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— FALL 2018 —



What Will You Read Next?



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Excerpt from *My Sister, the Serial Killer*
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© 2018 by Jessie Greengrass

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© 2018 by Caroline Hulse

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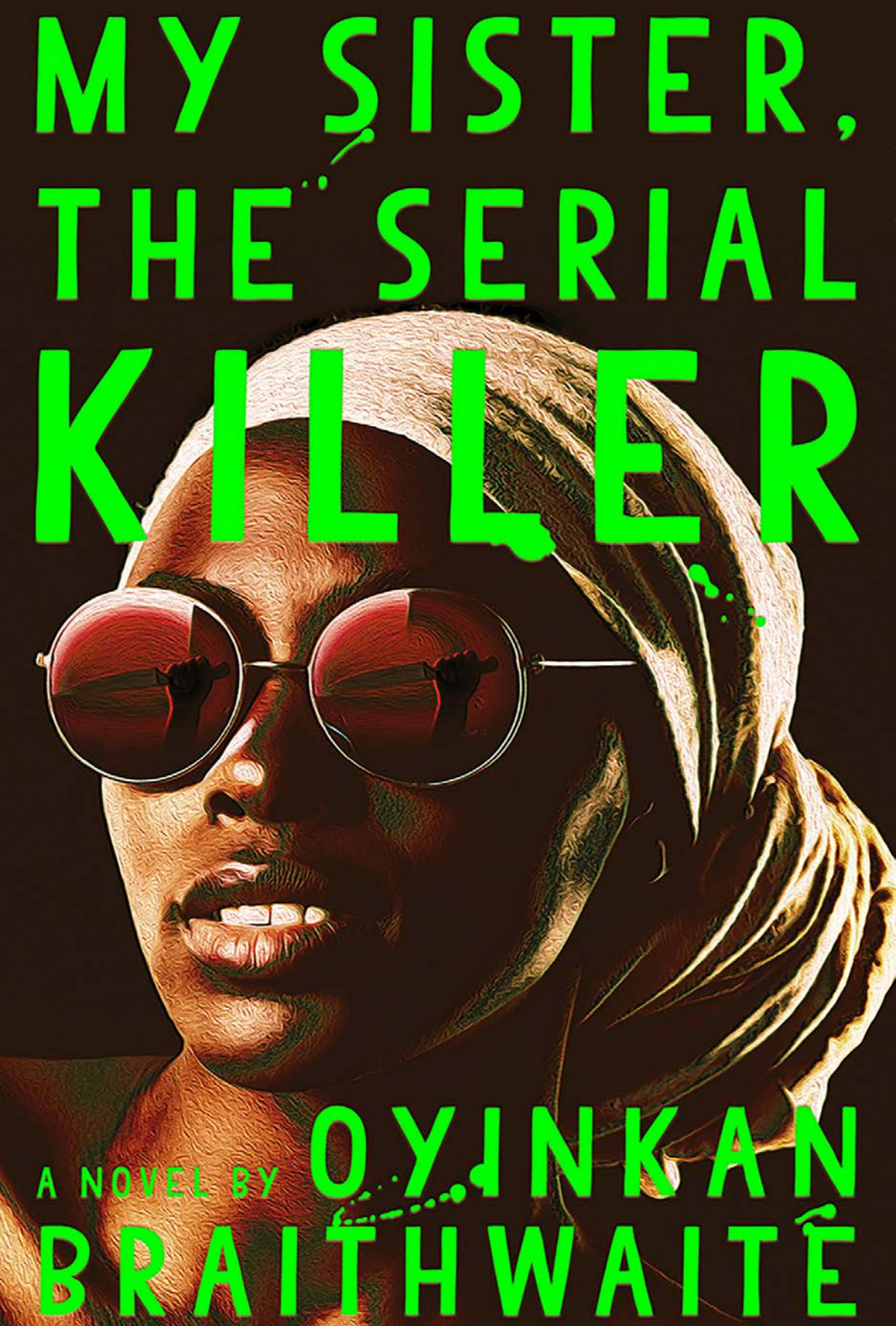
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Fall 2018 Debut Fiction Sampler

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MY SISTER,
THE SERIAL
KILLER

A NOVEL BY OYINKAN
BRAITHWAITE

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First Edition

WORDS

Ayoola summons me with these words—Korede, I killed him.

I had hoped I would never hear those words again.

BLEACH

I bet you didn't know that bleach masks the smell of blood. Most people use bleach indiscriminately, assuming it is a catchall product, never taking the time to read the list of ingredients on the back, never taking the time to return to the recently wiped surface to take a closer look. Bleach will disinfect, but it's not great for cleaning residue, so I use it only after I have first scrubbed the bathroom of all traces of life, and death.

It is clear that the room we are in has been remodeled recently. It has that never-been-used look, especially now that I've spent close to three hours cleaning up. The hardest part was getting to the blood that had seeped in between the shower and the caulking. It's an easy part to forget.

There's nothing placed on any of the surfaces; his shower gel, toothbrush and toothpaste are all stored in the cabinet above the sink. Then there's the shower mat—a black smiley face on a yellow rectangle in an otherwise white room.

Ayoola is perched on the toilet seat, her knees raised

and her arms wrapped around them. The blood on her dress has dried and there is no risk that it will drip on the white, now glossy floors. Her dreadlocks are piled atop her head, so they don't sweep the ground. She keeps looking up at me with her big brown eyes, afraid that I am angry, that I will soon get off my hands and knees to lecture her.

I am not angry. If I am anything, I am tired. The sweat from my brow drips onto the floor and I use the blue sponge to wipe it away.

I was about to eat when she called me. I had laid everything out on the tray in preparation—the fork was to the left of the plate, the knife to the right. I folded the napkin into the shape of a crown and placed it at the center of the plate. The movie was paused at the beginning credits and the oven timer had just rung, when my phone began to vibrate violently on my table.

By the time I get home, the food will be cold.

I stand up and rinse the gloves in the sink, but I don't remove them. Ayoola is looking at my reflection in the mirror.

“We need to move the body,” I tell her.

“Are you angry at me?”

Perhaps a normal person would be angry, but what I feel now is a pressing need to dispose of the body. When I got here, we carried him to the boot of my car, so that I was free to scrub and mop without having to countenance his cold stare.

“Get your bag,” I reply.

We return to the car and he is still in the boot, waiting for us.

The third mainland bridge gets little to no traffic at this time of night, and since there are no lamplights, it’s almost pitch black, but if you look beyond the bridge you can see the lights of the city. We take him to where we took the last one—over the bridge and into the water. At least he won’t be lonely.

Some of the blood has seeped into the lining of the boot. Ayoola offers to clean it, out of guilt, but I take my homemade mixture of one spoon of ammonia to two cups of water from her and pour it over the stain. I don’t know whether or not they have the tech for a thorough crime scene investigation in Lagos, but Ayoola could never clean up as efficiently as I can.

THE NOTEBOOK

“Who was he?”

“Femi.”

I scribble the name down. We are in my bedroom. Ayoola is sitting cross-legged on my sofa, her head resting on the back of the cushion. While she took a bath, I set the dress she had been wearing on fire. Now she wears a rose-colored T-shirt and smells of baby powder.

“And his surname?”

She frowns, pressing her lips together, and then she shakes her head, as though trying to shake the name back into the forefront of her brain. It doesn't come. She shrugs. I should have taken his wallet.

I close the notebook. It is small, smaller than the palm of my hand. I watched a TEDx video once where the man said that carrying around a notebook and penning one happy moment each day had changed his life. That is why I bought the notebook. On the first page, I wrote, *I saw a white owl through my bedroom window.* The notebook has been mostly empty since.

“It’s not my fault, you know.” But I don’t know. I don’t know what she is referring to. Does she mean the inability to recall his surname? Or his death?

“Tell me what happened.”

THE POEM

Femi wrote her a poem.
(She can remember the poem, but she cannot remember his last name.)

*I dare you to find a flaw
in her beauty;
or to bring forth a woman
who can stand beside
her without wilting.*

And he gave it to her written on a piece of paper, folded twice, reminiscent of our secondary school days, when kids would pass love notes to one another in the back row of classrooms. She was moved by all this (but then Ayoola is always moved by the worship of her merits) and so she agreed to be his woman.

On their one-month anniversary, she stabbed him in the bathroom of his apartment. She didn't mean to, of course. He was angry, screaming at her, his onion-stained breath hot against her face.

(But why was she carrying the knife?)

The knife was for her protection. You never knew with men, they wanted what they wanted when they wanted it. She didn't mean to kill him, she wanted to warn him off, but he wasn't scared of her weapon. He was over six feet tall and she must have looked like a doll to him, with her small frame, long eyelashes and rosy, full lips.

(Her description, not mine.)

She killed him on the first strike, a jab straight to the heart. But then she stabbed him twice more to be sure. He sank to the floor. She could hear her own breathing and nothing else.

BODY

Have you heard this one before? Two girls walk into a room. The room is in a flat. The flat is on the third floor. In the room is the dead body of an adult male. How do they get the body to the ground floor without being seen?

First, they gather supplies.

“How many bedsheets do we need?”

“How many does he have?” Ayoola ran out of the bathroom and returned armed with the information that there were five sheets in his laundry cupboard. I bit my lip. We needed a lot, but I was afraid his family might notice if the only sheet he had was the one laid on his bed. For the average male, this wouldn’t be all that peculiar—but this man was meticulous. His bookshelf was arranged alphabetically by author. His bathroom was stocked with the full range of cleaning supplies; he even bought the same brand of disinfectant as I did. And his kitchen shone. Ayoola seemed out of place here—a blight in an otherwise pure existence.

“Bring three.”

Second, they clean up the blood.

I soaked up the blood with a towel and wrung it out in

the sink. I repeated the motions until the floor was dry. Ayoola hovered, leaning on one foot and then the other. I ignored her impatience. It takes a whole lot longer to dispose of a body than to dispose of a soul, especially if you don't want to leave any evidence of foul play. But my eyes kept darting to the slumped corpse, propped up against the wall. I wouldn't be able to do a thorough job until his body was elsewhere.

Third, they turn him into a mummy.

We laid the sheets out on the now dry floor and she rolled him onto them. I didn't want to touch him. I could make out his sculpted body beneath his white tee. He looked like a man who could survive a couple of flesh wounds, but then so had Achilles and Caesar. It was a shame to think that death would whittle away at his broad shoulders and concave abs, until he was nothing more than bone. When I first walked in I had checked his pulse thrice, and then thrice more. He could have been sleeping, he looked so peaceful. His head was bent low, his back curved against the wall, his legs askew.

Ayoola huffed and puffed as she pushed his body onto the sheets. She wiped the sweat off her brow and left a trace of blood there. She tucked one side of a sheet over him, hiding him from view. Then I helped her roll him and wrap him firmly within the sheets. We stood and looked at him.

“What now?” she asked.

Fourth, they move the body.

We could have used the stairs, but I imagined us car-

rying what was clearly a crudely swaddled body and meeting someone on our way. I made up a couple of possible explanations—

“We are playing a prank on my brother. He is a deep sleeper and we are moving his sleeping body elsewhere.”

“No, no, it’s not a real man, what do you take us for? It’s a mannequin.”

“No, ma, it is just a sack of potatoes.”

I pictured the eyes of my make-believe witness widening in fear, as he or she ran to safety. No, the stairs were out of the question.

“We need to take the lift.”

Ayoola opened her mouth to ask a question and then she shook her head and closed it again. She had done her bit, the rest she left to me. We lifted him. I should have used my knees and not my back. I felt something crack and dropped my end of the body with a thud. My sister rolled her eyes. I took his feet again, and we carried him to the doorway.

Ayoola darted to the lift, pressed the button, ran back to us and lifted Femi’s shoulders once more. I peeked out of the apartment and confirmed that the landing was still clear. I was tempted to pray, to beg that no door be opened as we journeyed from door to lift, but I am fairly certain that those are exactly the types of prayers He *doesn’t* answer. So I chose instead to rely on luck and speed. We silently shuffled across the stone floor. The lift dinged just in time and opened its mouth for us. We stayed to one side while I confirmed that the lift

was empty, and then we heaved him in, bundling him into the corner, away from immediate view.

“Please hold the lift!” cried a voice. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ayoola about to press the button, the one that stops the lift from closing its doors. I slapped her hand away and jabbed the ground button repeatedly. As the lift doors slid shut, I caught a glimpse of a young mother’s disappointed face. I felt a little guilty—she had a baby in one arm and bags in the other—but I did not feel guilty enough to risk incarceration. Besides, what good could she be up to moving around at that hour, with a child in tow?

“What is wrong with you?” I hissed at Ayoola, even though I knew her movement had been instinctive, possibly the same impulsiveness that caused her to drive knife into flesh.

“My bad,” was her only response. I swallowed the words that threatened to spill out of my mouth. This was not the time.

On the ground floor, I left Ayoola to guard the body and hold the lift. If anyone was coming toward her, she was to shut the doors and go to the top floor. If someone attempted to call it from another floor, she was to hold the lift doors. I ran to get my car and drove it to the back door of the apartment building, where we fetched the body from the lift. My heart only stopped hammering in my chest when we shut the boot.

Fifth, they bleach.

JESSIE GREENGRASS

SIGHT

A NOVEL



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

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AS AUGUST FAILED into September the year after my mother died I began to suffer from headaches, near-migraines which were unlike anything I have experienced either before or since. For months I had drifted further and further away from myself. The faces of strangers caught sight of in the street, or on the opposite escalator as each morning I descended into the station to make my journey to the library, appeared familiar, rising suddenly out of the jumble like friends I had forgotten, their likenesses caught and lost again. The line between recognisable and unrecognisable blurred and the world appeared fragile, glassy and flat, so that I felt that it might shatter if I touched it, falling to my feet in shards to reveal whatever solidity was hidden underneath. Sounds—the grind of traffic, the voice of a man calling from a doorway, a radio spilling outwards from a windowsill—were both muted and precise, as if they were passing through some medium more viscous than air, but the pain of my headaches was something different again. I was incapacitated by it for days at a time, prostrate on my bed with the blinds pulled down and the curtains drawn across them, pain turning the passing of days and nights into

the ticks of an excruciating clock, indefatigable and cruel. I felt as though there was something swelling inside my skull, an abscess filling slowly with whatever stuff unhappiness is made of, its edges pressing against the bone like mud against stone, extruding into my sinuses, my eye-sockets, squeezing through my tear ducts and down my throat. Sometimes, at night, when exhaustion would briefly overcome pain and I would pass into a fitful doze at last, then I would dream that my mouth was filled with something like wet sand, a claggy, white substance which regenerated as fast as I could spit it out or excavate it with my fingers from the space between my gum and cheek; and waking I would have the taste of it still, the lingering memory of something like rotten milk catching in my throat.

Afterwards, as the pain receded, I would feel weak and new, a beach scoured clean and still unmarked, and I would lie on sheets stiffened with sweat and watch the dust motes fall slowly through the light which slanted down between a gap in the curtains, feeling the tiny chill of each indrawn breath, and I would wait until I had the strength to totter to the kitchen and pour a glass of water from the tap, lifting it with both hands to my mouth to feel it run into me, and it would be as though I had been reduced to almost nothing, my skin a fragile membrane parting light and liquid. Beforehand, though, in the days leading up to an attack, I would feel glorified. For twenty-four hours I seemed to glow, my body's radiance reflected back to me from every surface of the world to be reabsorbed and retransmitted, a refiner's fire which sharpened as it grew, and I was ecstatic.

I teetered on the brink of visions. Revelation pended, the veil between myself and understanding was in a constant state of almost-rendering, and I thought I could see shadows through it, the outlines of an as-yet uncomprehended truth, until all at once the mania crested and what came out of it, in place of elucidation, was agony, my head pinned in a vice, my body hanging limp below it, a disarticulated sack of bones and blood around which my limbs curled, stiff and liable to snap. Still, though, for almost two months I did nothing. After each attack the memory of pain was erased, but I could recall clearly how it had felt to be so enraptured and how the aftermath had been, that hollow peace that was so much like resurrection, and I wondered if it might be worth it. At other times, as the pain began and brought with it the certainty that nothing could be recompense for this, I was afraid, sure now that there was something really wrong with me and not wanting to know what it was, so that it wasn't until the period of these cycles had shortened to leave barely space between them to restock the fridge and wash and dry the bed sheets in preparation for the next headache, that I finally made an appointment to see a doctor.

BERTHA RÖNTGEN WAS used to lost hours, to her husband's absorption in his work which kept him away from home or returned him only in part, his mind elsewhere across the dinner table or as they sat with the fire between them in the drawing room where the piano was; still, though, even she began to worry as, by mid-November 1895, he had taken to

sleeping in his laboratory, to taking his meals there, returning to the house only to wash and change his clothes while Bertha watched him, trying hard to keep both concern and curiosity in check. Later, Röntgen would try to diminish what these weeks had been. He would seem to feel keenly Philipp Lenard's attempts to discredit him, the rumours muttered from the sides of mouths that his achievement had been nothing but an accumulation of serendipity. Even the speed with which his friends came to support him was felt as accusation—the suggestion left open by their quick defence that there were charges to be answered. “It is almost,” he would write some years later, “as though I had to apologise for discovering the rays”—and by late spring he would have done all the work on X-rays that he would ever undertake, publishing three papers and giving a single lecture. Such was his determination to avoid the subject that when, in 1901, he was awarded the inaugural Nobel Prize for Physics he declined to speak; but, whatever he might have come to feel afterwards, on the subject of those few weeks his own words betray him. The account of his work that he gives in *Über Eine Neue Art von Strahlen*, written hastily through the scrag-end of December to meet the Physical Medical Society's deadline, is a description cried aloud while still in flight, an account of actions performed while hours slipped past like river water, while the world remade itself in front of him, its solid surfaces dissolved to offer up their innards to his gaze; and the speed with which he wrote it, his figure running through the frozen Würzburg streets, is an indicator of his awareness of how fragile was his claim to priority

and how much, reflexively perhaps but certainly, he wanted it. While Bertha sat in an empty house and tried to keep her worries to herself, Röntgen in his laboratory reached for whatever was to hand, to hold it up in front of his machine. “I have,” he wrote, “observed and photographed many . . . shadow pictures. Thus, I have the outline of a door covered with lead paint; the image was produced by placing the discharge tube on one side of the door, and the sensitive plate on the other. I have also a shadow of the bones of the hand; of a wire upon a bobbin; of a set of weights in a box; of a compass card and needle completely enclosed in a metal case; of a piece of metal where the X-rays show the want of homogeneity . . .” For seven weeks and three days Röntgen existed in a private world transformed for him and him alone, and perhaps this too was a part of his later bitterness: that despite this experience of revelation, the conferral on him of a scientific grace, afterwards nothing was different at all, and although he had seen through metal and seen through flesh to what was hidden, and although he had known, or thought that he had known, its nature, what had been left afterwards was only so much quibbling at the bill.

At last, on 22 December 1895, Röntgen broke his run of solitude. Returning home he found Bertha, who for weeks had been his placeholder, moving through the routine business of their lives to keep the edges of it taut on his behalf, and he asked her to come with him. Without questioning she put on her coat and gloves, and together they walked through the winter streets and then through the university, their footsteps echoing in its empty corridors, until at

last they reached the door of his laboratory, and Röntgen opened it and pushed her through. For a few minutes, while Bertha stood, uncomfortable in this space which belonged to a version of her husband she knew only by reputation, he moved about, making sure of his equipment; and then without flourish he turned out the light and laid his wife's hand on a photographic plate. Bertha stayed still, doing as he asked of her, while he prepped the Crookes tube and shot the current across it, her hand an object sat between them in the darkness. It took ten minutes for Röntgen to develop the picture, the only sounds his footsteps and the ticking of the regulator clock which hung on the wall above them, and then it was done and, the lights on again, they looked at it, this picture which has become Bertha's enduring image: her skeletal hand, open, fingers curved above the convex length of her palm. Across the lower phalange of her fourth finger Bertha's wedding ring is an uncompromising mark, its blackness against the shadow of her bones a marker of the metal's immutability. Röntgen, who for weeks had been alone in his newly understood world, had sought with this image Bertha's admittance to it, the making of the picture a gesture of both initiation and affection: the tenderness of her bones made visible to them both, confirmation of the life which had formed such extraordinary structures; but these things are a matter of interpretation. To Bertha, whose hands were solid, whose body unitary, who had not doubted those things that constituted her—her skin, her thoughts; the single object that was flesh housing mind—nor sought to understand them, it had the chilly, soily smell of tombs.

—It is,
she said
—like seeing my own death—
and she turned away, and refused to look again.

AFTER I RETURNED from Hay, Johannes and I clung to one another. Something had changed between us: Johannes no longer reassured me that things would be all right and I no longer tried to talk about my fears because to do so seemed to wound him and I wanted above all that he should not look so sad. There was a breaking distance in the way we were so careful with one another. Although we were in contact with one another always, a hand on a shoulder, a leg slung across a knee, our fingers reaching out to twine about the other's, it was not for comfort but rather because it felt that to let go would be to risk a loss that would be absolute. At night we lay awake, our arms around one another, and although in the silence we pressed ourselves together, trying to reach one another, between our naked bellies there was a barrier that we couldn't break and we remained apart. Once from nowhere Johannes cried

—I can't bear it,
but I could offer no comfort, not even that which comes from conjoint suffering.

In the end it was nothing at all which brought resolution. We went away, together this time, walking for ten days in Cornwall along the coast path from Falmouth round the Lizard to Land's End as though in this steady progress west-

ward we might outdistance ourselves. We walked until my mouth filled with the taste of salt and iron, scrambling from sea to cliff-crest and back again with the turn of each cove, hours of arduous labour lost in the traversal of a few straight miles. Once, pausing for breath, looking out from the edge of the cliff at the sea five hundred feet below, we saw a peregrine falcon hovering barely an arm-span away from us and almost on a level, watchful and still, its spotted grey wings barely moving in the updraft, and I felt myself touched by something—privilege perhaps, or luck—that came, after so many months, like a sight of the first green growth through winter earth. We carried a tent, split between our two packs. At the end of each day's walking my skin was covered in a rime of salt, half sweat and half evaporated surf, so that rubbing my fingers on my face it came away in grubby curls, and after dinner in one pub or another we crawled into our tent before dark and in the gentle, subaquatic murk the canvas made of the evening sun, we slept. We barely spoke to one another. At first it was because we had nothing to say that had not been said already but by the middle of the week I felt that it was because we had been emptied out, poured into the rough path, our thoughts nothing more than surface, as routine and repetitive as the passage of the summer breakers up the beaches. In our matched strides we had found a mute accord which had been lacking for months, our only current concerns the cresting of each rise and the need to reach a campsite in time to pitch a tent before the pubs stopped serving dinner. The weather for most of the week was uniformly clear and hot and in the middle of each day we scrambled

down off the path to the sea and ate our packed lunches side by side, facing out across the North Atlantic, bread and cheese and packets of crisps after which I swam, the water so clear that I could see shoals of tiny blue fish in it; but on the last day it rained, a thick and heavy summer storm, the clouds descended down low so that air and water merged into a heavy, directionless grey spume and when we reached Land's End at last we couldn't even see as far as the edge of the point. We waited in line with all the other thwarted sightseers to have our picture taken by the signpost to John O'Groats and felt a sense of disjunction, after the solitary days, to be surrounded by such crowds of people, all of them looking askance at our dirty faces and the soaking, mud-splattered clothes we'd been wearing all week. Sitting on the bus back to Penzance we said how funny it was to have been striving so hard to reach a place so completely lacking in any kind of peace or beauty, so forbidding of contemplation, as though we had undertaken a pilgrimage to a supermarket, and we laughed. At the station we booked ourselves onto that night's sleeper and spent the balance of the afternoon and early evening drinking in the station bar, our wet things steaming on a radiator, and I realised, standing on the chipped tiles of the pub toilet looking in the mirror at my half-burned face, that at some point in the week I had outdistanced my anxiety. After all, my decision had been made months ago. I knew that I wanted a child and it was only the point of crossing from the abstract to the particular which was at issue, that gap I saw between myself and the people who were mothers already, my fear of being found

wanting, but I was not alone—there was Johannes, strong where I was not, and after all we were only people and a part of us was made for this, I wouldn't fail any further than others did; but most of all I had exhausted myself with indecision and was too tired for any more of it. I wanted to think about something else. I wanted the whole thing to be over and done, and the only way for that to happen was for me to do that thing which I had wanted from the start.

READING RÖNTGEN'S PAPER for the first time one sunny afternoon at my desk in the library I had been able to follow the thread of it with comparative ease; and surely this was the last time that such a feat was possible: the framing of a radical scientific discovery in ordinary language, the ability to impart understanding without first having to construct a language in which to do so. Röntgen's description of his work comes like the unravelling of a magician's illusion which, explained, quickens rather than diminishing, the understanding of its working conferring the illusion of complicity—the impression that we, too, might be so deft, so sure; and within weeks of the paper's publication interest in it, both academic and popular, had exploded. During 1896, forty-nine books and 1,044 scientific papers were published on the subject of X-rays, as well as newspaper reports and editorials, magazine articles, cartoons and sketches. Into the tail end of a repressive century it came like the promise of a change in the weather, that unsettling notion that far from the troublesome corporeality of bodies being obscured by

their enfolding layers of lawn and calico they might themselves become transparent, giving up their secrets to a gaze. By the summer of 1896 there were slot machines in Chicago that would X-ray your hand, and at that year's Electrical Exhibition in New York there was a tent in which the boxes stood one beside another in rows and people queued up to use them, the lines stretching backwards to the door. Afterwards, congregating in groups, talking in whispers as one might do in church, their eyes shone with the wonder of conversion and they said that during those few moments when they had seen their hands dissected on a screen they had received confirmation of their place among the living; or else they saw what Bertha Röntgen had done and in the peculiar repetitiveness of the images, each skeleton so like the last, they found the unindividuated mass of bones that we will all become. All through that year and the next, the enthralling mystery X-rays represented, their apparent promise, the sense they brought of a future already overtaken and inhabited, was such that when in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a man claimed to have used X-rays to transmute base metal into gold, finding the philosopher's stone in a cathode-ray tube, for a while he was almost believed; and why not, since if a solid body might become transparent—if one might step inside a fairground booth and see the bones of one's own hand—if one might pay a dime and see one's life or death—then what after all might be possible, what understood—and surely this is what brought them, all that summer, running to the fairground booths: the promise of the simplifying power of explanation, sight: that knowing

the constitution of their bodies they might be granted understanding of their minds.

the Adults

a novel



Caroline Hulse

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

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Transcript of 999 call

Christmas Eve, 14:06 hours

Operator: Emergency, which service?

