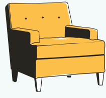

Summer Reading Sampler 2022

EXCERPTS FROM THE SEASON'S HOTTEST BOOKS

What Will You Read Next?

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© 2022 by Margo Candela

Excerpt from *Vigil Harbor: A Novel*
© 2022 by Julia Glass

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"Like if *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* was about Grace Kelly." —Molly Odintz

A Novel

The Force of Such Beauty

Barbara Bourland

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This is a work of fiction. While some characters are loosely inspired by real-life figures, their characterizations and the incidents in which they are depicted are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. This should be read as a work of fiction, not a biography or history.

Now

THE LAST TIME they caught me at the airport, I panicked.

The decision I'd made an hour earlier, to drive straight there like any regular woman and buy a ticket, was more than reckless; it was unequivocally selfish. In my defense it happened in a moment so opportune that I can still taste it on the sides of my tongue. How was I supposed to resist?

The service were drinking, their collars loose, cigarettes and playing cards between their fingers. I knew where Marie kept the keys to her rusted Peugeot. She was vacuuming upstairs. Everybody thought I was passed out for the night. It was so easy. Really—I almost did it just to see if I could. Is that a good enough explanation? As I was tying my scarf, a gift from his mother, the one with the interlocking Fs, over my prickling scalp—and the plastic of my sunglasses was cold against the tops of my ears—the hem of my car coat scratched my legs—sweat dripped into my underwear—it was a moment of, there's no other word for it, *possession*. I was *possessed*. I was Sleeping Beauty moving toward the spinning wheel, eyes dilated, holding my breath; I was Linda Blair in a nightgown screaming on the M Street steps. I was every woman

who had ever seen a way out, and I grabbed at the moment so desperately that I left my children behind.

I wedged a manila folder into the bottom of my handbag and made it through four courtyards to Marie's car, parked on gravel, near the stables. I shifted it into gear, feet working the pedals from memory, left hand skimming the door until I found the plastic handle, rolling the window down. I pulled out of the inner driveway, punched in the code at the iron gate—it was agony, watching it open, so slowly, on its own time, doing what its motor always did—and with an inch to spare, I ripped out onto the road, barreling hard on first gear until the engine whined. I found the sweet spot in the clutch and shifted again. The little Peugeot jerked into second, and then third.

A grin stretched across my face.

Fifteen minutes later I was on the coast road, cutting a diesel streak to the commercial airport. Or rather, I hoped I was, because I hadn't driven a car in years. It was west, I thought, and so I drove west. When I spotted a sign reading *Aeroporto,* I jerked the wheel and followed it.

It took forty-five minutes to get there. I kept the window down the whole time.

Wind blew against my veneers; wet beads of mascara dripped into the hollows below my eyes. My bare legs splayed out beneath my coat. The four remaining hairs on my knee, the ones that refused to submit to the laser, were long, from weeks of growth. I yanked one out—I remember that. But mostly I remember the air: sputtering diesel; the sweet-sour scent of Marie's car from her gardenia perfume and menthol cigarettes, fat Italian ones that she hoarded (how long had it been since I had discovered the smell of something as personal as someone's else's uncleaned house or car? years! *years!*); and the damp, salty smack of the ocean.

I don't recall much else, besides a vague awareness of the fact that as I drove the sun went down and the headlights had to be turned on. I don't know if there was traffic; I don't think there was. I simply drove along the road with everyone else, another animal in the pack, heading

northwest. And then I was turning into the parking lot, taking a ticket; pulling onto the ramp; nosing the dirty bumper into a space. I do remember wanting the parking job to look really nice and even. I didn't want Marie to be worried about her car, or to feel mistreated.

I tucked her keys into the visor and headed for the terminal, passing through the airlock of automatic doors into the cold embrace of the airport. It was the physical embodiment of white noise, a place designed to move you along. In bejeweled lilac mules, I fell into step behind a family. My coat was a blue cotton rimmed with white piping, lined in pine-colored silk. The scarf was still knotted very tightly around my head, though my wig was falling off in the back. My sunglasses, cream with olive lenses, took up half my face. Naturally, no one else was dressed like this. They had on zip-away cargo pants and money belts and leggings.

I made it halfway to the counter before they shouted my name.

"Caroline!" a girl's voice sang. Phone out, eyes wide. "Caroline!"

Me. My name.

Other people turned. I saw it forming on their lips. My name, my name, my name.

With that, my caper was over. The world went from black-and-white—an adventure of my own making—right back to smooth-motion, full-color, high-definition hell.

I died inside.

Caroline, Caroline.

The sound of my name, my name.

I turned right and walked my corpse to the nearest desk. Stared blankly at the logo, a tinny noise ringing in my ears, like there had been an explosion—and there had, I had died, it was the sound of my death—while the desk agent, a polite young woman with thick eyeliner and a patterned hijab, stared back at me.

"Your Serene Highness," she said, "it is a pleasure to serve you today."

She did not look me up and down as I would have done if our roles

were reversed. Now I realized she must have spotted me long before we spoke, when people called my name as I loped across the cold tile floors, tan legs stretching for miles beneath the short coat, a head taller than everyone else. I opened my mouth to reply and paused instead to breathe. The desk agent said nothing. In this moment, I was supposed to say something, obviously. To explain why I was there, make a plan, move forward. On the departure board Riyadh was the only word I saw.

"Riyadh?" I said, almost a question, asking her permission: *Can I go there, now?*

"That flight departs in seventy-five minutes. It's possible. I will try?"

I nodded. "One first-class ticket to Riyadh, please," I said, hiding my shaking hands by rooting around in my bag for my credit card and old South African passport. I noticed, as I handed it to her, that the passport would expire in three weeks.

To her eternal credit, she didn't question the dates and began typing furiously, polished nails pummeling the plastic keyboard in front of her. *Etihad*, read the sign behind her.

In retrospect, it wasn't a *terrible* idea. Saudi Arabia, like everybody else, invested in our real estate; Finn was away with our airplane. Taking a trip to Riyadh on the national airline of the UAE could be a political act, if you squinted. And if I could get on a flight—any flight—I could make it to London, where Zola might help me.

I kept looking around, thinking the service would emerge from the cracks in the walls. They'd corral me like a bull, spear me with knives wrapped in ribbons as I roared in pain. And like a bullfight, everyone would watch and nobody would do a thing about it.

Days before our wedding, they caught me here. I didn't see it coming that time. I thought I could go home. But they cornered me, swallowed me up. It wasn't a scene. Things were different then; easy to destroy the security footage, pay off the gate agents. Sure, there was a nasty rumor, but nobody had proof and that was all that mattered.

Today, the service were nowhere to be seen.

"Mmm," the desk agent uttered, peering at the screen. "You are confirmed on Flight Fifty-Six. The plane will have a layover in Doha and continue on to Riyadh. It will be most convenient. You do not need to exit the airplane at the layover. I have a very nice suite for you." I thought she might pick up the phone, but no. She looked at me with expectant satisfaction; she had done something for me, and I was supposed to say yes.

Yes. I nodded and said thank you. I think I did, anyway. If I didn't: *Thank you. Thank you, wherever you are. You were the first person to help me in so long.*

She swiped my card; I signed the slip. She did not ask about baggage—another polite gift. The ticket stuttered out of the printer and she handed it to me. I took off my sunglasses and stared up at the security camera. *Hello,* I mouthed, knowing it would be watched, again and again. *Goodbye.*

Off I went through security, hands shaking, waiting with every step to be taken aside—but nobody stopped me. Alone for the first time in years, I walked to the gate. After my ticket was scanned, I walked directly onto the plane and was cocooned in a private room. A butler wearing white gloves brought a glass of champagne. He offered to take my coat. As I wasn't wearing anything beneath it, I shook my head. He opened a compartment and pointed to a pair of silk pajamas folded inside. I nodded, thanked him, and curled up into a ball.

Six hours later, Doha. Another hour, in the air again. Soon we landed in Riyadh. By then the pajamas were beneath my coat, covering my legs. The cashmere blanket from my chair was wrapped around my head, doubled and pinned in place with safety pins from the travel kit. The butler's white gloves covered my bleeding cuticles.

The round door of the 747 popped open with a depressurizing sigh, and as was customary, I was the first to exit the plane. Three steps into the Jetway and I found myself in the waiting arms of the service. Of course. I knew they would be there. *When had they left me alone, ever? Never. They would never.* Roland took my passport from my hand, and

then my purse, with its folder of purloined paperwork. He held my arm as I walked up the Jetway. Otto and Dix—they were always together and looked so haunted, so *Germanic*—flanked us from the rear. I followed Roland automatically.

It was a relief, in a way. Before that day, I hadn't been alone in public for seven years. The service were as normal as being dressed. I was, at my core, truly convinced that I'd be harmed if they left my side—security will do that to a person, persuade you of their necessity. Especially if you cannot be incognito, which I was clearly incapable of being. I still cannot believe I went to the airport in underpants and a cotton car coat and a goddamned silk scarf with my husband's family name on it. It was so foolish.

I am such a fool.

Seventy-two hours later, toting a new suitcase stuffed with overpriced luxury goods, a syringe of Ativan coursing through my veins, I returned to the marble prison that held my children, my husband, and me—and then I cried for two days. Jane and Henry (Jeanne and Henri to everyone else) came to my bedside. Their seashell fingernails pressed into my arms, their plump fists wrapped around hanks of my hair, but I did not look up or stop crying. I pushed them away. *Go to nanny Lola,* I told them. *Maman is having a bad day. Maman is sick. You mustn't see Maman like this.*

They went. They always did what they were told.

I was ashamed, and I was heartbroken.

It was the closest I'd come to freedom since before we were married. The mere proximity to the knife-edge atoms of independence sliced open my scars, remaking me into a seeping wound.

I lay in bed for two days. I grew infected with sorrow and regret and hatred.

For two days my children cried, and I did not go to them. I was

destroyed. I was destruction itself, a specter of their mother, a rotten wraith left in her place.

Yet, I was—*finally*—on my way to becoming something else.

Three mornings after my botched escape, the curtains were drawn. I opened my eyes to the sea, winking and foaming like it always did, under a bright blue sky and a thoughtless yellow sun. Puffy clouds floated across the horizon like nothing was wrong. I yanked the curtains shut.

I started the bath, turning the gold taps to scalding, easing under the shower's thundering spray. I stayed there, water drumming on my skull until scrubby nubs of dead skin began to flake off, a snake shedding herself. I wrapped myself in yards of towels, then coated every inch of reddened skin in coconut oil, scooping it from a porcelain bowl. I removed the chipped polish from my nails with a linen napkin. Wasteful, of course, but I hated how cotton crumbled in acetone, found it viscerally disgusting. I was accommodated in so many ways, you see; I was precious, I was to be accommodated. When my nails were clean, the stained napkin went into the trash; when my skin was dry to the touch, I abandoned the towels in a heap on the floor. I strolled naked to the red lacquered room where they kept my clothes.

It was more holding area than closet. Thousands of dresses passed through there, encased in thick plastic, to be worn exactly once before being shipped to the archive with a sheaf of notes about what my body had done and said and who it had stood next to while wearing that dress. A pretense at accountability. The clothing that stuck around was more day-to-day but still absurdly impractical, appropriate only for a life of luxury in this seaside nation. I tucked a white shirt into seersucker shorts, laced up white cotton tennis shoes. Then I drew a net skullcap over the damp remains of my thinning hair and looked for a wig.

I chose a blond ponytail with heavy bangs. I ran a brush through the ends, my other hand gripping its foam skull, and walked to the window. I pictured myself opening the casement and falling out of it—past the blue cliffs and into the sea, the ponytail still clutched in my fingers. I saw the golden locks washing ashore, tangled, the lacy scalp catching on a rock, coated in blood.

Then I remembered my children.

The foam neck broke in half. I looked down to find it was my own hands that had strangled it into cracking. My own hands that chose everything.

I pinned the wig in place. Blinked mascara, dusted a garish swirl of blush over sunken cheekbones, then opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

The service waited there for me, but they are shadows; they have no depth, I don't acknowledge them. I swept down the hallway, gliding across the silk carpets, past the floor-to-ceiling windows dating from 1355 and their heavy draperies, past paintings of other dead women and children, turning to the right and the left and then up some stairs to the playroom where my Jane and Henry spent their days.

The playroom had everything. There was a dollhouse version of the Talon, the prison we lived in, constructed out of the very same marbles, silks, now-extinct woods, and so on, with lifelike figurines of the families who'd lived there, including us. There was a zoo-quality habitat for a family of bunnies. There were two iguanas, both named Jerome. There was a wall of bookshelves with every children's series on the market—*Five Children and It* and *Narnia* and *Redwall* and *Boxcar Children* and *Ramona* and *Fudge* and *Harry Potter* and so on—and a textured globe, mountains raised in relief and rivers glassed in with blue water, that spanned three feet across, dotted with tiny flags to mark the places that Jane and Henry wanted to go. There was a miniature drum kit and a babies' baby grand piano, and a costume corner where the children could "shop" for Jane- and Henry-sized commissions from the costumers for the West End production of *Wicked*.

The playroom had absolutely everything, but at the moment, it didn't have my children. I texted the nanny: *Where are they?* She did not reply. I texted Marie, the housekeeper whose car I'd stolen. She did not reply, either. I wondered if she had been fired. I returned to the hallway and asked the service about my children.

"They are not here, *signora,*" said Otto uncomfortably.

"Where did they go?"

"They are with *signore,*" he replied. "You must contact him."

It was no use fighting with Otto. He was made of stone. I pulled out my phone and called Finn, who answered with a chilly "*Pronto.*"

"Where are my children?" I asked, trying to sound reasonable, and failing.

"We took a trip," he said simply, choosing not to tell me where. "They'll be with my mother until you are well again." He paused, let out a long sigh. "You upset them very much. Henri especially."

I felt pure shame, a hot burst of it, exactly as he intended. "There's really no reason to take the children," I said, but it wasn't convincing. "Everything is perfectly fine."

"You're so selfish," he whispered. I closed my eyes. "How could you leave them? To go to Saudi Arabia, of all places?"

Because I feel that much hate, I did not say. "What difference does it make?"

"Why do you talk like that?" he asked, painfully—a rhetorical question I refused to answer.

"You're so comfortable with the conclusion that our life doesn't belong to us," I muttered, the words thick, my tongue numb. Dr. Sun had told us that it was possible to transition into a near-vegetative state as a result of depression. *Watch her speech patterns,* she'd said to my husband, like I wasn't in the room. *Make sure she is awake at least twelve hours a day. Measure her cognitive abilities at least once a week. You don't want her to atrophy.*

Atrophy.

My favorite word: the destruction of a trophy.

"You don't get to resent this life," he sighed. "This is how it has always been. It is a gift."

I tried pleading. "Please don't take my children."

"We're giving you time to get well," he told me.

"I am well. I'm fine," I said, but it didn't sound right. I wasn't fine and we both knew it.

"I love you, Caro." It was the first time he'd said he loved me in months—no, years. "I'll be home tomorrow. I'll spend tonight with them."

"I love you, too," I replied automatically, and then I hung up.

A moment later he sent me a text: *Please eat some lunch.*

I don't doubt for a moment that Finn once loved me very much. I'd loved him, too—and I loved my children. I think about the days after Henry stopped crying, when we lay in bed with him and read aloud, Jane sleeping between us in her blue jumper. We drank black coffee and listened to the birds. The room smelled like baby shampoo and sweat, like sour milk and coffee. Is there a greater love available to us? Does God give us more?

The problem is not how much I loved them.

The problem is that I loved them at all.

There were days when I, too, thought all of this was a gift. When he gave me a yellow diamond ring and sailed me into this port; when I crossed a green velvet carpet toward a decrepit priest, ready to wrap us in the bounding lines of matrimony; when he locked a collar of pearls around my neck, led me down a balustrade like a dog on a leash, and we waved to ten thousand people; even when he locked the door on me for the first time; still, throughout all of it, this had looked like a gift. This life had looked so special. I would have done *anything* to keep it.

Now?

Now I would do anything—*anything*—to leave.

1

Then

ONCE UPON A TIME I was the fastest woman on earth. I was extraordinary: a rising mountain and the tiger who jumped over it like it was nothing. I ate when I was hungry and slept when I was tired, and in the hours between, I ran. My body was a vessel for my willpower; my body put other people to shame; my body proved what was possible.

When I think about that body, I'm homesick in the pit of my stomach. There is no word special enough to describe its singularity. It was carved from volcanic rock and brought to life with the force of a thousand goddesses. It carried me to the top of the highest wooden box and placed a golden weight around my neck, and it did all of that by the time I was twenty-one years old.

Two hours, twelve minutes, eight seconds. 2:12:08. The record for the women's marathon, set at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

Then my body failed.

Eighteen months later, as I trained for Athens, home of the marathon.

Of course it failed.

No body could stay that perfect, so exhilarating in its function, not for long—definitely not a woman's body—and so nobody, except me, was surprised when my hips grew another half inch, spreading overnight, changing the rhythm of my legs while I slept. The next day, running faster than I had ever run before, I was *flying*. There was a rocket attached to me, wind at my back and wings on my shoes. My body reached its apex, nearly. I was so close to ecstasy.

It would have been a two-hour, ten-minute marathon.

Would.

Because of my hips, the traitors that spilled out in the night—because of them my gait was newly wrong, incorrect, and because of that, I stumbled.

I didn't know what was happening because I'd never been incorrect in my life. My gait had long been the very definition of the word. But what goes up must come down, and so at long last the mechanics failed me—one loose joint—my leg extended—I didn't lift it high enough—it didn't leave the ground—so I tripped, I stumbled—and as I put my weight on it again, the femoral head of my left leg, the ball that sits atop the thighbone, rotated forward and out of the socket of the hip, separating itself from the wall of my iliac bone.

Yet I was still in motion. I stepped again, right then left. I landed

with all my force and speed, on this extended series of bones that had moved out of their home, and with that pressure the femoral ball ripped from the hip socket completely. My leg couldn't hold the weight. It crumpled along all the joints, limp and ragged. It folded like a piece of paper in your hands.

My cheekbone hit the ground first. It shattered in what they later called a spiderweb fracture, a beautiful name for what it was, which was the particular, craterlike demolition of the left side of my face. The rest of me followed, and with that, my running career was over.

The reason for my fall, the diagnosis: osteoarthritis, a degenerative condition that wears away the cartilage between the joints. Arthritis. It's banal. The very word *arthritis* conjures visions of the elderly eating muesli with gnarled hands, struggling to open plastic bottles. A disease for the frail, not the strong. It can be inherited, or in my case, acquired as a result of severe overuse.

I remember the doctor telling me that the spread of my hips was minor, normal even. It wouldn't have been a problem for a regular woman. But my athleticism itself had made me fragile. In a cruel twist, the degradation of my legs was what in turn had helped them, over the past several years, fly so fast. The joints of my body wore out, became loose enough to respond to my muscles first—stronger and more powerful than my tendons—and so the tendons absorbed nothing, and the padding around my bones wore away, like frosting being scraped from the side of a bowl by a spatula. The pummeling force of eleven years and thousands of miles had rounded out brittle hollows that could separate and break with that one wrong step.

Combined with a sharply decreased rate of bone accretion throughout my adolescence—resulting from hormonal deficiencies caused by low weight and excessive exercise—I'd been decaying invisibly, and inevitably, for years.

I was in pain, of course. I was in pain all the time. But how was I to know that pain was *too much* pain? I thought everyone was in pain. I thought everyone's joints felt like they were on fire, because running is hard. I thought every muscle cramp was supposed to be agony. I thought it was normal—because of what it paid! I could go anywhere; I could do anything. Wasn't that supposed to cost you something?

I never knew what the cost would be until I paid it, because I was never examined deeply enough; I never had an MRI or even an ultrasound, because I never complained. All I did was run.

