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— FALL 2021 —



What Will You Read Next?



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Excerpt from *Brown Girls: A Novel*
© 2021 by Daphne Palasi Andreades

Excerpt from *Moon and the Mars: A Novel*
© 2021 by Kia Corthron

Excerpt from *The Corpse Flower: A Novel*
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Fall 2021

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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

Brown Girls: A Novel

by *Daphne Palasi Andreades* 3

Moon and the Mars: A Novel

by *Kia Corthron* 17

The Corpse Flower: A Novel

by *Anne Mette Hancock* 37

Out of Love: A Novel

by *Hazel Hayes* 59

Fiona and Jane

by *Jean Chen Ho* 77

The Family: A Novel

by *Naomi Krupitsky* 107

The Maid: A Novel

by *Nita Prose* 125

The Survivors: A Novel

by *Alex Schulman* 155

Always, in December: A Novel

by *Emily Stone* 173

The Sisters Sweet: A Novel

by *Elizabeth Weiss* 189

BROWN GIRLS



a novel



DAPHNE

PALASI ANDREADES

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BROWN GIRLS

WE LIVE IN THE DREGS OF QUEENS, NEW YORK, WHERE airplanes fly so low that we are certain they will crush us. On our block, a lonely tree grows. Its branches tangle in power lines. Its roots upend sidewalks where we ride our bikes before they are stolen. Roots that render the concrete slabs uneven, like a row of crooked teeth. In front yards, not to be confused with actual lawns, grandmothers string laundry lines, hang bedsheets, our brothers' shorts, and our sneakers scrubbed to look brand-new. *Take those down!* our mothers hiss. *This isn't back home.* In front yards grow tomatoes that have fought their way through the hard earth.

Our grandmothers refuse canes. Our brothers dress in wifebeaters. We all sit on stoops made of brick. The Italian boys with their shaved heads zoom by on bikes, staring, their laughter harsh as their shiny gold chains.

Our grandparents weed their gardens and our brothers smoke their cigarettes and, in time, stronger substances we cannot recognize. Whose scent makes our heads pulse. Our brothers, who ride on bikes, lifting their front wheels high into the air.



RANDOM HOUSE

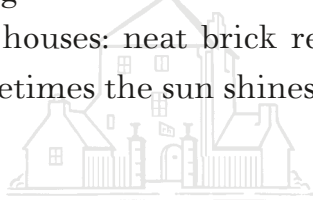
“BROWN”

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW, WE ARE THE COLOR OF 7-Eleven root beer. The color of sand at Rockaway Beach when it blisters the bottoms of our feet. Color of soil. Color of the charcoal pencils our sisters use to rim their eyes. Color of grilled hamburger patties. Color of our mother’s darkest thread, which she loops through the needle. Color of peanut butter. Of the odd gene that makes us *fair and white as snow*, like whatsername, is it Snow White? But don’t get it twisted—we’re still brown. Dark as 7 P.M. dusk, when our mothers switch on lights in empty rooms. Exclaim, *Oh! There you are.*

THE DREGS OF QUEENS

THE SIGHTS IN OUR HOMETOWN: CENTRAL ROAD NICK-
named the “Boulevard of Death” by the *New York Post*, which snakes through our neighborhood like a long gray tongue. Mimi’s Salon with an ad that reads, MANI N PEDI, \$15.99! W/ NECK MASSAGE FREE. Down the boulevard, across the street from the auto repair shop: a branch of the New York Public Library. Book pages smeared with fingerprints, a booger, the remnant of a sneeze. In the corner, a homeless man fortress by plastic bags snoozes peacefully. We know he’s different from the guy who raps his knuckles on car windows and asks, *Little girl, got any change?* before our parents zoom away. Welcome to the dregs of Queens: White Castle sign that comes into view when our subway pulls into the station, tracks rumbling above a Honda minivan, a halal food cart called RAFI SMILES with the

scent of bubbling oil and smoke that wafts past a forgotten discount electronics store now selling mattresses. Train slogs above a man chomping a Boston cream donut, whose custard filling explodes onto the tips of his fingers. He licks them, waits for the Q11 to arrive. Ray's Not Your Mama's Pizzeria with spongy Sicilian slices whose Cheetos-colored oil trickles down our chins when we take a bite. Soap 'n Suds Laundromat filled with steel machines pounding round and round. A Chinese-Mexican takeout joint beside O'Malley's, whose carpet of plastic green grass out front is littered with cigarette butts. Our own houses: neat brick rectangles. Hidden, peripheral. Sometimes the sun shines here.



RANDOM HOUSE

DUTIES

BUT WE BROWN GIRLS ARE TEN AND ALREADY KNOW HOW to be good. How to cross the Boulevard of Death, hand in hand with younger siblings to reach public school courtyards, how to trick and bribe and coax them to finish their homework (*In 1492*, they recite, *Columbus sailed the ocean blue*). How to mouth SHHH! when our fathers have fallen asleep on couches after long shifts, and how to vacuum homes, carpets dotted with hair and cookie crumbs. We know how to muscle these bagpipes up and down dim staircases, even though they are heavier than us. We know never to talk back. We know how to cram into our parents' beds when loved ones from distant lands and warm climates immigrate to the States with their suitcases and dreams and empty wallets. Stay for months, years.

One aunt gives us manicures every Sunday. Another squirts poop-colored henna onto our palms, sketches lotus flowers. One cousin lets us listen to her collection of country CDs—Dolly, Shania, the Dixie Chicks—her most prized possessions. *Wide open spaces!* we sing along. Another cousin lends us her romance novel, the lone paperback that sits atop her dresser, after we beg her. We'd glimpsed its cover of a woman clinging to a man's bare, muscled chest. The image excites us. We re-create it by standing in front of fans to mimic that hair-blowing-in-the-wind effect. We top it off with our best lovesick expressions. Until we grow bored of pretending to be these women. We sprinkle salt onto slugs instead.

Our parents take us aside one night. *If anyone asks, we're the only ones who live here, okay?*

Though we don't fully understand, we know how to keep our families' secrets.

When our cousins and aunts and uncles leave for new jobs in new cities—they are nannies and construction workers, cooks and caretakers—we feel a sinking sorrow. It doesn't matter if we don't share a drop of blood with these people; we have been taught to call them family. When they depart, we do not cry. We do not cling on. We are good girls. Instead, we prepare for going-away parties, which last all through the night and end with us falling asleep on couches, waking the next day in beds we share with our younger siblings. We

wake to the scent of garlic and bonfire smoke still lingering in our hair, traces of cake and drool crusted on our cheeks. No matter.

Before these parties begin, however, we must get ready. We have exactly seven minutes in bathrooms. We remember to wash our hair with cold water—*Hurry up, I need to go!*—so that it grows thick and shiny.



RANDOM HOUSE

BRAS

IN KITCHENS REDOLENT WITH GARLIC AND ONIONS, BROWN girls stand, hovering over pans, cracking open brown eggs, stirring them just so and frying them. We lie, starfish-like and still, atop sun-warmed concrete in backyards. We sing Mariah, Whitney, Destiny's Child, our voices straining for the same notes as these brown singers. *Say my name, say my name. When no one is around you.* In bedrooms, we adjust training bras for the first time. *Hook it like this under your rib cage. Now twist it back around.* Some of us are experts on bras because we've observed our mothers with their sagging breasts and *areolas*, a word we learned, eyes glued to our sisters' discarded puberty books (*Celebrate Your Body!*). When we view our mothers' breasts for the first time, we are filled with repulsion and fascination. We wrap our arms around our own flat chests to hide them. *After you've*

had four kids, our mothers explain, they get this way. You'll see. Some of us are experts because we've observed our sisters. This one's a T-shirt bra. This one's a push-up. This one's got straps that crisscross at your back. This one has lace and you should only wear it to parties. Why? we ask. Because anywhere else, people will just think you're a slut—trust me. We are experts because we've peeped through cracks right before our sisters shut their bedroom doors, boyfriends trailing behind them. Our parents are away working their usual twelve-, fourteen-hour shifts. Shhh! our sisters whispered to us, fingers to their lips.

Brown girls singing, jumping, spinning. Brown girls screeching Mariah at the top of their lungs, cackling in the school courtyard, playing handball, talking smack.

RANDOM HOUSE

LUNCHROOM

WHY DON'T YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP, JOSEPH JUSTIN O'Brien says to our friend Trish, *and go back to the projects you came from.*² We deliberate whether or not to beat the shit out of Joseph Justin O'Brien and take matters into our own hands because would the lunch ladies *really* understand if we told them what he said? Would they even care? So, in the end, we decide against carrying out our scheme because A) Everyone already knows Joseph Justin O'Brien and all his friends are racist, that they *definitely* would've been a part of the KKK (But seriously—does the KKK still exist?), and B) We're terrified of what our parents would do if we got in trouble at school. We imagine our punishments: rubber slippers to asses, brooms to asses, belts to asses, hands coiling swiftly around our arms followed by a merciless beating of our asses—and already, our back-

sides ache. Though that asshole, that *sphincter* (another word we've stolen from our older sisters' biology textbooks) really *does* deserve it, we tell Trish, who does not even live in the projects. Instead, we eat our chicken patty sandwiches, baked at 350 degrees in industrial ovens, and topped with squirts of ketchup. Lunches provided by New York City via the U.S. government, the same meals that prison inmates eat—that's what our Social Studies teacher Mr. DiMarco told us. We promise Trish that we will take our revenge another time. But not before we pluck the limp broccoli from our trays and fling the pieces at Joseph Justin's fat head. Bullseye! When we hear the satisfying squelch followed by Joseph Justin's bellow of outrage, we high-five each other. We wrap our arms around Trish and cheer.

Brown girls, age eleven. Who drink white milk and sit at the white lunch table. Brown girls being brown.

MOON *and the* MARS



KIA CORTHRON

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Lucky

Mutt I am.

Irish and the black, black and the Irish, colored, Celtic, County Kerry, Afri-can!

What you sayin in there? call Grammy Brook from the front-room.

Nothin!

Talkin to yourself again, mutter Grammy Brook to herself.

Throw the cover off, jump outa bed, *brrrrr!* Woke up alone in the bed I share, alone in the bed in the bed-closet in the apartment in the tenement a Grammy Brook. Come out to the front-room grinnin.

Whatchu grinnin for? she ask, smilin. Then hold out somethin warm, somethin sweet: johnnycake! Happy birthday, birthday girl.

Thank you, Grammy!

Careful—hot.

Ah!

Toldja—*hot!*

How old's Miss Theo today? ask Mr. Freeman.

Seven!

Seven. That's a good one. Mr. Freeman nod, Mr. Freeman our boarder sit in the chair havin his bread n coffee breakfast, his bed-roll rolled up, rolled to the corner. Our apartment have two rooms: front-room and bed-closet. Our apartment have two rooms, two windas—both windas in the livin room facin the street, none in the bed-closet. Gran-Gran sit in her chair nex to the front winda near the door, Gran-Gran always at her winda lookin down on Park street. Gran-Gran is Grammy's mammy.

So whatchu gonna do today, Miss Seven? Grammy ask, ironin her whites for the whites. The wet ones hung all over our apartment.

Door fling open, in come Hen. My cousin Hen, carryin in the pail.

Three, Hen say, then dump the water into Grammy's pot on the stove. Hen strong! Hen only nine years of age, carryin the full water bucket:

heavy! Soon as Hen empty it, she turn back around, head out our apartment, down the stairs for more.

I'd better be getting on to work, say Mr. Freeman.

All right, say Grammy.

I just want to say again how much I appreciate it, Mrs. Brook—you not raising the rent.

Didn't get mine raised, no call to raise yours.

The barbering business not what it used to be, Mr. Freeman say, more to hisself. Then put his tin cup on the shelf and our barber boarder out the door.

I'll sing a song for you, Grammy, *that* what I wanna do for my birthday!

Good girl. Grammy switch irons. Grammy tole me why ironin need two irons: one to use hot till it cool while the other *gettin* hot on the coals.

Hark! the herald angels sing!

Oh, that's that new pretty one.

That song *old*, Grammy! Two years old, that song come to be when I was five!

New to old me.

Glory to the newborn King!

Your papa woulda been proud a you.

I knew she say that! Every time I have a birthday Grammy Brook smile teary and say my dead father her dead son Ezekiel woulda been proud a me.

In come Hen. Four, she say, emptyin the water into the pot. After five, I gotta get to work myself, Hen say and gone. When the water come to boilin, Grammy'll dump it in the washtub and put in more a the white sheets and white towels for the white folks.

I gotta go to the necessary!

Bring me back a paper. Then Grammy careful count out her coin, sigh. I remember when it was the *penny* press. Now hard to find it under two.

But you gimme two cent and a *half*, Grammy.

The half-cent for *you*, birthday girl.

Thank you, Grammy!

Mijn gelukwenschen met uw verjaardag, say Gran-Gran, still lookin out the winda. Gran-Gran and Grammy useta be slaves with Dutch masters. I look at Grammy.

She wishin you good wishes.

Thank you, Gran-Gran! I'm seven!

Gran-Gran blink, not turnin her head from whatever's happenin out on the street.

We live on the fourth floor: top! I skip down the steps, out to the back courtyard water-closets to wait in line, one two three four five six seven eight *nine* in front a me! Nine colored, our tenement all colored, nine in front a me, *I gotta go!* There's Hen at the pump, *Hen!* I wave but she act like she don't see me. Eight in front a me, *I gotta go!* Hen finish fillin the bucket and start luggin it back up to our apartment, seven in front a me, *I gotta go! gotta go!*

The little Brook girl hoppin, she gotta go bad, say Miss Lottie who live crost the hall from us. Then everybody let me go! Then I run out to see whatever's happenin out on the street. The mornin boys hollerin.

New intelligence on the Bond street murder!

Bill passed for wagon road to the Pacific!

Latest on President-elect Buchanan's picks for his cabinet! Read all about it!

I buy a two-penny press for Grammy Brook, run it up to her, run back to the street back to Park street, right on Baxter street. Five-story tenement and on the third floor: Grammy Cahill.

Maidin mhaith, Grammy!

Maidin mhaith, Theodora Brigid, say Grammy, smilin because she pleased I'm practicin my *Good mornin* in Irish.

It's my birthday!

I know, little sprout. Seven is it?

I'm grinnin, noddin.

Lá breithe shona duit.

What's that, Grammy!

Happy birthday.

Lá breithe shona duit, Theo! say Maureen and Cathleen.

May the saints be with ye, say Cousin Aileen, who's my cousin Maureen and my cousin Cathleen's ma.

Go raibh maith agat!

That's how ye be thankin *one* person, Grammy correct me. More than one, ye say *Go raibh maith agaibh.*

Go raibh maith agaibh!

No, thank *you* for bein the livin spirit of herself, your dear mammy.

(I knew she'd say that! Every time I have a birthday Grammy Cahill smile teary and say I'm the livin spirit a my dead mother her dead daughter Brigid.)

Ye're after catchin me in the nick, *mo leanbh*, headin out to work. But I'm ready for ye. And she hand me a bite a cake.

Barmbrack! I chew it—still warm. Now Cathleen hold out her hand.

A little something for the birthday girl, say Cathleen.

Ah! say everybody. Cathleen made me a doll! Little doll, jus tall as my wrist to my fingertip. My cousin Cathleen and her sister Maureen and their mammy Cousin Aileen is seamstresses, Cathleen musta made my doll outa scraps from her work. Cathleen make pretty sewn things! Her mammy and sister work at the workshop but Cathleen gotta work the piecemeal at home: Cathleen's fifteen years of age, and when she was six, she climbed a tree and fell and her legs stopped workin.

Go raibh maith agat, Cathleen!

You're welcome.

Grammy Cahill headin out to work carryin her wares table, me skippin nex to her. Out to Baxter, then block and a half back to Park, set up her table, then send me to the grocer on Mott to pick her up a little flour. Crunch crunch through the Febooary sleet. Cross the road, I can do it! Look right and left for the carriages and carts. Look down for the horse manure and tenement manure. Look everywhere for the people rushin, pushin—hog runnin loose, everybody jump out the way! Buy the flour, back to Park, give it to Grammy. Then head six doors down the street:
O'SHEA'S BOARD & PUBLICK.

Mornin, Auntie Siobhan!

Well, good mornin to *you*, Miss Theo. Wonderin when you wander by, it bein the ninth of Feb.

I come near every day! Look what Cathleen gimme!

Aw, what a pretty doll baby. Care for a little birthday nog?

Yes! I can pay for it! Grammy Brook gimme a half-cent for my birthday!

You save that for candy.

Thank you!

Better spend it today. Government claimin they'll be endin the half-penny later this month.

No!

Spend it today.

I sit in my auntie's tavern sippin my nog. Nutmeg! And a birthday apple! I'll save it till later.

Tell me a story, Auntie Siobhan!

Em . . . Let me think.

(My colored family says *um*, my Irish family says *em*!)

A *birthday* story.

Right. Your mother's birthday was—

May the twenty-fourth!

May the twenty-fourth. Woke up to a glory of a Wednesday and I said to my sister, Why'n't you take off from that tyrant, we make a day of it in the park? The tyrant was—

Mrs. Bradley!

Told ye this one before, have I?

No!

Brigid was a day-maid, another girl lived there but your mother-to-be came home nights. Like all the fancy folks, Mrs. Bradley lived uptown—
Forty-first and Fifth!

And if your mother'd been older she'd never a done it, played hooky from her place of employ. If *I'd* been older I'd never a suggested it, but her newly sixteen and me two years behind so there we were, plannin the mischief. Walkin down to City Hall—

To the park!

And who we run into goin the other direction but Lily the cook! Brigid begged her to tell Mistress Scowlface she fell ill, promisin to return the favor one day. Your mother'd been workin for the beast a year, screamed at near daily, her face slapped for a vocal tone not pleasin to the lady or for disturbin the library's alphabetical, placin a Charlotte Brontë before an Anne. Lily'd had her own troubles with the witch, don't the Irish and the black always suffer it all? So Lily wished your ma a happy birthday and went on her way, and there we be: your mother and I and soft grass and crackers and whiskey. Laughin at some rough n tumble we'd seen at Mott street and Pell that mornin or at the people walkin by or at Brigid scrunchin up her face and makin her boss lady's voice and *that* she just happened to be at when we look up to see none other than you know who!

Mrs. Bradley yell at my mother?

Herself was takin an afternoon stroll with her aul chum Mrs. Hyde, *another* one. Everything stops still, them starin at Brigid, the one supposedly home runnin a bout of fever. Then the old mistress heads straight toward my sister, chargin, her hand ready aimed to slap your poor mother's cheek! Gets within three feet of her—and falls! Flat on her face, Lady Bradley is sherry-drunk middle of the afternoon—*she* of the Temperance Society! Then her companion comes to her aid, but appears aul Mrs. Hyde's not exactly treadin steady ground neither! Finally Brigid helps her employer to her feet, and Mrs. Bradley yanks herself away, stumblin again with that, and the ladies depart. When they're beyond hearin, we're rollin, our stomachs torn up with the laughter! But next day, your mother trembles to show up for work, fearin she'll be given her walkin papers.

My mother get *sacked*?

Auntie Siobhan shake her head, smilin.

The she-devil musta worried Brigid might someday have a mind to reveal that peculiar episode in the wrong company, so not only was your mother's position secure but thereafter her tenure on Forty-first and Fifth proceeded appreciably more agreeable.

Not fair!

We turn to the man just entered the tavern from upstairs, tenant a the boarding-house.

Ye can't just raise the rent every February the first, Siobhan!

The law says otherwise, my auntie answer him. Don't go into effect till May, ye make your decision. 'Tis a wee increase, be no effort ye'd just re-budget your monthly liquor allowance.

Here I slip off the stool, out the door, leavin em to their shoutin.

How do ye, Theo!

Round the corner in the alley I see Nancy, smaller n me, standin with her brother, Elijah, smaller n her. They sleep in the alley crates since their mammy caught the influenza from the white folks she worked for and died. Nancy and Elijah skinny like sticks, eyes on my birthday apple. Now *my* eyes on my birthday apple. I take a nibble: sweet! Then give the rest to Nancy and Elijah who attack it, hungry-greedy. In my head I see Saint Peter in heaven markin this good deed on my list.

Your rich auntie give it to ya? ask Nancy, *crunch*.

One of em, I say. Now off to see the other.

Uptown I head: twenty blocks north, forty blocks and more, up to the country. At Fifty-ninth, Broadway change its name to Bloomingdale, still I keep goin. Eighty-sixth and Seventh, *knock knock!* Nothin. *Knock knock!* Then I remember: today's Monday—my auntie at school!

Good mornink, Theo!

I turn around.

Good morning, Mr. Schmidt! It's afternoon now!

Ah, you're right! he smile. Tell your aunt sank you again. She's a nice landlady.

I will!

Seneca Village where my Auntie Eunice lives where her tenant Mr. Schmidt lives is Seventh avenue to Eighth, Eighty-second street to Eighty-ninth and some say higher. Mr. Schmidt lives in the house my auntie and uncle used to live in before they built the new one. Crost the field, I see Mr. O'Kelleher drivin a hog home. I wave. He wave back.

I run over to Colored School No. 3. My auntie at the front a the class nod her head to the back for me to sit, then she ask everybody, What's one over two times five over six?

Everybody *click click* scratch their slates.

When dismission time come, my teacher-auntie and me walk back to her house hand-holdin. I tell her what Mr. Schmidt said to tell her he said.

It's because I didn't raise the rent. February first is Rent Day, to warn the tenants if the rent's to be raised in May. If it's too much, May first is Moving Day, but Mr. Schmidt won't have to worry about that. Now why in the world would you be paying me a call on February ninth?

I grin. Look what Cathleen gimme!

What a pretty doll. You should leave it at home to play with so you don't lose it.

I won't! I can carry it around, not lose it!

All right, stubborn, don't cry when it's gone.

Won't be gone!

Auntie Eunice cookin. We got her house all to ourself because Uncle Ambrose a seaman, more months away than home. Teachers ain't sposed to be married but Auntie Eunice say she The Exception Proves The Rule and somethin else about bein a good convincer and childless. I look out the winda.

We in Seneca Village, Dolly, I tell my dolly. *How* the colored people come again? I ask my auntie.

Seneca Village as we know it began when land here was sold to a colored, then another colored, then another. In Seneca Village, the negroes are the landowners. But we get along fine with our tenants, those Johnny-come-latelys from across the Atlantic: the Irish and the German searching for America. Why don't you read me some Thoreau.

I read *Resistance to Civil Government* while she stir the stew, then she wipe a tear and say, Your papa loved that book. Then she tell me read a little *Winter's Tale*. I do, then: When you plan on going to school, Theo?

Which is a very often disagreement between me and my auntie. I say nothin. Auntie Eunice been teachin me to read since I was three. I tried school once for a week and didn't care for it so didn't go back. I know she know but I say nothin because impolite to insult somebody's livelihood.

After supper, Auntie Eunice step outside with a bowl and no coat, come back in with a mound a freshly fell snow. Open a cupboard. Vanilla, sugar: vanilly snow!

For the birthday girl, she say and hand me a spoon.

I snuggle up with Auntie Eunice for the night. In the morn, she go to school, and I turn south, walkin ninety-six blocks back downtown to below First street. In the Thirties, a nativist man gawk at me: that look I sometime get from them ones claimin they the First Americans, descended from the original white people. Then he bark: Mongrel!

No! Mutt! I giggle and run.

Don't let the ignorants worry you! my grammies and aunties always say. And between Seneca Village and my downtown home's a whole lot a blocks a ignorance. Plenty a mutts where *I* live, home is black and Irish every day every minute crossin all kinds a paths, don't the rest a the world only wish they got our harmony?

Near dinnertime, Park street bustlin in the pre-noon winter sun. Newsboys callin the afternoon editions—and there my grammies talkin together! Grammy Brook makin laundry deliveries, Grammy Cahill with her table set up peddlin anything she find to sell. Right now appears they dickerin on a shirt.

Grammies!

They see me, drop their haggles-faces to smile.

I take a hand a each one. Green eyes and flowy light-brown hair the Irish gimme, but my nose and lips took a bit a thickness from the colored. High yella, my skin betwixt: not rich dark like my father's people nor rosy fair like my mother's.

Long lashes just like your mammy, Grammy Cahill say.

Dimple-smile just like your papa, Grammy Brook say.

These I collect to make a picture, otherwise I don't know what they looked like. My mother dies three days after I'm born, father two years after her. Last summer, couple nights I stayed with Nancy and Elijah the back alley. Their mother passed not long before and no rent money, now they sleep the street. I try cheerin em up: Look at the Milky Way! But I don't speak a weather, rain and the comin snow. I don't remind em beddin under the stars is fun n rare for me because any night a the week I got a choice of roofs: my colored grammy's tenement or my Irish auntie's boardin-house or my colored auntie's uptown house or my Irish grammy's tenement. Mutt I am: orphan lucky.

The grammies start up the bargainin again so I move on. Adventures await! And them bounteous in Five Points, Manhattan, New York City, when a birthday girl got a whole half-cent to squander on em.

Arrivals

Late to work!

Grammy Cahill runnin around, puttin her wares in her bag.

My dearest friend and fiercest competitor Maeve better not've taken my spot!

I'm *never* late to work! Cathleen smile. She say that because her legs don't work so *her* work is *here*, home. Her needle nimble attachin collar to shirt: skill. Cathleen on the couch like usual, me under the couch playin with Dolly doll: four days past my birthday, I ain't lost her yet!

Rap rap!

Now who could that be? say Grammy, headin to answer. She ask that because nobody livin here would knock, and the landlord a just barged in, and the sub-landlord a just barged in specially with the doors in the tenement apartments broken off their hinges not lockin anyway, so who rappin the other side?

Maidin mhaith—Good morning? Cahill?

He pronounce it perfect! *Cab*-hill, rolled over the tongue fast! Head taller n me, his hair black and wavy, skin fair and rosy, eyes shinin bright blue but tired. And accent straight off the Isle. Grammy frownin, starin the suspicion. Then her face sudden soften altogether.

Ciaran?

The boy nod.

Ciaran Moore?

The boy nod.

Ciaran? Cathleen's mouth a ○.

Ah! And Grammy grab him, hug him.

The pittin of your sister, ye are! Oh, so cold! Let's warm ye!

Grammy hold him tight, rubbin his arms. His arms hang straight down his sides, boards. Now Grammy lean back, her hands still graspin above his elbows.

Look at this lad! How old ye be?

Eight.

Eight years of age!

Nine July.

Eight and a half years of age! Girls! Come meet your cousin Ciaran! Ciaran, this is Cathleen and Theo—Theodora Brigid.

Fáilte, Ciaran! welcome Cathleen, smilin bright.

My cousin how?

Not by blood, Grammy answer me. By love. Meara's brother.

And Grammy tell me the story I already know, not takin her eyes off Ciaran.

His poor parents near dead with the hunger, their three little ones they're after buryin, all those little girls. And me settin sail for America, the landlord offerin us escape from the Famine, but his mother and father too far gone, his mammy askin mightn't I bring Meara her eldest with us, sole survivor of her babies? Thirteen years of age his sister Meara was, year younger than Brigid year older than Siobhan, those girls all close just like his mother and me, We'll take her, sure we'll take her! All us wailin the farewells, and I'm thinkin next time I see Meara's mother's in heaven. Meara writin monthly hopeful and hearin nothin back, oh her poor parents sure be buried. Then one day comes the letter: Caoimhe and Riordan still in the land of the livin—and expectin another! And here he stands! Miracle baby, we called him! Baby Ciaran, born durin the Hunger. Shoutin the gratitude from their knees they were, his dear mother and father!

Dead, say Ciaran, and his eyes look dead when he say it.

Your poor aul fella, Grammy say, shakin her head. Didn't quite make it. Ah, in our families, the Famine was a widow-maker! Your mammy after losin your da, I'm after losin my Seamus, my niece Aileen her Malachi. That was Cathleen's poor father, Malachi. But somehow amongst us the mothers survived—

Dead.

Grammy stares. Your mammy?

Bump in her belly. Lump in her belly, hard. And bleedin.

Year ago! I remember, then she came bouncin back strong! Fearin she's not long for the world, she's after writin to Meara, askin her to take you. Meara scrape together the money for your passage, send to your mother, Meara cryin for her mammy but long to meet her baby brother who never arrived. Then your mammy's after writin she's feelin better!

Better. Then worse. Then dead.

When?

Two days before Christmas. Two days after New Year's uncle put me on a boat. Five weeks, six days.

Cathleen say, Crossing the Atlantic?

Five weeks, six days, Ciaran repeat.

Docked on Staten Island, were ye? Grammy ask. Early this mornin'?

Ciaran nod.

And found your way to us, say Cathleen. What a clever boy!

So clever! Grammy's eyes shine.

Ciaran pull out a piece a paper, show to Grammy. Grammy read it, show to Cathleen.

Letter's a year old, Grammy say soft.

From my sister, say Ciaran. Her whereabouts, your whereabouts.

Grammy nods.

I'm after goin to her house. Fire, people on the street is after sayin. Her house burnt to the ground, they're after sayin.

Grammy nods. Seven months ago. Ah, these wood tenements is nothin but kindlin! Just after the Fourth of July, 'twas. I wrote. Ye didn't get the letter?

Ciaran stare.

I wrote! Ye didn't get the letter?

Ciaran shake his head.

Well, ye're not to fret, Grammy swallow. You'll be stayin with us.

Now my mouth the same ○ Cathleen's was! Our apartment is one front-room and one bed-closet *that's it* now here's what we got:

1. Grammy Cahill
2. her niece Cousin Aileen
3. Maureen, Cousin Aileen's daughter who's eighteen
4. Cathleen, Cousin Aileen's daughter who's fifteen
5. Great-Uncle Fergus who's Grammy's brother
6. me (when I'm not at Grammy Brook's)
7. now Ciaran

You must be starving! say Cathleen.

Grammy catch her breath. *Starve* is a word she don't throw around devil-may-care. She look in the stove.

Lump of coal left! I'll make the porridge, ye must be achin for a bite.

Do you need a nap? ask Cathleen. Bed-closet's right through the doorway.

Is it a bath ye first be needin? ask Grammy. Theo, would ye fill the pail? Seein my sister I first be needin.

Everybody stop. Seem like Ciaran missed Grammy's meanin: 'tweren't only Meara's *builidin* come to ashes.

Ciaran, say Grammy, a tear startin to fall. Oh, Ciaran . . .

Out the door! Down the stairs, through the other door to the street. Walk down Baxter, cross at Park street, busy Park! Crunch, crunch, light snow lass night. Mary Bree on the corner a Park and Mission place, bare-foot with her broom. I wave.

How do ye, Mary Bree!

She don't see me. Talkin to a gentleman, hopeful customer, but the customer walk on. I get closer.

How do ye, Mary Bree!

How do ye, Theo! *Dia duit!*

Dia duit! I say. I taught Mary Bree that greetin, she oughta know some Irish since her name's Mary Briana O'Doolin. I like your gray shawl, Mary Bree!

Thanks! I found it!

Mary Bree only six and that shawl still a little small for her, fulla holes, lookin like a part a somethin bigger got ript up. Still, before she didn't have *no* cover over her dress, and Mary Bree work in the outdoors, street-sweeper, tidyin away the weather and the debris for the gentry steppin at the corners. Mary Bree rub her right foot gainst her left leg, then left foot gainst right leg, warmin em, hopin they change blue to red.

Where your Grammam Cahill be? She not in her spot.

Late, gatherin her wares. Then company come.

What company?

From Ireland.

From Ireland?

Little brother of Meara—the one died in the fire lass year with her husband and girl.

I remember that story!

Grammy wrote to Ciaran and his mammy bout the fire and bout everybody dyin but they didn't get the letter.

What his name?

Ciaran. *Kee-er-un*, that got three beats but fast it almost sound like two: *Keer-un*.

Sweep your walk for ya, ma'am?

Yes, thank you.

And Mary Bree get to work, grinnin, sweepin the corner so the lady can cross, not get dirty snow on her fine boots. Coal! A big lump right there in the street, no one else see it. I grab it quick! Give it to Grammy! Sometime hard to pick which grammy, but not now: don't wanna go back to Cahill's, the Meara tears! Like lass summer, everybody sad! I never much knew Meara. When I was toddlin, she met a sailor passin through town, marry and back to Boston with him. Then she miss New York so here they are again, her and him and a girl two years of age, and year later fire took em all. Most I remember about Meara is she come back to die and leave my family sad. I liked her little girl though, Regan. I taught Regan Pat-a-Cake!

Grammy! Grammy! I can't wait, hollerin, runnin up Grammy Brook's tenement steps, *Grammy!* Fly through the door, Looky what I got! I hold up the coal, knowin she be pleased because coal's gold.

Everybody standin quiet. Grammy Brook and Auntie Eunice and Hen and Mr. Freeman and a new one.

Come in, chatty girl, say Grammy, and close the door behind ya. I smell Grammy's hog fat n string beans on the boil. My belly growl.

The new one got skin night-dark, smooth. Tree-tall—I see the washtub out, she musta pulled her legs in tight to fit in that bath. Eyes shine like black pearls, and though the torn dress and bloody scratches speak a hardship, her thick lips open soft to smile.

