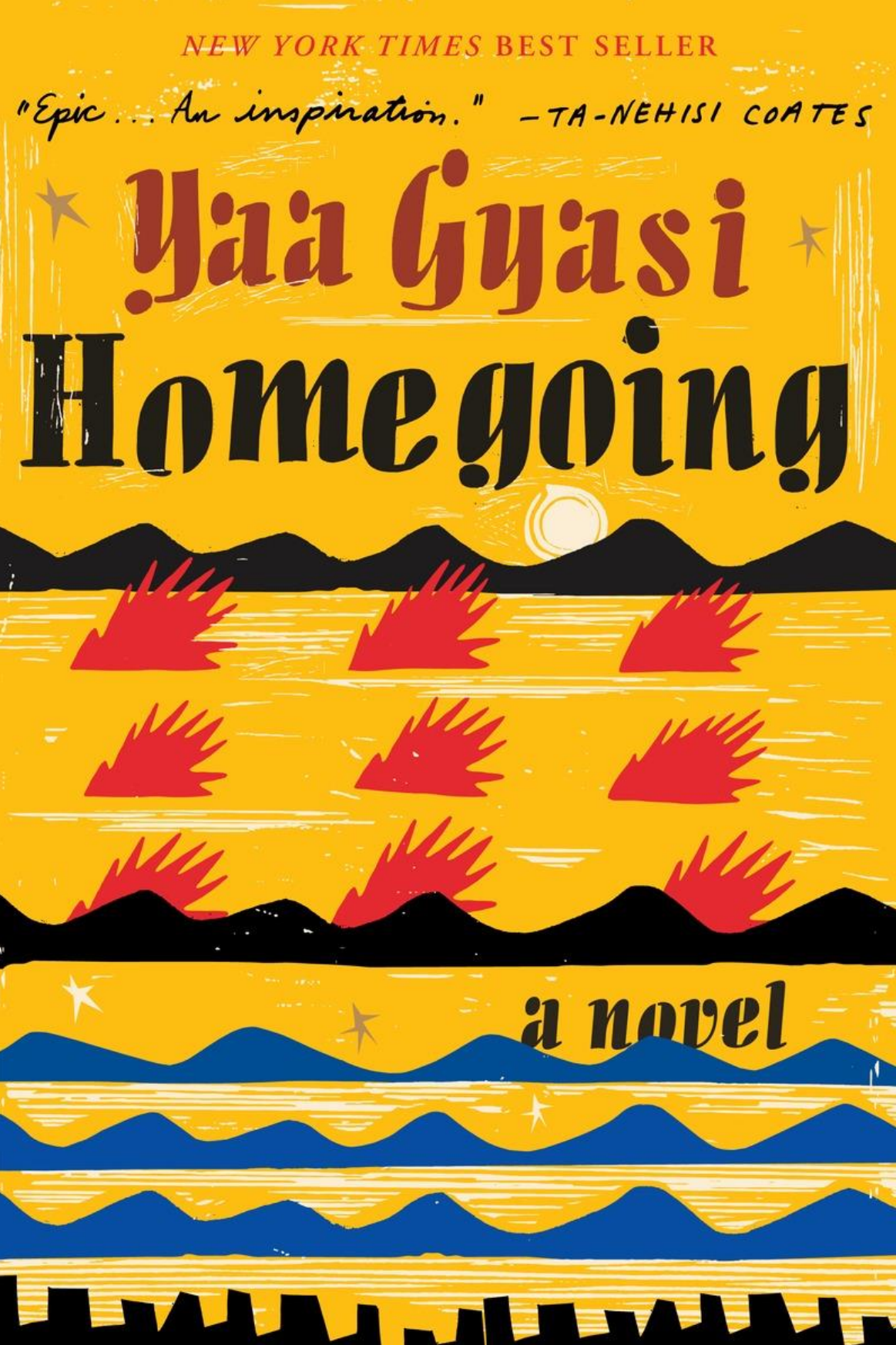
I shut my locker door and put my hair back in a ponytail.

"I'm done. Are you in charge of me?"

"Yes, I'm in charge of you. I'm your trailer. First lesson, if you miss family, you don't eat."

"Well it's nice to meet you. I'm—"

"I know who you are." He slammed the door behind us. "You're the new girl. Don't forget to clock in."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Yaa Gyasi
Homegoing
a novel

# *Homegoing*

Yaa Gyasi

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# *Effia*

THE NIGHT EFFIA OTCHER was born into the musky heat of Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father's compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night.

Effia's father, Cobbe Otcher, left his first wife, Baaba, with the new baby so that he might survey the damage to his yams, that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families. Cobbe had lost seven yams, and he felt each loss as a blow to his own family. He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued. When he came back into Baaba's hut to find Effia, the child of the night's fire, shrieking into the air, he looked at his wife and said, "We will never again speak of what happened today."

The villagers began to say that the baby was born of the fire, that this was the reason Baaba had no milk. Effia was nursed by Cobbe's second wife, who had just given birth to a son three months before. Effia would not latch on, and when she did, her sharp gums would tear at the flesh around the woman's nipples until she became afraid to feed the baby. Because of this, Effia grew thinner, skin on small bird-like bones, with a large black hole of a mouth that expelled a hungry cry

which could be heard throughout the village, even on the days Baaba did her best to smother it, covering the baby's lips with the rough palm of her left hand.

"Love her," Cobbe commanded, as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one's lips. At night, Baaba dreamed of leaving the baby in the dark forest so that the god Nyame could do with her as he pleased.

Effia grew older. The summer after her third birthday, Baaba had her first son. The boy's name was Fiifi, and he was so fat that sometimes, when Baaba wasn't looking, Effia would roll him along the ground like a ball. The first day that Baaba let Effia hold him, she accidentally dropped him. The baby bounced on his buttocks, landed on his stomach, and looked up at everyone in the room, confused as to whether or not he should cry. He decided against it, but Baaba, who had been stirring *banku,* lifted her stirring stick and beat Effia across her bare back. Each time the stick lifted off the girl's body, it would leave behind hot, sticky pieces of *banku* that burned into her flesh. By the time Baaba had finished, Effia was covered with sores, screaming and crying. From the floor, rolling this way and that on his belly, Fiifi looked at Effia with his saucer eyes but made no noise.

Cobbe came home to find his other wives attending to Effia's wounds and understood immediately what had happened. He and Baaba fought well into the night. Effia could hear them through the thin walls of the hut where she lay on the floor, drifting in and out of a feverish sleep. In her dream, Cobbe was a lion and Baaba was a tree. The lion plucked the tree from the ground where it stood and slammed it back down. The tree stretched its branches in protest, and the lion ripped them off, one by one. The tree, horizontal, began to cry red ants that traveled down the thin cracks between its bark. The ants pooled on the soft earth around the top of the tree trunk.

And so the cycle began. Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body. The summer of 1764, when Baaba broke yams across her back. The spring of 1767, when Baaba bashed her left foot with a rock, breaking her big toe so that it now always pointed away from the

other toes. For each scar on Effia's body, there was a companion scar on Baaba's, but that didn't stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother.

Matters were only made worse by Effia's blossoming beauty. When she was twelve, her breasts arrived, two lumps that sprung from her chest, as soft as mango flesh. The men of the village knew that first blood would soon follow, and they waited for the chance to ask Baaba and Cobbe for her hand. The gifts started. One man tapped palm wine better than anyone else in the village, but another's fishing nets were never empty. Cobbe's family feasted off Effia's burgeoning womanhood. Their bellies, their hands, were never empty.

In 1775, Adwoa Aidoo became the first girl of the village to be proposed to by one of the British soldiers. She was light-skinned and sharp-tongued. In the mornings, after she had bathed, she rubbed shea butter all over her body, underneath her breasts and between her legs. Effia didn't know her well, but she had seen her naked one day when Baaba sent her to carry palm oil to the girl's hut. Her skin was slick and shiny, her hair regal.

The first time the white man came, Adwoa's mother asked Effia's parents to show him around the village while Adwoa prepared herself for him.

"Can I come?" Effia asked, running after her parents as they walked. She heard Baaba's "no" in one ear and Cobbe's "yes" in the other. Her father's ear won, and soon Effia was standing before the first white man she had ever seen.

"He is happy to meet you," the translator said as the white man held his hand out to Effia. She didn't accept it. Instead, she hid behind her father's leg and watched him.

He wore a coat that had shiny gold buttons down the middle; it strained against his paunch. His face was red, as though his neck were a stump on fire. He was fat all over and sweating huge droplets from his forehead and above his bare lips. Effia started to think of him as a rain cloud: sallow and wet and shapeless.

"Please, he would like to see the village," the translator said, and they all began to walk.

They stopped first by Effia's own compound. "This is where we live," Effia told the white man, and he smiled at her dumbly, his green eyes hidden in fog.

He didn't understand. Even after his translator spoke to him, he didn't understand.

Cobbe held Effia's hand as he and Baaba led the white man through the compound. "Here, in this village," Cobbe said, "each wife has her own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband's night to be with her, he goes to her in her hut."

The white man's eyes grew clearer as the translation was given, and suddenly Effia realized that he was seeing through new eyes. The mud of her hut's walls, the straw of the roof, he could finally see them.