Woman: We need an ambulance at the Happy Forest holiday park.

Operator: Are you in danger?

Woman: Please hurry. We're in the archery field near Santa's grotto, opposite the elves' smoking shelter.

Operator: It's important I understand whether you're in danger now.

Woman: I'm not in danger but we need an ambulance. He's been shot. It was an accident.

Operator: I've got help on the way. I need to go through some questions with you but it's not delaying us, OK?

Woman: Get them to hurry. There's so much blood.

Operator: OK, when you say he's been shot, what has he been shot by? What can you see?

Woman: An arrow. An archery arrow.

Operator: What's your name?

Woman: Alex.

Operator: OK, Alex. Is he conscious?

Woman: Yes. And no.

Operator: Is he breathing?

Woman: Yes, for now. Please come quickly.

Operator: Like I say, the whole time you're talking to me, they're coming with lights and sirens, OK?

(Wind sounds and background noise cut out suddenly)

Operator: When did this happen?

Hello?

Does he appear to be completely awake and alert, Alex?

Hello?

Hello?

Are you still there? Alex, are you still there?

1



Matt had known about the trip for months before he dropped it into conversation.

Matt didn't deliberately keep things from Alex; he just dealt with complicated thoughts like he dealt with his post.

When letters landed in the hallway, Matt stepped over them or, when they could no longer be ignored, crammed them into any nook he could find. Next to the cooker, on the bookshelf; the letters went anywhere that was easy-reach and tucked away and—most important—had no established retrieval system.

Hence, Matt absolved himself from any sense of urgency and, if the sender tried to contact him again, Matt seemed (and, Alex came to realize, actually *was*) genuinely surprised the issue hadn't just gone away.

Within weeks of Matt moving in, Alex had piles of envelopes in places in her house where there had never been piles before.

After the first few times she spent pulling envelopes out of what had once been—unappreciated at the time—empty nooks, Alex gathered the letters all together one afternoon. She laid them out in a Hansel-and-Gretel trail from the front door to the kitchen table.

Matt came to find her in the bedroom, cradling the letters in his arms. “All this post is mine, Al? Really?”

“I thought I'd put the letters in one place. Make it easy for you.”

Matt shrugged, the letters lifting with him. “I don’t get the point of post. Who do they expect to read post nowadays?”

Weeks later, the nooks had filled up again.

The night Matt told her about the trip, Alex had made a pie—everything from scratch. Except the pastry: Alex wasn’t *made* of time. At the age of thirty-seven, she still felt like whenever she cooked an actual meal, it was a notable event: that she deserved some kind of award for not just pouring milk onto cereal.

Alex was washing up after tea when Matt came to find her. He loitered in the doorway, like it had occurred to him to come downstairs on a whim and he hadn’t yet decided whether he was staying.

“So. You know what I said about Claire’s idea for Christmas?”

Alex glanced round. “No.”

He widened his eyes. “I definitely haven’t mentioned it?”

“You definitely haven’t.”

Matt blew his dark fringe out of his eyes, as he did twenty times each day. His hairline was impressively youthful for thirty-eight and Alex suspected he might have cultivated the habit to accentuate it. He might have, he might not. Alex meant to ask someone who’d known him longer. Not that it mattered—but Alex was a scientist. Once she’d developed a hypothesis, she wanted to test it. Alex liked her facts clean, boxed.

“God, I’m useless, Al.”

Alex peered at the glass in her hand, checking for soapsuds so she didn’t have to reply.

Matt stayed in the doorway behind her, but reached out to stroke her arm. “I suppose I didn’t know how to bring it up. I thought you might get mad.”

Noting the seamless change of approach from “I thought I’d mentioned it” to “I didn’t know how to bring it up,” Alex unpeeled her washing-up gloves and flopped them over the drainer. She turned to face Matt. “Am I about to get mad?”

Matt gestured for her to step toward him. He put his arms

around her waist. “Understandably mad, of course.” He kissed her forehead. “Completely justifiably mad. Not *crazy psycho* mad.”

This did not bode well. “Go on.”

“So you know I haven’t spent Christmas with Scarlett since Claire and I split up.”

Alex nodded. “Have we got Scarlett this year? I’d like that.”

“No, it’s . . . Claire wants us to go on a weekend away together.”

Alex took a beat to process this. “*Us?*”

“*Us*. All of us. You and me. Her and Patrick. With Scarlett as the guest of honor.”

Alex stared at Matt. She gestured toward the kitchen table. This was not the kind of conversation Alex wanted to be having with someone who was standing in a doorway. She didn’t want to be having this conversation at all, but if she was going to have to do so, it would be with someone who was actually in the same room as her.

“At the Happy Forest holiday park in North Yorkshire.” Matt leaned on the back of a chair, palms down, like he was too excited to sit. “They pull out all the stops at Christmas, festive magic everywhere. Light-up reindeers and fake snow. Santa’s elves wander round the forest singing carols.”

Alex glanced at the wine rack but made herself look away. She refused to get annoyed. Annoyance led to irrationality, and irrationality was a personal—and professional—failure.

She lowered herself into a kitchen chair; it creaked. “*This* Christmas? You mean *one month’s time* Christmas?”

Matt sank into the chair next to Alex. He leaned forward and picked up one of her spotty-socked feet and placed it on his knee. “We’ve talked about it before, haven’t we?” He stroked her foot. “How magical it would be for Scarlett to spend Christmas with both me and Claire.”

“But we didn’t discuss it in *that* way. Not like we were really going to do it.”

Matt looked down at her foot. “But what other way is there?”

“We were just being smug about how grown-up and classy we are. It wasn’t a serious conversation.”

“It was to me.”

Alex felt a softening in her chest. Lovely Matt, who thought this kind of thing was a good idea. Who had accepted he would never be a superstar DJ, two years off his fortieth birthday. Who had recently bought a skateboard again, and who was planning to build a half-pipe in the garden—a prospect Alex hadn’t even objected to, knowing there was no chance he would ever get round to it.

Who thought stroking Alex’s socked foot would make this conversation easier.

Alex looked down at her lap. “Or maybe we meant go for a meal sometime. I’m sure no one meant a holiday.” She flicked one fingernail against another. “Claire can’t possibly think it’s a good idea. She’s a sensible woman.”

“She says we all get on fine. She likes you.”

“I like her too,” Alex said in a rush. She tried to get those words in first, when possible. “Did you tell her I’d agreed?”

Matt appeared to concentrate hard on Alex’s foot. He tipped his head forward; his fringe followed.

Curtains, Alex thought. *That’s what they used to call that haircut in the early nineties. When it was worn by more age- and era-appropriate people.*

“I thought I’d mentioned it, I’m sorry. But we can still make an excuse. Workload. Family clash.” Matt lifted his head in a question. “Dead grandparent?”

“I’m trying to understand if you’ve told her I’d agreed.”

Matt gave an *oops* smile.

“What does Patrick think about not getting to spend Christmas in Nottingham? Won’t he want to be near his own kids?”

“They’re teenagers. Claire said they never want to see him anyway.”

Alex took a deep breath. “So. Is the trip actually booked?”

“I’m sure we could get a refund. But you know Claire, she’s just so organized. Once she’s got an idea in her head, that’s it.” Matt shook his head tolerantly. “She’s probably packed her case already.”

Alex pressed her lips together. “Do other people do this? Go on holiday with their exes and their new partners?”

Matt shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“If we pull out now, I’ll be the bad guy.”

“I’m not going to drag you there by the hair, Al.” Matt lifted her foot up and placed it down on the floor with a pat, as if dismissing an eager pet. “If you really don’t want to go, we won’t go.” He paused. “I wouldn’t want to go without you—that would be weird.”

“Super-weird.”

“But you always said if you’d met Claire in a different way you might be mates.”

I did, Alex reflected. I said that. But it wasn’t fair of Matt to quote her out of context. Mixing up real, solid conversations and fluffy-cloud, Vaseline-on-the-lens conversations.

Matt put his hands on the table. “I just don’t want to miss another Christmas with Scarlett. She’s *seven*, Al. She was four the last time I watched her open her stocking.”

“Scarlett comes first, of course. But can’t we just have her here one year?”

“Claire’s her mum. I can’t take Scarlett away from her at Christmas. It’s not right.”

Alex closed her eyes. That was Matt all over, in one illogical sentence. So irritatingly respectful and chivalrous.

She opened her eyes and saw the washing-up in the sink. Perhaps not always that chivalrous. But about this kind of thing, he was chivalrous. About what felt, tonight, like exactly the wrong kind of thing.

Alex watched Matt carefully. “Are you sure you’ve thought it through?”

He gave his mouth a side-twist of thought. “What’s to think through?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s nothing complicated? At all? Nothing that might be awkward?”

“Why would there be?”

Alex looked out of the window. In her garden, the security light flickered, flashing her garden into focus in strobelike images.

Flash. Grimy washing line. *Flash.* Rusty garden chair with the wonky leg. *Flash.* Tiger-in-a-cape hand puppet strewn across the gravel, the cloth sodden and aged with dirt, left over from a friend’s visit with her baby.

Alex turned back to Matt. She’d always been determined not to infantilize her boyfriend like so many of her friends did, treating their partners like the cack-handed get-nothing-right males who flailed through TV adverts for household products. But he didn’t make it easy for her sometimes. She hated it when he pushed her into this position: making her into the wife from TV adverts, her hands on her aproned hips, lecturing him about brands of paper towels.

Alex leaned forward in her chair, maintaining eye contact. “How do you feel—really feel—about spending Christmas with your ex?”

“These things are only complicated if you make them that way, Al. It’s all in the mind.”

“No lingering emotion or resentment?”

Matt put his head to one side. “I don’t think so.”

“Nothing, however small, left unsaid? Your history’s all empty and wipe-clean? The needle’s back on the start of the record and everything’s peachy?”

Matt sat back in his chair.

“I’m just thinking of you,” Alex added. “A lot of people would find the situation hard.”

Me, she thought. I’d find it hard.

Matt took a while, visibly giving it some thought. “I don’t dislike Claire. I don’t love her and I don’t hate her,” he said eventually. “She’s just . . . Scarlett’s mum now. And we have to find a way to make it work, because she’ll always be Scarlett’s mum.”

“Of course.” Alex jiggled her leg against the table. “And Patrick? You want to spend a weekend with him?”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

Alex leaned forward. “He doesn’t have ‘a black hole of an anti-personality’?”

“I was being flippant. Claire likes him anyway, and she always had good taste in men.” Matt glanced at Alex’s face and held his palms up in response. “OK, not today. Sorry, Al. Not funny today.”

He stood up. “I’ll leave you to ponder. I know whatever you decide will be the right thing. Just give me a shout when you’re ready.”

He scurried upstairs, leaving Alex with the washing-up.

Alex emptied the lukewarm water out of the sink and refilled the bowl.

The water was too hot but she didn’t add any cold to the mix. The discomfort of her sweating hands was preferable to the more nebulous discomfort going on in her stomach.

Alex wished she was at work right now. It was easier to forget in the university lab, where there were readings to take and cells to study. In the lab, Alex could go hours before she raised her head and looked out of the window at the trees. Only then did she look down at her trainers on the scuffed floor, take in the sound of the tinny radio, and remember there was a world other than studying cells taken from diabetes patients.

But it was different at home. At home, it was just Alex and her thoughts.

She could refuse to go on the trip, of course. But that wasn’t satisfactory either.

She didn’t want to go—but she couldn’t *not* go either. She’d feel petty and churlish, which she definitely, actively—explicitly—wasn’t. Alex had always been very reasonable about the fact Matt got on with his ex, a fact that other people—people who were actually churlish—would have found difficult.

Alex had overcompensated, if anything. Kissed Claire on the

cheek on the occasions they did the Scarlett drop-off swap. Always had something nice to say about Claire's skirt, or her hair. Everyone had a past and nothing was personal. And Alex wasn't a personal person.

Alex scrubbed at the burnt pastry on the rim of the pie tin.

Though it was only a month away, Alex hadn't given much thought to the logistics of Christmas Day. She'd thought she'd see her parents, maybe, or see Matt's—it didn't matter. Alex didn't care about Christmas. It was just a day when the lab was shut.

But *this*—this was different.

And Matt had known for ages and not told her.

Alex didn't understand how he did it. Was he able to mentally compartmentalize awkward news? Or was he just putting off the inevitable?

Alex couldn't test either hypothesis, which made the situation even more frustrating. Matt had an amazing ability to wrong-foot her, and she ended up agreeing to things she hadn't meant to. Maybe this was why Matt did well in his job in sales, despite having what Alex considered a questionable work ethic.

Alex rinsed a plate; she stacked it on the drainer. She heard a scraping sound upstairs: a chair being dragged across the floor.

Matt was giving her some space. Ostensibly, busy upstairs. In reality, he was just staying out of her way.

After washing up, Alex looked through the online pictures of what she now thought of as *the enchanted forest*.

Not that it looked enchanted in the pictures. There might have been year-round fairy lights to go with the seasonal fake snow, but there were too many plastic barriers and warning signs for the place to look like a proper woodland wonderland.

Alex pushed her laptop away. She tried again not to look at the wine rack.

Don't be silly, she'd said, when Matt suggested getting rid of all the alcohol at home. *We can't be the people everyone avoids be-*

cause there's no booze in the house. But some nights she felt more of a pull from the retained wine rack than others. Like tonight. The wine's subtle pressure was multiplied by the jagged weight of a conversation unfinished.

Matt would be expecting her to talk about his suggestion tonight. Though he'd avoided the conversation for weeks, he would expect her to be decisive. They'd had an unspoken agreement in the two years they'd been together that bringing things to conclusion was Alex's role in their relationship.

So. Should they have a row about the trip? It would take Alex's mind off the wine, at least. But arguing about something to do with Matt's ex-wife didn't fit with Alex's view of herself. It would just make her existentially depressed.

No. There was no way she was going to row with Matt about this. That was a given.

Which meant she had to actually go on this stupid trip.

2



After telling Claire that he had to go into work early to do some papers, Patrick went to the gym at five-thirty A.M. He went to the gym again at lunchtime.

Twice in a day was a nice balance. Weights in the morning; cardio at lunch. He even did a conference call with a solicitor while on the treadmill.

Here he was—a successful barrister, a forty-three-year-old father of two and an (inherited) half—and Patrick still wore his shirts slim-fit, bought from boys with groomed eyebrows in shops that were officially too young for him (but the staff couldn't stop him, could they, if the clothes still fit?).

Patrick had stepped up his training regime that September. He'd been sitting at a high table in a coffee shop, drinking a superjuice in a domed plastic cup, when an ex-colleague's familiar haircut floated past the window.

He hadn't looked away in time.

"Patrick!" Tom put his case down on Patrick's table. "How's things?"

Patrick made himself smile. "Hi, Tom. I'm horrendously busy. The clerks at the new place are unforgiving with my diary."

"Bastards."

“And I’ve moved in with Claire now.” Patrick wondered why he was telling Tom this. “You know Claire Petersen, the solicitor?”

“Claire Petersen, really?” Tom shook his head. “Punching above your weight again.”

Patrick knew it was meant to be a compliment, but he didn’t appreciate being reminded who he’d last “punched” with. That Tom saw Lindsay at his chambers every day.

Tom looked at Patrick’s superjuice. “Why are you drinking the contents of a compost heap?”

Patrick stirred the drink with his straw, feeling the satisfying heft of the whizzed-up vegetables. “I’m doing an Ironman next year.”

Patrick hadn’t even known it himself until then. Yet, as he said goodbye to Tom, he found himself taking up more space at the table.

Two months later, Patrick still hadn’t worked out how to tell Claire. He knew she thought over-exercising a particularly shallow form of vanity.

He hid it well, until he happened to be doing some research on his tablet one evening, at a time he thought Claire was upstairs. So when she came up behind him, saying, “Patrick, have you seen the big extension plug?” he flinched.

He clicked the screen off.

She grabbed the tablet. “What are you hiding?”

“Claire, come on! Have some respect.”

“Let’s see what kind of porn floats your boat.”

“Can’t we just have *some* privacy?”

Claire switched the tablet on and looked at the screen.

Patrick couldn’t help following her—hardening—gaze. The gritted-teeth celebrations. The wetsuits; the goggles. The picture of the man in sunglasses, holding up his overly defined arms in self-approval.

Claire let the tablet fall against her leg. “You want to do an Ironman?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Dan Smith did an Ironman.” Claire arched an eyebrow like that should resonate.

Patrick knew he wasn’t always the best listener. “So?”

“Don’t you remember what Heather said? All day cycling on Saturdays. All day swimming on Sundays. The kids barely saw him, and he was always checking out his torso in shop windows. None of them could stand him by the end.”

Claire left a pause for Patrick to reflect.

Patrick chose not to. “Everyone’s different.”

“Heather said she couldn’t sleep with someone who fancied himself more than she did.” Claire held Patrick’s gaze. “Dan ended up taking a six-month holiday at the Travel Inn on the ring road.”

“I feel like a change.”

“And what about Amber and Jack?” Claire said. “Lindsay makes it hard enough for you to see them anyway.”

“It was just an idea.”

A good idea, Patrick thought.

But stealth exercise would soon be unnecessary. Because a few days ago, as the two stood in puffed-up jackets watching Scarlett play on the climbing frame in the park, Claire gave Patrick the golden ticket.

She wanted a weekend away. With her ex-husband.

Patrick spotted the opportunity right away.

“Really?” Claire turned to face Patrick. “Really?”

“I said fine, didn’t I?”

Claire widened her eyes. “You *really* don’t mind?”

Patrick shoved his hands in his pockets. “You’re not the only one who wants Scarlett to be happy.”

She touched his arm. “I’m pleased, that’s all.”

“What did you expect me to say? It’s clearly something you want to do.”

“I thought you’d think it was a terrible idea.”

Patrick did think it was a terrible idea. “I’ll always support you

in something you want to do. Even if it means being away from my own kids at Christmas.” He paused. “And those holiday villages have big swimming pool complexes, right?”

The sex they’d had that night had been particularly enthusiastic.

So Claire might have been lukewarm about Patrick’s exercise habits. But if he did this—well. The next discussion about Ironman would have to go more smoothly. And Patrick had to register in the next few weeks if he was going to make the next Ironman.

More pressingly, he needed to find another chair in their lounge. This one was clearly ill-judged: too close to the door. Because here she was again, looking over his shoulder at his tablet.

“Archery lessons? But why . . . ?” Claire tailed off.

Patrick straightened the coaster on the side table. “I want to learn what it feels like to shoot something.”

“This is about Christmas.”

“I’ve never shot anything before.”

Claire laughed. “If you’re going to try to get competitive at Christmas, you won’t have much luck with Matt.”

Patrick had learned a lot about Matt over the last two years. The Xbox; the T-shirts. The ridiculous new passion for skateboards. And with each thing he learned, Patrick studied Claire, with her buoyant solicitor’s practice and expressive eyebrows, a woman with a *whole wall* of personality. He didn’t get it.

“You won’t be the best at shooting anyway, even if you have lessons.” Claire grinned. “Unlucky. I shot loads as a child on the farm.”

Claire squeezed his knee and left the room. Patrick turned back to the screen.

Deliberately not stopping to think, he flicked onto the Ironman website and clicked the *book now* button.

THE
WATER
CURE

A NOVEL

SOPHIE

MACKINTOSH





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

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FOR REFERENCE ONLY



grace, lia, sky

ONCE WE HAD a father, but our father dies without us noticing.

It's wrong to say that we don't notice. We are just absorbed in ourselves, that afternoon when he dies. Unseasonable heat. We squabble, as usual. Mother comes out on the terrace and puts a stop to it by raising her hand, a swift motion against the sky. Then we spend some time lying down with lengths of muslin over our faces, trying not to scream, and so he dies with none of us women bearing witness, none of us accompanying him.

It is possible we drove him away, that the energy escaped our bodies despite our attempts to stifle it and became a smog clinging around the house, the forest, the beach. That was where we last saw him. He put a towel on the ground and lay down parallel to the sea, flat on the sand. He was resting, letting sweat gather along his top lip, his bare head.

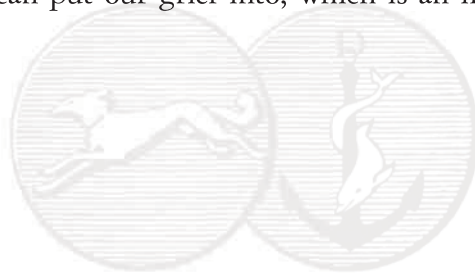
The interrogation begins at dinner when he fails to turn up. Mother pushes the food and plates from the table in her agitation, one sweep of the arm, and we search the endless rooms of the house. He is not in the kitchen, soaking fish in a tub of brine, or pulling up withered potatoes outside, inspecting the soil. He is not on the terrace at the top of the house, surveying the still surface of the pool three floors below, and he is certainly not in the pool itself, for the sound of his splashing

is always violent enough to carry. He is not in the lounge, nor the ballroom, the piano untouched, the velvet curtains heavy with undisturbed dust. Moving up the staircase again, a spine through the centre of the house, we check our rooms individually, our bathrooms, though we know he will not be there. From our scattered formation we come together to search the garden, search deeper, sticking long branches into the pond's green murk. Eventually we are out on the beach and we realize one of the boats has gone too—a furrow in the sand where it has been pushed out.

For a moment we think he has gone for supplies, but then we remember he was not wearing the protective white suit, we did not do the leaving ceremony, and we look towards the rounded glow of the horizon, the air peach-ripe with toxicity. And Mother falls to her knees.

Our father had a big and difficult body. When he sat down, his swimming shorts rode up and exposed the whiteness of his thigh where it was usually covered. If you killed him, it would be like pushing over a sack of meat. It would require someone much stronger than us.

The father shape he leaves behind quickly becomes a hollow that we can put our grief into, which is an improvement in a way.



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grace

I ASK MOTHER if she had noticed any sickness in you. Any hint of your body giving way. She says, “No, your father was in fine fettle.” Dark turn. “As you well fucking know.”

Your body was not completely all right. Of course I would see that where she would not. I noticed a slight cough, mixed up a honey tincture for you the day before you died. Boiled nettles from the end of the garden, where we dump our rubbish and leave things to rot. My hands blistering as I pulled them from the earth in flat afternoon heat. You drank it straight from the saucepan. Sunburnt throat moving under the metal. We were sitting in the kitchen together, two stools pushed close. Your eyes were watery. You did not touch me. On the counter, three sardines spilled their guts.

“Are you dying?” I asked you.

“No,” you said. “In many ways, I have never been better.”

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CONFIRMATION COMES IN the shape of his bloodstained shoe washed up high on the shore. Mother finds it, but we don't salt it or burn it the way we would with other dangerous waste. "This is your *father!*" she screams at me when I suggest it. So instead we pull on latex gloves and we all touch the blood patch on the shoe, and then we bury it in the forest. We fling the gloves into the shoe's open grave and Mother fills it in with a shovel. I cry on to Grace's shoulder until the flesh of it shows through the material of her dress, but she only stares into the canopy above us with dry eyes.

"Can you feel something, for once?" I whisper to her later in the dark, sharing her bed without asking permission.

"I hope you die in the night," she whispers back.

Often Grace is repelled by me. I don't have the luxury of being repelled by her, even when her breath is sour and a gentle scum of dirt clings to her ankles. I take whatever contact I can get. Sometimes I harvest the hair from her brush and hide it under my pillow, when things get very bad.

Grace has a deep fascination with a pair of black patent sandals that one of the women left behind years ago. She straps the sandals on from time to time even though the soles flap loose,

the leather scales and flakes. One morning she puts them on and lies facedown in the sweating dew, right in the middle of the garden. When Sky and I find her, roll her over with our hands, she is motionless for thirty seconds or more. Her eyes are fixed. Her first movement is to rend at her hair, and we join in like it's a game, but it turns out it's a cue that I didn't even know I was waiting for. Then we are all just useless there on the lawn, already painfully overgrown, waiting for Mother to find us.

Because we are new to mourning, Mother is panicked. There are no therapies for this unknown crisis. But she is a resourceful woman, ardently repairing the broken her entire life. More than that, she was a woman at our father's side, absorbing and refining his theories. Her hands are bloodless when she lays them upon us. Soon a solution is found.

For one week, Sky and I share Grace's bed. For one week, Mother puts the small blue insomnia tablets on our tongues three to four times a day. Short and foggy breaks in the sleep to be slapped awake, to drink from the glasses of water that crowd the bedside table and to eat crackers Mother spreads with peanut butter, to crawl to the bathroom, because by the third day our legs can no longer be relied upon to hold us. The heavy curtains stay closed to keep the light out, to keep the temperature down.

"What are you feeling?" Mother asks us during those swims up to consciousness. "Good, bad? Oh, I know that I wish I could sleep through all of this. You are the lucky ones."

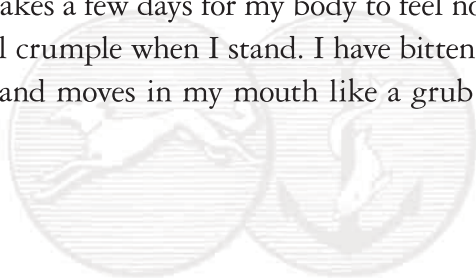
She monitors our breathing, our pulses. Sky throws up and Mother is there immediately to tenderly scoop the vomit from her mouth with her forefinger and thumb. When she puts her into the bathtub to clean her up we are dimly aware of the shower running like a distant storm.