Maryam, this is my granddaughter Theodora. Theo, this is Miss Maryam.

We are sisters, say Auntie Eunice.

Auntie Maryam, Grammy correct herself.

My father's sister? I ask, suspectin not.

Yes, say Auntie Eunice, you can say that. We shall say that.

You my father's sister, Miss Maryam?
Ain't that what you just heard, say Hen.
She'll say that, say Grammy, if anybody ask, but nobody likely to, and
don't *you* go voicin it out in the street.

I won't.

And not to your Irish kin neither, Hen just gotta add.

I won't!

I know she won't, say Grammy. She's a good girl.

We don't need a good girl, say Hen, we need a quiet girl.

Shut it!

I, start Miss Maryam. Everyone look to her but she stop. Hen scratch
her head and soot fall off. Soot most a her body, Hen musta just come
from work, *she* oughta get in the tub. Chimney sweep, the customers take
her for a boy.

Auntie Maryam will be staying with us, say Grammy, and I look at our
front-room and bed-closet, which is the whole a our estate.

1. Grammy Brook
2. her mother, Gran-Gran, at the winda
3. my cousin Hen who's ten
4. Mr. Freeman our barber boarder
5. me (when I'm not at Grammy Cahill's)
6. now Miss Maryam

Grammy take her string beans and seasonin off the stove.

Everybody suppin. Grammy say, What were ya? Before?

Miss Maryam take a pause, then: Lizzie Hathaway. Hathaway Planta-
tion, South Carolina. I work the fields. I's twenty-five. Or -six. Or -seven.

In the street a driver hollerin at his horses. Every time he crack the whip
Miss Maryam jump.

Lizzie they names me but my mammy secret names me Maryam,
Maryam I is.

Grammy take a think.

Let's make you New York born. Been workin a upstate farm, just come
back home to be with your family. Us. Let's make you a washerwoman.
Let's make you twenty-six.

Year younger than I, my baby sister! say Auntie Eunice. Do you know when your birthday is?

Spring. My mammy say I comes with spring.

March twentieth then! say Auntie Eunice. The first day of spring.

Your family name, say Grammy, will be Brook, *our* family name. My mother, husband, and me given the master's name, Broek—Broek with an *e* that the master shortened from *ten Broek*. When emancipation come to New York State thirty years back, we made it plain old Brook.

Manicipation thirty year *back*? say Miss Maryam, makin the third O-mouth a the day.

What's that? I point. Somethin hangin from her neck.

Miss Maryam finger the little leather pouch, square and somethin surely inside it.

From my mother, she say. From Africa.

Africa? say Grammy, smilin like wondrous. And passed down all these generations!

One generation. My mother born Africa.

But? Grammy start, eyes to the ceilin, figurin somethin.

They made the trans-Atlantic trade illegal in aught-eight, Auntie Eunice say, voicin whatever Grammy was tryin to solve. Which only means the trafficking continued covertly. Illegally.

Where's your mother now? Hen ask.

Miss Maryam look to Hen, eyes full a water, and when a tear from each eye start to fall, she quick wipe em away.

Auntie Eunice change the subject, start talkin bout makin a new dress for Miss Maryam so she don't gotta wear the dress she come in, start talkin bout city livin, love your neighbor but don't let em swindle ya. Auntie Eunice stay with us tonight, which I'm happy about! Even if the apartment now got *too many*. When Hen take Miss Maryam down to the w.c., I ask, Where Miss Maryam come from?

You heard, say Auntie Eunice. South Carolina.

I mean how she come to *us*?

It's organized, say Grammy. There's volunteers. Hosts. We volunteered to host. Didn't know when our guest would come, or if. All that's a secret.

Where's Miss Maryam's mother?

Must be sold or dead, say Auntie Eunice, don't bring it up.

I think about Miss Maryam's teary eye to talk about her ma, about Ciaran's eyes dry like the desert to talk about his ma and pa. Orphan lucky: I not known mother nor father so my eyes never too wet, never too dry, just right! Hearin stories bout my mother from Auntie Siobhan is fun! And I like when Auntie Eunice have me read the book my papa loved, but none a that ever make me long for the dearly departed. It jus give my eyes the twinkle, the only thing waterin bein my mouth, ponderin what kinda special treat a grammy or auntie might have in store for somebody happen to be the spittin image of the beloved dead that begat em.

"Hancock writes with a razor-sharp pen, wittily and with originality."
-KATRINE ENGBERG, #1 internationally bestselling author of *The Butterfly House*

THE CORPSE FLOWER

A NOVEL

ANNE METTE
HANCOCK

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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C H A P T E R

1

ANNA REGULARLY DREAMED about killing him. About creeping up on him and swiftly running the blade across his throat. That was why, on this particular morning, she didn't sit up in bed with a jolt but calmly blinked as she woke from yet another dream that left a kaleidoscope of violent images on the inside of her eyelids and filled her with excitement.

Is it over?

She lay still in the darkness as reality sunk in.

She checked the clock on the tiled floor next to her bed: 5:37 AM. It was the longest she had slept since renting the house.

A dog's barking echoed through the cloisters of the old monastery on the neighboring street. Two barks followed by a short, suppressed howl, then total silence. Anna raised herself up on her elbows and listened. She was about to lie down again when she heard a spluttering car approaching slowly.

She got out of bed and quickly made her way to one of the bedroom's two windows. A wave of unease washed over her. She opened one of the faded green shutters slightly,

sending a ray of morning sun through the room in a narrow beam, and looked down into the street two floors below her. Apart from a cat waving its tail languidly on the wall of the overgrown courtyard garden of the building opposite, Rue des Trois Chapons lay deserted.

Anna scanned the houses.

Her gaze stopped at the ground-floor window of the building across the road. It was wide open. Normally, all the windows in that house were covered with shutters. This was the first time she had seen any sign of life in the run-down property. The dark hole in the wall seemed to zoom in on her like a probing eye.

Her fingers started tingling, and she felt her pulse throb in her ears.

Is it him? Have they found me?

She stayed hidden behind the shutters until she'd gotten her breathing back under control. Then she nodded in an effort to reassure herself. There was no one down there. No one was hiding in the shadows.

In fact, very few people frequented Rue des Trois Chapons. The small street ran from the church on the square to the town's high street and was winding and narrow. You could touch the cobblestone houses on both sides by simply extending your arms. At street level, a sweet stench revealed that stray cats sought refuge there at night. They'd lurch and squeal pitifully in their search for company. But Anna rarely saw any people here. Not in this alleyway.

She closed the window and walked naked up the uneven stone steps. On the rooftop terrace she turned on the water hose, and it started wriggling on the tiles. She picked it up and washed herself in the spray. The cold water hurt, her body still warm from sleep, but she didn't flinch.

She brushed off the water and raked her fingers through her wet hair. She let her fingertips sink into her hollow cheeks

and studied her reflection in the window of the terrace door. She had lost weight. Not much, no more than maybe three or four pounds, but her breasts were smaller, her arms lean and her face gaunt. She couldn't decide what she looked like more: an overgrown child or an old woman. Both made her stomach turn.

She put on a jersey dress and a pair of espadrilles and walked downstairs to the kitchen, where she found a lump of baguette and a jar of fig jam. She ate by the open window and listened to the clatter of stalls being assembled on the market square.

Yesterday, she had sent the letter.

She had made the three-hour drive to Cannes, where she'd first picked up the FedEx package at La Poste on Rue de Mimont. Back in the car, she had ripped it open and made sure the money was inside. Then she'd popped the letter into the post box outside the post office and driven back to Rue des Trois Chapons.

In a few days, she would send another letter. And then another.

In the meantime, all she could do was wait. And pray.

She swallowed the last mouthful of baguette and put on a cap, grabbed her backpack and left the house. She walked down the high street to the market in the square, where she stopped between the stalls and shoppers to savor the atmosphere.

A group of children had gathered around a small, rickety table. On the table was a cardboard box, and inside it, a kid goat was being fondled by the children's eager hands. A sturdy man in dirty dungarees pushed his way between a pair of twin boys and stuffed a bottle into the goat's mouth. With the other hand, he held out a plastic basket to the parents who were watching and smiling at their children's excitement. Reluctantly they fished out some coins from their

pockets and tossed them into the basket. The man thanked them mechanically and immediately yanked the bottle from the mouth of the hungry goat, milk spraying all over.

Anna watched the man repeat the performance. She was about to angrily snatch the bottle from his hand when she noticed an elderly couple sitting under a flourishing wisteria at the café across the street.

The man was bald and wearing a bright-yellow polo shirt. His attention was fixed on a croissant. His shirt was what had caught Anna's eye, but it was the small, apple-cheeked woman in the chair next to him that made her stop dead in her tracks.

She didn't have time to register what the woman was wearing or eating. All she saw was the camera she was holding up and the look of disbelief on her face as she stared directly at Anna.

Anna turned and walked with measured steps to the nearest street corner and turned around it.

Then she started to run.

2

“IT’S NOT THE same thing. It’s not even *close* to being the same thing.”

Detective Sergeant Erik Schäfer looked perplexedly at his colleague across the desk.

He and Lisa Augustin had shared an office for almost a year, and not a day had gone by without them having an amicable but heated discussion of some sort. Today was no exception.

“Sure it is,” she said. “You’re just from an older generation, so you have a different mind-set. Society has brain-washed all of us into believing that one thing is completely normal and socially acceptable while the other is morally up there with fraud and manslaughter. Ultimately there’s no difference between the two, but for reasons unknown to us, we’ve decided to *think* there is.” Augustin emphasized her point by waving with the half-finished turkey sandwich in her hand.

“Right, explain it to me again, then,” Erik Schäfer said. “You’re telling me there is no difference between having sex and getting a massage? Same ball game?”

“I’m telling you that they’re both physically satisfying at a very intimate level. Imagine that you and Connie have both booked a full-body massage—”

Schäfer found the prospect highly unlikely.

“—and your massage therapist is a woman, hers a man. You’re both shown into a small, dimly lit room with some sort of bed-like device. You undress, and then you let a total stranger rub their oily hands up and down your naked body. You can smell the rose oil, meditative seductive feel-good music is playing, while you lie on your separate beds thinking, ‘Oh, that’s great, please don’t stop, yes, right there, oh, that feels so good.’ ”

“You’ve got mustard on your chin.” Schäfer looked at her matter-of-factly and pointed to the yellow stain.

She found a crumpled napkin in the Subway sandwich bag in front of her and wiped the mustard off while she continued to build her case.

“Afterwards, you and Connie meet up, pay the check, and tell each other how wonderful it was. You’ve never felt better, and no one seems upset by the fact that the other person has just been physically satisfied by a stranger. Quite the contrary, in fact. You actually agree that you really ought to do this more often.” She turned up the palms of her hands and shrugged wildly, implying that you had to be exceptionally stupid not to see the logic of her argument.

Schäfer blinked a couple of times. “So, you’re saying that getting a massage should be as forbidden as having sex with someone other than your partner?”

“No, dummy. I’m saying that both ought to be equally legit.”

Erik Schäfer’s eyes widened.

“It’s a scientific fact,” she continued. “Marital bliss increases with fewer restrictions in a relationship; couples would be far less likely to split up if especially the wife was allowed to hook up with someone other than her husband.”

“You’re full of shit!”

Augustin laughed out loud.

“This it all just because you think like a man,” Schäfer went on, referring to the fact that in her twenty-eight years, Lisa Augustin had scored more women than he had in nearly twice that amount of time.

“You don’t believe me?” She turned 180 degrees in her chair and was starting to pound the keyboard on her computer to find the evidence for her claim when Schäfer’s phone rang.

“Saved by the bell,” he laughed, and answered the call. “Hello?”

“Hi, there’s a woman down here who wants to talk to you.” The voice on the other end belonged to a receptionist on the ground floor of police headquarters.

“What’s her name?”

“She won’t say.”

“She won’t say?” Schäfer echoed. “Why the hell not?”

Augustin stopped typing and looked up at him with a frown.

“She’ll only say that she has something important to show you. Apparently it’s about one of your murder investigations from three years ago.”

Schäfer regularly received emails and phone calls from members of the public who thought they had valuable information to contribute. It was rare, however, for someone to turn up in person, and even rarer for them to have information about a case that old.

“All right, get an officer to take her up to the second floor and put her in interview room one.”

He hung up and stood.

“Who was that?” Augustin asked, nodding to draw his attention to the button on his trousers, which he had discreetly opened under his desk to make room for his stomach while he ate his lunch.

“That was my wife,” Schäfer replied. He pulled in his stomach and buttoned his pants. “She’s just had sex with the gardener, so she thought I deserved an Indian head massage. The massage therapist is making her way up the stairs as we speak.”

3

FINE, ALMOST SILENT September rain descended upon Copenhagen for the fifth day in a row. The summer, which was long over, had been grayer than usual, and it was starting to feel like the four seasons had been replaced by one long, muddy autumn.

Heloise Kaldan was closing her kitchen window, where water was dripping onto the windowsill, when her cell phone started buzzing.

It had been ringing off the hook all weekend. This time she didn't recognize the number. She rejected the call and popped a dark-green capsule in the Nespresso machine, and immediately it started spluttering out a pitch-black *lungo*.

From her living room she had a view of the huge, verdigris dome of the Marble Church. The old attic apartment on the corner of Olfert Fischers Gade had been neither spacious nor appealing when she had bought it. It hadn't even had a real bathroom, and the old kitchen, which was now Heloise's favorite room, had been downright disgusting. But from the small living room balcony, she had a clear view of the Marble Church, and that was one of the few criteria she had insisted

on from the estate agent: she'd have to be able to see the dome from at least one window in the apartment.

As a child, she had seen her father every other weekend, and the dome had been their special place. Every other Saturday they had first gone to get hot chocolate and cream cakes at Conditori La Glace, where he had charmed all the waitresses, and then strolled down Bredgade toward the church, where they had made their way up the winding stairs with familiar ease and crossed the squeaky floorboards in the loft under the roof before sitting down on one of the benches in the cupola at the top.

Snuggled up, they had savored their view of Copenhagen. At times the city had been covered in snow, at other times bathed in sunshine, but mostly it had just been gray and windswept. Her father had pointed out historical buildings and told her long, spellbinding tales about the country's old kings and queens. She had sat there listening, gazing at him with an expression that revealed that in her eyes, he was the nicest and wisest man in the whole wide world.

On every visit, he had taught her three new words she was to practice before their next meeting.

"Right, let me see," he had said as he moistened the tip of his finger and pretended to be leafing through an invisible dictionary.

"Aha! Today's words are *braggart*, *baroque*, and . . . *opulent*."

Then he had explained their meaning and given examples of amusing contexts they could be used in, and Heloise had lapped it all up. She had loved the times the two of them spent together at the top of the church, and it was there, cuddled up safely against his big belly, that her love of storytelling had been born.

In the first apartment she had moved into as an adult, she'd had an unobstructed view of the dome from her

bedroom window, and over time it had become her lucky mascot: a memento of a safe and meaningful childhood. Whenever she traveled, she missed the dome more than anything.

It was, however, rare for her to be standing as she was now, looking toward the church on an early Monday afternoon. Normally she would be at an editorial meeting at the newspaper where she worked, discussing this week's main issues and planning her research.

But not today.

Today's papers lay spread out in front of her on the kitchen table. The Skriver story was on the front page of every single one of them.

She opened page two of *Demokratisk Dagblad*, her workplace for the past five years, and read the editorial. The editor in chief was apologizing for a story published a few days earlier about the fashion mogul Jan Skriver's investment in an environmental disaster of a textile factory in Bangalore that used child labor. The paper had "acted naïvely in its search for the truth," he wrote. The piece was filled with pathos and well-choreographed hand-wringing, and its sole purpose was to make the paper appear honest, neutral, and—this was the crucial bit—to dodge any management responsibility.

Fair enough. It wasn't the editor in chief's fault. It was hers. She had written the story, she had trusted her source, and she had allowed something resembling trust to trump due diligence.

How the hell could she have been so stupid? Why hadn't she checked and double-checked her facts? Why had she trusted him?

Her cell phone started vibrating again. This time it was a number she couldn't dismiss. She let it ring three times before she answered in a weary voice.

“Kaldan speaking.”

“Hi, it’s me. Were you asleep?” Her editor, Karen Aagaard, sounded tense.

“No, why?”

“Your voice sounds a little rusty, that’s all.”

“I’m up.”

Heloise had been up most of last night and had finished off the bottle of white wine she and Gerda had opened yesterday. She had mulled over the story and examined it from all angles, reviewed every single detail in the course of events in an attempt to get to grips with it, but no matter how hard she’d tried, it had remained blurred, fuzzy. Or perhaps she just didn’t like what she was seeing? She was a journalist—a damn good one, too—and it just wasn’t like her to be so horribly wrong. She was furious with herself—and with *him*.

“I know I told you to take today off,” Karen Aagaard said, “but The Shovel wants to see you.”

Carl-Johan Scowl, aka The Shovel, was a greasy garden gnome of a man who worked as readers’ editor at *Demokratisk Dagblad*, taking his lead from the guidelines for good press ethics. He dealt with readers’ complaints about errors in the newspaper’s stories, and whenever he knocked on your door, you knew it would be a long day, maybe a long week, and possibly the end of your career.

“Again?” Heloise closed her eyes and let her head fall backward. She felt emotionally drained at the prospect of yet another exhausting review of the sequence of events. They had been over it three times already.

“Yes, you need to come in so that we can finish it off. There are still a few things he wants to go over before we can move on. Surely you’d like that too?”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” Heloise said, and hung up.

She grabbed her black leather jacket, kicked aside a pile of junk mail on the doormat, and slammed the door behind her.

* * *

Demokratisk Dagblad's offices were in a listed building in Store Strandstræde whose antiquated, regal expression and decor matched the paper's conservative views. The vaulted ceilings were high, the walls decorated with handmade wallpaper, and the glass in the old casement windows was so thin that Heloise always froze her butt off during the winter months.

She parked her bicycle in front of the building and nodded to a couple of guys from the paper's sales department who were smoking, sheltered from the rain on a café bench across the street. A black awning stretched out above them, filled to bursting with water, and drops of rain trickled down the big metal posts that held it up. Heloise watched the canvas, half expecting it to split above their heads.

One of the men returned her greeting with a cheerful, "Hey, Kaldan, what's up?"

His buddy leaned toward him without taking his eyes off Heloise and whispered something that made them both smirk.

She turned away and swiped her card through the electronic lock to the right of the entrance. She entered her personal code, and the door made a buzzing, mechanical sound before it opened.

Heloise climbed the stairs to the news desk on the third floor and jogged up, taking two steps at a time.

Karen Aagaard was waiting for her on the landing. They had always been on good terms, and Heloise liked and respected her, but they had never been close. Heloise knew that Aagaard lived in ritzy Hellerup, that she was married

and that her son was in the military, but apart from that she had no notion of her editor's private life—or vice versa. It was a level of intimacy that suited Heloise just fine, especially today.

"Let me guess: you don't believe in umbrellas, is that it?" Aagaard studied Heloise's soaked clothing quizzically.

Heloise smiled and shook off some of the raindrops. "Yeah, I'm just not *that* grown up yet."

"I assume that you've read today's editorial?"

"Yes."

"And?"

Heloise gave a light shrug. "What else could Mikkelsen write?"

"I suppose you're right, but he was seriously pissed off when I spoke with him this morning. If you hadn't produced so many of the paper's scoops this year, I really think he'd kick you out on your ass. I'm still not a hundred percent sure you're in the clear."

"Thanks. That's exactly the pep talk I was hoping for." Heloise opened the door to the open plan office. "After you, boss."

"There's nothing more to the story than what you've already told us, is there? Something The Shovel might dig up that I should know about?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know. *Anything* that might make you appear worse than you already do? And a spontaneous *no* would have been much more reassuring, let me tell you." Karen Aagaard looked at her over the rim of her tortoiseshell glasses.

Blurred images of naked bodies, sweat, and salty kisses appeared like a runaway slideshow in Heloise's mind. She wanted to be helpful, because she didn't enjoy having her name on a story that didn't hold up to scrutiny, but she also didn't want to share details of her private life. Not just

because it was none of her boss's business. She was also too proud to admit to having trusted Martin.

"No," she said, placing a reassuring hand on her editor's shoulder. "There's nothing more to the story. Let's just get it over with, shall we? Where's The Shovel?"

"He should be here by now."

Karen Aagaard stuck her head inside the conference room halfway down the editorial corridor. There was no one there.

"He was still in his car when he called me, so perhaps he hasn't arrived yet. Grab yourself a coffee, but stay on this floor. I'll let you know when he gets here."

On her way to the kitchenette, Heloise passed the pigeonholes. It was rare for her to receive actual mail these days. Today, however, a big pile of letters was waiting for her.

She carried the letters and a cup of instant coffee to the investigative section, swung both feet up on her desk, and opened the first envelope. It was a heavy thing, nine pages of densely written outrage about the use of child labor in India. The same theme recurred in letters two and three, while the fourth contained a small, yellow Post-it, bearing a single word:

Slut!

"Wow, that's original," she said, holding up the Post-it note to her colleague, Mogens Bøttger, who was sitting on the other side of the double desk.

He looked up from his notepad with an unimpressed raising of an eyebrow.

Heloise scrunched up the note along with the envelope and threw the paper ball toward the wastebasket at the far end of the room. It landed on the uneven herringbone parquet floor well clear of its target.

"Swish!" Bøttger said in mock admiration. "The NBA will surely be waiting to scoop you up if Mikkelsen kicks you out."

“He won’t.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, if I were you.”

“He won’t fire me,” Heloise stated.

She picked up the next envelope and started opening it.

“He fired the one with the warts,” Bøttger declared in a singsong voice, referring to a fellow reporter who had just been canned for having invented a source. The firing had echoed throughout the building and left chief editor Mikkelsen with a burst blood vessel in one eye. He had been incandescent with rage.

“She damn well deserved it,” Heloise said, “but my case is completely different. I acted in good faith. I’m not saying that I wouldn’t do things differently if I could turn back time—the bright light of hindsight and all that—but Mikkelsen and I, we . . .” Heloise shook her head dismissively. “He’s not gonna fire me.”

She unfolded the next letter and started reading. Bøttger went on talking, but the sound of his voice faded away as a cold, uncomfortable tingling spread inside her.

The letter was short.

It contained only a few sentences written in a neat hand, but the words made her mouth go dry and a cold, bubbly sensation fill her chest.

Bøttger’s voice cut through just as Heloise realized she had stopped breathing. “But you really shouldn’t let anyone tell you—”

“Mogens,” she interrupted him. “Didn’t you cover a story a few years ago about a lawyer who was murdered?”

“Huh?” He looked blankly at her across the desks and straightened up slowly in his chair when he saw her expression. “Who are we talking about?”

“That lawyer who was murdered. Was it in Kokkedal or Hørsholm or somewhere up north? What was his name?”

“His name was Mossing. And he lived in Taarbæk. What about him?”

“Did you cover that story?”

In the investigative section, Mogens Bøttger specialized in crime and social affairs, while Heloise was responsible for business and consumer issues and only rarely dealt with violent crimes.

“No, I was still on the news desk back then. It must have been Ulrich. Why are you asking?”

“What was her name? The woman they think did it?”

“Anna Kiel. And it’s not something they just think. They *know*. She was caught leaving the scene on a security camera in Mossing’s driveway. And when I say *caught*, I mean she stood staring directly into the lens for several minutes before leaving the crime scene without trying to remove or damage the camera. Covered in blood from head to toe, frozen like a statue. She just stood there gazing at the camera without moving a muscle. A total psycho.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know. She was never found. Why?”

Heloise went over to Bøttger and placed the letter in front of him. She leaned over him while they both read it.

Dear Heloise.

Have you ever seen someone bleed to death?

It’s a unique experience. Or at least it was for me, but then again, I had been looking forward to it for a long time.

I know they say I have committed a crime.
That I must be found, tamed and punished.

I haven’t.
I won’t be.

I can't be.
I already have been.

. . . And I'm not done yet.

I wish I could tell you more, but I have promised not to.

While I am denied your presence, Heloise, give me at least through your words some sweet semblance of yourself.

Anna Kiel

Bøttger looked up at her, stunned. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"It was in the mail."

"Do you know her?"

"No. I remember bits and pieces of the story, but apart from that, nothing. Never met her."

"Christ . . ." He scratched his head so hard his big, dark-brown curls waved from side to side. "Do you think it's legit?"

Heloise shrugged.

"It might be a hoax," Bøttger said. "I get the craziest emails from readers all the time. There are weirdos everywhere, Heloise; you know that. This letter could easily have come from one of them. Now that you're in the public eye with the whole Skriver scandal, your in-box automatically turns into Freak Central."

Heloise went back to her desk and examined the envelope in which the letter had arrived. It was medium sized and pale blue, and it was postmarked in Cannes eleven days earlier, a week before the whole Skriver thing had exploded. So, whoever sent it, they hadn't acted in response to the media circus.

"It makes no sense," she said, looking across to Bøttger. "Why write to me rather than to Ulrich if he was the one who covered the story? Do you know where he's working now?"

“I don’t think he is. Working, I mean.” Böttger picked up his cell phone and started swiping.

“What do you mean?”

“He was doing these sleazy tabloid stories for *Ekspressen* for a while, but I think he has been battling depression or something, and he hasn’t been back to work for a while. He’s covered so many violent crimes over the years, and maybe it all just caught up with him. I think that I have his . . . yeah, I have his private number here. You want it?”

“Yes, please.”

Heloise reread the letter. Then she turned on her computer and Googled *Anna Kiel*. Two hundred and thirty-eight search results appeared on her screen. She clicked on the first one—an article from her own newspaper, which was indeed written by Ulrich Andersson and dated April 24, 2016.

Murder Suspect Named

The identity of the woman who is wanted in connection with a murder in the small town of Taarbæk has now been established, according to a Copenhagen police press release to Ritzau today.

The suspect is 31-year-old Anna Kiel, a Danish native who is considered armed and dangerous. She is wanted in connection with the fatal stabbing of lawyer Christoffer Mossing, 37, on the night of Sunday 21 April.

The victim was attacked in his home. Police believe that no one else was present at the time of the murder, and no other residents are registered at the address.

“There’s nothing to suggest that the victim and the suspect knew each other, but we do know that the woman in question has a history of mental illness. We therefore ask anyone who might come into contact with her to keep their distance and to contact the police,” says Detective Sergeant Erik Schäfer, who is heading the investigation.

Anna Kiel is of Scandinavian appearance, 5 foot 7 tall, and of medium build, and at the time of the incident she had long, medium-blond hair. Anyone with information about her whereabouts or who can assist the police with their inquiries in any other way, please contact Copenhagen Police at telephone number 114.

UA, *Demokratisk Dagblad*

“Kaldan . . .”

Heloise looked up from her computer.

Karen Aagaard was standing at the end of the corridor, gesturing for Heloise to join her. “You’re on.”

"Sparkles with wit and a poignant emotional reality. I love it."

— MATT HAIG, bestselling author of *The Midnight Library*

OUT

OF

LOVE

HAZEL HAYES

a novel





DUTTON

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Muscle Memory

“Cup of tea?”

I’ve asked him this a hundred times before. I ask it now, casually, as though nothing has changed. As though this time is the same as all the others. But before the words have even left my mouth I think, *That’s the last time you’ll ever ask him that question.*

I know it’s true too. Because all this “let’s be friends” stuff is bullshit. Theo has no intention of being my friend; that’s just something he’s been saying to make it easier—not for me, of course, but for him.

He asked if we could have a break but what he meant was a breakup. He moved most of his stuff out of our apartment while I was home in Dublin, crying on my mother’s sofa. He stopped loving me a long time ago but wasn’t brave enough to tell me. And so our relationship kept trundling forward like a wagon down a dirt road, with me tied to the back like a rag doll. I imagine myself bouncing about in the dust, with a stitched-on smile and vacant eyes, just happy the rope is holding. The image is so morbidly funny that I have to conceal a grin.

“Sure. Thanks,” says Theo.

Go fuck yourself, I think, in response to his perfectly reasonable answer to my question. This is going to be interesting.

As I fill the kettle I can sense him start to notice his surroundings.

“The place looks great,” he says. He’s not being facetious. It does. I redecorated.

In the two months since he left, I’ve found it increasingly easy to accept that this is no longer *our* apartment; it is *my* apartment. The things that once served as comforting reminders of him have now grown alien and unwanted, which is why I want them all gone.

The first thing I did was dismantle the photo wall—dozens of pictures of us hung from rows of twine with miniature wooden pegs—my first and only attempt at being the kind of woman who is crafty around

the house. As I took the pictures down and placed them in a shoebox (I wasn't quite ready to throw them away), I noted how smug we seemed in each one: big, stupid smiles, cheeks pressed together, arms around waists. Here we were at a music festival. And here, outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. In one photo we were lying half-naked on a beach with the Pacific Ocean stretching out behind us. I remember how Theo splashed me with the icy water, bringing my skin out in goose pimples and making me shriek with laughter.

None of the photos were recent; most were taken early on in our relationship, when Theo would capture me in random, mundane moments—snuggled up on the sofa or laughing with friends. I used to love how he would take my picture unprompted, and not just on special occasions, like this candid of me, standing on the Ha'penny Bridge in the snow, looking back over my shoulder at him.

The last photo I took down was a Polaroid Theo took of me just a few days into what would become our five years together. In it, I'm lying in his bed half-asleep, my body tangled in his bedsheets, back exposed, one leg jutting out, and a mass of auburn hair spilling out across the pillow like warm honey.

He kept those sheets, the ones with the big green, red, and black circles on. They came with us from home to home over the years, and on the night Theo left, as he stuffed some clothes into black plastic bags, he held them in his hands and wondered whether to take those sheets or a different set.

He was going to stay with a friend, he said. Steve, he said. Who the fuck is Steve? I asked, but that was neither here nor there. He would just stay with Steve for a couple of weeks, he said, get his head straight, he said, take a little break and then maybe we could go on a holiday and reevaluate, he said.

“But Steve only has a blow-up mattress, so I'll need to bring sheets.”

It struck me as odd how, in the midst of what was a seemingly out-of-the-blue breakup, Theo already knew where he was going and what the situation regarding bedsheets would be when he arrived. And as he stood there, like a child asking his mother which towel to bring to swimming practice, it dawned on me what was happening.

I say that like the information came to me and stayed with me. It didn't. It was more like a gap in the clouds than a dawning, really. Just a glimmer of clarity that would soon pass, returning at odd intervals

and increasing in length until eventually the clouds cleared completely and my brain fully accepted that it was over. The clouds wouldn't clear for some time, but in that moment, in that gap, I said, "You're leaving me, Theo, take both fucking sets of sheets." He said nothing. He packed them both.

After I'd placed the last photo in the shoebox, I stood, hands on hips, and stared for a while at the blank space I'd created on the wall. The little wooden pegs hung there, gripping onto nothing, but they didn't stay that way for long; the next day I filled that empty space with pictures of friends and family, covering it in memories independent of Theo, ones that existed in a different part of my mind, a part that didn't hurt to access.

When the wall was full, I looked at the remaining stacks of photos I had printed out and decided to keep going. I stuck them all over the fridge, but still there were more. So I stuck them to the kitchen cabinets too. I had to run to the shop to get more Blu Tack and by the end of the evening my entire kitchen was covered in photos. When I finished, I chuckled to myself at the sheer number of pictures, then realized how much like a psychopath I would seem to the casual observer and erupted into a proper belly laugh at my own expense. My laughter sounded odd in the empty apartment.

I had a cleansing of sorts, boxing up Theo's things and removing everything that reminded me of him. I bought new bedsheets; crisp white with orange embroidery across the bottom. I sold the leather sofa I'd always hated and got a comfy secondhand one instead, scattering yellow cushions on it and adding a knitted throw and a brightly colored rug. I hung new artwork on the walls. I even lit scented candles every night, so that the smell would be different. Everyone who comes to visit now remarks at how much cozier the place feels, and I wonder why I didn't do this before.

I've welcomed the onset of winter and the increasingly long evenings, which provide the perfect excuse to settle into my snug new space and read all the books I'd been meaning to get to. I curl up on the sofa with *Norah Ephron* or *Joan Didion* or some other former heartbreaker who's been there and done that and lived to tell the tale. Sometimes I stop to contemplate a particularly relatable passage, relishing the silence as I stare at the bare treetops just outside my window, their skinny black branches quivering in the breeze, blindly searching for something just out of reach.

And when I get cold, I put the heating on, choosing to ignore Theo's voice in my head telling me to turn it off and put more clothes on instead. If anything, the place is a bit too warm.

The hardest and most worthwhile change I made was to replace the framed *Star Wars* posters in what had been our bedroom. I first saw them in Theo's apartment—the one he lived in when we met—and after that they hung in every home we ever shared. Our mutual love for *Star Wars* was one of the first things we talked about, and during our honeymoon days, snuggled up in his flat, we binged the original trilogy almost every weekend.