2

I MET HIM in the American hospital where they rebuilt my face. Scoria Vale was a yellow stone mansion on a rolling green hill with private rooms and one staff member for every patient. It had a movie theater with velvet seats; espresso machines and baristas; a sit-down restaurant with white tablecloths; and heated saltwater pools. The towels, made especially for healing skin, were the softest things I'd ever touched. My sponsor, a large athletic wear company, paid for it. I could not have afforded it on my own, but we'd signed a contract. Two years remained. I had to reappear, unbroken, to sell hats and shoes, moisture-wicking underpants. *Not* right *now,* they said, *of course, it takes time. Your hip will take time. But the way your face is, it's fixable, we know that it is, so let's fix it, let's move on. You'll be glad. We can do extraordinary things in America.*

There had been an emergency surgery in Johannesburg, where my fall happened, to remove the largest shards of bone from my shattered face and to deposit my hip back in its useless socket. Forty-eight hours after I arrived at Scoria Vale, this work was undone.

The leg was first. They scraped away the powdery excuse for bone that made up my left hip socket and exchanged it for a brand-new ceramic

version, drilling it deep into the wide smile of the remaining ilium. Then the surgeons lopped off the pointed femoral head that sat atop my thighbone like a spike and fastened a smooth metal ball in its place. The socket and ball were joined with a plastic spacer. I was sewn up and placed in traction to await my next operation—the one on my face.

The spiderweb fracture was a mess. Scoria Vale's plastic surgeon, with her wall full of credentials, warned that it might take multiple interventions to repair. The spider had already begun to build a web of scar tissue inside the cheek, she explained, and would likely form a series of lumps and depressions that she thought I would not want to keep.

She recommended a metal implant to stabilize the bone, then a later procedure to smooth it all out.

Fine, I told her. Turn my brain off again. Cut me up and put me to rights.

That was surgery number three.

Over the following month, my body knit around the implants. As predicted, the lumps began to appear in my cheek, as fragments of bone lodged beneath the muscle began to find their way to the surface. During that time my face looked as if it had cellulite—two square inches of fatty clefts and deep red pockmarks that ran from beneath my left eye and sagged to the jawbone.

I grew fond of that glorious, dented patch. I held my hand to it every waking hour, palpating the surface like it was braille. My *shatter*. In addition to the mere bizarre fact of its physical existence, the shatter was proof, absolute proof, of how my body had failed me. Everything else was the invisible shadow, the ghost of my arthritis. No one could see the degrading interiors of my bones, or the smooth new materials of my hip socket, but this—my teammates could see it, my government could see it. I could see it in the mirror and feel it under my fingertips whenever I needed a reminder. The shatter was right there, all the time. There was no denying it. The shatter *proved* that something had happened to me.

I should have kept it. Fought for it. But I didn't fight anyone then. I did what I was told.

He was just another resident at first: a clean-shaven man in silk pajamas and a waffle-weave cashmere robe. They all looked the same, the other patients at Scoria Vale, as though money incubated within them naturally, like a virus, and released from their pores. Cleanliness and comfort perfumed their sweat and atomized into their personal stratospheres. The patients of Scoria Vale—they were dewy with it.

He was easy to notice. Tall and broad, brutish even in a wheelchair, with a nose and jawline hewn from a tree. Handsome, but oversized. I assumed from his body that he, too, was an athlete. Hockey or discus or some other big-man sport. He was always reading, a book or sheaf of papers fanning from a folder, a pen held between his teeth. I don't remember the first time we made eye contact, though we must have exchanged a greeting or two. There were only thirty or so of us at a time. But we didn't speak at all until he graduated from the wheelchair to the cane.

I had a cane, too, which I resented and relied on constantly. It was a slow recovery to get there; months in traction, my leg up in a series of pulleys and supports, a catheter holding me in place, until an X-ray finally proved that leg and hip were back in functional alignment, and I was given the cane. (This was early, still, when I thought that the worst thing that would ever happen to me was being unable to run.) Mine was hospital-issue steel and rubber. His was made of carved wood so delicate that it looked like it would snap under his weight.

"Is that for show?" I asked one day when he passed by, hobbling down the paved path toward the rose garden with a pink newspaper tucked under his arm.

He paused. "The newspaper?"

"Your delicate cane, eh," I said. "It's a real twig. *Shame*. Couldn't they give you something *lekker*?" (*Shame*, a catch-all word for displeasure; *lekker*, meaning good, or better; my Johannesburg words, now long gone.)

"It's plenty strong," he said, looking me squarely in the eye. He sounded American.

"You're a big guy." I shrugged. "It's not stylish but the hospital one is safer." I raised my cane and handed it to him. He took it, gave it a hard lean, and nodded.

"You're the girl who fell," he said suddenly. "The athlete."

It took a moment to recognize myself in that description. "Yes," I agreed. "I'm the girl who fell."

"Something happened. Hip dysplasia?"

"No. Dogs and babies have that. Not women."

"I'm sorry. Painkillers," he explained. "I'm not at my best."

"Me neither. I'm on them, too." I tapped my bandages. Then I pointed to his right leg, encased in a complicated brace. "Bad break?"

"The leg is healed—it's the knee. I have to walk on it. It's—it's awful," he admitted, grimacing. "Makes me want to quit."

"You can't quit your own body," I said automatically, the rote recitation of an athletic mantra.

"Don't I know it."

"Hockey?" I asked.

"What?"

"Your sport."

He had a very brief look of shock before answering. "I'm in business. I'll go back to it."

"Oh," I said, realizing. I tapped the bench. "*Chair.* A game, not a sport."

After a beat his eyes brightened. "Yes. Chair. *Cher,*" he punned, French for "expensive," rubbing his fingers together.

I sang a few bars of Cher—*If I could turn back time!*—until he laughed.

"You're quick."

I raised my eyebrows. "I'm the fastest woman on earth."

"I'm Ferdinand," he introduced himself, holding out his hand. "Call me Finn."

I shook it. "I'm Caroline Muller," I said. "Don't call me Muller. I'll take off running. Then we'll both be in trouble."

It was supposed to be funny, a joke, but he looked sad.

"Let me buy you a coffee," he said. A real joke, because coffee was included. He took a step—and faltered. I held out my arm for him. Even with months of stillness my body was more powerful than his, than the orderlies', than anyone else's there. He hesitated.

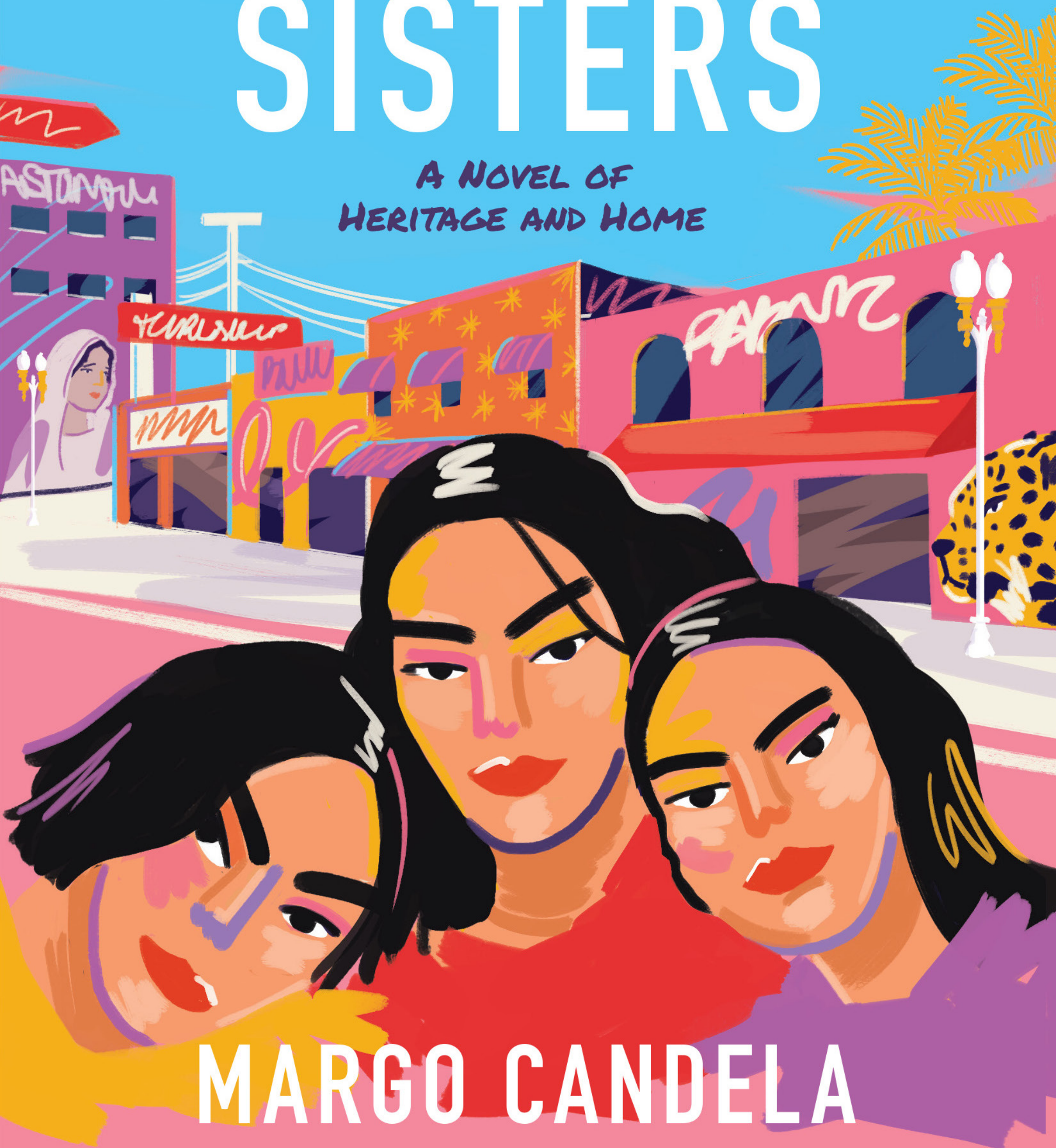
"It's okay," I encouraged him. "I'm strong."

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE FORCE OF SUCH BEAUTY: A NOVEL* by Barbara Bourland.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com here.

THE NEAPOLITAN SISTERS

A NOVEL OF HERITAGE AND HOME



MARGO CANDELA

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MARITZA

"MAMÁ? HOW DOES THAT song go? The one that's always playing on the radio when you're washing the dishes? The one about the girl and her party." I set another stack of wedding magazines on the dining table and sit opposite her so we both have enough space from each other. "You know which one. Where she's crying and it's her party. *Her* party. You know the one I'm talking about. Don't you, *Mamá*?"

My mother is listening but pretending she can't hear what I'm saying. This is just another one of her little games, but I can outplay her, or at least keep playing until she quits.

"Anyways, what's the biggest, most important party of any girl's entire life?" I'm wasting my time asking her because, like always, it's me who's going to have to answer my own question. "Her wedding! Right, *Mamá*? And since it's *my* wedding, I can wear what I want to. So why shouldn't I wear white?"

Mamá doesn't want to answer me because she wants me to not wear white, and she doesn't want to tell me to not wear white. She thinks if she waits long enough, my question will go away. It won't. I won't.

My mother rubs her forehead like she does before she gets one of her migraines. I'll change the subject for now.

"I need to be at my nail salon at four fifteen." Every third Sunday I do exactly the same thing. She knows this, but she'll forget on purpose if she thinks she can get away with it. "We'll eat when I get back. Make sure Daddy doesn't drink any more beer until then."

If it wasn't for me, she'd let him have all the beer in refrigerator. This was sort of okay until what he did last year. After that, even she had to admit it wasn't normal for Daddy to have Budweiser with his breakfast instead of coffee. It's not like he can't drink beer. He can but not as many as before.

"He gets so impatient when he has to wait," Mamá says.

"So?" I tell her. Her hand goes back on her forehead, but I don't have time to be nice about this. "It won't kill him to wait."

I don't understand why she's making this an issue. I already have more than enough to worry about besides keeping track of how many beers Daddy drinks. And it's not like she wants him walking around with pee down his pant leg again. That was so embarrassing. All the neighbors saw him, but Daddy says it never happened.

"Maybe, Maritza, if you go now, we can eat—"

"It's just a color change, no fill this time. I want to try a new shade before my wedding. It won't take that long. I'll get my pedicure on Wednesday when I go to the bank."

Mr. Kim, my boss, will complain about me being gone from the office for so long and not answering my phone, but he always does that. To Mr. Kim, complaining is like breathing.

"It's Sunday, Maritza. Why do you have to go so late?"

My mother says this as if she and Daddy have somewhere to be tomorrow morning. I'm the only one who has anything real to do Monday through Friday. My mother has never worked, and Daddy's retired now, so what's the

problem with having dinner an hour or so later one or two Sundays a month?

"Because they close at five, and I want my nails done by Mr. Ngo." I can pretend just like her that we haven't had this exact same conversation million times before. "He's fast and doesn't make mistakes, especially since he wants to go home."

I've learned enough Vietnamese at my job, so Mr. Ngo and the other manicurists can't get away with talking trash about me like they do with their other customers. And they don't waste my time with hand massages or by suggesting extras like paraffin dips and stupid designs. Maybe, though, I'll do something special for myself, like a facial, before my wedding.

"*Mamá*? Don't you think it would be wrong if I didn't wear white? I mean, it's my wedding, not some sort of funeral. People expect a bride to wear white. You did. Didn't you, *Mamá*?"

My mother looks at me but doesn't say anything. She can't. She wore a white dress when she got married even though she was already pregnant with my sister Dulcina.

Not that she and Daddy could've gotten married at St. Mary's even if she hadn't been pregnant. Daddy's not Catholic or Jewish even though he's both. When he was growing up, there were still a lot of Jewish and Italian people around here.

Our last name is Bernal because Daddy's dad was Jewish. Daddy's mom was a Renzi, and she was Catholic and Italian. It's even more confusing because Daddy speaks Spanish like a Mexican even if he doesn't look like one except for how he dresses. His parents died when he was in junior high in a car accident. Mrs. Gonzalez took Daddy in because his three older brothers had already moved away to start their own families.

I always thought it would be easier if we used my mother's last name, Suarez. Now that my wedding really happening, maybe I'll change my last name, but not to Auggie's. I don't like his at all. I'd rather keep Bernal.

Anyways, Daddy's never cared about being any type of religion even though Mamá has always wanted him to be Catholic like we are. All she can do is go to church enough for both of them, but I only go with her to the first morning mass on Sundays.

"Okay, sure, my wedding might not be at St. Mary's—and that's not my fault and it won't be fair if Father Gabriel doesn't change mind—but I'm still the bride. I should at least get to wear what I want. Right, *Mamá*?"

My mother pinches the bridge of her nose and leans away from me. This is how she is about everything, even the simple stuff that's not worth stressing out about.

What time does she want to go to Target? Later? Right now? Maybe tomorrow? What does she want to have for dinner? Pollo Loco? King Taco? Leftovers? How many beers are in the fridge? None? Some? What number is some?

Sometimes I just want to yell at her when she gets like this, but that would be disrespectful, like my sister Claudia is. Claudia never asks, she just does what she's decided to do. Kind of like Dooley with her problems, but Claudia is worse. She's always acted like she's too busy to have problems of her own, but she's never too busy to point out what everyone else is doing wrong or could do better. She loves to show up here at the house, boss everyone around, and then disappears back to her practically empty Studio City townhouse.

Neither of them has ever had to drive Mamá to Costco for toilet paper or reprogram the universal remote for Daddy. Claudia's fancy job keeps her *so* busy. And maybe Dooley will never get herself together. So who's going to take care of Mamá and Daddy forever?

Me, that's who!

And since I will, I want my mother to tell me I deserve to wear white. I want my answer and I'll wait for it. I'll wait forever if I have to.

Mamá hides behind a two-year-old issue of *Bride* before she says, "Whatever you decide to wear is your choice, Maritza."

"Exactly! If I want to wear a rainbow tube top and acid-washed jeans with the knees and butt all shredded and walk down the aisle to Def Leppard's 'Pour Some Sugar on Me,' that's what I'll do."

She looks at me like I'm crazy, as if she really thinks I'd do something so tacky. It annoys me that this is what gets her attention. I force myself not to show how mad I am.

"I'm wearing a white dress. Super white," I say to her. "With a long veil and a train. I don't care what anyone says. It's *my* wedding."

"Okay then, Maritza." She flips through the magazine, stopping every so often when something catches her eye, which seems to be everything but wedding dresses. "You know what's best."

"How about this one?"

I slide an even older issue of *Bride* in front of her. I've been collecting wedding magazines for a few years, and the dresses are beginning to show their age. The dress is atrocious. The bottom is like a birdcage with crushed up cotton balls stuck all over it, and it has only one sleeve. I wouldn't even wear a dress like that for Halloween.

"What do you think, *Mamá*?"

"It's very dramatic." She looks away quickly, as if it's a picture of a squashed bug. "More for a very big wedding maybe, but not so much for—"

"For what?" I ask. She stares down at the magazine, twisting her hands in her lap. "Not for what, *Mamá*?"

I don't need her to remind me that she thinks my second wedding shouldn't be a big deal. If she had it her way, all I would get is a five-minute ceremony at city hall and dinner at El Torito. Then we would pretend none of it ever happened, just like after the first one.

That wedding was big, at St. Mary's and almost exactly like I dreamed it should be. No one could question my wearing a white dress then. But I couldn't stay married to that person, and she's never going to let me forget it. I was barely eighteen. How could I have known about that kind of stuff?

"What does Augustino think?" she asks, like it matters. "He might want to see you in something different."

Yeah, a thong and stripper heels. That's exactly what he likes. How else would I know what "Pour Some Sugar on Me" sounds like?

"Augustino agrees with me. This is my wedding, and we deserve to have what I want."

Mamá has never liked to make a fuss over things like graduations and birthdays. Once we were old enough, me, Claudia and Dooley had to arrange our own special days, or else it would be just us and a Betty Crocker cake in a flavor none of us liked with never enough frosting.

We're all summer babies, born one right after the other—August for Dooley, July for Claudia and June for me but only because I was born six weeks early. When we were little, we looked so much alike, people thought we were triplets. No one would think that anymore.

"Are you looking at the dresses, *Mamá*?"

I've made it easy for her by marking the pages of the ones I like best. Even so, my mother isn't saying anything about the dresses I want her to have something to say about.

"Yes, Maritza, I'm looking." Her words all run together, her voice traveling up and down almost like she's singing.

My mother still has an accent. She wasn't born here, like Daddy was. She came to East Los Angeles as a teenager and she didn't speak a word of English, so Mamá decided not to talk for the longest time. Even now, she doesn't like to answer the phone or order her own food at restaurants. Her accent isn't too bad, but it's obvious she was born in Mexico. Me, Dooley, and Daddy sound like where we're from, Boyle Heights.

But not Claudia. She changed everything about herself the minute she left for college. After she was done, Claudia moved back to L.A., but has always lived on the Westside on purpose.

Dooley went to San Francisco for art school, but she stopped going to classes after her first semester. It's too bad because she's really talented. She used to draw me pictures of whatever I could think of and they always turned out even better than I imagined.

Claudia says Dooley hasn't done her art in while, but it doesn't mean she won't go back to it someday. Maybe she will, but I don't know. I've never gone to San Francisco to visit Dooley, and she hasn't been here in a couple years because of her problems. Claudia is less than twenty miles away and she hasn't come by since Thanksgiving. And she didn't even stay to eat.

I grab another magazine. It's from April 1997. I bought it after my first date with Augustino and he proposed six months later. It's too old to be useful, but I'll keep it since it was a sign.

