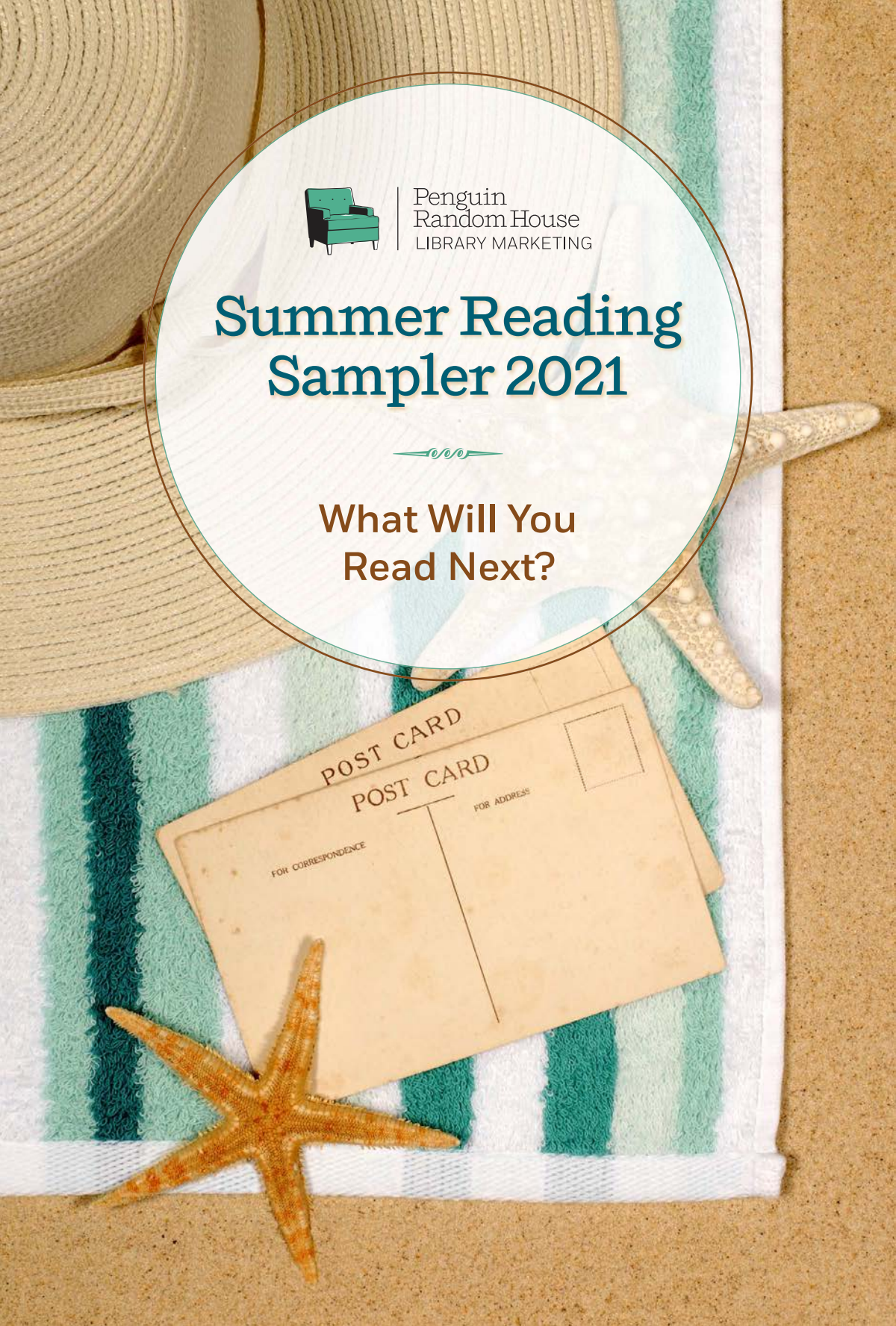
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Summer 2021 Excerpt Sampler