It wasn't the emotional attachment that made taking down the posters difficult. The fact is, I was absolutely terrified that somehow this breakup would ruin *Star Wars* for me; the physical act of removing those pictures from what was now my bedroom felt like a tiny defeat, and while I could accept that there were songs I'd no longer be able to listen to, places I would have to avoid for a while, and even people I would never see again, the idea that it might now be difficult for me to watch *Star Wars*—that I would forever associate those films with this shit show of a relationship—that stung.

But I did take them down and I immediately replaced them with three new posters of three powerful women; now Ellen Ripley, Sarah Connor, and the Bride hang side by side above my bed and I sleep a little better with them there. I've since watched all three *Star Wars* films and I'm happy to report that I still felt a childlike glee throughout.

Theo's here today to collect the rest of his stuff—the stuff he didn't shove in a black bag that first night or sneak out of the apartment when I wasn't home—but he hasn't seen the bedroom yet. I'm looking forward to that. In fact, I had to resist the urge to laugh out loud when he walked in and was met by the unmissable display of photos in the kitchen. I could see the cogs turning, his brain offering up to him the possibility that I had entirely lost it, and this, coupled with my chirpy demeanor in what I'm sure he was expecting would be an altogether more somber scene, must be confusing him greatly. It wasn't my intention to confuse him, only to show him that I'm just fine without him. Any other negative feelings on

his part are a bonus.

I flick the switch on the kettle while Theo grapples with the new decor. I see him spot a pair of red heels by the sofa—the pair I kicked off after a night out and chose not to put away in the hopes that he'd notice them. It's not pretty, but it's true; I wanted him to see them. I wanted him to wonder where I'd been. What kind of night I'd had. If I got drunk. Or flirted with anyone. Maybe brought someone back here. Had sex with that someone in our bed. I wanted those heels to remind him of the time I wore them for him with red lingerie. And now I want him to imagine me wearing them for someone else. And I want that thought to cut him.

I haven't been with anyone else, as it happens. That night—like most nights lately—I got into bed and cried, partly from loneliness, and partly from a sense of relief at having made it through another day. Truth be told, the thought of anyone touching me right now feels deeply wrong. I did go on a date, but that was just an attempt to convince myself that I'm okay, which is ironic, really, because it only served to prove that I'm very much not.

The date wasn't planned as such. Last week I was having tapas with a friend when I spotted a very attractive guy at the table behind us. I was genuinely taken aback by how good-looking this man was. I say man—I mean boy; he was a boy. At least to me he was; I'm thirty and I guessed he was about twenty-three. He was having dinner with his parents, so to avoid feeling entirely predatory, I wrote my number on a napkin and asked the waiter to give it to him when I left.

It was one of those “fuck it” moments you get in the throes of grief.

An hour later I got a text. I saved him in my phone as “The Guy from the Tapas Place.” We chatted for a few days. Then we went on a date. It was awful.

Now, I'm sure people have been on much worse dates than this one. The Guy from the Tapas Place wasn't sleazy or obnoxious or mean. He was just vapid; a beautiful, empty vessel of a man who taught me that making conversation with someone who has no ambitions in life and no real interest in anything can be quite difficult.

We went to a cocktail bar in Shoreditch with a sort of eighties nostalgia vibe—the wallpaper looks

like hundreds of little cassette tapes and the menus come in flimsy cassette-tape holders. Novelty menus become decidedly less novel when your world is falling apart, though, so all of this was lost on me. Still, we ordered cocktails and chatted as best we could for a few short, endless hours.

He's a model—of course he's a model—but he's "not actually that interested in modeling"; he was just eager to earn some extra cash because, as it turns out, working at his mate's brewery didn't pay very well. He was approached on the street one day and offered a modeling gig by an attractive older woman.

"Not unlike you," he said.

I'll take that.

When it felt like an appropriate amount of time had passed, I suggested we call it a night. The waiter came over with a bill for sixty pounds and the Guy from the Tapas Place made no move to get his wallet out. I'm usually happy to split the bill—I don't expect a man to pay the whole thing—but I definitely do expect him to not expect me to pay it just because he's gorgeous, which is what I began to suspect was happening here. Also, the cocktails were ten pounds each, and he'd had four; I'd had two. So we kept talking, but now there was an elephant in the form of a bill, sitting on the table in front of us.

The tension was finally broken when the waiter, half-bent forward in an apologetic fashion, announced that the bar would soon be closing. At this point, my date, having definitely already seen the amount we owed, leaned over, looked at the bill, and inhaled sharply through his teeth.

"That's a lot!"

"Yeah," I said, resisting the urge to explain basic math.

He kept looking at it in puzzlement until finally I caved and we split the bill fifty-fifty.

As we walked toward the train station, he took my hand in his. An oddly tender move for a first date, I thought. When he put his arm around my waist I broke, giggling uncontrollably. I assured him that everything was fine—I was just a bit tipsy, you know, from the two cocktails—but the truth is I found this all incredibly awkward, and I find awkward situations incredibly funny. I don't know why. Maybe it's a physical reaction, like how people laugh on roller coasters. Either way, I was done.

I stopped and announced that I'd rather get a taxi. I said good night and told him I'd had fun, and I

really felt like I was doing a good job of ending things there, but somehow he managed to mooch about until a cab arrived and the next thing I knew he was in it with me. Since we both lived in the same direction, he said, we might as well share a cab. I made a big point of telling the driver there'd be two stops.

When we pulled up outside his house, the Guy from the Tapas Place leaned across the back seat for what I thought was going to be a hug. It wasn't. As I put my arms halfheartedly around him he kissed me, but given my assumption that we were hugging, the trajectory was off and his mouth caught the corner of mine. My entire body cringed. He probably felt it. But not one to be discouraged, he looked at me and in the most dramatically Hollywood fashion said, "I can do better than that."

That was it. There was no way I was getting away without kissing this fool. So I let him kiss me. I even kind of kissed him back—nobody wants to be remembered as a bad kisser—and then it was over and he gazed adoringly at me for a moment before finally pissing off into the night, never to be seen again. Incidentally, he didn't offer me any money for the cab.

I looked him up when I got home and found photos of him in Calvin Klein underwear. I imagined waking up next to him, shafts of sunlight pouring across a body that shouldn't rightly exist in nature, carved specifically with moments like this in mind. Then I imagined him smiling up at me, and I shuddered.

I texted him a few days later to tell him the truth: that I thought I was ready to date again but it turns out I wasn't. I left out the part about him being a beautiful, empty vessel of a man, even though he probably would have taken it as a compliment.

Theo looks at the high heels, then at me, then immediately averts his gaze. I can't tell what he's thinking, but his face seems to be locked in a permanent state of semi-anguish. He looks terrible. His longish almond hair, which he always styles into a messy quiff, now lies limp and frizzy on his forehead. His whole body, usually poised in an athletic stance, seems sort of sunken somehow, and his skin is paler than usual, with dark puffy circles under his eyes.

I wonder if he's been crying. If he regrets leaving. Part of me hopes he does. Part of me hopes that

being back here reminds him how good he had it, and that seeing me looking intentionally, effortlessly gorgeous will make him realize he made a mistake. I want him to drop to his knees and beg to be allowed back into my life. Not because I want him back, mind you—I'm through the worst of it now and I know that getting back together would be an insult to all I've been through—I just want to know that he knows he won't survive without me. I think that would make me feel better.

"How's your mother?" he asks. I make a mental note that we've arrived at chitchat.

"Great."

"Yeah?"

"No, Theo. She's upset, obviously."

"Oh."

The kettle begins to boil, its steady crescendo adding some much-needed tension to the situation.

"So, are we going to talk about all the women you've been seeing?" I ask.

"Fucking hell!"

That's not a denial.

"Because one of the main reasons you cited for ending our relationship," I go on, "was a desperate need to 'focus on yourself' and 'spend some time alone,' and now I hear you're making every effort to avoid being alone."

"How did you find out?" he asks, and his nonchalance actually hurts a little, but I don't let that show.

"Oh please," I say. "You've spent weeks coming on to every woman in every bar this side of the Thames. We have a lot of mutual friends, Theo. Word gets around."

That's not entirely true; I read his text messages using an old phone he left behind. But I can't tell him that.

"Well, I've been grieving," says Theo. "I'm a fucking mess. It doesn't mean anything, I just needed an outlet."

"I hope you opened with that."

"Piss off."

“No, really, did you tell them they meant nothing up front or as they were collecting their knickers off your floor?” I ask.

“Oh God,” I say, suddenly realizing, “have you been fucking women on a blow-up mattress?”

“I’ve got a real bed now,” he retorts, and I exhale involuntarily as his words land like a punch to the gut.

“Well,” I say, “who’s a big boy, then?”

He regrets saying that. I can tell. But he won’t say so.

“Look, can we not do this please?” he says. “I’m not feeling great.”

“Not do what, Theo? Argue or break up or move your things out? Because the first is optional but the latter two are definitely happening.”

“Well, I’m not the one who’s been lording it about all over the internet!”

Two things strike me about this sentence. Firstly, yes, I have dramatically increased both the quality and quantity of my Instagram posts. They have followed the exact same pattern as that of every other recently dumped woman: beginning with inspirational quotes and pictures of sunsets, shortly followed by photos of the family pet, and then graduating to nights out with friends and overly filtered, uncharacteristically hot selfies. I’ve been taking a lot of gratuitous selfies lately, because I’ve dropped more than a stone and I look fucking great. That said, I can’t eat when I’m upset and I’d do anything to have my appetite back. But silver linings, eh?

Secondly, did he just say “lording it about”? I should really be focusing on the matter at hand but my brain can’t seem to get past this hilarious choice of phrasing.

“Lording it about?” I repeat, but saying the words out loud makes me laugh. Theo looks on, incredulous.

I’m not doing well to dispel the notion that I’ve lost it.

“I’m sorry,” I say, composing myself, “I should have been more considerate. I should have thought about how my actions might affect you. I should have had more respect for you.” His eyes narrow at me.

“You’re not talking about Instagram, are you?” he asks.

“No.”

“You’re talking about me getting with other women.”

“I am, yes.”

“Great!” he says. “When am I gonna hear the end of this?”

I sometimes wish I could record these gems to play back for him.

“Well, I brought it up twenty seconds ago, so . . .”

“Christ, what do you want to know?” he asks indignantly, like he hasn’t been behaving like an utter prick. I pull back my shoulders and lift my chin and without a hint of emotion I ask the question I’ve wanted to ask for months.

“Did you cheat on me?”

“No,” he says, a little too quickly.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then why ask?”

“You might have said yes,” I say. “Or not answered at all, which counts as a yes.”

“I didn’t cheat on you.”

“But you did start hitting on women a few days after you walked out on me,” I say.

He doesn’t answer.

The kettle reaches its climax and switches itself off. Theo turns and walks back down the hallway toward the bedroom.

Interestingly, I didn’t look through Theo’s messages to find out if he’d cheated on me; I just wanted to know who’d written the last email I received from him, because I could tell that he hadn’t.

Three weeks into our “break” we met for dinner, as planned, to discuss the future of our relationship. I was aware, far back in some shadowy corner of my mind, that said future did not exist, but I wanted to see him. He hadn’t spoken to me since he walked out; I had only received emails from him, all purely logistical. One asked if he could swing by the apartment to “pick up a few things,” so in an effort to be accommodating, I told him I was in Ireland with my mother but he could of course let himself in to get

them. When I returned to London, I asked my friend Maya to meet me at my apartment because I knew, without knowing, what I would find.

Theo's half of the wardrobe was empty save for a bunch of clothes hangers, which jangled together noisily when I opened the door; his underwear and sock drawers had been emptied too, and in the bathroom, my shelf remained untouched—full of jauntily colored nail varnishes, shampoos, and face creams—while beneath it, his shelf was completely bare save for a few rings of dust around vacant circular spots, which at least confirmed that I hadn't just imagined him.

I pictured Theo stuffing his belongings into a suitcase, frantically and unceremoniously, and now—the counterpoint to his frenzied evacuation—I moved through each room as though through tar, tentatively opening doors and pulling out drawers, conducting my morbid inventory. Maya stayed a step behind me. She said nothing. Sometimes our eyes met and we shook our heads, incredulous.

I had moments of panic about random missing items.

“Where's the iron? Did he take the iron? Check that cupboard.”

Maya did so, dutifully.

“It's not in here.”

“Right,” I said. “Okay. I can get a new iron.”

“You can get a new iron,” she echoed.

“I don't really iron things anyway. I suppose it was more his iron.”

“Yeah. It's fine,” she agreed. “It's just an iron.” I was nodding constantly and involuntarily.

“It's just an iron.”

It's just an iron. It's just stuff. I'm just heartbroken. It's just my heart.

I sat down on the bed and called my mother. Maya sat next to me and heard only my side of the conversation:

“Hey. I got back okay . . . Fine. Bit of turbulence, but fine . . . Listen, I think he's gone for good . . . Well, he took his stuff . . . No, not all of it, but, more than ‘a few fucking things,’ anyway . . . Clothes and toiletries . . . And the iron . . . Yeah, I can get a new one . . . I know I don't, that's what I said . . . No,

Maya's here . . . My mam says hi, Maya . . . She's gonna stay the night, Mam . . . Yeah, I'm okay . . . No, of course I'm not . . . He took his shirts . . .”

I will never know why, but it was the shirts that broke me. It's the shirts that have become an in-joke among my friends, one of whom even suggested that I write a novel about him and call it *He Took His Shirts*. It's a good title, but I feel it somewhat undersells the depth of the subject matter.

Tears came then and my voice failed me. I held out the phone to Maya and she took it, rubbing my back as she talked to my mother, reiterating what I'd already said and adding her own opinion of Theo to the mix. Maya is a soft soul who hates no one, and while she's prone to a good rant—usually about everyday injustices like people skipping queues or refusing to recycle—I have never seen her as angry as she was that night. It was a muted, determined sort of anger, far more conservative than the one I knew would soon consume me. While Maya assured my mother she'd stay with me, and, yes, she'd be sure to make me eat something, I went to the wardrobe and slid my clothes along the rail to fill the gap.

Straight after the call, she ordered pizza and watched me eat two slices of it. Then she called her husband, Darren, to let him know she wouldn't be home and to say good night to their daughter for her. Maya and Darren had been our friends for years and had seen us at our best, before things started to fall apart. I could tell they were genuinely disappointed that Theo and I were breaking up, and I knew it would change the dynamic between us all forever.

That's the problem with breakups, though. It's not just two people saying good-bye and going their separate ways; it's the excruciating process of untangling two lives, picking them apart like some sad surgical procedure, trying to detach this thing from that while causing as little lasting damage as possible.

I heard Maya tell Darren what Theo had done, and I heard the long silence on the other end of the line before he finally said, “Fuck's sake, Theo.”

That was all he said. That was all he needed to say.

Finally, Maya put me to bed and crawled in beside me. I asked her to tell me stories, silly ones, fairy tales, like “Goldilocks.” I knew it sounded childish but I was desperate for simple, familiar things. She happily obliged and even kept talking until she was sure I'd fallen asleep.

So this is how I knew, when I met Theo for dinner, that it was already over. Not only had he taken enough essentials for a new life without me; he hadn't even prepared me for it. My mother had flown to London to be there for me when I got home from seeing him that evening, because—although she wouldn't explicitly say it—she knew it was over too.

While I was getting ready, she asked what I would do if Theo wanted to work things out, and I told her I'd be open to it, because there was a part of me that still hoped we could. But the thought of getting back together also created a quiet unease within me, which I realize now is why she asked; it forced me to imagine both possible outcomes instead of feeling—as I did—that I had no choice in the matter. I began to hope and fear in equal amounts that he would officially end it; I didn't want to have to make a decision and I was terrified that, given the chance, I'd make the wrong one. So I went in accepting my fate, but still I agonized over what to wear and what to say. I almost didn't go. I almost called to cancel. I almost wish I had.

When I arrived too early to the restaurant, in the pretty orange dress and navy coat I'd eventually picked out, I sat outside and waited. It was a mild October evening. Autumn leaves swirled idly around my feet and on the street in front of me, a foot-wide shaft of light thinned to a sliver as the sun moved behind a building. The air cooled and I breathed, conscious of each breath.

My anxiety had flared up since Theo left, and I'd been seeing my therapist twice a week just to manage the almost daily panic attacks I was having. But on that night, I remember feeling oddly calm. Truth be told, I was excited to see Theo; throughout our weeks of forced separation the prospect of even a few hours with him was all that had kept me going. The part of me that still held hope of reconciliation swelled in size, and I decided, then and there, that if he wanted to try again, I would. Even if that meant taking things slow, living apart a little longer, having more space, more time. Whatever he needed, I would give it to him. Because I loved him. And I wanted to make this work.

He turned up in his gym gear.

I tell people that and they need to pause to process the information. Then I repeat myself and, as their faces change from shock to pity, I am humiliated all over again. I feel as foolish now, telling it, as I did

then. In fact, of all the things that happened that night and in the weeks and months surrounding it, of all the unimaginably low moments I've endured, the thing I'm most ashamed of is that I sat in a fancy restaurant opposite a man who until recently I thought might one day father my children, while he ended our relationship in a pair of trainers and grass-stained shorts. He said he'd come straight from training, and he hadn't had time to shower or change, but I'd spent three weeks waiting for this. I had lived those weeks. I had sat inside each minute and felt the weight of it pressing in on me. And he didn't even bother to wash himself, or put some fucking trousers on.

Theo told me it was over before the food even arrived; two servings of some sort of chicken in some sort of sauce. He devoured his meal, then asked if I was going to eat mine. I said no, I felt a bit sick, so he ate mine too.

A lot was said and all of it seemed of the utmost significance then, but I struggle to remember it now. Bits stand out. At one point he cried into a napkin. This was after I told him that I'd taken a pregnancy test on the morning he broke up with me and that it was positive.

"I wanted to tell you that night, when you got home," I said, "but I guess on some level I knew you were going to leave me and I didn't want you sticking around out of some misguided sense of obligation."

"Okay."

I can see him trying to compute all this.

"So that's why I didn't tell you. And then you just happened to break up with me. And leave. And the next day I took another two tests and they were both negative."

"Right," he said, staring down at his plate.

"Maybe the first test was broken," I offered.

"So, you're saying it was my fault?" he asked, tears filling his eyes.

"What?"

"That you lost the baby because I broke up with you."

"No! That's not . . ."

I couldn't think straight. Did he honestly think I was accusing him of causing a miscarriage by leaving me?

"I didn't 'lose a baby,' Theo. Like I said, the test was probably broken or something. I just wanted to explain why I was acting weird that day. Why I was so out of it when you were leaving. Why I didn't fight to figure it out. I should have fought harder. But I was scared. And exhausted. And I don't think I was coping very well."

Theo wasn't listening anymore. He had pushed back his chair and dropped his head into a napkin and was now crying heavy, globular tears.

Initially, almost a reflex, I put a hand on his arm and tried to comfort him. I apologized for telling him about the pregnancy test, for burdening him with this information. Then I looked around at the other diners, who were glancing at us over forkfuls of food, and I saw myself as they must see me: a pretty girl in a pretty dress, consoling this man in a pair of shorts.

Something inside me changed in that moment. I'd spent most of the night listening to Theo tell me what I did wrong in our relationship. How me quitting my job to pursue writing had been stressful for him. How my anxiety and depression were bringing him down. How he'd been "miserable" with me. Miserable. I remember that word distinctly. It's quite a severe word. Theo basically made it clear that I was the cause of all his unhappiness; his floundering career, his turbulent relationship with his mother, even his own emotional instability could be traced back to me. As though his life before me had been completely pain-free.

And I had just sat there, so weak and dejected that I believed him when he said I was the only thing holding him back. That if he could just be alone, to focus on himself and his career, he would finally be happy.

Here I was, keeping it together despite feeling like I might at any minute fall apart. Supporting him when I needed support. Being made to feel responsible for all his problems. It was a microcosm of our entire relationship. And seeing him there, with his head between his knees, sobbing, I felt something shift.

I let go, withdrew my hand, pulled my shoulders back, and took a long, deep breath. *That's enough now*, I thought. *That's enough*.

I spent the rest of our time together in a strange, detached state, as we dealt with the peculiar logistics of a breakup. Theo said he'd be in touch about collecting the rest of his stuff. He offered to pay his half of the rent for a couple of months until I figured things out. And he assured me he was not seeing anyone else, that he couldn't even think about that right now. This brought me some comfort, I'll admit.

He also said he wanted to remain friends. That, in particular, stands out, because even though I was hurt and angry, and had just now decided that I didn't want to try again, I still loved him, and I didn't want him to be gone from my life completely.

Afterward, he saw me to a taxi, and just before I got in the car, he took my hands in his and told me to call him if I needed anything. "Anything at all," he said.

We kissed. And I left. And that was it. I felt at once lighter and infinitely heavier.

A few days later, my mother flew home to Ireland and I picked my life up where I'd left off. First item on my agenda was coffee with my boss, Ciara.

I used to work for Ciara when I still lived in Dublin, writing mostly made-up holiday reviews for a magazine called *Taisteal*, which is Gaelic for "travel." She called me early last year, completely out of the blue, to say she was launching her own health-and-wellness magazine here in London and she wanted to give me my own column on mental health. I immediately quit my shit-but-stable full-time job to work for her, because she is a formidable woman who I had no doubt would be successful. She can also be quite persuasive.

Once the magazine took off, Ciara launched a website too, and now I supplement my column with a weekly agony-aunt-style blog. I'm increasingly unsure what qualifies me to give life advice, but people seem to like it. Unfortunately, I had fallen behind on several deadlines since Theo left, so on my way to meet Ciara that day, I braced myself for a grade A bollocking.

Ciara always insists on meeting at one of those shabby-chic cafés in Mayfair, where a coffee costs

The background of the cover is a vibrant green. On the left, there is a stylized illustration of a woman's face in shades of orange and yellow, with dark orange outlines for her hair and features. On the right, there is a stylized illustration of another woman's face in shades of pink and magenta, with dark blue outlines for her hair and features. She is wearing sunglasses. The text is overlaid on this background.

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JEAN CHEN HO

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The Night Market

My last evening in Taiwan, my father wanted to show me Shilin Night Market. We rode the subway, transferring at Taipei Main Station for the northbound red line. Saturday night, the market was jammed with people strolling up and down the arteries of the main thoroughfare. Baba and I dragged along with the crowd, pausing here and there to browse the wares. We'd made up from the fight in the car driving down Yangmingshan yesterday, at least for now. He'd promised to re-think the new university contract and seriously consider coming back to the States for good.

The air was saturated by the scent of grilled meat, custard pudding and red bean pies, propane fumes and human sweat. Deep house music pumped out of every other storefront speaker, as vendors shouted into megaphones pointed at the passing hordes: *Two-for-one ladies cotton underwear! Genuine leather*

sandals for men! Motorola flip phones unlocked here! DVDs! CDs! Come take a look!

At the food section in the back of the market, Baba stood in line to order us bowls of oyster vermicelli while I staked out seats at the communal tables set up in the center of the stalls. We dipped into the noodles. The oysters floated on top, fat and glistening like polished jewels.

“Listen, mei. There’s one more person who wanted to see you before you leave,” Baba said, between bites.

I asked if it was another relative. If Baba sensed my irritation, he didn’t show it.

Before this trip, I hadn’t seen my father in two and a half years, since he took this job. In the last week—my spring break—I’d barely spent any time with him alone. Every day, another banquet dinner with dozens of cousins, uncles and aunties, family friends who asked if I remembered them from the last time I visited the island, when I was just a kid.

“You can call him Uncle Lee,” he said. One of his college buddies, my father explained. For a second, he looked like he had more to add. “He’s been a good friend to me,” he said finally.

“That’s him over there now.” Baba lifted a hand and waved.

The man waved back and made his way to our table. He moved with the compressed energy of a wrestler, his chin slightly down, arms swinging deliberately, as if ready to grapple at a moment’s notice. Lee wore a red tank top with a cartoon duck printed on the chest, the hem tucked into a pair of

tight black jeans, an FOB outfit that would've caught stares back home, but here he looked cool, I thought.

"My baby daughter," Baba said.

"Uncle Lee," I said in Mandarin. "Pleased to meet you."

"Sit down, sit down!" He offered his hand to me, and I shook it. "A big lady, tall like Old Shen here."

"She takes after her mother more than me—"

"I should hope so, with your teeth," said Lee, and they both laughed. He extracted a blue handkerchief from the nylon fanny pack around his waist and wiped down his face, which gleamed with sweat. "Much hotter here than LA, right? And it's only March." He gestured toward the empty Styrofoam bowls on the table. "You like Taiwanese food? Even the broiled intestines in the vermicelli?"

"My daughter eats very well."

"Wah! Like you, then." Lee jabbed a finger into my father's side.

"Uncle Lee, have you eaten yet?"

Lee smiled. "She's quite mature. Good manners." He glanced at my father approvingly. "All foreign-born girls not this way. Sometimes you hear stories about overseas children."

I felt my cheeks warm under Lee's scrutiny.

"And your Mandarin isn't bad," he said. "I thought your father was exaggerating, going on about 'My daughter Jane doing this and that, memorized the periodic table when she was only twelve, super number one classical piano.'"

“My mother stuck me in Saturday Chinese school for years,” I said. “Baba bribed me with McDonald’s.”

“Lee and I used to compete in the university badminton courts,” Baba said. I was glad for the subject change. “When I moved back here, I went looking for a game at those same courts, and I saw him there, believe it or not.”

“In our college days, the girls crowded the bleachers,” Lee said. “Just to catch a glimpse of your father in those white athletic shorts.”

“Lee! Don’t make up stories.”

“Sometimes he even played bare chest,” Lee said, grinning. He pantomimed pulling off his shirt with a flourish of his arms. “Quite a scene you created, brother.”

“You, Baba?”

“Not me,” he replied. “You must be remembering someone else, Lee.”

“Don’t be so modest,” said Lee. “Your father was the school prince.”

Baba shook his head.

“We all knew he’d be the one to go to America.”

“I was lucky, that’s all,” said my father.

“Luck!” Lee exclaimed. “You’re brilliant. You worked hard—”

“I made certain choices,” Baba said. “Left or right—”

“Like deciding to move back here,” I said, with more force than I intended. “And stay here,” I added. “Or was that luck?”

A silence. Then Lee laughed lightly, a sound almost as if he were clearing his throat. He exchanged a look with my father,

and I saw something pass between them, the wordless language adults believe only they know how to speak. My father was silently apologizing to Lee: My daughter is a moody, sensitive girl prone to bursts of emotion, and something about these old stories puts her in a sour mood. She's in her last year of high school but still a child. Still childish. I'd better get her home.

"The university students your father helps are the lucky ones now." Lee's eyes fell on me, and I forced a smile to my lips. I nodded, pretending to agree. But the way he spoke about my father in the old days gave me the creeps. I couldn't imagine Baba like that at all—someone the girls swooned for? Who was that person?

The job in Taiwan was only supposed to be for one year. And sure, there'd been emails, and phone calls when the hours aligned. But why hadn't he come home to visit?

He left the summer after my freshman year. Before that, Baba had been out of work for I didn't know how long; at some point when I was still in junior high, he'd been laid off from his job at Boeing out in Long Beach. Mah was selling houses, out every weekend at showings, wooing clients over dim sum, managing contractors in every suburb in LA County where Chinese-speaking families lived: Alhambra, West Covina, Torrance, Cerritos. All I remember Baba doing during that time? He stayed in bed and read comic books. He'd dug them out of a cardboard box in the garage. Sometimes I sat next to him

with my own reading, a novel assigned for English class, or an issue of *Sassy* borrowed from Fiona, my best friend. The pillow smelled like Mah's face cream, even though she'd started sleeping in the guest room. "Because Baba snores," she'd complained.

Weekdays, he didn't get dressed or ever leave the house. No more badminton at the park on Saturday afternoons with the other church dads, and he stopped accompanying Mah to Sunday service at First Chinese Calvary over on South Street. He wasn't acting like a normal father anymore. I was in the ninth grade and embarrassed about everything, including this.

One Sunday afternoon, the church dads showed up unannounced. They dragged Baba out of bed and forced him into the shower, chanting, "Jesus loves you! He will provide! Praise Him!" Crowded outside the bathroom door, they sang a rousing hymnal while Baba cleaned up, their voices ringing through the house. They came the Sunday after that, and again on the third Sunday. They wanted Baba to get back to himself, and this was how they thought they could help, with earnest harmonizing, shouts of Hallelujah, wreathing my father in God's holy spirit.

It didn't work. After they left each week, Baba crawled back into bed, surrounded by his comic books. There were volumes stacked on the nightstand, a few tossed on the ground. One time, I flipped through a copy. All those hours of Chinese school homework, that dreaded calligraphy notebook with pages of black grids, and I could only understand about half the text in

the comics. The illustrations filled in the rest. A teenage boy wakes up on a Taiwanese fishing boat with amnesia; he'd survived the typhoon but remembers nothing about his past.

What finally helped, I guess, was finding another job. He and Mah told me together in July that year: Baba was moving to Taiwan for a position at his alma mater, working to secure overseas internships for their engineering grads. I can't remember who packed the suitcases or if I rode along in the car to LAX. Just that one day he was gone, like nothing.

Sophomore year, I picked up smoking menthols from Fiona. I turned sixteen. Failed my driving test a bunch of times before I gave up. Baba didn't come home that summer like he'd said he would. Mah explained that he'd signed on for another academic year. I asked if they were getting a divorce. "We need his salary for your college," she said. "Don't be ridiculous."

As if to make up for his absence at church, Mah threw herself into her devotionals even more vigorously than before. She hosted Friday night Bible study at our house once a month. Not long after Baba left, she bought a huge Jesus painting and hung it on the living room wall, above the black leather sofa with the rip in the arm. A crown of thorns rested on His head, and rivulets of blood flowed down His temples. Jesus's soft blue eyes gazed over the furniture—the matching leather love seat to the side, the walnut-and-glass coffee table decorated with a white doily at its center—and landed on the upright Yamaha against the opposite wall, where I took my weekly piano lessons.

Junior year, I learned to drink soju and beer with my friends. Another school year passed, and then it was summer again. I was seventeen. I asked Mah if Baba was coming home. Instead of answering, she said she was switching me to a new piano teacher.

Ping was a grad student in music composition and performance at CalArts up in Valencia. Mah had heard about her because another girl under Ping's tutelage kept winning first place at piano competitions and junior talent shows all over LA, South Bay, Orange County. Mah wanted Ping to work her magic on me, too.

Last August: the first time Ping came over to give me a lesson, I caught a look of horror in her eyes when she saw Mah's huge painting of Jesus. I was caught off guard—He'd been hanging there for so long I sort of forgot about it—but when Ping's eyes met mine, she gave a bighearted, booming laugh. I laughed, too. She looked back at Jesus, then again at me. She wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and shook her head. It was the first time an adult (Ping was twenty-four, she told me later, when I asked) had ever used that secret language with me, telling a joke without words. We sat down at the piano, me at the bench, Ping in the chair beside it. She wore a plain black sweatshirt over green cargo pants, and black ankle socks on her feet. Large, docile eyes set wide apart on her round face gave Ping the appearance of a curious goldfish. When she pushed up her sleeves, I saw that her arms were covered in tattoos. I'd never imagined someone from China like that, the doomed way Mah talked about the Communist mainland: starvation, corruption, pollution.

Senior year now. I turned eighteen in March; only sixty-four days until graduation. Two years, seven months, since the last time I saw my father. I had to come here to find him. Nine days together in Taipei, finally. To invite him home.

I shifted in my seat, peeling sweaty thighs off the molded plastic chair. Lee's presence irritated me. It was my last night in Taiwan—couldn't Baba and I have spent it alone, just the two of us? There were things I wanted to talk to him about, like when exactly he was planning to return to LA, to Mah, and to me.

I wondered if Mah had been one of those girls watching my father at the badminton court. Neither of my parents had ever been forthcoming about the early days of their romance. I'd tried to ask about it, but they only ever gave me desultory answers, claiming there'd been nothing extraordinary about their courtship.

I asked Lee if he knew my mother back then, too. Before he could answer, Baba's cell phone jingled. "Her ears must be itching," Baba said, flipping the phone open.

Lee took out the blue handkerchief again, shaking it in the air a few times before refolding it into a neat rectangle. He turned away from us and blew his nose violently, his eyes squeezed shut.

On the phone, Baba repeated my flight info to Mah. He promised to follow Taoyuan regulations and get me there three hours ahead of the scheduled departure time.

"What we're doing now?" For an instant, his eyes slid toward Lee. "You want to talk to her?" He handed me the phone.

“Hi, Mah.” She asked what foods we’d eaten today, and I listed them for her, everything at breakfast, lunch, dinner, the night market. After a pause, she asked if I’d had a good time. I said yes.

“You still want to come back, right?” She gave a soft laugh. “Fiona called yesterday for you. I tell her you’re not home yet.” What time was it in LA? Fifteen hours behind, so it was Friday morning there. My mother must have been getting ready to leave for work.

“Did you cancel Ping for this week, too?” I said. My lessons were on Friday afternoons.

“Oh!” Mah cried. “I forget. I have to call her—”

I promised one last time to get to the airport early, and then we hung up.