I check my cell phone to see if Augustino has answered the text I sent him after Mamá and I got back from church this morning. I want him to choose our first dance song. He has to pick either "You Sang to Me" or "This I Promise You." One or the other, it doesn't matter to me. We're not doing a choregraphed dance, just something easy so he doesn't embarrass me too much.

Nothing from Auggie, not even a stupid ;-). I hate that winky face. What is it even supposed to mean?

Fine. We'll dance to "You Sang to Me." My mother likes Marc Anthony, so at least this will make her happy.

I set my phone aside. Once he gets back to me, I'll make him wait. Maybe I'll make him wait so long we miss the movie we're supposed to see. He'll still drive over from Glendale, but he's not going to get what he wants from me. I check the time. It's already 3:36. He definitely doesn't deserve anything for making me wait this long for a stupid text message.

Outside, there's the usual Fickett Street noises of traffic, kids yelling, and neighbors blaring music from boom boxes on their porches or car stereos. Coming from our backyard, I can barely hear the steady *thunk*, pause, *thunk*, pause, *thunk* as Daddy works his shovel into the dirt.

I woke up really early yesterday, giving up my Saturday morning, which is the only day I get to sleep in, to go buy rosebushes at Home Depot. When I saw how much they cost, I decided on a mix of light pink and white flowers the plant guy promised would last through the month. They're pretty and close enough to the right colors. Anyways, I don't have time to wait for roses to bloom and I can't dig them up and take them with me after my wedding. I already spent hundreds of dollars on sod for the backyard because I refuse to let my special day be ruined by patchy grass. It's not like I can roll it up like a carpet and take it with me either.

My mother looks up when there is an extra-long pause from the backyard. If she goes to check on Daddy, it'll be almost impossible to get her back to the table.

She's worried he'll have a heart attack or hurt his back, but it's not like him spending his Sunday afternoon watching soccer, eating pistachios, and drinking Budweiser is any

less dangerous. At least this way he's getting some exercise. And she's the one who suggested I should have my reception here instead of a banquet hall like the first time. What she didn't consider is what I've had to spend to get the house to look halfway decent. It's my wedding account, not Daddy's back or heart, that's in danger.

"Don't you think a gazebo would look pretty in the backyard?" I ask to bring her attention back to where it's supposed to be. "I'm thinking of renting one for my wedding."

"Rent a what?" Her eyes are on the kitchen door. She doesn't look away until we hear the sound of my dad digging again. "A gus sey bo? What is that?"

"Gah-*ZEE*-bow! And you know what one is. If Father Gabriel doesn't change his mind, we can say our vows and have our first dance on it, and set up a small table for me and Auggie. Then we can put the cake there to cut it." In my mind, it looks perfect. With lots of white Christmas lights and some of those paper lanterns—very romantic. "We'll just get rid of some of the tables and chairs to make room. People can stand during the ceremony and then take turns sitting when it's time for the food."

I didn't budget for a gazebo because I just thought of it, but that doesn't mean I don't have a plan. I know exactly what I'm doing. I always have.

"I don't know, Maritza." She looks out toward the doors, front and back, as if she expects someone to bust in and save her from whatever her problem is. "People expect to sit down and there's not—"

"How about this one?" I interrupt her and show her a strapless dress with a full skirt and lots of beads and lace. It's very white and costs almost $10,000. "Isn't it pretty?"

She wrings her hands together. Mamá has arthritis, but she still won't stop doing it. She just sits there and twists

them around each other and doesn't say anything or even nod.

"If I want to spend all my wedding money on that dress, I will." I never seriously considered that dress, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't be able to have it if it's dress I want. Not that I do, but still. "This is my wedding. Mine."

"It's a beautiful dress, Maritza." She doesn't even try to sound like she means it. "Maybe we can find something like it in ivory or cream? You look so nice in ivory—"

"Wedding dresses are white. Not cream or ivory." I hold up a picture of a bride in white and a guest in a light blue dress. "Wedding dress. Party dress. Big difference."

"Okay, Maritza," she says, giving up. "If it's the dress you want, it's the dress you should choose. Okay?"

I hate it when she does that—tells me what she thinks I want to hear so I'll shut up. But not this time. If I listened to her, I wouldn't even be having a wedding. I wouldn't have my job or a fiancé and I definitely would never have my own house. I'd be stuck here forever while my sisters are off doing whatever they want with their lives. It's time I did something just for me, and it has to happen on May 31 because it's not fair I lost out on those extra six weeks.

My phone vibrates, making us both jump. Auggie's answered my text. I leave it where it is. He can wait. I hand my mother this month's issue of *Modern Bride*. My dream dress is on page 179. It's not marked with a tab. I want to see if she finds it on her own.

"Will you call Claudia and tell her to call Dooley?" I've already asked her once, but with Mamá I have to tell her what to do at least three times before she gets around to it. "I can't deal with either of them right now. I'm so busy with everything else I have to do."

"I will," she says, but we both know she won't do it today.

As long as it happens by the end of the week, it's fine with me. I don't care if it gives her a migraine. My mother can have as many as she wants after she does this one little thing for me. I'm the bride, I shouldn't have to do everything.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE NEAPOLITAN SISTERS: A NOVEL OF HERITAGE AND HOME* by Margo Candela.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com here.

VIGIL HARBOR

A novel

JULIA GLASS

National Book Award–Winning Author of
THREE JUNES

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Let's say it's true that geography is destiny, place entwined with person. Would living on a peninsula—promontory, headland, bluff—make you peninsular by nature? Not someone who sticks out but someone who likes backing up to a body of water, who finds a cul-de-sac comforting, not cornering? You'd miss out on casual, unpredictable commerce with travelers merely passing through, because your town would be a place of beginnings and endings, of retreat or stasis, and after a while you'd likely notice a sameness to your neighbors. You'd all *be a bunch of proud peninsulites: privileged, but also myopic.*

That's how some outsiders see the people of Vigil Harbor, a town that thrusts itself into the Atlantic Ocean, all but completely enclosed by restless water, deflecting the longshore current like a crooked foot aimed straight toward the rising sun. On a map, the harbor itself resembles a long blue parcel held snug beneath a muscular arm against the Massachusetts coastline. At the big toe, two of the town's oldest roads rise toward a park with a view raised high by granite cliffs. The shoreline here is rugged with rock, nothing like the bygone aprons of silken sand that once turned neighboring towns into summer playgrounds, much of that sand recently eroded by pummeling rains and swallowed by storms that no longer repay the ground they borrow.

That park is where residents gather every year to watch their fireworks on a Fourth of July that lasts for days. In spirit, not much has changed on this day for a couple hundred years—not through

depressions, recessions, pandemics, and definitely not during wartime. In wartime, town pride swells like a spinnaker in a sailing race at the yacht club.

It begins at dawn: for two hours, the bells of the three remaining churches ring with abandon. At eight a.m.—shame on those who sleep in—veterans of wars and invasions from Vietnam to Venezuela march the twisting colonial ways or wave from an antique trolley, the high school marching band preceding them with off-key pomp and drumming. The Girl and Boy Scouts follow in turn like a ragtag militia, and a small fleet of jewel-toned vintage automobiles creeps along behind, klaxons blaring, the caboose to this train a 1969 powder-blue Volkswagen convertible owned and driven by the longest-standing elected official, a fourth-generation Harborite named June Smithson.

The parade ends at the Old Burial Ground, where four hundred revolutionary patriots—most of them fishermen who tossed aside their nets to form George Washington's navy—lie beneath slabs half-swallowed by the earth, their epitaphs worn thin as a whisper. June lays a wreath on the grave of a different soldier every year, his name pulled from a big mason jar of names by the town historian.

Local merchants—the chowder café, the ice-cream parlor, the yarn shop, and the nestlike boutiques owned by women wealthy enough to lose their silk shirts on the bottom line—put their wares out on the sidewalk. They offer compostable cups of lemonade, along with the molasses cookies whose recipe dates back to the town's first innkeeper.

The Episcopal church hall displays local artworks and sells them to benefit a vaccination campaign or a refugee camp in some remote, far less fortunate country that few of the artists or donors could place on any map. Roving bands of tankard-wielding reenactors sing sea shanties and use their role-playing as justification to drink too much rum at noon. The blazing sun makes them drunker still.

If the summer's catch is decent, somebody runs the Scholarship Lobster Raffle. Tall-masted sailboats swan around the harbor, backyard grills ignite, and families turn from feuding to playing horseshoes and croquet. As day seeps into the folds of night, streams

of sunburnt Harborites converge on foot at Emmons Head; spread their blankets, some seasons hem to hem, others distanced like tiny islands; and open their bottles of wine. Before the fireworks begin, they clamber to their feet, older folks feeling the kinks in their joints, and they sing the town song (first verse only).

> *Take to your boats; oh, men, take to the sea!*
> *Hoist anchor, loft sail, like your fathers 'fore ye!*
> *Leave behind hearth; oh, leave behind brides;*
> *We are sworn to the ocean, our fate in her tides.*
> *This be our fortune, the bounty down under.*
> *Leave whales to New Bedford; 'tis cod we shall plunder.*
> *Women and babes, let thy vigilance burn*
> *Until to the harbor your mariners return!*

People who now make their living from forces unseen—chips and codes, chromosomes and neutrinos—are moved to tears by a cornball song from an era they count their lucky stars never to have lived in. In the picturesque gloaming, they stand and sing and shed all sense of irony, skepticism, threats of despair. It is an intimacy both true and artificial.

As an almost-island, Vigil Harbor has not suffered as badly during waves of contagion as other, landlocked towns. It has so far, you might say willfully, remained aloof from political extremes. Town Meetings remain bipartisan in a cantankerous but ultimately collegial fashion now regarded as arcane in most parts of the country. In the last election, only seventeen residents registered as members of the EndTimer Party, the angry spinoff of the failed campaign to elect Kip Kittredge to the White House.

But unsettling times will unsettle everyone. Struck by a recent rash of divorces, beginning with a pair of well-known yacht club members who swapped their respective marriages for a shared membership in a survivalist commune, Vigil Harbor is a little less secure about its resilience. Because love, as firmly as war, is stitched deep into town lore. Approach by water and, at the mouth of the harbor, you must circumnavigate Ruby Rock, originally Arabella's

Rock, Arabella the widow of Samuel Thesper. They were married hardly a month when Samuel launched his fishing dory and small crew to challenge the entry of a British ship in search of patriot outlaws. He meant to hold them off long enough that a meeting of rebels in a local sail loft might disband and hide. But he was shot through the chest by a hotheaded Regular equally intent on breaching the harbor. Samuel fell overboard, and his body washed ashore on the island, a place used for drying cod on vast wooden racks. Two days after he was buried, Arabella swam to the island and threw herself from a ledge on the far side. Three women who had rowed in pursuit made it there only in time to bring her body back. She was interred next to Samuel, near the peak of the burial ground.

Such stories, though always a little suspect in their fairy-tale pathos, are countless in a town like this one. Towns like this one are, after all, mostly the sum of their stories, or the voices that tell the stories. Add to those stories this one.

Brecht

Like every basic Saturday night, the windows in my room are shaking in their frames. Not an earthquake but my stepfather's music. He stays up way late and plays it so maxed up, basso profundo, that the walls in the living room vibrate clear to the third floor. It pumps through my veins, frazzles my nerves. He gets a river of random heritage tuneshop flowing along, *thumpa thumpa thump*, everything from Nina Simone to Code Dread, and whether there are guests or it's just him and Mom or even just him, he dances. Austin is a dance maniac. He says dance is his number one narcotic. But sometimes he also breaks out that champion leaf he gets from he won't say where. He promises Mom it's throwback, the kind they swear won't pickle your judgment, and it does have a smell more like some weirdass tea, less like skunk. He only smokes if it's just him or he's only with Mom, though I don't think she smokes. Austin would never smoke with clients, and all friends, he claims, plus even strangers you pass on the street, are future if not past or present clients. So the whole basic world is a client.

Sometimes I vext him to turn it down. Maybe he does, by a margin that doesn't matter.

He'll yell up the stairs, "Earplugs, dude!" in that diluvian-but-who-cares tone, and I'm like, what if I slept through something asteroidal? Austin says don't be melodramatic. He says I'm a doomseer, too typical of my generation. He says it lightly, in a faux-jokey voice, but when he doesn't think I'm in earshot, I've heard him refer to Generation F: failure, fuckup, fatalist; take your pick. If you want to get

poetic, flotsam. Others call us Generation NL (out loud, *nil*): No Life, as in having no lives worth living, or maybe as in Get a Life, which it's true a lot of us cannot seem to do, or not according to some fossil definition of "grown-up." As in, going out there to Be Something. People who are hard on us like that tell us to look at the kids who came of age in the pandemic years, the ones who survived and even, somehow, figured out how to live lives of their own while ducking in and out of lockdown during the surges.

Austin, who has no kids genetically his own, says our allergy to independence (that's what he calls it) is the fault of our parents, but collectively, not individually—because he wouldn't want to get Mom too far down. I was twelve when she married Austin, so there wasn't much he could do, he says, except root from the sidelines. As if me and Mom are some kind of sporting event.

It's so obviously not her fault that I boomeranged home, that I'm in this state she sees as deep limbo, but she's always felt responsible for who I am. I think she can't help feeling guilty about us losing Dad—which is nuts, but I get it. Maybe it's also middle age and the whole mortality thing, but she's in this fragile place right now.

I guess we are doomseers, me and Noam and the rest of us, but why shouldn't we be? We're not Timers, we're not *that* stooge. No way would we flee to the deep woods just because we're afraid the next bomb will flash-fry our own town square, the next virus turn that town square into an emergency graveyard. Nor are we desperate enough to join the Restitution Corps, forget the army! But we see that the bar's going up on surviving what's to come, some of which is certain, some not. Like the growing list of Hot Spots on the Global Climate Watch. (Picture a map punctured with cigarette burns.) I heard one of Austin's clients saying that his son's college has a major called survival studies.

Me and Noam have a bet going. It's about the next tsunami, the one that some seismologists are sure will be set off soon, maybe even tomorrow, by a slip in plates that meet somewhere off the coast of Spain. The projections show it pointed in our direction. So we've taken positions on exactly what date the big wave will rise, on how much time it will take to cross the ocean, on how long a stretch of

coast will take the max hit, on the number of fatalities. We're allowed to change our minds as we please. It's a subject we like what-iffing.

We know that unless there's some futuristic warning system in place, we might not be alive to see who wins. Our town is bull's-eye center of the wave's projected path. (Farewell to Cape Cod, or what's left of it.) Anyone who thinks that our being up on a cliff will protect us, that the wave will just crash politely into the granite ledge and slither back, is *totally* stooge. The wave will roar up and over Emmons Head, then horizontalize its King Kong fury, probably even smash off parts of the ledge. All the fine old antique houses? Four centuries' worth of driftwood in a flash. My stepfather's clients' brand-new houses? Lethal sheets of fractured steel and glass turned into shrapnel.

The Big T, as we call it, would make Cunégonde, that monster storm from three years back, look like a fairy princess. On Back Harbor, Cunégonde ripped every dock off Harrow Point, blew out nearly all the windows, toppled a dozen power poles, sent three roofs flying out to sea, and buckled two new houses cardboard flat (houses not designed by Austin, he'll be quick to tell you). On Ruby Rock, the bunkhouses must've vaporized; not even the kiddie toilets remained. The summer camp was toast and lost its insurance. They put a FOR SALE sign on the island, but the sign's now totally covered in guano. Me and Noam took Austin's tender out there last summer: what a wasteland. I never went to that camp—we moved here when I was too old for stuff like that—but Noam said it was a cool place if you were little and liked running wild: bows and arrows, camping under the stars, bonfires and ghost stories, dissecting dead fish, Huck Finn stuff. Now the island's been conquered by seals, refugees from the Cape, which lost miles and miles of beach, megatons of sand. Some afternoons, they make such a ruckus, barking, squabbling, yodeling, you hear it from all over town. Some people think they're a nuisance, other people say they bring us "closer to nature." But conservation rules give them squatters' rights.

Where there are seals, you're always warned, there will be sharks. Big ones. But Noam says where there are seals, there will be selkies. He says if you hide out and watch super close, and if it's one of the rare days they strip off their silky fur pelts, all you have to do is poach one

on the sly and, jackpot!, you've got the naked maiden who owns it. She is yours, so long as you keep hold of her skin and take good care of it. She will do your every basic bidding (though not sure I like the medieval sound of that). And just try to picture the two of us sneaking a pair of feral maidens up to my parents' third floor. We could do it when Austin's stoned, but no way would Mom fail to notice.

I told Noam that story's got to be from a children's book, and he said it is, okay yeah, but the story in the book is based on a million stories from history, nautical *facts* recorded in ship's logs. I asked him when did he ever read a ship's log, and he said he totally did, in fact he read *several,* back when he had to do a research paper in American history class for Ms. McCarthy. He went to the town archives and dug up this crazy stuff. No way, I said, would Ms. McCarthy ever let a paper be about mermaids. First of all, Noam told me, selkies aren't mermaids (*those* are fictional, he says), and second of all, he wrote about ship's logs from cod-fishing voyages back like four hundred years ago. Those guys were at sea for months on end, I told him: all sailing and no sex, never mind sanity! But okay, I conceded, we'll call it history. Besides, what harm is there in looking out for naked girls on Ruby Rock? And if we get lucky, we will pounce. I do like Noam's brand of eccentric.

Noam is a year older than me. We both went to the High, and we lucked out on being young enough that we didn't have to yo-yo on and off screen through those years, but we didn't hang out. Maybe we had a math class together; we can't quite remember. Afternoons, I ran cross-country or track, though I was no star; he played basketball in winter (he *was* a star), took after-school marine tech in spring. He thought he'd go to a maritime college, maybe get to be a naval mechanic, but he had a GPA blowout. I only found this stuff out much later, when we became friends.

I went to college for almost three semesters, but now I honestly wonder, what's the logical point of it, really? It was a college with a major price tag, and Austin joked once too often about "potential ROI." Also? I was in New York and my sophomore year was the year of the Union Square attack. All those innocent people just buying roses and pumpkins and fancy beeswax candles, or playing in the

playground with their kids; I heard the explosions from my dorm. When I decided to take a break, go home for a while, Mom didn't argue. She said I could return to school when I felt ready, but it's been a year and a half and I'm pretty sure I lost my place.

What throws us together now, me and Noam, is that Noam wound up back at home, too, but his mother had turned his old room into an office. So Mom offered to put him up here. She doesn't even charge him rent, and it's not hard to guess why. She doesn't like my being alone too much. So now I am practically the opposite of alone, because Noam hardly ever leaves the house. He reads a lot, and he says he's boning up for tests to get him back on track for the maritime college, the Coast Guard, anything that will send him to a job at sea. That's where he's happiest, he says—out on the water—which would help explain why he has fantasies of bagging a selkie.

He would drive me crazy, except that I'm out working most days—since no way was Austin going to let me come home without getting a job, so he made sure that happened. I work for this guy who does landscaping and tree work, a lot of it for Austin's firm. I know my stepfather hopes I'll go berserk with boredom and decide to finish my degree, maybe somewhere close, maybe just the remote-classroom thing, and while the job can be boring, and it doesn't offer what Austin calls *prospects,* there's a basic sense to it, like even a "goodness." We plant and transplant things. We keep living things from dying, fight the blight. (To put it biblically, the blights are legion: beetles, moths, fungal shit, bacteria and microscopic worms carried by alien birds blown astray from their migratory groove.) We organize stones into walls—garden walls, property walls, walls to hold back water. (You sleep like a champ after a day of walls, even through Austin's house-quaking music.) We're "doing no harm," you might say. And there is plenty of harm going on out there. Plenty.