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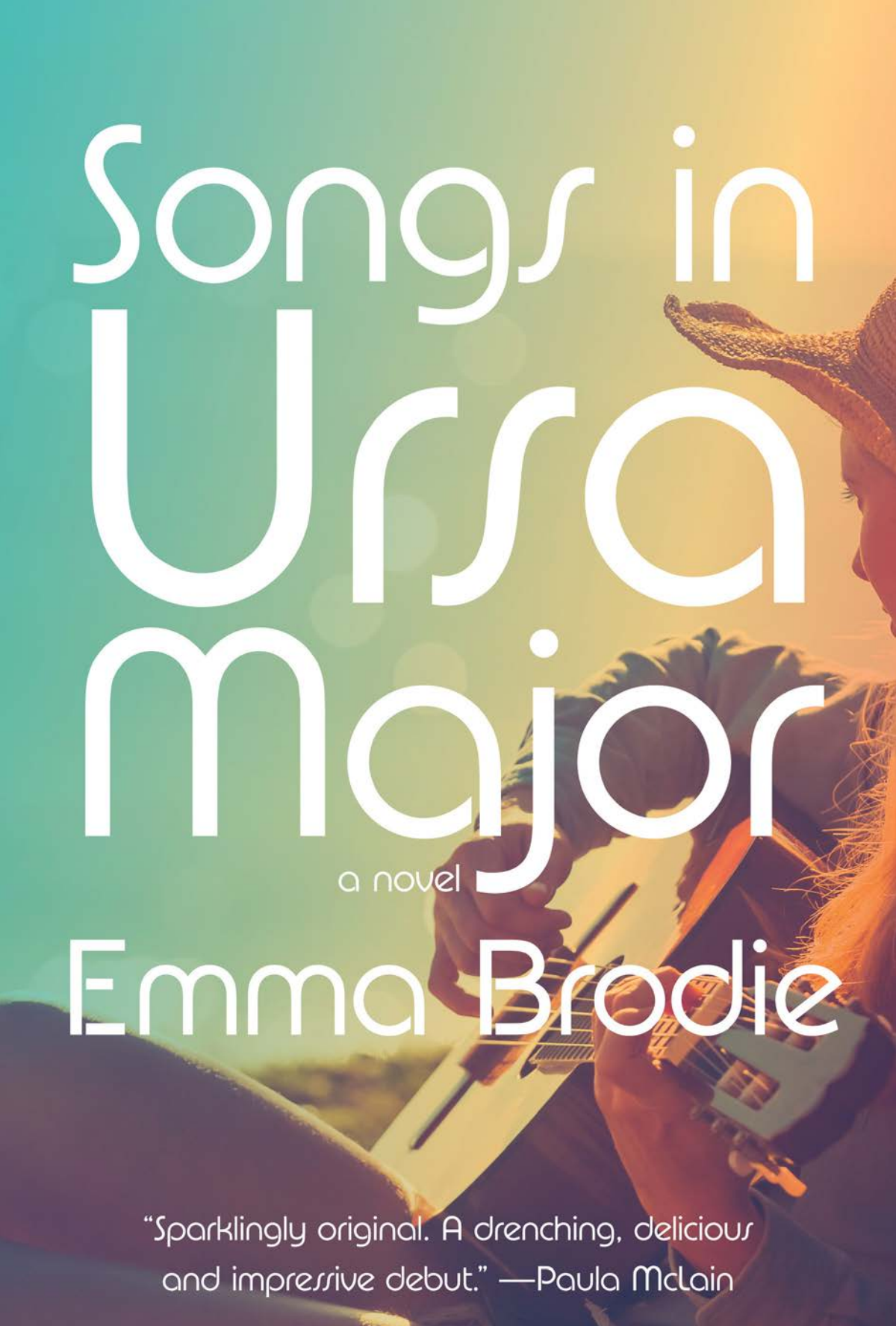

Songs in Ursa Major

a novel

Emma Brodie

"Sparklingly original. A drenching, delicious and impressive debut." —Paula McLain

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was inspired by the records produced at A&M Studios and Sunset Sound in the late 1960s to early 1970s, under labels such as Reprise Records, Ode Records, and Warner Bros. Records.

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First Edition

1

Island Folk Fest
Saturday, July 26, 1969

As a stagehand cleared the dismantled pieces of Flower Moon's drum set, the last shred of daylight formed a golden curve around the cymbal. It winked at the crowd; then the red sun slipped into the sea. In the gathering dusk, the platform shimmered like an enamel shell, reverberating with the audience's anticipation.

Any minute now, Jesse Reid would go on.

Curtis Wilks stood about thirty feet from the platform with the rest of the press. There was *Billboard*'s Zeke Felton, sharing a joint with a Flower Moon groupie in a beaded kaftan; Ted Munz from *NME,* reading over his notes under the nearest floodlight; Lee Harmon of *Creem,* trading stories with *Time*'s Jim Faust.

The Flower Moon groupie approached Curtis with the joint between her lips, eyeing the pass around his neck. It showed a picture of Curtis's face—which Keith Moon had once compared to "a homeless man's Paddington Bear"—printed above his name and the words *Rolling Stone*. The groupie offered Curtis the joint. He accepted it.