They continued on through the village, showing the white man the town square, the small fishing boats formed from hollowed-out tree trunks that the men carried with them when they walked the few miles down to the coast. Effia forced herself to see things through new eyes, too. She smelled the sea-salt wind as it touched the hairs in her nose, felt the bark of a palm tree as sharp as a scratch, saw the deep, deep red of the clay that was all around them.

"Baaba," Effia asked once the men had walked farther ahead of them, "why will Adwoa marry this man?"

"Because her mother says so."

A few weeks later, the white man came back to pay respects to Adwoa's mother, and Effia and all of the other villagers gathered around to see what he would offer. There was the bride price of fifteen pounds. There were goods he'd brought with him from the Castle, carried on the backs of Asantes. Cobbe made Effia stand behind him as they watched the servants come in with fabric, millet, gold, and iron.

When they walked back to their compound, Cobbe pulled Effia aside, letting his wives and other children walk in front of them.

"Do you understand what just happened?" he asked her. In the distance, Baaba slipped her hand into Fiifi's. Effia's brother had just turned eleven, but he could already climb up the trunk of a palm tree using nothing but his bare hands and feet for support.

"The white man came to take Adwoa away," Effia said.

Her father nodded. "The white men live in the Cape Coast Castle. There, they trade goods with our people."

"Like iron and millet?"

Her father put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead, but when he pulled away the look in his eyes was troubled and distant. "Yes, we get iron and millet, but we must give them things in return. That man came from Cape Coast to marry Adwoa, and there will be more like him who will come and take our daughters away. But you, my own, I have bigger plans for you than to live as a white man's wife. You will marry a man of our village."

Baaba turned around just then, and Effia caught her eyes. Baaba scowled. Effia looked at her father to see if he had noticed, but Cobbe did not say a word.

Effia knew who her choice for husband would be, and she dearly hoped her parents would choose the same man. Abeeku Badu was next in line to be the village chief. He was tall, with skin like the pit of an avocado and large hands with long, slender fingers that he waved around like lightning bolts every time he spoke. He had visited their compound four times in the last month, and later that week, he and Effia were to share a meal together.

Abeeku brought a goat. His servants carried yams and fish and palm wine. Baaba and the other wives stoked their fires and heated the oil. The air smelled rich.

That morning, Baaba had plaited Effia's hair. Two long braids on either side of her center part. They made her look like a ram, strong, willful. Effia had oiled her naked body and put gold in her ears. She sat across from Abeeku as they ate, pleased as he stole appreciative glances.

"Were you at Adwoa's ceremony?" Baaba asked once all of the men had been served and the women finally began to eat.

"Yes, I was there, but only briefly. It is a shame Adwoa will be leaving the village. She would have made a good wife."

"Will you work for the British when you become chief?" Effia asked.

Cobbe and Baaba sent her sharp looks, and she lowered her head, but she lifted it to find Abeeku smiling.

"We work *with* the British, Effia, not for them. That is the meaning of trade. When I am chief, we will continue as we have, facilitating trade with the Asantes and the British."

Effia nodded. She wasn't exactly sure what this meant, but she could tell from her parents' looks that it was best to keep her mouth shut. Abeeku Badu was the first man they had brought to meet her. Effia wanted desperately for him to want her, but she did not yet know what kind of man he was, what kind of woman he required. In her hut, Effia could ask her father and Fiifi anything she wanted. It was Baaba who practiced silence and preferred the same from Effia, Baaba who had slapped her for asking why she did not take her to be blessed as all the other mothers did for their daughters. It was only when Effia didn't speak or question, when she made herself small, that she could feel Baaba's love, or something like it. Maybe this was what Abeeku wanted too.

Abeeku finished eating. He shook hands with everyone in the family, and stopped by Effia's mother. "You will let me know when she is ready," he said.

Baaba clutched a hand to her chest and nodded soberly. Cobbe and the other men saw Abeeku off as the rest of the family waved.

That night, Baaba woke Effia up while she was sleeping on the floor of their hut. Effia felt the warmth of her mother's breath against her ear as she spoke. "When your blood comes, Effia, you must hide it. You must tell me and no one else," she said. "Do you understand?" She handed Effia palm fronds that she had turned into soft, rolled sheets. "Place these inside of you, and check them every day. When they turn red, you must tell me."

Effia looked at the palm fronds, held in Baaba's outstretched hands. She didn't take them at first, but when she looked up again there was something like desperation in her mother's eyes. And because the look had softened Baaba's face somehow, and because Effia also knew desperation, that fruit of longing, she did as she was told. Every day, Effia checked for red, but the palm fronds came out greenish-white

as always. In the spring, the chief of the village grew ill, and everyone watched Abeeku carefully to see if he was ready for the task. He married two women in those months, Arekua the Wise, and Millicent, the half-caste daughter of a Fante woman and a British soldier. The soldier had died from fever, leaving his wife and two children much wealth to do with as they pleased. Effia prayed for the day all of the villagers would call her Effia the Beauty, as Abeeku called her on the rare occasions when he was permitted to speak to her.

Millicent's mother had been given a new name by her white husband. She was a plump, fleshy woman with teeth that twinkled against the dark night of her skin. She had decided to move out of the Castle and into the village once her husband died. Because the white men could not leave money in their wills to their Fante wives and children, they left it to other soldiers and friends, and those friends paid the wives. Millicent's mother had been given enough money for a new start and a piece of land. She and Millicent would often come visit Effia and Baaba, for, as she said, they would soon be a part of the same family.

Millicent was the lightest-skinned woman Effia had ever seen. Her black hair reached down to the middle of her back and her eyes were tinged with green. She rarely smiled, and she spoke with a husky voice and a strange Fante accent.

"What was it like in the Castle?" Baaba asked Millicent's mother one day while the four women were sitting to a snack of groundnuts and bananas.

"It was fine, fine. They take care of you, oh, these men! It is like they have never been with a woman before. I don't know what their British wives were doing. I tell you, my husband looked at me like I was water and he was fire, and every night he had to be put out."

The women laughed. Millicent slipped Effia a smile, and Effia wanted to ask her what it was like with Abeeku, but she did not dare.

Baaba leaned in close to Millicent's mother, but still Effia could hear, "And they pay a good bride price, eh?"

"Enh, I tell you, my husband paid my mother ten pounds, and that was fifteen years ago! To be sure, my sister, the money is good, but I for one am glad my daughter has married a Fante. Even if a soldier offered

to pay twenty pounds, she would not get to be the wife of a chief. And what's worse, she would have to live in the Castle, far from me. No, no, it is better to marry a man of the village so that your daughters can stay close to you."

Baaba nodded and turned toward Effia, who quickly looked away.

That night, just two days after her fifteenth birthday, the blood came. It was not the powerful rush of the ocean waves that Effia had expected it to be, but rather a simple trickle, rain dripping, drop by drop, from the same spot of a hut's roof. She cleaned herself off and waited for her father to leave Baaba so that she could tell her.

"Baaba," she said, showing her the palm fronds painted red. "I have gotten my blood."

Baaba placed a hand over her lips. "Who else knows?"

"No one," Effia said.

"You will keep it that way. Do you understand? When anyone asks you if you have become a woman yet, you will answer no."

Effia nodded. She turned to leave, but a question was burning hot coals in the pit of her stomach. "Why?" she finally asked.

Baaba reached into Effia's mouth and pulled out her tongue, pinching the tip with her sharp fingernails. "Who are you that you think you can question me, enh? If you do not do as I say, I will make sure you never speak again." She released Effia's tongue, and for the rest of the night, Effia tasted her own blood.

The next week, the old chief died. The funeral announcements went out to all of the surrounding villages. The proceedings would last a month and end with Abeeku's chief ceremony. The women of the village prepared food from sunrise to sunset; drums were made out of the finest wood, and the best singers were called upon to raise their voices. The funeral attendants began dancing on the fourth day of the rainy season, and they did not rest their feet until the ground had completely dried.

At the end of the first dry night Abeeku was crowned Omanhin, chief of the Fante village. He was dressed in rich fabrics, his two wives

on either side of him. Effia and Baaba stood next to each other as they watched, and Cobbe paced the crowd. Every so often, Effia could hear him muttering that she, his daughter, the most beautiful woman in the village, should be up there too.

As the new chief, Abeeku wanted to do something big, something that would bring attention to their village and make them a force to be reckoned with. After only three days in office, he gathered up all of the men of the village to his compound. He fed them for two days straight, got them drunk on palm wine until their boisterous laughing and impassioned shouting could be heard from every hut.

"What will they do?" Effia asked.

"That does not concern you," Baaba said.

In the two months since Effia had begun to bleed, Baaba had stopped beating her. Payment for her silence. Some days, when they were preparing meals for the men, or when Effia would bring back the water she had fetched and watch Baaba dip in with cupped hands, she would think they were finally behaving as mothers and daughters were supposed to behave. But then, other days, the long scowl would return to Baaba's face, and Effia would see that her mother's new quiet was only temporary, her rage a wild beast that had been tamed for the moment.

Cobbe came back from the meeting with a long machete. The handle was gold with carvings of letters that no one understood. He was so drunk that all of his wives and children stood around him in a circle, at a distance of two feet, while he shuffled about, jabbing the sharp instrument this way and that. "We will make the village rich with blood!" he screamed. He lunged at Fiifi, who had wandered into the circle, and the boy, leaner and quicker than he had been in his days as a fat baby, swiveled his hips, missing the tip of the machete by only a few inches.