Celestino, as bosses go, is pax. I told Noam one time, "That man has the patience of moss." Noam just about choked on his beer. We were blowing my pay at The Jetty. He asked if maybe I should go back to writing poetry, the way I did at the High, when I had Mrs. Tattersall for creative writing. I said I just might! I still keep my word book, my random thoughts on the nutzoid pretzeling of English. Like

take the word *match:* how can it mean, all at once, a sports competition; a way to start a fire; and the perfect partner or twin, like your soul mate? How can *tender*—the word for Austin's little boat—also refer to both softness and money?

But for now I'm an apprentice at something more or less unwordly.

Celestino likes teaching the things he knows to other people, which is not something you can ever assume in a boss. He's maybe more serious than ideal: doesn't joke around or even take much time off. He doesn't seem to put much stock in conversation (no wordplay for him), and it's got nothing to do with his English, which is practically perfect when you listen past his accent. Not that he says a lot. But if he's fitzed about something, he lets you know, even calmly. The air is always clear.

He seems like a great dad, too. Once in a while, if we have a loophole in the day, we stop by his house, where Connie, his wife, runs a home school with a bunch of other families. Celestino's there to sneak a hit of his kid, Raul, who would be in third grade if he went to normal school. The house is pretty small, and even eight or nine kids fill it up fast, like a flock of ducklings. There's this big glassed-in porch set up like a classroom, with an actual olden-days blackboard, baskets of paper books and wooden puzzles; the museumy smell of chalk! But most of the time, no tronics allowed. Which is either genius or totally not.

Celestino's wife calls it "going retro." Mondays and Wednesdays the kids work onscreen, because how else can they grow into this world, into the *connectivity*? But every other day they put their tronics in an old wine crate beside the front door. They read from those pulp-and-glue books, write and draw on paper. They make music with real instruments, not audioware. They build real things in real space.

While Celestino gets in time with Raul, maybe fills his thermos or consults on married stuff that's none of our business, Connie will give me and Finn, who does the gruntwork with me, lemonade or cold tea and some kind of treat she's made for the kids. Even with all that duckling chaos, the house feels like a good house, a happy house. I get a little jealous, but it's just my imagining what it would be like to live with parents who don't wonder why I have no ambition. Never mind

parents who are both your original parents. *What is your signature passion?* was a question on a sheet handed out by my freshman writing professor at college. I wanted to write, *I haven't met her yet,* but instead I wrote, *Making things that don't fall apart.* It just came to me then and there, like horseshit that's accidental wisdom. Or maybe I poached it, unconsciously, from Austin. But it felt pretty true.

Here is another thing about Celestino, though nobody would ever say it out loud, or not anymore, not since the visa raids: he's one of the very few not-white people who actually live and work in Vigil Harbor. Which would have to make anyone self-conscious, especially if you saw that fascist shit unfold around you. I'm guessing he was sponsored, like Samson and Ayeh, the couple who run the bowling alley—but even they don't live here. They take a bus from somewhere near Boston: let's be honest, somewhere a whole lot more real than this town.

It's none of my business, but when I see how much he sticks out, I hope he's secure. This town, where you will meet any number of people who claim to be *thirteenth* generation—as if it's a brag to have loitered forever in the place where your diluvian max-greats settled out of total desperation—has an isolated feel, or more like protective halo, even though we're only thirty miles from the city. People who live here tend to never really leave—or they come back, even when they swore they never would. (Connie is one of those people.) My parents are unusual: neither one grew up here. So it's a bit like a Mobius strip, this town.

When you're somewhere out of state and people ask where you're from (like when I was in New York) and you say Vigil Harbor, either it means zero to them or they kind of light up, as if you've said you're from Camelot or Palm Springs or Blue Hill: somewhere once-upon-a-timey, somewhere tricky or impossible to find. Or gone. "We live in Brigadoom," says Mom, whatever that means. Me and Noam joke that, come the tsunami, we just might be the next Atlantis. Vigil Harbor is like a place that's obsolete but nobody knows it yet. I'm fine with obsolete. Not dead, of course, but outmoded. I've never cared about mode. Mode puts you in the crosshairs.

Maybe Noam moving in with us was a bad idea in unexpected

ways. Because we have each other, we become stasis. We are a physics problem from Mr. Clevenson's class: Brecht + Noam x (same politics + shared bathroom) = Inertia. We colonize the third floor of this house, like those seals on Ruby Rock, and even if we dent our heads on the low ceilings and the idiot rafters, we have the best views of the harbor. We even get an eyeful of the VHYC on the opposite shore, its fat-cat porches, its foofy kite-tails of dainty little banners that represent a coded wink-wink system of who's welcome there from other yacht clubs of the world. (*Burgee:* there's a word for you, one meaning only, though not to be confused with *bungee.*) And all summer, on party nights, I get an earful of the worst wedding bands on the planet. (Austin: "And you complain about *my* music?")

We also have a pact, me and Noam: no more gaming. Read, listen to music, debate life, maybe check the news just enough not to be stooge out of touch. I was done with games after that therapist my mother made me see last year prescribed this VR situational thing called Moodroom. I'd stand in the middle of his office and enter this mansion of emotions, one per room, and tell him what images popped into my head as I roamed through the feelings. Horseshit. It reminded me, in fact, of how I feel when Austin's music is turned up too loud.

Noam's company is therapy enough.

All basic things considered, why would I go anywhere else? And did I say that my mother is a very fine cook?

I did say that she's fragile, though, and this is something I can only sense. Fragile as in lonely, even when she's at a party. (I know how to read Mom's eyes, expressions, ways with her hands.) Which stands to reason, a little anyway, with how hard Austin's working these days, meaning Celestino works hard, meaning I work hard, meaning Mom's on her own a lot, since she mostly works from home. Sometimes she leaves meals out for the rest of us before she goes to bed.

I know her better than most people know their moms because we lived together, just the two of us for four years, in a shoebox apartment in the city, before she married Austin and we moved out. For all my complaints about him, she made a good choice. She's smart; she just hasn't always been lucky. My actual dad, who I remember but not well, died in the original corona surge. He was young, but he had

asthma. (Mom claims the chaos of the hospital is what killed him. She couldn't get his body back for months.) In photos where he's holding me on his shoulders or pushing my swing at the playground, he's almost scarecrow thin, body like a spear, smile so big and bright in his tall skinny face that his head looks like a lantern. I have his bushy black hair, also his long nose and hands, not so much his height. There I'm pretty average.

Austin's work bonanza happened like this. Last year, suddenly, like so suddenly you could feel the air crackle with it, couples around town fell apart, splitting like trees struck by lightning. Some kind of rise or fall in the atmospheric love pressure, a virus of radical discontent. (You can have an emotional epidemic, I've heard. Or maybe it was dormant stress from home repairs after Cunégonde. Mortality panic syndrome: if the jig's up soon, I am partying NOW.) It started with the Tyrones, who, to spite each other you can be sure, both hired Austin to blueprint their do-over lives or, to be more exact, the places they'd live in to do it all over.

Thaddie Tyrone is easily the richest man in town. He has a papal bank account, so his do-over was your dream house on slam, perched cliffside (prime view of the ocean from which that tsunami will rise!), the kind of work any architect lives for. At the same time, Ex–Mrs. Tyrone (Lucia? Felicia?) asked Austin to perform a luxe gut job on the Federal mansion she held on to in the squalling. A deal with the devil, he admits. He does not like obliterating that kind of history. But some checks, Austin says, you're stupid not to cash. They're more than money. And I think he's salvaging all the details: paneling, floorboards, mantels. He rents an old sail loft by the town landing, just for stockpiling things like that. The woman from the history museum who gives the walking tours claims it's the loft where the rebels were meeting on the day Sam Thesper saved their lives—and lost his—by distracting the British ship sent to root out the treason. Austin says that's apocryphal BS, since he's sure the original part of the building was built after 1800. No harm in coloring a little out of the lines, I told him. Don't be so sure, said Austin. Of course, to an architect, coloring outside the lines is dangerous. The draftsman's lines are what keep the buildings from falling down.

All around, though, principles are shakier these days.

High-profile stuff, those two projects, the stuff of both gossip and news, after which word goes out that Austin Kepner is the architect to hire if suddenly you are facing the domestically uprooting shock, whether rude or welcome, of postmarital solitude, and if your attorneys, accountants, therapists, and mediators leave you with a nickel to your name.

So he's been taking on clients left and right, like the female castoffs of the Vanderhoff-Cho, Rosenberg, and Tattersall splits, also Stanley Guardini (ditched by his younger husband; you could see *that* one coming) and the poor, totally humiliated good guy Mike Iliescu, whose wife, it turns out, was boffing Mr. Tattersall—yeah, my English teacher's husband—and is supposedly running off with him to one of those psycho wilderness camps. The Tattersalls and the Iliescus are members of the yacht club, so the whole thing was max tectonic, socially speaking. The kind of thing where you couldn't not take sides. Or so says Mom. And she is the fairest of the fair.

Right after Tyrone showed Austin the site for his new bachelor château, Celestino took me and Finn up there to see the literal lay of the land. "Up there" is right. It's out near Harrow Point on a spot where a much older house burned down decades ago. The heirs hung on to the land until someone—that would be Tyrone—offered them the right price. So Austin's building him this total testosterone palace. It'll look like a massive ship with its prow aimed straight toward the incoming nor'easters. Austin says he's designed it to cleave a storm like a sailboat's bow divides a wave when you take it straight on. The wind's gotta be champion fierce up there, and right now there's nothing growing but one big-ass oak that Celestino says isn't long for this world. So plantings will be tricky.

Trees, of course, were one of the "sentinel alarms" Senator Kittredge listed in that stooge convention speech. Like what people who are old enough to vote haven't seen the years and years of death-watch headlines eulogizing coral reefs, honeybees, songbirds, frogs, bats, and just about all tropical fruits? "Play Noah's story backward," he said, "and that is where we are, folks. We are unbuilding the ark!" Clever. Talk Bible and you play to both sides of the room. But lis-

ten, rich old boy who gets to geyser on about your platinum ideals, talk about doomseers! After hearing your max-dire prophecies, who wouldn't *rather* live in what you call "end-stage denial"? Because what are you supposed to do, adopt a bat? Not like I didn't vote for the guy myself—I still have that PURGE OR PERISH biodegradable badge I got at the rally—and not like I didn't zone on the delusion of him as president, but when you think about it, who sanely thinks some old-money beekeeper-poet, from a part of Maine that's practically Canada, could begin to run a country as deranged and post-traumatic as this one? So I'm over it. I'm here in Brigadoom. As for Kittredge, he's back in Maine, CEO of a geothermal energy conglomerate. So much for *Cooperate Over Corporate.*

The frame on Tyrone's boff palace started going up last week. So I got the idea I could camp out there some nights and who would know? If Mom and Austin go to bed on the early side, I grab my sleep roll, a couple of beers, and hike on up. I go home at sunrise, and if I run into Austin, who's always up way before Mom, he's not going to ask where I've been. Not like I have a curfew. We do the *hey dude* wave and I head straight upstairs.

Clear nights up there, the stars are killer, and even if it's raining, I'm dry. The surprise is that I've got a crow's nest vantage on the night trawlers, or that's what I figure they are. You can't exactly see them—even if you have snipersight, they're just these voids of space—but I have amazing ears, and the first night I was up there, the surf was satin calm and I became aware of a mechanical hum, way out past Ruby Rock. Next time, I borrowed Austin's fancy binoculars, and sure enough, I could make out these ghost-boat shapes up top near the horizon, like paper cutouts on the moon-striped water.

Word is that the Coast Guard's totally overstressed on storm damage and drug traffic, that they've given up on policing black-market seafood; as crimes go, it's trivial. Or they're looking the other way. Austin says palms are being greased. It's not like the fish, or the ones everybody wants to eat, are ever coming back south. The notion of quotas is quaint. You hear about these old-world dories they use, heading out in buddy-system pairs, one the operator, one the decoy to fool the enforcers—if they show up. But if the boats are old-school,

the diving gear and track-nets are hypermodern. They're equipped with life-seeking gizmos but undetectable, using some kind of military ghosting technology. Hackers of the sea. So if it's out there, they will catch it. And of course there's shark. They're off-limits, too, even if, thanks to the seals, they're not so scarce.

First night in my lookout, I stayed up way late just watching the dories slip to and fro, beads on a wire. They run parallel to the coast, sliding way up north for days, or that's the rumor, to the underwater banks off Labrador where the last fish hang out. Fun to picture the crews on those boats like old-timey pirates in a picture book I had as a kid: rings in their ears, patches on their eyes, pegs for legs, colorful parrots draped on their shoulders. *Argh, matey!*

The second night, Noam caught me sneaking out. I told him I was meeting a girl, and when I consider that lie, it's not a bad idea: I could hook a girl—my own secret fishing expedition—and take her to that place and she'd be totally, if she was worth it, awed and thankful. When the second level's framed out, I could bring her to the same spot where Tycoon Tyrone plans to plant his king-size bed. My wingmen? The stars above. (Nobody's figured out how to endanger the stars.)

But some things are better off not shared.

So last night I was up there, eyes on the horizon, eating Mom's cheesy turnip pudding (the dill from her garden makes it), sipping an ale from Austin's bougie Bev-rij, and I notice something new. A boat with a light—faint but sure, a tiny beam like a golden pencil. It's headed my way, in toward shore. Its passage is marked by a seam in the sky that means a naked mast: a sailboat under motor. It's dark-hulled, not white, so it's murky. No one on deck that I can see. Then it veers close around the end of the point, out of sight.

Weird. But weird things are the norm. Weird weather, weird politics, weird relationships. Another reason I like my routine, my own not-weird norm, however dull it seems to others. I show gratitude for it when I can. I do stuff I never used to do, voluntarily, like weed Mom's garden or do my own laundry. I heard Mom telling Austin I'm taking steps toward getting back in the world. But, *Mom,* I wanted to yell downstairs, I *am* in the world! This is my world, not some

fantasy she might have of my living a "life of the mind" in New York or wherever. I am making *this* world mine, and I like it. I like it fine. If I were a bird, I'd be lining it with dead leaves and dryer lint and random cozy shit. It's a version of safe. Wave or no wave, that's all I basically want, though hell if I'd admit it to anyone. Safe.

I'm hoping work on the palazzo goes slowly. The nights are getting warmer, and maybe I'll loosen up and invite Noam. I can't tell if he resents that I've been keeping it to myself, claimed it like an alpha dog keeps that bone between his paws.

And then there's this: Austin's been a little sidelined by a journalist from some architecture institute who's following him around to write a profile or tribute. She's from Texas, says Austin, and though at first he was skeptical, he doesn't mind her company, and she doesn't get in his way. She sees him as an overlooked genius, which even though I'm not exactly qualified to judge, I basically doubt. That's the way she was talking when I met her in the office yesterday morning.

I was picking up my lunch. Mom does that sometimes, packs me lunch and drops it off at the firm or sends it in with Austin, since Celestino usually picks me up way early. He says early hours are the most productive (and, as summer looms, definitely cooler). He's right, since roads are empty and there's nobody holding you back with random chitchat, but I think it's mainly because he likes getting home early, back to Connie and Raul.

So Mom packs healthy food in these little steel containers she got at some Euro kitchen boutique when we still lived in New York. She's making sure I eat things like seaweed salad and apples and her excellent meatless meatballs, but she puts in cookies or cake, too. Her cardamom blondies if I'm lucky. Last year she bought up all these spices and froze them, right before the new tariffs happened.

So Austin was at the big table in the open area the offices share. He's not the kind of honcho who takes clients to an inner sanctum for private meetings—even though his office is the best one, giant windows from which you could dive directly into the harbor. But he goes in there pretty much only when he wants to do something solo, regeneration and creativity shit. He likes it when everybody at the firm works together in a "flow." He's got this fake-rustic wooden sign

by the water machine that says OPEN DOORS, OPEN MINDS. So Filene and Troy, the baby architects, leave their doors open, though I notice that Hap, the guy who does all the digital scutwork, tends to close his. (His work, to me, is the definition of dull. And he's ten years older than me. *There* is somebody with no life.)

Austin was at the table with this woman, and they looked up when I came in. Austin's giant laptop was open, on its screen the plans for the new façade to Ex–Madame Tyrone's Federal mansion. I wondered if he'd take the reporter into the Vroom, this windowless closet-nook with a soft chair where you can put on a headset and tour the house you dream of that hasn't even been built. Fictional furniture and curtains. Sometimes Austin throws in a virtual pet. It's Moodroom minus the cheap psychology.

"My stepson, Brecht," Austin said to the woman when I walked in. "He's on our landscape team. Out in the field today, as you can see. You might enjoy tagging along with them, too."

From the state of my clothes, I looked like a mudslide survivor. Plus I nearly smirked at the notion of being on a "team." Yeah: Celestino, plus me, college dropout, plus Finn, whose brain I am certain was pixelated by weed. Go, *team.*

But she stood right up like I was a VIP, and the first thing I have to say is *fuck* was she ever tall. She's maybe fifty, but sleek fifty. She had on a long coat, made of something light and swishy, the color of fancy-ass cashews, a swoop of a coat that's more about style than warmth. Her hair was the same color as the coat, thick and braided like a helmet around her head. She looked like a warrior goddess, even her white skin bronzed—I guess by time in the Texas sun.

"Happy to meet you, sir," she said in this Technicolor Southern accent, a shock by itself, but "sir"? As if I wasn't half her age.

"Brecht, meet Mrs. Coyle."

"Petra," she said. "Please."

I told her I was happy to meet her, too, and sorry for my grubby appearance.

She clapped her hands together (nails tapered and polished copper) and said, "No sorrys for good hard work, young man! *Il faut mettre la main à la terre,* my Huguenot great-great-papaw liked to say. He

had a modest grapefruit plantation, and I suppose he had an entourage of pickers, but he is reputed to have had his own hands in that soil the whole season through."

"Quite the history," said Austin, sparing me the need for comment when I had none. Though I did wonder how picking grapefruits would involve sticking your hands in the dirt. More like standing on ladders. But I excused myself and went to the bathroom to wash up. Celestino had us rebuilding a terrace at a house overlooking Calico Beach; the slate flagstones were jumbled all to hell by the last storm, not even a big one. The client wanted us to replace all his dead rosebushes, too, though not with roses. Roses are a bad bet. February was freakish: subzero for days, then a week of warm winds, then back down into the teens. (Except, says Celestino, you can't really call it freakish anymore.) The rugosas survived, but most hybrids caved, heirlooms frostbitten back to the rootstock. Celestino's shown me the chart he keeps of temps through every winter. It helps him predict which plants will survive in which gardens, which will seem dead for a while when they're not, which ones leaf out fine but fail to bloom. Wisteria, he says, will be flowerless for the third year in a row. Not that the vines don't still spread like armies on a mission, splitting clapboards off houses and strangling drainpipes.

While I was in the bathroom, I listened; hung out at the sink, washed my face, tried to get a comb through my wildman hair. Mom says it's more like a mane, though she doesn't tell me to cut it. I know it makes her think of my dad.

I heard Mrs. Coyle say, "Look at what you've done with these curved dormers. And this clerestory! My oh my. Flattery's not my job here, but who would've dreamed up such graceful lines, marrying the new to the old? Ingenious."

"Not to the purists," said Austin. "I'm afraid what I'm doing is highly inauthentic, but the commission has lost its teeth. The Antiquity Commission."

"Teeth? What teeth?"

"The ability to do more than strongly suggest restrictions on exteriors. The ability to enforce. To tell rich white people what they can and cannot do with their money."

"Progress will have its way," said Mrs. Coyle.

"As will regress, I'm sorry to say. Sometimes they march hand in hand," said Austin. "But if you come back in a couple of weeks, we'll be starting the actual work."

"I have nowhere pressing to go," she said. "I am taking my time on this project because I'm enjoying it. I hope you don't mind."

"How could I mind?" said Austin.