“Heavens,” Lee said. “Don’t be late for this, don’t forget that—I bet you can’t wait to go off to college and get away from all the nagging.”

He was right, but I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction by agreeing.

“You look so much like her.” Lee’s unwavering gaze made me uncomfortable. “It’s almost like being back there again, twenty years ago.”

So he did know my mother, before.

“You’re going to have to find a new badminton partner, Uncle Lee,” I said.

“I see,” he said. “Of course. You miss him.”

“He’s coming back to the US soon.”

“But in six months, you’re leaving home, too. Correct?” Lee’s eyes hardened, as if he’d been assessing me this whole time and had just now decided something. “Isn’t this American tradition? You move out of your parents’ house after high school. Different from Taiwan—”

“He doesn’t belong here,” I said. My voice was unsteady. I took a breath. “He belongs with my mother—me—”

“Did you ask him if that’s what he wants?”

“I don’t have to ask him.” *He’s my father. I know him. He’s mine.*

“She’s our only child,” Baba said. He put a hand on Lee’s arm. “Let’s go home so you can finish packing.” His voice was gentle, but firm.

I shook Lee’s hand when we said goodbye. He exclaimed at my long fingers, how wide my palms were. I could span an octave easy with my right hand. The left needed practice, but I was getting there.

Baba and I strolled in the direction of the subway station. As we walked, I clenched my left hand in a fist, then spread my fingers wide, as far apart as possible. Ping had taught me this exercise to loosen up my reach. Imagine fire shooting out, she’d said. *Energy! Power! Add gasoline!* I tightened and relaxed my left hand at my side, over and over again.

It was past eleven, but the night market still thronged with people at this hour. Baba and I picked our way through the

crowd, both of us silent. We passed into an alley that led to a turnout to the main road; neon signs lit up the storefronts along the boulevard. We paused at the corner, waiting for the traffic light to change. Now that we were a ways off from the night market din, the sound of cicadas chirping filled the air all around us, teeming thousands nested in the camphor trees.

I thought about Mah. Was she missing me? Baba? Or was she glad to be free of us? Her way of loving was sharp, never tender. She needled us about every little thing, blamed us for every strand of gray hair on her head, every frown line that settled on her face. I missed her all of a sudden. I realized I'd barely thought of her at all, my whole time here.

As if reading my thoughts, Baba began to tell a story about her.

"After college," he said, "Mah worked as a clerk at the department store. They only hired the most beautiful, elegant girls. Ones who knew how to dress, how to talk to customers. Everyone—I mean everyone—admired her. She could have picked any young man to marry." He paused for a moment. "But she chose me."

I thought of the photos I'd seen of them from those days, preserved behind vellum in an album back home. They'd looked like actors in a movie to me: Baba all Bruce Lee bravado in yellow aviators and polyester button-down shirts with huge collars, Mah rocking bell-bottom jeans and platform sandals, her waist tiny, hair curled into lustrous ringlets.

Mah had always blamed the pregnancy for ruining her trim

shape. One time, in a moment of rage when I was a kid, Mah unzipped her pants and let her gut hang out, the loose flesh puckered with purple stretch marks. She'd grabbed me by the neck and smashed my face against her belly. "You did this to me. You! Are you happy?"

"Before I left Taiwan," Baba said, "she made me promise not to meet any American girls. I gave her my word." He smiled. "That was our engagement."

"No ring?"

"It was a secret between us," he said. "And then I went to the US for graduate school."

The traffic signal flashed green. Baba reached for my hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. We crossed the street linked together that way. Past the median, a dozen scooters flew within inches of us, mufflers rattling as the riders sawed through the night.

"I want to talk to you about Lee," he said. We were on the other side of the street now.

"Tell me more about you and Mah," I said. "You never—"

"She's a part of this story."

"Lee had a problem with me," I said. "He was trying to pick a fight."

"Twenty years ago, we were inseparable," Baba said. "Best friends, like brothers. But we lost touch after I moved overseas." He paused a moment before continuing. "When I came back here, I asked around. I found him, through old friends."

“I thought you said— The badminton court—”

“I went looking for him,” Baba said. “When I saw him again”—he stopped, as if to catch his breath—“I realized something about myself.”

His words hung in the air between us. I looked at him carefully. Baba wore his hair longer than he used to, or maybe it was that he was overdue for a cut. He’d gained back the weight he lost before, the year he stayed in bed. I studied his golden-brown skin, his dark amber eyes.

We’d reached the entrance to the subway station. Under the fluorescent bulbs, my father looked exhausted, as if all the talking had worn him out.

“What did you realize?” I asked. A block of ice had settled in my stomach. I knew what my father was trying to tell me but I couldn’t hear it. There was no room for it inside of me.

“Jane,” he said. “My daughter. My dear daughter.”

“You’re staying here for good,” I said. “That’s what you’re saying to me.”

“I didn’t know this would happen,” he said. “Lee and I—”

“Does Mah know you’re not coming back?”

“We’ll always be a family,” he said. “Nothing can change that.” Then he said, haltingly: “I’m in love—with . . .”

“No.” I met his gaze and held it for a long time. “No,” I said again. “You’re supposed to— You can’t just—”

“I care for him. Very much.” He was quiet for a moment, before adding, “And he cares for me.”

“What about Mah?” I said. “What about me?” I shook my

head. “So you don’t care about us, then? You haven’t been thinking about anyone except yourself.” The words left my mouth before I knew what I was saying. “You’re selfish—”

“I wanted to tell you the truth,” he said. “You’re eighteen years old.”

“We don’t need you,” I said. “I don’t need you.”

“You’re angry,” he said. “Let’s talk when we get home.”

“You’re right, Baba. I’m not a little kid anymore,” I said.

“Jane.”

I fumbled for my subway card and held it out against the sensor. The gate glided open with a pneumatic hiss. I walked ahead. He kept his distance, five or six paces between us. I rode the escalator down and stood on the platform, my eyes on the white line painted on the ground. A gust of wind announced the train’s arrival, followed by two short whistles as the leading car thundered toward the station.

The train’s door opened, and I stepped inside. From the corner of my eye I saw Baba follow me in. He didn’t try to sit next to me. The AC blasted cold air. I clutched my stomach. The ice cube was melting, ice water draining down my legs, into my shoes, but I didn’t feel any warmth replace it. The train’s movement hid my trembling.

That night, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep in Baba’s bed—he’d insisted on taking the sofa while I was visiting—I thought about Ping.

It happened four piano lessons ago.

I'd kissed a few guys before, spin the bottle in junior high, seven minutes in heaven at some dim basement party, a date to the movies where we made out the whole time in the back row. The only girl I'd ever kissed was Fiona, and that was just for practice, we'd said. What friends did to help each other prepare for the real thing.

Ping and I were in the middle of a lesson, me on the bench and her in the chair next to me. We had just started a new piece, Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor. The first step was sight-reading. I was doing terribly.

"Your fingering here," she said, pointing to a bar on the sheet. "Try this." She slid onto the bench. Our thighs were touching. I didn't move my leg away.

She showed me the correct finger passage, and I wrote down notes on the sheet. At the end of our forty-five minutes, she made me promise I would practice every night that week.

"I promise."

"One hundred times." She held out a fist with her pinky finger extended.

"One hundred?"

"Every time, you write it down in the notebook. Twenty times per day. Easy," she said.

I rolled my eyes, but I hooked my pinky against hers anyway.

And then—I couldn't tell you how it happened or who made the first move—our hands opened up, and we were touching

palms. Ping smiled and drew her hand away. I held her gaze. We tilted toward each other, and then. It happened.

We sat on the piano bench like that, just exploring each other with our lips. I felt a rushing in my ears. I held my breath. My eyes were shut, and I wondered if hers were, too. I was too afraid to peek. *We're kissing*, I thought. *Me and Ping. We're kissing!* Was that allowed? I didn't care. I was kissing Ping, and she was kissing me back.

Mah picked me up at LAX on Sunday afternoon. She gave me a hug, then held me at arm's length, studying my face for a moment. I braced myself for criticism, but she didn't say anything mean. We picked up my luggage at the carousel and crossed to the parking structure.

She had a cassette playing in the car, a live recording of Mandarin praise songs, acoustic guitars, tambourines. I was too tired to object. Soon enough I was falling asleep in the seat. One minute I was staring at the gray concrete freeway stretching out in front of us, the next minute, I was out. Then we were home, pulling into the driveway, the white garage door scrolling up. I slept through dinner, woke up at three in the morning. Mah let me stay home the next day to recover.

Back in school on Tuesday, I felt as if I was walking through the halls asleep on my feet. I couldn't pay attention in class at all; at lunchtime, Fiona caught me staring into space while she

was in the middle of a story. “Helloooo? Why do you look like you’re concentrating really hard?” she said. “Holding in a fart or something?”

I claimed jet lag, but that wasn’t it. I couldn’t stop thinking about my father and Lee. I thought about talking to Fi about it. I couldn’t. It was too strange. If there was anyone I could tell, I realized, it was Ping.

Friday, three o’clock: my weekly piano lesson.

Ping had shaved her head again while I was gone. “Because I was bored,” she said. “I missed to see the real shape of my head.” She took one of my hands in hers and placed it on her crown. The skin on top of her skull felt soft, pliable.

“Your head shape is beautiful,” I said.

She accused me of trying to flatter her because I knew I was in trouble. “Did you practice Chopin this week since you come back from Taiwan?” Yes, I said. “Prove.” She nodded in the direction of the keyboard. “Jesus is watching,” she added.

Ping twisted the knob on the electric metronome and set it on top of the piano. The digital pulse clicked on. I held my hands over the keys for a moment. My face felt warm all of a sudden.

At first, I was intensely aware of Ping’s gaze, her attention switching back and forth between the sheet music leaning against the rack and down toward my fingers, curled, then reaching. When I landed at the wrong chord progression, muddling through the middle, she made a sound with her mouth,

lips kissing teeth. I relaxed into the second half anyway; the piece ended with a series of seventh inversions and I leaned into them, ignoring the metronome. My foot on the damper, I dragged the harmony out sweet and long. I knew she hated this kind of sentimental performance, but I didn't care. I was enjoying myself, sweating a little under my arms. When I finished, I realized I was smiling. An imperfect rendition, but I was pleased.

I snuck a look at Ping, nervous to hear her verdict. "Not bad," she said.

"Really?"

"Will you still study the piano in college?" she asked.

"No way," I said. "No offense."

"You have a talent for music," Ping said. "But you're so lazy."

"Ping!" I said, laughing. "That's so mean."

She said it was true. Then she laughed a little, too. "Is that mean to say?"

"I'm your favorite student," I said. "Admit it."

This made her laugh harder. I liked it when Ping laughed at something I said. Her whole face changed; it opened right up and became something else. When Ping smiled, she looked pleasant and kind, but you noticed right away that she was carefully hiding her teeth. Only when she laughed would you ever catch Ping's mouth stretched wide, unguarded and lovely.

"Jane," she said, "I will really miss you." She pretended to wipe tears away from her eyes.

"We still have the summer," I said. "Plus, I don't know where

I'm going, if I'm even going anywhere. I haven't heard back from colleges yet." I looked down at my hands. I thought of my father, and Lee, again. "Ping, can I ask your opinion about something?"

"I have some news to tell you," Ping said. "Actually, I am going back to China."

"What? When?"

She said her mother was ill, so she wanted to go home to Xian sooner rather than later. Once she was there, she'd decide if her mother's case would require her to stay through the rest of the year. "It's hard to know the truth, over phone calls," Ping said. "Even if she is much worse than she tells me, I know my mother will never ask me to give up my life here." Ping shook her head. "Until it's too late," she added. "I'm sorry. It's very sudden—"

"So then this is—our last lesson?"

"I already told your mom," she said. "Everything happened last week." She paused a moment. "What did you want to ask me? My opinion about . . . ?"

"Nothing," I said. "Never mind."

Mah had wanted me to learn from Ping, to grow into a new and improved girl, the kind of daughter who placed in piano competitions and brought home trophies. My transformation hadn't happened in the last eight months with Ping as my piano teacher. I kept losing. The judges never called my name. I was a loser, and there was nothing I could do to change that.

"Jane. What's wrong?"

“What about—well, you know. What happened—”

“I’ll always be your friend. We’ll stay in touch.” She reached into the cloth tote bag at her feet. “I brought you a present.” It was a CD, obviously, wrapped in silver paper. I took it from her. “Aren’t you going to open it?” she asked.

After she left I threw the CD in the trash. I didn’t want her stupid goodbye present.

Adults were all the same. Even Ping. They were always feeding you some line, expecting you to eat it up without any questions. I’d thought she was different, like a friend’s cool older sister, someone who listened. Though of course she was more than that to me, or could have been, anyway. The trip to Taiwan had taken everything away.

When Mah got home later, I asked if she wanted my help setting up the chairs for her Bible study, but it wasn’t her turn to host. She was going to a fundraising dinner that Calvary was throwing for Auntie Ruby’s son, who was taking a leave of absence from Stanford to go on mission next year.

“Evan flunked out of freshman chemistry, calculus, everything. That’s really why,” Mah said. “Everyone knows, but no one will say that. Too shame.” A pleased expression glimmered in her eyes. “If Baba was here,” she added, “he could tutor that dummy boy.”

“Ba? I don’t think he’s ever coming back,” I muttered.

“What you say? Don’t talk crazy,” Mah said. “Of course he

is.” Then she asked me about my piano lesson. “Ping told you about her mother?”

I started to say I was fine, but my voice choked up. I tried to swallow down my tears, but they turned into hiccups. Finally I just buried my face in my hands.

Mah sat down on the sofa next to me. For once she didn’t tell me to dry up the tears. “I know you really liked Ping,” she said. She stroked the back of my head gently. Her tenderness was a surprise.

“You didn’t say anything all week about Baba,” she said. “Until now.” I looked at her through my fingers, lost for a response. “I miss him, too,” she said softly.

The phone rang, and she got up to answer it. I heard Mah telling whoever was on the line that she would be late to the church dinner. Then she came back in and sat down next to me again.

“I’ll tell you something,” she said. “Listen to me. A real secret.” She hesitated for a few seconds, then said, “I was pregnant with you, before I marry your father.”

I glanced up into her face. Mah’s cheeks were slightly flushed. A light was in her eyes, like lamps turned on in a house at dusk.

“By the time I realized you were growing in my belly, he was gone to the US. I had to tell my parents.” Mah shook her head, almost as if she were still embarrassed. I’d never seen her so girlish. “They wanted him to move back right away, take his responsibility!”

“What happened?” I was mesmerized.

“He flew in for one week only, we married, and he flew back. Few months later, after the visa cleared, I came over. Everything fast.” She snapped her fingers three times quickly. “Just like that.”

“That’s why you got married?” I said. “Because your parents forced him?”

“We loved each other,” she said sternly. “Then God stepped in to help.”

“In Taiwan,” I said, “Baba told me you could’ve married anyone you wanted.”

“Good, that turkey remembers,” Mah said. “Anyway, everyone agreed we made one perfect match.” Then, her expression darkened. “All except for one of Baba’s friends. Think of it now, he showed up at my job, I remember.” Mah shook her head. “What a lunatic!”

My throat tightened. I knew she was talking about Lee.

“Remember when Baba was in bed all day? Reading those comic books?” Mah said. I nodded. The boy at sea who lost all his memories. She went on: “Baba was sick like that, before. When he was young, after college.” She peered into my eyes, as if deciding whether she should go on.

“We all thought it was because he studied too hard,” she said. “You don’t know this about your father. I never told you.” She paused for a moment. “He hurt himself—he tried to do it—too much pressure. He couldn’t handle.” The light in her

eyes had changed. They were dimmer now, like embers glowing at the end of a beach bonfire. “He almost died. Before you came.”

“He was alone? By himself, in the US . . .”

“Only after I told him I was going to have a baby, then he was able to walk out of the dark that time,” Mah said after a moment.

“Do you still love him?”

“I never loved anyone else.” Mah smiled. I hardly recognized her like this. “I’m telling you this story,” she said, “because you have to know your father loves you. From the beginning to now. You are his reason—”

“No,” I said bitterly. “I’m not.”

Then I did something regrettable.

I told my mother about meeting Lee at the night market in Taipei with Baba. “You called while we were all sitting there,” I said. “He and Baba—they’re—they’re together now.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I was sorry to have said them out loud.

I had no way of knowing then that I’d regret everything that followed, for the next twenty years of my life.

Mah pressed her fingers to her brow and kneaded her forehead. The phone rang again, but neither one of us moved. The answering machine picked up; in a cheerful tone, a man left a message saying he hoped to see my mother at the dinner soon. I thought I recognized the voice as one of the church dads who had shown up years ago to sing my father out of his depression.

“His friend named Lee,” Mah said. “He was the one at the department store. He scolded me—he said I should let your father go free, start over in America—”

“They’re in love,” I said.

“Baba said that? That’s what he told you?”

“He said I’m old enough to know the truth—”

“The truth!” Mah said. She gave a hard little laugh. “In love?”

“You told me he was going there for a job. But now—”

“Mah knows everything, you understand?” she said. “You think it’s so easy to hold this family together?” Her voice was suddenly quiet, and cold as a knife. This was the mother I recognized, not the one who’d shown me kindness earlier. “For years, that man writes letters to Baba.” Her eyes were black now, no light in their depths at all. “I read them. I know your father better than anyone. I know him better than he knows himself.” Her words chilled me. “All those comic books—*he* sent those to your father. Presents. Each time a letter inside.”

Mah stood abruptly and walked out of the living room, and I heard her unhook the cordless roughly from its cradle in the kitchen. She strolled back in, the phone in her hands. As she punched the keypad, Mah began chanting for Jesus.

“We’re all here,” Mah shouted when Baba answered. She always shouted when we had him on speaker, even though he told her, every time, that he could hear us just fine.

In Taipei, it was ten o’clock in the morning, Saturday. Baba

was in the future. I imagined him in the midmorning light, gripping a battered badminton racquet, bouncing on his feet. He wore a pair of scuffed white Reeboks, the bottoms squeaking on the green rubber court as he chased the shuttlecock. Lee on the other side of the net, returning the volleys.

Or maybe they were in my father's apartment, having breakfast. Did they spend nights together? Lee in my father's bed, where I'd slept. I wondered if Lee had a family; I hadn't thought to ask.

"Is Jane okay?" Baba asked. "What's wrong?"

Who do you belong to? I wanted to ask him. *Who do you belong to, Baba?*

"You tell her, Shen. Tell your daughter it's lies. She's confused."

There was a silence.

I thought of a call with Baba from last summer, before Mah hired Ping. On the phone, Baba had dismissed her prejudices and said that Mah was being paranoid. China wasn't the mess it used to be, he said. That afternoon, he'd reminded her that we were all Chinese, separated only by geography, politics, civil war.

"Dog fart," Mah had replied.

"You think something will happen to Jane? She will fall for mainland propaganda and run away with her piano teacher? The revolution is over," he said.

Mah had laughed, and I was relieved, though I didn't totally understand what they were talking about. "Your daughter is one

hundred percent American, like it or not,” Mah said, which made Baba laugh, too. I’d felt like I was being insulted, but another part of me enjoyed being the punch line to their jokes. I hadn’t heard my parents laugh like that in a long time.

“Baba,” I said. My voice was caught in my throat. “I’m—sorry. I”

My heart was beating fast in my chest. It wasn’t my secret to tell, but I’d told it anyway. All I wanted—all I’d ever wanted—was the possibility of my father’s safe return to us. I thought revealing the truth about Lee, the reason he was growing more and more distant from Mah and me, would bust the problem wide-open. Call him back to his life—his real life—with us. But I was wrong. In the silence before he said anything, I realized: Baba was already living his real life.

“Jane,” he said. “It’s okay. It’s okay, my daughter. My baby daughter.” He kept saying it was okay, over and over again, as if that might make it true.



The Family

A Novel

Naomi Krupitsky

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This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Chapter Break

Sofia Colicchio is a dark-eyed animal, a quick runner, a loud shouter. She is best friends with Antonia Russo, who lives next door.

They live in Brooklyn, in a neighborhood called Red Hook, which is bordered by the neighborhood that will become Carroll Gardens and Cobble Hill. Red Hook is younger than Manhattan, but older than Canarsie and Harlem, those wild outskirts where almost anything goes. Many of the buildings are low wooden lean-tos near the river, but the rooftops climb higher away from the waterfront, toward still-low but more permanent brick townhouses, everything a dark gray from the wind and the rain and the soot in the air.

Sofia and Antonia's families moved to Red Hook on the instructions of their fathers' boss, Tommy Fianzo. Tommy lives in Manhattan, but he needs help managing his operations in Brooklyn. When their neighbors ask Carlo and Joey what they do, Carlo and Joey say, *this and that*. They say, *importing and exporting*. Sometimes they say, *we're in the business of helping people*. Then their new neighbors understand and do not ask any more questions. They communicate via snapped-shut window shade, and by telling their children, *it's none of our concern*, loudly, in the hallway.

The other people in the neighborhood are Italian and Irish; they work the docks; they build the skyscrapers sprouting like beanstalks from the Manhattan landscape. Though the violence has abated since the adults in this neighborhood were children, it is still there, hovering in the spaces between streetlamp circles.

Sofia and Antonia know that they are to tell a grown up before going to one another's houses, but not why. Their world consists of the walk to and from the park in the summers, the

clang and hiss of winter radiators, and all year round, the far away splash and echo of men working the docks. They know certain things absolutely, and do not know that there is anything they do not know; rather, the world comes into focus as they grow. *That's an elm tree*, Antonia says one morning, and Sofia realizes there is a tree in front of her building. *Uncle Billy is coming for dinner tonight*, says Sofia, and Antonia suddenly knows that she hates Uncle Billy: his pointed nose, the shine of his shoes, the stink of cigars and sweat he leaves in his wake. *Cross the street or you'll wake the maga*, they remind each other, giving a wide berth to the smallest building on the block, where everyone knows – but how do they know? – that a witch lives on the third floor.

Sofia and Antonia know that Uncle Billy is not their real Uncle, but he is Family anyway. They know they are to call him Uncle Billy, like Uncle Tommy, and that they have to play nicely with Uncle Tommy's children at Sunday dinner. They know there will be no discussion in this regard.

They know that Family is everything.

Sofia lives in an apartment with three bedrooms and a wide window in the kitchen, which looks out onto the no-backyard-access backyard. The landlord sits out there in the summer with no shirt on and falls asleep with cigarettes dangling from his thick fingers. The midday heat burns the places his body is exposed to the sun, leaving the underside of his round belly and arms lily-white. Sofia and Antonia are not supposed to stare. In Sofia's room there is a bed with a new bedspread, which is red flannel; there are three dolls with porcelain faces lined up on the shelf; there is a plush rug she likes to sink her toes into.

Down the hall from her bedroom there is her parents' room, where she is not supposed to go unless it's an emergency. *Cara mia*, her papa says, *there have to be some things just for mamma and papa, no? No*, she responds, and he makes claws of his hands and chases her down the hall to tickle her, and she shrieks and runs. And then there is an empty room with a small cradle from when Sofia was a baby, which is no one's. Her mamma goes in there sometimes and folds very small clothes. Her papa says, *come on, let's not do this. Come on*, and leads her mamma out.

Sofia has just started to notice that people are afraid of her father.

At the deli or the café, he is served first. *Signore*, the waiters say. *So nice to see you again. Here – on the house. It's a specialty. Prego*. Sofia holds him by the hand like a mushroom growing from the base of a tree. He is her shade; her nourishment; her foundation. *And this must be Sofia*, they say. Her cheeks are squeezed; her hair is ruffled.

Sofia pays only a glancing attention to other adults. She notices when they enter her father's gravitational field, and when the warmth of his attention skips from one to another. She notices that her father always seems to be the tallest in the room. She accepts the offerings of jellied candies and biscotti handed down by men who, even Sofia can tell, are more concerned with currying her father's favor.

After his meetings Sofia's papa takes her for gelato; they sit at the counter on Smith Street and he sips thick black espresso while she tries not to drip stracciatella down the front of her shirt. Sofia's papa smokes long thin cigarettes and tells her about his meetings. *We're in the business of helping people*, he tells Sofia. *For that, they pay us a little bit, here and there*. So Sofia learns: you can help people, even if they are afraid of you.

She is his girl, she knows that. His favorite. He sees himself in her. Sofia can smell the danger on her father like a dog smells a storm coming: an earthy quickening in his wake. A taste like rust. She knows that means he would do anything for her.

Sofia can feel the pulse of the universe thrumming through her at every moment. She is so alive she cannot separate herself from anything around her. She is a ball of fire and at any moment she might consume her apartment, the street outside, the park where she goes with Antonia, the church and the streets her papa drives on for work and the tall Manhattan buildings across the water. It is all tinder.

Instead of burning the whole world Sofia contents herself with asking why, *papa, why, what is that.*

Antonia Russo lives in an apartment with two bedrooms, one that is hers and one that is her parents'. Her mamma and papa leave the door to their room open and Antonia sleeps best when she can hear the cresting waves of her papa snoring. Her kitchen has no window and a small round wooden table instead of the square dining table Sofia's family has. Her mamma scrubs and scrubs the floor and then sighs and says *there is nothing to be done about this*. In the living room there are pictures on all the walls, the greyish-brown old-fashioned kind where everyone looks upset. The pictures are of Antonia's grandparents, before they left *the old country*. Sometimes her mamma looks at them and kisses the necklace around her neck and shuts her eyes tightly, just for a moment.

Antonia finds that though she is expected to stay inside her own body, she often feels like she is in Sofia's body, or her mamma's body, or the body of the princess in a story. It is easy for

her to slip away, spread out, and exist in the whole universe instead of within the confines of her own skin.

In the mornings, Antonia lines up her stuffed animals and names them. She makes her bed without being asked.

Sofia often appears in the doorway of Antonia's home with unbrushed hair and dirt under her fingernails; she possesses the effortless light of the sun, sure she will rise, confident that she can wake everyone up. Antonia is both attracted and repelled: fascinated in the way a child will circle a dead bird, admire a lone feather, build a shrine to it. She is scrupulous about her own appearance. She wants to drink Sofia, to fill herself with her friend's addictive magic.

Sofia and Antonia spend all of their time together, because they are young, and they live next door to one another, and their parents encourage their friendship. It is convenient for parents when your child can always be found with someone else's.

The texture of Sofia's walk is as familiar to Antonia as the heft and rhythm of her own; her reflection in Sofia's brown eyes is more grounding than the reflection of a mirror. Sofia, for her part, recognizes Antonia by way of a smell of powder and lilies, left in her room long after her friend has gone home for dinner; by the perfectly stacked tower of blocks on her shelf; in the wave of her favorite doll's neatly brushed hair.

Sofia and Antonia do not realize that their friendship is undisturbed by other children.

Sofia and Antonia close their eyes and make the world. Together, they go on safari, narrowly escaping bloody death in the teeth of a lion. They travel in airplanes, to Sicilia, where their families are from, and to Japan, and to Panama. They survive in the wilderness with only two sticks and a tin of Christmas cookies to sustain them; they escape quicksand and locusts.

They marry princes, who ride down bedraggled Red Hook avenues on horseback. Sofia and Antonia straddle their own horses. They lean forward and whisper into their horses' ears. They shout, *fly like the wind!* and are *hushed* by their mammas. *Go play somewhere else*, the mammas say. Sofia and Antonia play on the moon.

Antonia feels free next to Sofia, who is lit by an internal flame that Antonia can warm her hands and face next to. Antonia catches herself just watching Sofia sometimes; staring at the place her dress tugs between her shoulders as she hunches over a table, or forgetting to rinse her hands as they wash up side by side in the bathroom before dinner. *If I can see you, I must be here.* Antonia feels that without Sofia she might float away, disintegrate into the night air. And Sofia, comfortable in the spotlight of her friend's undivided attention, feels herself growing brighter as it shines. *If you can see me, I must be here.*

Antonia and Sofia live, mostly, with their mothers, and with each other. Their fathers are often gone, though Sofia's father comes home for supper often enough that she can feel his presence like bookends to her days: filling the house with the smell of Brilliantine and espresso in the morning; rumbling around the kitchen just before she goes to bed at night. Sometimes, the click of the front door and his retreating footsteps just as she falls into sleep: leaving again.

Antonia has no idea that her father's absence two or three nights a week is unusual compared with other fathers in her neighborhood, or that her mother once broke down crying in the butcher, overcome with a deep, existential exhaustion from planning meals "for two *or* three," or that deep in the belly of the night when her father comes home, he tip toes into Antonia's room and cups her forehead in his palm and shuts his eyes in prayer. Antonia doesn't know what he does, only that it is work with Uncle Billy or Uncle Tommy. *He has meetings*,

Sofia once told her. *Meetings about helping people*. But something about that seems insubstantial and incomplete to Antonia. Here is what she knows: she knows that while he is gone her mother is never the right size and shape – either larger than life, trailing a cloud of matter and chaos around as she obsessively cleans, arranges, fixes, fusses; or small, skeletal, a shadow of her usual self. And Antonia, five years old, depends upon her mother the way the ocean depends on the moon: she grows and shrinks accordingly.

She imagines her father sitting in a small room. Uncle Billy smokes cigars and swivels back and forth in his chair and gesticulates fiercely and shouts into a telephone. Uncle Tommy stands in a corner and watches over them; he is the boss. Her father sits quietly, with pen and paper. Antonia puts him at a desk and gives him an expression of deep concentration. He stares out the window, and occasionally drops his gaze to scribble something on his paper. He stays out of the fray.

Antonia thinks she can make the world up if she shuts her eyes.

At night, when her mother has put her to bed, Antonia can feel the apartment straining up away from its foundations. The weight of herself and her mother is not enough to keep it attached to the earth, and so it bucks and floats and Antonia shuts her eyes and builds foundation brick by brick until she drifts into sleep.

In the next room, her mother reads, or, more than once, slips on shoes and goes next door to drink three fingers of wine with Sofia's mother, Rosa. The two women are subdued, weighted down by the knowledge that their husbands are out doing *god-knows-what*, *god-knows-where*. They are both twenty-seven; by day, each of them can conjure the blinding glow of youth, but by lamplight, maps of concern crease each of their faces; some pockets of skin darken with exhaustion while others thin over the bone. They, like so many women before them, are made

older by worry, and stretched taut by the ticking seconds, which they swear pass slower at night than during the light of day.

Antonia's mamma, Lina, has a nervous constitution. As a child Lina stayed in to read when the other children played rough outside. She looked back and forth five or six times before crossing streets. She startled easily. Lina's mother often looked at her sternly, shook her head, sighed. Lina will always be able to picture this. Look; shake; sigh. Marrying Carlo Russo did not make her less nervous.

Every time Antonia's papa Carlo leaves the house, fear whittles away at Lina's person until he is home again. And when Tommy Fianzo decides he needs Carlo to spend nights picking up and transporting crates of Canadian liquor each week, fear grips Lina around the throat and will not let her sleep at all.

So Lina develops a system: she doesn't worry until the sun comes up. When she is awakened by the pulled-taffy air stretched between herself and Carlo, by the knowledge that he is elsewhere and has taken the most vulnerable part of her with him, Lina slips out of bed and alights on the floor lightly, like a bird. She pads down the steps of her building and up into the Colicchio apartment next door. She uses her spare key, and she sits on the couch with Rosa until she can bear the silence of her own apartment.

Just before dawn, Lina knows a key will turn in the front door. Carlo will move quietly into the apartment. And it, and she, will settle back down into the earth where they belong.

Sofia's mamma Rosa remembers her own father working nights. Rosa stayed at home with her mother, who spent her days finishing the buttonholes of men's shirts, making small stitches and worrying about Rosa's father, spinning yarns for her children about her childhood

before the boat ride to America, shouting at them to finish their homework, for God's sake, to study, to sit up straight, to be careful, to make something of themselves, her babies. Rosa's mother, with her raw fingertips from sewing, slicing onions for dinner and never wincing, but shutting her mouth, quiet for once, which is how Rosa and her siblings knew she was in pain. This all made sense to Rosa: the building of community and home no matter how, no matter where, no matter what the cost.

So when she met tall and striking Joey Colicchio, who had accepted a job from her father's associate Tommy Fianzo, Sr., Rosa knew what it would take to build her own house.

Antonia and Sofia do not always go to sleep when their mammas tell them to. They pass many hours pressing messages to one another through the wall between their bedrooms. They doze fitfully. Sleep is not as finite for them as it is for adults: there is no reason they cannot continue their conversation in a dream. They tell each other, *your mamma is here tonight*, because of course they know. And the mammas sit pressed together in one kitchen or another, sipping their wine and laughing, sometimes, and crying, others, and of course, they know when their daughters fall asleep, because they can still feel the shapes of those daughters turning against the inside of their bellies.

They remember being pregnant at the same time: tender to the touch, humming with potential. That, more than their husbands' shared work, is what bonded them.

When they were pregnant is when Rosa and Lina took to whispered late-night conversations in one another's apartments. There, by low light, they laid themselves open. They talked about the future, which always means talking about the past: about Rosa's father and mother, their buzzing, bustling house, and about how Rosa wanted a bustling house of her own.