All through the long sleep my dreams are boxes filled with

boxes filled with small trapdoors. I keep thinking I am awake, and then my arms fall off or the sky pulses a livid green, I am outside with my fingers in the sand and the sea is vertical, spilling its seams.

After, it takes a few days for my body to feel normal again. My knees still crumple when I stand. I have bitten my tongue, and it swells and moves in my mouth like a grub against dry earth.

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grace, lia, sky

WHEN WE EMERGE from the lost week, we are surrounded by pieces of paper with Mother's writing on like reminders. They are pinned to the walls, slipped into drawers, folded into our clothes. The pieces of paper say, *No more love!* Her pain gives her the gravity of an oracle. We are very troubled by them. We ask her about them and she tells us a revised version.

"Love only your sisters!" All right, we decide, that is easy enough for us to do. "And your mother," she adds. "You have to love me too. It's my right." OK, we tell her. It is no problem.

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grace

SOMETIMES WE PRAY in the ballroom, sometimes in Mother's bedroom. It depends on whether we need bombast, Mother on the stage with her arms raised towards the ceiling, sound bouncing from the parquet. In her bedroom it is a quieter worship, graver. We hold hands very tightly, so we can blur where the *I* ends and the *sister* begins. "Devotions for the women of our blood," we say.

It feels good to wish my sisters only well. I can feel them focusing on our love like a crucial piece of information that needs memorizing. "Sometimes," Mother tells us, when she is trying to be loving, "I can no longer tell you girls apart." Some days we like this, some days we don't.

The first time we gather to pray in Mother's room after your death, I broach the idea of drawing the irons again. When I say it nobody nods, nobody agrees with me. Our eyes go to where they hang on her wall. Five hooks, five lengths of iron. Five names above the hooks, but only four names on the irons.

"Once a year, Grace," Mother tells me. "Just because you don't like the result."

Lia looks sideways at me. She was the one who drew the blank iron, which meant that there was no specific love allo-

cated to her this year. “Bad luck,” we told her. She was stoic. All of us put our arms around her and told her that of course we would still love her, of course, but we knew it wouldn’t be the same, that she would have to scramble more for the affection, that it wouldn’t come as easily. We wouldn’t be able to touch her so freely. You picked me, as usual, tying me to you for another year. You rigged it. The whole thing was a sham.

“My person is dead,” I point out.

“Grief is love,” Mother says. I expect her to be angry, but she looks panicked instead. “You could call it the purest kind.”

So much for loving only my sisters.

It occurs to me that I would like you to come back to life so I could kill you myself.

“We always love some people more,” Mother explained when we first drew them. “This way, we can keep it fair. Everyone gets their turn.” It seemed simple, with those irons new in our hands and our names painted fresh upon them. Lia got me, that time.

We would all still love each other, but what it meant was: if there was a burning fire, if two sisters were stuck in the inferno and they were screaming a name, the only right thing would be to pick the one the iron dictated to save. It is important to ignore any contrary instinct of your traitor heart. We were quite used to that.

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ONE MONTH AFTER we lose our father, King, I am standing at the edge of the swimming pool, in the lavender light that comes up where the border hits the sky. Our pool is the sea made safe, salt water filtered through unseen pipes and sluices, blue and white tiles surrounding it and a marble counter where drinks were once served. Thick rivets of salt are laid down on the tiles immediately bordering the water, guarding against toxins brought in on the wind. King explained to us that the salt drew out badness like damp, his hands quick and busy as he scattered it, tanned a deep, dry brown.

I am wearing a white cotton dress, fishing weights sewn into the hem, the sleeves, the neckline, where their coldness presses against my collarbone. I have not worn it since King died. On the pastel-striped recliner behind me, my belongings: towel and water, sunglasses, an enamel cup of coffee. Taking a deep breath, I release myself into the water.

Grace and I are the only ones who play the drowning game. Sky is more than old enough now, but Mother kicked up a fuss when King suggested that she start—the baby, the favourite—and Mother herself has always been exempt. She has suffered enough already. There is little we can do to save her body now, beyond the palliative. When we were younger

she made a point of watching us from one of the recliners, a tall glass of water in her hand, her favourite blue linen dress hitched up to mid-thigh.

Grace and I could go together when we first started. King held us both under the water with ease. He only invented the drowning dress later, when we became bigger, our limbs harder to manipulate. My sister was small for her age, and when I was twelve and she fourteen we overlapped, a year of being exactly the same size, before I overtook her. I remember this as the golden year, the year of my double. We wore identical swimming costumes that Mother had sewn by hand, red with a bow at the left shoulder. Our lungs started to develop the capacity of grown women, so that we could hold a note for a long, long time. We could blow our emergency whistles for what felt like whole minutes.

My feelings are limping, wretched things. Underwater, staring at the stained tiles, I scream as loudly as I can. The water kills the sound. Opening my eyes, I turn on to my back and watch the sun through the water, a rippling orb of light. It is at times like these that I can imagine holding myself down until the water floods my lungs, that I realize it wouldn't even be so hard. The real trick is how and why we continue surviving at all.

My chest starts to hurt, but I stay under until the static creeps at my vision, and then I claw to the surface. I stagger out of the water, fall on the recliner and wait as the feeling subsides. A deep gratitude floods my heart.

Part of what made the old world so terrible, so prone to destruction, was a total lack of preparation for the personal energies often called *feelings*. Mother told us about these kinds of energies. Especially dangerous for women, our bodies already so vulnerable in ways that the bodies of men are not. It was a

wonder that there were still safe places, islands like ours where women can be healthful and whole.

“We’ve cracked it,” King told us in the first days of the drowning game. Inventing a new therapy always put him in an expansive, joyful mood. He whirled Mother around in his arms, her shoulder blades tight against his hands, feet off the floor. Day of happiness! We ate a whole packet of chocolate wafers to celebrate, only slightly stale, dipped in goat’s milk.

The air did become lighter; small seabirds came to our home, hovered around the garden, the pool, and sang to each other. Yet beyond the forest, beyond the horizon, the toxin-filled world was still there. It was biding its time.



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"Maher's debut stars a debutante to root for in this moving coming-of-age tale."

—KATE QUINN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Alice Network*

K E R R I M A H E R



THE
KENNEDY
DEBUTANTE

A
NOVEL



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CHAPTER 1

Presentation day. *Finally*, Kick thought as soon as she opened her eyes that morning. *This is it*, she kept thinking, her heart pounding. *This is it.*

Rising out of damp sheets, Kick stole into the bathroom down the hall and ran steaming water into the tub, then spiked it with a strong dose of lavender oil to cleanse away the sour sweat that had drenched her the night before. Fear had plagued her dreams for weeks, encouraging one of her most embarrassing and least ladylike bodily functions—perspiration—and made daily baths an absolute necessity. Her new friend and fellow debutante Jane Kenyon-Slaney claimed to bathe only a few times a week, and yet she was as groomed and aromatic as the gardens of Hampton Court. Kick blamed her father's insistence on sports for all his children, including the girls. Perhaps if she hadn't exerted herself so often on tennis courts or the harbors of the Cape, she would be as dainty as Jane and the other girls who'd line up with her that day. But then, she thought ruefully to herself almost in her father's voice, she wouldn't have won so many trophies.

Still. Surely even Jane would be nervous in her place. Every photographed move Kick had made since her family's arrival in London two months before had been leading up to the moment when she would lower

herself in a meticulously refined curtsy before King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, then drink champagne with the most essential people in England. Kick had always been expected to perform better than anyone else, but here in England she wasn't just Rose and Joe Kennedy's fashionable daughter, eighteen years old and fresh from school, who could keep up with her older brothers when she set her mind to it. She was the daughter of Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, the first Irish Catholic ever to be appointed to the coveted post in this most Protestant of countries. This time, she had to succeed. There was more than a trophy on the line.

She'd been waiting for a moment like this forever, through every long mass and from inside every scratchy wool uniform at Sacred Heart. A new life. And now she had a chance at it—in one of her favorite places, thank the good Lord. She'd savored a delicious taste of English society two years before when, on a too-brief break from her year in the convent at Neuilly, she'd attended the Cambridge May Balls in a swirl of music and laughter. Now that she was free of nuns and school, she was ready to embrace it all—but as *Kick*, not just Kathleen Kennedy.

Add to all that the problem of Rosemary, her beautiful older sister who'd be presented with her that morning, whose erratic behavior could make everything impossible, and Kick judged that her fear was well-founded. A long hot soak in a fragrant tub would do her a world of good. Arms suspended in the water, Kick said a solemn Hail Mary and an Our Father before moving on to a short prayer asking God to guide her footsteps that day.

A knock on the door interrupted her. Typical.

"I'm bathing!" she shouted back, assuming it was Bobby, Teddy, or maybe Jean or Pat, one of her littlest siblings who didn't give a toss about the few moments of privacy she savored in a day. This day especially. As soon as she got out of the tub, she was in for relentless hours of beauty treatments, photo shoots, and then the presentation itself, followed by the most important party of her life.

"It's your mother," said Rose as she opened the door, letting in a gust of cold air.

She was wearing a tweed suit and black pumps, her dark hair sleekly coiffed and her red lipstick recently applied, looking ready for a ladies' luncheon or a visit to one of the children's schools. No one would know that in a few hours, Rose Kennedy would be stepping into a white Molyneux gown designed just for her and the night's grand occasion. "A work of art," she'd said to her favorite designer on the phone.

Now Rose perched on the rim of the white porcelain tub and looked down at her naked daughter. In an effort to look as slender as possible to her petite mother, who'd been monitoring every mouthful of food she ingested on one of her infernal index cards, Kick pulled up her knees, which she thought made her legs look thinner and her belly concave, then she stretched her arms around her knees in an effort to cover some of the rest.

"I know you'll make us proud today, Kathleen," said Rose, her voice sounding higher and tinnier than usual as it pinged off the tile walls and floors. "This presentation is so important for your father. For the whole family. The English have been so accepting of the Kennedy family so far, but today will show them and the world that there is no difference between us and them."

"Of course, Mother," Kick replied, because it was easier than pointing out that more than half of the many articles written about their family had included references to their Catholicism, or Irish descent, or both. It was only with her new friends—Jane, Debo Mitford, Sissy Lloyd-Thomas, and Jean Ogilvy—all of whom would be queuing with her to curtsy before the king and queen, that Kick could sometimes forget who she was.

Rose made an effort to smile, then said, "You've done a wonderful job of keeping your figure, Kathleen. And, after some initial stumbles, of knowing who everyone is and engaging everyone important in conversation. The newspapers love you."

"Thank you, Mother," Kick replied, now shivering in the tub. Her mother had left the door ajar, and a draft was blowing in, cooling the water and giving her goose bumps. It didn't help that Rose kept referring to her "stumble" from a month ago, when Kick had mistaken Lady

Smithson for Lady Winthrop at the opera, a gaffe made worse by the fact that Lady Winthrop was a rotund matron whose husband had expatriated to Paris to live with his French mistress, and Lady Smithson was a statuesque but hardly fat beauty whose husband discreetly kept a French mistress in Bath. Thankfully, Lady Nancy Astor had come to her rescue with her trademark double-edged wit and said to Lady Smithson, “Gretchen, you can hardly expect such a young American to be familiar with the hypocrisies of English society as soon as she steps off the boat. Give her another few weeks and she’ll be insulting you without your even knowing it.”

It was a profound show of support from Lady Astor, once a belle from Virginia who was now a member of Parliament and one of the most important hostesses in her adopted homeland. When Lady Smithson had huffed off to find her seat, Kick had gushed her thanks to this fellow American, who’d replied with a wave of her hand, “Any opportunity to put that woman in her place is a welcome one, my dear.” After that, Kick had made herself a set of flash cards, so that she could study every single name and face that appeared in the papers and magazines, and in the copy of *Burke’s Peerage* her mother had given her to study a week before they’d sailed from New York, insisting she *must* know who everyone was. She never got another name wrong.

“I remember how difficult it could be, playing a role like this,” her mother went on. “There were times when I wanted to run away from all the duties of being a mayor’s daughter. But I’m glad I never did.”

“Seems like Grandfather would have made everything fun,” Kick said, thinking fondly of her mother’s father, Honey Fitz, infamous former Boston mayor and number one grandfather. He never tired of playing on the floor with her and her siblings as children, or taking them to races and dockyards and political meetings as they got older.

“He did,” her mother agreed, looking down at her hands, “some of the time. But there is a big difference between being a parent and grandparent. He was different with me than he is with you and your brothers and sisters.”

“Mother,” Kick said, sensing her mother’s little pep talk was winding down, and wanting very much to warm back up again, “the water’s getting cold.”

Rose stood and brought Kick one of the plush American towels she’d immediately ordered from New York when she saw the sad state of English towels, which were, as she’d put it, “little more than dishrags.”

Kick stood with a waterfall sound and wrapped herself in the blessedly toasty towel that had been waiting on that most ingenious of English amenities, the warming rack. She loved that the English had found so many weapons to combat the constant chill: warming racks in the bath, hot water bottles in bed, chic scarves from Liberty, steaming tea and sweets at four in the afternoon when it seemed the gray would never dissipate.

Rose looked once more at her daughter, appraisingly, and Kick worried she might say more, but after a beat Rose informed her, “Hair and makeup is at eleven.” Then, with that heavy sigh she indulged more and more often when thinking of her oldest daughter, she said, “Now to attend dear Rosie. Thank goodness I can count on you to take care of yourself, Kathleen.” Rosie. Rosemary. Her mother’s namesake and doted-on darling who was nearly twenty, a year and a half older than Kick herself, who so often acted more like she was ten. Which could be charming—until it wasn’t.

Rose left in another puff of cold air. Despite the warm towel, Kick felt chilled down to her toes.



At Buckingham Palace, there was a last-minute kerfuffle as Kick and Rosemary were lining up with the other debutantes because Kick’s train wasn’t properly fastened to the white lace gown that had been hand stitched for the occasion. *Curses*, she thought as a lady-in-waiting pinned it on, stabbing Kick in the side with a pin. How typical that Kick had been forgotten with all the attention being paid to Rosemary to ensure that she was perfectly dressed and serene as the Tintoretto Madonna she resembled that morning.

Kick tried to reason that this was correct and necessary given her sister's problems. She told herself not to be jealous, to be a good and patient sister. After all, her mother had employed a genius makeup artist who knew how to coax the bones from Kick's doughy cheeks and make her eyes appear larger and more prominent. Her often unruly auburn waves had been brushed and sprayed into glossy submission, curving smoothly off her forehead and skimming her shoulders. It was surely because of their efforts that the photographers and reporters had fawned over Kick's every move, from the ambassador's house at 14 Prince's Gate to the palace.

Hail Mary, full of grace, please make me graceful today. Just for the next five minutes, at least. And Rosemary, too!

To steady herself, she put her nose to her wrist and inhaled the *Vol de Nuit*, her first adult perfume, which her mother had bought for her on their last trip to Paris. After an exhausting day of fittings and painful facials, Rosemary had retired to the hotel for a nap, and Rose had strolled with Kick down the Champs-Élysées to the Guerlain store. "It's time you had a woman's scent," she said, handing Kick a square bottle with a propeller design molded into the glass and VOL DE NUIT engraved in a circle at the center. "The name means 'night flight.' It's popular, but not common, bold but still refined. I think it suits you." Kick had lifted the stopper, which produced a pleasing ring as it scraped against the glass, and let a tiny golden drop fall on her wrist. It smelled surprisingly sophisticated, not at all flowery and girly. "Wonderful, isn't it?" Rose had prompted. Kick nodded eagerly and felt tears needle her eyes. For a moment, she felt her mother had seen her and loved what she saw. And though she didn't say it, Kick relished the idea that *night*, with all its forbidden pleasures and promises, should be so featured on the bottle. Throwing her arms around her mother, she exclaimed, "I love it! Thank you."

Time to fly, she told herself now.

It was almost her turn to curtsy before the king and queen, and her hands were so slick with sweat inside the white gloves, Kick thought for sure she'd lose her grip on the little bouquet she was holding. Meanwhile, Rosemary's eyes were closed and Luella, the family nurse, was running

her hand soothingly over Rosemary's arm because Rose herself had to stand in the audience with Joe, the only man in the room not wearing the traditional knee britches because with characteristic obstinacy, he'd refused on account of his knock-knees. Kick thought her father should have worn the ridiculous short pants anyway, out of respect for the country with which he was supposed to be forming close ties, especially with so many uncertainties brewing in Germany. But she wouldn't have dared tell him so.

Then it was time. As the king's attendant called "*Kathleen Agnes Kennedy*" in his full-throated bass voice, Kick put one foot in front of the other. When she stood before the monarchs—King George, encrusted in medals, and Queen Elizabeth, encrusted in jewels—she lowered her eyes deferentially as she curtsied, then hurried on. Just as Kick completed her relieved escape, her stiff white gown rustling as if in genteel applause, she heard a *thump* and a *gulp* and a whispered, mortified "*excuse me,*" as stifled gasps rose up all around them.

Kick turned back to see that Rosemary had tripped. *In front of the king and queen.*

Her feet suddenly winged, Kick rushed to offer her arm to Rosemary, whose own white hand was on the velvet ground, her long body arched over like a giraffe in a wedding dress. Rosemary smiled gratefully at her sister and miraculously recovered her composure. Then, standing one more unplanned time before the king and queen, Kick lifted her eyes to them and nodded. King George nodded back, and Kick saw a glimmer of understanding in his eye. *Well, why should that be so surprising?* she asked herself. She began to relax, just a little.

Reunited in the receiving room after all the debutantes had been presented, Rose bent over carefully under the weight of Lady Bessborough's diamond and platinum tiara, kissed each daughter on the cheek, and simply said, "Marvelous, my darlings. I'm so proud of you both." Their father stood between them and patted each girl on the back, beaming for the flashing cameras with that confidence he always exuded in public, as if he were Laurence Olivier or Errol Flynn. Rosemary appeared unper-

turbed by the incident, perhaps because their parents had chosen not to mention it and—as usual—to act as if she was nothing less than perfect. In fact, the conspiratorial silence about her sister’s fall was so absolute, Kick began to wonder if it had actually happened.

Until later, when her mother clutched the ungloved part of Kick’s upper arm a bit too tightly and whispered in her ear without looking her in the eye, “Thank you, Kathleen.” Kick blushed hot and red at her mother’s gratitude, then saw that her father was there, too, giving Kick a similarly grateful look from behind his round spectacles. She wasn’t sure why she felt so much like she wanted to cry, but with the stiff mask of mascara and rouge on her face, there would be no crying that night, that was for sure. She sniffled back the collecting phlegm and coughed out a “you’re welcome” just before Lady Astor charged toward her, hands in the air, saying, “There you are!” She was wearing pearls and a green gown, and her copious chestnut mane—which was fading to gray, Kick couldn’t help but notice—was pulled gently off her face and secured with pearl combs. She greeted Rose and Joe with kisses on the cheeks, then turned to Kick with a warm smile and effused in her bizarre Anglo-American accent, “Well, if it isn’t the most talked-about debutante in London! I am so glad your father did away with that absurd practice of allowing every American tramp with some money to come to court.”

Kick glanced at her father, who threw his head back and guffawed at Lady Astor’s crass comment. One of his most controversial decisions in office thus far had been to allow only American girls currently living in England to be presented at court. No more could families sail their daughters across the Atlantic for a month of parties and prestige in London.

Suddenly it was Kick’s turn to enter into the conversation, and something inside her shifted. She had logged many years practicing the alchemy of spinning nerves into confidence, and pressure—the uncomfortable kind that she’d been feeling for weeks—was a key component of the transformation. How else had she charmed the friends of her whip-smart older brothers? Her parents were depending on her.

Giving Lady Astor's hands a strong clasp, Kick cleared her throat and replied with a conspiratorial smile, "Well. You might not say that if you were his daughter."

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"Let's just say the English press has nothing on the spurned friends from home who've written me infuriated letters," Kick replied.

"Oh, Kathleen, people will be jealous of you your whole life. It's about time you get used to it."

"That would be a welcome state of being," Kick replied. "But I wouldn't want to forget myself or my friends."

Lady Astor laughed. "Oh, my dear, you are so young." Then, turning to Joe and Rose: "Let me have the honor of showing off your lovely daughter."

"Of course," Joe agreed with a generous nod to Lady Astor, and a whispered "well done" in Kick's ear. Kick knew she would vanish before his very eyes as soon as Joe Jr. and Jack arrived on break from Harvard, so she savored this warm, rare moment with her father, leaning against his broad chest and inhaling his clean scent, the sandalwood notes in his aftershave.

With that, Lady Astor steered Kick away from her parents and deeper into the buzzing room. She patted Kick on the forearm and whispered, "By all accounts, you are a success, my dear, but be on your guard always. The serpents lie in wait." Just as she'd been starting to relax, here was another warning to put the nerves back in her belly. Serpents liked to hide.

As the evening went on, *Nancy*, as she instructed Kick to call her, laughed and confided benign secrets about this viscount or that duchess, and Kick imparted a few about her debutante friends. Shortly before dinner, Lady Astor released her into the company of Kick's favorite of the other debutantes that year. The youngest of the five Mitford sisters to be presented at court, Deborah—or Debo, as everyone called her—had a relaxed, often hilarious attitude toward the whole procedure. The two had become fast friends, trading quips about the ugly hats worn by ancient

matrons at a luncheon weeks before, and they'd been seeing a great deal of each other ever since. Lucky for them, the Mitfords' London house was just around the corner from 14 Prince's Gate. Kick just wished she didn't envy her friend's tiny bones, the delicate arc of her eyebrows, her little nose, and her glistening blond hair, all of which were magnified by the ethereal white dress and dewy makeup she wore that night. Kick knew her own nose was a bit too large and her eyes too deeply set for her to ever be called a great beauty.

"Having a good time in the lion's cage?" Debo inquired.

"The best," Kick replied. "I feel as though I've met the entire cast of Miss Sketch's column. And now I'm famished."

"Only about half of the column," Debo judged. "Here, have a canapé." She flagged down a footman with a silver tray of some sort of mousse on crackers, and Kick wolfed down two, then took a third.

"Is Andrew here?" Kick asked, referring to Andrew Cavendish, the second son of the Duke of Devonshire and their friend Jean Ogilvy's cousin. Debo had liked him as soon as she'd clapped eyes on him at a party in Cambridge. He was handsome and blond and a bit of a gadabout.

"No," Debo lamented and then, deftly shifting the topic, asked, "did *Grande Dame Astor* introduce you to anyone *fun*?"

"The Duke and Duchess of Kent, the Lancasters, the Grotons . . ."

"Oh, Kent's fun, I've heard," Debo said in a warning tone.

"N-sit?" Kick asked, using one of her favorite London terms, short for "not safe in taxis." It was almost as fabulous as bloody.

"Worse," said Debo.

Kick was about to ask for clarification, when they were approached by a darkly handsome young man of about Jack's age, who looked like he hadn't smiled all night. He looked familiar, though, and it drove Kick crazy that she couldn't immediately put a name to his face.

"David!" cried Debo warmly, exchanging kisses on each cheek.

Ah yes, David Ormsby-Gore, thought Kick. Sissy's boyfriend! She kept a picture of him in a locket in her handbag. *You should have remembered something so simple,* she told herself, hearing her mother's voice.

“David,” said Debo, “I’m sure Sissy’s told you about our friend Kick Kennedy. Kick, this is David Ormsby-Gore.”

Son of the Baron of Harlech, Kick recited to herself, just to prove she wasn’t a complete failure.

With a raise of his thick black eyebrows and the twitch of a smile on his lips, David shook Kick’s outstretched hand and said, “Miss Kennedy, it’s a pleasure to meet you at last. What a relief to see that our press has left you in one piece.”

“In dancing shape, in fact,” she said, determined to find a way to get this dour young man to laugh. “And please, call me Kick. All my friends call me Kick.”

“Does that mean we are friends . . . *Kick*?”

“I don’t see why not,” she said, “Sissy and I are.” *And Sissy’s a Catholic, too, so you won’t hold that against me*, she didn’t add. She countered David’s stern gaze and held it. A dare.

Then David Ormsby-Gore shook his head and burst out laughing. “I don’t, either, *Kick*. Is it really Kick, as in *to kick a football*?”

“Or even a soccer ball,” she replied.

“Not on our turf,” he replied, faking a terrible American accent. Then, back in his normal voice, he asked, “But seriously. How the deuce did you come by such a nickname?”

“None of my younger siblings could say Kathleen,” she told him, not even sure if this was the truth or some sort of Kennedy apocrypha, for she couldn’t remember Pat or Jean trying to say *Kathleen* and failing. She’d just always been Kick. Only her mother and the nuns called her Kathleen.

It seemed to satisfy David, though. “Charming,” he said, shaking his head in amazement.

Now that the whole coming-out business was done, Kick could admit that she relished conversations like these. Until England, she’d thought only Jack and Joe Jr. and a few of their friends from Choate and then Harvard treated conversation like a blood sport. But it appeared that everyone in society here did, and as she collected laughs and approving

nods, she put them down in her mind as points she was scoring in a new and exhilarating game.

They were soon joined by Jane and Sissy, then Robert Cecil and William Baring, and it was such a relief to finally talk about Cary Grant and Errol Flynn, and Cole Porter records and dancing the Big Apple at the upcoming balls. She saw that David was something of a leader in this set; his opinion mattered just slightly more than anyone else's. She wondered what it would feel like to be in a position like that, to be more than a middle child in a large family, a Catholic among Protestants, and now an American among the English gentry. To be her own person, worthy of respect on her own terms.