On my way out, I nearly forgot to pick up my lunch, but Austin stopped me. "You're on the Frankenheimers' terrace?"

I nodded.

"Finish today, do you think?"

"Should," I said.

"Splendid." A word he'd never use if it was just us. "Tomorrow I promised Tyrone we'd make a site visit with Celestino. Brainstorm trees." I knew this was his way of getting himself to a place where he could mention the boff palace in front of his visitor. Which, why shouldn't he? I figured this woman would now be along on that visit. But while me and Austin traded a few more logistics, I saw her staring at me, like she was unpeeling me (as opposed to undressing; more a psychic than sexual thing). I was spooked, though Austin would tell me it's just the doomseer in me, on post-traumatic alert. (Can I tell you how tired I am of all this PTS talk?)

Her eyes, unlike the rest of her, are a sharpshooter blue. Blue like the sky before the bomber drove his little death truck into the farmers' market and filled that sky with flash and then smoke. Smoke, but also flying fragments of so many things, things that shouldn't have been, blown to smithereens. That's the most vivid memory I have: the sky filled with every conceivable color of smoke, me standing at a high window that might or might not have been in the room where I lived. I can't really tell you where I was for a lot of that day.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *VIGIL HARBOR: A NOVEL* by Julia Glass.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com here.

Flying Solo

A NOVEL

LINDA HOLMES

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of EVVIE DRAKE STARTS OVER

Flying Solo 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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Prologue

Laurie took her fingers out of her ears only after she was out of the house, and only to pick up her bike and ride the mile and a half to Aunt Dot's. Her mom had said she could go, after Laurie wrapped her neck in a red scarf and slipped on a pair of gloves with little snowflakes on them, and after Dot said on the phone that it was okay. The boys were being loud, the four of them—fighting and wrestling and slamming doors—and Laurie had gotten tired of hiding in her room. Since she turned twelve, her mother had been letting her make her way over to Dot's by herself, even after dinner when it was dark.

When she arrived at Dot's, Laurie dropped her bike in the grass and went up to the big red door. Dot, who was actually Laurie's mother's aunt, had grown up in this house and always said her parents brought her here straight from the hospital, and she just kept coming back. Laurie rang the bell.

When Dot came to the door, she was in jeans and a purple chenille sweater, with her long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Hello, honeybun,” she said, and she stood aside.

Laurie loved how it smelled in Dot’s house: like wood because of the fireplace, like lavender because of Dot’s soap, and like the ocean because everything in Maine that’s near the water smells a little bit like the ocean. There was a fire going, and Laurie pulled off her gloves and took off her scarf and carefully laid them over the back of one of the dining room chairs. “It’s freezing out there,” she said.

“I know. I’m so glad you’re here and out of all that. You must be practically a Popsicle.” Dot already had a little pot of milk on the stove, and she spooned instant hot cocoa mix into two mugs and mixed it up, then she took a can of whipped cream out of the fridge and said, “shoooop,” like she always did as she built two little towers of it. Laurie wrapped her hands around her cup as they went into the living room together. “So,” Dot said, “your mom said it was pretty noisy at home.”

Laurie blew delicately on her hot chocolate and rolled her eyes. “Patrick and Scott are arguing about something. I don’t even know what.” They were teenagers, seventeen and fourteen, and a lot of the time, Laurie didn’t know what they were talking about, whether they were fighting or not. She just tried to stay out of the way. “And Ryan says he’s trying to figure out what the loudest thing in the house is.” Ryan was the baby.

“Oh, no.” Dot laughed. “Never good when an eight-year-old does research.”

“And Joey is being Joey.” She looked meaningfully at Dot. “And you know how *that* is.” Dot nodded. Joey was ten, the drum-on-everything, break-everything, jump-on-everything, run-through-everything, eat-everything, get-stains-on-everything brother.

“Well, I talked to your mother, and we were thinking maybe you’d like to stay overnight. It’s not a school night.”

Laurie almost spilled her cocoa wiggling in her chair. "Yes yes yes! Should I go home and get my pajamas and stuff?"

"Oh, you can borrow something of mine."

Laurie looked down at herself. "I'm bigger than you," she said.

Dot bark-laughed. "You are absolutely not bigger than me," she said. "And even if you were, there are plenty of things you can sleep in. For all I care, you can wrap yourself up in my bathrobe. And I have some extra toothbrushes, and that's pretty much all you really need, right?"

When they finished their cocoa, Laurie followed Dot upstairs, and Dot dug around in the dresser in her bedroom and eventually came out with a long-sleeved pink shirt that said NIAGARA FALLS. When Laurie held it up to herself, it hung to the middle of her thighs. "Thank you for letting me come over," she said, and she put her arms around Dot, who squeezed her tight and kissed the top of her head.

"You know you always have a place here when you need one," she said.

Laurie laid the shirt on the bed and sat down next to it, listening to the furnace flip on. "It's amazing here—it's so quiet," she said finally. "I can't read over there, I can't even think."

"Well, you have a big, beautiful family that loves you very much," Dot said, "and I know that you love them." She came and sat down next to Laurie. "But they're loud, I agree."

Laurie smiled. "Really loud."

Dot raised her eyebrows. "Well, there's nobody here but you and me. You can sleep in as long as you want," she said, "and nobody will make a peep unless it's me making coffee. You might sleep until noon. You might sleep until dinner!"

"I'm so jealous," Laurie moaned. "You get to be by yourself all the time."

"I'm not by myself all the time." Dot laughed.

"Mom says you have a boyfriend," Laurie said.

"Oh, your mother is a gossip." Dot grinned. "I have lots of friends, and that's all you're getting, Nosy-Nose." She got up, went to stand in the doorway, and ran her finger over the painted wall, which was peeling a little. "I have to paint this room," she said. "Absolutely have to."

"What color are you going to paint it?" Laurie asked.

Dot was quiet, then she turned back to Laurie. "What's your favorite color?"

"Right now it's goldfish."

"Goldfish? Like orange?"

Laurie nodded. "I really love it. My mother says it makes her think of macaroni and cheese."

Dot nodded. "Well, let's paint it goldfish, then."

Laurie's eyes opened wider. "Really?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Just like that?"

"Why are you scandalized, love? It's just paint."

"I don't know. You just . . . paint your walls however, whenever you want? You don't . . . talk to anybody?"

"I'm talking to you," she said. "Who else would I talk to? It's my house. They're my walls. I can cover the entire place in zebra-stripe wallpaper if I want to. I can fill it up with sand and make a beach. Compared to that, a few goldfish walls are pretty tame."

Laurie looked all around. Her parents owned their house too, but somehow she felt certain they didn't think of it this way. She imagined zebra-stripe wallpaper. She imagined herself lying on this bed, in a zebra-stripe room, with sand on the floor, with no one around, no one yelling, no one deciding when breakfast was or when was too late for hot cocoa.

A week later, Laurie went over to Dot's and they repainted the bedroom she had slept in. They did the whole thing in a bright orange with a few red swirls Dot painted with a fat brush to make it more "goldfishy." At the end of the day, Laurie had orange specks in

her hair and on her jeans, and she told Dot it was the greatest room she'd ever seen. And while Dot lived almost thirty more years, and she repainted rooms and refinished floors and put in new countertops and renovated the bathroom two more times, that room stayed the goldfish room, always.

Chapter One

She could have missed the duck entirely. It was at the very bottom of the cedar chest, and in the manner of the princess and the pea and the stack of mattresses, Laurie might have ignored it if she hadn't pulled all the blankets out to see whether any of them seemed special.

The duck was about a foot long, made of wood, and lighter than she expected when she picked it up. She couldn't even guess how old it was, since it looked pristine, like it had barely been touched. It was without a single visible scratch, and it was worked to a finish so smooth she could make out the thinnest brushstrokes in the paint with the tips of her fingers. The colors were bright: a green head and a reddish-brown chest, a gold flush along the sides with blues and greens along the wings. Laurie stepped into the hall. "Now, why," she said, standing with one hand on her hip and

the duck in the other, "would a ninety-three-year-old woman have had a wooden duck in a chest under three afghans and a quilt?"

"To get to the other side?" June called back from the living room.

"It's not that kind of riddle."

Laurie walked with it out into the living room, where June was working through the books. Or some of the books. Aunt Dot had them in practically every corner, stuffed into floor-to-ceiling built-in shelves or sitting in stacks on the floor, in danger of tipping over. "I guess she had it for the same reason she has four feather boas and a signed picture of Steve McQueen."

"Which is what?"

"She was ninety-three. Why *wouldn't* there be a duck?"

Laurie took out her phone and snapped a couple of pictures of the duck from different angles to show her mother. "It's pretty, actually. I don't know why it wouldn't be out somewhere you could look at it. Everything else is."

Dot's whole house was an extravagant display case for the fruits of her adventures. There were postcards in patterned fabric boxes, home-movie reels in bins with labels marked in ballpoint pen, and travel souvenirs that suggested impulsive shifts in Dot's collecting philosophy. There were egg cups, spoons, and little dessert plates with scenes painted on them. She'd been to Rome, to Bangkok, to Buenos Aires and Mexico City. She'd camped in a trailer with two girlfriends in Yellowstone in the summer of 1952, and she'd wandered around China on her own in 1994, when she was in her sixties. In a photo from that trip that she must have convinced a stranger to take for her, she was next to the Great Wall, her gray hair gathered in a loose ponytail at the back of her neck. She wore a light denim jacket with a patch of Elton John's face on the arm.

Dot had tried just about everything they taught at the community college—and kept every course catalog—and her work and supplies were stacked and stored in one of the bedrooms. Ceramics, cross-stitch, knitting, scrapbooks with stenciled titles like

"Christmas 2003: Cold as Hell." Painting, sketching, calligraphy, beaded bracelets strung on fishing line. There was a big blue plastic bin at the bottom, under all the boxes of crafts, that said IN PROGRESS/UNFINISHED. Those were destined to remain so now.

There was a small stash of love letters from some of Dot's known boyfriends: Paul, the teacher; John, the chemist; Andrew, the journalist. There was also one without an envelope that was signed "M," which Laurie suspected might have been from a woman, based on the handwriting. (Again: She was ninety-three. Why *wouldn't* there be a woman?) Laurie set aside but did not read these, for the simple reason that she wouldn't want anyone to read *her* letters after she was dead. It seemed wrong, though, to throw them away, so she'd just left them in their shoebox labeled CORRESPONDENCE, SPECIAL and set it on the bed.

Laurie dropped onto the couch. "Take a break with me," she said. "I finished with the jewelry box, and I cannot start a box labeled CAMERAS AND 8-TRACK TAPES without sustenance."

"Just keep petting that duck," June said, getting off her knees and passing Laurie on her way to the kitchen. "You want an iced tea?"

"You are the best friend in the history of best friends."

"Laur, it's only iced tea."

"You know what I'm talking about," Laurie said. "I've been doing this for a week and a half, and I already have scratches all over my hands from tearing boxes open and a sore shoulder for no reason I can particularly pinpoint. And I have to be here. You're just here because you're a good person."

"I've got news for you," June said, over the sound of ice clinking into glasses. "When you're the one relative who shows up instead of just letting Goodwill take everything in the house, you are also a good person."

Laurie puffed out a breath. "It made the most sense. I didn't want everything she owned to vanish just because she didn't get married or have kids. Nobody else had the time."

June appeared with the drinks in two of Dot's tall glasses, crisscrossed with a chunky diamond pattern. "I don't know. Four brothers, and you wind up holding the bag?" she said as she sat down. "Regardless, I'm very happy to be talking to you somewhere other than FaceTime. I like seeing your beautiful face in person."

"You're very sweet, given how sweaty and disgusting I am, and I feel the same way. I thought I was going to see you in person at the wedding I didn't end up having, so I'm glad I had an excuse. Honestly, it's a particularly good time to see old friends, since everyone I know in Seattle also knows Chris, and I have no idea whether any of them likes me anymore. And even if they do, I definitely don't want them to throw me a fortieth birthday pity party based on the assumption that I have given up my last chance at happiness and will now shrivel up like a prune."

"Nobody thinks that," June said, rolling her eyes.

"Tell it to *When Harry Met Sally*."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, do you remember the part of that movie where Harry goes over to see Sally, and she's crying in her bathrobe because her ex-boyfriend, that guy who's Gerald Ford's son, is getting married?"

"That guy is Gerald Ford's son?"

"Yes. And she starts crying, and she's very depressed, and she says through these really pitiful tears, 'And I'm gonna be forty.' And he says, 'When?,' and she says, 'Someday.' That's the first punchline. The second punchline is that he says she's going to be forty in eight years."

At Laurie's expectant look, June shook her head. "I don't get it yet. Keep going."

"Well, the joke is that it's hilarious that she thinks she's washed up when she won't be forty for eight entire years. Believe me, when you watch that movie and you're going to be forty in a month, it's really different. Why can't he just say, 'Who cares? You'll be forty either way, and if you're single that's fine, and if you're married that's

fine, and by the way, Gerald Ford's son and his fiancée are also going to be forty someday'? I've always wondered why he can't just say it that way."

June raised one eyebrow. "You always wondered that, or you maybe just recently wondered that?"

"Nobody likes a smart-ass," Laurie said, narrowing her eyes. "I'm just saying it seems like they didn't have to make such a big deal out of whether she did or did not have a grand romantic destiny."

"I mean, it's a romantic comedy."

"I know. I know. I just had this moment where I envisioned myself telling Billy Crystal that I called off my wedding, and saying, 'And I'm gonna be forty.' And then I see him say, 'When?,' and I say, 'In a month,' and he just says, 'Yikes.'" June's chuckle was so good, so small and melodic. It really had been too long. "Don't laugh when I'm railing against ageism."

"I'm sorry. I just think . . . it has nothing to do with you. You wouldn't be crying in a bathrobe. You would be pouring drinks and watching a movie, you know? Meg Ryan was single and despondent. You're just single."

"Well, that's true. I mean, I feel bummed that we lost some of our deposits, and I feel regretful about the hours of my life I spent sending back gifts, but I cannot claim to be despondent."

"Well, then, be at peace. Nobody asked Billy Crystal for his opinion anyway."

Laurie said, around an ice cube in her mouth, "Did you worry about getting married before you did it?"

June looked up at the ceiling, then back at Laurie. "Not really, I don't think. I worried about the wedding DJ, and I worried about logistics, like whose family we were going to spend Christmas with and whether any of our relatives were going to flip out if I didn't change my name. But I'd been living with Charlie for a couple of years by then, so I didn't think it would be that different."

"Was it different?"

"Not really. A lot of the time, I sort of forgot that we had gone from not married to married."

"You two are amazing. It's like after you met in college, you just floated from there to here."

"Oh, hardly. I got completely freaked out when we were having Bethie. That was a whole other person puking and pooping and yelling at us all the time. *That* was different. Even though she was a good baby. And Tommy was also a good baby, very mellow and quiet, although for some reason he smelled worse more of the time. I don't know. I guess I'm saying everything's an adjustment."

"I haven't seen your kids in so long, when I walked in the other day, I was sure for a second you had traded them for other, much older kids."

"I think that sometimes, too," June said.

"Do you miss when they were babies? They were so cute."

"I liked it when they were babies," June said. "But now they're old enough that they have backpacks and frenemies and real opinions about things besides hating everything when they're tired. And that's fun, too. I'm glad they got to see you. I think after all this time, they thought you lived in Skype."

Laurie had learned to knit so she could make a blanket for Bethie, and then she never did it again. "I'm sorry I wasn't around more. I feel like I wanted to be Aunt Laurie, and I ended up being somebody they barely remember."

"That's not true. Even if it was, what are you going to do? It's a long flight here from Seattle. And you travel so much for work already."

"Yeah." Laurie picked up the duck, which had been sitting next to her on the couch. "I am so in love with this thing." She ran her thumb along its back, looked at the painted feather patterns, felt the bright green head with her fingertips. "I think it's a wood duck."

June put down her drink on a crocheted coaster on the side table. "It looks like wood."

“No, not a wooden duck, a wood duck. A kind of duck that can nest in the woods.” Laurie looked at the bottom, which was a plain light wood with a faint mark that looked like a circle with the initials CKM inside. “CKM,” she said quietly. “It says ‘CKM’ on the bottom.”

“Calvin Klein . . . Mallards?” June offered.

“Outstanding guess, but probably not. I honestly have no idea where this would have come from or why Dot would have it.”

“It’s a decoy, right?”

“Yeah. And even though I’m embarrassed by how little I knew about big parts of her life, I’m pretty sure she didn’t have anything to do with hunting.” She kept running her finger over the mark on the bottom. “Baby wood ducks can jump fifty feet out of trees.”

Laurie had been a wildlife journalist, writing about critters and bugs and birds and fish—just about everything that swam, walked, wriggled, or flew—long enough that June expected a certain amount of animal trivia. “Are wood ducks endangered? Did you spend six months chasing them across Michigan or something and then write a heartbreaking article about how they’re getting slammed by climate change?”

“Some ducks are endangered,” Laurie said, “but not these ducks, at least not right now. They were before, partly because of hunting, but then the Migratory Bird Treaty Act”—she looked over and saw that June’s eyes had gone wide—“they were protected long enough to recover.” Laurie smiled and ran her fingers down the wings. “But I did write a story for *The Outdoors* about a kind of botulism that knocked out a lot of waterfowl up in Oregon and Washington, and some of them were ordinary ducks, like this guy. So I’m not totally without relevant waterfowl experience.”

“That reminds me, you said you had an assignment in a few weeks, but you haven’t told me what it is.”

Laurie put the duck down next to her. “Turtle trafficking.”

“People traffic turtles?”

"Absolutely. They catch them in traps, gather them up, ship them off to places where they're in demand as exotic pets. Box turtles especially. So I'm going to South Carolina to meet a reformed turtle trafficker named Puppy Tavishaw who's helping the fish and wildlife guys bust them."

June stopped what she was doing. "Puppy? His name is Puppy?"

"Just one of the many things I'm looking forward to investigating while I'm embedded with *Law & Order: Turtle Unit*."

"*Spe-shell Victims Unit,*" June offered.

"Turtles are chased by two separate yet equally pokey groups. These are their *slow*-ries," Laurie said. "Please, let's stop before I start googling turtle species that rhyme with 'criminal minds.'"

June went back to her work. "Hopefully, Puppy isn't dangerous."

"I think the most dangerous part is probably the threat of getting about six million mosquito bites. That, and the fact that I have to take pictures myself, at least for online. I'm still not completely used to it. Which reminds me, wait here, I'm ready to move on to the next box."

By the time Laurie returned to the living room with the CAMERAS AND 8-TRACK TAPES box, June had put her feet up on the ottoman. "Okay, it's time to see what's in here. I found one camera on the kitchen table, so I don't know what this is." The ancient masking tape gave way easily, and the dusty flaps of the box puffed motes into the sunlight.

At the very bottom of the box, there were two short rows of 8-track tapes lined up. "So for music, our selections include Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, The Beach Boys, Fleetwood Mac, Smokey Robinson, Santana, David Bowie, and Van Halen."

"Dot listened to Van Halen?"

"Well, let's see. This is *Van Halen II*. From this label it looks like it came out in 1979. Dot would have been, what, about fifty? That tracks. I hope to still be listening to cool new music in ten years."

She picked up the tape, and found something stuffed into the cardboard sleeve. When Laurie slid it out and unfolded it, she grinned and looked at June. "It's a ticket stub. Dot saw Van Halen in Boston, at the Paradise Theater, on March 27, 1978. Opening for Journey." She handed it to June.

"Wow. My mind is completely blown. The idea of my grandmother or even my mother rocking out is so baffling to me."