His exhale became a brushstroke inside an Impressionist painting; swirls of smoke rose in the salty air, tanned limbs and youthful faces interweaving like daisy chains across the meadow. He handed the joint back to the girl and watched her skip into a ring of hippies. Someone had a conga; thrift-store nymphs began dancing to an asynchronous rhythm.

Curtis had cut his teeth as a correspondent on the festival circuit. Berkeley, Philly, Big Sur, Newport—none of them could

touch Bayleen Island for atmosphere: the hike up the red clay cliffs, the wildflower meadow, the view of the Atlantic Ocean. There was something magical about having to take a ferry to get to a show.

As he watched the girls dance, Curtis felt a wave of premature nostalgia. There was a sense in the industry that folk was on its way out; the Vietnam War had been dragging on so long, the protest songs that had made Dylan and Baez what they were now felt empty and tired.

Curtis had come to see what they'd all come to see: Jesse Reid ushering in a new epoch for the dying genre. As if on cue, the dancing girls began to sing Reid's breakout single, their voices tremulous with excitement.

"My girl's got beads of red and yellow,
Her eyes are starry bright."

Their feverish giggles recalled Curtis to the time a young Elvis Presley had played his high school in Gladewater, Texas, back in '55. Eighteen-year-old Buddy Holly–obsessed Curtis had watched girls he'd known since kindergarten openly weep, swept away by the fantasy that Elvis might choose them. The full *Bye Bye Birdie*. That was the power of a true rock star.

Soft-spoken Jesse Reid's persona couldn't have been more different from Elvis's, but Reid seemed to inspire the same devotion in his fans. He had the cowboy baritone of Kris Kristofferson (but Reid's sounded effortless), and the lyrical guitar skills of Paul Simon—plus, he was taller than both, with blue eyes that, according to Curtis's guilty pleasure *Snitch Magazine,* were "the color of medium stonewash Levi's."

"She makes me feel so sweet and mellow,
She makes me feel all right."

"Sweet and Mellow" was a Snickers bar of a song; to hear it was to crave it. Hands down the hit of the summer, it had been holding in *Billboard*'s top ten for eighteen weeks. Curtis had been tracking

Reid since he opened for Fair Play at Wembley Stadium the previous year—but this single from Reid's self-titled album had turned him from fringe hero to mainstream sensation overnight.

And tonight, Reid would take his place as the heir apparent to folk rock.

The crowd broke into applause as a bald man with a gray beard shuffled onstage—Joe Maynard, the Festival Committee chair. The longer the audience clapped, the more pained Maynard looked. Curtis's news radar bristled.

"Yes, hello, my beautiful friends," he said. Maynard quieted the cheering with his hands.

"Well, there's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to say it," he said. "I'm afraid Jesse Reid won't be performing tonight."

Curtis felt a stab of disappointment as his mental list of feature headlines turned to ash. A visceral shock wave passed through the crowd. One by one, dreamy expressions began to wilt, a field of dandelions turning white with anger, ready to blow.

And then they did. Cries of outrage rang the twilight like a bell. The girls who had been singing and dancing a moment before collapsed into sobs. Maynard shrank behind the mic.

"But we've got a great act for you up next—it'll just be a few minutes now," he said, sweat gleaming at his temples. A second roar from the crowd buffeted him into the wings.

Curtis edged toward the platform. Something must have just happened—he'd seen Reid's A&R man backstage after Curtis had interviewed Flower Moon. Maybe Reid had gotten too drunk to go on. Maybe he'd lost it backstage. The festival tonight was performance number thirty-six in a sixty-arena global tour. Sometimes artists just cracked; Curtis had seen it before.

He spied Mark Edison passing from the backstage area into the audience and caught his eye. Edison was a reporter for *The Island Gazette,* a local independent daily. Most of the Fest's press corps found his snide antics insufferable, but he had always been useful to Curtis.

The audience's initial dismay had given way to movement. Amidst cries from the most stalwart Reid fanatics, lines had begun to form through the crowd, pushing toward the exits.

Edison reached Curtis. He offered Curtis his flask—warm gin. They both drank deeply.

"What's happening back there?" said Curtis. "Where's Reid?"

Edison shook his head. They stepped aside as two girls thundered by, ripping up the PEACE LOVE JESSE sign they carried like a banner. Curtis did not envy the band about to perform to this mob.

"Who's going on?" said Curtis. "Someone from tomorrow's lineup?" Mark shook his head.

"It's a local band—the Breakers," said Mark.

"I don't know them," said Curtis. "What's their label?"