Close to midnight, when the older guests and dignitaries were starting to drift out of the palace, Debo slid her arm around Kick and leaned in close to breathlessly say, "David's offered to give us a lift to the 400 tonight. He said to tell our parents there's a party at Adele Cavendish's. She's agreed to be our cover."

The 400—at last! Kick and Debo had been trying to go there for weeks, but with chaperones and matronly aunts and worried mothers watching the debutantes so closely, neither of them had been able to figure out how to get there.

In fact, when Kick scanned the crowd to find her parents, she saw Adele's husband Charles already chatting with her father. Kick wondered how Charles, not the most handsome or charming of men, had come to marry Fred Astaire's gorgeous and talented sister Adele, who used to perform with Fred until she became a Cavendish.

Kick wandered over to them as casually as she could and said hello, though her heart was hammering holes in her ears. She was used to her brothers doing this sort of thing for her at home. *Time to take care of yourself.*

"Well, well, if it isn't my daughter, the star debutante of the evening, if I do say so myself," said her father.

"You may always speak the truth, sir," said Charles generously, sliding an easy arm around Adele as she joined them.

“You are too kind,” Kick said to Charles, then turning to her father, she teased, “but you are ridiculous to make such a claim with all these beautiful and clearly superior ladies present.”

“Such modesty,” Joe marveled, still jesting. Then he clapped his hands together and said, “So! I’ve heard a party is forming.”

“Adele and I would be honored to have your daughter back to our house for a late supper and some charades, with some of the other young ladies and gentlemen. I know how difficult it is to wind down after a night like tonight, and we’d be very glad of the opportunity to help her settle.”

“May I, Father?” Kick asked, on her tiptoes to meet his eyes as well as she could. She hoped he couldn’t tell how flushed she was with anticipation.

“I don’t see why not. You’ve earned some fun,” he said, pressing a meaningful look into her eyes—another reference to helping Rosemary earlier, Kick assumed. Was this the way things worked when you became an older Kennedy? Tit for tat? “And,” Joe went on, “your mother’s already gone home with Rosemary, so she isn’t here to disagree.”

Kick threw her arms around him. “Thank you, Daddy!”

And as simple as that, she was in a taxi with Debo, Jane, and Jean heading for the storied nightclub as Big Ben tolled one. *The first hour of a new day*, Kick thought to herself. *And I’m wide-awake to greet it.*



TELL ME

YOU'RE

MINE

Where is the line between
hope and madness?

A NOVEL

ELISABETH
NOREBÄCK

PUTNAM

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

Stella

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

My heart's still pounding in my ears, the pain in my stomach has turned to nausea, but at least I've stopped shaking.

My name is Stella Widstrand now, not Johansson. I'm thirty-nine, not nineteen. And I don't get panic attacks anymore.

A gray autumn light streams in. I still hear rain pouring down outside. My office at the clinic looks the same as always. Tall windows, moss green walls. A large landscape painting and a wooden floor with a handwoven rug on it. My old, battered desk, the armchairs in the corners, just inside the door. I remember decorating this room, how carefully I chose every detail. I no longer recall why that felt so important.

I always imagined that I would find her. Not that she would track me down. Maybe she was driven by curiosity, wanting to see who I am. Maybe she's come to accuse me, so I won't ever forget.

Maybe she's here for revenge.

It's taken me so many years to rebuild my life, to get to where I am today. But even though I've left what happened in the past, still I've never forgotten. There are things you can't forget.

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

Henrik kissed me on the cheek before he left for work this morning. I ate breakfast with Milo and dropped him off at school, then headed to

Kungsholmen. Just a normal day. Fog on the windows, traffic over the Traneberg Bridge, mist hanging above the gray waters of Lake Mälaren, and no place to park when you get to the city.

Her appointment was an hour before lunch. She knocked, I opened the door, and I knew immediately. We shook hands, introduced ourselves. She called herself Isabelle Karlsson.

Does she know her real name?

I took her wet jacket. Said something about the weather and asked her to come inside. Isabelle smiled and sat down in one of the armchairs. She has dimples.

As I usually do when I meet a patient for the first time, I asked her why she sought help. Isabelle was prepared. She played her role very well and claimed she's been suffering from a sleep disorder since her father's death. She needs help dealing with grief. She said she felt lost and insecure, that she found social situations difficult.

It all felt extremely practiced.

Why?

Why didn't she just say what she wants? There's no need to hide her real reason for coming.

She's twenty-two now. Medium height, an hourglass figure with a narrow waist. Short, unpainted nails. She has no visible tattoos or piercings, not even in her ears. Her straight black hair hangs down her back. Still wet from the rain, it glistened against her pale skin, and it struck me how beautiful she is. More beautiful than I ever could have imagined.

The rest of the conversation is a haze. It's difficult now to remember what I said. Something about the dynamics of group therapy, or something about communication, or how our self-image determines how we see others.

Isabelle Karlsson seemed to listen attentively. She tossed her hair and smiled again. But she was tense. She was on guard.

At first, I felt sick to my stomach, then came the dizziness and the pressure on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I recognized the symptoms. I apologized and left the room, went into the lavatory in the hallway. My heart raced, a cold sweat ran down my back, and the throbbing behind my eyes sent flashes of light through my head. My stomach knotted up, and I dropped down on my knees in front of the toilet

and tried to vomit. I couldn't. I sat on the floor, leaning against the tile, and closed my eyes.

Stop thinking about what you did.

Stop thinking about her.

Stop thinking.

Stop.

After a few minutes I went back in, told her she was welcome at group therapy next Wednesday at one o'clock. Isabelle Karlsson pulled on her jacket, lifted her hair from her neck, and tossed it. I wanted to stretch out my hand and touch it, but I stopped myself.

She noticed.

She saw my doubt, my desire to make contact.

Maybe that was exactly what she'd hoped to accomplish? To make me feel unsure?

She slung her bag over her shoulder, I opened the door for her, and she left.

I've dreamed of this day. Fantasized about how it would happen. How it would feel, what I would say. It wasn't supposed to be like this. And it hurts more than I ever could have believed.

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

She's come back.

She's alive.

Isabelle

Isabelle!”

I hear Johanna’s voice and turn around. I’m back in the M-building at the far end of campus. The lunch hour is almost over, the room is full of students, and every table and chair is occupied. It’s always packed here at lunchtime. I spin around, but don’t see Johanna until she stands up and waves.

“Come over here,” she calls out.

I have no desire to do so. I’ve spent the last hour on pins and needles. It felt like I might explode from holding all those feelings inside.

Grief. Rage. Hate. And the struggle to hide all of it. To smile and act nice. Be someone I’m not.

I’d much rather eat my sandwich alone before the next lecture starts. Think through what happened at the therapist’s office. *But I always have a hard time saying no.* I pull my bag up on my shoulder, then start winding my way through all those people, all those backpacks on the floor, all those green tables and red chairs, until I arrive.

Johanna’s the closest thing I have, have ever had, to a friend. And she has been ever since that first horrific period at KTH, the Royal Institute of Technology, when she took me under her wing and let me move in with her. Why, I don’t know. We’re not at all alike. She’s done so much, traveled all over the world. She has purple hair, pierced ears and nose, also a tattoo on her lower back and another on her forearm. It’s of a unicorn spraying fire. She’s cool, confident, knows what she wants.

Susie and Maryam, who are sitting next to her, are also very nice. But I can relax with Johanna, actually be myself.

“Where’d you go?” Maryam says. “I didn’t see you at the mathematics lecture.”

“I wasn’t there,” I say.

“Did something happen?” Susie puts a hand over her heart. “You never miss anything.”

“I had to take care of something.” I pull out the chair next to her, hang my jacket over the backrest, and sit down. It still surprises me when people even see that I’m here. When somebody notices me. Maybe even misses me. I’m so used to being invisible.

I open my bag and take out a sandwich I bought at 7-Eleven. It’s seen better days, so I throw it back in again.

“Is it still raining?” Johanna says.

“Same as this morning,” I answer.

“Ugh, Mondays.” Susie sighs while flipping through a textbook on mechanics. “Do you understand any of this?”

“I wrote down a bunch of stuff about momentum last time,” Johanna says, “but I can’t make sense of it.”

They laugh. I laugh, too. But part of me feels like I’m in a glass cage looking out. I feel like two different people. One is the person people see. But the other one, only I see. She’s the real me, and the difference between the two is profound. Inside me is a ravine of darkness.

And a tendency to be melodramatic.

“Isabelle, you understand it, right?” Maryam asks, turning toward me. “The panic is setting in, we need to start prepping for our exams soon.”

“I promise, if you read the book you’ll get it,” I say.

“Just say it. If we spent our time studying instead of partying, we’d understand it, too.” Susie nudges me and grins.

“Admit she’s right.” Johanna’s napkin hits me in the head. “Admit it, Isabelle.”

“Do you think I’m boring?” I say. “You think I’m a stick-in-the-mud, a nerd who doesn’t know how to have a good time? You’d all be lost without me, you slackers.”

I throw the napkin back at Johanna and burst out laughing when two more hit my head straightaway. I throw them at Susie and Maryam, too,

and soon there's a full-on napkin war at our table. We laugh and scream and everyone in the lunchroom stands up and starts shouting and—

My phone rings.

I do this way too often. Disappear into a fictional dream world. Play ridiculous little movies in my head. Scenes in which I'm as spontaneous and natural as everyone else.

I fish the phone out, look at the screen.

"Who is it?" Maryam asks. "Aren't you going to answer?"

I send the call to voicemail and put the phone back.

"Nothing important."

After the lecture I head home by myself. Johanna is going to her boyfriend's place. I wish I could have gone straight home after my appointment with Stella, considering how exhausting it was to meet her, but I didn't want to miss anything important at school.

Now I'm on the subway. Alone, one of many strangers. When I moved here I hated that, but now I don't mind. And after a year in Stockholm I can find my way around pretty well. In the beginning, I was terrified of getting lost. I mixed up Hässelby and Hagsätra, triple-checked how to get wherever I needed to go. In spite of that, I traveled around quite a bit, visited most of the shopping centers that were within reach of Stockholm public transportation.

I've taken the commuter trains to their final stations, tried out all the subway lines, and taken most of the buses in the city center. I've walked around on the islands of Södermalm and Kungsholmen, through the neighborhoods of Vasastan and Norrmalm, and spent a lot of time in the city center.

I look at my fellow commuters and pretend I know everything about them. That old lady with orange hair and ruby red glasses, she works out at Friskis&Svettis twice a week, wears colorful leggings from the eighties, and stares saucily at men in the gym.

The couple holding hands and kissing each other: he's a medical student and she's a middle school teacher. They're on their way home to their studio apartment near Brommaplan. They'll cook something together and watch

a movie and fall asleep next to each other on the sofa. Then she'll go to bed, and he'll take out his computer and watch Internet porn.

The tall, skinny guy in the suit, coughing until he's bent over double. He's dying of lung cancer. No one knows how long he has left. How long do any of us have left? Life could end at any moment. *It could be over today.*

I miss Dad. Four months have gone by since that day in May. Four long, empty months. Afterward, I found out that he'd been feeling sick for several weeks. Of course he didn't go to the doctor. I didn't know a thing. Dad was hardly ever sick. Why would he bother me unnecessarily?

To say I feel guilty doesn't begin to cover it. I went home too rarely. The last time I saw him was at Easter. I didn't even stay the whole weekend.

Was it selfish of me to move? Dad wanted me to take this chance. He encouraged me to stay in the city, hang out with my new friends on the weekends, and to break free.

Only after he was gone did I learn the truth. And I will never forgive her for what she did. With all my heart I wish she was dead. I hate her.

Hate her.

Hate her.

Hate her.

Stella

I wake up in our house on Alviksvägen in Bromma. I've been sleeping on the bed under a blanket. It feels like I've been lying here for days.

I asked Renate to cancel the rest of my patients and blamed it on a migraine. Hailed a taxi in the rain on St. Eriksgatan. I don't remember anything after that. I must have paid the driver when we arrived, left and gone inside. Took off my shoes and my coat, and climbed the stairs up to my bedroom. I don't remember any of it.

My eyes ache, I have a pounding headache, and for a moment I wonder if I imagined everything. If I dreamed that a woman named Isabelle Karlsson came to my office.

I wish it was so.

Avoiding pain is a basic human instinct, trying to escape rather than face what hurts.

And I do wish I could escape.

At the sound of Henrik's Range Rover rolling down the driveway, I get up from bed and walk over to the window. It's still raining. Our neighbor is standing at the fence in a raincoat with his little yapping dog. Milo jumps out of the car and runs toward the house. Henrik greets our neighbor and follows after. The front door opens; I hear him shout hello. I close my eyes a few seconds, take a deep breath, and go down.

Milo slips past me, asks what we're having for dinner. When I say I don't know, he goes to the living room and throws himself into one of the sofas. Henrik picks my coat up off the hall floor, hangs it, and says he tried to reach me.

I tell him my phone must be in my purse. He turns his face toward the floor. It's lying next to my shoes. He picks it up, hands it over to me.

“We wondered if we should pick up food,” he says. “You didn’t make dinner.” It’s more of a statement than a question.

“I haven’t had time.”

“Did something happen?”

“Why do you think that?”

“Your car?”

My Audi is still parked on Kungsholmen, not in the driveway.

“I took a taxi.”

Henrik examines me closely. I give him a quick kiss, avoiding his gaze, and head into the kitchen. He follows me.

“Milo needs to eat,” he says, opening the fridge. “He has to leave soon.”

I forgot about Milo’s basketball practice. I never do that. I sit down at the kitchen table, check my phone. Two missed calls and one text message. Henrik takes a plastic container out of the freezer, shouts to Milo that food is on its way.

“How was your day?” he asks after a while.

“Good.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Henrik stirs the pasta and warms up the Bolognese. While telling me something about plans to visit his parents in the country next weekend and Milo’s basketball game on Saturday. Also, his day at work. He sets the table: plates, cutlery, and glasses, pours water into a pitcher. Tells me more about work.

It’s just like any other Monday, meeting at home after a long day, chatting in the kitchen. My husband is the same, my son, too. Our beautiful home is unchanged. And yet it all feels so foreign. As if I’ve been transformed into someone else. As if I’m a stranger in my own life.

Henrik calls out to Milo to tell him the food is ready. No reaction from the living room. He tells him to come now, but Milo dawdles. I walk to the living room, go over to the sofa. I take off his headphones and pull the iPad out of his hands. I snap at him that he’s in a hurry. Milo is surprised at first, then annoyed. He strides past me and sits down at the kitchen table.

Henrik puts his hand on my arm when Milo's not looking. I know exactly what he wants to say. *Take it easy. What's the matter with you?*

I should tell him what happened. Should talk to him. It's not like me to keep secrets. I am, after all, a psychologist and a certified psychotherapist. I verbalize my emotions, I discuss things, figure out where the problem might lie. Especially when it comes to something that could transform our lives. Plus Henrik is my best friend. We're always open with each other, we talk about everything. He knows me better than anyone else, which is what makes it so hard to hide something from him. I've never wanted to, either. Until now.

I can't choke down any dinner. Henrik and Milo talk to each other; I don't know about what. I hear them, but also don't. My thoughts constantly return to her.

Isabelle Karlsson.

I wonder why she's using that name. I wonder how much she knows.

Milo is telling us about some super sweet bike he wants. He takes out his phone to show us. I apologize, get up from the table, and leave the kitchen. I go to the laundry room and try to compose myself.

A panic attack. Only one, in twelve years. I'm losing control and can't do anything about it. Panicked terror and paralyzing anxiety are taking over my body, invading my thoughts and feelings. Like boarding a runaway train, then being forced to ride it all the way to its final destination. And I never wanted to go there again. I'd do anything to avoid going there again. The thought of exposing my family to this terrifies me.

If I'd known what this meeting would entail, would I have gone through with it? If I'd known who she is, would I have been brave enough to meet her?

If it's really her.

I can see myself asking her. Looking into her eyes, formulating the question, watching my words reach her consciousness, starting some chain reaction.

No, that's not me.

Truth? Lie?

Yes, that's me.

Truth? Lie?

I don't trust Isabelle Karlsson. How could I? How could I trust her, when I have no idea what she wants? I have to find out more. I have to know.

Henrik is standing behind me; he puts his hands on my arms.

"What is it?" he says. "Talk to me, Stella."

"I'm tired."

"It's not just that," he says. "I can tell something happened."

He won't give up. I turn around.

"I had a shitty day," I say. "I got a migraine, canceled everything, and went home." I imply that it has to do with Lina, a patient I've had problems with recently. I can tell he understands. Knew he'd interpret it that way.

Henrik touches my cheek and holds me. He asks if I have been contacted by the Health and Social Care Inspectorate. I haven't. Not yet.

He tells me the last few months have been stressful, but it will all work out in the end. He'll take Milo to practice today, I can stay home.

I stand at the kitchen window watching them leave.

Go up to the attic. Look in the bag.

The handbag in the attic. I haven't touched it since we moved here, but after twelve years I still know exactly where it is. I don't intend to look inside it. If I do, I'll lose my mind again.

Twenty-one years ago my life was destroyed, but I rebuilt it. I can't forget that. I chose to live. I couldn't do anything else. The only alternative was death, and that was something I couldn't do.

I focused on my education, on my goals. Five years later I met Henrik and fell in love.

I buried her. That doesn't mean I forgot.

Look in the handbag, in the attic.

My panic attack today was a singular event. It won't happen again. And I don't need to go to the attic. What I need is sleep.

By the time I reach the bedroom I feel too tired to shower, too tired to wash off my makeup. Don't even have the energy to brush my teeth. I take

off the wristwatch Henrik gave me and put it in my bureau. My pants and shirt I throw on the chair next to the door. I take off my bra and crawl under the blanket.

The rain's still beating against the windows when I wake up in the middle of the night. I must have slept deeply, I didn't even hear Henrik and Milo come home. The room is pitch-black thanks to our thick curtains. I usually prefer that, but tonight the darkness is suffocating.

Go up to the attic. Look in the handbag.

Henrik's arm is draped over my waist; he grunts when I lift it off. I climb out of bed and pull on my robe. I sneak out of the bedroom and close the door. I pull a chair down the hall and place it under the hatch that leads to the attic. I climb up, grab the handle, and pull it down. Hold my breath when it creaks. I pull down the ladder, climb up, and turn on the lights.

The handbag is in the corner. I move a few boxes before I'm able to see it. A blue and wine-red paisley pattern, given to me by my mother years ago. I pick it up, then sink down to the floor and unzip it.

The spider has soft, limp legs of purple and yellow and a big silly smile. I pull the cord under its belly, but nothing happens. It used to play a few bars of "Itsy Bitsy Spider." We found it hysterically funny.

A white blanket with gray stars. A small blue dress with lace around the neck and sleeves, the only garment I saved. I bury my nose in it, but it smells only of mothballs.

Photographs. In one stand three happy teenagers. Daniel; his sister, Maria; and me.

I've almost always had long hair. It's thick and dark brown and naturally wavy. When this picture was taken it hung to the middle of my back. I'm wearing a yellow dress with a wide black elastic belt around my waist. Daniel's arm is draped around my shoulders, he seems cocky and self-assured. His black hair is as disheveled as ever, and he wears a pair of worn jeans and a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off.

I wonder where he is right now. Wonder if he's happy. If he ever thinks of me.

I look closely at Maria. Her waist-length straight hair is as black as Daniel's. The resemblance to Isabelle Karlsson is uncanny. They could be sisters. Twins.

But it's a coincidence. It has to be.

More photos. A seventeen-year-old holding a small baby. She's barely more than a child herself. Both she and the baby are laughing. They have dimples.

My eyes sting, and I rub them with the sleeve of my robe. At the bottom of the bag is a red hardback book. I pick it up.

DECEMBER 29, 1992

Heeeeeeelp! Shit, shit, shit. I'm pregnant. How could this happen? Or, I know how. But still. So that's why I'm so tired all the time. So that's why I've been so insanely moody and weepy.

Or like today. Me, Daniel, and Pernilla went to Farsta Center to try on some clothes. I found a pair of super cute jeans, but couldn't button them even though they were my size. I really tried, but I couldn't get them closed.

I totally overreacted, I know. I cried in the fitting room. Daniel didn't get it at all and was insensitive, like he can be. "You on your period? Try on a bigger size, what's the big deal?" I got so angry I cried even harder. Pernilla chewed him out for me. We skipped shopping and got coffee instead.

How am I gonna tell Mom? She's gonna hit the roof. Helena will think it's awful. And Daniel, what's he gonna say? He's going to be a father. That's not what we planned.

My emotions are out of control. My whole life is spinning.

I can't believe we were so stupid. So irresponsible. All my plans, what am I gonna do now?

It feels like I'm going crazy. I go from laughing to crying every other second. I'm overjoyed. I'm terrified. A human being. Just like that?! Is it possible to already love this little creature inside me?

I want this baby. With him. I hope he wants it, too, because I can't do anything else.

So, hello and welcome, whoever you are. The rest will have to wait.

Isabelle

It's mid-morning rush hour at Östra Station. Susie is a few steps below me on the escalator. I just turned around and noticed her looking at me. That means I'll have to converse with her the rest of the way. Try to seem carefree, normal.

Normal. I don't even know what the word means.

To be like everyone else?

Will I ever truly learn how to do that? So nobody sees what a weirdo I am? How evil I am?

Evil. I can't call it anything else. I don't do mean things. But sometimes I'm afraid I will. The hatred inside me, the ever increasing rage. That's what makes me evil. I don't know what to do about it. And I suspect it will end badly. These thoughts I have, these feelings swirling inside me will surely lead to something terrible.

Am I being melodramatic again?

I step off the escalator and wait for Susie.

"Heeey, Isabelle!" she bursts out and comes over to me. She always speaks in exclamation marks. "So crazy that it's not raining! It's been such crappy weather for days! Where's Johanna!"

"She's grabbing something to eat, I think."

"Grabbing something to eat." She laughs and mimics the melody of my country bumpkin accent. That happens more rarely now, and I don't feel so embarrassed as I did in the beginning.

"Where's the lecture?"

"Q1 hall," I answer.

"Did you do the homework?"

"Yes," I say. "And you?" I toss my hair. *A habit I'm trying to break.*

Susie grimaces. “You’re so smart. I hope I don’t get called on today.”

She chatters the rest of the way, about how thankful she is it’s Friday, tells me everything that’s happening this weekend, how some people are going out on Saturday and do I want to come along, and then about how her dog threw up yesterday, and did I know her friend is a veterinarian, and, boy, do they see some gross stuff, ha ha. She reminds me that half of September has gone by, time is moving so fast, and it’s going to rain again soon.

I listen, hmmm sometimes. When we get to the hall, she heads off to the bathroom. I open the door and enter. The lecture won’t start for another eleven minutes. I look around before heading down the stairs. I choose a spot near the end of the third row.

I always sit close to the front. *And always get there early.* Sit with my notebook and pencils in front of me, ready to take copious notes. Every number and letter. I use different colors to mark things, underline them, and draw connections as a memory aid. There is something slightly neurotic about it. I know that. I’ve read about it. I have a thing about numbers. Even if I know I’m going to remember them, or will never need them again, I always write them down.

See you at three twenty-six. *03:26.*

Take bus five-fifteen or sixty-seven from Odenplan. *515, 67*

Height sixty-four inches, weight one hundred and twenty-three pounds:
64, 123

A lot of people think I’m too serious. Every student I know here at KTH takes their studies seriously, but they party, too. A lot. On Fridays there’s cheap beer at the student union, then there are the dinner parties where everyone wears coveralls over their nice clothes and ends up getting wasted, there are also the beer drinking contests and the pub crawls organized by the various classes, and when exams are over there’s always a huge blowout to celebrate. Not to mention all the house parties.

Johanna and Susie always try to get me to go to them, but I’ve only done so a few times. The freshman party last spring was the only big party I’ve been to.

It’s not that I don’t *want* to join. I want to be one of the gang, and I wish it were easier for me. Easier to forget who I am.

Still, moving here is the best thing I've ever done. The number of friends I have on Facebook has increased drastically. I have more followers on Instagram. And I have Snapchat. *I love it!* I document my daily life. I take selfies. My digital reality is awesome, crazy, insane. When you look at my pictures you see a life filled with unforgettable moments where I'm surrounded by all these amazing friends who love me. Every like, every comment makes me happy. I know it's superficial, but I don't care. There's nothing wrong with being superficial. And until last summer I was social in real life, too, not just online.

Then Dad died.

There's a movement at the corner of my eye, and I look up. A guy I don't recognize. He's good-looking. He asks if he can pass by me, and I feel myself blushing. I stand up, and he smiles at me before squeezing into the row. Throws a long glance at my short dress and my knee-high boots.

One thing I've gotten used to this year is guys looking at me. *At home I was invisible.* My hair was the only feature I was satisfied with, even proud of. But my body? Sometimes they check me out, like now. It's weird. But at the same time, I like it. No one looks beneath the surface, no one looks behind the mask. No one sees how fake, nasty, ruined, and twisted I am. No one is allowed inside.

Johanna and Susie gave me a makeover. It started when I borrowed a shirt from Johanna, which fit really well. Then they made me try on one of her shortest dresses. It was definitely too short. But, according to them, that was the point. My legs were made for showing off.

They dragged me to H&M, Monki, Gina Tricot, all over the place. I discovered the secondhand stores here are way better than in Borlänge. Now I have a whole new wardrobe. Clothes in sizes and styles I've never bought before.

I've gotten used to being noticed. Realized it's not that bad. Quite the opposite. It's easier to hide that way. You can choose who you are in other people's eyes.

My newly won freedom. My new strength.

I just wish I could forget the real me completely.

And that's where Stella Widstrand comes in.

My thoughts are interrupted when the lecture begins. I listen closely

and take notes until the break. Then I stand up and let the people in my row file past me into the aisle. I'm considering if I should leave the hall or stay, when I hear his name.

Fredrik.