But no needles, Rosa always said, *no thread*. No raw-pricked fingers. Her children would want for nothing. Lina, whose future had always felt like a vice tightening, was just relieved to love the baby growing inside of her more often than she was afraid of it. She thought of her own childhood, where there was no room for want in the face of the fight for survival. *No have-to's*, she told Rosa. *No musts*. Her children would have a full world of choice. She would teach them to read.

It looks like a boy, the other Family ladies told Rosa at the butcher, at the park. *It looks like twins*, they told Lina, who was big, big, big, and could no longer fit in her usual shoes, and could not see her feet anyway, and who thought, *of course, I will not be good at this either*. The ladies reached out their hands to pinch Rosa and Lina's faces and pat the domes of their stomachs. Rosa and Lina interlocked elbows and hobbled down the street. They realized that their babies would not have a blank slate: that they would be born into a world that expects them to be the right size, shape. *If it's a boy*, they prayed, *let him be good with his hands*. *If it's a girl*, *let her be careful with her heart*.

Lina, with her clammy hands and her pinched low back, added, *let this child fear nothing*.

Chapter Break

In the fall of 1928, Sofia and Antonia start school together, and the world gets exponentially bigger with each passing day. They race there each morning, tripping over each other's feet and legs. They are fierce and small, and arrive breathless and early. They learn numbers, and letters, and geography.

They learn on the first day that half the kids in their class are Italian, and half are Irish. They learn that Ireland is a small island far away from Italy, but not as far away as America, *where we all are*, says Mr. Monaghan. Sofia and Antonia make friends with Maria Panzini and Clara O'Malley. They are all wearing blue ribbons in their hair. They decide they will also do this tomorrow. They eat lunch together and they hold hands on the way out to their waiting mammas. *Mamma, mamma*, the four of them are ready to call out, but the mammas have dark shades drawn over their faces. The next day Maria Panzini eats lunch with another table of girls, and Clara eats all the way across the courtyard. *The Irish kids eat over there*, Antonia realizes. *Just stick with Antonia*, Sofia's mamma says later. *Our families are a little different*, Rosa and Lina tell their daughters, and Sofia and Antonia don't know whether that means they are better or worse, but soon they spend lunch alone.

They still love school, because of Mr. Monaghan, who fought in the Great War and has a limp, and who lives by himself in the basement apartment of a run-down brownstone a stones-throw from the ship forge. Mr. Monaghan has a twinkle in his eye. He is long and lanky and lively. He looks at them when they speak.

Every morning they spin a globe and pick a part of the world to learn about. This is how they have come to know about the pyramids, and the Taj Mahal, and Antarctica. No matter

where Mr. Monaghan's finger lands, he knows stories about the place, and he has pictures, and he tells them great, animated, nearly too-tall-tales that hold twenty children rapt, still as stones in their seats. And today Marco DeLuca has stolen Sofia's turn to spin the globe.

He did it without knowing, which means when Sofia looks at him with a furrow in her brow and a boiling fury in her chest, he returns her gaze with his own soft, impassive stare, and does not know why she is glaring, and that makes it worse. Inside Sofia's body a heat builds, flushing her face and shaking her fingertips and turning the breath in her body to bile. Later in her life, friends and family will come to recognize the telltale tightening at the mouth and narrowing of the eyes as Sofia sinks into anger. She, too, will come to appreciate the hot, swollen, all-consuming fire of an imminent fight.

Today Sofia does not participate as her classmates look at pictures of sea creatures in old copies of *National Geographic* and Mr. Monaghan's special Encyclopedia Britannica. She does not *ooh* and *woooooah* with them as Mr. Monaghan draws a to-scale stick figure of a human being on the chalkboard, and next to it a to-scale giant squid, and next to that a blue whale. She stares at Marco, and she waits in vain for Mr. Monaghan to remember that it should have been her turn. She feels the great unfairness of life rippling through every fiber of her being.

Antonia knows something is wrong with Sofia with the sixth sense of someone who does not understand, yet, that human beings think of themselves as separate containers. She participates in the sea creatures lesson, though rumbling around in the crush of children without Sofia makes her nervous. She cranes her neck with everyone else to see the picture of sharks lined up by size, and gasps on cue at the diagram of a shark's many rows of sinister, red-rimmed teeth, but she sits quietly as Mr. Monaghan calls on her classmates to name the seven seas, and doesn't raise her hand even when the rest of the class is stumped on "Indian." She looks down at

her shoes, which are very black against the pale of her stockinged legs. For a moment, she imagines being one inch tall. She could live inside her desk, then – weave blankets out of torn up paper, the way the mice she found in her closet had done with tissues; eat crumbs and bits of rice from leftover *arancini* and the occasional shaving of milk chocolate. She does not notice Sofia narrow her eyes as Marco makes his way back up the row of desks.

It is this moment that Sofia's anger boils and cannot be contained inside her skin anymore. As Marco de Luca approaches her seat, Sofia clenches her small hands, and extends her leg to catch him across the shins.

Antonia looks up to see Marco de Luca sobbing as he picks himself up from the floor. In the din that follows, Antonia snatches up images that she will sort out later – Sofia, her leg still lifted into the aisle, her mouth open in shock; Maria Panzini, wailing and clutching the side of her desk in a very good impression of an old lady; Mr. Monaghan, face bare in unmasked shock and horror; and a single, glistening, red-rimmed tooth, lying on its side on the linoleum floor.

And as Antonia watches, she sees a strange expression creep over Sofia's face – a version of the one Sofia's father wears when he smashes a waterbug under his shoe, or slits the glistening belly of a fish.

That expression will haunt Antonia for many years. It will come back to her in the moments she is not sure whether to trust Sofia, during the dark and thin parts of their friendship. There is a seed of something volatile and consuming and dark in Sofia. Antonia searches herself and cannot find a similar place. She does not know whether or not she is relieved.

Later that evening, Sofia sits at her chair in the kitchen, snapping the ends off of green beans. She understands by the stiffness of her mamma's shoulders and the thick quiet in the

kitchen that she is in trouble. Tripping Marco had made her feel giddy, and a little surprised. She hadn't meant to hurt him. But Sofia does not quite feel sorry.

Every Sunday, after Mass, the Russos and the Colicchios pile into one car and drive across the Brooklyn Bridge, to Tommy Fianzo's house for dinner.

Tommy Fianzo lives in a sprawling four-bedroom penthouse close enough to Gramercy Park that everyone who walks by outside his home is dressed head to toe in silk and leather, furs and pearls. He doesn't have a key to the park but can often be heard telling anyone who will listen that he doesn't want one, doesn't care about the things the Americans do, here, your glass is empty, come, have a drink, have some wine. The Colicchios and the Russos arrive as one unit in a slow parade of Tommy's employees.

By three o' clock, the usually spacious-seeming Fianzo apartment is stuffed to the brim with the buzzing and spitting of adults, the smell of wine and garlic. In the winter, the windows steam and the house fills with the singed, snowy smell of gloves and scarves drying on radiators; in the summer there is the sharp stench of sweat, and melting buckets of ice for lemonade and white wine on every surface. Antonia and Sofia are quickly forgotten in the maelstrom and fend for themselves with the other Family children, who they see once a week but who they do not know well, because their families are the only ones who live in Red Hook.

Tommy Fianzo has a son, Tommy Jr., who is bigger than Sofia and Antonia and mean, given to vicious pinches and obscene gestures when no adults are looking. Tommy's brother Billy comes, who Sofia and Antonia like even less than Tommy's son. He doesn't have a wife, or children, and he seems to skulk at the edges of rooms like a barnacle on a rock. His eyes are narrow and black, and his teeth crowd into his mouth like commuters on a train platform. He

rarely speaks to them, but he watches them with his beady eyes, and Sofia and Antonia avoid him.

At six, Tommy Fianzo and his wife carry the platters of food into the room. *Bellissima*, the guests cheer. They welcome the bowl of pasta, the falling apart lamb, the cold plates of beans and sliced squid drenched in olive oil, the slippery roasted red peppers. The guests kiss their fingers. They beam. *Moltissima grazie*, they moan. *I have never been so full. I have never seen food so beautiful.*

For the most part, Sofia and Antonia are ignored: left to their own devices, they play precarious games of tag, racing around the table and between the legs and gesturing elbows of adults. The house fills with pipe tobacco and ladies' perfume; the chaos is friendly, familiar, the burbling high point of a wave. Eventually, their parents fill their plates.

On the way home, Sofia and Antonia are half-asleep, eyes lowered, limbs heavy. Manhattan sparkles through the car windows as they flash over the Brooklyn Bridge. And if they are lucky, Antonia's papa will put a hand to each of their backs and sing to them, low and soft songs that he remembers from his own mamma, from the island where he grew up. He tells them about the red-hot dirt, the whitewashed ancient church, the fragrant shade of gnarled lemon trees, the old woman with long and tangled hair who lived in a hut overlooking the sea.

When they get home, the Colicchios and the Russos unfurl from the cab and the grownups kiss one another before they go into their respective apartments. Carlo carries Antonia upstairs and Joey takes Sofia by the hand and Rosa and Lina share a lingering look at one another, at their husbands, at their girls.

Papa, Antonia says, before she drifts into solid sleep, *you would rather be here all the time instead of going to work, wouldn't you*. It is not a question. *Cara mia*, Carlo whispers. *Of course*.

In the other room, Lina Russo always knows when Carlo gives this answer. She knows when Carlo eases their daughter into sleep. *Cara mia*, and Lina is weighted down at last, balanced and calm. *Of course*.

On Sundays after Sofia is asleep Rosa stands still in her living room and surveys her territory. *Cara mia*, she thinks. Her sleeping daughter, who wants for nothing. Her husband with his raised eyebrows, waiting for her to decide the room can be abandoned for morning. *Of course*.

The next morning Sofia will wake in her bed, and Antonia will wake in hers. The garbage carts come on Monday morning and if the trash men look up, they sometimes see, in two adjoining buildings on a small side street in Red Hook, two little girls in nightgowns, both staring out of their windows as a new week begins.

THE
MAID

A Novel



NITA PROSE

The Maid 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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CHAPTER I



I am well aware that my name is ridiculous. It was not ridiculous before I took this job four years ago. I'm a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel, and my name is Molly. Molly Maid. A joke. Before I took the job, Molly was just a name, given to me by my estranged mother, who left me so long ago that I have no memory of her, just a few photos and the stories Gran has told me. Gran said my mother thought Molly was a cute name for a girl, that it conjured apple cheeks and pigtails, neither of which I have, as it turns out. I've got simple, dark hair that I maintain in a sharp, neat bob. I part my hair in the middle—the exact middle. I comb it flat and straight. I like things simple and neat.

I have pointed cheekbones and pale skin that people sometimes marvel at, and I don't know why. I'm as white as the sheets that I take off and put on, take off and put on, all day long in the twenty-plus rooms that I make up for the esteemed guests at the Regency Grand, a five-star boutique hotel that prides itself on "sophisticated elegance and proper decorum for the modern age."

Never in my life did I think I'd hold such a lofty position in a grand hotel. I know others think differently, that a maid is a lowly nobody. I know we're all supposed to aspire to become doctors and lawyers and rich real-estate tycoons. But not me. I'm so thankful for my job that I

pinch myself every day. I really do. Especially now, without Gran. Without her, home isn't home. It's as though all the color has been drained from the apartment we shared. But the moment I enter the Regency Grand, the world turns Technicolor bright.

As I place a hand on the shining brass railing and walk up the scarlet steps that lead to the hotel's majestic portico, I'm Dorothy entering Oz. I push through the gleaming revolving doors and I see my true self reflected in the glass—my dark hair and pale complexion are omnipresent, but a blush returns to my cheeks, my *raison d'être* restored once more.

Once I'm through the doors, I often pause to take in the grandeur of the lobby. It never tarnishes. It never grows drab or dusty. It never dulls or fades. It is blessedly the same each and every day. There's the reception and concierge to the left, with its midnight-obsidian counter and smart-looking receptionists in black and white, like penguins. And there's the ample lobby itself, laid out in a horseshoe, with its fine Italian marble floors that radiate pristine white, drawing the eye up, up to the second-floor terrace. There are the ornate Art Deco features of the terrace and the grand marble staircase that brings you there, balustrades glowing and opulent, serpents twisting up to golden knobs held static in brass jaws. Guests will often stand at the rails, hands resting on a glowing post, as they survey the glorious scene below—porters marching crisscross, dragging suitcases behind them, guests lounging in sumptuous armchairs or couples tucked into emerald love seats, their secrets absorbed into the deep, plush velvet.

But perhaps my favorite part of the lobby is the olfactory sensation, that first redolent breath as I take in the scent of the hotel itself at the start of every shift—the *mélange* of ladies' fine perfumes, the dark musk of the leather armchairs, the tangy zing of lemon polish that's used twice daily on the gleaming marble floors. It is the very scent of animus. It is the fragrance of life itself.

Every day, when I arrive to work at the Regency Grand, I feel alive again, part of the fabric of things, the splendor and the color. I am part of the design, a bright, unique square, integral to the tapestry.

Gran used to say, “If you love your job, you’ll never work a day in your life.” And she’s right. Every day of work is a joy to me. I was born to do this job. I love cleaning, I love my maid’s trolley, and I love my uniform.

There’s nothing quite like a perfectly stocked maid’s trolley early in the morning. It is, in my humble opinion, a cornucopia of bounty and beauty. The crisp little packages of delicately wrapped soaps that smell of orange blossom, the tiny Crabtree & Evelyn shampoo bottles, the squat tissue boxes, the toilet-paper rolls wrapped in hygienic film, the bleached white towels in three sizes—bath, hand, and washcloth—and the stacks of doilies for the tea-and-coffee service tray. And last but not least, the cleaning kit, which includes a feather duster, lemon furniture polish, lightly scented antiseptic garbage bags, as well as an impressive array of spray bottles of solvents and disinfectants, all lined up and ready to combat any stain, be it coffee rings, vomit—or even blood. A well-stocked housekeeping trolley is a portable sanitation miracle; it is a clean machine on wheels. And as I said, it is beautiful.

And my uniform. If I had to choose between my uniform and my trolley, I don’t think I could. My uniform is my freedom. It is the ultimate invisibility cloak. At the Regency Grand, it’s dry cleaned daily in the hotel laundry, which is located in the dank bowels of the hotel down the hall from our housekeeping change rooms. Every day before I arrive at work, my uniform is hooked on my locker door. It comes wrapped in clingy plastic, with a little Post-it note that has my name scrawled on it in black marker. What a joy it is to see it there in the morning, my second skin—clean, disinfected, newly pressed, smelling like a mixture of fresh paper, an indoor pool, and nothingness. A new beginning. It’s as though the day before and the many days before that have all been erased.

When I don my maid uniform—not the frumpy *Downton Abbey* style or even the Playboy-bunny cliché, but the blinding-white starched dress shirt and the slim-fit black pencil skirt (made from stretchy fabric for easy bending)—I am whole. Once I’m dressed for my workday, I feel more confident, like I know just what to say and do—at least, most of

the time. And once I take off my uniform at the end of the day, I feel naked, unprotected, undone.

The truth is, I often have trouble with social situations; it's as though everyone is playing an elaborate game with complex rules they all know, but I'm always playing for the first time. I make etiquette mistakes with alarming regularity, offend when I mean to compliment, misread body language, say the wrong thing at the wrong time. It's only because of my gran that I know a smile doesn't necessarily mean someone is happy. Sometimes, people smile when they're laughing at you. Or they'll thank you when they really want to slap you across the face. Gran used to say my reading of behaviors was improving—*every day in every way, my dear*—but now, without her, I struggle. Before, when I rushed home after work, I'd throw open the door to our apartment and ask her questions I'd saved up over the day. "I'm home! Gran, does ketchup really work on brass, or should I stick to salt and vinegar? Is it true that some people drink tea with cream? Gran, why did they call me Rumba at work today?"

But now, when the door to home opens, there's no "Oh, Molly dear, I can explain" or "Let me make you a proper cuppa and I'll answer all of that." Now our cozy two-bedroom feels hollow and lifeless and empty, like a cave. Or a coffin. Or a grave.

I think it's because I have difficulty interpreting expressions that I'm the last person anyone invites to a party, even though I really like parties. Apparently, I make awkward conversation, and if you believe the whispers, I have no friends my age. To be fair, this is one hundred percent accurate. I have no friends my age, few friends of any age, for that matter.

But at work, when I'm wearing my uniform, I blend in. I become part of the hotel's décor, like the black-and-white-striped wallpaper that adorns many a hallway and room. In my uniform, as long as I keep my mouth shut, I can be anyone. You could see me in a police lineup and fail to pick me out even though you walked by me ten times in one day.

Recently, I turned twenty-five, "a quarter of a century" my gran

would proclaim to me now if she could say anything to me. Which she can't, because she is dead.

Yes, dead. Why call it anything other than what it is? She did not pass away, like some sweet breeze tickling the heather. She did not go gently. She died. About nine months ago.

The day after her death was a lovely, balmy day, and I went to work, as usual. Mr. Alexander Snow, the hotel manager, was surprised to see me. He reminds me of an owl. He has tortoiseshell glasses that are very large for his squat face. His thinning hair is slicked back, with a widow's peak. No one else at the hotel likes him much. Gran used to say, *Never mind what others think; it's what you think that matters*. And I agree. One must live by her own moral code, not follow like a sheep, blindly.

"Molly, what are you doing here?" Mr. Snow asked when I showed up for work the day after Gran died. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Mr. Preston told me that your grandmother passed away yesterday. I already called in a replacement for your shift. I assumed you'd take today off."

"Mr. Snow, why did you assume?" I asked. "As Gran used to say, when you assume, you make an A-S-S out of U and ME."

Mr. Snow looked like he was going to regurgitate a mouse. "Please accept my condolences. And are you sure you don't want the day off?"

"It was Gran who died, not me," I replied. "The show must go on, you know."

His eyes widened, which perhaps suggests shock? I'll never understand it—why people find the truth more shocking than lies.

Still, Mr. Snow relented. "As you wish, Molly."

A few minutes later, I was downstairs in one of the housekeeping change rooms donning my maid's uniform as I do every day, as I did just this morning, as I'll do tomorrow even though someone else—not my gran—died today. And not at home but at the hotel.

Yes. That's right. Today at work, I found a guest very dead in his bed. Mr. Black. *The Mr. Black*. Other than that, my workday was as normal as ever.

Isn't it interesting how one seismic event can change your memory

of what occurred? Workdays usually slide together, the daily tasks blending into one another. The trash bins I empty on the fourth floor meld into those on the third. I would swear I'm cleaning Suite 410, the corner room that overlooks the west side of the street, but actually I'm at the other end of the hotel, in Room 430, the east-side corner room, which is the mirror inverse of Suite 410. But then something out of the ordinary occurs—such as finding Mr. Black very dead in his bed—and suddenly the day crystalizes, turns from gas to solid in an instant. Every moment becomes memorable, unique from all the other days of work that came before.

It was today, around three in the afternoon, nearing the end of my shift, when the seismic event occurred. I'd cleaned all of my assigned rooms already, including the Blacks' penthouse on the fourth floor, but I needed to return to the suite to finish cleaning their bathroom.

Don't think for a moment that I'm sloppy or disorganized in my work just because I cleaned the Black penthouse twice. When I clean a room, I attack it from top to bottom. I leave it spotless and pristine—no surface left unwiped, no grime left behind. *Cleanliness is next to godliness*, my gran used to say, and I believe that's a better tenet to live by than most. I don't cut corners, I shine them. No fingerprint left to erase, no smear left to clear.

So it's not that I simply got lazy and decided *not* to clean the Blacks' bathroom when I scoured the rest of their suite this morning. *Au contraire*, the bathroom was guest-occupied at the time of my first sanitation visit. Giselle, Mr. Black's current wife, hopped in the shower soon after I arrived. And while she granted me permission (more or less) to clean the rest of the penthouse while she bathed, she lingered for rather a long time in the shower, so much so that steam began to snake and billow out of the crack at the bottom of the bathroom door.

Mr. Charles Black and his second wife, Giselle Black, are longtime repeat guests at the Regency Grand. Everyone in the hotel knows them; everyone in the whole country knows of them. Mr. Black stays—or rather,

stayed—with us for at least a week every month while he oversaw his real-estate affairs in the city. Mr. Black is—was—a famous impresario, a magnate, a tycoon. He and Giselle often graced the society pages. He'd be described as “a middle-aged silver fox,” though, to be clear, he is neither silver nor a fox. Giselle, meanwhile, was oft described as “a young, lithe trophy socialite.”

I found this description complimentary, but when Gran read it, she disagreed. When I asked why, she said, *It's what's between the lines, not on them.*

Mr. and Mrs. Black have been married a short time, about two years. We at the Regency Grand have been fortunate that this esteemed couple regularly grace our hotel. It gives us prestige. Which in turn means more guests. Which in turn means I have a job.

Once, over twenty-three months ago, when we were walking in the Financial District, Gran pointed out all the buildings owned by Mr. Black. I hadn't realized he owned about a quarter of the city, but alas, he does. Or did. As it turns out, you can't own property when you're a corpse.

“He does not own the Regency Grand,” Mr. Snow once said about Mr. Black when Mr. Black was still very much alive. Mr. Snow punctuated his comment with a funny little sniff. I have no idea what that sniff was supposed to mean. One of the reasons why I've become fond of Mr. Black's second wife, Giselle, is because she tells me things plainly. And she uses her words.

This morning, the first time I entered the Blacks' penthouse, I cleaned it from top to bottom—minus the occupied bathroom because Giselle was in it. She did not seem herself at all. I noted upon my arrival that her eyes were red and puffy. Allergies? I wondered. Or could it be sadness? Giselle did not dally. Rather, soon upon my arrival, she ran off to the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her.

I did not allow her behavior to interfere with the task at hand. On the contrary, I got to work immediately and cleaned the suite vigorously. When it was in perfect order, I stood outside the closed bathroom door with a box of tissues and called out to Giselle the way Mr. Snow had

taught me. “Your rooms have been restored to a state of perfection! I’ll return later to clean the bathroom!”

“Okay!” Giselle replied. “No need to yell! Jeez!” When she eventually emerged from the bathroom, I handed her a tissue in case she was indeed allergic or upset. I expected a bit of a conversation, because she is often quite talkative, but she quickly whisked herself away to the bedroom to get dressed.

I left the suite then and worked through the fourth floor, room after room. I fluffed pillows and polished gilt mirrors. I spritzed smudges and stains from wallpaper and walls. I bundled soiled sheets and moist towels. I disinfected porcelain toilets and sinks.

Halfway through my work on that floor, I took a brief respite to deliver my trolley to the basement, where I dropped off two large, heavy bags of sullied sheets and towels at the laundry. Despite the airlessness of the basement quarters, conditions aggravated by the bright fluorescent lights and very low ceilings, it was a relief to leave those bags behind. As I headed back to the corridors, I felt a great deal lighter, if a tad dewy.

I decided to pay a visit to Juan Manuel, a dishwasher in the kitchen. I zoomed through the labyrinthine halls, making the familiar turns—left, right, left, left, right—rather like a clever trained mouse in a maze. When I reached the wide kitchen doors and pushed through, Juan Manuel stopped everything and immediately got me a large drink of cold water with ice, which I appreciated greatly.

After a short and agreeable chat, I left him. I then replenished my clean towels and sheets in the housekeeping quarters. Next, up I went to the fresher air of the second floor to begin cleaning a new set of rooms, which suspiciously yielded only small change in tips, but more on that later.

By the time I checked my watch, it was around three o’clock. It was time to circle back to the fourth floor and clean Mr. and Mrs. Black’s bathroom. I paused outside their door to listen for evidence of occupancy. I knocked, as per protocol. “Housekeeping!” I said in a loud but

politely authoritative voice. No reply. I took my master keycard and buzzed into their suite, dragging my trolley behind me.

“Mr. and Mrs. Black? May I complete my sanitation visit? I would very much like to return your room to a state of perfection.”

Nothing. Clearly, or so I thought, husband and wife were out. All the better for me. I could do my work thoroughly and without disturbance. I let the heavy door close behind me. I surveyed their sitting room. It was not as I'd left it a few hours earlier, neat and clean. The curtains had been drawn against the impressive floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the street below, and there were several small minibar bottles of scotch knocked over on the glass table, a tumbler beside it half-empty, an unsmoked cigar beside that, a crumpled napkin on the floor, and a divot on the divan where the drinker's bottom had left its mark. Giselle's yellow purse was no longer where I'd seen it in the morning, on the bureau by the entrance, which meant she was traversing the town.

A maid's work is never done, I thought to myself as I pulled the pillow off the divan, plumped it, returned it to its spot, and smoothed any lingering divan imperfections. Before cleaning up the table, I decided to check the state of the other rooms. It was looking very much like I'd have to clean the entire suite from scratch.

I headed to the bedroom at the back of the suite. The door was open, and one of the hotel's plush, white bathrobes was strewn on the floor just outside the threshold. From my vantage point, I could see the bedroom closet, with one door still open, exactly as I'd left it in the morning because the safe inside was also open and was preventing the closet door from closing properly. Some of the safe's contents were still intact—I could see that much immediately—but the objects that had caused me some consternation in the morning were notably missing. In some ways, this was a relief. I turned my attention away from the closet, stepped carefully over the bathrobe on the floor, and entered the bedroom.

And only then did I see him. Mr. Black. He was wearing the same double-breasted suit he had on earlier when he bowled me over in the

hallway, only the paper in his breast pocket was gone. He was lying down, flat on his back on the bed. The bed was creased and disheveled, as though he'd tossed and turned a lot before settling on his back. His head was resting on one pillow, not two, and the other two pillows were askew beside him. I would have to locate the mandatory fourth pillow, which I most certainly put on the bed this morning when I made it, because the devil is, as they say, in the details.

Mr. Black's shoes were off, on the other side of the room. I remember that distinctly because one shoe pointed south and the other east, and immediately I knew it was my professional duty to point both shoes in the same direction, and smooth out the nasty tangle of laces before I left the room.

Of course, my first thought upon beholding this scene was not that Mr. Black was dead. It was that he was napping soundly after having enjoyed more than one afternoon tippie in the sitting room. But upon further observation I noted some other oddities in the room. On the bedside table to the left of Mr. Black was an open bottle of medication, a bottle I recognized as Giselle's. Various small blue pills had cascaded out of the bottle, some landing on the bedside table and others on the floor. A couple of pills had been trampled, reduced to a fine powder that was now ground into the carpet. This would require high vacuum suction, followed by a spot of carpet deodorizer to return the carpet pile to a state of perfection.

It isn't often that I enter a suite to find a guest sound asleep in bed. If anything, much to my dismay, it's more common that I stumble across guests in another state entirely—in flagrante, as they say in Latin. Most guests who decide to sleep or to engage in private activities are courteous enough to employ the "Do Not Disturb: Zzzing" door hanger I always leave on the front bureau for such eventualities. And most guests call out immediately if I inadvertently catch them at an inopportune moment. But not so with Mr. Black; he did not call out and order me to "bugger off," which is how he would normally dismiss me if I arrived at the wrong time. Instead, he remained soundly asleep.

It was then that I realized I had not heard him breathe during the ten

seconds or more I'd been standing at his bedroom door. I do know something about sound sleepers, because my gran happened to be one, but no sleeper rests so deeply that he gives up breathing entirely.

I thought it prudent to check on Mr. Black and ensure that he was quite all right. This, too, is a maid's professional duty. I took a small step forward to scrutinize his face. That's when I noticed how gray he appeared, how puffy and how . . . distinctly unwell. I gingerly moved even closer, right to his bedside, where I loomed over him. His wrinkles were entrenched, his mouth drawn down in a scowl, though for Mr. Black that can hardly be considered unusual. There were strange little marks around his eyes, like red and purple pinpricks. Only then did my mind suddenly ring alarm bells. It was at that moment that I fully cued to the disturbing fact that there was more wrong with this situation than I'd realized at the outset.

I eased a hand forward and tapped Mr. Black's shoulder. It felt rigid and cold, like a piece of furniture. I put my hand in front of his mouth in the desperate hope that I'd feel some breath come out of him, but to no avail.

"No, no, no," I said as I put two fingers to his neck, checking for a pulse, which I did not find. I took him by the shoulders and shook. "Sir! Sir! Wake up!" It was a silly thing to do, now that I think about it, but at the time it still seemed largely impossible that Mr. Black could actually be dead.

When I let him go, he plunked down, his head banging ever so slightly against the headboard. I backed away from the bed then, my own arms rigid by my sides.

I shuffled to the other bedside table, where there was a phone, and I called down to the front desk.

"Regency Grand, Reception. How can I help you?"

"Good afternoon," I said. "I'm not a guest. I don't usually call for help. This is Molly, the maid. I'm in the penthouse suite, Suite 401, and I'm dealing with a rather unusual situation. An uncommon mess, of sorts."

"Why are you calling Reception? Call Housekeeping."

"I *am* Housekeeping," I said, my voice rising. "Please, if you could alert Mr. Snow that there's a guest who is . . . permanently indisposed."

"Permanently indisposed?"

This is why it's always best to be direct and clear at all times, but in that moment, I can admit that I'd lost my head, temporarily.

"He is very dead," I said. "*Dead* in his *bed*. Call Mr. Snow. And please dial emergency services. Immediately!"

I hung up after that. To be honest, what happened next all feels surreal and dreamlike. I recall my heart clanging in my chest, the room tilting like a Hitchcock film, my hands going clammy and the receiver almost slipping from my grasp as I put it back in its place.

It was then that I looked up. On the wall in front of me was a gilt-framed mirror, reflecting not only my terrified face back at me but everything I'd failed to notice before.

The vertigo got worse then, the floor tilting like a funhouse. I put a hand to my chest, a futile attempt to still my trembling heart.

It's easier than you'd ever think—existing in plain sight while remaining largely invisible. That's what I've learned from being a maid. You can be so important, so crucial to the fabric of things and yet be entirely overlooked. It's a truth that applies to maids, and to others as well, so it seems. It's a truth that cuts close to the bone.

I fainted not long after that. The room went dark and I simply crumpled, as I sometimes do when consciousness becomes overwhelming.

Now, as I sit here in Mr. Snow's luxurious office, my hands are shaking. My nerves are frayed. What's right is right. What's done is done. But still, I tremble.

I employ Gran's mental trick to steady myself. Whenever the tension got unbearable in a film, she'd grab the remote control and fast-forward. "There," she'd say. "No point jangling our nerves when the ending's inevitable. What will be will be." That is true of the movies, but less true in real life. In real life, the actions you take can change the results, from sad to happy, from disappointing to satisfactory, from wrong to right.

Gran's trick serves me well. I fast-forward and pick up my mental replay at just the right spot. My trembling immediately subsides. I was

still in the suite but not in the bedroom. I was by the front door. I rushed back into the bedroom, grabbed the phone receiver for the second time, and called down to Reception. This time, I demanded to speak with Mr. Snow. When I heard his voice on the line saying, “Hello? What is it?” I made sure to be very clear.

“This is Molly. Mr. Black is dead. I am *in his room*. Please call emergency services immediately.”

Approximately thirteen minutes later, Mr. Snow entered the room with a small army of medical personnel and police officers filing in behind him. He led me away, guiding me by the elbow like a small child.

And now, here I sit in his office just off the main lobby in a firm and squeaky maroon leather high-backed chair. Mr. Snow left some time ago—perhaps an hour, maybe more? He told me to stay put until he returned. I have a lovely cup of tea in one hand and a shortbread biscuit in the other. I can’t remember who brought them to me. I take the cup to my lips—it’s warm but not scalding, an ideal temperature. My hands are still trembling slightly. Who made me such a perfect cup of tea? Was it Mr. Snow? Or someone else in the kitchen? Perhaps Juan Manuel? Maybe it was Rodney at the bar, a lovely thought—Rodney brewing me a perfect cup of tea.

As I gaze down at the teacup—a proper porcelain one, decorated with pink roses and green thorns—I suddenly miss my gran. Terribly.

I put the shortbread biscuit to my lips. It crunches nicely between my teeth. The texture is crisp, the flavor delicate and buttery. Overall, it is a delightful biscuit. It tastes sweet, oh so very sweet.

CHAPTER 2



I remain alone in Mr. Snow's office. I must say, I am concerned to be running so behind on my room-cleaning quota, not to mention on my tip collection. Usually, by this time in my workday, I'd have cleaned at least a full floor of rooms, but not today. I worry what the other maids will think and if they'll have to pick up the slack. So much time has passed, and Mr. Snow still hasn't come to fetch me. I try to settle the fear that's bubbling in my stomach.

It occurs to me that a good way to sort myself is to track back through my day, recollecting to the best of my ability everything that occurred up to the moment I found Mr. Black dead in his bed in Suite 401.

Today started out as an ordinary day. I came through the stately revolving doors of the hotel. Technically, employees are supposed to use the service door at the back, but few employees do. This is a rule I enjoy breaking.