"Label?" said Mark. "They don't have one. They're just a bunch of kids. They were scheduled to play at the amateur stage down the hill, and the committee just scooped them up. The biggest show they've ever played is forty, fifty people."

"Holy shit," said Curtis. This was going to be a train wreck.

As he spoke, three young men began to set up onstage. They couldn't have been more than twenty. The drummer looked the most filled out, with a chiseled jaw, shoulder-length black hair, and almond-toned skin. He and the bassist were clearly related; the bassist looked younger, hair shorn around his chin, a red bandanna tied across his brow. The guitarist was paler, with boyish features and a somber manner. His sandy hair flopped in front of his eyes as he tuned.

"We want Jesse!" a girl shrieked from over Curtis's shoulder.

Curtis began to wonder if it wasn't better just to head back to town. The Elektra producers had rented a yacht and were hosting an after-party for industry folk. Bayleen Island was only five miles from international waters, which meant good drugs; he could be flying within the hour.

"Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid," a chant rose up in the crowd among the faithful.

As the boys checked their equipment, Curtis noticed a figure plugging in to the amplifier behind the drum set. As she straightened up, the spotlight caught her yellow hair, which hung down to her waist like a bolt of golden silk. Her clothing was simple: jean cutoffs and a white peasant shirt, an acoustic guitar strapped across

her back. Her tanned legs looked girlish as she strode center stage, but she had a woman's features: full lips, hollow cheekbones.

She glowed.

"Who is that?" said Curtis.

"Jane Quinn," said Mark. "Lead vocals and guitar."

As she got into position, the boys instinctively inched toward her. Their feet pawed the ground, like horses anxious at the starting gate.

"We want Jesse!" a hysterical girl cried out.

Jane Quinn stepped up to the mic. Curtis saw then that her feet were bare.

"Wow," she said, flushed with excitement. "Quite a view from up here."

The crowd ignored her. Those headed toward the exits continued walking, as if she wasn't there. A small contingent of Reid fans chanted his name like a descant over the din.

"Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid."

Jane Quinn tried again.

"Hi, everyone," said Jane. "We're the Breakers."

This had no impact; the crowd continued to chatter as though they were in a parking lot rather than at a concert. Onstage, the boys fidgeted in place. Jane exchanged a look with the guitarist.

"Get off the stage," a shrill voice cried above the chaos.

Jane glanced toward the drummer as though about to count off. She faltered. Curtis felt a wave of pity. How was this slip of a girl supposed to compete with one of the world's biggest stars?

"Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid."

Then Jane Quinn turned toward the crowd, squaring her shoulders. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She took a deep breath and placed a hand on the mic stand, closing her eyes. She stood perfectly still, listening. The crowd quieted half a decibel.

When she opened her eyes, there was flint in her stare. She leaned toward the mic.

"My girl's got beads of red and yellow."

Curtis's heart skipped a beat as the chorus from "Sweet and Mellow" arched over the meadow like a silver comet. Jane's bandmates exchanged mystified looks. The crowd gasped.

Had she really just done that?

"Her eyes are starry bright."

Jane Quinn surveyed the audience with self-assurance, as though to say, *I know you think you want Jesse Reid, but I'm about to show you something so much better.* It was like watching someone hold a lighter up to a monsoon. The girl was bold as fuck.

"She makes me feel so sweet and mellow."

What a range—a soprano, in the school of Joan Baez and Judy Collins, though not nearly as patrician-sounding as Collins, or as embattled as Baez. There was an untrained edge in her voice, an almost Appalachian coarseness, that raised the hair on Curtis's neck. Just gorgeous.

"She makes me feel all right."

Jane glanced at her guitarist. He gave her a nod—she had taken a leap, and they were right behind her. The root chords of the song were a simple A-major progression any practiced group could pick up. The drummer counted them in, and the Breakers began to play.

Time slowed.

"My girl makes every day a hello."

When Jesse Reid sang "Sweet and Mellow," his voice intoned the melody: no ornamentation, just his pure baritone and his guitar. As Jane Quinn sang, she cast off any memory of Reid's rendition, adding runs and grace notes as she went, as though composing the song in real time. Curtis was astounded. She made choices no other musician would have—or could have—made.

"Her eyes light up the night."

The crowd couldn't help themselves—they began to sing along. They had all come to witness a legend being born, and now they were: it just wasn't Jesse Reid.

"She makes me feel so sweet and mellow."

Curtis had been at Newport when Bob Dylan had walked onstage with his electric Fender Stratocaster. He'd been in Monterey two years later when Jimi Hendrix had lit his guitar on fire during "Wild Thing." Neither compared to this. An unknown taking over the headlining spot—a girl. They'd be talking about Island Folk Fest '69 forever.