I look around the hall. He's sitting a few rows above me. He looks up, meets my eyes, and nods briefly. *I know I'm staring.* He rises and turns around, looking for Medhi. He shouts out something to him that I don't quite catch.

Fredrik is slender and slightly taller than me. He has a thick mop of blond hair that he often tosses to the side or runs his hands through. He laughs a lot. I can imagine the seven-year-old version of him in his school picture. Pretty much like now, but with a tooth missing in the front.

He usually wears jeans or chinos low on his hips and T-shirts. He's a skater and coaxed me onto his long board once. He ran along beside me, holding my hand and laughing so hard. When I asked why, he told me I squeal like a girl. He's cute, cool, handsome. And he's a good dancer. I know from experience, at the freshman party.

He can never ever know what I'm really like.

There's a gorgeous, rail-thin brunette sitting next to him. She stands up, pulls on his hand, and he looks at her. Laughs at whatever she's telling him as they climb up the stairs toward the exit. He's obviously tired of me. Maybe he suspects something. Maybe he knows.

Maybe everybody knows there's something wrong with me.

I sit down again. Wish my life was different. Wish I fit in, that I was like everyone else. That there was no shadow inside me. Nothing to hide. But my life is not like anybody else's.

And it's *her* fault.

I want revenge.

I want her to suffer, like I've suffered.

I want her to cease to exist.

I want her to die.

Stella

Thunk, thunk, thunk. The sound of basketballs bouncing against the floor and walls. Now and then a ball actually hits the backboard with an echoing racket. The noise level is deafening.

I'm headed down the bleacher stairs at the Vasalund Hall in Solna. A firm grip on my paper cup of scalding hot coffee. I sit down and nod to some familiar faces, then take out my phone to avoid conversation. I spent the week going to work, listening to my patients, buying groceries, cooking dinner, doing laundry. Pretending that everything is the same as always. But I haven't been able to think about anything but Isabelle Karlsson. I think about her all the time. It didn't matter to me that Henrik was working late every night or that Milo hung out with his friends too much.

Marcus sent a text message: Does dinner Wednesday work for you? My brother defers to you. I've always liked Henrik's little brother, but I have no desire to socialize with anyone right now. Still, I reply that we're looking forward to finally meeting his new love interest. And seeing him and the kids, of course.

Another basketball mom I recognize asks if she can sit down. I scoot over on the bench and look out at the players. Milo is dribbling on the other side of the court. I wave but he doesn't see me. I take my diary out of my purse, balance it on my knees. In my teens I kept a diary almost daily, and this ended up being the last one.

There's obviously page after page about Daniel, but also about what I wanted to do with my life. A teenager's thoughts, plans, and dreams. I wanted to be a tailor. Or a ceramist. Maybe work in fashion or interior design. I wanted to do it all. I wanted to be a Renaissance woman, working

in some creative field, traveling around the world, spending a month here or there.

Daniel didn't share my dreams. He had no interest in traveling or studying or learning new languages. He wanted to stay in Kungsängen, the suburb of Stockholm where we grew up, and eventually open an auto repair garage. He was content with his cars, some street racing, and a few beers with his buddies on the weekends. We were very different. But I was in love, and we were happy.

In the fall of 1992 Daniel and I spent all of our time together. We drove around in his red Impala, having fun, with no clue what was in store for us. We both wanted to keep the baby. We even talked about having more.

I wrote about the pregnancy, about my anticipation and my fear. About the looks people gave us. We were teenagers expecting a child and not everyone thought it was as wonderful as we did.

The birth, the first time I held her to my breast. Daniel with tears in his eyes and Alice in my arms.

The first time we met the little person who would turn our lives upside down. Her scent. I could smell her forever. Her sweet little mouth. Her dimples.

I thought I'd feel more when I read about all of this. That every word would grab me, give me joy and laughter, or sorrow and tears. Honestly, I don't remember much of what I've written. It's like a story told to me by an acquaintance.

As long as I refuse to think about that day a year later. As long as I keep the door closed to that room. I don't know if I have it in me to face the pain, if I could handle hearing the accusations. I just don't think I can go back, let guilt drag me down me again.

Why weren't you there?

I flinch when someone scores a basket, and the man behind me roars.

Milo takes the rebound and dribbles across the court.

When he was younger I went to every practice, every game. Both basketball and tennis. Even though I don't need to anymore, I still go to many of them. He's thirteen. And I am hopelessly overprotective. He's my only child.

I wonder when I stopped thinking of him as my second.

Both of them got their smiles from me. Milo has my curly hair and Alice, my eyes. Otherwise they both favor their fathers.

Alice. Daniel.

Milo. Henrik.

Different lives.

Are they colliding now?

What will that do to me? To my family?

It must be a coincidence. It has to be my imagination. I've spent enough time hoping and believing. I can't handle more anxiety and useless suspense. Nothing will change what happened. I'll never get back the time I lost.

As we leave Vasalund Hall, I throw the diary into a trashcan.

WE CAST A SHADOW



A Novel

MAURICE
CARLOS RUFFIN

We Cast a Shadow 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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1

My name doesn't matter. All you need to know is that I'm a phantom, a figment, a man who was mistaken for waitstaff twice that night—odd, given my outfit. I managed to avoid additional embarrassments by wallflowering in the shadow of the grand staircase. Their cheeks pink from Southern Comfort, the partners—or shareholders, as the firm called them—stood chatting in clusters around the dining room.

I had been invited by my law firm's leaders to attend their annual party at Octavia Whitmore's mansion on the Avenue of Streetcars. It was a highlight of my life, an honor for a lowly associate just to be invited, although I was surprised to be told to show up in a costume.

Rough fabric chafed against my collarbone. I was dressed as a Roman centurion. I had rented the mega-deluxe option, no expense spared: full tunic of lamb's wool, leather sandals, and five—count 'em—five Hollywood-prop-grade weapons: a sword, a javelin, a bow and arrow, a shield, and a dagger. I never knew that Roman soldiers used daggers. But the costume guy assured me that they did too use daggers, the dagger being the preferred weapon of choice for when shit got real, which apparently it did

from time to time.

The first floor of Octavia's mansion was a series of large rooms. Playful notes of sandalwood and jasmine lingered in the foyer. I spotted my fellow black associate Franklin beyond that entryway. Franklin, who got white-girl drunk at every firm function, karaoke'd "I Feel Pretty" into a microphone. Franklin had come wearing the perfect icebreaker. He wore a white smock and a black bow tie, the uniform of every black busboy and waiter at every old-line restaurant in the City. Café de Réfugiés, Carnation Room, Pierre's—no, not Pierre's; there were no brothers at Pierre's. I wasn't sure what must have been more mortifying for Franklin: that he was singing so poorly or that no one paid him any mind. It couldn't have helped that he was too black to be pretty.

My frenemy, good ol' back-slapping Riley, was bent over a table giving the managing shareholder, Jack Armbruster, a foot massage. Sweat made Riley's bald head glow. He looked like a scoop of chocolate ice cream, melting under the parlor lights. Riley was dressed as a parish prison inmate, which rankled my sense of propriety. They saw enough of us dressed that way in news reports. However, I had to admit it was an impressive getup. He wore a Day-Glo orange jumpsuit, and even a fake chest tattoo. He carried clinking leg shackles slung over his shoulder, as if ready to reincarcerate himself on request.

Riley was working the old fart's feet, feet so gnarly they seemed like roots ripped from the field behind the mansion. He dabbed his dome with a handkerchief. Was a promotion and bonus worth the kind of humiliation Franklin and Riley were undergoing? Confetti rained down on the junior shareholders in the adjacent parlor. You betcha.

My son Nigel's procedure would be expensive. After feeding the snarling, three-headed beast of mortgage, utilities, and private school tuition, I only managed to pocket a few copper coins each month. But if I were promoted, I would earn a fat bonus, and

Nigel would finally get a normal face, over his mother's objections.

I idled on the sideline, nursing a rum and Coke, which, in turn, nursed my ever-present migraine (thankfully, almost down for the night). I had lost count of how many drinks I'd had over the last few hours, which meant by now my blood was probably 75 percent alcohol by volume. And that was on top of the dissipating effects of the Plum I took that morning. I told myself on each awakening that I didn't need Plums anymore. I told myself I could quit anytime I chose. But I knew better. Those petite purple pills, which turned my nervous system into a tangle of pleurably twinkling Christmas lights, had become a constant companion.

Riley ambled over. He exaggeratedly wiped his palms on his jumpsuit pants. Smiling, he jabbed his hand out for a handshake. I shook my head.

"Where is the love?" Riley glanced at his hand and sniffed. "I don't blame you actually. I think Armbruster's been on his feet all day." He grabbed the sleeve of my tunic, tossed his head back, and chuckled. "You don't think you're going to win in this, do you?"

"I like my look," I said, taken aback. "Check out this hand-stitching—wait. Win what?"

"Win this hazing ceremony. Tonight is a competition, after all. There's three of us, but only one promotion. You knew that." Riley raised his eyebrow. "You didn't know that."

"But this is just a party."

"And one of us will have something to celebrate." Riley always seemed to have inside knowledge about the firm's workings. But he was also the kind of person to say things just to get a reaction from me. Still, he wouldn't joke about this. The stakes were too high.

"What happens to the losers?"

He leaned in to whisper. "You know how it works. It's up or out." Riley adjusted my breastplate. "I didn't mean to mess with your confidence. You're right. This is a great look." He straight-

ened up and nodded. “Really authentic.”

Riley patted my shoulder and trotted off, his manacles clattering against the back of his jumpsuit. He shook the hands of a couple of shareholders and laughed.

I suddenly realized I had made a serious miscalculation. Riley’s costume was a great way to get attention and spread good cheer. Mine, on the other hand, was the sartorial equivalent of a glower. Centurions were badasses who killed anyone who crossed them. The only way I could have made this group any more nervous was if I showed up as Nat Turner, but I knew better. Or I should have. There were many unknowns in my pursuit of happiness, but one thing I understood: law firms like Seasons, Ustis & Malveaux didn’t hire, let alone promote, angry black men. If this was a competition, I needed a new strategy. The shareholders wanted entertainment. They wanted a good time. They also wanted subservience. They did not want to feel threatened. If I was going to win, I would have to demonstrate I was willing to give them exactly what they wanted.

I quickly moved from room to room searching for anything that could help me. In the back den, I spotted Octavia Whitmore in a gingham dress, carrying a terrier in the crook of her elbow and drinks in each of her hands. If anyone could help me find an advantage, she could. After all, she was a senior shareholder, and I her legal footman. I was the associate who did the grunt work that was beneath her valets. She needed me.

“You look just like Judy Garland,” I said. Octavia hadn’t noticed me, so her face momentarily lit up in surprise as I approached. I kissed her cheek.

“Well, aren’t you sweet?” she said.

I liked Octavia. She was one of the good ones, even if, as she once drunkenly admitted to me in a stalled elevator, she sometimes fantasized about wearing blackface and going on a crime spree. After shattering storefront windows and mugging tourists by the Cathedral, she would wash the makeup from her face, con-

tent in the knowledge that the authorities would pin her deeds on some thug who actually had it coming.

That was when I realized that the Toto in her arm was a cat—a Ragamuffin cat wearing a wig. I'd never seen a cat wearing a wig. It was a night of wonders.

"Why you off to the side like this, sugar?" Octavia licked her thumb and polished the foot of a gilt bronze cherub.

"Someone has to stand watch over these rabble-rousers." I puffed my chest out and stamped my javelin on the marble floor.

"But who's guarding you? Here, this will freshen you right up." She took the javelin and handed me another glass. I gave my empty rum glass to one of the waiters, an onyx-skinned man who would have otherwise eluded my attention if not for the fact that he'd clearly undergone enthusiastic rhinoplasty, his broad-winged brother's nose replaced by a narrow, upturned pointer. Such procedures had become much more common among black folk lately. I couldn't tell if he'd only had his schnoz done because he was too poor to afford the full procedure or because he was afraid. Half measures were such a waste of effort. If you were going to skydive into whiteness, aim for the town square, not the outskirts.

"What's this?" I said.

"A Sazerac," Octavia said with a wink. Her hair's silver streak glinted.

"But you know I don't drink," I said, drinking.

She chuckled.

"I don't think I'm a fan favorite in this." I gestured to my clothing.

Toto growled at me. That cat took its role seriously.

Octavia grabbed my javelin and, handling it as if it were a pool cue, leveled it at the crowd, but I couldn't tell who she was shooting at. She leaned it against the stairwell banister. I reached for it, but she stopped me.

"Leave it," she said. "I have something for you upstairs."

We climbed the stairs until we reached a side gallery that looked

down on the atrium. Powder-blue shapes shimmered from the aquarium and formed waves across the checkerboard floor. Franklin passed behind the bars of the staircase, dragging his chain. I was glad to be away from the scrum of shareholders with their plastic smiles, the smiles of sharks before a feeding frenzy. You really shouldn't be able to see a person's molars when they grin. The whole situation made me jumpy, as if a squid were twitching around in my tunic. I should have worn underwear.

Octavia led me into a long room. Every wall was covered with leather-bound books. *Eyes Without a Face*. *The Hip Hop Ontologist's View of Leda and the Swan*. *Blackstone's Law*. I pulled that book from the shelf and opened the cover. Dust motes pirouetted into the air. I sneezed.

"You read all these?" I asked, wiping my nose with the back of my Sazerac hand.

"Shit, no." She ran a French-tipped nail along the rim of my glass. "Neither did my father. They're real, but mainly for effect."

"Oh."

She pointed past me, and I followed her line of sight.

Statues lined the back wall. Just like me to notice books but not creepy wax men lurking in the shadows. One mannequin was Chinese, I guessed. He wore a fulvous robe and had long tufts of hair along his chin. Another looked like a Jack Kirby Thor, square jaw, blond hair, and Mjolnir, the magic hammer. I caught the theme even though there were no placards. Gods of the Human World.

"What do you think of this one?" she said.

It was a black man. He wore a headdress, face paint, and a bone necklace. I had no idea which African deity he was supposed to be, but I'd read enough to know there were more black deities than anyone could possibly keep track of, so many, in fact, that it cheapened the idea of godliness. If everyone was a god, no one was a god.

Whoever made the statue apparently believed the myth that all

us black men were hung like Clydesdales, a myth that led to plenty of awkward dating experiences since I was only average in the Joe department. The African god's loincloth did little to obscure his bulge. It was a safety hazard. Someone could poke their eye out.

As for my overall opinion of the statue, whenever a white person asked me any question just because I was the onliest black guy in the room, the possible responses rattled around my brain like dice in cup: one, answer with anger; two, answer with humor; or three, answer with a question.

The first, I practically never used. Anger, of course, could get you killed.

The second, humor, was fine in most situations, but it was only something I deployed in safe environments. This was not a safe environment. Octavia was up to something. Something dangerous, or brilliant, or both.

"Is this a museum?" I asked.

"My father's private collection." She trailed her index finger down my bare arm. She walked behind the African god. From its perch on Octavia's arm, Toto sniffed the statue's butt. "These were sculpted by the same man who did the original Madame Tussauds. The hair is real human hair. Even the eyelashes. Even the eyeballs, I think." She squatted by a low drawer and rummaged through it. She pulled out a gong. "There are accessories all around the room. You can upgrade your look to something more . . . appropriate."

She struck the gong with her glass, producing a hollow sound.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

"I like you. Always have, but also I put a dollar on you winning." Octavia stepped into me, the way she might if we were about to tango, close enough that I could smell her liquor-drenched breath. "If you want to win, gather your balls and get out there, boy."

"Thanks?" The only non-black person with permission to call me "boy" was my wife. Yet I knew I couldn't say anything. Octavia had probably consumed a liter of Sazerac, and who could fault

anyone who had probably consumed a liter of Sazerac?

She flourished her hand and strutted toward the door. “Don’t worry. I won’t watch you change,” she said. “This time.” And then she left.

I don’t know how I missed the giant figure just inside the door back to the gallery. He was easily double the size of the other gods. He wore a toga and had a beard that would have made Jerry Garcia proud. Actually, given Octavia’s wealth, it could have been Jerry Garcia’s actual beard. The statue held a lightning bolt. Zeus! That was who I wanted to be.

Zeus was a shameless choice in my quest to climb the social step stool. Who could fault me for choosing the ruler of Mount Olympus? Victory was close at hand. Possibility whisked me away. I wondered whether the virtuoso plastic surgeon I had in mind for Nigel’s procedure preferred credit cards or cashier’s checks. I imagined my boy’s wedding day in distant future, his cheeky face flawless as a seaside sunrise.

No. I couldn’t be Zeus. If I went back to the party as the king of gods, the shareholders would think I was conceited, crass, uppity.

I needed something that would give me a fighting chance against Franklin’s Stepin Fetchit uniform and Riley’s “20 to life.” I had to sink to the level of the shareholders’ expectations. My fellow melanated associates fit in better than me because everyone was used to seeing black waiters tending to tourists or black convicts being led to work in neck shackles. There was a comfort in these familiar images, as reassuring as steaming apple pie or drones dropping barrel bombs on terrorists. The Zulu chief stared over my head. I only had to fulfill an expectation. I only had to say yes one more time, right? Examining the various fasteners and clips of a remnant barely large enough to cover a child’s bottom, I thought: *I can totally do this.*

Once I finished changing, I inhaled, threw my shoulders back and descended the curving staircase with all the resolve of an overlooked but hopeful debutante. I anticipated a collective pause

when people noticed me. There was. Entering a crowded room full of intoxicated lawyers wearing nothing but a loincloth, leg tassels, and feathery headdress is bound to attract attention. What I didn't expect was that Jack Armbruster, who prided himself on never wasting so much as a molecule of bourbon, dropped his highball glass. It shattered with a satisfying crack against the marble. Liquor spread, a pale imitation of lifeblood.

I gazed at the shareholders in their costumes, a zombie pilgrim, a cheerful Madame LaLaurie, and a diminutive Honest Abe, all silent for what felt like an hour at the bottom of the ocean's deepest trench. Armbruster whipped out a silk handkerchief from his blazer—I think he was the Millionaire from *Gilligan's Island*, but it was hard to tell because that was more or less how he always looked—and wiped his mouth with a flick. Everyone watched him. He chuckled and clapped once. The room burst into applause.

I realized that I'd walked out smack into the middle of the judging session. The other associates had been cleared out, probably into the field behind the mansion. The big plate-glass windows reflected the interior of the room, the shareholders, and myself. But by concentrating, I caught a glimpse of the world beyond the mirror. Sure enough, amid the restless security personnel who guarded Octavia's neighborhood with machine guns, Riley and Franklin stared at me from the grass, their faces featureless in that spectral mansion glow. They clapped, too. My chest tightened as if someone were squeezing my lungs from the inside of my chest.

Then the drumbeat kicked in.

The firm had hired an Afro-Cuban quartet, trumpet, keys, drums, and congas for the party. Possibly sensing a chance to fill their tip bucket, the band stuttered into a dark tribal beat. Not the kind of rhythm that rock and roll was built on, but the kind of rhythm that predated *bluesuederockaroundtheclockpleasepleasefightforyourrighttoparty* by at least a thousand years.

I danced. I wasn't a dancer, but I was a decent mimic. I'd watched

Mardi Gras Indians buck jump my entire life. I'd seen people around the neighborhood twerk and p-pop. I'd seen crackheads have seizures.

Facing the shareholders, I couldn't see myself. But if I could have sprung from my own body and watched myself from Zeus's perch upstairs, I would have seen a skinny, nearly naked Negro in a sumo squat, flapping his arms and legs as though they were on fire. People laughed and imitated my movements. Flashes popped. The videographer swung in for a close-up. It's a strange thing to feel so alive even as a part of your soul turns to cold green goo and oozes out of your heel. Every time I raised my spear, they cheered louder. The higher I raised it, the louder they roared.

And then suddenly the music shifted—like a runaway tour bus transitioning from cliff to air. Silence. Armbruster covered his mouth with his handkerchief, his eyes locked on me. Octavia fanned herself. Somewhere in the room a camera clicked twice.

It must have been the buzz of the alcohol and pill that delayed the feeling of a licking breeze across my lower body. The loincloth had come undone, and I was naked as a peeled egg.

Do you know how eerie it is for a hundred people to go completely quiet at the sight of your manhood?

Toto ran over, and I backed into the wall, all eyes on me against the world. I snatched him up, using his furry body like a pom-pom. I stumbled out of the mansion's back door and into the field.

2

We lived, at that time, in a part of the City once inhabited by Mosopelea Indians who migrated to the marshlands to avoid the white man, then by immigrants from Continental Europe who, having left behind crowd, famine, and disease, fled the City to escape the black man, then inhabited by blacks who were vigorously reappropriated to the penitentiary at the parish line, and finally by the descendants of those earlier whites who returned when the coast was again clear. Except for me and half of my son, there were no other blacks in our neighborhood.

Our enclave was not without its charms. Sometime before we bought in, our neighbors prosecuted an altogether different kind of war of the roses so that every porch and garden box was an explosion of floral fireworks: elephant ears reared back from mouse flowers, pineapple lilies and calla lilies brushed sisterly hips, a Mexican hen and chicks soundlessly clucked from a terracotta pot left behind on our porch by the previous owners.

Our house was very fine, long and narrow as a folio book, so it seemed quite quaint from the front. But inside, the house, with its long, left-centered hallway, went on for many chapters.

Past the den where our frumpy paisley couch nested, past the

dining room where the drop-leaf mahogany table gave port to an armada of Penny's acrylic paint tubes and brushes, past the second bedroom where Nigel's vintage Rev. ManRay McKintosh poster (gifted by his grandmother) hung, was our kitchen, where my wife and son gathered the morning after my failure at Octavia's mansion. From the bedroom door in the back corner of the kitchen, I entered in rumpled, kaleidoscopic pajamas, hyperactive gorillas pounding kettledrums in my head. I wore opaque safety goggles left over from a welding-accident case I'd worked years earlier. I could hardly see a thing, but they served a purpose. They were meant to buy me time.

"You look like you lost a wrestling match." Penny poured orange juice into the leaf-green carafe without looking at me. As usual, she was already ready for work. Whereas I took an eternity to put myself together, Penny wasn't the kind of woman to overdo it with hair or makeup. She was a pragmatist. A little foundation. A little blush. No lipstick. She still wore her red curls long, although not as long as she did in the early days of our marriage. Her light green blouse matched the underside of the leaf she had just filled. "Doesn't he, munchkin?"

"My dad doesn't lose fights." Nigel poured batter onto the well-seasoned iron skillet, a wedding gift from Penny's mother. My nose twitched to cinnamon and a hint of ginger. Eleven years old, and it was an accepted fact that Nigel was the most talented chef in our tribe. We discovered this at age three when he grabbed a shaker of seasoning salts and dumped it into my bowl of bland grits.

"He won, and I bet the other guy looks way worse."

"Crap." Penny righted a quart of chocolate milk that had spilled on the counter. I asked if she needed a hand, but she was already pushing the lake of dairy into the sink with a ream of paper towels.

I returned my gaze to Nigel. "That's my boy." I ran my hand through my son's hair, a velvety tousle of black laurel, and poured

a cup of coffee. He didn't have to attack his hair with noxious chemicals, like I did, to make it unkink.

Penny jotted a note on the fridge to-do list. Her chicken-scratch was almost impossible to read, except for the note that had been next to the door handle for years. In block letters, it clearly read, "I love my boys!"

I gestured. She folded the paper she'd just written on and stuffed it into her bra. "I'm calling the City about those surveillance vans," she said.

"They're safety patrols, not surveillance vans," I said. Yes, the City Police van visited our block twice a day. And yes, it had cameras and infrared devices that could look into the deepest reaches of our home. But the vans checked in on any neighborhood where black folks lived to monitor vital signs: low heart rates suggested barbiturate use, elevated heart rates meant conflict, no heart rate was self-explanatory. It was for our—that is, black folks'—own good. When I was growing up, it wasn't uncommon for people to attack us in the streets.

Since Nigel and I didn't live in a black neighborhood, the poor officer assigned to protect us had to ride all the way over from the Tiko. He had to speed to stay on schedule.

"Those goons almost hit Mrs. Kravits this morning." Penny tossed the soiled paper towels into the garbage and pressed down with both hands.

"Okay. I'll call, if it makes you feel better," I said.

"It would." She washed her hands.

"May I?" I gestured toward her chest. She smirked. I removed the reminder note.

"So are you going to explain that?" Nigel pointed at the goggles on my face.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I parked at the head of the table. Penny pitched a look of disgust over Nigel's shoulder at me. We had fought a few minutes earlier about my behavior. That is to say, my darling dragon fruit did not appreciate my stum-

bling into the house sometime around three A.M. wrapped in the plaid picnic blanket we kept in the trunk of my car. Nor did she enjoy my bleary recitation of the night's absurdities before falling asleep on the floor at the foot of our bed or my presentation of red-rimmed eyes on awakening that were a sign of—well, she knew what they were a sign of.

I caught Penny's look and stirred it into my bitter coffee. "Oh. You mean these?" I removed the safety goggles. Beneath them I wore a small pair of dark sunglasses.

Nigel screwed his mouth up in mock derision. "Jerk."

On checking myself out in the mirror that morning, my eyes were puffy, pink, a side effect of all I'd ingested the day before, plus a lack of sleep and a bellyful of stress. I didn't want to miss seeing Nigel off to school, I never missed doing so. So I plied my peepers with the prescription eye drops I kept for just that purpose and donned the goggles and glasses to give the drops time to do their thing.

Penny asked Nigel to go grab her phone from the bedroom, and he went. Ah. Coffee. No sugar. No cream. I liked my java so black, the police planted evidence on it. And I was such a lucky man. My beautiful wife. My lovely, intelligent, red-headed wife swung across the room, her hips, about which she was unduly self-conscious, clicked in sympathy with my cuckoo clock heart. Then my amazing soul mate whacked me in the back of the head so hard, coffee squirted from my nostrils.