Fiifi had been the youngest one at the meeting. Everyone knew he would make a fine warrior. They could see it in the way he climbed the palm trees. In the way he wore his silence like a golden crown.

After her father left and Effia was certain that their mother had gone to sleep, she crawled over to Fiifi.

"Wake up," she hissed, and he pushed her away. Even in half sleep he was stronger than she was. She fell backward but, with the grace of a cat, flipped back onto her feet. "Wake up," she said again.

Fiifi's eyes flashed open. "Don't worry me, big sister," he said.

"What will happen?" she asked.

"It's the business of men," Fiifi said.

"You are not yet a man," Effia said.

"And you are not yet a woman," Fiifi snapped back. "Otherwise you would have been there with Abeeku this very evening as his wife."

Effia's lips began to quiver. She turned to go back to her side of the hut, but Fiifi caught her arm. "We are helping the British and the Asantes with their trade."

"Oh," Effia said. It was the same story she had heard from her father and Abeeku just a few months before. "You mean we will give Asante gold and fabric to the white men?"

Fiifi clutched her tighter. "Don't be stupid," he said. "Abeeku has made an alliance with one of the most powerful Asante villages. We will help them sell their slaves to the British."

And so, the white man came to their village. Fat or skinny, red or tanned. They came in uniform, with swords at their sides, their eyes looking sideways, always and ever cautious. They came to approve of the goods Abeeku had promised them.

In the days following the chief ceremony, Cobbe had grown nervous about the broken promise of Effia's womanhood, nervous that Abeeku would forget her in favor of one of the other women in the village. He had always said that he wanted his daughter to be the first, most important wife, but now even third seemed like a distant hope.

Every day he would ask Baaba what was happening with Effia, and every day Baaba would reply that she was not yet ready. In desperation, he decided to allow his daughter to go over to Abeeku's compound with Baaba once a week, so that the man could see her and remember how much he had once loved her face and figure.

Arekua the Wise, the first of Abeeku's wives, greeted them as they came in one evening. "Please, Mama," she said to Baaba. "We weren't expecting you tonight. The white men are here."

"We can go," Effia said, but Baaba clutched her arm.

"If you don't mind, we would like to stay," Baaba said. Arekua gave her a strange look. "My husband will be angry if we come back too early," Baaba said, as if that were enough of an explanation. Effia knew that she was lying. Cobbe had not sent them there that night. It was Baaba who had heard that the white men would be there and insisted that they go pay respects. Arekua took pity and left to ask Abeeku if the two of them might stay.

"You will eat with the women, and if the men come in, you will not speak," she said once she had returned. She led them deeper into the compound. Effia watched hut after hut pass by until they entered the one where the wives had gathered to eat. She sat next to Millicent, whose pregnant belly had begun to show, no bigger than a coconut, slung low. Arekua had prepared fish in palm oil stew, and they dug in until their fingers were stained orange.

Soon, a maidservant Effia had not noticed before came into the room. She was a tiny girl, only a child, whose eyes never lifted from the ground.

"Please, Mama," she said to Arekua. "The white men would like to tour the compound. Chief Abeeku says you are to make sure you are presentable for them."

"Go and fetch us water, quick," Millicent said, and when the servant came back with a bucket full of water, they all washed their hands and lips. Effia tidied her hair, licking her palms and rubbing her fingers along the tight baby curls that lined her edges. When she finished, Baaba had her stand between Millicent and Arekua, in front of the other women, and Effia tried her best to seem smaller so as not to draw attention to herself.

Before long the men came in. Abeeku looked as a chief should look, Effia thought, strong and powerful, like he could lift ten women above his head and toward the sun. Two white men came in behind him. There was one who Effia thought must be the chief of the white men because of the way the other glanced at him before he moved or spoke. This white chief wore the same clothes as the rest of them wore, but there were more shiny golden buttons running along his coat and

on the flaps above his shoulders. He seemed older than Abeeku, his dark brown hair flecked with gray, but he stood up straight, as a leader should stand.

"These are the women. My wives and children, their mothers and daughters," Abeeku said. The smaller, more timid white man watched him carefully as he said this and then turned to the white chief and spoke their strange tongue. The white chief nodded and smiled at all of them, looking carefully at each woman and saying hello in his poor Fante.

When his "hello" reached Effia, she couldn't help but giggle. The other women shushed her, and embarrassment like heat began to move into her cheeks.

"I'm still learning," the white chief said, resting his eyes on Effia, his Fante an ugly sound in her ears. He held her gaze for what seemed like minutes, and Effia felt her skin grow even hotter as the look in his eyes turned into something more wanton. The dark brown circles of his pupils looked like large pots that toddlers could drown in, and he looked at Effia just like that, as though he wanted to keep her there, in his drowning eyes. Color quickly flooded into his cheeks. He turned to the other white man and spoke.

"No, she is not my wife," Abeeku said after the man had translated for him, his voice not bothering to hide his annoyance. Effia hung her head, embarrassed that she had done something to cause Abeeku shame, embarrassed he could not call her wife. Embarrassed, too, that he had not called her by name: Effia the Beauty. She wanted desperately then to break her promise to Baaba and announce herself as the woman she was, but before she could speak, the men walked away, and her nerve faded as the white chief looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

His name was James Collins, and he was the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle. Within a week, he had come back to the village to ask Baaba for Effia's hand in marriage. Cobbe's rage at the proposal filled every room like hot steam.

"She is all but promised to Abeeku!" he yelled at Baaba when Baaba told him that she was considering the offer.

"Yes, but Abeeku cannot marry her until her blood comes, and we have been waiting years now. I tell you, husband, I think she was cursed in that fire, a demon who will never become a woman. Think about it. What creature is that beautiful but cannot be touched? All of the signs of womanhood are there, and yet, still, nothing. The white man will marry her regardless. He does not know what she is."

Effia had heard the white man talking to her mother earlier that day. He would pay thirty pounds up front and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods to Baaba as bride gift. More than even Abeeku could offer, more than had been offered for any other Fante woman in this village or the next.

Effia could hear her father pacing all throughout the evening. She even awoke the next morning to that same sound, the steady rhythm of his feet on the hard clay earth.

"We must make Abeeku think it was his idea," he finally said.

And so, the chief was called to their compound. He sat beside Cobbe as Baaba told him her theory, that the fire that had destroyed so much of their family's worth had also destroyed the child.

"She has the body of a woman, but something evil lurks in her spirit," Baaba said, spitting on the ground for emphasis. "If you marry her she will never bear you children. If the white man marries her, he will think of this village fondly, and your trade will prosper from it."

Abeeku rubbed his beard carefully as he thought about it. "Bring the Beauty to me," he said finally. Cobbe's second wife brought Effia into the room. She was trembling and her stomach pained her so much that she thought she might empty her bowels right there in front of everyone.

Abeeku stood up so that he was facing her. He ran his fingers along the full landscape of her face, the hills of her cheeks, the caves of her nostrils. "A more beautiful woman has never been born," he said finally. He turned to Baaba. "But I see that you are right. If the white man wants her, he may have her. All the better for our business with them. All the better for the village."

Cobbe, big, strong man that he was, began to weep openly, but Baaba stood tall. She walked over to Effia after Abeeku had left and pulled out a black stone pendant that shimmered as though it had been coated in gold dust.

She slipped it into Effia's hands and then leaned into her until her lips were touching Effia's ear. "Take this with you when you go," Baaba said. "A piece of your mother."

And when Baaba finally pulled away, Effia could see something like relief dancing behind her smile.

*

Effia had passed by the Cape Coast Castle only once, when she and Baaba ventured out of their village and into the city, but she had never been in it before the day of her wedding. There was a chapel on the ground level, and she and James Collins were married by a clergyman who had asked Effia to repeat words she didn't mean in a language she didn't understand. There was no dancing, no feasting, no bright colors, slicked hair, or old ladies with wrinkled and bare breasts throwing coins and waving handkerchiefs. Not even Effia's family had come, for after Baaba had convinced them all that the girl was a bad omen, no one wanted anything to do with her. The morning she left for the Castle, Cobbe had kissed the top of her head and waved her away, knowing that the premonition of the dissolution and destruction of the family lineage, the premonition that he had had the night of the fire, would begin here, with his daughter and the white man.

For his part, James had done all he could to make Effia comfortable. She could see how much he tried. He had gotten his interpreter to teach him even more words in Fante so that he could tell her how beautiful she was, how he would take care of her as best he could. He had called her what Abeeku called her, Effia the Beauty.

After they were married, James gave Effia a tour of the Castle. On the ground floor of the north wall there were apartments and warehouses. The center held the parade ground, soldiers' quarters, and guardroom. There was a stockyard, a pond, a hospital. A carpenter's

shop, smithy, and kitchen. The Castle was itself a village. Effia walked around with James in complete awe, running her hands along the fine furniture made from wood the color of her father's skin, the silk hangings so smooth they felt like a kiss.

She breathed everything in, stopping at the gun platform that held huge black canons facing out toward the sea. She wanted to rest before James led her up his private stairwell, and so she laid her head down against one of those cannons for just a moment. Then she felt a breeze hit her feet from small holes in the ground.