"She makes me feel all right."

Those who had been walking away turned back. Those who had been crying smiled. They whooped and cheered and kissed and hugged. When the song finished, they lost their minds.

"Janie Q!" shouted Edison, applauding beside Curtis.

Janie Q.

"It really is a beautiful night," said Jane, as though continuing a conversation from earlier.

With that, she counted the Breakers into their next song—an up-tempo original called "Indigo" that brought to mind "White Rabbit." Curtis couldn't catch the words, but the music was hot. The Breakers had a great sound—a mix of art and psychedelic rock, all twisting notes and braying chords.

Even so, Jane's voice stole the show. Her loveliness felt personal—it was impossible to look at her and not take flight in some small part of you. As she sang, Curtis felt that true rock-star feeling—he wanted her to see him. She gave her shoulders a small shimmy, light refracting off the silken strands of her hair. Then it happened. Jane Quinn grinned right at him. He just knew it.

Hours later, as Curtis floated on the Elektra party yacht snort-

ing lines off the Flower Moon groupie's abdomen, Mark Edison received word from a source at the Island's hospital. Thirty minutes after that, *The Island Gazette* went to press with the headline: FOLK FEST'S BREAKOUT JESSE REID NARROWLY MISSES DEATH IN MOTORCYCLE CRASH AND CANCELS REMAINDER OF TOUR.

2

Jane lay in bed, listening to the wind chimes knock against the front porch. Daylight warmed her eyelids, but she kept them closed. She wasn't ready to let go of last night.

A series of images replayed through her mind: kicking her sandals at Kyle as he tuned his bass behind the amateur stage; Greg agape as he placed his snare drum into the back of a beat-up army jeep; the crowd roaring as a Fest staffer dropped them behind the Main Stage; the heat of the spotlights on her own cheeks as she walked on and realized she'd left her shoes behind; Rich's knuckles turning white against his frets when the crowd refused to quiet.

In three years of performing at the Fest, Jane had never imagined she might appear on the Main Stage. It was as much a part of her world as a tri-deck yacht docked in Regent's Cove: sure, she could see it, but it belonged to the sphere of wealth and power. Jane hadn't been scared to walk onstage last night because it hadn't felt real.

Then she'd seen Rich about to lose his nerve, and her instincts had taken over: if they wanted "Sweet and Mellow," she'd give them "Sweet and Mellow." She could still hear the sound of her own voice crackling over the loudspeakers.

The irony was that Jane had never even heard Jesse Reid's album—she knew "Sweet and Mellow" because it had been playing nonstop at her grandmother's hair salon all summer, but the album had been so overhyped (namely, by Kyle) that she'd resisted listening to it. She'd had to improvise the hell out of the verses, but in the end it hadn't mattered; she could still hear the crush of applause after she'd sung.

Knuckles rapped against her door. Jane kept her eyes closed.

"Janie." Grace walked in. "I waited as long as I could, but we have to be up-Island by eleven." Her aunt drew back the curtains, illuminating Jane's cluttered floor.

"My shift doesn't start until noon," said Jane, rolling over.

"Sorry, I know. But I have an interview at eleven-thirty—outpatient care." Grace pried open Jane's closet and tossed a starched blue uniform at her head. Jane groaned.

"Come on. Today's going to be a *big day,*" said Grace. Jane sat up. She felt a twinge of dread as the uniform slid into her lap.

Downstairs, Jane found her cousin Maggie propped up at the kitchen table, chair pulled out to accommodate her swollen belly. Their grandmother, Elsie, looked up from the stove.

"Morning," said Elsie. The kitchen smelled like lemons and burned butter.

"Good morning," said Jane, piling her hair into a bun with a comb. Maggie glared at her, then turned back to *The Island Gazette*'s front page.

"And hello," said Jane. Maggie said nothing. She was twenty to Jane's nineteen, and in golden hair, long limbs, and sun-browned skin they could have been sisters. That's where their similarities ended.

Elsie gave Jane a wink, then went back to scraping hash browns around the frying pan. She was in her early fifties, and Jane had inherited her angular features and gray eyes—though Elsie's gaze seemed otherworldly, exaggerated by her silvery hair. It had been that color for ten years, since the night Jane's mother hadn't come home.

Jane walked over to the stove and reached her fingers into the pan.

"By all means, help yourself," said Maggie, without looking up. Jane popped a hash brown into her mouth and felt the oil sizzle on her tongue. She walked to the table and read the headline over Maggie's shoulder.

"Whoa—Jesse Reid was in an accident?"