"Ow," I said. Penny smiled slightly. Plums were sometimes called zombie pills due to their anesthetic effect. My pain proved to her that I was still with her in the land of the living.

"Why aren't you dressed?" she said through clenched teeth so Nigel wouldn't hear.

"I told you I'm not going," I whispered. After the previous night's debacle at Octavia's mansion, I had no doubt that Franklin or Riley had already been promoted. The sun was still scrubbing darkness from the sky outside the high window, but I was sure

that Administration had already ripped my nameplate from my office door and deleted my biography from the firm website.

“So that’s your solution?” she said. “You won’t even find out what actually happened?”

My hand trembled and coffee splashed out of my mug. Without my job, we wouldn’t be able to keep the house, the cars would get repossessed, and worst of all, I wouldn’t be able to pay for Nigel’s procedure. But I couldn’t change that. I had been held up to the light and found wanting. I could imagine Penny’s estranged parents guffawing at the thought of her being forced to move back in with them. Interracial marriage was perfectly legal, of course, but it—along with mixed-race births—had been on the decline for years, especially in the South. Our dissolution would be proof that her folks had been right about the folly of such unions.

Penny wasn’t on speaking terms with her family. They hadn’t come to our wedding, not that they would have, if invited. Penny had grown up in a highly exclusive planned community upstate. The only people of color she knew were her Filipino nanny Esmeralda and Mr. Bowman, the elderly black man who handled the lawn care. When she dated a Muslim boy from an equally successful family, her parents almost disowned her. She broke off that relationship, which she would regret, but moved to the City as soon as she finished high school. She was in college when I met her.

As for my failure to procure Nigel’s treatment, Penny didn’t want some mad scientist fooling with her baby’s face anyway. She thought it best for him to learn to love himself rather than slice and dice his little body in a quest for acceptance. It was the only area of discourse where there was daylight between us.

Nigel reentered and threw his hands up. “Ma,” he said, “I didn’t see it anywhere.”

“Really,” she said, rummaging through her burlap purse on the hutch. “Here it is. If my head wasn’t stapled to my shoulders . . .”

Penny and Nigel decked the table with pancakes, vegan bacon,

and a bowl of raspberries. We ate. The flavors wreathed my stomach in joy.

“Mm,” I said, drowning the last of my cake in maple syrup. “So good. Who gets to eat like this on a Friday morning?”

Penny reached out to touch Nigel’s face.

“Ma!”

“You’ve got gunk in your eye.” Of course, I didn’t see any gunk. I saw the thing on my son’s face.

It was very small at first, the spot. After Nigel was born, cleaned, and placed in Penny’s arms, I had to count backward from ten three times before I stopped shaking enough to actually see him. He was a gorgeous ball of fat with a miniature version of my family nose and Penny’s pinkish coloration, the shade a fingertip turns once released. I finally understood why little old ladies, when pinching chubby toes in sequence, often spoke of wanting to “eat the child right up!” Up until that moment, the notion had been a dark one, bringing to mind flashes of Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Son*.

There was a speck, like a fleck of oregano, on Nigel’s eyelid. He had been baking in Penny’s oven nine full months, so it made sense that there would be bits of gristle in hard-to-clean creases. I gently touched the spot and realized it was part of him, a birthmark.

Nigel pulled the sunglasses from my nose. He gave me a queer glance, then put the frames on his face. The birthmark flashed at me. It had metamorphosed over the years. First, it had grown. By preschool, what had been a dot had spread to the ridge of his eyebrow, and, eventually, down the side of his face. Second, it changed shapes from a rough circle to a wedge to a silhouette the shape of New Zealand or perhaps the Wu-Tang Clan symbol turned on its head. Third, it darkened with him. Nigel’s general shade stabilized to an olive tone so that he might be mistaken for a Venetian boy who spent his summers cartwheeling across the Rialto Bridge, but the birthmark colored from wheat to sienna to umber, the hard hue of my own husk, as if a shard of myself were emerging from

him. It was the reason I encouraged Nigel's love of baseball caps. Anything to keep the birthmark from blackening.

I asked him where his hat was, the new neon-yellow one that I had gotten him. It was a kind of anticamouflage, really, a target designed to draw the viewer's eye away from his beautiful but distorted face.

"Oh"—Nigel glanced at his book sack by the exit door—"I must have left it in my room."

"So today is the big day, huh?" Penny said.

Nigel nodded and grunted, knowing that talking with his mouth full was verboten.

I wondered what they were talking about. My boy was involved, in varying degrees, in so many school activities that one could easily lose track: the visual arts society, soccer, the *Big Fish* lit mag, the keyboard chamber orchestra, peer tutoring in math, speech and debate, the drama club, and kiddie slam poetry every third Thursday. We kept a calendar on the fridge, but the shorthand that Penny used was as indecipherable to me as Chinese *hanzi*.

What big day was it? How did I get here? Why couldn't I ever follow the plot? I bet even that busybody down the street knew what big day it was. A tiny me, feet propped up in the back-theater row of my mind, spilled his popcorn and let loose a Bronx cheer.

"How do you feel about it?"

"Like I'm going to win, Ma." Ah, Nigel's class at the School Without Walls—an offshoot of the Montessori tradition—was having a creativity show-and-tell. Students were encouraged to "make the impossible possible." Favorites would be selected for display in the auditorium. Nigel's project had something to do with the magic of mirrors, but between Elevation Night and working late all week, I wasn't able to help out. Not that this was any great loss to Nigel. Penny was the hands of the family. My fumbling efforts at arts and crafts usually led to a frantic bandage search, both for my damaged digits and for my ecchymotic ego.

Nigel skipped away from the table. Penny raised her hand to

whack me in the back of the head again but stopped and did that thing she did when she wasn't whacking me in the back of the head; she swept her hand sideways like a blackjack dealer laying cards on a table. The lower edge of her tattoo said hello to me from behind her blouse sleeve. I could only see the bottom tendril of a vine that led up her forearm to a garden above her elbow where a butterfly—a Leopard Lacewing, if that was the artist's intention—hovered over a white-haloed flower on her right shoulder blade. She shoved the bowl of leftover raspberries away and held my chin between thumb and forefinger.

"I know things have been crazy at work, but you worked like crazy to get there. Maybe it's over, but if there's any chance of changing their minds, you're the only one who can do it." She grabbed the scruff of my neck like a lioness taking a cub between its teeth and pulled me closer. "I'm sorry I thumped your noggin, baby." Her breath smelled like citrus. Citrus and embers.

"Who doesn't love a good thumping?" I leaned in for the kill.

"Gross!" Nigel stepped back into the kitchen. He wore the neon-yellow baseball cap. "Again with the kissy face."

Penny and I straightened in our seats. She gave me a look that said, *Could you just try to keep it together for our son?* I gave her an *As you wish*.

"Tooth inspection," I said.

Nigel groaned.

"You'll understand when you're older," I said. "Cavities are the great scourge of adulthood."

Nigel carried a box-shaped arrangement of cardboard and plastic. He set the box on the table and pointed at the plastic window on its side.

"You have to get really close and stare inside," Nigel said. "Go on."

I stared. A light snapped on. A diorama appeared. It was a simple reconstruction of Nigel's bedroom, the bed and dresser made of folded jacks and queens—Nigel and I sometimes played euchre

or Forty-fives—and near the wall, to the right, was Nigel, or rather a cutout of a photo of him with his arms thrown up victoriously.

I recalled that photo well. I had taken it on a Gulf Coast beach two summers earlier. The scent of seawater assailed my memory, the murmur of waves. A seagull wing whirled cryptically out of view. Nigel and I raced from the car parked on the coastal highway. I gave him a head start, but soon found that I couldn't catch him. His long-toed feet beat against the clay until he stopped at the water's edge and a cloud of water surged around his calves. He turned back to me with a smile so bright, I was shocked it didn't reduce me to ashes. Penny was just beyond the frame when I took the picture. A moment later her arms were wrapped around him, and I took that picture, too, of them so deliriously happy in the surf, but the shot came out blurry.

I couldn't help but notice how much he had grown in so short a time. He had been shorter and rounder of face then. Plus, the birthmark had been smaller.

Suddenly, mini-Nigel vanished, although the rest of the tiny room remained exactly as it was. Where did it go? Despite myself, I gasped and drew back.

Nigel and Penny watched me with complete satisfaction. Penny smacked the table and guffawed, her somewhat wheezy laugh that jangled the keys to my heart every time. They had gotten the response they wanted. Penny kissed Nigel's forehead.

"Pretty good, right?" Nigel blushed and adjusted my sunglasses on his face.

I sputtered for a moment asking how, shaking my head. Nigel explained about relative levels of light and the expectations of the person watching, but I was distracted as Nigel brought his hand to the birthmark and lightly scratched. Dermatologists assured us long ago that the mark was no danger to him in any way and that it certainly wasn't infectious or spreadable by rough handling, but the cup clanging against the bars of my mind said that scraping it

might make it worse. It could inflame; it would spread to other parts of his body. What if the dermatologists were wrong? My medical malpractice cases had taught me that doctors are no better at predicting the future than weathermen.

“Don’t do that.” I grabbed Nigel’s wrist, harder than I intended, and saw framed in the oval lenses my own frantic, bloodshot eyes.



"Josie Silver writes with a warmth so palpable her characters sneak their way into your heart and stay for a long time. The perfect book to get lost in this holiday season."

—Jill Santopolo, author of *The Light We Lost*

One Day in December

A Novel

Josie Silver



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

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Laurie

“Try not to make any snap decisions when you meet David tonight? You probably won’t think he’s your type on first sight, but trust me, he’s hilarious. And he’s *kind*, Laurie. I mean, he gave up his chair for me the other day in a meeting. How many guys do you know who’d do that?” Sarah delivers this speech while on her knees pulling as many dusty wineglasses as she can find from the back of the kitchen cupboard in our tiny shared flat.

I cast around for an answer and, to be honest, it’s slim pickings. “The guy from the bottom flat moved his bike out of the way to let me through the front door this morning. Does he count?”

“You mean the same one who opens our mail and leaves trails of cold kebab on the hall floor every weekend?”

I laugh under my breath as I immerse the wineglasses in hot foamy water. We’re throwing our annual Christmas party tonight, which we’ve held every year since we first moved into Delancey Street. Though we’re kidding ourselves that this one will be much more sophisticated now we’ve left university, it’s mostly going to involve students and a few colleagues we’re still getting to know descending on our flat to drink cheap wine, debating things we don’t really understand and—for me it would seem—hitting it off with someone called David who Sarah has decided is my

perfect man. We've been here before. My best friend fancies herself as a matchmaker and set me up a couple of times when we were at uni. The first time, Mark, or it might have been Mike, turned up in running shorts in the depths of winter and spent the entire dinner trying to steer my food choices away from anything that would take more than an hour to work off in the gym. I'm a pudding girl; the main thing off the menu as far as I was concerned was Mike. Or Mark. Whichever. In Sarah's defense, he bore a passing resemblance to Brad Pitt, if you squinted and looked at him out of the corner of your eye in a dark room. Which I have to admit I did; I'm not normally one to sleep with guys on a first date, but I felt I had to give it a go for Sarah's sake.

Her second choice, Fraser, was only slightly better; I can at least remember his name. He was far and away the most Scottish Scotsman I've ever met, so much so that I only understood about fifty percent of what he said. I don't think he mentioned bagpipes specifically, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he was packing a set underneath his jacket. His tartan bow tie was disconcerting, but none of that would have mattered. His real downfall came at the end of the date; he escorted me home to Delancey Street and then kissed me in the style of someone trying to administer CPR. CPR with an entirely inappropriate amount of saliva. I made a dash for the bathroom as soon as I got inside, and my reflection confirmed that I looked as if I'd been snogged by a Great Dane. In the rain.

Not that I've got an impressive track record at choosing boyfriends for myself, either. With the exception of Lewis, my long time boyfriend back at home, I seem to somehow keep missing the mark. Three dates, four dates, sometimes even five before the inevitable fizzle. I'm starting to wonder if being best friends with someone as dazzling as Sarah is

a double-edged sword; she gives men unrealistic expectations about women. If I didn't love her to pieces, I'd probably want to poke her eyes out.

Anyway, call me stupid, but I knew none of those men were right. I'm a girl given to romance; Nora Ephron is my go-to answer for fantasy dinner party guest and I yearn to know if nice boys really do fucking kiss like that. You get the idea. I'm hoping that among all these frogs will one day come a prince. Or something like that.

Who knows what David is going to be like; perhaps it will be third time lucky. I'm not going to hold my breath. Maybe he'll be the love of my life or maybe he'll be hideous, but either way I'm undeniably intrigued and more than up for letting my hair down. It's not something I've done very often over the course of the last year; we've both had the upheaval of moving out of the cushioned world of college into the reality of work, more successfully in Sarah's case than mine. She practically walked into a junior position with a regional TV network, whereas I'm still working on the reception desk at the hotel. Yes, despite my New Year's Resolution I am decidedly not working in my dream job yet. But it was that or go home to Birmingham, and I fear that if I leave London I'll never get back again. It was always going to come more easily for Sarah; she's the gregarious one and I'm slightly shy, which means interviews don't tend to go so well.

None of that tonight, though. I'm determined to get so drunk that shyness is a complete impossibility. After all, we'll have the buffer of New Year to forget our ill-advised, alcohol-fueled behavior. I mean, come on, that happened *last year* for God's sake. Move on already!

It's also the night that I finally get to meet Sarah's new boyfriend. She's known him for several weeks already, but

for one reason or another I've yet to lay eyes on him in the apparently incredibly hot flesh. I've heard enough about him to write a book, though. Unfortunately for him, I already know he's a sex god in bed and that Sarah fully expects to have his children and be his wife once he's the high-flying media celeb he's clearly on track to becoming. I almost feel sorry for him having his future mapped out for the next ten years at the age of twenty-four. But hey, this is Sarah. However cool he is, he's still the lucky one.

She can't stop talking about him. She's doing it again now, telling me far more about their rampant sex life than I'd ideally like to know.

I scatter bubbles in the air like a child waving a wand as I hold my soapy fingers up to halt her flow. "Okay, okay, please stop. I'll try not to orgasm on sight when I finally clap eyes on your future husband."

"Don't say that to him, though, will you?" She grins. "The future husband thing? Because he doesn't know that bit yet and, you know, it might, like, shock him."

"You reckon?" I deadpan.

"Far better if he thinks it's all his own brilliant idea in a few years' time." She dusts off the knees of her jeans as she stands up.

I nod. If I know Sarah, which I do, she'll have him wrapped round her little finger and more than ready to spontaneously propose whenever she decides the time is right. You know those people that everyone gravitates toward? Those rare effervescent birds who radiate this aura that draws people into their orbit? Sarah's that person.

I first met her right here, the first year of college. I'd decided to go for one of the university rentals rather than halls and I'd picked this place. It's a tall old townhouse split into three: two bigger flats downstairs and our attic

perched on the top like a jaunty afterthought. I was utterly charmed when I first viewed it, my rose-tinted glasses jammed all the way on. You know that shabby-chic little flat Bridget Jones lives in? It reminded me of that, only more shabby and less chic, and I was going to have to share it with a total stranger to meet the rent. None of those drawbacks stopped me from signing on the dotted line; one stranger was easier to contemplate than a crowded, noisy hall full of them. I still remember carting all of my stuff up three flights of stairs on moving-in day, all the time hoping that my new flatmate wasn't going to crush my Bridget Jones fantasy dead.

She'd tacked a welcome note to the door, big, loopy red handwriting scrawled across the back of a used envelope:

Dear new housemate,

Have gone to buy cheap fizzy piss to celebrate our new home. Take the bigger room if you like, I prefer being in stumbling distance of the bog anyway!

S x

And that was it. She had me in the palm of her hand before I'd even laid eyes on her. She's different from me in lots of ways, but we share exactly enough middle ground to get on like a house on fire. She's in-your-face gorgeous with waves of fire-engine-red hair that almost reach her ass, and her figure is amazing, though she doesn't care how she looks.

Normally someone like her would make me feel like the ugly sister, but Sarah has this way of making you feel good about yourself. The first thing she said to me when she got back from the corner shop that day was, "Fucking

hell! You're a dead ringer for Elizabeth Taylor. We're going to have to get a deadlock on the door or else we're gonna cause a riot."

She was exaggerating, of course. I don't look very much like Elizabeth Taylor. I have my French maternal grandmother to thank for my dark hair and blue eyes; she was quite a celebrated ballerina in her twenties; we have the prized programs and grainy press cuttings to prove it. But I've always thought of myself as more of a failed Parisian; I have inherited my grandmother's form but not her grace, and her neat brunette chignon has become a permanently electrocuted mass of curls in my hands. Besides, there's no way I'd ever have the discipline for dancing; I'm far too fond of an extra chocolate biscuit. I'm going to be a goner when my metabolism catches up with me.

Sarah jokingly refers to us as the prozzie and the princess. In truth, she's not got an ounce of slut in her and I'm nowhere near ladylike enough for a princess. Like I said, we meet in the middle and we make each other laugh. She's Thelma to my Louise, hence the reason I'm disconcerted that she's suddenly fallen hook, line, and sinker for a guy I haven't even met or vetted for suitability.

"Do we have enough booze, do you think?" she asks now, casting a critical eye over the bottles lined up across the kitchen work surface. No one could call it a sophisticated collection; it's pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap supermarket special offer wine and vodka we've been hoarding for the last three months to make sure our party is one to remember.

Or not remember, perhaps.

"More than. People will bring a bottle too," I say. "It's going to be great." My stomach rumbles, reminding me that neither of us has eaten since breakfast.

“Did you hear that?” I say, rubbing my middle. “My guts just asked you to make a DS special.”

Sarah’s sandwiches are the stuff of Delancey Street myth and legend. She’s taught me her holy breakfast trinity of bacon, beetroot, and mushrooms, and it took us the best part of two years to settle on our signature dish, the DS special, named after our flat.

She rolls her eyes, laughing. “You can make it yourself, you know.”

“Not the way you do it.”

She preens a little, opening the fridge. “That’s true.”

I watch her layer chicken and blue cheese with lettuce, mayo, and cranberry, an exact science that I’ve yet to master. I know it sounds hideous, but trust me, it’s not. It may not be your average student food, but ever since we hit on the winning combo back in our uni days we make sure to always have the ingredients in the fridge. It’s pretty much our staple diet. That, ice cream, and cheap wine.

“It’s the cranberry that does it,” I say after my first bite.

“It’s a quantity thing,” she says. “Too much cranberry and it’s basically a jam sandwich. Too much cheese and you’re licking a teenager’s dirty sock.”

I raise my sandwich for another bite, but she lunges and pushes my arm down. “Wait. We need a drink with it to get us in the party mood.”

I groan, because I realize what she’s going to do when she reaches for two shot glasses. She’s laughing under her breath already as she reaches into the back of the cupboard behind the cereal boxes for the dusty bottle.

“Monks’ piss,” she says, pouring us each a ceremonial shot. Or Benedictine, to give the old herbal liqueur that came with the flat its proper name. The bottle informs us that it’s a special blend of secret herbs and spices, and on

first taste not long after we moved in we decided that one of those secret ingredients was almost certainly Benedictine monks' piss. Every now and then, usually at Christmas, we have one shot each, a ritual we've come to enjoy and loathe in equal measures.

"Down the hatch." She grins, sliding a glass across the table to me as she sits back down. "Happy Christmas, Lu."

We clink and then knock our shots back, banging the empty glasses down on the table and wincing.

"Doesn't get any better with age," I whisper, feeling as if it's taken the skin off the roof of my mouth.

"Rocket fuel," she rasps, laughing. "Eat your sandwich, you've earned it."

We lapse into sandwich silence, and when we've finished she taps the rim of her empty plate.

"I think, because it's Christmas, that we could add a sausage."

I shake my head. "You can't mess with the DS special."

"There isn't much in life that can't be improved by a saveloy, Laurie." She raises her eyebrows at me. "You never know, you might get lucky tonight and see David's."

Given the last two blind dates Sarah set me up on, I don't let the prospect overexcite me.

"Come on," I say, dumping the plates in the sink. "We'd better get ready, they'll be here soon."

I'm three glasses of white in and definitely very relaxed when Sarah finds me and literally drags me from the kitchen by the hand.

"He's here," she whispers, crushing the bones of my fingers. "Come and say hi. You have to meet him right now."

I smile apologetically at David as she pulls me away. I'm starting to see what Sarah meant about him being a

grower. He's made me laugh several times already and he's kept my glass topped off; I'd just been considering a tiny exploratory snog. He's nice enough in a vaguely Ross from *Friends* kind of way, but I find I'm more intrigued to meet Sarah's soulmate, which must mean that Ross from *Friends* would be a regret come tomorrow. It's as good a barometer as any.

She tugs me through our laughing, drunk friends and a whole load of people I'm not sure either of us even know, until finally we reach her boyfriend standing uncertainly by the front door.

"Laurie," Sarah is jittery and bright-eyed. "Meet Jack. Jack, this is Laurie. *My* Laurie," she adds, for emphasis.

I open my mouth to say hello and then I see his face. My heart jumps into my throat and I feel as if someone just laid electric shock pads on my chest and turned them up to full fry. I can't get any words to leave my lips.

I know him.

It feels like just last week I saw him first—and last. That heart-stopping glimpse from the top deck of a crowded bus twelve months ago.

"Laurie." He says my name, and I could cry with the sheer relief of him being here. It's going to sound crazy but I've spent the last year wishing, hoping I'd run into him. And now he's here. I've scoured countless crowds for his face and I've searched for him in bars and cafes. I'd all but given up on ever finding bus boy, even though Sarah swears I've gone on about him so much that she'd even recognize him herself.

She didn't, as it turned out. Instead she's presented him to me as the love of her life.

Green. His eyes are green. Tree moss vivid around the iris edges, warm amber gold seeping in around his pupils. But it's not the *color* of his eyes that strikes me so much

as the look in them right now as he gazes down at me. A startled flash of recognition. A dizzying, headlong collision. And then it's gone in a heartbeat, leaving me unsure if the sheer force of my own longing made me imagine it had been there at all.

"Jack," I manage, thrusting my hand out. *His name is Jack.* "It's so good to meet you."

He nods, a skittish half-smile flickering over his lips. "Laurie."

I glance toward Sarah, crazy guilty, certain that she must be able to sense something amiss, but she's just grinning at us both like a loon. Thank God for cheap wine.

When he takes my hand in his, warm and strong, he shakes it firmly, politely almost, as if we're meeting in a formal boardroom rather than at a Christmas party.

I don't know what to do with myself, because all of the things I want to do wouldn't be okay. True to my word, I don't orgasm on the spot, but there is definitely something going on with my heart. How on earth has this colossal fuck-up happened? He can't be Sarah's. He's mine. He's been mine for an entire year.

"Isn't she fabulous?"

Sarah has her hand on the small of my back now, presenting me, actually propelling me toward him to hug because she's desperate for us to be new best friends. I'm wretched.

Jack rolls his eyes and laughs nervously, as if Sarah's obviousness makes him uncomfortable.

"Just as splendid as you said she was," he agrees, nodding as if he's admiring a friend's new car, and something horribly like an apology creeps into his expression as he looks at me. Is he apologizing because he remembers or because Sarah is behaving like an overeager aunt at a wedding?

“Laurie?” Sarah turns her attention to me. “Isn’t he every bit as gorgeous as I said he was?” She’s laughing, proud of him, as well she should be.

I nod. Swallow painfully, even as I force a laugh. “He certainly is.”

Because Sarah is so desperately keen for us to like each other, Jack obligingly leans in and touches his lips briefly against my cheek. “It’s good to meet you,” he says. His voice matches him perfectly; coolly confident, rich, shot through with gentle, knowing wit. “She never shuts up about you.”

My fingers close around the familiarity of my purple pendant, looking for comfort as I force a laugh, shaky. “I feel as if I know you too.” And I do; I feel as if I have known him forever. I want to turn my face and catch his lips with my own. I want to drag him breathlessly to my room and close the door, tell him that I love him, strip off my clothes and climb into bed with him, drown in the woody, clean, warm scent of his skin.

I’m in hell. I hate myself. I take a couple of steps away from him for my own sanity and grapple with my wretched heart to stop it from banging louder than the music.

“Drink?” Sarah suggests, light-hearted and loud.

He nods, grateful to be thrown a lifeline.

“Laurie?” Sarah looks at me to go with them.

I lean back and peer down the hallway toward the bathroom, jiggling as if I’m in dire need of the toilet. “I’ll catch you up.” I need to get away from him, from them, from this.

In the safety of the bathroom, I slam the door and slide onto my backside with my head in my hands, gulping air down so as not to cry.

Oh God, oh God. Oh God! I love Sarah, she’s my sister in all but biology. But this . . . I don’t know how to navigate safely through it without sinking the ship with all of

us aboard. Hope flares bright in my chest as I fantasize running out there and just blurting out the truth, because maybe then Sarah will realize that the reason she's so drawn to him is that, subconsciously, she recognized him as bus boy. God knows I've all but drawn him for her. What a misunderstanding! How we'll laugh at the sheer absurdity! But . . . then what? She graciously steps aside and he is *my* new boyfriend, easy as pie? I don't even think he recognized me, for Christ's sake!

Lead-heavy defeat crushes the delicate, ridiculous hope as reality creeps in. I can't do it. Of course I can't. She has no clue, and Jesus, she's so happy. It shines from her brighter than the star of fucking Bethlehem. It might be Christmas, but this is actual life, not some crappy Hollywood movie. Sarah is my best friend in the entire world, and however much and for however long it kills me, I'll never silently, secretly hold up signs to tell Jack O'Mara, without hope or agenda, that to me he is perfect, and that my wasted heart will always love him.