"I'm clearly going to have to pick through all her music, in case she has anything else stashed in here. The rest of this bin is supposed to be cameras, but everything's in these fabric boxes." She took the lid off one, and inside were two Polaroid cameras. One looked older than any of the Polaroid cameras Laurie had ever seen, and one was the same kind of OneStep her parents had when she was a toddler. She unloaded all the fabric boxes, and she kept finding instant cameras. A total of five Polaroids, two Kodaks, and a Fujifilm. Some looked like they were of an 8-track vintage; others looked like they were probably made right before digital cameras upended instant photography. One or two looked practically current.

The last box she opened was labeled on top 2007. Laurie pulled the lid off, and inside were Polaroid photos. Long rows of Polaroids, or Fujifilms or whatever, filed with unlabeled dividers that separated them into bunches. She pulled one stack out. This was a trip to New York. The Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the marquee at Radio City Music Hall. There was a picture of Dot, then almost eighty years old and silver-haired, her beaming face pressed next to that of a man who looked about the same age, under the marquee for *Avenue Q*. There was a single word written in Sharpie in the white border under the photo: "Leo." She turned the picture around and showed it to June. "I knew she liked Broadway."

June leaned forward. "Who's Leo?"

Laurie shook her head. "I don't have any idea. She was well into her retirement by then, and I know she traveled all over with all

kinds of people. I have no idea who Leo might have been, but clearly, they were having a lot of fun together seeing the dirty puppet musical."

The rest of the box held a combination of travel pictures, pictures from birthday parties and a couple of weddings and what seemed to be a football game at the high school, and pictures of people Laurie only occasionally recognized. There was one of her mother and father, and a few that had been taken at her brother Patrick's wedding. She only vaguely remembered Dot walking around with an instant camera, stopping at every table to grab a couple of shots.

"Why do you think she packed her cameras with a box of pictures from 2007?" June asked as she went back to sorting books into boxes by type and condition.

"Maybe these are the most recent ones she had," Laurie said as she put them back into the box and picked up one of the older cameras. "I know they stopped making instant film for a while, so maybe she stopped when she got a digital camera."

"Maybe all the newer ones were naughty."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they were, but I would be surprised if she left those around for people to find. I do think there are probably more pictures somewhere." She turned the camera over in her hands. "Like, a lot more pictures."

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A LADY'S GUIDE TO FORTUNE-HUNTING

A NOVEL

Sophie Irwin

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Netley Cottage, Biddington, Dorsetshire, 1818

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"You're *not* going to marry me?" Miss Talbot repeated, disbelievingly.

"Afraid not," Mr. Charles Linfield replied, his expression set in a kind of bracingly apologetic grimace—the sort one might wear when confessing you could no longer attend a friend's birthday party, rather than ending a two-year engagement.

Kitty stared at him, uncomprehending. Katherine Talbot—Kitty to her family and closest acquaintances—was not much used to incomprehension. In fact, she was well known among her family and Biddington at large for her quick mind and talent for practical problem-solving. Yet in this moment, Kitty felt quite at a loss. She and Charles were to be married. She had known it for years—and it was now not to be? What should one say, what should one feel, in the face of such news? Everything was changed. And yet Charles still *looked* the same, dressed in clothes she had seen him in a thousand times before, with that disheveled style only the wealthy could get away with: an intricately embroidered waistcoat that was badly misbuttoned, a garishly bright cravat

that had been mangled rather than tied. He ought at least, Kitty thought, staring at that awful cravat with a rising sense of indignation, to have dressed for the occasion.

Some of this ire must have seeped through to her expression, because all at once Mr. Linfield swapped his maddening air of apologetic condescension for that of a sulky schoolboy.

"Oh, you needn't look at me like that," he snapped. "It isn't as if we were ever *officially* promised to one another."

"Officially promised to one another?" Kitty's spirit returned to her in full force, and she discovered, in fact, that she felt quite furious. The irredeemable cad. "We've been speaking of marriage for the past two years. We were only delayed this long because of my mother's death and my father's sickness! You *promised* me—you promised me so many things."

"Just the talk of children," he protested, before adding mulishly, "and besides, it isn't as if I could call things off when your father was on death's door. Wouldn't have been at all the thing."

"Oh, and I suppose now that he's dead—not a month in the ground—you could finally jilt me?" she said wrathfully. "Is that really so much more 'the thing'?"

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes flicking to the door.

"Listen, there's no point us discussing it when you're like this," he affected the tone of a severely tried man holding onto his patience. "Perhaps I should go."

"Go?! You can't possibly drop news such as this, and not explain yourself. I saw you just last week and we were discussing marrying in May—not three months away."

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"Perhaps I should have just written a letter," he said to himself, still staring longingly at the door. "Mary said this was the best way to do it, but I think a letter would have been simpler. I can't think properly with you shrieking at me."

Kitty cast aside her many irritations and, with the instincts of a true hunter, fixed only on the salient information.

"Mary?" she said sharply. "Mary Spencer? What, exactly, does Miss Spencer have to do with this? I had not realized she had returned to Biddington."

"Ah, yes, yes, well, she is, that is," Mr. Linfield stammered, beads of sweat appearing on his brow. "My mother invited her to stay with us, for a time. It being so good for my sisters to make other female acquaintances."

"And you spoke to Miss Spencer about ending our engagement?"

"Ah, yes, well she was so sympathetic to the situation—to *both* our situations—and I must say it was good to be able . . . to speak to someone about it."

Silence, for a moment. And then, almost casually, "Mr. Linfield, do you mean to propose to Miss Spencer?"

"No! Well, that is to say—we already . . . So, I thought best to—to come here . . ."

"I see," Kitty said—and she did. "Well, I suppose I must commend you upon your confidence, Mr. Linfield. It is quite the feat to propose to one woman whilst already being engaged to another. Bravo, indeed."

"This is exactly what you always do!" Mr. Linfield complained, mustering some courage at last. "You twist everything around until one doesn't know which way is up. Have you thought perhaps that I wanted to

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spare your feelings? That I didn't want to have to tell you the truth—that if I want to make a career for myself in politics, I can hardly do it married to someone like *you*."

His derisive tone shocked her. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

He spread his arms, as if inviting her to look around. Kitty did not. She knew what she would see, for she had stood in this room every day of her life: the worn chaises huddled by the fireplace for warmth, the once elegant rug on the hearth now moth-eaten and shabby, shelves where there had once been books now standing empty.

"We may live in the same town, but we're from different *worlds*." He waved his hands about again. "I'm the son of the squire! And Mama and Miss Spencer helped me to see that I cannot afford to make a *mésalliance* if I am to make a name for myself."

Kitty had never been so aware of the sound of her heartbeat, pounding a drum loudly in her ears. A *mésalliance*, was she?

"Mr. Linfield," she said, softly but with bite. "Let there be no lies between us. You had no issue with our engagement until you encountered the pretty Miss Spencer again. A squire's son, you say! This is not the sort of ungentlemanly conduct I would have expected your family to condone. Perhaps I ought to be pleased that you have proven yourself to be so utterly dishonorable before it was too late."

She landed each blow with the precision and force of Gentleman Jackson, and Charles—Mr. Linfield, now—staggered backward from her.

"How could you say such a thing?" he asked, aghast, "It is not *ungentlemanly*. You're becoming quite hysterical." Mr. Linfield was sweating thickly now, twisting uncomfortably. "I do want us to remain great friends, you have to understand Kit—"

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"*Miss Talbot*," she corrected with frigid politeness. A shriek of rage was howling through her body, but she contained it, gesturing sharply to the door with a wave of her hand. "You'll forgive me if I ask you to see yourself out, Mr. Linfield."

After a quick bob of a bow, he fled eagerly from her, without looking back.

Kitty stood motionless for a moment, holding her breath as if to prevent this disaster from unfolding any further. Then she walked to the window, where the morning sun was streaming in, leaned her forehead against the glass, and exhaled slowly. From this window, one had an uninterrupted view of the garden: the daffodils just beginning to flower, the vegetable patch, still thick with weeds, and the loose chickens picking their way through, looking for grubs. Life outside continued on, and yet on her side of the glass, everything was utterly ruined.

They were alone. Completely and utterly alone now, with no one to turn to. Mama and Papa were gone, and in this hour of most grievous need, where more than ever she wished to ask for their advice, she could not. There was simply no one left to whom she could turn. Panic was rising within her. What was she to do now?

She might have stayed in this position for several hours, were she not interrupted by her youngest sister, ten-year-old Jane, who barged in only a few minutes later with the self-importance of a royal messenger.

"Kitty, *where* is Cecily's book?" she demanded.

"It was in the kitchen yesterday," Kitty answered without looking away from the garden. They ought to weed the artichoke bed this afternoon, it would need planting before long. Distantly, she heard Jane call to Cecily to pass on her words.

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"She's looked there," came the reply.

"Well, look again." Kitty dismissed her impatiently with a flap of a hand.

The door opened and closed with a bang. "She says it's not there and if you've sold it, she'll be very upset because it was a gift from the vicar."

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Kitty snapped, "you may tell Cecily that I can't look for her silly vicar book, because I have just been jilted and need a few moments' reprieve, if that is not too much to ask!"

No sooner had Jane relayed this unusual message to Cecily, than the full household—all of Kitty's four sisters and Bramble the dog—descended upon the parlor, instantly filling the space with noise.

"Kitty, what is this about Mr. Linfield jilting you? Has he really?"

"I never liked him, he used to pat me on the head as if I were a child."

"My book is *not* in the kitchen."

Kitty told them as briefly as she could what had happened, with her head still resting on the glass. There was silence after this, as Kitty's sisters stared uncertainly at each other. After a few moments, Jane—having grown bored—wandered over to the creaking pianoforte and broke the silence by bashing out a jolly tune. Jane had never received music lessons, but what she lacked in talent she made up for in both fervor and volume.

"How awful," Beatrice—at nineteen years, Kitty's closest sister in both age and temperament—said at last, appalled. "Oh, Kitty dear, I am sorry. You must be heartbroken."

Kitty turned her head sharply. "Heartbroken? Beatrice, that is quite beside the point. Without my marrying Mr. Linfield, we are all ruined.

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Papa and Mama may have left us the house, but they also left an astonishing amount of debt. I was depending on the Linfield wealth to save us."

"You were marrying Mr. Linfield for his *fortune*?" Cecily asked, a judgmental note in her voice. The intellectual of the family at eighteen years of age, Cecily was felt by her sisters to have a rather overdeveloped sense of morality.

"Well, it was certainly not for his integrity or gentlemanly honor," Kitty said bitterly. "I just wish I'd had the sense to wrap it up sooner. We should not have pushed back the wedding when Mama died, I knew that a long engagement was asking for trouble. To think that Papa thought it would look unseemly!"

"How bad is it, Kitty?" Beatrice asked. Kitty stared silently at her for a few moments. How could she tell them? How could she explain all that was about to happen?

"It is . . . serious," Kitty said carefully. "Papa re-mortgaged the house to some quite disreputable people. The sales I made—our books, the silverware, some of Mama's jewels—were enough to keep them at bay for a while, but on the first of June they will return. Not four months away. And if we do not have enough money, or proof that we can start paying them, then . . ."

". . . We will have to leave? But this is our home." Harriet's lip wobbled. As second youngest, she yet remained more sensitive than Jane, who had at least stopped playing to sit quietly on the stool, watching.

Kitty did not have the heart to tell them that it would be worse than just leaving. That the sale of Netley Cottage would barely cover their debts, with nothing left after to support them. With nowhere to go and no obvious means of income, the future would be a dark place. They

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would have no choice but to split up, of course. She and Beatrice might find some employment in Salisbury, or one of the larger towns nearby, perhaps as housemaids—or lady's maids if they were truly lucky. Cecily—well, Kitty could not imagine Cecily being willing or able to work for anyone—but with her education she might try a school. Harriet—oh, Harriet was so young—would have to do the same. Somewhere that would provide room and board. And Jane . . . Mrs. Palmer in the town, singularly mean-spirited though she was, had always had a sort of fondness for Jane. She might be persuaded to take her in until she was old enough to find employment, too.

Kitty imagined them all, her sisters, separated and cast to the wind. Would they ever be together again, as they were now? And what if it was far worse than this already-bleak scenario? Visions of each of them, alone, hungry and despairing, flashed before her eyes. Kitty had not yet wept a tear over Mr. Linfield—he was not worth her tears—but now her throat ached painfully. They had already lost so much. It had been Kitty who had had to explain to them that Mama was not going to get better. Kitty who had broken the news of Papa's passing. How was she now to explain that the worst was still to come? She could not find the words. Kitty was not their mother, who could pull reassurances from the air like magic, nor their father, who could always say things would be all right with a confidence that made you believe him. No, Kitty was the family's problem solver—but this was far too great an obstacle for her to overcome with will alone. She wished desperately that there was someone who might carry this burden with her, a heavy load for the tender age of twenty, but there was not. Her sisters' faces stared up at her, so sure even now that she would be able to fix everything. As she always had.

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As she always *would*.

The time for despair had passed. She would not—could not—be defeated so easily. She swallowed down her tears and set her shoulders.

"We have more than four months until the first of June," Kitty said firmly, moving away from the window. "That is just enough time, I believe, for us to achieve something quite extraordinary. In a town such as Biddington, I was able to ensnare a rich fiancé. Though he turned out to be a weasel, there is no reason to believe the exercise cannot be repeated, simply enough."

"I do not think any other rich men live nearby," Beatrice pointed out.

"Just so!" her sister replied cheerfully, eyes unnaturally bright. "Which is why I must travel to more fruitful ground. Beatrice, consider yourself in charge—for I shall be leaving for London."

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2

It is not uncommon to encounter persons who are in the habit of making outlandish claims. It is rarer to meet persons who are also in the habit of fulfilling them, and it was to this second group that Miss Kitty Talbot belonged.

Not three weeks after that gloomy morning in the parlor of Netley Cottage, she and Cecily were rattling in a stagecoach on their way to London. It was an uncomfortable journey of three days spent jiggling in their seats, accompanied by an assortment of persons and poultry, the Dorsetshire countryside fading slowly from view as they passed through county after county. Kitty spent much of the time staring out of the window—by the end of the first day, she was the furthest she had ever traveled from home.

Kitty had known for a long time that she would have to marry rich, but she had quite counted upon being able to do so whilst remaining close to Biddington, and to her family, with the Linfield match plotted and executed with her mother. In the weeks and months following her mother's death, she had been all the more grateful to have already wrapped up her future so neatly with Mr. Linfield, who lived nearby. In the darkest of times, to know that she did not need to leave her family's

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side for a single moment was a gift indeed, and yet now she had left most of her sisters far behind. With every mile the stagecoach put between them and Biddington, the anxious knot in her chest grew larger. This was the right decision—the only decision—Kitty could make for her family, but it felt so very wrong to be without them.

What a fool she had been, to trust in Mr. Linfield's honor—and yet she still could not understand how he had so quickly fallen out of love with her. Miss Spencer was pretty, yes, but dull as a fish; it did not make sense for it to have happened so quickly. Besides, she had thought that the rest of the Linfields had not been overly fond of Miss Spencer. What was Kitty missing?

"What a *fool*," she said again, out loud this time. Beside Kitty, Cecily shot her an affronted look, and she added, "Not you, me. Or rather, Mr. Linfield."

Cecily returned to her book with a huff. Once the heavy tome given to her by the vicar had been found, she had insisted on bringing it with her, despite Kitty pointing out that a book of its size and heft might not be the choicest companion on a hundred-mile journey.

"Do you want me to be miserable in every way, Kitty?!" Cecily had asked her dramatically. The honest answer at that moment—standing hot-faced over her sister's hulking case—was *yes*, but Kitty had capitulated and was resigned to lugging the absurd cargo all the way to London. She cursed again her father's ridiculous and expensive decision to send Cecily to be educated at the Bath Seminary for Young Ladies for two years. It had been entirely motivated by a desire to keep up with the local gentry—the Linfields in particular—and all Cecily seemed to have gained in her time there was an inflated sense of her own intellectual superiority. Yet despite her passionate defense of the book,

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Cecily had not been paying it much attention, instead she bothered Kitty with the same questions that had obsessed her the whole trip.

"Are you quite sure that you understood Aunt Dorothy's letter correctly?" she whispered now, finally taking heed of Kitty's repeated rebuke not to share their private business with the entire carriage.

"How else could it be understood?" Kitty hissed back, not a little irately. She sighed, calmed her voice, and explained again with a passable imitation of patience. "Aunt Dorothy knew Mama when they both worked at the Lyceum Theater. They were very close—Mama used to read her letters aloud to us, do you remember? I wrote asking for her help, and Aunt Dorothy has offered to introduce us to London society."

Cecily harrumphed.

"And how can you be sure that Aunt Dorothy is a respectable woman, with good Christian morals? We might be walking into a den of iniquity for all you know!"

"I must say, I do not think the time you have been spending with the vicar has done you any good at all," Kitty told her severely. Privately, though, she too harbored a few fears about Aunt Dorothy, though Mama had always insisted she was very respectable. But it would do no good to confide in Cecily, when Aunt Dorothy truly was their only option. "Aunt Dorothy is the only person of our acquaintance with a residence in London. Papa's family are all on the Continent now—not that they would have helped us anyway—and she was kind enough to pay for our travel, too. We cannot turn up our noses at her aid."

Cecily still looked unconvinced, and Kitty leaned back into the seat with a sigh. Both of them would have preferred Beatrice to accompany Kitty on this mission, but at the end of Aunt Dorothy's letter had been a clear instruction: *Bring your prettiest sister.* And as Beatrice was

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currently—by her own admission—half girl, half forehead, and Cecily was the possessor of a sweet prettiness very much contrary to her sulky nature, she was the obvious choice. That she was also a complete bore, Kitty hoped would not matter. Kitty comforted herself with the thought that Beatrice was a far better person with whom to leave the management of the house and the younger girls. If it had been Cecy in her stead, by the time they returned there would be no house left to save.

"I still think our efforts would be better spent finding honest, gainful employment," Cecily was now saying. "With my education, I would make a very fine governess."

There was a pause while Kitty considered the horror of placing the responsibility of the family's finances in Cecily's hands.

"Be that as it may," Kitty said in a low, careful voice, "the going rate for a governess is not more than five and thirty pounds a year. Not nearly enough, I'm afraid. My marrying someone rich really is the quickest way out of our mess."

Cecily opened her mouth—presumably about to utter another judgmental but entirely useless comment—but before she could they were interrupted by a small boy in the forward seat telling his mother loudly, "Mama, we're here!"

And sure enough, peering out of the window, they could see London's great sprawl on the horizon, long plumes of smoke trailing into the sky above it like beacons. Kitty had heard so many tales of London, which had been spoken of wistfully by her parents like a great friend they had lost. They had told her of its height and breadth, of its beauty and regality, of its bustle and opportunity—the queen of cities, they had called it. Kitty had long desired to see it for herself, this alien country that seemed to be the first love—and real home—of both her

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parents. And as they began to trundle through the city in earnest, her first impression of it was . . . dirty. With soot everywhere, smoke billowing from chimneys high above, horse droppings left in the street. Dirty and—and *messy*, with streets crashing into each other rudely, before zigzagging off in another direction. Buildings teetering at bizarre angles—buildings that were not always square, or rectangular, but haphazardly drawn, as if by a child. And it was bustling, yes, but loudly—so loudly! With the incessant sound of wheels and hooves clacking over pavements, yells from street peddlers, and a sense of hurry hurry hurry all around them. It was loud, and messy, and dirty, demanding of attention and respect and so very—

"*Magnificent*," she breathed. "Cecily, we're here at last."

At Piccadilly, they swapped the stagecoach for a hackney cab, which took them to Aunt Dorothy's residence on Wimpole Street. Kitty could not yet tell the difference between fashionable and unfashionable boroughs in London, but was pleased that, though Aunt Dorothy's street was not nearly as grand as some of the lofty mansions they had passed, it seemed sufficiently well-to-do to spare her any blushes. The cab halted in front of a narrow town house, squashed in between two others, and after Kitty had parted with a precious coin, they walked up the steep steps, and knocked. The door was answered by a housemaid with bright red hair—how thrilling to see that Aunt Dorothy had actual servants—and they were taken up to a small parlor containing their honorary aunt.