"Ugh, Jane, your breath," said Maggie, elbowing Jane into her own chair. Elsie slid a plate of hash browns, bacon, and eggs in front

of each of her granddaughters. She picked up the paper just as Grace swept in from the yard.

"Good, you're up, Janie," said Grace, replacing a watering can under the sink. She walked over to the pan and plucked out a hash brown, just as Jane had done.

"And that's where Jane gets her manners," said Maggie.

"Relax, officer, it's the last one," said Grace. She and Maggie shared a strong mother-daughter resemblance, though Grace's brown eyes creased around the corners and her hair had dimmed from time spent indoors.

Elsie let out a hoot. She folded over *The Island Gazette* and began to read aloud.

> *"While Jesse Reid was having arguably the worst night of his life, Bayleen Island favorites the Breakers had one of their best: indeed, Reid's absence paved the way for the Breakers to become a main act, and lead singer Jane Quinn was more than ready to take center stage."*

"Mark Edison wrote that?" said Jane. In six years, he'd never given the Breakers a favorable review.

"He goes on to call the Breakers a 'slowly evolving but serviceable garage quartet,' " said Maggie.

"There it is," said Jane. Elsie placed the paper on the table.

"What was it like up there?" she said.

Jane could still feel the music thrumming from her heels to her sternum, the crowd's energy washing over her in waves.

"Like an ocean," she said. Elsie's eyes twinkled, as though sharing in the memory. Grace gave Jane a weary smile.

"We should head out in a minute," she said.

A clomping noise shook the stairs as the Breakers' drummer, Greg, descended from Maggie's bedroom. In Jane's mind, Gray Gables was a grand old house; but any time she saw a man framed in one of its Victorian doorways, she was reminded that it was just a cottage.

"Morning, all," Greg said. He wore his clothes from the night

before, caked with dry sweat, his hair sticking up at odd angles. After the show, they'd stayed out drinking until last call.

"Janie Q!" he said, giving Jane a high five. "Last night was epic. Breakers for life!"

"The Breakers are derivative and trite," said Maggie.

"Mags, my chickadee," said Greg. "I know you're uncomfortable, but there's no need—"

"I told you, you can't stay here until after the baby comes, and last night you just showed up and passed out. You snored for five hours, Greg."

"You should have moved me."

"I tried. I could not. You're like a giant drunk porpoise," Maggie said. She turned to Jane. "And you brought him here."

"It's not Jane's fault," said Greg stoutly. "I'm sorry, it was thoughtless of me." He picked a hash brown off Maggie's plate. Maggie looked murderous.

"Time to go," said Jane.

"Are you heading to the Center?" said Greg. "Can you drop me at the rez?"

"You're not staying?" said Maggie.

"Can't," said Greg. "I need a shower. I need clothes. My feet are swollen—I need to rest."

"You've got to be fucking jok—" Maggie gave a little gasp. At once, the room was at attention. She was only two weeks from her due date.

"Relax," Maggie said, shifting slightly in her chair. "It's just a kick."

Greg sighed. "Wouldn't it just be easier to get married and move in?" he said.

"Not for me," said Maggie.

The Quinn women smiled. The last of their kin to marry had been Charlotte Quinn, traded as a fifteen-year-old bride to the captain of a Portuguese whaling vessel in 1846. When the whaler had landed on Bayleen Island to drop its cargo, Charlotte had stolen off inside a kerosene crate. The seven generations of Quinns who

had lived on the Island since had been called many names—harlot, witch, grandma—but never wife.

They left the house in the Quinns' ancient wood-paneled station wagon at quarter to eleven. Jane adjusted the FM dial until she came across "Yellow Submarine." She rolled down the window and let the salty air wash over her as they drove from the white cottages of Regent's Cove into the wooded roads of Mauncheake. She hummed along to the radio with tender vocal cords.

A stone's throw off the coast of Massachusetts, Bayleen Island's terrain spanned sandy beaches, wildflower meadows, farmland, and forests across its six towns: the three year-round towns—Perry's Landing, Lightship Bay, and Regent's Cove—and the sprawling "up-Island" towns—Caverswall and Mauncheake, which abutted the Wampanoag reservation.

The local population was of mixed descent, with Wampanoag, Portuguese, British, and Barbadian bloodlines as inextricably tangled as a fisherman's nets. The Island's diverse community was as intrinsic to its identity as its clay cliffs and beach plums, contributing to its broad appeal as a vacation destination.