WAYS TO
HIDE
IN WINTER



A NOVEL

SARAH ST. VINCENT

Ways to Hide in Winter

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This is a work of fiction. The story is profoundly tied to its setting and therefore refers to a number of real places and institutions. With the exception of certain historical and political events, however, all aspects of the story are solely the product of the author's imagination. These include characters, dialogue, incidents, reputations, and interiors of buildings. The views characters express regarding businesses, agencies, or the fictional individuals who hold particular positions are likewise wholly invented and should not be regarded as the views of the author or statements of fact.

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The last of the deer hunters had come through for the day, and I was closing the store, counting the cash and watching the snow turn the gravel parking lot into a dappled expanse of white on gray. Someone had abandoned a car there a few weeks back, an ancient brown Subaru that was gradually succumbing to a shroud of whiteness, its tires deflating. A silence wound its way through the pines, slipping on the hidden, frozen creeks, drifting quickly on the wind. The hunters brought it in on their boots, brushed it from their hats, felt the remnants of it on their lips and fingers. When they ordered, the words were soft and gruff, as if this were no place for sound.

There was an old plastic broom on the porch, and I used it to knock the snow off the metal signboard before dragging it inside. *Sandwiches*, it announced. *Ice Cream. Hot Coffee*. Illustrated with silhouettes of a steaming mug, a man's hand giving a thumbs-up. The porch, with its picnic tables balanced carefully on eroding cement, was covered in a layer of dirt, a few spots of ash where the hunters sat if they didn't feel like leaving the cold. They would hunch there in their thick jackets, faces looking ageless behind their beards as they smoked. Sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours, they would stay there, gazing at the old iron smelter that stood just down the hill, exposed to the elements, its proud limestone chimney slowly crumbling and falling.

There were still a few trail-hikers in the forest, too, the diehards, mostly retired men with time on their hands, even though it was dangerous to venture into the park at this time of year. The trails were overgrown, their markers obscured by snow, and the hunters—cautious as they were—had been known to mistake many things for deer.

I left the sign swinging in a corner and moved behind the counter. Outside, the snow was growing thicker, and I knew I should go—should have left hours earlier, in fact. I lifted the half-full coffeepot

from the burner with my right arm—the good one—and tilted it over the sink, but then paused. On the other side of the window, the clouds seemed to trap the light against the earth, reflecting it from snow to cloud and back again, prolonging the dusk. The wind stirred the tops of the pines, making them ripple against the sky, bending and rising under the great invisible thing that moved them, as if they were underwater.

Watching them, the coffeepot heavy in my hand, I leaned against the edge of the sink. The wind grazed the edges of the building, humming. I chewed my lip.

Then, reaching for a styrofoam cup, I poured in a stream of the black liquid, dumped in a spoonful of sugar, and went out.

The store had once been a stable and was long and narrow, made from blocks of limestone probably hauled in from the quarries that had been just down the road. Standing under the low wooden roof of the porch, I leaned back against the wall, sipping the coffee and looking out over the mountains. Below me, the empty trail unfurled along the edge of a steep drop, past the fallen smelter and vacant campground, on its long, forbidding march from Maine to Georgia. Up the hill, the windows in the two-story brick hostel were all dark, giving the place a grim, haunted look; the manager, I knew, had left that morning to visit his mother in town, and there hadn't been a guest in weeks. The summer cabins up the road were similarly empty, surrounded by walls of stacked, frozen cordwood. Viewed from above, their roofs, like the store's and hostel's, would have looked like lost islands in a river of trees.

A cold tongue of wind touched my face, and I felt the familiar ache in my shoulder. Planting a hand in my pocket, I took another swallow of coffee. A car passed by on the state road just up the slope, sending vibrations through the hard, frozen air.

When it was gone, the park once again wrapped itself in stillness. Even now, in 2007, this was a corner of the world that had been left in peace, tucked away in the forgotten forests of Pennsylvania, high in the northernmost tendrils of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In my great-grandfather's time, the quarries up here had crawled with the to-and-fro of laborers; now, they were just a pair of lakes where, if you were to stand on the bottom, you could look up and see the legs of swimmers and the bottoms of aimless canoes. Or at least, that's what you would see in the summer. At this time of year, you would be

trapped under a foot of ice and—more often than not—the only other person for miles around would be me.

Finishing the dregs of the coffee, I crushed the cup and went in, plucking a dirty ashtray from one of the tables as I passed. The door banged shut behind me.

I slipped my library book into my purse and turned in a circle, making sure everything was turned off, the grill and the coffee machine and the deep-fryer that left my skin smelling like hot oil. My eyes swept over the small space, skimming past the blurred reflections of the young woman with the pointed elbows who turned with me.

Of course, everything was turned off. I had never forgotten.

Just as I was reaching into my pocket for the keys, the door hinges groaned behind me. Jumping in surprise, I spun to face the front of the store, realizing even as I did it that I was moving much too quickly, making a mistake. Pain sang through my hip and shot down my arm in a dart, hard and searing, the shock of it running through me like a blade.

Gasping and bending nearly double, I found myself standing with my back against the grill, staring at a wide-eyed stranger.

“Please don’t scream! I’m so sorry. Please don’t scream.”

The stranger was tall and thin, wearing jeans and a padded brown jacket that was much too large for him, black hair protruding from under a dirty knit cap, a scarf wrapped over his nose and mouth. His hands were bare and half-raised, as if in surrender.

“What do you want?” I asked. My hip throbbed, and I gripped it with both hands, pressing down against the muscles that had seized over the bone. The pain sent a cloud across my vision, harsh and blue and electric, and for a moment I thought I would have to kneel on the floor.

The stranger’s eyes were wide and black above the scarf. “I’m very sorry. Are you all right?”

With an effort, I nodded.

“I saw the light on,” he continued, obviously alarmed. “I thought your store was open.”

“It’s not my store. And it’s closed.” Facing him, I caught my breath. “What were you coming in for?”

“Nothing, nothing—please don’t worry about it.” He lowered his palms and glanced around, seeming to take in the shelves of insect repellent and canned sausages, the ice cream case, the telephone that

had been dead since the fire. “I was just looking for something hot to drink.”

I gave him a long, doubtful look, keeping a grip on my side as I slowly straightened. “We’re closed,” I said again.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to trouble you. In fact, I’m really just looking for the man—the, ah . . . whoever runs this little hotel, up the hill. I thought you might know where he was. Or she.” He tugged the scarf down, revealing thin lips and cheeks that were sunken, famished-looking, maybe feverish. He was young, I thought—or at least, a few years younger than I was. Maybe twenty-five.

“He’s away. He won’t be back until tomorrow.”

The stranger fingered the buttons on his coat, considering this piece of information. “Is there somewhere else to stay?”

“No.” I looked him up and down, beginning to grow curious in spite of myself. “It’s a state park. There’s nothing around here for miles. You’d have to go into town.”

His eyebrows drew together, and he leaned back slightly. “Ah.” A thoughtful pause. “You mean . . .”

“Carlisle. It’s about ten miles north of here.”

“Ten miles,” he echoed. “I see.”

Behind him, through the screen door, I could see the snow, even heavier now. A gust of cold reached me where I stood, still pressing a hand against my side, as if to silence a voice there.

The stranger looked over his shoulder, rubbing his bare fingers together as he took in the same sight. As I watched him, my conscience began to get the better of me; even so, I was surprised to hear myself speak.

“I have a key to the hostel,” I said. “I could probably let you in.”

He turned back to me. “Really? That would be most kind of you.”

“Just until Martin gets back. Then you’ll have to talk to him. I’m not sure if he’ll want to keep the place open for just one person.”

The key was on a hook behind the ice cream case, empty at this time of year except for a lone and inexplicable drum of strawberry, which I dipped into from time to time as I sat at the counter and read. Sometimes entire days went by without anyone coming in. The store’s owner, a placid and forgetful man, long since retired to South Carolina, made most of his money during the summer; he kept me on during the colder months largely out of charity, I knew. I reached for the key without taking my eyes off the stranger.

“Is your car in the lot out here?”

He removed his hat and held it in his hands, knitting his long fingers into the fabric. His hair was limp and untrimmed. “No, I—I don’t have a car, actually.”

“You walked?” His shoes were odd, resembling dress shoes but cheap and rubbery, with heavy soles and fragile-looking laces. Not at all suited for hiking, and possibly not even suited for walking.

“No, I was given a ride. It would be a long way to walk, wouldn’t it?”

I realized I was squinting at him, this man with the peculiar face and even more peculiar accent. “It would.”

“My bag is on the porch,” he said, still fingering his hat. “But of course, I can carry it.”

“All right.” I reached for my coat and pulled it on, fastening the buttons. It was long and gray, left over from my time in college, still warm despite the holes in the lining that I’d never bothered to fix. In a few more years it would grow visibly shabby, and then I would consider replacing it, but in the meantime there wouldn’t be anyone to notice. My grandmother, with whom I lived, was increasingly blind.

He did have a suitcase, small and blue and wheeled. We stepped out from under the porch awning and walked side-by-side to the path that led up the hill. Above us, the hostel was still dark, a lonely mass of brick. Once a dormitory for the ironworkers who had journeyed across the sea from Ireland, Scotland, Germany, it was now a bare-bones refuge for the masses who came through on the trail—the Appalachian Trail, the one that put us on the map—in the summer. I unlocked the entrance, handed the stranger a set of sheets and towels, and showed him where to sign his name in the guest book. “You can pay Martin tomorrow. That’s the manager. Pick any room with a cot in it.”

“Thank you,” he said, but I was already stomping outside in my heavy boots, going home.

The next morning’s light was thin and gray, the clouds hanging over the sun. It was still snowing. I rolled over in the cold sheets, drawing the afghans around me. The pills sometimes made me forget where I was upon waking, giving me a long moment of confusion as I examined the stains on the ceiling. The feeling never lasted for long, though.

Everything came back eventually, even if it didn't always come back all at once.

I did my best to stay wrapped in the blankets as I sat up and leaned against the wall, letting the world come into focus from my place on the mattress on the floor. Through the window, I could see the field with its mossy brown Herefords, the bleak gash of Route 233, the family plot with its row of gently leaning headstones. It was Sunday, and somewhere across the fields a bell sounded. A horse and cart appeared on the road and passed with the rhythmic, fading sound of hooves. Probably a Mennonite family heading to the church a few miles west in Walnut Bottom, I thought, gripping a blanket under my chin. Sometimes I wondered if they really felt as religious as they looked, the Mennonites, with their men in somber black hats and their women in those plain dresses and stiff-looking hairnets. Maybe they just got into the habit of doing things the way they did them, and that was why they bothered to rig up a horse and buggy every Sunday, even in the winter.

Aside from them, not a soul seemed to be stirring; even the cows were lounging on their sides, watching over their shoulders as the buggy receded out of sight. The railroad tracks that passed by the house were silent, stretching emptily to the east and west.

After a little while, there was a shuffling sound downstairs, a cough, a stream of water pouring from a tap. I could picture my grandmother standing in front of the kitchen sink in her robe, clutching a glass of water, returning to bed. Sure enough, the shuffling soon retreated in the direction from which it had come. Outside, a dog barked several times, as if it had spotted a stranger, and then stopped.

The stranger. Rubbing my eyes, I pushed myself to my feet and walked down the hall to the bathroom, turning the knob in the shower. If he was still on the mountain, I realized as the water struck my skin, then he was alone there, probably with no food. Martin's closet-sized kitchen rarely contained more than bread and milk, and the hunters would be crouched in silent, camouflaged lumps in the woods by now. Martin himself would be dealing rummy hands at the United Methodist nursing home in Carlisle until the evening.

I could have called him, told him he had a guest.

Instead I got into the Jeep and set off toward the winding roads that led upward.

Who was this stranger? Russian? Greek? I had never met a Russian,

or any Greeks aside from the dark-haired, weary-looking family who ran the diner in Carlisle, but couldn't think of any other guesses. A married man, it seemed—I had glimpsed a gold band the previous day—but alone. Alone in rural Pennsylvania, in the woods. A state park built around some flooded quarries and an abandoned iron smelter. An empty hostel next to a store that sold little more than firewood and beans. A place that was miles away from anywhere, where even the telephone and electricity lines were unreliable thanks to the fire that had swept over the mountain a few months earlier. I couldn't understand it.

There was just no reason for a person to be there in December unless he was searching for a quiet place to shoot deer.

The radio signal faded as I made the steep climb, passing through the stands of live pines and, every few hundred yards, the stands of burned ones. Birches and maples. A few red oaks. The maples, when I noticed them, always made me think of the two trees in the yard behind my grandmother's house—the ones my father had planted when my brother and I had been born. It was my brother who had taught me to keep cars like this one running, or rather, had let me watch while he taught his friends; the rest I'd eventually figured out myself. I listened to the murmur of the engine as I steered around a bend, the whispering sound as snow and ice gave way under the tires.

The stranger was sitting on the porch in front of the store when I pulled into the lot, slamming the car door and approaching noisily in my boots. Same knit cap on his head, same tan scarf pulled over his nose and mouth. Looking out, it seemed, over the long, undulating slopes of the mountains draped in fog. He gave a jerk when the car first appeared, rising to his feet with a wary look, as if he might run. When he recognized me, however, he sat back down and even gave a small wave.

"Hey," I said neutrally, wiping my shoes on the cement and digging the key out of my pocket as I passed him.

"Hello!" His eyes were no longer feverish, but inquisitive, even merry. "Is something the matter? I thought your store was closed today."

"It's still not my store." The deadbolt turned back with a satisfying thump. "And it is closed, but I thought you might be hungry." I pushed my way in, dropping my coat and book on the floor. The lights came on with a flickering buzz. "What do you want?"

He followed me in, startled, looking like a courteous but starved wolf. “Oh, no. I don’t need anything.”

I crossed to the other side of the counter and folded my arms over my chest, trying to clear the last of the haze from my mind as I surveyed the terrain. “Egg sandwich? That’s probably the best I can do.”

He stood by the door, hesitant. “Well. If you really don’t mind. All right.”

“If I minded, I wouldn’t offer,” I told him bluntly, turning the knob on the grill. “Coffee? Tea?”

“Yes, tea would be delightful.” The hat had come off; he was staring, forming his replies slowly. “Thank you.”

“Sugar’s over there by the door. I’ll have to open some milk.” I flipped the switch on the coffee maker, which doubled as the hot water machine, and pulled two styrofoam cups from the pile. The grill began to heat, and I scraped it carefully, even though it didn’t need to be scraped. I could sense him behind me, watching, and suddenly became aware that my movements were a kind of methodical flurry, a hurried but well-practiced sequence of pushings and polishings and liftings and turnings, as if I had been programmed to do these things. Vaguely embarrassed, I slowed down.

“You’re from Russia?” I asked, doing my best to sound indifferent.

“What? Oh—no.” He cleared his throat. “That is to say, not really.”

“Not really?”

“My family is Russian. But I’m from Uzbekistan.” He paused. “It’s in central Asia.”

“I know where it is.” The eggs cracked neatly. “Or at least, I have some idea.”

“Really?”

I turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. “Yes, really.” There was, in fact, a map on the wall in my room at my grandmother’s place, one I had tacked up years earlier so I could follow my brother’s deployments. Over time, I’d found that I’d gradually begun to absorb its web of rivers, oceans, borders, all those remote places reduced to blots of blue and gray. “You can sit down, you know. There’s a stool over there somewhere.”

The egg whites crackled and hissed in the oil. I smeared slabs of butter onto English muffins with the spatula, dropping the upturned halves onto paper plates. Unwrapped the cheese, poured the tea, slid the eggs onto the muffins and moved everything over to the counter.

“Here.”

“Oh, I don’t need that much.”

“One’s for me.”

He drew the stool closer, pinching the hot sandwich between his fingertips and spreading a napkin on his lap, waiting for me to take a bite before he began. As we ate, our heads tilting toward one another, I tried not to stare at him—this stranger who was, indeed, so very strange.

“And you?” He swallowed a mouthful of the acidic tea, dabbing at his mouth politely. “Where are you from?”

I shifted, pressing the soles of my feet against the edge of a shelf beneath the register. “I’m from here.”

“Here?”

I gestured behind me. “Down the mountain. Centerville. It’s a small town—just a couple of houses, really. Well, and a fire station and a store and a library. That’s about it.”

The tea warmed my stomach. Through the steam, I could see him, the delicate-looking line of his scalp as he bent over his sandwich. The same slightly musty smell I had noticed the day before seemed to rise from his coat, and I found myself wondering if he’d slept in it. Then a troubling thought made me examine him more closely. “Was the heat on overnight?”

“You mean at the hotel?” He dabbed at his mouth again. “A little, maybe. Not really. But I had the blankets, of course.”

“I’m sorry.” I closed my eyes, frowning as I lifted the tea to my lips again. “I’ll fix that.”

“It’s all right. I may be leaving before tonight, anyway.” He was looking at me curiously. I was wearing a bulky hooded sweatshirt and men’s jeans, my hair pulled back in a knot that was already coming undone and mouth probably set in that severe, distant line I had recently begun to observe when passing mirrors and shop windows. Where had it come from, that sad, wooden expression? I wasn’t unhappy.

He wiped his fingers painstakingly on a paper towel. “May I ask what your name is?”

“My name? I’m Kathleen.”

“Kathleen—that’s a nice name. I’m Daniil.” He extended his hand carefully and correctly over the paper plates, and we shook. “Thank you for the breakfast.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll give you some soup you can heat up for dinner if you’re still here. That’s pretty much all we’ve got right now.”

“Thank you.” He nodded. “That would be nice.”

“And then I have to go. After I turn on the heat.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

After some searching, I managed to locate some cans of beef stew, which were so dusty I checked each one to make sure it hadn’t expired. He handed me a pair of creased bills that looked as though they had passed through many hands and counted out another dollar in dimes and nickels. Then, almost timidly, he stood with the bag dangling at his side.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, touching his waist.

“What?”

“Your—your side. Yesterday it looked like it hurt you.”

I stopped, standing behind the register, his money in my hand.

“No,” I said after a pause. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“Oh. That’s good. This morning you seemed to be . . .” He hesitated.

“Well, walking a bit unevenly, I suppose. When you got out of the car.”

Heat rose to my face; I could feel it. I pressed my lips together.

“No,” I said again, quietly but firmly. “I’m fine.”

“Yes, of course,” he said hastily, nodding in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. At any rate, thank you once more. It was very kind of you.” When I looked back at him without answering, he cleared his throat. “Well, have a good day, as they say.”

My eyes narrowed, I watched him go, the bag of cans banging against the door as he closed it behind him. For a moment, I stood there, drumming my fingers against the Formica. Then I locked the store—after all, I had no reason to stick around—and walked to the car, pulling off in the direction of town. I never really relished going there, but I had things to do—groceries to buy, my grandmother’s medications to pick up, all the little tasks that kept our lives moving like a second hand ticking around a clock.

I pressed my foot against the gas, letting the tires find the ruts in the snow that still hadn’t been plowed. The road cut through the trees, white and smooth, like a path in a fairy tale. The woods seemed to wrap themselves around me as I turned on the headlights. It had an undeniable power, this place, a kind of majesty. I tried to disappear into the feeling of it as the forest passed by outside my window, dense and motionless, a wall of slender brown columns.

Then there was a gap, a long, empty stretch where a pair of ruts led down to one of the lakes. It appeared and was gone just as quickly, flickering by on my right. Slowing, I found myself looking back at it in my rearview mirror.

Before I knew it, I had pulled over.

There were two lakes in the park, Laurel and Fuller, both of which stood where the quarries had once been. When I was a child, bits of blue and green slag from the old iron smelter had still washed up on the sand that had been trucked in. My brother and I would walk along the shore and collect them, along with pebbles and snail shells and shining fragments of charcoal. Laurel was the shallower of the two and was always crowded in summer—small children with their mothers, Boy Scouts, softball teams, fishermen. Laurel had pavilions and grills, fire pits. When I'd gotten married, we'd had the reception there, outdoors, under the sun. Surrounded by hordes of happy, frolicking strangers.

Fuller was something different: smaller, deeper, darker, encircled by pines. Fuller was where, when I was sixteen, I would lie on the sand late at night, long after the park had closed, and look up at the stars in their endless, stoic expanse. Where I brought friends, the ones who could stand the silence. Sometimes, coyotes would bay, or a small nocturnal animal would crash through the brush, but otherwise nothing stirred. By day, it was just as still. Few people swam at Fuller. It was too isolated, too chilly, too overwhelming in its indifference, its unchanging beauty.

Grabbing my book, I tramped through the woods to Fuller, drawing my coat around me and following the slight downward slope until I could see a clearing through the trees. A few more steps and there it was: the great, pale expanse of the lake, ice streaked with snow that glittered under the empty sky. A ring of pines surrounded the void like sentries, stretching back over the mountain, dark and imposing, keeping watch.

A pair of picnic tables stood near the shore, and I walked over to them. With a gloved hand, I brushed the snow off one of the benches and sat, opening the novel I was carrying. The pines stretched overhead, seeming to bend and converge at their tips.

The wind stirred the pages, tugging them from my fingers. I put the book aside restlessly and rose, stepping closer to the lake that seemed to draw me toward it, its very blankness beckoning to me. How thick was the ice? I'd never seen anyone skating here, but that

didn't necessarily mean anything. Most people, aside from the hunters, wouldn't care to risk the steep curves the road made as it wound its way up the side of the mountain. Not in December.

Edging up to the shoreline, I touched the ice with a foot, and something tightened in my chest.

It didn't matter what people thought they saw when they looked at me. I didn't limp.

I let out a breath. The cold air was sharp in my lungs, making me feel even more alert than usual to every movement around me, every sound.

Tentatively, I slid my foot all the way onto the ice, then took a step. The surface was firm beneath me, seeming to push back against my heels. The breeze reached through my clothes, and I shivered, feeling something inside me twist, like hard, dead vines being wrung tight.

I didn't limp. I didn't.

I took a second step, elbows pressed against my sides. There was a low sound as snow yielded under me, crushed into footprints. Otherwise, the world remained devoid of noise.

I looked out over the gray plain that stretched around me. Our wedding, mine and Amos's, had been held in a chapel on this mountain, St. Eleanor Regina—a falling-down clapboard place in a clearing, one with a handful of windows to let in the sunlight, a priest who came through once every couple of weeks.

It was what I had wanted.

I scuffed a foot against the surface. The twisting feeling grew tighter, as if something within me would rub together too hard and spark.

I stood still.

Then suddenly I was marching forward, half-running, feet pounding against the ice. My breath came quickly as I lifted my boots, one after the other, traces of snow scattering behind me. The hot, clenched feeling burned inside me, pressing against my heart and making me stumble. I banged my knee against the surface, hard, and gasped but pushed on. Slipping and scrambling, I went out fifty feet from shore, then a hundred, then two hundred, farther and farther.

Before I knew it, I had reached the center of the lake.

I came to a stop, panting. The ice stretched out around me, wide and smooth, a hundred yards or more to each point of the shore.

The cold had brought tears to my eyes, and I wiped them roughly with the back of my hand, legs trembling, pretending not to feel my

hip burning and my shoulder throbbing where the pins had been put in. Steam rose from my mouth as I breathed.

When I shifted my foot, the ice creaked, sending a jolt through my nerves. I moved quickly to what felt like a thicker patch and crossed my arms over my chest, listening to the rush of my breath.

The space before me was deserted, as quiet and stark as the surface of the moon. Tipping my head back, I gazed up at the sky and the dark, ragged points of the treetops.

Sweat coated my temples and the back of my neck, and I could feel my pulse thudding. Feeling both sick and exhilarated, I let myself drop onto a thin layer of snow, sitting back and letting it soak through my jeans.

I would never know why I did these things, not really. Most of the time, for the past four years, I had felt as though I were enveloped in a haze of fear, a low sense of terror that hummed and crackled in the background, making me flinch when I lit the gas stove, when I drove in the rain, when I mounted the ladder to fix the gutter. And yet, every so often, I flung myself into danger as if it were the only thing I wanted, as if I could only be alive in moments as swift and violent as the one that had frightened me the most.

When the surface beneath me remained solid, I gradually began to relax, realizing I'd been holding my breath. After a few minutes, I unfolded backward, lying down to look up at the sky.

Okay, I thought, waiting for my racing heart to slow.

The mountain, I could guess, had never been a welcoming place to live, plagued as it was with blizzards in the winter, damp heat and clouds of mosquitoes in the summer. No doubt my great-grandfather had suffered here when he was mining, and the prisoners who had later been held in the camp down the road probably hadn't had an easy time of it, either. Although, I thought as I rested there, maybe it was just the same where they'd come from. They were long gone anyway, the prisoners, and nobody thought about them much anymore. Hidden in life and almost as hidden in death, remembered only by a few retirees who had time on their hands and saw fit to look into these things, driving up on sunny days to pester the park rangers with questions—uselessly, I thought, since the rangers didn't seem to know any more about it than anyone else did.

I picked up a handful of snow, squeezing it, letting it crumble in my fingers.

There were times when the days seemed to slip away so quickly, one after the other, like paper boats going over a waterfall, until one morning—this morning—I had found myself waking in the cold at my grandmother's, twenty-seven, alone, body curled tightly under the sheets like some hibernating thing. I didn't know how it had happened, how I had gotten to be this old, the years falling through my hands before I could catch them. Standing undressed in front of the mirror before I got into the shower, I almost hadn't known who I was, my face sharp with cares, my limbs shivering, wrapping my arms around myself to keep warm.

She never was able to light the woodstove properly, my grandmother.

I gazed up into the gray of the atmosphere. The longer I looked at it, the more it seemed to deepen, revealing itself to be finely graded, clouds blending into one another almost imperceptibly. I waited to see if a bird or an airplane would cross the sky, or something else would come along to break the stillness, but nothing did. I was alone, as alone as I could ever wish to be.

If I fell through, I thought, no one would see me. I would just disappear into the water. Maybe they'd find me in the spring, and maybe they wouldn't.