I love the cold feeling of the polished brass banisters leading up the scarlet steps of the hotel's main entrance. I love the squish of the plush carpet under my shoes. And I love greeting Mr. Preston, the Regency Grand's doorman. Portly, dressed in a cap and a long trench coat

adorned with gold hotel crests, Mr. Preston has worked at the hotel for over two decades.

“Good morning, Mr. Preston.”

“Oh, Molly. Happy Monday to you, my dear girl.” He tips his hat.

“Have you seen your daughter recently?”

“Why, yes. We had dinner on Sunday. She’s arguing a case in court tomorrow. I still can’t believe it. My little girl, standing up there in front of a judge. If only Mary could see her now.”

“You must be proud of her.”

“That I am.”

Mr. Preston was widowed more than a decade ago, but he never remarried. When people ask why not, his answer is always the same: “My heart belongs to Mary.”

He’s an honorable man, a good man. Not a cheater. Have I mentioned how much I detest cheaters? Cheaters deserve to be thrown in quicksand and to suffocate in filth. Mr. Preston is not that kind of man. He’s the kind you’d want as a father, though I’m hardly an expert on that subject, given that I’ve never had a father in my life. Mine disappeared at the same time my mother did, when I was “just a wee biscuit” as my gran used to say, which I have come to understand as sometime between the age of six months to a year, at which point Gran took over my care and we became a unit, Gran and me, me and Gran. Until death did us part.

Mr. Preston reminds me of Gran. He knew her too. It’s never been clear to me how they met, but Gran was friendly with him and quite close with his wife, Mary, may-she-rest-in-peace.

I like Mr. Preston because he inspires people to behave properly. If you’re the doorman at a fine, upstanding hotel, you see a lot of things. Like businessmen bringing in sultry young playthings when their middle-aged wives are a thousand miles away. Like rock stars so drunk they mistake the doorman’s podium for a urinal. Like the young and beautiful Mrs. Black—the second Mrs. Black—exiting the hotel in a rush, mascara running down her tear-stained cheeks.

Mr. Preston applies his personal code of conduct to lay down the law. I once heard a rumor that he got so mad at that same rock star that he tipped off the paparazzi, who swarmed the star so much he never stayed at the Regency Grand again.

“Mr. Preston, is it true?” I once asked. “Were you the one who called the paparazzi that time?”

“Never ask what a gentleman did or didn’t do. If he’s a true gentleman, he did it with good cause. And if he’s a true gentleman, he’ll never tell.”

That’s Mr. Preston.

After passing him this morning, I swung through the massive front lobby and dashed down the stairs into the maze of hallways leading to the kitchen, the laundry rooms, and, my favorite rooms of all, the housekeeping quarters. They may not be grand—no brass, no marble, no velvet—but the housekeeping rooms are where I belong.

Like I always do, I put on my fresh maid uniform and collected my housekeeping trolley, making sure it was replenished and ready for my rounds. It was not replenished, which is no surprise, since my supervisor, Cheryl Green, was the one on shift last night. Chernobyl is what most employees at the Regency Grand call her behind her back. To be clear, she’s not from Chernobyl. In fact, she’s not from Ukraine at all. She’s lived her entire life in this city, as have I. Let it be known that while I do not think highly of Cheryl, I refuse to call her—or anyone—names. *Treat others as you wish to be treated*, Gran used to say, and that’s a tenet I live by. I’ve been called many a thing in my quarter century, and what I’ve learned is that the common expression about sticks and stones is backward: sticks and stones often hurt far less than words.

Cheryl may be my boss, but she’s definitely not my superior. There is a difference, you know. You can’t judge a person by the job they do or by their station in life; you must judge a person by their actions. Cheryl is slovenly and lazy. She cheats and cuts corners. She drags her feet when she walks. I’ve actually seen her clean a guest’s sink with the same cloth she used to clean their toilet. Can you believe such a thing?

“What are you doing?” I asked the day I caught her in flagrante. “That’s not sanitary.”

Shoulder shrug. “These guests barely tip. This’ll teach them.”

Which is illogical. How are guests to know that the head maid just spread microscopic fecal matter around their sink? And how are they to know this means they need to tip better?

“As low to the ground as a squirrel’s behind,” is what Gran said when I told her about Cheryl and the toilet cloth.

This morning, upon my arrival, my trolley was still full of damp, soiled towels and used soaps from the day before. If I were the boss of things, let me tell you this: I would relish the chance to restock the trolleys.

It took me some time to replenish my wares, and by the time I was finished, Cheryl was finally arriving for her shift, late as usual, dragging her floppy feet behind her. I wondered if she’d rush to the top floor today as she usually did “to do her first rounds,” meaning to sneak to the penthouse suites that are mine to clean and steal my biggest tips off the pillows, leaving only the loose change behind for me. I know she does this, though I can’t prove it. That’s just the kind of person she is—a cheater—and not the Robin Hood kind. The Robin Hood kind takes for the greater good, restoring justice to those who’ve been wronged. This kind of theft is justified, whereas other kinds are not. But make no mistake: Cheryl is no Robin Hood. She steals from others for one reason only—to better herself at the expense of others. And that makes her a parasite, not a hero.

I said my halfhearted hello to Cheryl, and then greeted Sunshine and Sunitha, the two other maids on shift with me. Sunshine is from the Philippines.

“Why are you named Sunshine?” I asked her when we first met.

“For my bright smile,” she said as she put a hand on one hip and made a flourish with her feather duster.

I could see it then, the similarity—how the sun and Sunshine were similar. Sunshine is bright and shiny. She talks a lot, and guests love her. Sunitha is from Sri Lanka, and unlike Sunshine, she barely says a word.

“Good morning,” I’ll say to her when she’s on shift with me. “Are you well?”

She’ll nod once and say a word or two and little else, which suits me just fine. She’s agreeable to work with and she does not slack or dilly-dally. I take no exception to other maids, provided they do their jobs well. One thing I will say: both Sunitha and Sunshine know how to make up a room spotlessly, which, maid to maid, I respect.

Once my trolley was set, I rolled down the hall to the kitchen to visit Juan Manuel. He is a fine colleague, always quite pleasant and collegial. I left my trolley outside the kitchen doors, then I peeked through the glass. There he was, at the giant dishwasher, pushing racks of dishes through its maw. Other kitchen workers milled about, carrying food trays with silver covers, fresh triple-layer cakes, or other decadent delights. Juan Manuel’s supervisor was nowhere to be seen, so now was a good time to enter. I crept along the perimeter until I reached Juan Manuel’s workstation.

“Hello!” I said, probably too loudly, but I wanted to be heard above the whirring machine.

Juan Manuel jumped and turned. “*Hijole*, you scared me.”

“Is now a good time?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied, wiping his hands on his apron. He ran over to the large metal sink, grabbed a clean glass, and filled it with ice-cold water, which he handed to me.

“Oh, thank you,” I said. If the basement was warm, the kitchen was an inferno. I don’t know how Juan Manuel does his job, standing for hours in the unbearable heat and humidity, scraping half-eaten food from plates. All that waste, all those germs. I visit him every day, and every day I try not to think about it.

“I’ve got your keycard. Room 308, early checkout today. I will clean the room now so it’s ready for you whenever you want it. Okay?” I’d been slipping Juan Manuel keycards for at least two months, ever since Rodney explained Juan Manuel’s unfortunate situation.

“*Amiga mía*, thank you so much,” Juan Manuel said.

“You’ll be safe until nine tomorrow morning, when Cheryl arrives. She’s not supposed to clean that floor at all—but with her, you just never know.”

It was then that I noticed the angry marks on his wrist, round and red.

“What are those?” I asked. “Did you burn yourself?”

“Oh! Yes. I burned myself. On the washer. Yes.”

“That sounds like a safety infraction,” I said. “Mr. Snow is very serious about safety. You should tell him and he’ll have the machine looked at.”

“No, no,” Juan Manuel replied. “It was my mistake. I put my arm where it shouldn’t go.”

“Well,” I said. “Do be careful.”

“I will,” he answered.

He did not make eye contact with me during this part of the conversation, which was most unlike him. I concluded he was embarrassed by his mishap, so I changed the subject.

“Have you heard from your family lately?” I asked.

“My mother sent me this yesterday.” He pulled a phone from his apron pocket and called up a photo. His family lives in northern Mexico. His father died over two years ago, which left the family short of income. Juan Manuel sends money home to compensate. He has four sisters, two brothers, six aunts, seven uncles, and one nephew. He’s the oldest of his siblings, about my age. The photo showed the entire family seated around a plastic table, all of them smiling for the camera. His mother stood at the head of the table proudly holding a platter of barbecued meat.

“This is why I’m here, in this kitchen, in this country. So my family can eat meat on Sundays. If my mother met you, Molly, she’d like you right away. My mother and me? We are alike. We know good people when we see them.” He pointed to his mother’s face in the photo. “Look! She never stops smiling, no matter what. Oh, Molly.”

Tears came to his eyes then. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want

to look at any more pictures of his family. Every time I did, I felt an odd sensation in the pit of my stomach, the same feeling I got when I once accidentally knocked a guest's earring into the black hole of a drain.

"I must be off," I said. "Twenty-one rooms to clean today."

"Okay, okay. It makes me happy when you visit. See you soon, Miss Molly."

I rushed out of the kitchen to the quiet, bright hallway and the perfect order of my trolley. Instantly, I felt much better.

It was time to go to the Social, the restaurant bar and grill inside the hotel, where Rodney would be starting his shift. Rodney Stiles, head bartender. Rodney, with his thick, wavy hair, his white dress shirt with the top buttons tastefully undone, revealing just a little of his perfectly smooth chest—well, almost perfectly smooth, minus one small round scar on his sternum. Anyhow, the point is, he isn't hairy. How any woman could like a hairy man is beyond me. Not that I'm prejudiced. I'm just saying that if a man I fancied was hairy, I'd get the wax out, and I'd rip the strips off him until he was clean and bare.

I have not yet had the opportunity to do this in real life. I've had only one boyfriend, Wilbur. And while he didn't have chest hair, he turned out to be a heartbreaker. And a liar and a cheat. So perhaps chest hair isn't the worst thing in the world.

I breathe deeply to cleanse my mind of Wilbur. I'm blessed with this ability—to clean my mind as I would a room. I picture offensive people or recall uncomfortable moments, and I wipe them away. Gone. Erased, just like that. My mind is returned to a state of perfection.

But as I sit here, in Mr. Snow's office, waiting for him to return, I'm having trouble keeping my mind clean. It returns to thoughts of Mr. Black. To the feeling of his lifeless skin on my fingers. And so on.

I take a sip of my tea, which is now cold. I will focus once more on the morning, on remembering every detail. . . . Where was I?

Ah, yes. Juan Manuel. After I left him, I headed to the elevator with my trolley, taking it up to the lobby. The doors opened and Mr. and Mrs.

Chen were standing there. The Chens are regular guests, just like the Blacks, though the Chens are from Taiwan. Mr. Chen sells textiles, so I'm told. Mrs. Chen always travels with him. That day, she was wearing a wine-colored dress with a lovely black fringe. The Chens are always flawlessly polite, a characteristic I find exceptional.

They acknowledged me right away, which, let me just say, is rare for hotel guests. They even stepped aside so I could exit the elevator before they entered.

"I thank you for being repeat guests, Mr. and Mrs. Chen."

Mr. Snow taught me to greet guests by name, to treat them as I would family members.

"It is we who thank you for keeping our room so orderly," said Mr. Chen. "Mrs. Chen gets to rest while she's here."

"I'm getting lazy. You do everything for me," Mrs. Chen said.

I am not one for attention-seeking behavior. I prefer to acknowledge a compliment with a nod, or silence. At that moment, I nodded, curtsied, and said, "Please enjoy your stay."

The Chens shuffled onto the elevator and the doors closed.

The lobby was moderately busy, with new guests arriving and some checking out. At a glance, it appeared clean and orderly. No touch-ups required. Sometimes, however, guests will leave a newspaper in a state of disarray on a side table, or discard a coffee cup on the clean marble floor, where it spills its last drops and leaves an ominous blot. Whenever I notice such infelicities, I address them immediately. Strictly speaking, cleaning the lobby is not my job, but as Mr. Snow has said, good employees think outside of the box.

I pushed my trolley to the entrance of the Social Bar & Grill and parked it. Rodney was behind the bar, reading a newspaper spread on the bar top.

I walked in briskly to show that I am a woman with confidence and a sense of purpose.

"I've arrived," I said.

He looked up. "Oh, hey Molly. Here for the morning papers?"

“Your assumption is one hundred percent correct.” Every day, I picked up a stack of newspapers to deliver to guest rooms as I made my rounds.

“Have you seen this?” he asked, pointing to the newspaper in front of him. He wears a very shiny Rolex watch. Even though I’m not much of a brand person, I’m well aware that Rolex is an expensive brand, which must mean Mr. Snow recognizes Rodney’s superior abilities as a bartender and pays him more than a usual bartender’s salary.

I looked at the headline Rodney pointed at: “FAMILY FEUD ROCKS BLACK EMPIRE.”

“May I see that?”

“Sure.” He turned the article my way. It featured several photos, a large one of Mr. Black in his classic double-breasted suit, fending off reporters who were sticking cameras in his face. Giselle was on his arm, perfectly styled from head to toe, wearing dark sunglasses. Judging from her outfit, the photo was taken recently. Perhaps yesterday?

“Looks like trouble’s brewing in the Black family,” Rodney said. “Seems his daughter, Victoria, is forty-nine percent shareholder of the Black business empire, and he wants those shares back.”

I scanned the article. The Blacks had three children, all of them grown-up. One of the boys lived in Atlantic City, the other flitted from Thailand to the Virgin Islands or wherever else the party happened to be. In the article, Mrs. Black—the first Mrs. Black—described her two sons as “flakes” and was quoted saying, “The only way Black Properties & Investments will survive is if my daughter, Victoria, who essentially already runs the organization, becomes a half shareholder, at least.” The article went on to describe the nasty legal jabs between Mr. Black and his ex-missus. A host of other power magnates were referenced in the article, rallying on one side or the other. The article suggested that Mr. Black’s second marriage to Giselle two years ago—a woman less than half his age—marked the beginning of destabilization within the Black empire.

“Poor Giselle,” I said aloud.

“Right?” Rodney replied. “She doesn’t need this.”

A thought occurred to me. “How well do you know her, Giselle?”

Rodney whisked the paper away and slid it under the bar, bringing out a fresh stack for me to take upstairs. “Who?”

“Giselle,” I said.

“Mr. Black doesn’t let her come down here to the bar. You probably have more contact with her than I do.”

He was right. I did. I do. An unlikely and pleasing bond—dare I say friendship?—has recently formed between us, between the young and beautiful Giselle Black, second wife of the infamous property mogul, and me, Molly, insignificant room maid. I don’t talk about our bond much because Mr. Preston’s adage applies equally to gentlewomen as to gentlemen: best to keep my lips pressed shut.

I waited for Rodney to extend the conversation, leaving the kind of ample room that a single-but-not-desperate female might leave were she romantically interested in the eligible bachelor before her whose cologne hinted of bergamot and exotic masculine mystique.

I was not disappointed—not entirely, at least.

“Molly, your newspapers.” He leaned on the bar, the muscles in his forearms contracting attractively. (Since this was a bar and not a dinner table, the no-elbows-on-the-table rule did not apply.) “And Molly, by the way, thanks. For what you’re doing to help my friend, Juan Manuel. You’re really a . . . special girl.”

I felt a surge of warmth rush to my cheeks as if Gran had just pinched them. “I’d do the same for you, probably more. I mean, that’s what you do for friends, right? You help them out of binds?”

He put one of his hands on my wrist and subtly squeezed. The sensation was extremely pleasing and I realized suddenly how long it had been since I’d been touched at all, by anyone. He pulled away long before I was ready. I waited for him to say something more, to ask me on another date, perhaps? I wanted nothing more than a second rendezvous with Rodney Stiles. Our first occurred exactly thirty-six days ago and remains a highlight of my adult life.

But I waited in vain. He turned to the coffee station and began making a fresh pot.

“You’d better get upstairs,” he said. “Or Chernobyl’s going to drop a bomb on you.”

I laughed—more of a guffaw/cough, actually. I was laughing with Rodney, not at Cheryl, which surely made it okay.

“Speaking with you has been delightful,” I said to Rodney. “Perhaps we can do it another time?” I prompted.

“You bet,” he said. “I’m here all week, haha.”

“Of course you are,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“It was a joke,” he replied with a wink.

Though I did not get the joke, I most definitely understood the wink. I floated out of the bar and collected my trolley. I could hear my heart in my ears, the excitement pumping.

Through the lobby I wheeled, nodding at guests as I walked. “Discreet courtesy, invisible but present customer service,” Mr. Snow often says. This is a manner I’ve cultivated, though I must admit it comes rather easily to me. I believe my gran taught me a lot about this way of being, though the hotel has offered me ample opportunity to practice and perfect.

This morning, I carried a happy tune in my head as I took the elevator up to the fourth floor. I headed to Mr. and Mrs. Black’s suite, Suite 401. Just as I was about to knock on their door, it opened, and Mr. Black stormed out. He was dressed in his trademark double-breasted suit, with a paper sticking out of his left breast pocket, on it, the word “DEED” in little curlicue letters. He nearly knocked me over with the brute force of his exit.

“Out of my way.”

He often did this—bowled me over or treated me like I was invisible. “My apologies, Mr. Black,” I said. “Have an enjoyable day.”

I stuck my foot in the door to keep it open, then decided I should still knock. “Housekeeping!” I called.

Giselle was seated on the divan in the sitting room, wearing a bathrobe, her head in her hands. Was she crying? I was not entirely sure. Her hair—sleek, long, and dark—was disheveled. It made me quite nervous, her hair in that state.

“Is this a good time for me to return your suite to a state of perfection?” I asked.

Giselle looked up. Her face was red, her eyes swollen. She grabbed her phone off the glass tabletop, got up, and ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. She switched on the fan, which, I noted, sounded loud and clunky. I would have to report that to the Maintenance Department. Next, she turned on the shower.

“Well then!” I called loudly through the bathroom door. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just tidy up in here while you prepare yourself to seize the day!”

No answer.

“I said, I’ll just clean in here! Since you haven’t actually answered me. . . .”

Nothing. It was unlike Giselle to behave in this manner. She was usually quite talkative whenever I cleaned her suite. She’d engage me in conversation, and in her presence, I felt something I rarely did with others. I felt comfortable—like I was sitting at home on the sofa with Gran.

I called out to her one more time. “My gran always said that the best way to feel better is by tidying up! If you feel sad, just grab a duster, Buster!”

But she couldn’t hear me above the running water and the clunky whirring of the fan.

I busied myself with cleaning, starting in the sitting room. The glass tabletop was a mess of smudges and fingerprints. People’s propensity to generate filth never ceases to amaze me. I grabbed my ammonia bottle and set to work, returning the table to a high and mighty shine.

I surveyed the room. The curtains were open. Fortunately, the windows had not been smeared by fingerprints, which was at least one blessing. On the bureau by the door were some envelopes, opened. A ripped corner lay curled on the floor. I retrieved it and threw it in the trash. Beside the correspondence was Giselle’s yellow purse with the gold chain-link strap. It looked valuable, but you’d never know it from the way she flung it about. The zipper at the top was open, and sticking out was a flight itinerary. I’m not one to snoop, but I couldn’t help no-

tice it was for two one-way flights to the Cayman Islands. Were this my purse, I would always close the zipper and make sure my precious valuables weren't about to fall out. I took it upon myself to place the purse exactly parallel to the mail and arrange the chain strap neatly.

I surveyed the room. The carpet had been well trampled—the pile disturbed on both sides, as if someone, Mr. Black or Giselle or both, had been pacing back and forth. I took my vacuum from my trolley and plugged it in.

“Pardon the ruckus!” I called out.

I vacuumed the room in straight lines until the carpet plumped right up and looked like a newly swept Zen garden. I've never actually visited a Zen garden in real life, but Gran and I used to holiday together on the sofa, side by side in our living room.

“Where shall we travel tonight?” she would ask. “To the Amazon with David Attenborough or to Japan with *National Geographic*?”

That night I chose Japan, and Gran and I learned all about Zen gardens. This was before she was sick, of course. I no longer engage in armchair travel because I can't afford cable or even Netflix. Even if I did have the money, it wouldn't be the same to armchair travel without Gran.

Right now, as I sit in Mr. Snow's office replaying my day, it strikes me again just how odd it was that Giselle stayed in the bathroom for so long this morning. It was almost as though she didn't want to speak with me.

After vacuuming, I moved on to the bedroom. The bed was ruffled, no tip on the pillows, which was a disappointment. I will admit that I've come to count on the generous tips from the Blacks. They've gotten me through the last few months now that I'm a one-salary household and can't count on Gran's earnings to help pay the rent.

I set about removing the bedsheets and crisply made up the bed, complete with perfect hospital corners and four plump, hotel-standard pillows—two hard, two soft, two pillows each, for husband and wife. The closet door was ajar, but when I went to shut it, I couldn't because the safe inside was open. I could see one passport inside the safe, not two, some documents that looked very legal, and several stacks of money—crisp, new \$100 notes, at least five stacks in total.

It's hard to admit this, even to myself, but I am in the midst of a financial crisis. And while I'm not proud of the fact, it is nevertheless the truth that the piles of money sitting in that safe tempted me, so much so that I tidied the rest of the room as fast as I could—shoes pointing straight, negligee folded on the dressing chair, and so on, just so I could leave the bedroom and finish cleaning the rest of the suite quickly.

I returned to the sitting room, where I tended to the bar and the mini fridge. Five small bottles of Bombay gin were missing (hers, I presumed) and three mini bottles of scotch (definitely his). I replenished the stock and then emptied all the trash cans.

I heard the shower turn off, at long last, and the fan as well. And then I heard the unmistakable sound of Giselle sobbing.

She sounded very sad, so I announced that the suite was clean, took a tissue box from my trolley, and waited outside the bathroom door.

Eventually, she emerged. She was wrapped in one of the hotel's fluffy white bathrobes. I've always wondered what it must be like to wear one of those robes; it must feel like being hugged by a cloud. She had a bath towel around her hair, too, in a perfect swirl, like my favorite treat—ice cream.

I held the tissue box out to her. "Need a tissue for your issue?" I asked.

She sighed. "You're sweet," she said. "But a tissue isn't going to cut it."

She walked around me and into the bedroom. I could hear her rooting around in her armoire.

"Are you quite all right?" I asked. "Can I help you in any way?"

"Not today, Molly. I don't have the energy. Okay?"

Her voice was different, like a flat tire if it could talk, which of course it can't except in cartoons. It was evident to me that she was most upset.

"Very well," I said in a chipper voice. "May I clean your bathroom now?"

"No, Molly. I'm sorry. Please, not right now."

I did not take this personally. "I'll come back later to clean it then?"

"Good idea," she said.

I curtsied in response to her compliment, then retrieved my trolley and buzzed myself out the door.

I set about cleaning the other rooms and suites on that floor, feeling increasingly unsettled as I did so. What was wrong with Giselle? Normally, she talked about where she was going that day, what she was doing. She solicited my opinion about whether she should wear this or that. She said pleasing things. “Molly Maid, there’s no one like you. You’re the best, and never forget it.” The warmth would rise to my face. I’d feel my chest expand a bit with every kind word.

It was also unlike Giselle to forget to tip me.

We’re all entitled to a bad day now and again, I heard Gran say in my head. But when they are all bad days, with no pleasant ones, then it’s time to reconsider things.

I moved on to Mr. and Mrs. Chen’s room a few doors down. Cheryl was just about to enter.

“I was going to take the dirty sheets downstairs for you, as a favor,” she said.

“That’s quite all right, I’ve got it,” I replied, pushing past her with my trolley. “But thank you for your kindness.” I buzzed through, allowing the door to shut abruptly on her scowling face.

On the pillow in the Chens’ bedroom was a crisp twenty-dollar bill. For me. An acknowledgment of my work, of my existence, of my need.

“That’s kindness, Cheryl,” I said out loud as I folded the twenty and tucked it into my pocket. As I cleaned, I fantasized about all the things I would do—spray bleach in her face, strangle her with a bathrobe tie, push her off the balcony—if ever I caught Cheryl red-handed, stealing tips from one of my rooms.

"Brilliant." –FREDRIK BACKMAN,
author of *A Man Called Ove*

THE SURVIVORS

A Novel

ALEX
SCHULMAN

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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Nils shoves the urn with full force at his brother. Pierre isn't ready for it and it lands on his chest. From the crack, Benjamin knows immediately that something has broken inside Pierre's body. A rib or his sternum. Benjamin has always been able to see three steps ahead of everyone else. He could predict conflicts between the members of his family long before they happened. From the first moment of irritation, so subtle that it was hardly even there, he knew how the argument would begin and how it would end. But this is different. From this moment on, as something breaks inside Pierre's chest, he knows nothing. Everything starting now is uncharted territory. Pierre lies in the shallow water and holds his chest. Nils hurries to him: "Are you okay?"

He bends down to help his brother up. He's frightened.

Pierre kicks Nils in the calves so that he collapses on the rocky shore. Then Pierre throws himself on top of his older brother; they roll around and around, hammering their fists into faces and chests and shoulders. And all along, they speak. Benjamin finds the scene surreal, almost fantastical, how they're talking to each other even as they try to kill each other.

Benjamin picks up the urn, which has fallen by the embankment. The lid has come off, and some of the ash has spilled onto the sand. The color of the skeletal remains is gray, leaning purple, and he reacts very briefly to it as he picks up the urn and puts its lid back on; that's not how he imagined Mom's ashes. He holds on to the urn with both hands, takes a few steps back, going stiff as he is faced with his brothers' fight. Frozen on the sidelines, as was so often the case in the past. He observes their awkward punches, their clumsiness. On any other day, Pierre would beat his brother black and blue. He's been fighting since he was a teen. Memories from their school days, as Benjamin crossed the schoolyard and saw kids gathering to watch a fight, and between the down jackets Benjamin could see his brother bending over someone and he moved by quickly, never wanted to see his brother landing punch after punch even though his opponent was no longer moving, looked lifeless. Pierre can fight, but here at the water's edge the odds are evened out, because he's cracked a rib and can hardly stand upright. Most of the blows between the brothers meet only air, or don't quite land, or are parried with hands and arms. But a few of their attacks are devastating. Pierre gets Nils in the eye and right away Benjamin can see the blood trickling down his cheek and onto his neck. Nils elbows Pierre and it sounds like he breaks his nose.

Nils tears at Pierre's hair, and when he finally lets go, tufts of it dangle between his fingers. After a while, they grow tired. For an instant it seems as though neither of them has the strength to continue. They sit at the water's edge, a few yards between them, looking at each other. And then they start all over again. It's slow and drawn out; they want to kill each other but don't seem to be in any hurry.

And they keep talking.

Nils aims a kick at his brother but misses and loses his balance. Pierre backs away and picks up a rock from the beach, lobbing it at Nils. The rock whizzes by, but Pierre takes another and throws it and this time it hits Nils on the chin. More blood. Benjamin tentatively backs up and over the embankment, holding the urn so tightly that his fingers go white. He turns around and trudges up to the house. He goes inside, into the kitchen, and finds his phone. He calls the emergency number.

"My brothers are fighting," he says. "I'm afraid they're going to beat each other to death."

"Can you intervene?" asks the woman on the phone.

"No."

"Why not? Are you injured?"

"No, no . . ."

"Why can't you intervene?"

Benjamin presses the phone firmly to his ear. Why can't he intervene? He gazes out the window. He can see all of the little settings of his childhood. This landscape is where it all began, and this is where it ended. He can't intervene because he got stuck here once upon a time and hasn't been able to move since. He's still nine years old, and the men fighting down there are adults, the brothers who kept living.

He sees the shape of the two of them, trying to kill each other. It's no worthy finale, but perhaps it's also no surprise. How else had they expected this to end? What did they think would happen when they returned at last to the place they had spent their lives trying to flee? Now his brothers are fighting in knee-deep water. Benjamin watches as Pierre heaves Nils down under the surface. He stays there, doesn't get up, and Pierre makes no attempt to help him.

A thought passes through Benjamin: They're going to die down there.

And he drops the phone and now he's running. He dashes out and down the stone steps—the path to the lake is in his muscle memory; he can still dodge every obstacle, so even at high speed, he avoids every protruding root, jumps every sharp rock. He is running through his childhood. He passes the spot where his parents always sat in the last of the evening sun, before it set behind the lake. He makes his way past the wall of forest that rises to the east, passes the boathouse. He runs. When did he last do that? He doesn't recall. He has lived his adult life at a constant standstill, as if within parentheses, and now that he feels his heart pounding in his chest he is filled with a strange euphoria to find that he can run, that he has the energy, or, maybe, above all: that he wants to. He takes strength in the fact that something is finally driving him to act. And he jumps over the little ledge where he used to catch tadpoles as a child and throws himself into the water. He grabs his brothers and prepares to pull them apart, but he soon realizes that there's no need. They've stopped fighting. And they're standing close together in water up to their waists, a few yards out into the lake. They're looking at each other. Their dark hair is alike,

they have identical eyes, the same chestnut brown. They don't speak. The lake grows quiet. Just the sound of three brothers crying.

On the stone steps they inspect each other's wounds. They don't apologize, because they don't know how, because no one has ever taught them. They cautiously feel each other's bodies, dab at cuts, they press their foreheads together. The three brothers hold each other.

Through the dull, humid summer silence, Benjamin suddenly hears a car engine in the forest above them. He glances over at the slope. A police car slowly plows through the blue foliage, down the narrow tractor path that leads to the property. There is the cottage, lonely on the point of land, in the June night that will never be entirely dark.

THE PILLAR OF SMOKE

Mom and Dad stood up after lunch on the patio. Dad gathered the plates and stacked the glasses. Mom brought the white wine into the kitchen and gingerly put the bottle in the fridge. Signs of life in the bathroom after that—the water pump howled a few times. Dad spat forcefully into the sink. Then they trooped upstairs, their steps heavy. Benjamin heard the bedroom door close, and it was quiet.

They called it their “siesta.” Nothing strange about it, they’d informed the children—people in Spain did it all the time. An hour’s nap after lunch, in order to face the evening fresh and alert. For Benjamin it was a long hour of nothing, followed by the peculiar half hour when Mom and Dad staggered back out to the patio, sitting silent and combustible in their plastic

chairs. As a rule, Benjamin kept his distance then, letting them wake up in peace, but soon he approached his parents, and his brothers did too, from different parts of the yard, because once in a while, after the siesta, Mom would read aloud to the children. On a blanket on the lawn if the weather was nice, or on the kitchen bench before the fire if it was raining, the children sat in silence and listened as Mom read from old classics, the books she thought children should know. And it was just Mom's voice, there was nothing else, and she ran her free hand through a child's hair, and the longer this time lasted the closer the boys came to their mother, until at last it was like they were joined together, you couldn't tell where one child ended and the next began. When she reached the end of a chapter, she would close the book with a snap right in front of one of their noses, and they all screeched in delight.

Benjamin sat down on the stone steps. He had a long wait ahead of him. He gazed down at his banged-up summer legs, saw the mosquito bites on his shins, smelled the scent of his sunburned skin and the antiseptic Dad had dabbed onto his feet to treat his nettle stings. His heart beat faster even though he wasn't moving. It wasn't boredom he felt; it was something different, harder to explain. He was sad without quite knowing why. He gazed down the placid slope at the lake, the sun-scorched, bleached meadow. And he felt everything around him falter. It was like a bell jar had been lowered over the point. His eyes followed a wasp as it anxiously circled a bowl of cream sauce that had been left on the table. The wasp was heavy and irrational and it was having problems, it looked like its wings were beating more and more slowly, with more and more effort, and then it got too close to the sauce and was caught. Benjamin

followed its struggle to free itself, but little by little its movements slowed until at last they stopped. He listened to the bird-song, suddenly strange; it was as if the birds were singing more slowly, at half speed. Then they fell silent. Benjamin felt terror flow through him. Had time stopped? He clapped five times as he usually did to return to himself.

“Hello!” he called into the air. He stood up, clapped again, five times, so hard that his palms stung.

“What are you doing?”

Pierre was standing down by the lake and looking up at him. “Nothing,” Benjamin replied.

“Want to go fishing?”

“Okay.”

Benjamin went to the hall for his boots. Then he walked around the corner of the cottage to get the fishing rod that was leaning against the wall.

“I know where there are worms,” said Pierre.

They went behind the barn, where the soil was moist. They turned over two shovelfuls and suddenly the ground was glistening with worms. The brothers pulled them from the soil and collected them in a jar, where they lay placidly, unconcerned about their captivity. Pierre shook the jar, turning it over to rouse them, but they seemed to take everything as it came—even death, because when Benjamin threaded them onto the hook down by the lake they didn’t protest but let themselves be drilled through by the metal.