Tourism was the Island's main industry, and each summer its population swelled to ten times its normal size. Vacationing families generally stayed in Regent's Cove and Lightship Bay, with their large public beaches, while the rich resort-goers flocked to the yacht club in Perry's Landing. The stratospherically wealthy, including several former first families, oil magnates, and the East Coast bluebloods, lived in thousand-acre Mauncheake and Caverswall estates. The locals and the vacationers interacted on a primarily customer-service basis.

As the Quinns' station wagon approached the rez's south entrance, Grace slowed to let Greg out.

"Thanks for the lift," said Greg. Grace smiled, shifting the car into reverse.

"Janie Q," Greg called, "you working the Carousel later?"

"You know it," Jane called. He waved as the station wagon pulled back onto the road.

"You can take the car back after your shift," said Grace. "I'm on for a double—I'll grab the bus."

"You sure?" said Jane. Grace nodded.

Five minutes later, they pulled into a long, paved driveway Jane knew almost as well as her own. She watched a blue-clad caregiver help a patient across the recreation lawn and felt herself go numb. Grace rolled down her window and waved to the guard at the gate.

"The Mighty Quinns," said Lewis, ushering them inside.

Housed in the palatial home of a nineteenth-century whaling magnate, the Cedar Crescent Hospital and Rehabilitation Center was an upscale private facility known among the wealthy for its state-of-the-art care and its discretion.

Grace had worked there for over a decade, and Jane had become a certified nursing assistant once she graduated from high school. She had intended to work at the Center full-time, but found that she couldn't bear to face its sterile halls every day. Bartending had turned out to be just as lucrative; but with Maggie's baby coming, they needed every extra cent, so Jane had taken a few Center shifts.

Grace pulled into the parking lot. She switched off the motor but didn't get out of the car.

Jane turned to face her aunt. In profile, Grace looked almost exactly like Jane's mother.

"What is it?" said Jane.

Grace shrugged. "I guess I didn't imagine myself a grandmother at thirty-nine," she said.

"Gran must have been about that age when she became a grandmother."

Grace shook her head. "Maggie just does whatever she wants."

"I personally can't wait to watch her have to change diapers," said Jane.

Grace laughed. "She doesn't understand. She'll never get a day off. And we're all going to be scraping by for the next couple months. Hospital bills add up."

"She wants a home birth," said Jane, but Grace wasn't listening. It wasn't just the bills, Jane knew. Commerce ground to a halt during the winter months, leaving Island locals to squirrel away as

much as they could during the tourist season. With Maggie out of commission at the height of summer, the Quinns' budget would be tight for the entire year.

"I'll feel better if I can lock in this long-term gig," said Grace, steadying herself. On occasion, the Center would match-make patients with their staff nurses if a patient needed protracted care or physical therapy. If Grace got the job, her take-home pay would more than double for the time being.

"You will," said Jane. "And even if you don't—Gran and I have Mag's clients covered at the salon. And I'll be here a few times a week, plus tips from the Carousel. We'll be fine. More than fine."

Grace nodded, but still didn't move to get out of the car.

"Is there something else?" said Jane. Grace looked at her own reflection in the rearview mirror.

"I have this uneasy feeling," she said.

"Because of the baby?"

Grace shook her head. "No . . . I think it's more to do with the Fest," she said.

Sugar rushed through Jane's veins at the memory, already growing dim amidst these familiar surroundings. "It was no big deal," she said. "Just one great night."

"This is how it starts," said Grace, getting out of the car. "One great night; then the sharks start showing up and making promises."

Jane laughed, stepping onto the pavement. "It's not going to be like that," she said. "You heard Maggie. We're derivative and trite."

"We both know that's not true," said Grace.

They crossed from the parking lot onto the recreation lawn, waving to a tall blue-clad orderly playing croquet with a patient.

"Hey, Charlie," said Jane. "See you in a sec."

The orderly nodded as they passed.

"Just be careful, whatever happens," said Grace, taking the flagstone path to the staff entrance.

"Nothing's going to happen," said Jane.

The possibility that it might both terrified and thrilled her. Music wasn't real life—it was just for fun, a way to blow off steam. If it became more than that, she ran the risk of having her heart