"What's below?" she asked James, and the mangled Fante word that came back to her was "cargo."

Then, carried up with the breeze, came a faint crying sound. So faint, Effia thought she was imagining it until she lowered herself down, rested her ear against the grate. "James, are there people down there?" she asked.

Quickly, James came to her. He snatched her up from the ground and grabbed her shoulders, looking straight into her eyes. "Yes," he said evenly. It was one Fante word he had mastered.

Effia pulled away from him. She stared back into his piercing eyes. "But how can you keep them down there crying, enh?" she said. "You white people. My father warned me about your ways. Take me home. Take me home right now!"

She didn't realize she'd been screaming until she felt James's hand on her mouth, pushing her lips as though he could force the words back in. He held her like that for a long time, until she had calmed. She didn't know if he understood what she said, but she knew then, just by the faint push of his fingers on her lips, that he was a man capable of hurting, that she should be glad to be on one side of his meanness and not another.

"You want to go home?" James asked. His Fante firm, though unclear. "Your home is no better."

Effia pulled his hand from her mouth and stared at him for a while longer. She remembered her mother's joy at seeing her leave, and knew that James was right. She couldn't go home again. She nodded, only barely.

He hurried her up the stairs. On the very top floor were James's quarters. From the window Effia could see straight out to the sea. Cargo ships like black specks of dust in the blue, wet eye of the Atlantic floated so far out that it was difficult to tell how far away from the Castle the ships actually were. Some were maybe three days away, others merely an hour.

Effia watched a ship just like this once she and James finally got to his room. A flickering of yellow light announced its presence on the water, and with that light, Effia could just barely make out the boat's silhouette, long and curved like the hollowed-out skin of a coconut. She wanted to ask James what the ship was carrying and whether it was coming or going, but she had grown tired of trying to decipher his Fante.

James said something to her. He smiled when he spoke, a peace offering. The corners of his lips twitched almost imperceptibly. She shook her head, tried to tell him that she didn't understand, and finally he gestured to the bed in the left-hand corner of the room. She sat. Baaba had explained what would be expected of her on her wedding night before she had left for the Castle that morning, but it seemed no one had explained it to James. When he approached her, his hands were trembling, and she could see the sweat building on his forehead. She was the one who laid her body down. She was the one who lifted her skirt.

They went on like this for weeks until, eventually, the comfort of routine began to dull the ache that missing her family had left her with. Effia didn't know what it was about James that soothed her. Perhaps it was the way he always answered her questions, or the affection he showed her. Perhaps it was the fact that James had no other wives there to attend to and so every one of his nights belonged to her. She had cried the first time he brought her a gift. He had taken the black stone pendant that Baaba had given her and put it on a string so that Effia could wear it around her neck. Touching the stone always gave her great comfort.

Effia knew she was not supposed to care for James, and she kept hearing her father's words echoing through her mind, how he had

wanted more for her than to be the Fante wife of a white man. She remembered, too, how close she had come to really *being* someone. Her whole life Baaba had beat her and made her feel small, and she had fought back with her beauty, a silent weapon, but a powerful one, which had led her to the feet of a chief. But ultimately, her mother had won, cast her out, not only of the house but of the village entirely, so that now the only other Fantes she saw regularly were the spouses of the other soldiers.

She'd heard the Englishmen call them "wenches," not wives. "Wife" was a word reserved for the white women across the Atlantic. "Wench" was something else entirely, a word the soldiers used to keep their hands clean so that they would not get in trouble with their god, a being who himself was made up of three but who allowed men to marry only one.

"What is she like?" Effia asked James one day. They had been trading languages. In the early mornings, before he went off to oversee the work of the Castle, James would teach her English, and at night, when they lay in bed, she taught him Fante. This night, he was tracing his finger along the curve of her collarbone while she sang him a song that Baaba used to sing Fiifi at night as Effia lay in the corner, pretending to be asleep, pretending not to care that she was never included. Slowly, James had started to mean more to her than a husband was supposed to mean to a wife. The first word he had asked to learn was "love," and he said it every day.

"Her name is Anne," he said, moving his finger from Effia's collarbone to her lips. "I haven't seen her in so long. We were married ten years ago, but I've been away for so many of those years. I hardly know her at all."

Effia knew that James had two children in England as well. Emily and Jimmy. They were ages five and nine, conceived in the few days he was on leave and able to see his wife. Effia's father had twenty children. The old chief had had nearly a hundred. That a man could be happy with so few seemed unfathomable to her. She wondered what the children looked like. She wondered, too, what Anne wrote James in those letters of hers. They came at unpredictable intervals, four months here,

one month there. James would read them at his desk at night while Effia pretended to be sleeping. She didn't know what the letters said, but every time James read one, he would come back to bed and lie as far away from her as possible.

Now, without the force of a letter to keep him away, James was resting his head on her left breast. When he spoke, his breath was hot, a wind that traveled the length of her stomach, down between her legs. "I want children with you," James said, and Effia cringed, worried that she would not be able to fulfill this want, worried too that because she had a bad mother, she herself would become one. She had already told James about Baaba's scheme, how she had forced Effia to keep her womanhood a secret so that she would seem unfit for the men of her village, but James had just laughed her sadness away. "All the better for me," he said.

And yet, Effia had started to believe that perhaps Baaba was right. She'd lost her virginity on the night of her wedding, but months had passed without a pregnancy. The curse may have been rooted in a lie, but perhaps it bore the fruit of truth. The old people of her village used to tell a story about a woman who was said to have been cursed. She lived under a palm tree on the northwest side, and no one had ever called her by her name. Her mother had died so that she might live, and on her tenth birthday, she had been carrying a pot of boiling hot oil from one hut to another. Her father was napping on the ground and she, thinking that she could step over him instead of going around, tripped, spilling the hot oil onto his face and disfiguring him for the rest of his life, which lasted only twenty-five more days. She was banished from the house, and she wandered the Gold Coast for years, until she returned at age seventeen, a strange, rare beauty. Thinking that perhaps she no longer courted death wherever she went, a boy who had known her when she was young offered to marry her as she was, destitute and without family. She conceived within a month, but when the baby came out it was half-caste. Blue-eyed and light-skinned, it died four days later. She left her husband's house the night of the child's death and went to live under the palm tree, punishing herself for the rest of her life.

Effia knew that the elderly of her village only told this story to warn the children to take care when around hot oil, but she wondered about the end of the story, the half-caste child. How this child, both white and black, was an evil powerful enough to force the woman out into the forest of palms.

When Adwoa had married the white soldier, and when Millicent and her mother had wandered into the village, Cobbe turned up his nose. He had always said that the joining of a man and a woman was also the joining of two families. Ancestors, whole histories, came with the act, but so did sins and curses. The children were the embodiment of that unity, and they bore the brunt of it all. What sins did the white man carry with him? Baaba had said that Effia's curse was one of a failed womanhood, but it was Cobbe who had prophesied about a sullied lineage. Effia couldn't help but think that she was fighting against her own womb, fighting against the fire children.

"If you don't give that man children soon, he will take you right back," Adwoa said. She and Effia had not been friends when they lived in the village, but here they saw each other as often as possible, each happy to be near someone who understood her, to hear the comforting sounds of her regional tongue. Adwoa had already had two children since leaving the village. Her husband, Todd Phillips, had only gotten fatter since Effia had last seen him, sweaty and red in Adwoa's old hut.

"I tell you, oh, Todd has kept me flat on my back since I arrived in this place. I am probably expecting right now as we speak."

Effia shuddered. "But his stomach is so big!" she said, and Adwoa laughed until she choked on the groundnuts she was eating.

"Eh, but the stomach is not the part you use to make the baby," she said. "I will give you some roots from the woods. You put them under the bed when you lie with him. Tonight, you must be like an animal when he comes into the room. A lioness. She mates with her lion and he thinks the moment is about him when it is really about her, *her* children, *her* posterity. Her trick is to make him think that he is king of the bush, but what does a king matter? Really, she is king and queen and everything in between. Tonight, we will make you live up to your title, Beauty."

And so Adwoa came back with roots. They were no ordinary roots. They were large and swirled, and when you pulled back one strand, another would appear to take its place. Effia put them under the bed and they only seemed to multiply, spilling leg after leg out until it seemed the root would pick the bed up on its back and walk away, a strange new spider.

"Your husband should not be able to see any of it," Adwoa said, and they worked to push back the strands of root that insisted on peeking out, pushing and pulling until finally it was contained.

Then Adwoa helped Effia prepare for James. She plaited and smoothed her hair and spread oil on her skin, and red clay on the apples of her cheeks and the curve of her lips. Effia made sure that when James came in that night the room smelled earthy and lush, like something there could bear fruit.

"What's all this?" James asked. He was still in his uniform, and Effia could tell that he'd had a long day by the way his lapel drooped. She helped him pull off his coat and shirt and she pressed her body against his, as Adwoa had taught her. Before he could register his surprise, she grabbed his arms and pushed him to the bed. Not since their first night together had he been this timid, afraid of her unfamiliar body, the full-figured flesh, so different from how he had described his wife. Excited now, he pushed into her, and she squeezed her eyes as tightly as she could, her tongue circling her lips. He pushed harder, his breathing heavy and labored. She scratched his back, and he cried out. She bit his ear and pulled his hair. He pushed against her as though he were trying to move through her. And when she opened her eyes to look at him, she saw something like pain written across his face and the ugliness of the act, the sweat and blood and wetness they produced, became illuminated, and she knew that if she was an animal tonight, then he was too.