Despite Kitty's careless dismissal of Cecily's doubts on the journey, she had harbored a secret fear that they might be greeted by a heavily made-up female, complete with a comical wig, a bawdy laugh and damp petticoats, which would not at all do for what Kitty had in mind. She

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was relieved, then, to see a striking woman of fashion within, her generous figure encased neatly in a morning dress of dove gray. Her brown locks were uncovered, but the informal style suited her—there was a cunning glint to her eye which would ill suit a sedate bonnet or widow's cap. Aunt Dorothy rose from her chair. She stood still, surveying them for a moment from under dramatically dark brows. Kitty and Cecily held their breath, both quite uncharacteristically nervous. Then—a smile. She held out two bejeweled hands.

"My darlings, you look so much like your mother," she said. And they fell into her arms.

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Aunt Dorothy had squeezed many lives and roles into her one and fifty years. As an actress, she had enjoyed a varied and glittering career onstage, while offstage, she had spent her hours entertaining a selection of London's most generous gentlemen. Having accumulated a not inconsiderable sum of money in this manner, upon her forty-first birthday she had dyed her fiery red hair a dark brown and rechristened herself, in both name and conduct, as affluent widow Mrs. Kendall. As Mrs. Kendall she began to enjoy a different lifestyle on the fringes of polite society, spending her days in houses that—as a young lady—she had only spent evenings. Though Kitty had worried Aunt Dorothy's storied past could very well be more hindrance than help—after all, actresses were hardly considered respectable—from her deportment it was clear that her transformation to a lady of quality was unerring. Seeing her, Kitty felt surer that Aunt Dorothy would be able to guide them through their next steps in London, to lend wisdom to Kitty's pursuit

of a fortune. But though Kitty had a thousand questions to ask her aunt, for their first few hours together, all they spoke of was their mother.

"I should have liked to come to her funeral," Mrs. Kendall told them fervently. "You must know that I would have come, but your father thought . . . it might not be wise."

Kitty understood this vague explanation perfectly. In a better world, it would have meant everything to have Aunt Dorothy there with them—to share stories of Mama's life before, so they might still learn new things of her even as she was gone. But Mr. Talbot had acted in the family's best interests by keeping Aunt Dorothy away. Her presence might have raised questions . . . and some things were best left in the past.

"It was a beautiful day," Kitty said instead, clearing her throat. "Crisp and cool. She would have loved it."

"You never could keep her inside if the sky was bright," Aunt Dorothy said, her smile pained but sincere. "No matter the day."

"I did a reading," Cecily piped up. "From *The Book of the Duchess*—her favorite." No one had understood a word of it, of course, Kitty reflected privately, but Cecily had read clearly and well.

They spent many more hours exchanging memories, their chairs inching together, their hands clasping at points, growing closer in that sure, inexorable way people do when they have shared in such a loss together. By the time conversation turned at last to Kitty's broken engagement, the sky outside was dark.

"You were quite right to come," Aunt Dorothy reassured Kitty, pouring three liberal glasses of ratafia. "London is just the place—what a disastrous thing it would be to commit yourself to Bath or Lyme Regis at such an hour. Consider me your fairy godmother, my darlings.

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I am quite sure we can sort an excellent match for each of you in just a few short weeks."

Cecily's attention—which had wandered a little—shot back to the present. She looked at Kitty with wide, accusing eyes.

"Aunt Dorothy, it is only I who shall be making a match," Kitty said firmly. "Cecily is too young."

Aunt Dorothy looked surprised. "Are you quite sure? Would it not be wise to find husbands for you both?"

"Quite sure," Kitty affirmed. Cecily breathed a sigh of relief.

Aunt Dorothy looked unconvinced but rallied almost immediately. "I suppose she can still help us catch the flies, then!" she declared. "We have much to do first, mind. We must sort your clothes, your hair, your . . ." She gave a waft of her hand that seemed to encompass everything about them. "And there is not a day to lose—the Season is about to begin."

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Chapter i

Carlota

THEY'D BE ARRIVING that day, the two gentlemen, their boat gliding through the forest of mangroves. The jungle teemed with noises, birds crying out in sonorous discontent as if they could foretell the approach of intruders. In their huts, behind the main house, the hybrids were restless. Even the old donkey, eating its corn, seemed peevish.

Carlota had spent a long time contemplating the ceiling of her room the previous night, and in the morning her belly ached like it always did when she was nervous. Ramona had to brew her a cup of bitter orange tea. Carlota didn't like when her nerves got the best of her, but Dr. Moreau seldom had visitors. Their isolation, her father said, did her good. When she was little she'd been ill, and it was important that she rest and remain calm. Besides, the hybrids made proper company impossible. When someone stopped at Yaxaktun it was either Francisco Ritter, her father's lawyer and correspondent, or Hernando Lizalde.

Mr. Lizalde always came alone. Carlota was never introduced to him. Twice she'd seen him walking from afar, outside the house, with her father. He left quickly; he didn't stay the night in one of the guest rooms. And he didn't visit often, anyway. His presence was mostly felt in letters, which arrived every few months.

Now Mr. Lizalde, who was a distant presence, a name spoken but never manifested, was visiting and not only visiting but he'd be bringing with him a new mayordomo. For nearly a year since Melquíades

had departed, the reins of Yaxaktun had been solely in the hands of the doctor, an inadequate situation since he spent most of his time busy in the lab or deep in contemplation. Her father, however, didn't seem inclined to find a steward.

"The doctor, he's too picky," Ramona said, brushing the tangles and knots out of Carlota's hair. "Mr. Lizalde, he sends him letters, and he says here's one gentleman, here's another, but your father always replies no, this one won't do, neither will the other. As if many people would come here."

"Why wouldn't people want to come to Yaxaktun?" Carlota asked.

"It's far from the capital. And you know what they say. All of them, they complain it's too close to rebel territory. They think it's the end of the world."

"It's not that far," Carlota said, though she understood the peninsula only by the maps in books where distances were flattened and turned into black-and-white lines.

"It's mighty far. Makes most people think twice when they're used to cobblestones and newspapers each morning."

"Why did you come to work here, then?"

"My family, they picked me a husband but he was bad. Lazy, did nothing all day, then he beat me at night. I didn't complain, not for a long time. Then one morning he hit me hard. Too hard. Or maybe as hard as every other time, but I wouldn't take it any longer. So I grabbed my things and I went away. I came to Yaxaktun because nobody can find you here," Ramona said with a shrug. "But it's not the same for others. Others want to be found."

Ramona was not quite old; the lines fanning her eyes were shallow, and her hair was speckled with a few strands of gray. But she spoke in a measured tone, and she spoke of many things, and Carlota considered her very wise.

"You think the new mayordomo won't like it here? You think he'll want to be found?"

"Who can tell? But Mr. Lizalde's bringing him. It's Mr. Lizalde who's ordered it and he's right. Your father, he does things all day

but he never does the things that need done, either." Ramona put the brush down. "Stop fretting, child, you'll wrinkle the dress."

The dress in question was decorated with a profusion of frills and pleats, and an enormous bow at the back instead of the neat muslin pinafore she normally wore around the house. Lupe and Cachito were giggling at the doorway, looking at Carlota, as she was primped like a horse before an exhibition.

"You look nice," Ramona said.

"It itches," Carlota complained. She thought she looked like a large cake.

"Don't pull at it. And you two, go wash your faces and those hands," Ramona said, punctuating her words with one of her deadly stares.

Lupe and Cachito moved aside to let Ramona by as she exited the room, grumbling about all the things she had to do that morning. Carlota sulked. Father said the dress was the latest fashion, but she was used to lighter frocks. It might have looked pretty in Mérida or Mexico City or some other place, but in Yaxaktun it was terribly fussy.

Lupe and Cachito giggled again as they walked into the room and took a closer look at her buttons, touching the taffeta and silk until Carlota elbowed them away, and then they giggled again.

"Stop it, both of you," she said.

"Don't be mad, Loti, it's just you look funny, like one of your dollies," Cachito said. "But maybe the new mayordomo will bring candy and you'll like that."

"I doubt he'll bring candy," Carlota said.

"Melquíades brought us candy," Lupe said, and she sat on the old rocking horse, which was too small for any of them now, and rocked back and forth.

"Brought *you* candy," Cachito complained. "He never brought me none."

"That's because you bite," Lupe said. "I've never bitten a hand."

And she hadn't, that was true. When Carlota's father had first brought Lupe into the house, Melquíades had made a fuss about it,

said the doctor couldn't possibly leave Carlota alone with Lupe. What if she should scratch the child? But the doctor said not to worry, Lupe was good. Besides, Carlota had wanted a playmate so badly that even if Lupe had bitten and scratched, she wouldn't have said a word.

But Melquíades never took to Cachito. Maybe because he was more rambunctious than Lupe. Maybe because he was male, and Melquíades could lull himself into a sense of safety with a girl. Maybe because Cachito had once bitten Melquíades's fingers. It was nothing deep, no more than a scratch, but Melquíades detested the boy, and he never let Cachito into the house.

Then again, Melquíades hadn't liked any of them much. Ramona had worked for Dr. Moreau since Carlota was about five years old, and Melquíades had been at Yaxaktun before that. But Carlota could not recall him ever smiling at the children or treating them as anything other than a nuisance. When he brought candy back, it was because Ramona asked that he procure a treat for the little ones, not because Melquíades would have thought to do it of his own volition. When they were noisy, he might grumble and tell them to eat a sweet and go away, to be quiet and let him be. There was no affection for the children in his heart.

Ramona loved them and Melquíades tolerated them.

Now Melquíades was gone, and Cachito slipped in and out of the house, darting through the kitchen and the living room with its velvet sofas, even stabbing at the keys of the piano, ringing discordant notes from the instrument when the doctor was not looking. No, the children didn't miss Melquíades. He'd been fastidious and a bit conceited on account of the fact that he'd been a doctor in Mexico City, which he thought a great achievement.

"I don't see why we need a new mayordomo," Lupe said.

"Father can't manage it all on his own, and Mr. Lizalde wants it all in perfect order," she said, repeating what she'd been told.

"What does the mister care how he manages it or not? He doesn't live here."

Carlota peered into the mirror and fiddled with the pearl necklace,

which, like the dress, had been newly imposed on her that morning to assure she looked prim and proper.

Cachito was right: Carlota did resemble one of her dollies, pretty porcelain things set on a shelf with their pink lips and round eyes. But Carlota was not a doll, she was a girl, almost a lady, and it was a bit ridiculous that she must resemble a porcelain, painted creation.

Ever the dutiful child, though, she turned from the mirror and looked at Lupe with a serious face.

"Mr. Lizalde is our patron."

"I think he's nosy," Lupe said. "I think he wants that man to spy on us and tell him everything we do. Besides, what does an Englishman know about managing anything here? There are no jungles in England, all the books in the library show snow and cold and people going around in carriages."

That was true enough. When Carlota peered into books—sometimes with Cachito and Lupe looking with interest over her shoulder—magic lands of make-believe spread before her eyes. England, Spain, Italy, London, Berlin, and Marseille. They seemed like made-up names to her, jarring in comparison with the names of the towns in the Yucatán. Paris especially surprised her. She tried to say the name slowly, the way her father did. *Paree,* he said. But it wasn't merely the way he said it, it was the knowledge behind it. He had lived in Paris, he had walked its streets, and therefore when he said Paris he was invoking a real place, a living metropolis, whereas Carlota knew only Yaxaktun, and though she might conjugate her verbs correctly—*Je vais à Paris*—the city was never real for her.

Paris was the city of her father, but it wasn't her city.

She did not know the city of her mother. An oval painting hung in Father's room. It showed a beautiful blond woman wearing an off-shoulder ball gown and sparkling jewels around her neck. This, however, was not her mother. This was the doctor's first wife. He'd lost her and a baby girl; a fever took them. And then, afterward, in his grief, the doctor had acquired a lover. Carlota was the doctor's natural daughter.

Ramona had been at Yaxaktun for many years, but even she could not tell Carlota her mother's name or what she looked like.

"There was a woman, dark and pretty," she told Carlota. "She came by one time and the doctor was expecting her; he received her and they talked in the little parlor. But she came round only that one time."

Her father was reluctant to paint a more detailed picture. He said, simply, that they had never wed and Carlota had been left with him when her mother went away. Carlota suspected this meant her mother had married another man and had a new family. Carlota might have brothers and sisters, but she could not meet them.

"Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old," her father said, reading the Bible with great care. But he was both mother and father to her.

As for her father's family, the Moreaus, she knew none of them, either. Her father had a brother but he lived across the sea, in distant France. It was the two of them, and that was enough for her. Why would she need anyone but her father? Why would she want Paris or her mother's town, wherever it might be?

The one place that was real was Yaxaktun.

"If he brings candy, I won't care if he's nosy," Cachito said.

"The doctor will show him the laboratory," Lupe said. "He's kept himself there all week, so he must have something to show them."

"A patient?"

"Or equipment or something. I bet it's more interesting than candy. Carlota is going into the laboratory. She'll tell us what it is."

"Are you really?" Cachito asked.

He had been pushing an old wooden train across the floor, but now he turned to Carlota. Lupe had stopped rocking her horse. They both waited for an answer.

"I'm not sure," Carlota said.

Mr. Lizalde owned Yaxaktun; he paid for Dr. Moreau's research. Carlota supposed that if he wanted to see her father's lab, he would. And they might show it to the mayordomo, too.

"I am. I heard the doctor talking to Ramona about it. Why do you think they got you in that dress?" Lupe asked.

"He's said I might receive our guests and walk with them, but nothing is certain."

"I bet you get to see. You have to tell us if you do."

Ramona, walking down the hallway, paused to look into the room. "What are you still doing here? Go wash your faces!" she yelled.

Cachito and Lupe knew when their merriment was at an end, and they both scampered away. Ramona looked at Carlota and pointed a finger at her. "Now don't move from this spot."

"I won't."

Carlota sat down on the bed and looked at her dollies, at their curly hair and long eyelashes, and she tried to smile like the dolls smiled; their tiny mouths with a cupid's bow looked perfectly pleasant.

She grasped the ribbon in her hair, twisting it around a finger. All she knew of the world was Yaxaktun. She'd never seen anything beyond it. All the people she knew were the people there. When Mr. Lizalde chanced to appear in their home, he was, in her mind, as fantastical as those etchings of London and Madrid and Paris.

Mr. Lizalde existed and yet he didn't exist. On the two occasions on which she'd glimpsed him he had been but a figure in the distance, walking outside the main house, talking to her father. But during this visit she would be up close to him, and not just to him, but to the would-be mayordomo. Here was an entirely new element that would soon be introduced into her world. It was like when Father spoke of foreign bodies.

To soothe herself she took a book from the shelf and sat in her reading chair. Dr. Moreau, wishing to cultivate a scientific disposition in his daughter, had gifted Carlota with numerous books about plants and animals and the wonders of biology so that, in addition to the fairy tales of Perrault, Carlota could be exposed to more didactic texts. Dr. Moreau would not tolerate a child who knew only "Cendrillon" or "Barbe Bleue."

Carlota, always agreeable, read everything her father put in front

of her. She had enjoyed *The Fairy Tales of Science: A Book for Youth,* but *The Water Babies* scared her. There was one moment in which poor Tom, who had been miniaturized, met some salmon. Even though the book assured her salmon "are all true gentlemen"—and even though they were more polite than the vicious old otter Tom had previously run into—Carlota suspected they would eat Tom at the slightest provocation. The whole book was full of such dangerous encounters. Devour or be devoured. It was an infinite chain of hunger.

Carlota had taught Lupe to read, but Cachito stumbled over his letters, jumbling them in his head, and she had to read out loud to him. But she had not read *The Water Babies* to Cachito.

And when her father said Mr. Lizalde would be visiting, along with a gentleman, she could not help but think of the terrible salmon in the book. And yet, rather than turn away from the image, she stared at the illustrations, at the otter and the salmon and the horrid monsters that inhabited its pages. Though they were all getting too big for children's tales, the book still fascinated her.

Ramona returned after a while, and Carlota put the book away. She followed the woman into the sitting room. Carlota's father was not much for fashion, so the furnishings of the house had never concerned him, and they consisted mostly of the old, heavy furniture that the previous owner of the ranch had brought, supplemented by a few choice artifacts the doctor imported through the years. Chief among these was a French clock. It struck a bell upon the hour, and its sounds never failed to delight Carlota. It amazed her that such precise machinery could be produced. She pictured the gears turning inside its delicate, painted shell.

As she stepped forward into the room she wondered if they could hear her heart beating, like the song of the clock.

Her father turned toward her and smiled. "Here is my housekeeper with my daughter. Carlota, come here," he said. She hurried to her father's side, and he placed a hand on her shoulder as he spoke. "Gentlemen, may I present my daughter, Carlota. This is Mr. Lizalde and this here is Mr. Laughton."

"How do you do?" she said, automatically, like the well-trained parrot that slept in its cage in the corner. "I trust your trip has been pleasant."

Mr. Lizalde's whiskers had a bit of gray in them, but he was still younger than her father, whose eyes were bracketed with deep wrinkles. He was dressed well, in a gold brocade waistcoat and a fine jacket, and dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief as he smiled at her.

Mr. Laughton, on the other hand, did not smile at all. His jacket was of brown and cream wool tweed, with no embellishments, and he wore no vest. She was struck by how young and dour-looking he seemed. She'd thought they'd get someone like Melquíades, a man balding at the temples. This fellow had all his hair, even if it was a bit shaggy and untidy. And how light his eyes were. Gray, watery eyes.

"We're doing well, thank you," Mr. Lizalde said, and then he looked at her father. "Quite the little princess you have there. I think she might be of an age with my youngest child."

"You have many children, Mr. Lizalde?" she asked.

"I have a son and five daughters. My boy is fifteen."

"I am fourteen, sir."

"You're tall, for a girl. You might be as tall as my boy."

"And bright. She's been schooled in all the proper languages," her father said. "Carlota, I was trying to assist Mr. Laughton here in a matter of translation. Could you tell him what *natura non facit saltus* means?"

The "proper" languages she'd learned indeed, though the smattering of Mayan she spoke she had not obtained through her father. She'd learned from Ramona, as had the hybrids. She was, officially, their housekeeper. Unofficially she was a teller of tales, an expert in every plant that grew near their house, and more.

"It means nature does not make leaps," Carlota replied, fixing her eyes on the young man.

"Right. And can you explain the concept?"

"Change is incremental. Nature proceeds little by little," she

declaimed. Her father asked questions such as these frequently, and the answers were easy, like practicing her scales. It soothed her fragile nerves.

"Do you agree with that?"

"Nature, perhaps. But not man," she said.

Her father patted her shoulder. She could feel him smiling without having to look at him.

"Carlota will guide us to my laboratory. I'll show you my research and prove the point," her father said.

In its corner the parrot opened an eye and watched them. She nodded and bid the gentlemen follow her.

We hope you've enjoyed this excerpt of *THE DAUGHTER OF DOCTOR MOREAU* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com here.

DELE WEDS DESTINY

a novel

TOMI OBARO

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
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Prologue

In the photo they are eating something out of frame, pounded yam, perhaps, or maybe eba. They hadn't bothered to take off their graduation robes; they were ravenous, tired from the heat; their bottoms sore from the plastic chairs they had sat in for hours; their feet swollen from the high-heeled shoes they had worn for the ceremony. Funmi sits on the left. She had pinned a yellow flower to her graduation cap so her loose, bouncy curls, courtesy of Mama Fatima's hair rollers and not, as many people seemed to think, a biological gift from her late Lebanese mother, frame her face just so. Enitan sits in the middle, her hand hiding her laugh. She had gotten her hair relaxed as well, but the results were not as striking. She was glad that her graduation cap added volume to what was now chin-length, lackluster hair. She had worn powder to mute the impact of her shiny forehead and to cover the smattering of acne that dotted her cheeks. Zainab sits on Enitan's right-hand side. She wears a tight black scarf that pulls back the hair around her face, and she has twisted the ends of the scarf into a low knot at the nape of her neck so it looks like a sophisticated chignon.