THEY TOOK TURNS holding the rod. The bobber was red and white and stood out clearly against the black water, except

when it vanished into the spots of sun on the surface. Along the shore came the Larsson Sisters, the farm's three hens, in a group but each minding her own business, randomly pecking at the ground here and there, clucking softly. Benjamin had always felt uncomfortable when they came near him, because there was no logic to their behavior. He felt edgy, as if anything could happen—like when a wino suddenly spoke to you on the square. Plus, Dad had said one of them was blind, and might lose it if she felt threatened, and Benjamin would stare into the hens' empty eyes but could never tell which of them couldn't see. Weren't all of them blind, in fact? It looked like it as they crept nervously across the ground. Dad was the one who had bought the hens, a few summers ago, in order to finally fulfill his lifelong dream of eating freshly laid eggs for breakfast. Dad fed them, tossing the dry feed after them in the afternoon and calling, "Pot-pot-pot," and in the evenings he herded them into the barn, the sound of his ladle striking the bottom of a pan echoing across the whole property. Each morning Pierre had the task of fetching eggs from the Larsson Sisters' coop, and he'd come running back up the grassy path to the house with the treasure in his hands and Dad would hurry into the kitchen and put on a pot of water. It became a tradition of theirs, Pierre and Dad, and it was a nice moment for Benjamin as well because it made him feel calm, it was bright and let you breathe easy.

The hens stopped pecking at the ground and gazed with their dead eyes at the brothers on the shore. Benjamin lunged at them and the Larsson Sisters immediately picked up the pace, moving on with long steps, staring down into the grass. They passed the boys and were gone.

Pierre was holding the rod when the bobber began to move.

First there was a little tremor, and then it vanished completely into the black water.

“We’ve got a bite!” Pierre shrieked. “Take it!” he cried, handing the rod to Benjamin.

Benjamin did as his father had taught him—he didn’t lift the fish out right away, but reeled it in gently. Benjamin was tugging in one direction and the fish in another, with a strength that took Benjamin by surprise. When he saw the shape of the beast just beneath the surface, saw it struggling wildly to get loose, he cried, “Quick, a bucket!”

Pierre looked around, not sure what to do. “A bucket?” he asked.

“Nils!” Benjamin called. “We’ve got a fish, bring a bucket!”

He saw movement from the hammock. Nils hurried to the house, then ran down to the lake with a red bucket in hand. Benjamin didn’t want to pull too hard for fear that the line might break, but he had to resist as the fish aimed for the center of the lake. Nils didn’t hesitate; he stepped into the water and sank the bucket.

“Pull it in!” he cried.

The fish slapped at the surface, moving closer to land again. Nils took another step into the water, his shorts got wet, and he scooped up the fish.

“I’ve got it!” he shouted.

They gathered around the bucket and looked inside. “What is it?” Pierre asked.

“A perch,” Nils replied. “But you have to toss it back.”

“Why?” Pierre asked, surprised.

“It’s too small,” he said. “You can’t eat that.”

Benjamin gazed into the bucket and saw that the fish was

flailing against the sides. It was smaller than he'd expected while he was fighting it in the water. Its comb-shaped scales glittered; its sharp dorsal fins bristled.

"Are you sure?" Benjamin asked.

Nils chuckled. "Dad will laugh in your faces if you show him that."

Pierre picked up the bucket and marched toward the house.

Benjamin followed close behind.

"What are you doing? You have to put it back in the water," Nils cried. When they didn't respond, he ran to catch up with them.

Pierre set the bucket on the kitchen table. He looked down at the fish, and the red plastic of the bucket was reflected on Pierre's face, making it look like he was blushing.

"Shall we fry it alive?" he asked softly. Nils stared at his brother in shock.

"You're not fucking right in the head," he said.

He turned around and went outside, and Benjamin heard him say, as he passed by the window, "Madhouse."

Benjamin watched him go, saw him lie down in the hammock. "Let's fry it alive," Pierre said again, looking at Benjamin.

"No," said Benjamin. "We can't do that." Pierre stood on a chair and took down one of the frying pans that hung on the wall over the counter. He set it on the gas stove and stared at the knobs in confusion. He turned one and suddenly they could hear the gentle whisper of the gas. He leaned forward, looking down along the burners.

"How do you light it?" he asked. He twisted the knob back and forth but only heard the gas starting and stopping. He turned to Benjamin.

“Come on, help me!”

“You need matches,” Benjamin told him.

“So can you help me or what?”

“Pierre,” said Benjamin. “You can’t fry a fish that’s alive.”

“Stop it,” said Pierre. “Just help me.”

And the gas trickled into the room, and a window slammed upstairs, and the swallows that had built nests in the ridge of the roof scraped at the wood as if they were scratching the house, and the afternoon sun shone in onto the rough planks of the kitchen table, onto the yellowed deck of cards that was still there from their parents’ games the night before, sunshine from the side onto the two brothers, illuminating the dead flies that lay in little drifts on the windowsill, and Benjamin looked out the window and then back at Pierre. And then he took the matches from the top drawer and struck one against the burner which immediately flared up with red flames.

“Do we need butter or something?” Pierre asked, looking around the room. Benjamin didn’t answer. Pierre dug around in the fridge but didn’t find what he was looking for. He came back to the stove; it smoked a little as the fire heated the pan. Pierre lifted the red bucket and dumped the fish into the frying pan. It tumbled out and threw itself violently into the air when it touched the iron. Then its strength was sapped. It stuck to the pan, its gills heaving, careful movements from its tail. It tried once or twice to pull loose, but its scales had begun to melt and it was slowly riveted to the iron.

The pan began to smoke. Benjamin, speechless, looked on. Pierre tried to work a spatula gently under the fish to turn it. He poked and prodded and squinted when the smoke got into

his eyes, and eventually he pried it loose. The place where it had just been was covered in scales. The fish threw itself into the air, tried to flip over, and landed in the same spot. Both brothers leapt back and stared at the pan.

“It’s still alive!” Benjamin said. “We have to kill it!”

“You do it, I’m scared,” Pierre said.

“Why me?” Benjamin hissed.

Pierre shoved Benjamin, trying to push him toward the pan.

“Stop it!”

The fish flipped over again.

“You’re the one that did this!” said Benjamin.

Pierre was frozen, staring at the pan with his mouth open. Benjamin hurried to the stove and turned the knob, setting the gas to max. He backed away, recoiling, and stood beside his brother. Through the smoke they heard small noises, the fish slapping its tail against the pan; it was as though it were keeping time against the iron as the heat got worse. Benjamin felt like his legs were about to give out and grabbed the arm of a chair to steady himself. There was a sudden sizzling sound as the fish burst and its innards slipped into the pan; the smoke thickened and there was something about this experience that made Benjamin feel that God was involved, when the smoke was lit by the sun as it rose to the ceiling, and he thought that the pillar of smoke created a canal, a divine channel, that through it the fish was rising to heaven. And suddenly everything was crystal clear, as if all the events on earth had suddenly concentrated into this frying pan, the weight of the planet exerting all its pressure there on the gas range.

Then it was over. Everything was still.

Benjamin went over to the pan and put it in the sink. He ran water into it; the sizzling was replaced with a different kind of sizzling, and then it was quiet. He looked at the charred little fish, which still lay in the pan. He scooped it into the trash and put some paper on top of it. He walked over to Pierre, who was still standing motionless a few steps from the stove.

“This was wrong, Pierre.”

Pierre gazed seriously up at his brother.

“Get lost and I’ll take care of this,” said Benjamin.

Pierre vanished, Benjamin watching through the window as he ran full speed for the barn. Benjamin washed the frying pan, scraping under hot water to get all the fish scales off.

He went out to the stone steps. It was so bright out that everything looked black. He heard vague sounds from inside the house, someone on the stairs, and suddenly there stood the dog, just up from an afternoon nap.

“Hey there, hi there,” Benjamin whispered, using his mother’s typical call for the dog, and he patted his knee and Molly hopped into his arms, settling into place there. He held her; maybe his heart would stop beating so fast if he pressed her warm body to his chest. He stood up, took the path to the lake, and sat on one of the big rocks with Molly. It was still like an eclipse out there, and as the colors returned he could see clearly what he had suspected: the world had changed. He saw the ripples on the water left by a school of fish fighting for food under the surface. He saw the rings on the water, noticed they were moving not out but in. The rings shrank toward the center and vanished without a trace into their own ripples. He stared out at the bay and saw the same phenomenon again. The rings on the lake sought their own center, as if someone were playing a

movie backward. He was startled by the echo of a scream over the lake. He looked out, trying to locate the source. Then he screamed. He realized that time hadn't stopped at all—it was moving backward.

He covered his eyes with his palms.

“Hey there, hi there!”

Who was that? Through his fingers he glanced up at the darkened lawn and saw Mom and Dad, newly awakened and dazed. Mom had spotted the dog in Benjamin's arms and called for her. And slowly the world straightened out again.

He released Molly, who dashed to Mom, and Benjamin ran along the trampled path after her. His parents were staring down at the grass. Mom took out a pack of cigarettes and placed it on the table, reached for the dog.

“Hello, son,” Dad said in a thick voice.

“Hi,” said Benjamin.

He sat down on the grass. Silence. Mom glanced his way. “Come scratch my back,” she said.

Benjamin went to stand behind her, scratched carefully, and Mom closed her eyes and made a small sound, his hand inside her shirt. “Hold on,” she said, unclasping her bra so he could reach better.

He felt the impressions on her skin from the band as he ran his fingers from the back of her neck and down over her shoulder blades. And he scratched deliberately, just the way he knew she liked, because he didn't want the moment to end. Mom cast a quick glance up at Benjamin.

“Why are you crying, honey?”

Benjamin didn't respond, just kept scratching his mother.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Sweetie,” Mom said. “Don’t cry.” Then she fell silent, bowed her head. “A little farther down.”

From the corner of his eye Benjamin saw the Larsson Sisters sneaking up to the patio. They lined up on the lawn, observing what was going on. He felt his heart beating. He thought of the fish, of the smoking frying pan, the scales sticking to the iron. The hens stared at him. They knew what he had done and were judging him in silence.

And he scratched his mother as he looked at the hens, afraid to look away, afraid to look up. He didn’t dare to aim his gaze at the table, because he was afraid he would find lunch still on it, the meal just ended, and Mom and Dad about to take a siesta.

"A poignant, heart-tugging, life-affirming story that will wrap around you like a hug." —**Josie Silver**, bestselling author of *One Day in December*

Always. in December



EMILY STONE

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CHAPTER ONE



Josie stood in the doorway of her flat, under the mistletoe that Bia had insisted they hang “just in case” and stared mutely at the box Oliver was clutching. One of her hands was still resting on the door, and for a moment she nearly gave in to the urge to slam it in his lying, cheating and, she realized now, far too symmetrical face.

Oliver cleared his throat. “I know you wanted your stuff back so I just thought I would . . .” Something about the expression on her face caused him to trail off and he looked down at the box of her belongings instead. He fumbled with it as he tried to hold it out to her, awkwardly bumping into the doorframe instead.

“Right.” She gave in and took it from him, deliberately maneuvering so that she avoided touching his hand. She grunted at the sudden weight of it—it was far heavier than it looked. She supposed that made sense—two years’ worth of stuff left at his flat, forgotten about or left there deliberately to

make life easier. Stuff she'd presumed, up until a few weeks ago, wouldn't be leaving there for the foreseeable future, given she'd assumed that she would, sooner or later, be moving in. What had he been thinking, as he packed it all away? He'd pleaded with her not to end things, initially, but now here he was, determinedly marking the end of the relationship.

She pressed her lips together firmly to stop them trembling, and turned her back to Oliver. Right at the top of the box, rolling around on one of her books, as if thrown in as an afterthought, were the flashing reindeer earrings he'd given her three weeks ago, ahead of their work Christmas lunch. The lunch where, instead of coming back with her once the desserts were out of the way, he'd stayed on to drink and flirt with a colleague of theirs. The lunch where, instead of coming home within the hour, he'd gone round to said colleague's house instead. And slept with her.

She set the box down on the vinyl floor, just outside Bia's room. She supposed, then, the earrings had been his farewell gift to her, though neither of them had known it at the time. The thought that had flared up time and time again since the morning after, where, still in bed, he'd told her what he'd done, stabbed at her mind again now, even as she tried to repress it. The idea that, if she hadn't gone home early after the lunch, then maybe they wouldn't be stood here now. Maybe she'd be curled up next to him on his tiny red sofa watching reruns of *Line of Duty* and ordering a Thai takeaway and bottle of white wine. Maybe he wouldn't have given in to temptation, also known as Cara. Or maybe it would have only been delayed, until the next time there was Prosecco and a skin-tight red dress involved.

She took a deep breath through her nose as she stood up, vowing to throw the earrings in the bin the first chance she got. He was still standing there when she turned back around, and she fought hard to keep her face impassive, to force down the angry lump in her throat. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his too-tight jeans and rocked back on his heels, looking over her head and around the flat as if admiring it for the first time. She folded her arms and raised her eyebrows. No way was she making this easier for him.

“So are you . . . OK?” He finally met her gaze and seemed to flinch back a bit from whatever he saw there. Good. It meant she’d nailed the drop-dead glare. She raised her eyebrows farther. She wouldn’t be surprised if they’d disappeared under her fringe by now, but she didn’t care. She refused to be dragged into any form of small talk, not after what he’d done to her.

“I mean, after what happened in the office today, I just wanted to make sure . . .” He trailed off again, apparently losing the ability to speak in full sentences. Josie kept her arms tightly crossed, desperately hoping that the heat she felt pulsing under her cheeks wasn’t showing on her face. Of course he’d bring that up. Of course he’d figured out why Janice had wanted to talk to her. One of the serious drawbacks to sharing an office with your ex, on top of the fact you had to see them every day, was the fact that you couldn’t lie and say everything was going just *swimmingly* at work.

“I’m fine,” she said shortly, though from the way his brown eyes turned soft as his gaze lingered on her face, she knew he didn’t buy it. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, wishing she’d changed out of her black-and-white-striped

work dress, which felt too tight now, and too exposing, like she'd got home at two in the afternoon and been sat doing nothing for four hours. Which, to be fair, she had. Though maybe he wouldn't notice—he'd never paid much attention to what she'd worn when they were together, something she'd found incredibly charming, the fact that he'd genuinely seemed not to care whether she was in a tracksuit or heels. She wondered now if that had all been put on, given the girl he'd slept with.

Oliver opened his mouth, shut it again and nodded, clearly thinking better of whatever he'd been about to say, whatever condescending support he'd been about to offer. "All right," he said evenly. He ran a hand through his dark brown hair, which lay flat against his head, almost like it was stuck in place, though the side parting that she knew he combed into place every day was slightly ruffled. "But you know you can still talk to me, right, babe? I still—"

Josie held up a hand. "Don't call me babe." She sighed. "Please, just don't." She didn't want to hear it. The offer of a shoulder to cry on, telling her that he still cared about her. Because surely if he cared about her that much, he wouldn't have slept with someone else. And certainly not someone they both worked with, someone she had to face in the office, who walked around the place in completely impractical heels like she owned it.

"Right," he said, and rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, looking away from her and glancing around the dull hallway. One of the lights was flickering weakly down the other end, the effect somehow highlighting the ugly, stained carpet which contrasted sharply with the vinyl inside the flat

that Josie made an effort to keep clean and shiny. He took a breath, looked back at her with those brown Bambi eyes, the ones she'd fallen for two and a half years ago, when he'd first swanned into the office, just confident enough for it to be attractive and not annoying. "Jose, look, I know I hurt you, and I know you don't think you'll ever be able to forgive me, but I hate the idea of you sitting here alone, trying to deal with this. I just think if we could talk, we—"

Josie shook her head. "Oliver, I can't do this right now." His hand dropped to his side and he looked so damn pathetic in that moment, shoulders hunched under his black North Face coat, that she almost gave in and rested a hand on his arm. Almost. Until she remembered that he was not the wronged party in this situation. He had no right to keep trying to worm his way back in, to make her feel like she was overreacting. "And I'm not alone," she said, her voice clipped. "I have Bia."

"Right." He nodded a few times, looking like that bobbing-head dog she'd got in this year's office secret Santa. She'd had it on her desk since, trying to show she appreciated the gesture, even though the fact that every single bloody person that stopped by bopped it when they left her desk and then she had to watch it slow down its nodding out of the corner of her eye while she tried to type. "All right." Oliver cleared his throat. "Well I guess I'll see you at the party on Tuesday then?" He tried a hesitant smile, showing off the crooked teeth she knew he hated.

"I guess you will," she said, trying not to sigh. The party that they all had to go to, despite the fact that it was on Christmas Eve.

He hovered in the doorway for a moment longer, and she wondered if he was waiting for her to give in and hug him, or invite him in or something. After all, throughout the course of the relationship it had always been her making the compromises, her staying out late because he wanted a night out, or agreeing to go on a hectic city break rather than a retreat to the country. They both knew it, both had their roles to play. But this was different. Oliver glanced up, saw the mistletoe hanging sadly above them, and turned a little pink. Josie grimaced. She was going to kill Bia.

“Well,” he muttered, “until then, I suppose.” He shuffled away from the door, but glanced over at her before she could shut it. “I’m sorry, you know.” His eyes, almost exactly the same shade of brown as hers, didn’t blink once. “I know it’s crap timing and I really . . .” He shook his head. “I’m just sorry.”

She hesitated for half a second, her lips pressed tightly together, wondering whether she should say something to make him realize that sorry wasn’t good enough, to ask him why, and why now, at a time of year he *knew* was difficult for her. To ask him if he’d slept with Cara again, if he would move in on her, now that Josie was out of the way. But she couldn’t bring herself to, wasn’t sure she actually wanted to know the answer. So instead she nodded once, then let the door click shut.

She allowed herself a moment to close her eyes and rest her head back against the door. She refused to let the tears come, though, taking slow breaths and screwing up her eyes to banish back the burning. *He’s not worth it*, she told herself. And she’d been through worse and survived, hadn’t she?

She pushed away from the door and sighed as she hauled the box of her stuff to her room at the far end of the corridor. The bigger room, because Bia had insisted she take it, even though they paid the same amount of rent. She grimaced at the purple tinsel Bia had put up around her doorframe. She had half a mind to tear it down, but wouldn't because, despite her feelings on the subject, she knew it would upset Bia.

She'd only just dumped the box on her bed when she heard a key in the front door. Speak of the tiny she-devil.

“Jose? Josie!” The sound of Bia's voice was followed by the sound of various objects falling, including the clanging of a set of keys, and Bia swearing, loudly. Josie huffed out a small laugh despite herself as she stuck her head around her bedroom door to see Bia's multicolored handbag on the floor, contents strewn everywhere, and one of Bia's arms stuck inside her coat as she flapped around to try and get it off. Bia caught her eye and held up a bottle of wine in her non-trapped hand. “I saved the essentials, and that's what counts.” She carefully set the wine down on the step that led up to the kitchen, then maneuvered her way out of her coat and flung it into her bedroom without looking. “Come on, you look like you need a glass.”

Josie followed Bia obediently to the open-plan kitchen-slash-living room and perched on their secondhand sofa while Bia clunked around in the kitchen for glasses. The living room was currently cozy and festive—fairy lights across the top of the fake fireplace and around the windows, a bowl of nuts on the coffee table in the middle of the room and a small Christmas tree in the corner, decorated erratically with blue, silver, red and gold baubles and tinsel, so that if you stared at it for

too long you felt dizzy. All Bia's handiwork, except for one decoration on the tree—a small wooden swan—which Bia had given Josie the first year they lived together and forced her to put on the tree every year since then.

How lucky Josie was that Bia had been one of the four people she'd shared a house with when she first moved to London. She'd known no one here, so had to opt for the Spare-Room option, making a decision on which place to rent based on a twenty-minute viewing and awkward chat with the other housemates. It had been Bia's sparkle then that had sold her on that first place and now, eight years later, they were still living together, albeit in a different flat.

"So," said Bia, setting down a glass of red in front of Josie, before leaning against the counter which separated the living room and kitchen, "I passed short-arse coming down the stairs." At four foot nine, Bia was hardly in the position to call anyone short, but she'd always been sure that Oliver had a complex over being just a few centimeters shorter than Josie. Maybe she was right, thought Josie, given Cara was perfectly petite and not long and gawky like her.

Josie scowled her displeasure to Bia, who already knew all about the breakup and how he'd told her he'd slept with someone else while she was still in bed, barely awake and not yet dressed.

"Want to talk about it?" Bia asked.

Josie shrugged. "Nothing more to say. He was just dropping back my stuff."

Bia snorted. "Nice of him."

"Quite."

Bia took a gulp of wine, closed her eyes and groaned in

not entirely faked pleasure. “Thank God for that,” Bia sighed. “I swear to God, Jose, if someone offers me one more glass of mulled wine, I’m going to throw some goddamn mulled water in their face.”

Josie raised her eyebrows. “What happened to the jolly, festive you?”

“Oh, she’s still here, but she wants champagne, not stewed alcohol.” Bia took another grateful gulp of wine and Josie sipped hers too.

“It’s nice.”

“Malbec.” Bia grinned. “To get me in the mood for my flight tomorrow.”

Josie frowned. “What?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

Josie hesitated, caught in the headlights.

“Argentina!” cried Bia, her wine sloshing dangerously close to the surface of the glass as she punched it in the air. “Remember? You were the one who told me to go for it. I’m going to go, find the lust of my life, spend Christmas on the beach, then party in Buenos Aires for New Year. I told you this,” she insisted.

“Yes, but I didn’t think . . .” Josie didn’t finish the sentence. She’d told Bia to go for it, yes, assuming, at the time, that she’d be spending Christmas with Oliver like they’d planned, but she hadn’t really thought she’d book it. Bia was constantly announcing grand plans and then never following through—over the summer she gave up on a month-long yoga retreat in Spain because she decided she didn’t really like yoga, then there was the time she signed up for acting courses in London before figuring out she couldn’t afford them, or

when she thought it would be brilliant to make some more money selling beauty products from home, until she discovered that actually involved quite a lot of effort.

“. . . and when I come back, I will miraculously have figured out what I want to do with my life and can quit this terrible PA job.” Josie nodded, and tried to look like she’d been paying attention to everything Bia had just said. “That’s how it works, right? Life-changing holiday, life epiphany?”

“What? Yeah, that’s how it works, for sure.”

Bia twisted her lips, clearly unimpressed with Josie’s lack of enthusiasm. “Unless you think I should be a PA for the rest of my life?”

“No, don’t be silly,” Josie said. Though in all honesty, it was relatively hard to keep up with what Bia was doing for work at any point in time—she hadn’t stuck to the same job for more than eight months since Josie had known her, though she didn’t look at it as being flaky, just as figuring out what she wanted to do. Living that way would give Josie near constant heart failure, she was sure, but it worked for Bia.

“Jose, are you OK?” Bia frowned down at her.

“Yeah,” said Josie, taking a big gulp of wine as a distraction. “Just, you know, Oliver.” Bia nodded sympathetically. In truth, Josie hadn’t quite realized she’d be spending Christmas alone until just now. She hadn’t given it a huge amount of thought, trying to put off thinking about the day as she always did, but if she had, she’d have assumed Bia would be around for most of it at least, given Bia’s parents lived in London too. Now, she was facing the quite grim prospect of spending over a week alone in this flat. She glanced automatically to the coffee table in front of her, to the three envelopes there that she’d

been preoccupied with before Oliver had interrupted. The first, unopened, was a formal letter from her company. The second, a Christmas card from her grandmother, reminding her, again, that she was welcome to stay with them for Christmas. And the third, the same letter she wrote every year without fail, to her parents.

Bia followed Josie's gaze, but didn't ask, and for that Josie was grateful. She couldn't face telling Bia about her job yet, and Bia already knew why Josie couldn't bring herself to spend Christmas with her grandparents. But she didn't know about the last letter. Josie hadn't ever told anyone about that—it was something private, something she did just for herself.

“You could come with me, you know,” Bia said softly. “The offer's still there, I'd love to have you with me.” Josie looked up, and hated the understanding she saw on Bia's face. It made her head hurt, trying to stop herself from giving in to the urge to cry all over again. Today had been a rough day, that was all.

Josie hesitated, then sighed. “I can't. I'm sorry.” Because the thought of booking a ticket to fly tomorrow was too much, given how drastically her life had already changed in a matter of weeks. She'd seen first-hand how impulsive decisions could lead to devastating consequences, and while that sort of spontaneity seemed to work for Bia, it wasn't something she'd ever been able to do. Just the thought of it sent a writhing ball of anxiety through her stomach.

“Well, what about Laura then?” Bia asked, referring to Josie's self-proclaimed work wife. “You know, for Christmas?”

“She’s off to Scotland with her hunky Scottish fiancé.”

Bia shook her head. “Typical. OK, well, look, I’ve got another bottle of this hiding in my handbag . . .”

“Of course you do.”

“So let’s drink our way through this and the next one, order a takeaway and maybe put on *Love Actually*, or, as it’s your pick, like *Pride and Prejudice* or something.”

Josie wrinkled her nose. “Not really in a romantic film kind of mood.”

“*Lord of the Rings?*”

Josie laughed. She looked from Bia, her heart-shaped face currently framed with curly bright red hair, hair which she’d dyed to go with the festive period but was liable to change at a moment’s notice, to the over-decorated Christmas tree, and felt her chest tighten painfully at the thought of a Bia-free flat as of tomorrow. The burning behind her eyes was back. God, she needed to get a grip on herself. She glanced down at the envelopes on the table again, thought of everything they signified, and knew she had to get out of the house.

“Hold that thought. I’ve just got to post this letter, then I’ll be back.”

“Now?” Bia exclaimed incredulously.

“I’ll be back,” Josie repeated, pushing to her feet and setting the half-empty glass of wine down on the kitchen counter beside Bia before she grabbed the three letters. She dropped two of them on her bed beside the box of her things while she grabbed her phone, bike lock and bank card—just in case—from her room.

When she strode back along the corridor toward the front door, Bia was standing at the top of the step in the living

room, watching her over the rim of her wine glass. “If this is you bolting because you smell smoke and I don’t or something, then I’m definitely going to come back to haunt you after I burn alive.”

Josie rolled her eyes as she slipped on her coat, put on her trainers and tucked the last letter inside her pocket. “Lovely, graphic image there.”

“All right, but hur-ry,” Bia said, drawing out the syllables on the last word. “If you’re not back soon, I’m finishing the rest of your wine. I’ll drink it out of your glass, no shame.” Josie waved a hand over her shoulder at Bia as she let herself out of the flat.

As soon as she was the other side of the door, she allowed her face to crumple and screwed up her eyes. Of the last twenty years, there had never been one where she’d looked forward to Christmas Day. She’d long since forgotten what it had been like to be a child, desperate and excited for Santa to come, listening out for the creak of a parent’s footstep. And though she liked the break from work every year and enjoyed the extra time to spend with friends, who were inevitably in better moods and looking for excuses for fun as the day grew nearer, she dreaded the countdown to Christmas itself, to the reminders it brought. The last few years, she’d got through it in London by keeping busy and distracted, which had been made easy by good friends, especially Bia and Laura, a demanding job, and, more recently, Oliver. And now, at least two of those things had been taken away from her. Josie slid a hand into her coat pocket and ran two fingers over the smooth envelope. Christmas, it seemed, was looking very bleak indeed this year.



THE

SISTERS

A NOVEL

SWEET

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PROLOGUE

A YOUNG WOMAN IS PACING UP AND DOWN THE FRONT steps of my house, her briefcase bouncing against her knees. She's muttering to herself, steeling her resolve to ring the bell, I think, as I watch her through my study window. I've been staring at the blank page in my typewriter for an hour. I'm not exactly sorry to abandon it.

When I open the front door, she scrambles up the steps, pushing her sunglasses back into the nest of her pale hair.

"Harriet Szász?" she asks.

"Yes."

"You're Josephine Wilder's sister? Her twin?" She blinks at me expectantly.

"Who are you exactly?"

"I'm Linda Delaney? I'm working on a story? For *Vanity Fair*? Well, it's on spec. But in light of your sister's passing, I took the train up from the city." And then she shakes her head gravely, as if she's just remembered she's supposed to. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"What are you talking about?"

She goes ashen.

"Then you don't—oh, but I assumed you—well, look." She scoops the newspaper off the welcome mat and shakes it open to the obituary page. There she is: my sister Josephine. Smiling out of a headshot from the forties, when we were in our thirties. My eyes glide over the words, my mind struggling to absorb their meaning:

star of Hollywood's golden age, dead. A heart attack in her Malibu home. I skim down to the list of survivors. My name does not appear.

"I've seen all of her movies," she says. "Everything she was ever in, really. Her talk show, both seasons. And that episode of *What's My Line?* She was my college thesis. I got the tapes."

Me too, I want to say. I've seen it all too. But the words are trapped in my throat. Is it grief I feel? Maybe after all this time it won't be. Maybe I long ago forfeited my right to grief.

When I look up from the paper, she is studying me, her forehead tense. Her cream-colored silk blouse, fussed into a bow at the collar, looks brand-new, her blazer looks borrowed from some older woman's closet—special clothes chosen for an important day. If she'd said she was writing an article for the school paper I would have believed her.

"How did you even find me?" I ask. "How are you here?"

"Oh, I called up your publisher and got your address." She beams, as if she expects a merit badge for resourcefulness. "I read one of your books, you know."

"You did?" I feel an old, sheepish pleasure. She nods brightly.

"For my thesis. I thought it might be relevant. Of course it wasn't, but I'm not sorry I read it. I liked it!"

Of course, of course: my life, my work, just a footnote in some coed's thesis. As far as Miss Delaney is concerned, I'm the family dud, the tragically abandoned second fiddle, a nobody stunned by her sister's magnificence. But as soon as I allow myself that bitter thought, the grief I worried I had no right to feel floods my chest, threatens to spill out my throat in a cry. Josie! But it's always been this way! The desire to be known, to mark my own clear edge, is tethered to the desire to keep her close.

For a wild instant, I think I can make Linda Delaney understand. This girl who wants to make sense of the person I once knew better than anyone in the world, the person who once knew me. Maybe the story I need to tell isn't exactly the story Miss Delaney expects to hear, but I can make her hear it. My life may not have

demanded notice the way Josie's did, but it was never a footnote. I was never a footnote. I grab her arm.

"Would you like to come in?"

In the study, she makes a beeline for the photo on the bookshelf: Josie and me in the harness, eleven, or maybe twelve, dressed in ruffles, with Little Bo Peep bonnets and a shepherdess's crook resting against my shoulder.

"Incredible," she says. Her fingers are smudging the glass. "No one talks about the Siamese Sweets. I read six obituaries this morning, and none of them even mentioned you. Everyone's just forgotten your part of the story, which is crazy, because—I mean, what a story! To have performed with Josephine Wilder, and then to have lost her."

My part of the story: to have performed with Josie, and then to have lost her. That's all she can imagine.

"What I want is to paint the complete picture," she's saying. "She's always been flattened out, hasn't she? Into whatever they needed her to be. Ingenue, vixen, mother."

"Trailblazer," I say. "Ball buster. Grand dame."

"Exactly." Now she's growing excited. "Wife. Ex-wife. Camp queen." She holds up the photograph. "Do you have anything else like this?"

I'm beginning to worry I've made a mistake, inviting her in, but I open the big oak trunk opposite the desk. She kneels on the floor beside it and starts pawing through the archive: clippings and photos, ticket stubs, handbills. I sit next to her on a stool. It's been years since I looked at any of it. Josie, a smudge of ink on a yellowing piece of newsprint, cuts a ribbon outside a new home for wounded soldiers. Josie, in pearls, hawks Lustre-Creme shampoo. A bill promotes our appearance at a county fair: "The Siamese Sweets! Born joined together!" Paper flakes beneath my fingertips. The scent of old fibers, of dust and wood and the soft hint of mildew, seems like the scent of memory itself.

"What's this?" she asks, handing me a typewritten manuscript tied with a ribbon. The paper is thin, yellowing. I read:

Maude Foster emerges into the steam and hustle of the platform at Grand Central Station, clinging to her suitcase and staring, with great purpose, some yards ahead, the surest way, she has learned, to keep busybodies from asking why she is traveling alone.

It takes me a moment to recognize the words as my own. I wrote them twenty-five years ago, right after Mama died. Absurd to think of oneself as an orphan at fifty-three, but that was how I felt. My parents were gone. The truth of what had passed between us was fixed. All I had left were their stories. For a week, I holed up in my apartment, writing what I knew, or what I thought I knew, or what I dared to imagine. There should be a word for what I am now: orphaned in all directions. Sister-orphaned. And once again, the urge arises: to tell the story, to make it stick.

“Just something I wrote once,” I say, at last. “A long time ago.”

“Another book?”

“Not another book.”

If she hears the coolness in my answer she makes no sign. With an absent smile, she pulls a tape recorder and microphone out of her briefcase and sets them up on the desk. I sit across from her, still clutching my parents’ stories. I’ll need them if I’m going to make her understand. If I’m going to properly tell my own.

I settle into the comfortable groove of my chair. The recorder starts to whirl. She leans forward, legs crossed, notebook propped on one knee.

“Now,” she says. “Where should we begin?”