Once they had finished, Effia lay with her head on James's shoulder.

"What is that?" James asked, turning his head. They had moved the bed so that now three strands of the root were exposed.

"Nothing," Effia said.

James jumped up and peered underneath the bed. "What is it,

Effia?" he asked again, his voice more forceful than she had ever heard it before.

"It's nothing. A root that Adwoa gave me. For fertility."

His lips formed a thin line. "Now, Effia, I don't want any voodoo or black magic in this place. My men can't hear that I let my wench place strange roots under the bed. It's not Christian."

Effia had heard him say this before. Christian. That was why they had been married in the chapel by the stern man in black who shook his head every time he looked at her. He'd spoken before, too, of the "voodoo" he thought all Africans participated in. She could not tell him the fables of Anansi the spider or stories that the old people from her village used to tell her without his growing wary. Since moving to the Castle, she'd discovered that only the white men talked of "black magic." As though magic had a color. Effia had seen a traveling witch who carried a snake around her neck and shoulders. This woman had had a son. She'd sung lullabies to him at night and held his hands and kept him fed, same as anyone else. There was nothing dark about her.

The need to call this thing "good" and this thing "bad," this thing "white" and this thing "black," was an impulse that Effia did not understand. In her village, everything was everything. Everything bore the weight of everything else.

The next day Effia told Adwoa that James had seen the root.

"That is not good," Adwoa said. "Did he call it evil?" Effia nodded, and Adwoa clicked her tongue three times. "Todd would have said the same thing. These men could not tell good from evil if they were Nyame himself. I don't think it will work now, Effia. I'm sorry." But Effia wasn't sorry. If she was barren, so be it.

Soon, even James was too busy to worry about children. The Castle was expecting a visit from Dutch officers, and everything needed to run as smoothly as possible. James would wake up well before Effia to help the men with the imported store items and to see to the ships. Effia spent more and more time wandering around the villages surrounding the Castle, roaming the forests, and chatting with Adwoa.

The afternoon of the Dutch arrival, Effia met with Adwoa and some of the other wenches just outside the Castle. They stopped beneath the

shade of a patch of trees in order to eat yams with palm oil stew. There was Adwoa, then Sarah, the half-caste wench of Sam York. There was also the new wench, Eccoah. She was tall and slender, and she walked as though her limbs were made of thin twigs, as though wind could snap and collapse her.

This day, Eccoah was lying in the slim shade of a palm tree. Effia had helped her coil her hair the day before, and in the sun, it looked like a million tiny snakes rising from her head.

"My husband cannot pronounce my name well. He wants to call me Emily," Eccoah said.

"If he wants to call you Emily, let him call you Emily," Adwoa said. Out of the four of them, she had been a wench the longest, and she always spoke her opinions loudly and freely. Everyone knew that her husband practically worshipped at her feet. "Better that than to listen to him butcher your mother tongue over and over."

Sarah dug her elbows into the dust. "My father was a soldier too. When he died, Mama moved us back to our village. I came to marry Sam, but he did not have to worry about my name. Do you know he knew my father? They were soldiers together in the Castle when I was just a small girl."

Effia shook her head. She was lying on her belly. She loved days like this one, where she could speak Fante as fast as she wanted. No one asking her to slow down, no one telling her to speak English.

"My husband comes up from the dungeons stinking like a dying animal," Eccoah said softly.

They all looked away. No one ever mentioned the dungeons.

"He comes to me smelling like feces and rot and looking at me like he has seen a million ghosts, and he cannot tell if I am one of them or not. I tell him he must wash before he touches me and sometimes he does, but sometimes he pushes me to the floor and pushes into me like he has been possessed."

Effia sat up and rested a hand against her stomach. James had received another letter from his wife the day after he'd found the root underneath their bed. They had not slept together since.

The wind picked up. The snakes in Eccoah's hair snapped this way and that, her twig arms lifted. "There are people down there, you

know," she said. "There are women down there who look like us, and our husbands must learn to tell the difference."

They all fell silent. Eccoah leaned back against the tree, and Effia watched as a line of ants passed over a strand of her hair, the shape of it seeming, to them, to be just another part of the natural world.

After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves they kept in the dungeon, but he spoke to her often about beasts. That was what the Asantes trafficked most here. Beasts. Monkeys and chimpanzees, even a few leopards. Birds like the king crowns and macaws that she and Fiifi used to try to catch when they were children, roaming the forests in search of the one odd bird, the bird that had feathers so beautiful it seemed to be set apart from the rest. They would spend hours on end looking for just one such bird, and most days they would find none.

She wondered what such a bird would be worth, because in the Castle all beasts were ascribed worth. She had seen James look at a king crown brought in by one of their Asante traders and declare that it was worth four pounds. What about the human beast? How much was he worth? Effia had known, of course, that there were people in the dungeons. People who spoke a different dialect than her, people who had been captured in tribal wars, even people who had been stolen, but she had never thought of where they went from there. She had never thought of what James must think every time he saw them. If he went into the dungeons and saw women who reminded him of her, who looked like her and smelled like her. If he came back to her haunted by what he saw.

Effia soon realized that she was pregnant. It was spring, and the mango trees outside the Castle had started to drop down mangoes. Her stomach jutted out, soft and fleshy, its own kind of fruit. James was so happy when she told him that he picked her up and danced her around their quarters. She slapped his back and told him to set her down, lest they shake the baby to pieces, and he had complied before bending and planting a kiss on her barely bulged stomach.

But their joy was soon tempered by news from her village. Cobbe

had fallen ill. So ill that it was unclear whether or not he would still be alive by the time Effia made the journey back to see him.

She was not sure who had sent the letter from her village, for it was addressed to her husband and written in broken English. She had been gone two years, and she had not heard from anyone in her family since then. She knew that this was Baaba's doing, and indeed she was surprised that anyone had even thought to notify her of her father's illness.

The journey back to the village took about three days. James did not want her to make the trip alone in her condition, but he could not accompany her, so he sent along a house girl. When they arrived, everything in the village looked different. The colors of the treetop canopies seemed to have dulled, their vibrant browns and greens now muted. The sounds seemed different too. Everything that once rustled now stood still. Abeeku had made the village into one so prosperous that they would forever be known as one of the leading slave markets in all of the Gold Coast. He had no time to see Effia, but he sent along gifts of sweet palm wine and gold to meet her once she arrived at her father's compound.

Baaba stood in the entranceway. She looked to have aged a hundred years in the two that Effia had been gone. Her scowl was held in place by the hundreds of tiny wrinkles that pulled at her skin, and her nails had grown so long that they curled like talons. She didn't speak a word, only led Effia to the room where her father lay dying.

No one knew what sickness had struck Cobbe. Apothecaries, witch doctors, even the Christian minister from the Castle, had been called upon to give their opinions and pray over the man, and yet no measure of healing thoughts or medicines could spit him out of the lips of death.

Fiifi stood beside him, wiping the sweat off his forehead carefully. Suddenly, Effia was crying and shaking. She reached out her hand to her father's and began to stroke the sallow skin there.

"He cannot speak," Fiifi whispered, glancing quickly at her bulging belly. "He is too weak."

She nodded and continued to cry.

Fiifi dropped the drenched cloth and took Effia's hand. "Big sis-

ter, I am the one who wrote you the letter. Mama did not want you to come, but I thought you should get to see our father before he enters Asamando."