Zainab and Funmi were the striking beauties of the trio—"Coke and Fanta" people would joke when they would see the three of them walking together on campus. That Enitan never got a nickname was a slight she was used to. "You attract beauty," a boy had told her once, but he had meant this quite literally; she attracted beauty only in the sense that she herself was not beautiful but her two best friends were.

Enitan had wanted to mark their graduation with some sort of pag-

eantry; she was the unabashed sentimentalist of the group, prone to easy tears. She procured a candle used when there was no light and had stuck it in the swallow since they had no cake. Funmi had rolled her eyes at first, saying it was childish, but then Zainab lit the candle and they all erupted into peals of laughter, their shoulders juddering, their stomachs aching from the strain of giggling so hard. The photo hadn't captured that moment, though, only the aftermath, when Zainab had taken the candle out and they were all eating greedily with their hands, slurping ogbono soup off their fingers.

Though well acquainted with unexpected sorrow, they were still so excitable that day, drunk with the potential they believe they have—at nineteen, twenty-one, and twenty-two, their lives stretch out before them, vast and expansive. They feel fortunate—they are fortunate.

One of them marries a good man and has four sons, four tall, dark sons with cheekbones sharp as cutlasses and milk-white teeth. She will be surrounded by so much steady and abiding affection, so unlike the love she coveted from the romance novels she read voraciously in school, with their dramatic declarations and epic back-and-forth. But then there's tragedy—the usual, ordinary, ruthlessly unromantic kind. Three strokes and just like that she has an incapacitated husband, and the looming, imminent prospect of life without him. It is so hard to think of what she will be when he leaves her. She has been wife, then mother for so long.

Meanwhile, the one who brought the three of them together suddenly leaves the country, less than a year after this photo is taken, opting to marry the first man who ever really looks at her. She had never known what it felt like to be gazed upon with rapt admiration, to say something and know that she will be listened to. It's an intoxicating feeling—this attention. For a long time, she will think it is enough to sustain her. She is wrong.

And one of them will become quite rich, as in she-has-an-apartment-in-London, shops-at-Harrods rich, as in she-also-has-a-house-in-Lekki-and-a-sprawling-compound-in-her-husband's-village rich. As in tinted-black-SUV-windows rich and walk-in-closet-full-of-brand-name-shoes-she-seldom-wears rich, as in drivers-and-servants-and-what-her-husband-does-is-ill-defined-and-definitely-involves-bribery, but-she-prefers-not-to-think-about-it rich.

These three women are essentially sisters, though Funmi would chafe at the sickly sweetness of such a term. Their love has the makings of an ancient habit; it is automatic and unyielding. And though their unexpected separation so shortly after graduation tests their friendship, they remain steadfastly in each other's lives. And now they are going to be reunited, for the first time since this photo was printed and handed out to each of them, a few days after their college graduation ceremony in Zaria, Kaduna.

CHAPTER 1

Enitan

"I THINK THEY'VE LOST OUR LUGGAGE," ENITAN ANNOUNCED TO Remi. They both watched the only item left on the carousel—a haggard, haphazardly taped Ghana-Must-Go bag—make yet another turn.

"Well," Remi said, and then she looked at her mother and they both began giggling, the unfettered, unhinged laughter of the exhausted. Their journey from New York to Lagos had been a chaotic one. Remi was supposed to have spent the night with her mother in Enitan's new apartment in Jamaica, Queens, where Enitan now lived since she had moved out of the family's two-bedroom Park Slope apartment. But Remi had decided to take the train to Queens instead that morning, slowing them down considerably.

Even when she and Remi had finally managed to get a car, they had had to endure a two-hour-long wait to get through security at JFK because everyone, it seemed, was desperate to go somewhere warm two weeks before Christmas. Then they had another three-hour wait when they got to Heathrow because their flight to Lagos had been delayed. Now, at last, they had arrived, tired, hungry, and apparently without luggage.

Still, it was good that Enitan and Remi were laughing together. That Remi had even agreed to come had been somewhat unexpected. Since Enitan and Charles had announced their intention to separate, Remi, nineteen years old, had reverted back to a younger, more beleaguered self; her eyes had rapidly filled with tears when

they had sat her down and first told her the news. They had not expected her to take it so hard. In truth the divorce had been a long time coming. Remi's departure for college had clarified that yes, this man Enitan had abruptly and dramatically left Nigeria for, while she loved him and always would in the familial sense (he was the father of her child after all), he was no longer someone she could envision spending the rest of her life with—certainly not as husband and wife. In many ways, it felt like a miracle that they had been together as long as they had. Sometimes Enitan wondered if, were it not for her utter literal dependence on him those first few years in the U.S., and the shared deep sense of mutual obligation toward the other—he for taking her away from everything she had ever known; her for doing so without complaint and even excitement—their marriage would have lasted as long as it had.

But to Remi, who was nineteen but a young nineteen, Enitan thought, a naïve nineteen, her mother was a traitor; she was breaking up their beautiful, close-knit family that had always prompted smiles from neighbors who thought that Enitan's presence in the neighborhood belied the persistent and aggressive whitening of the area. Just that morning, as Enitan kept refreshing the ride-hailing app hoping for a car to magically appear, Remi had rolled her eyes and sighed melodramatically and then suggested they take the bus so Enitan could save money for the divorce. Enitan had told Remi to cut it out and Remi had rolled her eyes again and so Enitan had slapped her reflexively. They had both stared at each other in shock. Remi began to cry. Enitan said she was sorry and then their car had come.

So yes, laughter was good and suggested momentary forgiveness, which Enitan appreciated. In general Remi had always been bad at holding grudges. And Enitan was grateful that Remi had given up a ski trip with her boyfriend's family over the winter break to attend the wedding of a girl she had only met twice. Once, when Remi was a baby and Destiny a docile five-year-old, dutifully holding on to the handle of the pram in which Remi had been lying in Washington Square Park; the second time as surly adolescents, when Funmi had come with her daughter on another occasion to the city and they

had gotten breakfast at the Waldorf Astoria. Charles had insisted on paying the bill, and Enitan had felt so embarrassed she barely spoke to him on the train ride home.

She hoped that the trip would be good. Charles was going to be spending the holiday with his sisters and their children in that giant house in Newport—that last vestige of family wealth—so if Remi was feeling guilty or traitorous there was no need for that. In fact, before Enitan had finally decided to go to the wedding, Charles, ever the gentleman, had invited Enitan to join him there for Christmas. Everything had been amicable considering, but the thought of being in that drafty house—probably built by slaves, Enitan suspected—seeing the secret, knowing smiles from his sisters, who had never liked her, and all their bratty children—loud and entitled in that uniquely white American way—made her say no. Enitan genuinely would have preferred to stay in her apartment. Alone for the first time in two decades that first night, she had climbed onto the twin bed in her narrow bedroom and cried like she hadn't cried in years. Not since her mother's funeral five years ago. Which, incidentally, was the last time she had been home.

"So, what do we do now?" Remi asked. Enitan moved a strand of hair from Remi's face. Remi automatically flinched at the gesture, and they looked at each other then, the memory of the slap still fresh.

"I wish I had some water," Remi said, stepping away slightly from her mother.

"We should be able to buy some. I have to break these bills anyway," said Enitan. "But let's sort out this luggage situation first." It was hot, stiflingly so; the overhead fans didn't appear to be doing much. The bright fluorescent lights only seemed to make the hall hotter. Fellow passengers coming from abroad were quickly shedding layers in the humidity as sinewy luggage boys finessed trolleys stacked with suitcases. Cranky toddlers cried in harried mothers' arms, a phalanx of drivers with signs for clients stood near one side while oyinbo businessmen, dressed in cargo shorts and boots as if they were going on a safari, marched toward them.

"Wrong side of the continent," Enitan wanted to mutter to them.

She checked her watch—still set to New York time. It was 3:04 p.m. there, which meant it was 8:04 p.m. here. Funmi had told Enitan that Sunday, her driver, would be coming to meet them.

"We'll report the luggage missing and then we can find Sunday and head to the house," Enitan said. She scanned the crowds looking for a uniformed official. She spotted one walking without evident purpose, a walkie-talkie attached to his belt loop.

"Excuse me!"

He didn't seem to hear her. She rolled her shoulders back. She tried to channel the aggression that felt so necessary when traveling in Nigeria. As soon as the plane had slowed to a crawl on the runway, the clicking of unbuckling seat belts began even as one of the flight attendants asked, at increasing volume, for passengers to remain seated. Her pleas were futile as men, always men, sprung out of their seats ignoring her. Enitan and Remi had exchanged a meaningful eye roll after the man in front of them leaped from his seat with alarming alacrity, opening the overhead bin to retrieve a dilapidated carry-on. That competitiveness, a singular, almost-myopic self-centeredness, that dog-eat-dog mentality, permeated every interaction with a stranger in Lagos. It was why Enitan had always hated visiting Lagos as a child. She felt unprepared, caught off guard by the demands of the city. Abeokuta was so much more tranquil in comparison.

At dinner parties with Charles's acquaintances, whenever talk turned to cities and the inevitable, slightly ostentatious comparisons of the ones his guests—fellow failed or struggling artists who had lived in Prague or Berlin or what have you—had visited, Charles would tell them that Lagos was like the New York of Africa. She knew he was just trying to draw a point of comparison for them but she still inherently chafed at the phrase, which she hated because it made Africa sound like one massive country, something a lot of Americans irritatingly seemed to believe, if not literally, then in essence. The other reason was because, if anything, Lagos was what New York wished it was at its grittiest. Lagosians were desperate in a way New Yorkers would never be. When failing meant actual

starvation, the hustling became boundless. Of course, long term, these gripes didn't really matter. As Remi never failed to periodically remind Enitan, both cities were going to sink into the ocean one day.

"Our luggage has not arrived," Enitan told the officer, tipping her head up at him in an imperious manner. She watched the officer look at the both of them, his gaze lingering on Remi, who shifted under his eyes. The stares were going to be inevitable on this trip. She was mixed ("half-caste" as they said here at home, though Enitan had learned the hard way that this was not the appropriate term in the U.S.) and tall, with a mass of red curls and freckles. No one ever assumed that the short, skinny woman, with closely cropped hair and a complexion the warm brown of a coconut husk, standing alongside Remi was her mother. Enitan had begrudgingly accepted this fact.

The officer smiled, revealing a prominent gap between his front teeth. He leaned in conspiratorially.

"You are from America?" He was still looking at Remi, smiling. Remi reddened and looked at Enitan quickly before answering.

"Yes?" she said, making it sound like a question. She always sounded less sure of herself when she was anxious. Enitan had given Remi a lecture during their layover in London about not divulging more information than necessary to strangers while they were in Nigeria.

"You know there are kidnappings. You don't want to give anybody any reason to think you have a lot of money."

Remi had rolled her eyes. "Please, Mom. You're being ridiculous. Didn't you say yourself that kidnappings are happening on the roads? Aren't we going to be in Lagos the whole time? And as soon as people look at me, they're going to know I'm not from here, so who are we trying to fool?"

Enitan had been quiet. Remi was right of course. Enitan wanted to scare Remi into being vigilant; she was distressingly lacking in street smarts, a naturally trusting person. She had been the kind of child who would engage strangers in conversation on the subway

and would say hello and goodbye as a toddler to passersby when Enitan took her on walks in the park in the middle of the day, sleep-deprived and depressed and often mistaken for the nanny.

Enitan knew her anxiety was slightly unreasonable. But traveling to Nigeria fueled her paranoia. Just the thought of going home made her deeply apprehensive and anxious—on a molecular level. The stress of it. Now that her mother was dead, there had been no strong incentive to ever go back. Not until now.

"Don't worry, fine gehl, we will get your luggage for you in no time," said the official, and though he did not lick his lips, he looked like he would have had Enitan not been standing there. Enitan cleared her throat and mustered up her strongest glare. The official's smile weakened. "Please, follow me," he instructed them. "We will go to the computer and should be able to locate your boxes." He led them away from the carousels to a booth and asked for their passports and boarding passes. He held Remi's passport up, squinting.

"Is this the same person? This small pikin?" And he smiled again at Remi and winked. This man. Enitan had had enough.

"Please, tell us where our luggage is!"

The official now eyed Enitan warily.

"No problem, no problem." He began typing on a keyboard—hen pecks, not the QWERTY style Enitan had learned to do on Charles's old typewriter when she had first arrived in New York, unable to work legally and utterly bored. To save paper, she would reuse the same sheet over and over again so at the end of her self-guided lesson superimposed lines of *see the quick lazy fox run* filled the page.

"It looks like your luggage didn't make the flight," the official said.

He printed out a paper and handed it to Enitan. "Your boxes will be coming on this flight tomorrow. You should be able to pick them up here at that time."

He smiled again at Remi.

"Welcome to Nigeria."

. . .

THEY WALKED BACK INTO the arrival hall, this time studying the signs the drivers were holding up more closely. Sunday should be here by now. She spotted him at the far end of the line.

"Sunday," Enitan said when she saw him. "How far?" They had met before briefly. Five years ago, he had picked her up from the airport and had driven her to Abeokuta the following morning—courtesy of Funmi.

"This is my daughter, Remi," Enitan said.

Remi smiled and stuck out her hand. "So nice to meet you, Uncle Sunday."

Sunday looked bewildered. He took Remi's hand tentatively, while looking at Enitan as if for permission.

All Remi's life, Enitan had told her that calling adults by their first names was rude. Mister or Ms. sufficed, though Enitan still thought those honorifics sounded so formal, so distant. They were fine for white people Enitan didn't know. Charles told Enitan he thought it would be odd for Remi to call their friends "uncle" or "aunty" if they weren't related. Enitan had fought this battle and won for a while when Remi was young, but by the time she turned eleven, Remi had abandoned the habit. She had decided it was awkward after her friends would stare at her quizzically when she told them the Indian woman with the Trinidadian accent who sometimes picked her up from school was Aunty Maya. Remi hadn't revived the practice until now.

Enitan smiled at Sunday and he took her carry-on. Then he looked behind them as if he expected the rest of their luggage to suddenly appear.

"Madam, na all your bag be dis? Where the remaining?"

"They didn't make it," Enitan said. "Don't worry, we will get them tomorrow. Let's go."

They followed Sunday out of the hall and into the humid night air. The streetlights cast a soft lambent glow and illuminated the hordes of flying insects hovering near each lamppost. Enitan used her knuckles to knead her lower back slowly. She had had to pick up extra shifts at the nursing home in order to accrue the ten days of vacation she was taking and to start saving up for the divorce.

The dull ache there was a reminder that her body was no longer cut out for such labor. As annoying as standing around and waiting for their missing luggage had been, it was preferable to sitting at the moment. And judging from the long line of traffic right in front of the airport, they would be sitting for a long time.

A zealous young man speed walked past them commandeering a luggage trolley loaded with precariously positioned suitcases. A fashionably dressed young woman wearing Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses, her phone glued to her ear, followed slowly after him.

Sunday led them to where the SUV was parked and loaded their carry-ons into the trunk. They settled into the car and immediately drove into the snaky line of traffic, succumbing to a snail's pace.

Sunday put on the air-conditioning and switched on the CD player. "God will make a way when there seems to be no way," boomed out of the speakers. Enitan recognized the cloying baritone. It was Don Moen, the American praise and worship leader whom her mother had loved so much, especially after she had gotten heavily involved in the Celestial Church and renounced all secular music. She had played this cassette tape ad nauseam.

Remi smiled. "This is Grandma's music." Enitan smiled back and squeezed her daughter's hand.

Enitan's mother, Sharon, had visited them in New York on two different occasions, and she and Remi had shared a bedroom. Her eyesight was failing, so Charles bought her a portable CD and tape player. Enitan had scavenged around Fulton Market, looking for Agatha Moses or Midnight Crew—Christian acts that at least sang songs in Yorùbá and Igbo with percussion sections that you could dance to. But her mother favored the rhythmless Americans, singing along with the machine in her bedroom until late into the evening. Charles had found it amusing, as he generally found all religious expression to be, until the upstairs neighbors began to complain. But Enitan didn't have the heart to confront her mother about the noise. Her presence in New York had been a hard-fought détente. Enitan did not want to disturb this fragile peace. And Remi loved her grandmother. The hardness Sharon had acquired in her later years melted in Remi's presence. She taught Remi how to roll meat

pies and how to cut plantain in oblong ovals. She and Remi went on walks together; Remi always so talkative, asking so many questions and Sharon happy to answer them all.

Those were perhaps Enitan's favorite memories of her mother. Obtaining Sharon's forgiveness had been such a difficult experience. When Enitan had finally gathered the courage to call her after she and Charles had eloped, the first thing Sharon had screamed into the phone was "Is he even a Christian?" He was not. Not Muslim either. Just nothing. At the time, Enitan had found this thrilling.

As the synth-laden keys began to transition into another song, Enitan knew she couldn't listen to this music much longer.

"Please, can you put on the radio?" she asked Sunday. He nodded and fiddled with the sound system until a pop song started playing.

The singer sang in Yorùbá. Remi hummed along. Enitan looked at her daughter.

"You know this song?"

Remi pretended to look annoyed. "Yes, it's a huge song, Mom. Afrobeats is global now."

"Afrobeats? This isn't Afrobeat. That's Fela and King Sunny Ade."

"This is Afrobeats too, Mom." They had finally started moving and so her voice trailed off as they began speeding toward the bridge. Enitan looked out her own window. The city sprawled before them, a maze of scattered objects indiscriminately placed together: flyover bridges, yellow Keke NAPEPs and fearless okada drivers negotiating space on the roads, weary office workers trudging to car parks, snack and newspaper vendors weaving into traffic, illuminated billboards for Milo hot chocolate and mobile phone service providers featuring cheery brown families. She looked over at Remi, whose face was plastered to the window. This was Remi's first time in Nigeria, and Enitan was surprised at how suddenly and urgently she wanted Remi to love the country. As if she hadn't left Nigeria voluntarily for a whole raft of reasons.

"Is that Makoko?" Remi asked. Enitan looked out Remi's window and saw the telltale maze of wooden huts floating above the fetid water—a few canoes with kerosene lamps illuminating the

stillness of the ocean. A structural feat, both of human ingenuity and of cruelty.

"Yes."

They sat in silence as another upbeat pop song played: "I'm looking for my Johnny," sang the artist. After two hours, the car finally slowed in front of a gate. A uniformed security guard, his AK-47 resting loosely in his right hand, waved them through. The SUV eased over a cobblestoned path. The car's headlights briefly shone on a man circling around the perimeter, huffing and puffing, wearing a tight T-shirt that clung to his convex stomach and shiny gym shorts. Behind him a woman in a long flowing buba and denim jeans was walking a tiny dog.

Sunday turned down the street and drove past imposing houses barricaded by cement walls with barbed wire festooned on top. He stopped at a yellow gate and honked the horn. The gate slowly opened forward and then back. Sunday rolled into the courtyard. There were two SUVs parked outside. The headlights from Sunday's car shone onto the house's exterior, which was an intimidating bulwark of cream brick with a coral stucco roof. Purple bougainvillea lined the walls and there were banana trees planted around the perimeter of the courtyard.

"Wow," Remi said, opening the car door and stepping out. "Beautiful." Enitan also got out of the car and stretched. They both watched the front door open.

"Enitan, is that you?"

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