CHAPTER

1

A RAINY MORNING, LATE SPRING OF 1918. JOSIE AND I, five years old, sat together at the table in the little, muggy kitchen, pressing craters into our porridge with the backs of our spoons and watching them ooze shut again. Mama, who had warned us twice already not to play with our food, was stirring something in a pot, her hair wrapped in a red flannel cloth, a cigarette clamped between her teeth, her forehead mottled and glistening, when the door swung open and Daddy swept in, waving a pale garment high above his head. I dragged my spoon through my porridge and sighed just loudly enough for Josie to hear. Another costume.

For as long as I could remember, Daddy had been trying to convince Mama to get us into show business—the family business, he called it, when we scrambled up onto his knees and begged him for a story, and instead of a fairy tale he told us about his grandfather, the dancer, or his grandmother, who had been in a traveling show, or his parents' puppet theater, or, best of all, the stories we wanted most but knew better than to ask for, stories that would only come when Daddy was in the mood to offer them, which depended on Mama being in the mood to give him tacit permission: stories about their glory days, when Mama was a star of the *Follies*, and Daddy built the sets on which she performed. (We knew Mama had had an accident, that it was the reason she used a cane, that it had ended her career and inaugurated the poverty into which we had been born,

though that didn't figure into Daddy's lore, and I couldn't have said how I learned any of it; the accident was a foundational fact of our lives, part of the history that belonged neither to memory nor to telling. The history that simply was.) When Daddy described relieving Mama of an unwieldy freight of roses as she came offstage, she pretended to scoff. When he told us about how she'd come on as Lady Godiva in a flesh-colored body stocking, her long yellow wig arranged to reinforce the illusion of her nudity, and three young men had actually fainted from excitement, she swatted the back of his head and said, "Oh really." But Josie and I knew it was okay to smile. If Mama had really been angry, she would have gone silent, or retreated into one of the long baths she took to escape the rest of us. Instead, she lingered. She fussed at a potted fern. She sat and mended a blouse, only pretending not to listen.

But whenever Daddy turned the conversation to Josie and me—when he said let's just teach them a number, see what they can do—Mama's eyes would go cold. Absolutely not, she'd say. Over my dead body. Until one morning Mama and Josie and I heard a ruckus outside and went to the window. There was Daddy on the sidewalk beside an upright piano, a crowd at his back.

I don't know what finally persuaded Mama: the sight of our father, sunburned and panting, arm draped over the piano as if it were a prize rhino he'd just shot down; the four men who emerged from the crowd to carry the piano up to the third floor, who laughed as they wiped the sweat from their faces, who insisted on kissing Mama's hand and then toasting her fine specimen of a husband, who'd just moved that piano ten blocks, all by himself; his blistered feet and bloodied ankles, which she cleaned and bandaged. But the next morning, she took Josie and me to a shop on Twenty-Third Street and bought us tap shoes on credit. That afternoon, she sat down at the piano and taught us our first song. Just like that, we were an act: The Magnificent Singing Szász Twins.

Right away, Daddy started making costumes. He sewed skirts of rose tulle. He bent slim wires into the shape of butterfly wings and wrapped them in green net. He constructed denim overalls and red

cotton work shirts for us to wear during choreographed trots on broomstick ponies. He dressed Josie in an ivory wedding gown and me in a shiny black tuxedo and a top hat fashioned from a scrap of black silk and some rolled-up pasteboard. Whenever he came home with another bolt of fabric Mama would scowl. She'd ask him if he'd married and murdered an heiress she didn't know about. Sometimes he brushed her aside, sometimes he risked a fight by snapping back that the fabric had been a gift from a friend—they still had friends in the theater. But by the time he sat down at the sewing machine and fed a cotton cuff or a pleated panel of butter yellow organza under the needle, he would be grinning.

As the months wore on without a callback, let alone a job, no one blamed me, not out loud. But I could see as clearly as anyone that Josie's voice was effortlessly sweet and true, while I had to try and try again to match the pitches Mama played on the piano. I knew that when Josie danced, her whole body seemed to float, as if carried by invisible strings, while I got stuck in the sludge of my own thoughts, trying to remember where my feet were to go next, how to hold my hands, how to keep my balance.

A year had passed, and all we had to show for our efforts was a trunk full of useless costumes. That morning, in the kitchen, I was certain nothing would come of Daddy's latest creation, whatever it was, save a quarrel, a fact that struck in my belly with a hot, awful thud. A few nights earlier, I'd listened through the wall as Mama had begged Daddy to ask his friend Bert for some work. By then, from the glimpses I got of the lives of the other children who lived in our building and on our block, I had gleaned that normal fathers worked every day, while my father worked only occasionally. It was Mama who took in mending and laundry, Mama who sold paper fans out of a cart in Union Square, each fan printed with the name and biography of a star, while Josie and I played nearby, tethered to the cart with a length of clothesline. I knew that Josie was like Mama—it was something people always said—but in a way I couldn't explain I sensed that I was like her too, that we worried with the same heat, while Josie and Daddy seemed hardly to worry at all.

I sighed again, a little louder this time, but Josie's eyes were fixed on Daddy, her spoon gripped tightly in her fist. Daddy draped the costume over his arm, delicately, as if he were handling a fine French frock, though this garment, a corset-like contraption with open sides, was obviously improvised. Buckles lined both edges of the back panel, matched on the front by short belts. It took me a moment to recognize that the garment was double wide: its two neck holes were separated by a strip of canvas.

Mama tapped a little ash from her cigarette into a tin can on the narrow counter and looked at him, as if to say, "Well?"

In a single, swift motion, he stepped toward the table and lifted our bowls.

"Stand up, girls," he called.

The bowls crashed into the sink.

"Up up up."

We stood. He pushed my shoulder into Josie's and lowered the harness over our heads, then threaded the buckles with the belts and pulled them tight, crunching our inside arms together. Josie's eyes didn't fall from Daddy's face, not for a second. After he'd yoked us in, he wrapped one hand around our waists—our waist—and lifted.

The enamel tabletop was clammy against the bottoms of my feet. Daddy turned to Mama, raised his fist against his lips, and blew as if it were a trumpet: Ta-ta-ta!

"I present to you, Josephine and Harriet Szász, the Siamese Twins who will also dance and sing!"

The lid rattled softly on the pot. The shadows of raindrops twitched along the foggy window. The harness crushed my arm so tightly against my ribs that I could feel my heartbeat in my armpit. I worried Josie could feel it too, that it was communicating to her the fact of my fear. All year, she had been alert to my fear. In hallways before auditions she would sometimes pinch me from wrist to elbow, to distract me, she said, but she couldn't do that now, any more than Mama could lean over and whisper in my ear, "Big girls don't cry, Harriet."

Daddy's explanation came tumbling out: he'd been to the library, he said, and history proved his case. Chang and Eng. The Two-Headed Nightingale. The Chalkhurst Sisters. Twins were a dime a dozen, Daddy said. We were pretty girls, maybe we could carry a tune, but that didn't make us special.

A long groove formed between Mama's eyebrows. She kneaded her bad hip with her fist, as she often did when she was thinking something through. Josie was smiling wildly, theatrically. I felt the stirring of a powerful desire to perform, and I knew that it had been Josie's desire first, that she had passed it to me. As far back as I could remember, we'd been able to do that—pass things back and forth, thoughts and feelings and dreams. Sometimes—when Mama wasn't listening—instead of telling us stories about our forebears, Daddy would tell us stories about ourselves as babies, which dipped into a period of family history I knew we were not supposed to discuss, but which I loved nevertheless for the proof they offered of our twinnedness: how in the cradle, Josie and I had babbled in a language of our own invention; how our teeth had come in at the same time, all in the same order.

He flicked his wrist at Mama, his cheeks starting to pink. Her silence always flustered him. Of silence, Mama was a virtuoso, every variety of discontent expressed in a quiet of its own key. If rehearsal went poorly or if dinner burned, she stamped around the kitchen, cleaning roughly, her silence an interior stir that drew in any part of herself on which our blame or disappointment might otherwise hitch. If one of us hurt her feelings she signaled her unforgivingness—and she had a great capacity for unforgivingness—with a silence like a block of ice: still and cold and slow to thaw. Even at the best of times there was something brisk and stiff in Mama, as if happiness were palatable only as long as no one suspected you might be feeling it.

"You'll come up with something—a name." He turned to us, his gaze pressing, urgent, as if he were willing us to understand something crucial. "Show your mother, girls."

She nodded. Josie stepped to the left—the opening move from

“Coffee and Cream,” a song Mama had written for us. For a split second the harness tugged against my ribs, but then I was moving with Josie, singing with her. At first, my inside arm wanted to stretch, but after a moment her left arm was my left arm, and my right arm belonged as much to her as to me.

“The cat’s got his cradle, the fish has the sea, I’ve got my sister, my sister’s got me.”

We swung to the left, Josie’s hip a hip for both of us, and we swung to the right. Our bare feet pounded the tabletop. I was sure of the choreography as I’d never been at an audition. It was as if the harness had granted me a share of Josie’s muscles, as if the breath beneath my voice were pouring from her lungs as well as my own.

“We go together,” we sang the last line, our voices billowing in the snug kitchen, “like coffee and cream!”

We stood on our inside toes, lifted our outside feet in perfect unison, and then I pushed off and we began to spin. When we came back around to the front, our inside feet crossed. We pointed our outside feet, beaming at Mama and Daddy, and reached high into the air, our outside hands spreading open like starfish, our rib cages knocking our inside arms together as we caught our breath. Daddy clapped and shouted brava. From the apartment below there came a shout, followed by the sound of a broom handle pounding the ceiling. But I couldn’t stop smiling.

Mama studied us, her expression perfectly calm, a shutter against whatever roiled within. After several seconds, she pronounced her verdict:

“Okay, Lenny.”

THEY SOLD EVERYTHING THAT wasn’t nailed down. Mama bought us tickets to Chicago—“our starting over place,” she called it, brightly, now committed in every outward way to Daddy’s scheme. In Chicago, we’d find a crop of producers and casting agents who didn’t already know us as an ordinary twin act that had failed to get off the ground. We took our first rail journey in the harness; when

we disembarked I was too giddy, too charged with excitement, to worry about the fact that I couldn't feel my inside arm, or about the blood I could feel, seeping into the bottom edge of the harness, where it had rubbed the flesh of my stomach. Josie muttered directions: get ready to turn right, I should take the suitcase and she would hold the railing. People crowded and gawked; Mama hurried us along; Josie beamed.

In our rented room, Mama stuffed a towel in the crack beneath the door and a bit of sponge in the keyhole. Daddy bought daintier buckles for the harness. He reworked its necklines so they couldn't gape and lined its bottom edge with a strip of velvet. He ripped up our old costumes and repurposed the fabric for new ones: a pink gingham dress with two Peter Pan collars; a satin gown with a wide sash that traversed both our waists; a forest green leotard with double turtlenecks. We rehearsed every day, Mama choreographing on the fly. Daddy watched with his hands pressed together, index fingers tapping his slightly parted lips, face glazed with pleasure. At night, in our narrow cot, I would come right to the edge of sleep only to feel Josie's finger poking between my shoulder blades, then her warm breath against my neck as she whispered: "Harry. I was just thinking. What if we rode in a limousine?" Or, "Do you think we'll get into the pictures? Someday?" Or she would hum the song we'd learned that afternoon, and I'd hum back, and then next thing I knew it would be morning.

Three weeks after our arrival in Chicago, we were hired as an opening act for a benefit concert at the Studebaker Theater.

A warm evening early in June 1918. The curtain rises for the first time on the Siamese Sweets. Two-girls-in-one stand at center stage wearing pink gingham, two arms extended, fingers loose but energized ("like you're holding an egg," Mama had told us), our smiles wide slices between round, rouged cheeks. For the first time, I hear the hush of an audience, a not-quite silence, electric with anticipation. The footlights heat my chin and, somehow, sharpen the scent of paint and muslin. From the pit comes the plink of the piano.

We were off. One two wink smile shuffle ball change. Every note, every step, every breath unfurled in exquisite synchronization. In the harness, Josie's body pressed warm and solid against mine. The audience faded to nearly nothing. It was just Josie and me, our harmonies shimmering and clear, the perfect unison of our footwork approaching something like flight. But as soon as we finished there they were, all those watching, listening people, clapping and hollering and stomping their feet. The great wave of sound buoyed us into the wings.

Backstage, Mama fixed our hair, but there was an unusual tenderness in her touch that made me want to lean toward her fingers like a petted cat. Daddy walked a tight, elated loop and kissed the stage manager's forehead. I could tell he wanted to pick us up but didn't dare. He was like that sometimes: shy, his affection tinged by woundedness, as if we were a treasure of which he'd been robbed. Josie, panting happily, her cheek a pink blotch in my peripheral vision, raised her free hand toward mine. I pressed my fingers into hers, one by one. It would become our secret sister salute, meaning whatever we needed it to—don't worry, or I'm sorry. But in that moment it meant only that something important was happening, something I didn't have a name for. Later I would name it like so: our real lives had begun.

THAT NIGHT, WE ALL stayed up well past midnight, too giddy to sleep. Already, Mama had spoken to a booking agent: we'd have a weeklong engagement at the McVickers Theater, and then four more jobs on the road. The Road! The words rang in my ear like something unreal, the name of a kingdom in a fairy tale. Finally, Mama insisted on pajamas and lights out. Josie's breath fluttered in my ear, soft and even, but I fought my own exhaustion to listen to Mama and Daddy.

"It's all riding on the illusion," Mama said. "Your harness. If we're ever found out—"

"We'll be ruined."

In my gut, I felt the sickening bloom of worry, a feeling so familiar it was almost a comfort. But the day's exertions overtook it. I soon fell asleep.

When Josie and I woke the next morning, Mama sat us on the edge of the cot. Daddy stood in the corner, combing the end of his beard with his fingertips. Looming over us, hands on her hips, Mama announced the new cardinal family rule: Josie and I would never go out unattached.

TWO WEEKS LATER WE left Chicago with work lined up through the fall. Daddy released us from the harness only behind locked doors and drawn curtains. If secure conditions could not be achieved, in the harness we remained, even if we had to sit up all night in the third-class carriage, even if we were just passing through some little place where no one knew us. If we needed to buy shoes, if, on a rare afternoon off, Mama agreed to take Josie and me to the movies, we were yoked up and buttoned into one of our double-wide dresses. The whole time we were out, Mama would hover, making sure no one looked too closely.

Sometimes I cried at night because my left arm, my inside arm, still felt tingly, hours after being unbound, or because my right flank, where the harness held tight to my skin, had flared once again in a bright, bumpy rash that stung at the slightest brush of my nightgown. And I felt a pang when I remembered the games of stickball or hide-and-seek we'd played in New York, or the comfort, in our building, of any of a dozen mothers' aprons that might be dragged roughly over a teary face after a fall, of a dozen kitchens where I felt entitled to snag molasses cookies or crispy pickles or glasses of cold milk. But in boardinghouse rooms and dressing rooms and green rooms, Josie and I now played the games of pretend I had always preferred. We invented an invisible pet rabbit named Jenny, which we carried around and cradled and stroked, and which Daddy obliged us by kissing good night. We held our hands in front of our bellies as if we were gripping reins and trotted around on imaginary

horses. Late into the night we whispered under the covers. After Mama hushed us a second or third time, her voice taking on a dangerous edge, we communicated through a system of hand taps and kicks.

We were in Wabash, Indiana, when we decided that if we didn't play cat's cradle before a *matinée* then the theater would catch fire. In Indianapolis, we agreed that when we entered a new dressing room for the first time we had to go in backward or we'd fall onstage. In Vincennes, Josie decreed that after every curtain, one of us had to say "zing zing" before we said anything else, or the next time we took the stage we'd go mute. From Indiana, we traveled west, back into Illinois. We played churches and Elks clubs and library meeting rooms, and stores with folding chairs set out where that afternoon there might have been a display of potatoes or washing powder. But over the course of that first summer, Daddy filled three sketchbooks with designs for new harnesses and trick props and spectacular sets. And every time we stepped onto whatever platform there was, into whatever light there was, I felt a tugging in my chest, a swell of pride, as if I'd entered Daddy's grandest drawing. Whatever separation remained between Josie and me melted away. The rapt attention of the audience, the skill and power of my own dancing legs, the way my voice and Josie's voice slipped into each other and wrapped around each other: it all summed and shimmered, and seemed to prove we were exactly who we said we were. It wasn't that when we stepped onstage I believed our lie. It was that for the duration of a show, it wasn't a lie; it was simply a different sort of truth. I was the Siamese Sweets, I was Josephine and Harriet both. Our false body was irreducible, indivisible. The truest fact in the world.

WE WERE IN WISCONSIN that October, performing a two-week engagement at a proper theater where we shared a proper dressing room with Little Tibby Longfellow, a girl a few years our senior who had begun to make a name for herself on the circuit by delivering

comedic monologues as adult personae—washerwomen, fishwives, gold diggers. One afternoon, Daddy finished our makeup and then, instead of staying to watch our act, went straight back to the boardinghouse with a headache. Josie turned and whispered, her breath hot and awful in my ear, that his headache was actually something called a hangover. I didn't answer, not quite knowing what this word meant but recognizing that it must be something vile.

The three of us—Mama, Josie, and I—were alone in the dressing room, Tibby having gone to perform and her mother having followed to watch, when a stagehand knocked on the door. There was something wrong with one of our sets, some question of whether another would be suitable. They needed a decision right away.

Mama put down her mending with a frown. After a moment's hesitation, she crouched down and looked beneath the counter, where Josie and I were hunched over our drawing of a castle.

"You stay put," she said sternly. "No funny business."

"Yes, Mama," we said. She followed the stagehand out.

It seemed impossible we could get into any trouble in just a few minutes alone. But not long after Mama left, Tibby returned, flushed from her outing on the stage. Her own mother wasn't with her. Josie looked up at her, curious, even lifted her hand as if she might wave. I looked down at our drawing, cheeks hot, willing Josie to be good.

A few weeks earlier, a pink-faced old comedian had observed slyly, insinuatingly, that we certainly kept to ourselves. Since then, Mama and Daddy had taken us to a couple of parties, just to make an appearance, and some meals in the restaurants where other troupers gathered. But we were strictly forbidden from speaking to other children. Children had a way of poking at things, Mama said, and asking questions they shouldn't. How lucky we were, she said, to have each other. Who needed friends when you had a sister?

Tibby took a step toward us and bent to get a better look. I felt like an animal in a burrow.

"I heard something," she said, pulling up the front of her dress to wipe her damp face. "I know why you are the way you are."

Josie crawled us forward, out from under the counter, and pulled

us to our feet. If I could have resisted without giving away the falseness of our body I would have. Instead, I clenched my crayon and scowled.

“Why?” Josie asked. Inside the harness, her muscles seemed to tauten, as if she were preparing to run.

Tibby looked over her shoulder at the open door and then back at us.

“Your mother was raped by the devil.”

We were staring at her, tongue-tied, when Mama returned. Tibby gave her a little curtsey and retreated to her side of the dressing room, where she poked at her hair with a comb. Mama looked sharply from Tibby to Josie and me, but we scrambled back beneath the counter. Tibby’s mother turned up not long after that, complaining of her bad stomach. Mama offered her a tight smile before turning back to her mending.

That afternoon, Josie and I danced with a ferocity that won us a standing ovation. I knew that she had been picturing the same thing as me: Tibby’s dumb face on the stage beneath our feet. It was the fact of the insult we understood, not its substance. But we spent the next several days plotting revenge. Josie came up with ways to punish Tibby we didn’t have the means to pull off: replacing her face powder with itching powder, bribing the lighting man to plunge her act into darkness, retrieving the dead rat we had seen in the street near the boardinghouse and leaving it in her bed.

But before we could take any more revenge than glaring across the dressing room, everything changed. We were in our room at the boardinghouse, dressed and ready to go to the theater, when Mama came in, pale. She whispered in Daddy’s ear. Daddy ran his fingers over his pockets until he found his pipe, which he squeezed in his palm but didn’t light.

“You can take that off,” Mama finally said to Josie and me, lightly, as if it weren’t anything to make a fuss about. “You won’t be performing today after all.”

Every theater in town had been ordered closed on account of Spanish flu. We were stuck; there was no work to be had within a

hundred miles, and even if she had managed to find something for us, Mama said she didn't trust the trains. Daddy would go out for supplies, or down to the parlor in the evenings to play cards with the other stranded members of the company. But save for a half hour every afternoon when Mama took Josie and me out for a walk, harnessed and masked, wearing camphor stuffed into the toes of old stockings on strings around our necks, we stayed in our room.

Late one night, I was supposed to be asleep when I heard Mama tell Daddy about a family musical act we'd shared a bill with not a month before; the mother and two of the brothers had died in a single afternoon.

I knew what dead was: dead was a cat I'd seen once in an alley, rigid, with little flies in its eyes. Dead was why a girl we'd known in New York only had a father and a grandmother but no mother. Dead was soldiers in Europe. Dead was, even, the row of pine boxes we'd seen lining a street the day before, two girls skipping from one to the next, chanting, "I had a little bird, its name was Enza, I opened the window, and in flu Enza," until a woman came out of a house with black bunting over the front door and screamed for them to come inside. But now a terrible fact surged through me: dead could be any of us. Mama or Daddy or Josie could catch the flu and be dead by the end of the day.

I turned from them, toward the heat of Josie's sleeping body, and pulled the quilt over my head. But the low, grave hum of their voices still reached my ear. I screwed my eyes tightly shut, as if the deep darkness might provide some relief. Instead, an even more horrible understanding crashed over me like a black wave: even if influenza spared us, we'd all die eventually, of something. Everyone died. Mama would die, Daddy would die, Josie and I would die. The fabric of the quilt clung to my face. But I couldn't push it away, I didn't dare.

That night, and the next night, and the one after that, instead of sleeping, I found myself listening to Mama and Daddy's conversation, waiting to hear another name I knew, the story of another death. Usually, all I could make out was a whipping tension, but

even that gave me a stomachache. I worried we'd have to stay in that little room forever. That for eternity, I'd have to look at those four walls, those two beds, that brass lamp, the painting on the wall of the boardinghouse itself, which, even before we'd been trapped, had made me feel slightly uneasy. And if someday we did get out, I worried we'd never work again. What if the act failed, as, I remembered now, our first act had? What then? Who would we be? The life we had made as the Siamese Sweets was still new, but already, any alternative seemed like its own sort of death.

I dragged through the days that followed my sleepless nights. Every afternoon, I collapsed into a long, dense nap, from which I woke hot and damp, certain I sensed the beginnings of a fever. I irritated Josie by asking her to feel my forehead, asking if I could feel hers.

But the fever never came. In November, Mama found us a job, and, anxious, masked, we boarded a train for the first time in a month. After that job came another, and another, short stints here and there until January, when, at last, Mama booked us a long engagement, in Moline. We settled into a new boardinghouse room, hanging postcards on the walls and putting bundles of dried flowers in the drawers. In February, we had a new job in Joliet, where Daddy won a ukulele in a card game, and that seemed to mark with certainty the return of our good fortune. We learned to play: Josie made the chords while I strummed.

Sometimes, when I lay awake at night, listening to the soft sounds of the rest of them sleeping, the black wave would come crashing over me. But as winter gave way to spring, as the tense weeks of the fall of 1918 slipped further into memory, the wave came less and less. One afternoon that May, Josie and I picked lilacs from a bush outside our rooming house. After dinner, we begged Mama to let us braid them into her hair. She relented, settling on the floor beside the bed, leaning back on her palms, legs straight forward, skirt smoothed out around her. I maneuvered her thick plait around my little fingers. Beside me, Josie cradled the flowers, trying not to laugh lest she swallow the hairpins poking out from between her

lips. Daddy sat across the room, sketching the three of us. In that instant, I could almost believe my fear that any of us would die, that anything about our lives would ever have to change, was just another game of pretend. A nightmare I'd confused for real life.

*

THAT SUMMER, THE SUMMER OF 1919, OUR SECOND ON THE road, Mama started writing us sketches to perform between songs. Daddy had the idea for a Siamese cartwheel, and Mama worked out how we could do it, training us on whatever stage she could get us into early in the morning, or on days we didn't perform. We were in Terra Haute when, one morning, just after sunrise, we arrived at a dance school, where Mama had arranged for us to use a studio. She went in search of the studio key, leaving Josie and me waiting in the hall. I had brought a book of fairy tales I'd found some months back, abandoned in a rooming house parlor, and was idly turning the pages when I realized I wasn't just looking at the pictures: I was reading some of the words.

I slammed the book shut, recognizing danger, though I couldn't have said what exactly that danger was.

"Hey, I was looking at that," Josie said. But Mama returned then.

We were staying in a cheap hotel, lucky to have a bathroom en suite. That night, I dragged the book in with me and turned the flimsy lock. I sat on the toilet lid and opened the book over my knees. Sure enough, there were the words, rising up from the black shapes my eyes had been sliding over for months as Mama read aloud.

After that, whenever I could get a moment alone—when Mama retreated into a bath or a nap, and Daddy went out to look for some company or a drink, and Josie settled in a corner for one of her private spells of daydreaming—I would crawl under a bed or into a closet with the book and run my finger under each row of words, whispering them to myself. From Mama's briefcase, I stole a stubby pencil and a few sheets of paper so I could practice writing the let-

ters, matching what I saw on the pages of that picture book to the alphabet song. All summer, I decoded words in newspaper headlines and on posters and billboards, every new word like a piece of candy in a secret stash. I scrawled letters and crumpled them up before anyone could see I hadn't just been drawing. That I could read and write stirred in me the same flushed-cheek thrill as being onstage, but better for being private, contained entirely within myself. And at the same time, for the same reason, a source of shame. As if to possess an experience so wholly were somehow deceitful. Greedy.

We were in Kalamazoo one bright, golden morning that fall, sitting at the back of the house, on a bench that had been put there for us special, since the harness made it impossible for us to sit in the seats, waiting for our turn to rehearse, when a suited woman with a clipboard swooped in. The manager of the theater watched with crossed arms as she approached. After a brief argument, the manager made an angry sweep of his hands and walked away, and the woman pointed at Little Tibby Longfellow. We'd been annoyed to discover she was also on the bill in Kalamazoo, and were quietly satisfied when the woman, who had an authoritative, punishing aura about her, ordered Tibby to follow her into the hall.

Mama hurried to join the cluster of mothers whispering in the corner. When she came back she spoke urgently: "If she asks your age keep quiet. Be smart." But before she could explain what exactly being smart entailed, the woman returned a tear-stained Tibby to her mother and pointed to Josie and me.

When she saw what we were—what we wanted her to think we were—she turned to look at the wall, as if she couldn't trust herself not to gawk. Josie and I followed her into the hallway and perched together on a folding chair. I tried to keep from slumping too badly over the edge, so the harness wouldn't dig into my latest rash.

The woman took the chair across from ours and lifted her clipboard, shifting her shoulders and blinking rapidly as she forced herself to look right at us, take us in.

"Age?" she said.

We shrugged, our shoulders rising and falling in perfect unison. The woman peered at us over her glasses and scribbled something on her clipboard. The questions continued: What was the nature of our act? Did we do any juggling, acrobatics, fire work, animal work? We folded our hands together in our lap, and I kept my gaze forward and level, while Josie answered the questions, one after the next. I began to relax. Be smart, Mama had said, and Josie knew just what to do.

“And have you ever been enrolled in school?”

Josie’s inside arm went stiff against mine. She opened her mouth and closed it again. The lady pursed her lips, made another mark on her clipboard. Then she handed me a blank piece of paper and Josie a pencil.

“Write your name—your names—your name, please,” she said.

My secret rose like an itch to the surface of my skin. If the woman had handed the pencil to me instead of Josie, I might have managed something close to H-A-R-R-I-E-T. But Josie clung to it helplessly. My heart pounded in my throat.

The woman made one last mark on her clipboard and ushered us back into the theater.

“Mrs. Sweet?” she said. Mama followed her into the hall.

The next morning Mama woke us early, but instead of readying us for the dance studio, she had us sit on the edge of our lumpy mattress and declared—cheerfully, matter-of-factly, as if it had been her plan all along—that it was time we learned our ABCs. She set a phonebook on my knees and on top of it, a sheet of paper with the alphabet written out in neat rows. She handed me a pencil and before she could say another word, I was copying out the letters, so excited that I forgot I wasn’t supposed to know how yet.

“Why, Harriet!” Mama said. I braced myself for trouble. But she was smiling at me the way she smiled at Josie when she made a joke or mastered a new song. Pleasure swirled in my chest.

Josie grabbed the pencil with her right hand, the hand she always grabbed with when we weren’t in the harness. Mama swatted her fingers gently.

“No, no,” she said, and moved the pencil to Josie’s left hand—her outside hand.

Josie frowned but accepted the phonebook and the paper from me. Tongue pressed between her teeth, eyebrows knitted together, she tried to fill in a row of letters below mine. But no letters emerged, just tangled lines, some thickly scrawled, some trailing off in a barely visible thread. She pressed harder, and the pencil slid the paper off the phonebook. Again, Mama said no. She said let me show you, begin at the beginning, and reached to guide Josie’s hand, but Josie yanked her own hand away. She looked at Mama, and then she turned to me, her eyes burning with anger, and snapped the pencil in two.

We didn’t perform for a few days—we were waiting for the Gerry lady to clear out of town, Mama explained, to find some other hard-working Americans to harass. But every morning, she sat us down for a reading lesson. Josie snapped another pencil, tore the page with its printed alphabet into confetti. When we were finally able to return to the theater, Mama seemed more relieved than any of us.

On our first day back, during our first matinée, in the middle of our first sketch, a wooden pear fell from a rickety stock set tree, right onto my head. I was startled: there was a lag, a tiny one, during which I felt myself blinking stupidly into the dark house. But I had recovered and was about to say my next line when Josie scooped up the pear.

“Say, why don’t you lay off my sister!” she said and mimed a punitive bite.

The audience’s laughter was electric, quickly out of control. She tossed the pear over her shoulder with a wink, and there was another wave of it. People clapped and whistled. For the first time since New York, stage fright crimped my belly. I started my next line but couldn’t get it out over the sound of the crowd. Inside the harness, Josie pressed her elbow into mine; I waited until the laughter trailed to a trickle, as we’d been trained, and then, finally, I got out the line, and on we went. We made it to the end of the act without another mishap, but the whole time, I felt peculiar. Cold. Separate from Josie as I had never before felt onstage.

As we took our bows, Josie gave an extra wink and wave and there was a rush of fresh applause and a shrill whistle. Just for her. It was impossible: there was no her on the stage, there was only us, a single being. But as we hurried off I understood: Josie was the star. When we were onstage together and I felt so free, so warm, so alive, so gifted, it wasn't because of some mutual effort, some equal exchange. I was basking in Josie's light.

Backstage, Daddy shook his head and laughed, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to slap Josie or give her a dollar. But Mama grabbed her shoulder and dragged us both down the hall toward the dressing rooms. As soon as we were alone, she crouched down and whispered fiercely in Josie's face.

"What were you thinking? What business do you have, improvising? Showboating? Don't think I didn't know that was exactly what you were doing." As she went on I looked down at the floor, as if by refusing to watch the scolding I might make it end. My chest was heaving, my muscles jelly, my undershirt clinging to my sweaty skin. Mama promised her a spanking when we got back to our room. Josie didn't even flinch.

I was certain then that she had done it on purpose. Because I could read, and she couldn't. It had been a message, a warning. Look, sister, she had said. Never forget how things stand.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Mama attempted another reading lesson, but Josie hummed "Yankee Doodle Dandy" until she threw up her hands. She tried again a few months after that, and a few months after that, and then periodically over the next few years, the lessons usually following a visit from a Gerry agent, or a warning that one was at hand. But Josie refused to listen. She refused to learn.

We outgrew harnesses as quickly as Daddy could stitch them. Our dolls, Susan and Emily, evolved from babies into dancers, whose pink painted mouths we filled with words of the women we eavesdropped on backstage and at parties, words we didn't quite understand but knew better than to say loud enough for Mama to

hear—pessary and blotto and cramps. I moved from storybooks and headlines to newspapers and whatever reading material I found discarded on trains and in hotel lobbies, forgotten in backstage nooks: novels and popular histories and magazines and seed catalogs and collections of speeches and volume “M” of an encyclopedia. Still, every time Mama tried to teach her how to read, Josie sighed, she broke pencils, she ripped paper, she split strands of her hair and tore out the hems of her clothes, calmly, as if she was only asserting her right to be left alone, until, at last, Mama closed her eyes and said, “All right. That’s enough. We’ll try another time.” A dancer who had run away from home offered us whatever we wanted from a stack of her old books. I took eleven, of which Mama gave me permission to keep three: I chose *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Women*, and, for self-improvement, an old exercise book that I worked through, over and over, until the front cover tore from the spine. Josie laughed as if the dancer had offered us her old underthings.

Onstage, I made occasional mistakes: garbled a lyric, missed a note, forgot a line. Josie rescued me when she needed to but never again drew attention to herself as she had in Kalamazoo. Still, I didn’t forget what she’d shown me that afternoon, didn’t lose track of the distinction she’d drawn. When fans approached us after a show, or when we came off a train and found a crowd waiting for a glimpse of the medical and theatrical miracle, I signed the autographs. Josie mugged and chatted, absorbing their admiration.

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