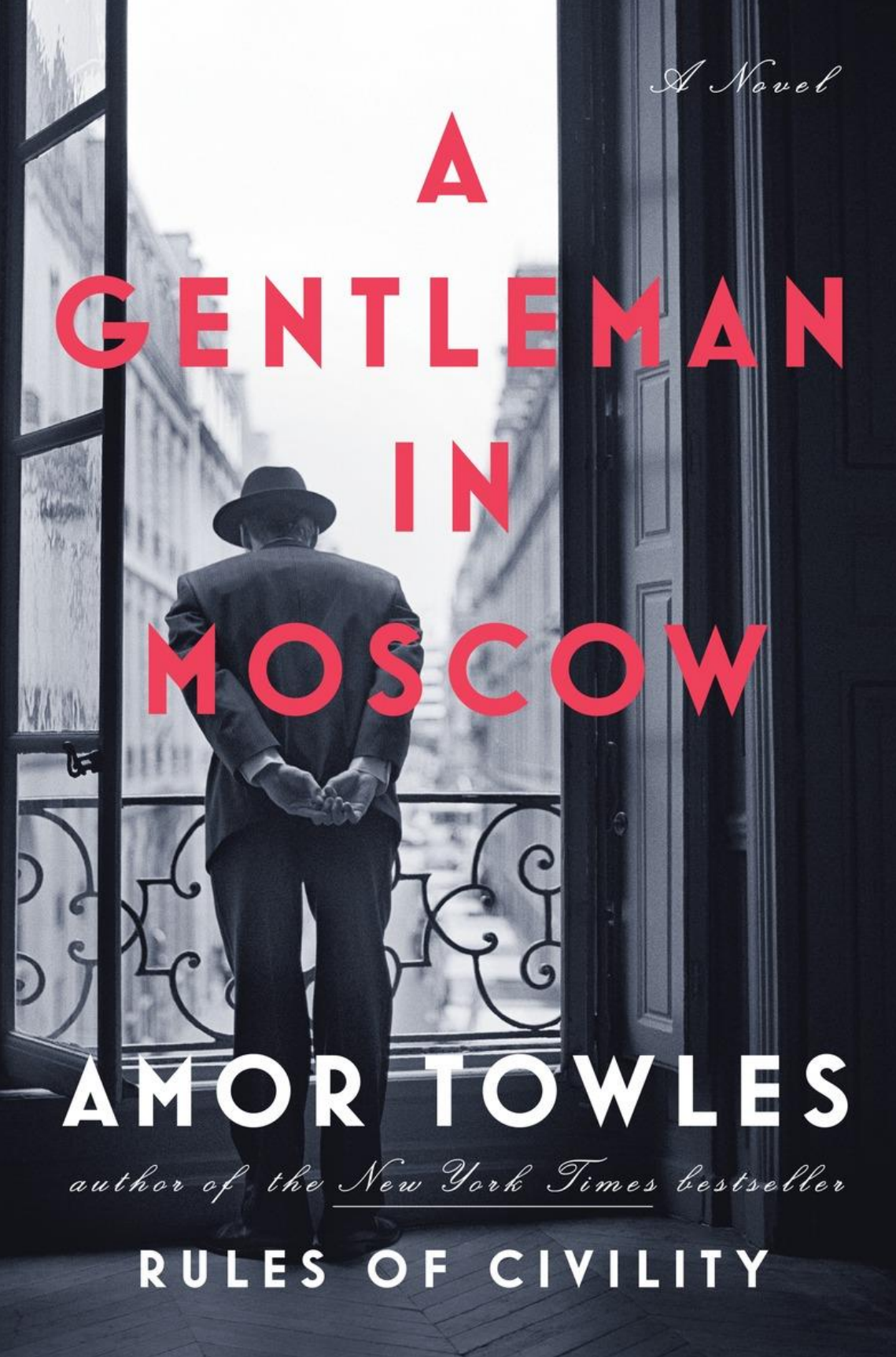
Cobbe closed his eyes, and a low murmur escaped his lips so that Effia could see that the Land of the Spirits was indeed calling him.

"Thank you," she said to Fiifi, and he nodded.

He began walking out of the room, but before he reached the hut's door, he turned. "She is not your mother, you know. Baaba. Our father had you by a house girl who ran away into the fire the night you were born. She is the one who left you that stone you wear around your neck."

Fiifi stepped outside. And soon, Cobbe died, Effia still holding his hand. The villagers would say that Cobbe had been waiting for Effia to come home before he could die, but Effia knew that it was more complex than that. His unrest had kept him alive, and now that unrest belonged to Effia. It would feed her life and the life of her child.

After she had wiped her tears, Effia walked out of the compound and into the sun. Baaba sat on the stump of a felled tree, her shoulders squared as she held hands with Fiifi, who stood beside her, now as quiet as a field mouse. Effia wanted to say something to Baaba, to apologize perhaps for the burden her father had made Baaba carry all of those years, but before she could speak, Baaba hacked from her throat, spit on the ground before Effia's feet, and said, "You are nothing from nowhere. No mother and now no father." She looked at Effia's stomach and smiled. "What can grow from nothing?"


A Novel
A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW
AMOR TOWLES
author of the New York Times bestseller
RULES OF CIVILITY

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# *An Acquaintanceship*

There were two restaurants in the Hotel Metropol: the Boyarsky, that fabled retreat on the second floor that we have already visited, and the grand dining room off the lobby known officially as the Metropol, but referred to affectionately by the Count as the Piazza.

Admittedly, the Piazza could not challenge the elegance of the Boyarsky's decor, the sophistication of its service, or the subtlety of its cuisine. But the Piazza did not aspire to elegance, service, or subtlety. With eighty tables scattered around a marble fountain and a menu offering everything from cabbage piroghi to cutlets of veal, the Piazza was meant to be an extension of the city—of its gardens, markets, and thoroughfares. It was a place where Russians cut from every cloth could come to linger over coffee, happen upon friends, stumble into arguments, or drift into dalliances—and where the lone diner seated under the great glass ceiling could indulge himself in admiration, indignation, suspicion, and laughter without getting up from his chair.

And the waiters? Like those of a Parisian café, the Piazza's waiters could best be complimented as "efficient." Accustomed to navigating crowds, they could easily seat your party of eight at a table for four. Having noted your preferences over the sound of the orchestra, within minutes they would return with the various drinks balanced on a tray and dispense them round the table in rapid succession without misplacing a glass. If, with your menu in hand, you hesitated for even a second to place your order, they would lean over your shoulder and poke at a specialty of the house. And when the last morsel of dessert had been savored, they would whisk away your plate, present your check, and make your change in under a minute. In other words, the waiters of the Piazza knew their trade to the crumb, the spoon, and the kopek.

At least, that was how things were before the war. . . .

Today, the dining room was nearly empty and the Count was being

served by someone who appeared not only new to the Piazza, but new to the art of waiting. Tall and thin, with a narrow head and superior demeanor, he looked rather like a bishop that had been plucked from a chessboard. When the Count took his seat with a newspaper in hand—the international symbol of dining alone—the chap didn't bother to clear the second place setting; when the Count closed his menu and placed it beside his plate—the international symbol of readiness to order—the chap needed to be beckoned with a wave of the hand; and when the Count ordered the okroshka and filet of sole, the chap asked if he might like a glass of Sauterne. A perfect suggestion, no doubt, if only the Count had ordered foie gras!

"Perhaps a bottle of the Pouilly-Fumé," the Count corrected, politely.

"Of course," the Bishop replied with an ecclesiastical smile.

Granted, a bottle of Pouilly-Fumé was something of an extravagance for a solitary lunch, but after spending another morning with the indefatigable Michel de Montaigne, the Count felt that his morale could use the boost. For several days, in fact, he had been fending off a state of restlessness. On his regular descent to the lobby, he caught himself counting the steps. As he browsed the headlines in his favorite chair, he found he was lifting his hands to twirl the tips of moustaches that were no longer there. He found he was walking through the door of the Piazza at 12:01 for lunch. And at 1:35, when he climbed the 110 steps to his room, he was already calculating the minutes until he could come back downstairs for a drink. If he continued along this course, it would not take long for the ceiling to edge downward, the walls to edge inward, and the floor to edge upward, until the entire hotel had been collapsed into the size of a biscuit tin.

As the Count waited for his wine, he gazed around the restaurant, but his fellow diners offered no relief. Across the way was a table occupied by two stragglers of the diplomatic corps who picked at their food while they awaited an era of diplomacy. Over there in the corner was a spectacled denizen of the second floor with four enormous documents spread across his table, comparing them word for word. No one appeared particularly gay; and no one paid the Count any mind. That is, except for the young girl with the penchant for yellow who appeared to be spying on him from her table behind the fountain.

According to Vasily, this nine-year-old with straight blond hair was

the daughter of a widowed Ukrainian bureaucrat. As usual, she was sitting with her governess. When she realized the Count was looking her way, she disappeared behind her menu.

"Your soup," said the Bishop.

"Ah. Thank you, my good man. It looks delicious. But don't forget the wine!"

"Of course."

Turning his attention to his okroshka, the Count could tell at a glance that it was a commendable execution—a bowl of soup that any Russian in the room might have been served by his grandmother. Closing his eyes in order to give the first spoonful its due consideration, the Count noted a suitably chilled temperature, a tad too much salt, a tad too little kvass, but a perfect expression of dill—that harbinger of summer which brings to mind the songs of crickets and the setting of one's soul at ease.

But when the Count opened his eyes, he nearly dropped his spoon. For standing at the edge of his table was the young girl with the penchant for yellow—studying him with that unapologetic interest peculiar to children and dogs. Adding to the shock of her sudden appearance was the fact that her dress today was in the shade of a lemon.

"Where did they go?" she asked, without a word of introduction.

"I beg your pardon. Where did who go?"

She tilted her head to take a closer look at his face.

"Why, your moustaches."

The Count had not much cause to interact with children, but he had been raised well enough to know that a child should not idly approach a stranger, should not interrupt him in the middle of a meal, and certainly should not ask him questions about his personal appearance. Was the minding of one's own business no longer a subject taught in schools?

"Like swallows," the Count answered, "they traveled elsewhere for the summer."

Then he fluttered a hand from the table into the air in order to both mimic the flight of the swallows and suggest how a child might follow suit.

She nodded to express her satisfaction with his response.

"I too will be traveling elsewhere for part of the summer."

The Count inclined his head to indicate his congratulations.

"To the Black Sea," she added.

Then she pulled back the empty chair and sat.

"Would you like to join me?" he asked.

By way of response, she wiggled back and forth to make herself comfortable then rested her elbows on the table. Around her neck hung a small pendant on a golden chain, some lucky charm or locket. The Count looked toward the young lady's governess with the hopes of catching her attention, but she had obviously learned from experience to keep her nose in her book.