A strange feeling ran up my spine at the thought, but I stayed where I was. The sky above me remained empty, as if some previous sky had been erased.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before I heard a sound in the woods; nothing much—a small shifting and crackling—but enough to make me come back to myself and peer around.

Rolling onto my side, I rocked forward and slowly pushed myself to my feet. Whatever it was I'd been trying to prove, I'd proven it. There was no reason to linger.

Carefully, I began picking my way back to the shore, passing my own footprints in the dusting of snow, trying not to notice that the left ones were slightly elongated. My breath quickened again with effort, and I leaned forward, appreciating for the first time just how far out I had gone. From here, the picnic tables looked like little more than children's toys.

At last I reached the sand and stepped onto it, exhaling with a startled sound. For a moment I bent in half, hands on my knees, stomach fluttering. My mind seemed to draw back together, rejoining itself from the places where it had scattered.

What a stupid thing to have done.

I stayed there, letting my head hang between my shoulders, feeling the weight of my boots in the snow. Finally I straightened, bracing myself against my knees and ignoring the ache that was spreading in my bones, the numbness of my exposed skin. I stumbled to the Jeep and turned the heat as high as it would go, gripping the wheel as I rested my head against it. Then I put the car into gear, continuing north through the forest that petered out into the foothills.

In town, I did what had to be done, taking care of my business the way I always did.

“Grandma,” I said as I entered the house that night, pushing the door tightly against the jamb. She was in her orange overstuffed chair, facing away from me, her eyes on the television although she probably couldn’t see much more than a blur of light. *The Price Is Right* was on, as it somehow always was. Someone, a brunette in her forties, had just correctly guessed the price of laundry detergent and was jumping up and down on the stage, her hands clasped over her mouth, ecstatic. A curl of cigarette smoke rose over my grandmother’s head. “Where’s the sewing box?”

“In the kitchen closet. On top of the old microwave.” She didn’t turn around. “What do you need it for?”

“My coat’s torn.” My joints were still aching, but I strode as evenly as I could back into the kitchen at the rear of the old farmhouse, opening the narrow closet. The sewing box—an old cookie tin that rattled with buttons—was there, a rusting dull green. I carried it up to my room and sat heavily on the mattress.

“Beth called,” my grandmother bellowed from below.

“Okay,” I said, drawing my knees to my chest and leaning back against the wall. It wasn’t much warmer in the room than it was outside. I draped a blanket over my shoulders and glanced around at the bare space, the stacks of books and folded clothes in the corners, the map. *I need to remind her how to re-light the woodstove*, I thought, and opened the tin, searching for a needle.

When I found it, however, I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. It was amazing, I thought: the things we did that no one else knew about, that didn’t leave a sign, that we ourselves almost couldn’t believe.

When the night came, I turned off the light, curling up on my side and reaching under the mattress to feel for the paper bag I knew

was there. Pinching two of the small ovals, I slipped them into my mouth and held them on my tongue for a moment before swallowing them without water. They were slightly bitter but otherwise tasted of nothing.

It was then that I realized I had never turned on the heat for the stranger. Even as the thought entered my mind, however, the deep red curtain fell over me, weighing on me, sending me into sleep.

2

The next morning was brighter, the sun slipping over the horizon as I stood in the bathroom, prodding my knee where I'd smacked it against the ice. There was an ugly bruise there, painful to the touch, but it was nothing. I pulled my clothes on, the fabric sliding up over the old scars, and turned my back on my reflection as I switched off the light.

Outside, I checked the mailbox, hoping for a postcard from my brother, as I always did. He'd left the valley years earlier, marrying a girl from Texas, someone he'd met in basic training, and moving from base to base before finally being sent overseas. I sometimes found a note from him among the bills and Publishers Clearing House envelopes, although not very often. When I did, the handwriting was always slanted and sparse, as if he were writing while running. Maybe he was.

The mailbox was empty.

The light was just breaking through the clouds as I drove the five miles to the gas station. At this hour, the only other people there were truckers, holding steaming cups of coffee as they chatted with one another, leaning against their rigs. One of them I thought I recognized from high school—elementary school, really. He was heavyset, with a pale, doughy face and hair in a crewcut. His father had been a trucker, too, I remembered, driving eighteen-wheelers for the potato chip company down in Hanover. John, the son, had always had a gravelly voice and almost dog-like friendliness, rasping good-naturedly to anyone who passed by. We'd been confirmed in the same church, long ago, two of the only Catholic children in the area, our families holding out somehow against the gulf of stern Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism and fiery Lutheranism that surrounded us. I still remembered kneeling next to him at our First Communion, envying his dirty knees and scuffed shoes as I sat there in my silly white dress.

I walked into the station as briskly as I could, staring straight ahead. The truckers' eyes followed me, then dropped down to their cups. Only John continued to watch, his gaze meeting mine accidentally. I nodded, not knowing what else to do, and he nodded back, giving me the shy, cautious half-smile people had been giving me since the accident. Some of them remembered the rumors and were uncomfortable, I could tell; others simply didn't know what to say. It didn't matter; I wasn't angry with them, not anymore. After all, I didn't know what to say, either. Maybe there was nothing to be said.

The sun shone through the trees as I wound my way back up the mountain, a rapid patter of light and shade playing against the windows. The bottoms of the trunks were still blackened in places, but the branches were uplifted, tall and defiant, as if there had never been a fire. Farther on, the blue-and-gold memorial to the three girls passed by, a dark blot backlit by the sun. I wondered, at times, who maintained it. It had been there for some seventy years, the signboard with its short, stark sentences, and yet it never leaned, never faded. The paint was always fresh. One of the more thoughtful retirees, I imagined, some aging farmer who snuck out early in the morning to touch up the gold lettering and returned home before anyone could discover this strange impulse of anonymous kindness, this sentimentality about someone else's long-ago tragedy.

The porch outside the store was empty, which gave me a small twinge of pleasure as I pulled into the lot. A few minutes later, I was sitting at one of the dusty tables, feet propped up on a chair, attempting to find my page. Martin, I noticed, had returned from Carlisle, a jumble of what looked like metal parts filling the back of his station wagon. I wondered if he had met the stranger yet—assuming, of course, that the stranger was still there.

The book was slow going. Even at the store, in the unbroken quiet, I sometimes found it difficult to follow the story, a fact that puzzled me. During my years in college, I had flown through books, consuming piles and piles of them, as if I were feeding them into a fire. Beth, my best friend, and I had shared a place for a while, two married women temporarily bunking away from our husbands, and together we'd devoured an almost unthinkable number of books. My husband, who was still living and working thirty miles away in Mechanicsburg, preferred that I didn't go out, while her husband was struggling to feed and house himself and Beth on a noncom's salary. And so we read,

sometimes getting so lost in our conversations, our chance to try out ideas without anyone else there to say we were wrong, we forgot to eat the food in front of us. She was usually the one who was brave enough to say something first, and I remembered the sound of our laughter when we said something so bold we didn't know what else to do, looking around as if somebody would surely catch us.

Today, she was one of the few people I could speak to for a long period without losing my concentration, although as the months went by I felt less and less of a need to discuss anything with anyone at all. There was something to be said, I thought, for a quiet life, for self-sufficiency.

Around noon, Martin's wiry figure rounded the corner of the hostel, carrying an armful of branches. Waving with his free hand, he motioned for me to join him. I put the book down and mounted the hill.

"So!" he said, throwing the branches into a pile by the old stump he used for splitting wood. He was short, with a sharp, narrow face that should have been ugly but somehow wasn't—or if it was, I had long since stopped noticing. There was something oddly magnetic about the hopeful expression he always wore, a cheerful alertness that seemed to radiate from his very skin. "You'll never guess what I've got out in the trunk."

"You're right, I probably won't." I watched him pull a hatchet from his coat, testing the blade with his thumb. "What happened? Did your car eat some other car?"

"Very funny. I'm not going to tell you what it is, actually. I can tell you it's going to be awesome when I build it, though. And I mean totally awesome. Like, phenomenal." Bending down, he dragged a branch onto the stump and began quickly chopping it into kindling, pausing to smile up at me as he did so.

I watched him toss the handful of sticks into a pile. "But for some reason I'm not allowed to know what it is?"

"You'll see. I mean, you can try and guess if you want, but I don't think you'll get it." He picked up another branch and broke it into pieces with his hands.

I glanced up at the station wagon.

"Go ahead!" He laughed, his grin showing two gray teeth among the white ones. "Guess."

"Guess? I don't know. A medieval printing press."

“What? Come on—that’s not a real guess. Try again.”

“A Ferris wheel.”

“All right, wisecrack, so you’re not going to play along. That’s okay—you’ll see it soon enough. Man,” he went on, the hatchet knocking against the stump, “I wish I’d invented this thing. I almost did! One of those blueprints I drew up last winter wasn’t far off.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, “whatever happened to that grill thing you built? The one with the old oil drum?”

“That? That’s ancient history. I raffled it off for the church last week.”

“Raffled it off?” I looked up. “After all that work?”

“Sure! Don’t worry, I’ll build another one—maybe even better. Gotta keep busy up here somehow.” He winked. “So how’s your friend?”

I handed him a branch, smelling the deep reassuring smell of black walnut. “What friend?”

“The Russian guy. The odd one.”

“Oh—good, you met him. I was worried he’d skip out without paying.” I hadn’t been worried, really; whoever he was, something about him seemed honest, although it had occurred to me that someone who had appeared so abruptly could probably disappear with just as little notice.

“No, he seems to have decided to hang out for a while. He’s hitchhiking around or something and says he’s enjoying the peace and quiet. I told him if that’s what he’s looking for, then believe me, he’s found it.” Martin straightened. “He’s a lawyer, you know. That’s what he told me.”

“Really?” I pictured the tall, threadbare foreigner standing by the door, face half hidden behind his scarf, hat in his hands.

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” Martin gathered up the split kindling and tipped an imaginary hat. “Thanks for the help,” he said, ambling back toward the hostel in his slightly bowlegged way.

“See you, Martin.” Smiling to myself, I walked back down the hill. I liked Martin, I thought: he had never once asked me a personal question, and I returned the favor. It was one of the best kinds of friendship I could imagine.

In the store, I unwrapped the sandwich I’d bought at the gas station and ate it standing up. There was an old combination radio and cassette player on top of the ice cream case, and although the radio part was useless up here, the tape deck worked fine. Picking a cassette from

the pile on the hidden shelf under the counter, I opened the cracked case and nudged the volume up. A woman's plaintive voice threaded its way through the room, accompanying me as I filled a plastic pail and reached for the mop, diligently erasing footprints and dust with swaths of water. Patsy Cline. I wrung the mop and pushed it methodically, back and forth, under the shelves, into the corners. It was warm in the store, at least, thanks to the grill and the rattling electric heater along the back wall. When I was finished, I made a fresh pot of coffee, leaning back against the counter and inhaling the sharp scent as Patsy warbled in her somehow luxuriant sadness, her melancholy pleasure. Then I refilled the pail and did the chore again, humming, letting myself drift off into the simple rhythm of it, my joints gradually loosening.

"Crazy," I sang with Patsy, letting my voice ripple through the empty aisles while the backup singers chimed in: *ah, ah, ahhhh*. "I'm crazy for feeling so lonely . . ." The wet strands of the mop kept time.

"Excuse me, is this your book?"

I turned sharply. The foreigner was standing in the doorway, wearing the same coat, the same scarf drawn over his mouth, holding a thick hardcover before him. His eyes were bright.

I switched off the tape and looked at him guardedly, taken aback by his seeming ability to materialize out of nowhere.

"Yeah, looks like it," I said shortly. "Did I leave it out on the porch?"

"That's where I found it, yes." He gazed at the cover thoughtfully, pulling his scarf down and running a thumb over the embossed letters of the title. "Is it really yours? You're reading it?"

I bent and lifted the pail of dirty water, trying not to show that this was difficult. "Yes, it's mine." Then, raising an eyebrow, "Why? Do I not look like someone who would read books?"

"Oh." He placed the volume on the counter and rubbed his gloveless hands together. "I'm sorry—that's not what I meant. It's just that it's a very good book. I didn't expect that that was what you would be reading." He winced. "Sorry, I mean that—well, you know, it's a Russian book, and—"

"Never mind. I knew what you meant." I emptied the water in a cascade of brown, then took my place behind the register, sliding the book onto the hidden shelf where he could no longer see it.

He stood with his hands folded in front of him, gazing hesitantly around the store. Something about him looked apologetic, I thought, although—as I remembered belatedly—I was the one who had left him

to shiver through a second mountain night with no heat.

“You want something?” I asked, making an effort to sound, if not friendly, then at least slightly less hostile. “Coffee?”

“Oh—no, thank you. I left my wallet up there at the, ah—” He gestured uphill. “Not the hotel. What did you call it?”

“The hostel.” I reached for the glass pot. “It doesn’t matter—just take some. Whatever I don’t drink by the end of the day just goes to waste anyway.”

I put a cup on the counter and filled it. With a quick look at me, he took it and held it in both hands, as if to warm them.

When he didn’t show any sign of leaving, I had the unfamiliar sensation of realizing I would have to think of something else to say.

“Um. Have you been out hiking?” I glanced around in search of a task with which I could busy myself.

“Hiking? Oh, no. I wish I could, but it’s not good for me to be out in the cold air for very long, unfortunately. I’ve just been, you know, looking around a bit here and there.” He took a sip of the black coffee and grimaced. I pushed the tall glass sugar jar toward him, and he tipped it carefully, watching the thread of sugar disappear into the liquid.

There was something about his face—the set of the eyes, maybe, or the fine-looking line of the jaw, like a bird’s bones—that almost compelled me to look at it. Disconcerted, I turned away from him and settled on cleaning the coffee machine even though it was still hot.

“You’re really in a very pretty place,” he said behind me. “This park, I mean.”

“I’ve always thought so,” I replied, wetting a napkin. It was, in fact, a place so beautiful I sometimes felt as if my entire soul were bound up with it, although I wasn’t about to explain that to a stranger.

“So are you the only one who works here?”

I pulled out the used filter and wiped down the dull metal inside the machine. “I certainly seem to be.”

“I see.” There was a slight pause; I could picture him sweeping his gaze over the small space again. “You’ve been here for a long time?”

I shrugged, keeping my back to him as I rubbed at a stain. “Depends what you mean by ‘a long time,’ I guess.”

“A year or two?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh. Longer?”

I scrubbed harder. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Since you finished university?”

I stopped and looked down at my reflection in the scratched surface of the machine.

“Martin says you’re a lawyer,” I said after a moment, turning and throwing the napkin away. “Is that true?”

He seemed to be studying me. “Martin is the man I met at the hostel?”

“Yes.”

He smiled, although I didn’t see what was funny. “Well, in a sense, yes, I’m a lawyer. I was a lawyer in Uzbekistan, although that isn’t very useful here, I’m afraid.”

“So what brings you here, then?” It was my turn to study him, looking over the rim of my coffee cup as I raised it to my face.

“You mean, to America?”

“Yeah, I guess.” There were thin lines at the corners of his eyes, I noticed, and his brows seemed somehow weighted, as if he spent much of his time thinking about problems that could only be solved with great difficulty.

“I’m a student,” he said simply.

“Oh. You’re on your winter break or something?”

“Yes, something like that.” He rolled the sugar jar between his palms. “So, you like Dostoyevsky?”

I narrowed my eyes—was he about to mock me?—but his face was sincere. I looked down, fingering the book under the counter.

“Yeah, I do,” I said softly, surprising myself with the honesty of the words. Then, “Well. I don’t know, exactly. I mean, I read *The Brothers Karamazov* in school, and it—I guess you could say it drew me in. This one, though . . .”

He waited, watching me expectantly. “You don’t like it?” he said finally.

I bit the inside of my lip. “It’s not that. It’s . . .” I remembered the hours I’d spent hunched over the opening chapters on the very day he’d first walked in, how vividly the scenes had played out before me in the emptiness of the store. “Actually,” I admitted, “I like it very much. It’s just that it’s so focused on the psychology of the main character, the murderer. And as strange as it probably sounds, I still can’t really understand why he killed the old woman to begin with.”

A light came into his eyes. He spoke softly. “Do you happen to have the other chair? May I sit down?”

After a moment of hesitation, I walked to the broom closet and dragged it out for him.

He sat and faced me across the counter, folding his hands. “Perhaps you could tell me why *you* think he killed the old woman?”

His pose was so earnest that I almost laughed in spite of myself. “I thought you were a student, not a professor.”

“Oh, I’m not a professor at all. It just happens that *Crime and Punishment* was one of my father’s favorite books. He and I used to talk about things like that sometimes—over tea, much like this.” He waved a hand at our cups of coffee, smiling. “He wasn’t well-educated, but somehow he always used to find the best books, even the ones the government didn’t allow. I used to see him sitting in his chair for hours, just reading, and then he’d call me over. I was a boy with his head in the clouds—I always thought foreign books were better—but those were some of my favorite times.”

I blinked, surprised by the openness of the words, the frank affection in them. Nobody I knew would have spoken that way. I reached under the counter and retrieved the book, thumbing through the pages.

“My grandfather was a bit like that,” I said, almost to myself. “All right, Dan—Dahn—sorry, how did you say your name?”

“Daniil—like ‘Daniel.’ You can call me that if you like. Or ‘Danya’—that’s what friends call me in Russian.”

“Russian? Is that what they speak in Uzbekistan?”

He chuckled. “That’s what *I* speak in Uzbekistan. I’m from a Russian family, as I mentioned.”

“Okay. Daniil. Right.” I held a hand to my cheek, looking down at the open pages. A moment passed as the wall clock ticked. If this man really was a lawyer, I thought, then he probably had twice the education I did. It would be absurd to go on.

“Please,” he urged.

I looked up, surprised.

“Well,” I said slowly, “the first few chapters make you think he did it for the money, obviously. You can tell he’s desperate, wandering around penniless and in rags. And yet . . .” I paused. “Somehow, that doesn’t seem to be what bothers him the most. He spends all those hours dwelling on his sister and how she’s thrown herself away—marrying that older man—for his sake. And that other girl, too, the one who becomes a—a prostitute so she can feed her family after her father dies.” I looked up with embarrassment, expecting

to find an expression of disappointment on his face, but he was leaning forward, paying attention to every word. “I don’t know. I guess I don’t quite understand it, really. Especially since, after the murder, he just buries the jewelry and the money he steals and never comes back.”

“Yes, that’s the mystery, isn’t it? He goes to all the trouble of planning and carrying out the murder, and then he seems to care very little about the money.” The stranger gripped his cup, the light glancing off his ring. His eyes held mine. “Do you think he kills the old woman, the moneylender, just because he can? That’s what some people say.”

I let out a small laugh and shook my head. “I’m not sure why you’re so interested in what I think. I can promise you I know a lot more about hamburgers than I do about literature.”

He leaned back and blew a puff of air through his lips. “Nonsense,” he said, unwinding the scarf from his neck and placing it on the counter. It was tattered and stained, coming apart at the ends. “Of course I’d like to know. Otherwise I wouldn’t ask.”

I was still looking at the scarf, at his bright eyes and ragged hair.

“Okay,” I said finally. “What I think, Daniil—”

“Danya,” he interrupted with a quick smile. “No need to be formal.”

“What I think, Danya, is that this Raskolnikov—the murderer—is driven insane by living in a world where people suffer so much, and for no reason, and where there’s this kind of horrible, relentless cruelty everywhere you look. And the people who are cruel, or who even just exploit others, like the old woman he kills, are never punished. They rarely even seem to feel guilty about what they’ve done.” The words sounded jumbled and confused, but I pressed on. “To him, killing her is like evening the score, or—I don’t know how to explain it. Taking an eye for an eye, I guess. In some ways, I think it’s that simple.”

He remained silent for a moment after I’d finished, watching my face. With a flicker of irritation—what was it about the fact of my standing behind a counter that made people feel free to gawk at me as if I were an animal in the zoo?—I turned away to pour the last of my drink down the drain.

He stopped me by drawing a breath and reaching for the book. “May I?”

I made a vague gesture.

“I agree with you in some respects,” he said. “But what I’ve always thought Raskolnikov can’t bear is that so many people around him

are . . .” He drew a breath, seeming to choose his words with care. “. . . Sacrificing themselves for others. All the best characters in the story, the most noble and honest and innocent ones, do that. And ultimately it causes them great pain without giving any real benefit to the people they intended to help.” He closed his eyes, speaking almost as if to himself. “I think it angers him, knowing that so many of these sacrifices are useless. ‘Futile,’ perhaps, is the word I’m looking for. Yes, that’s it—‘futile.’” He opened his eyes again, giving me a self-conscious smile. “Sometimes these words just seem to escape from my memory, you know? I often regret that my English isn’t better.”

“What? Your English is perfect.” I was relieved at the change in subject. “You must have been living here for a long time.”

“Not at all, actually. In fact, I’m still a recent arrival, you might say.” He continued to smile lopsidedly, rising to his feet and sliding the book back toward me. “But perhaps,” he went on as he reached for his hat, “you could tell me what you think when you’ve finished? I’d be most interested to hear your views.” He looked away, then back at me again. “Only if you’d like that, of course.”

I watched him, reluctantly intrigued. “I don’t know. I guess I don’t see why not. You’ll be long gone by then, though, I’m sure.” I opened the cover to look at the due date, scratched there in pencil by a librarian with a shaky hand. Then, almost as an afterthought, I added, “You’re lucky your winter break starts so early. I don’t think most schools give the whole month of December off.”

For the briefest of moments, he was flustered. I could see it in his face, an expression of unease that flew over his features, although it passed almost immediately. His hands twitched toward one another, a small involuntary movement. When he replied, however, his voice was as amiable as before. “Yes,” he said. “It *is* very lucky. They want us to have a rest, you know—after our exams. And it’s a good thing, I’d say. After all, this really is a beautiful place, isn’t it? The perfect place to take a holiday.” Then, with a wave, he was gone.

Through the window, I watched his dark, shambling figure step off the porch and climb the path to the hostel, his shoulders jerking awkwardly with each step, his head bent.

Sliding the back of the ice cream case open, I reached for a butter knife and began chipping away at the fuzzy layer of ice that had accumulated inside. My mind, however, kept drifting back to the conversation. It wasn’t that anything he’d said was especially outlandish; if

anything, his manners were almost painfully correct. But there was something odd behind the smiles, I thought, an uncertainty, as if he were afraid of something he might say.

On the other hand, who knew? Maybe he just wanted to be liked. It had been ages since I'd felt any impulses in that direction myself, but I could dimly remember what it felt like to care about that kind of thing. He was young and probably still did.

He would learn.

I swept the ice chips into my palm and stretched. It felt good to do physical work, even in such a small way. Before the accident, I had loved helping friends do farm work, stacking bales of hay, building sheds, mucking out stalls. There was something so pleasing about being able to see the results of all that effort, the stump that had been dug out, the crumbling wall that had been repaired, the door that had been re-hinged. There was something satisfying, too, about picking up a tool and knowing how to use it. *You want that old stall divider taken down? Sure.* Thinking of this, I looked down at the now-slightly-bent butter knife and smiled slightly. It was true that I couldn't do most of those things anymore, but I still did what I could. Maybe there was something in me of my grandfather's old stubbornness.

As afternoon slid into evening and I prepared to lock up, gathering my things into a pile, Jerry came in, bringing the smell of the woods with him. He was carrying a hunting rifle in one hand—an old one, I noticed, with a worn walnut stock. It must have been his father's or grandfather's, I thought as he propped it next to the door.

"Burger with onions," he grunted. He was a big man, with a thick beard and a bad back that had gotten him laid off from the Pepsi plant in town. A dusty black cap was settled on his head.

"Sure." I put the slab of frozen meat on the grill and covered it with a pot lid. It cooked more quickly that way, I had discovered. "You want the onions fried, too?"

"Naw, that's all right." He reached into his back pocket and fumbled for his wallet, his stomach bulging under his camouflage jacket. "How you been, Kathleen?"

"Been okay, I guess. You get anything out there?" I lifted my chin at the window, the woods outside.

"Nothing yet. Looks like it's gonna be a hard season."

"Yeah, that's what everybody's saying."

He waited quietly the way he always did, his cap pulled low over his

eyes, like someone who could never quite get used to being indoors. I decided to throw an extra patty onto the burger and reached back into the freezer.

“Thanks,” he said when it hit the grill with a hiss.

“No problem.”

Then, reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a brown packet—a paper lunch bag, as usual—and put it on the counter.

Without speaking, I moved the bag to the shelf next to the cassette tapes and extracted two twenty-dollar bills from my purse, giving them to him with his change for the burger. He was shifting from foot to foot, I noticed, as if trying to ease a pain that couldn’t be eased. “How’s your back?”

He shrugged. “Not so good. Nice of you to ask, though. I might need surgery one of these days, it sounds like, but I’m trying to put it off as long as I can.” He began his slow stroll back to the door, holding the sandwich awkwardly in one hand and picking up the gun with the other.

“By the way.” As he opened the door, he looked back over his shoulder without turning. I could see twigs clinging to the hood of his coat, a spatter of mud. “You oughta be careful, you know?”

I looked at him blankly.

“Out on the ice,” he said. “I knowed a kid that drowned that way, back before you were born. It ain’t safe.”

I stared at him. By the time I opened my mouth to respond, he was shuffling out, the rifle gripped in his hand.

“Just because you’re used to this place don’t mean it ain’t dangerous,” he murmured, and then the door closed behind him, scraping against its sill.

“Okay,” I said softly, watching through the window as he placed the gun on a rack on the back window of his pickup and climbed stiffly into the cab. A dog clambered to its feet in the backseat and put its paws on the window, panting, seeming to look at me as the truck drove away.

After he had gone, I opened the paper bag and looked into it, counting. They were all there, twenty of them, small and white and oval. I folded the bag again and held it in my hands for a moment, looking down at the floor, then stuffed it into my pocket and walked onto the porch, gathering the ashtrays and flipping the sign on the door so it read CLOSED.

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