The girl gave another canine tilt to her head.

"Is it true that you are a count?"

"It is true."

Her eyes widened.

"Have you ever known a princess?"

"I have known many princesses."

Her eyes widened further, then narrowed.

"Was it terribly hard to be a princess?"

"Terribly."

At that moment, despite the fact that half of the okroshka remained in its bowl, the Bishop appeared with the Count's filet of sole and swapped one for the other.

"Thank you," said the Count, his spoon still in hand.

"Of course."

The Count opened his mouth to inquire as to the whereabouts of the Pouilly-Fumé, but the Bishop had already vanished. When the Count turned back to his guest, she was staring at his fish.

"What is that?" she wanted to know.

"This? It is filet of sole."

"Is it good?"

"Didn't you have a lunch of your own?"

"I didn't like it."

The Count transferred a taste of his fish to a side plate and passed it across the table. "With my compliments."

She forked the whole thing in her mouth.

"It's yummy," she said, which if not the most elegant expression was at least factually correct. Then she smiled a little sadly and let out a sigh as she directed her bright blue gaze upon the rest of his lunch.

"Hmm," said the Count.

Retrieving the side plate, he transferred half his sole along with an equal share of spinach and baby carrots, and returned it. She wiggled back and forth once more, presumably to settle in for the duration. Then, having carefully pushed the vegetables to the edge of the plate, she cut her fish into four equal portions, put the right upper quadrant in her mouth, and resumed her line of inquiry.

"How would a princess spend her day?"

"Like any young lady," answered the Count.

With a nod of the head, the girl encouraged him to continue.

"In the morning, she would have lessons in French, history, music. After her lessons, she might visit with friends or walk in the park. And at lunch she would eat her vegetables."

"My father says that princesses personify the decadence of a vanquished era."

The Count was taken aback.

"Perhaps a few," he conceded. "But not all, I assure you."

She waved her fork.

"Don't worry. Papa is wonderful and he knows everything there is to know about the workings of tractors. But he knows absolutely nothing about the workings of princesses."

The Count offered an expression of relief.

"Have you ever been to a ball?" she continued after a moment of thought.

"Certainly."

"Did you dance?"

"I have been known to scuff the parquet." The Count said this with the renowned glint in his eye—that little spark that had defused heated conversations and caught the eyes of beauties in every salon in St. Petersburg.

"Scuff the parquet?"

"Ahem," said the Count. "Yes, I have danced at balls."

"And have you lived in a castle?"

"Castles are not as common in our country as they are in fairy tales," the Count explained. "But I have *dined* in a castle. . . ."

Accepting this response as sufficient, if not ideal, the girl now furrowed

her brow. She put another quadrant of fish in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Then she suddenly leaned forward.

"Have you ever been in a duel?"

"An *affaire d'honneur*?" The Count hesitated. "I suppose I have been in a duel of sorts. . . ."

"With pistols at thirty-two paces?"

"In my case, it was more of a duel in the figurative sense."

When the Count's guest expressed her disappointment at this unfortunate clarification, he found himself offering a consolation:

"My godfather was a second on more than one occasion."

"A second?"

"When a gentleman has been offended and demands satisfaction on the field of honor, he and his counterpart each appoint seconds—in essence, their lieutenants. It is the seconds who settle upon the rules of engagement."

"What sort of rules of engagement?"

"The time and place of the duel. What weapons will be used. If it is to be pistols, then how many paces will be taken and whether there will be more than one exchange of shots."

"Your godfather, you say. Where did *he* live?"

"Here in Moscow."

"Were his duels in Moscow?"

"One of them was. In fact, it sprang from a dispute that occurred in this hotel—between an admiral and a prince. They had been at odds for quite some time, I gather, but things came to a head one night when their paths collided in the lobby, and the gauntlet was thrown down on that very spot."

"Which very spot?"

"By the concierge's desk."

"Right where I sit!"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Were they in love with the same woman?"

"I don't think a woman was involved."

The girl looked at the Count with an expression of incredulity.

"A woman is always involved," she said.

"Yes. Well. Whatever the cause, an offense was taken followed by a demand for an apology, a refusal to provide one, and a slap of the glove.

At the time, the hotel was managed by a German fellow named Keffler, who was reputedly a baron in his own right. And it was generally known that he kept a pair of pistols hidden behind a panel in his office, so that when an incident occurred, seconds could confer in privacy, carriages could be summoned, and the feuding parties could be whisked away with weapons in hand."

"In the hours before dawn . . ."

"In the hours before dawn."

"To some remote spot . . ."

"To some remote spot."

She leaned forward.

"Lensky was killed by Onegin in a duel."

She said this in a hushed voice, as if quoting the events of Pushkin's poem required discretion.

"Yes," whispered back the Count. "And so was Pushkin."

She nodded in grave agreement.

"In St. Petersburg," she said. "On the banks of the Black Rivulet."

"On the banks of the Black Rivulet."

The young lady's fish was now gone. Placing her napkin on her plate and nodding her head once to suggest how perfectly acceptable the Count had proven as a luncheon companion, she rose from her chair. But before turning to go, she paused.

"I prefer you without your moustaches," she said. "Their absence improves your . . . countenance."

Then she performed an off-kilter curtsey and disappeared behind the fountain.

*An* affaire d'honneur . . .

Or so thought the Count with a touch of self-recrimination as he sat alone later that night in the hotel's bar with a snifter of brandy.

Situated off the lobby, furnished with banquettes, a mahogany bar, and a wall of bottles, this American–style watering hole was affectionately referred to by the Count as the Shalyapin, in honor of the great Russian opera singer who had frequented the spot in the years before the

Revolution. Once a beehive of activity, the Shalyapin was now more a chapel of prayer and reflection—but tonight that suited the Count's cast of mind.

*Yes,* he continued in his thoughts, *how fine almost any human endeavor can be made to sound when expressed in the proper French. . . .*

"May I offer you a hand, Your Excellency?"

This was Audrius, the Shalypin's tender at bar. A Lithuanian with a blond goatee and a ready smile, Audrius was a man who knew his business. Why, the moment after you took a stool he would be leaning toward you with his forearm on the bar to ask your pleasure; and as soon as your glass was empty, he was there with a splash. But the Count wasn't sure why he was choosing this particular moment to offer a hand.

"With your jacket," the bartender clarified.

In point of fact, the Count did seem to be struggling to get his arm through the sleeve of his blazer—which he couldn't quite remember having taken off in the first place. The Count had arrived at the Shalyapin at six o'clock, as usual, where he maintained a strict limit of one aperitif before dinner. But noting that he had never received his bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, the Count had allowed himself a second glass of Dubonnet. And then a snifter or two of brandy. And the next thing he knew, it was . . . , it was . . .

"What time *is* it, Audrius?"

"Ten, Your Excellency."

"Ten!"

Audrius, who was suddenly on the customer side of the bar, was helping the Count off his stool. And as he guided the Count across the lobby (quite unnecessarily), the Count invited him into his train of thought.

"Did you know, Audrius, that when dueling was first discovered by the Russian officer corps in the early 1700s, they took to it with such enthusiasm that the Tsar had to forbid the practice for fear that there would soon be no one left to lead his troops."

"I did not know that, Your Excellency," the bartender replied with a smile.

"Well, it's quite true. And not only is a duel central to the action of *Onegin*, one occurs at a critical juncture in *War and Peace, Fathers and Sons,* and *The Brothers Karamazov*! But then, for all their powers of invention,

the Russian masters could hardly have come up with a better plot device than two central characters resolving a matter of conscience by means of pistols at thirty-two paces."

"I see your point. But here we are. Shall I press for the fifth floor?"

The Count, who suddenly found himself standing in front of the elevator, looked at the bartender in shock.

"But Audrius, I have never taken the lift in my life!"

Then, after patting the bartender on the shoulder, the Count began winding his way up the stairs; that is, until he reached the second-floor landing, where he sat on a step.

"Why is it that our nation above all others embraced the duel so wholeheartedly?" he asked the stairwell.

Some, no doubt, would simply dismiss it as a by-product of barbarism. Given Russia's long, heartless winters, its familiarity with famine, its rough sense of justice, et cetera, et cetera, it was perfectly natural for its gentry to adopt an act of definitive violence as the means of resolving disputes. But in the Count's opinion, the reason that dueling prevailed among Russian gentlemen stemmed from nothing more than their passion for the glorious and grandiose.

True, duels were fought by convention at dawn in isolated locations to ensure the privacy of the gentlemen involved. But were they fought behind ash heaps or scrap yards? Of course not! They were fought in a clearing among the birch trees with a dusting of snow. Or on the banks of a rivulet. Or at the edge of a family estate where the breezes shake the blossoms from the apple trees. . . . That is, they were fought in settings that one might have expected to see in the second act of an opera.

In Russia, whatever the endeavor, if the setting is glorious and the tenor grandiose, it will have its adherents. In fact, over the years, as the locations for duels became more picturesque and the pistols more finely manufactured, the best-bred men proved willing to defend their honor over lesser and lesser offenses. So while dueling may have begun as a response to high crimes—to treachery, treason, and adultery—by 1900 it had tiptoed down the stairs of reason, until they were being fought over the tilt of a hat, the duration of a glance, or the placement of a comma.

In the old and well-established code of dueling, it is understood that the number of paces the offender and offended take before shooting should be

in inverse proportion to the magnitude of the insult. That is, the most reprehensible affronts should be resolved by a duel of only ten paces, to ensure that one of the two men will not leave the field of honor alive. Well, if that was the case, concluded the Count, then in the new era, the duels should have been fought at no less than ten thousand paces. In fact, having thrown down the gauntlet, appointed seconds, and chosen weapons, the offender should board a steamer bound for America as the offended boards another for Japan where, upon arrival, the two men could don their finest coats, descend their gangplanks, turn on the docks, and fire.

# *Anyway . . .*

Five days later, the Count was pleased to accept a formal invitation to tea from his new acquaintance, Nina Kulikova. The engagement was for three o'clock in the hotel's coffeehouse at the northwest corner of the ground floor. Arriving at a quarter till, the Count claimed a table for two near the window. When at five past the hour his hostess arrived in the manner of a daffodil—wearing a light yellow dress with a dark yellow sash—the Count rose and held out her chair.

*"Merci,"* she said.

*"Je t'en prie."*

In the minutes that followed, a waiter was signaled, a samovar was ordered, and with thunderclouds accumulating over Theatre Square, remarks were exchanged on the bittersweet likelihood of rain. But once the tea was poured and the tea cakes on the table, Nina adopted a more serious expression—intimating the time had come to speak of weightier concerns.

Some might have found this transition a little abrupt or out of keeping with the hour, but not the Count. Quite to the contrary, he thought a prompt dispensing of pleasantries and a quick shift to the business at hand utterly in keeping with the etiquette of tea—perhaps even essential to the institution.

After all, every tea the Count had ever attended in response to a formal invitation had followed this pattern. Whether it took place in a drawing room overlooking the Fontanka Canal or a teahouse in a public garden, before the first cake was sampled the *purpose* of the invitation would be laid upon the table. In fact, after a few requisite pleasantries, the most accomplished of hostesses could signal the transition with a single word of her choosing.

For the Count's grandmother, the word had been *Now*, as in *Now,*

*Alexander. I have heard some very distressing things about you, my boy. . . .* For Princess Polikova, a perennial victim of her own heart, it had been *Oh,* as in *Oh, Alexander. I have made a terrible mistake. . . .* And for young Nina, the word was apparently *Anyway*, as in:

"You're absolutely right, Alexander Ilyich. Another afternoon of rain and the lilac blossoms won't stand a fighting chance. Anyway . . ."

Suffice it to say, that when Nina's tone shifted, the Count was ready. Resting his forearms on his thighs and leaning forward at an angle of seventy degrees, he adopted an expression that was serious yet neutral, so that in an instant he could convey his sympathy, concern, or shared indignation as the circumstances required.

". . . I would be ever so grateful," Nina continued, "if you would share some of the rules of being a princess."

"The rules?"

"Yes. The rules."

"But Nina," the Count said with a smile, "being a princess is not a game."

Nina stared at the Count with an expression of patience.

"I am certain that you know what I mean. Those things that were *expected* of a princess."

"Ah, yes. I see."

The Count leaned back to give his hostess's inquiry a more appropriate consideration.

"Well," he said after a moment, "setting aside the study of the liberal arts, which we discussed the other day, I suppose the rules of being a princess would begin with a refinement of manners. To that end, she would be taught how to comport herself in society; she would be taught terms of address, table manners, posture . . ."

Having nodded favorably at the various items on the Count's list, Nina looked up sharply at the last one.

"Posture? Is posture a type of manners?"

"Yes," replied the Count, albeit a little tentatively, "it is. A slouching posture tends to suggest a certain laziness of character, as well as a lack of interest in others. Whereas an upright posture can confirm a sense of self-possession, and a quality of engagement—both of which are befitting of a princess."

Apparently swayed by this argument, Nina sat a little more upright.

"Go on."

The Count reflected.

"A princess would be raised to show respect for her elders."

Nina bowed her head toward the Count in deference. He coughed.

"I wasn't referring to me, Nina. After all, I am practically a youth like yourself. No, by 'elders,' I meant the gray haired."

Nina nodded to express her understanding.

"You mean the grand dukes and grand duchesses."

"Well, yes. Certainly them. But I mean elders of every social class. The shopkeepers and milkmaids, blacksmiths and peasants."

Never hesitant to express her sentiments with facial expressions, Nina frowned. The Count elaborated.

"The principle here is that a new generation owes a measure of thanks to *every* member of the previous generation. Our elders planted fields and fought in wars; they advanced the arts and sciences, and generally made sacrifices on our behalf. So by their efforts, however humble, they have earned a measure of our gratitude and respect."

As Nina still looked unconvinced, the Count considered how best to make his point; and it so happened that at that very moment, through the great windows of the coffeehouse could be seen the first hoisting of umbrellas.

"An example," he said.

Thus commenced the story of Princess Golitsyn and the crone of Kudrovo:

One stormy night in St. Petersburg, related the Count, young Princess Golitsyn was on her way to the annual ball at the Tushins'. As her carriage crossed the Lomonosov Bridge, she happened to notice an eighty-year-old woman on foot, hunched against the rain. Without a second thought, she called for her driver to stop the carriage and invited the unfortunate soul inside. The old woman, who was nearly blind, climbed aboard with the footman's help and thanked the Princess profusely. In the back of the Princess's mind may well have been the presumption that her passenger lived nearby. After all, how far was an old, blind woman likely to journey on a night like this? But when the Princess asked where the old woman was

headed, she replied that she was going to visit her son, the blacksmith, in Kudrovo—more than seven miles away!

Now, the Princess was already expected at the Tushins'. And in a matter of minutes they would be passing the house—lit from cellar to ceiling with a footman on every step. So, it would have been well within the bounds of courtesy for the Princess to excuse herself at the Tushins' and send the carriage on to Kudrovo with the old woman. In fact, as they approached the Tushins', the driver slowed the horses and looked to the Princess for instruction. . . .

Here the Count paused for effect.

"Well," Nina asked, "what did she do?"

"She told him to drive on." The Count smiled with a touch of triumph. "And what is more, when they arrived in Kudrovo and the blacksmith's family gathered round the carriage, the old woman invited the Princess in for tea. The blacksmith winced, the coachman gasped, and the footman nearly fainted. But Princess Golitsyn graciously accepted the old woman's invitation—and missed the Tushins' altogether."

His point expertly made, the Count raised his own cup of tea, nodded once, and drank.

Nina looked at him expectantly.

"And then?"

The Count returned his cup to its saucer.

"And then what?"

"Did she marry the blacksmith's son?"

"Marry the blacksmith's son! Good God. Certainly not. After a glass of tea she climbed into her carriage and headed for home."

Nina mulled this over. Clearly, she thought a marriage to the blacksmith's son a more fitting conclusion. But despite the shortcomings of history, she nodded to acknowledge that the Count had delivered a well-told tale.

Preferring to preserve his success, the Count opted not to share his normal coda to this delightful bit of St. Petersburg lore: that the Countess Tushin had been greeting guests under her portico when Princess Golitsyn's bright blue carriage, known the city over, slowed before the gates and then sped on. This resulted in a rift between the Golitsyns

and the Tushins that would have taken three generations to repair—if a certain Revolution hadn't brought an end to their outrage altogether. . . .

"It was behavior befitting a princess," acknowledged Nina.

"Exactly," said the Count.

Then he held out the tea cakes and Nina took two, putting one on her plate and one in her mouth.

The Count was not one to call attention to the social shortcomings of acquaintances, but giddy with his story's reception, he could not resist pointing out with a smile:

"There is another example."

"Where is another example?"

"A princess would be raised to say *please* when she asked for a cake, and *thank you* when she was offered one."

Nina looked taken aback; and then dismissive.

"I can see that *please* would be quite appropriate for a princess to say when she has asked for a cake; but I can see no reason why she should have to say *thank you* when she has been offered one."

"Manners are not like bonbons, Nina. You may not choose the ones that suit you best; and you certainly cannot put the half-bitten ones back in the box. . . ."

Nina eyed the Count with an expression of seasoned tolerance, and then presumably for his benefit, spoke a little more slowly.

"I understand that a princess should say *please* if she is asking for a cake, because she is trying to convince someone to give her the cake. And I suppose, if having asked for a cake, she is given a cake, then she has good reason to say *thank you*. But in the second part of your example, the princess in question didn't ask for the cake; she was *offered* it. And I see no reason why she should have to say *thank you* when she is merely obliging someone by accepting what they've offered."

To punctuate her point, Nina put a lemon tartlet in her mouth.

"I concede that there is some merit to your argument," said the Count. "But I can only tell you from a life of experience that—"

Nina cut him off with a wave of a finger.

"But you have just said that you are quite young."

"Indeed, I am."

"Well then, it seems to me that your claim of 'a life of experience' may be premature."

*Yes*, thought the Count, *as this tea was making perfectly clear.*

"I shall work upon my posture," Nina said quite definitively, brushing the crumbs from her fingers. "And I will be sure to say *please* and *thank you* whenever I ask for things. But I have no intention of thanking people for things I never asked for in the first place."

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