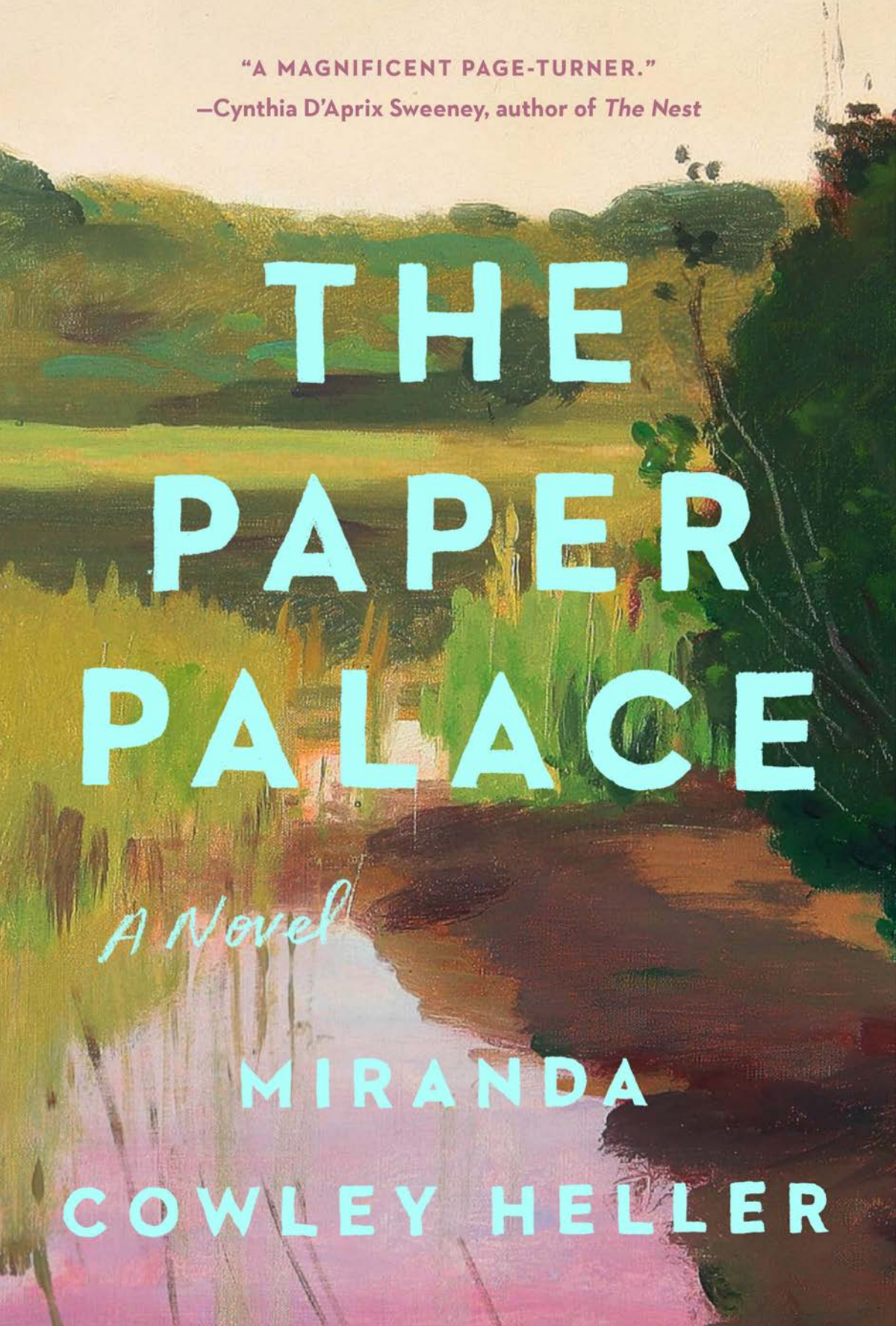
broken, or worse. Grace was right to be cautious: their family knew too well how disappointed dreams could lead to tragedy.

And yet part of Jane felt as though she'd met herself onstage last night. It had been so natural for her to sing to all those people—as if she'd been born to do it. Once you knew you could feel like that about something, was it even possible for life to continue as it had before?

"Nothing's going to happen," she repeated, more to herself than to Grace.

Grace gave her a small smile, but Jane could still trace a curve of unease around her mouth as they entered the hospital.

"A MAGNIFICENT PAGE-TURNER."
—Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney, author of *The Nest*



THE PAPER PALACE

A Novel

MIRANDA COWLEY HELLER

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1

Today. August 1, the Back Woods.

6:30 A.M.

Things come from nowhere. The mind is empty and then, inside the frame, a pear. Perfect, green, the stem atilt, a single leaf. It sits in a white ironstone bowl, nestled among the limes, in the center of a weathered picnic table, on an old screen porch, at the edge of a pond, deep in the woods, beside the sea. Next to the bowl is a brass candlestick covered in drips of cold wax and the ingrained dust of a long winter left on an open shelf. Half-eaten plates of pasta, an unfolded linen napkin, dregs of claret in a wine bottle, a breadboard, handmade, rough-hewn, the bread torn not sliced. A mildewed book of poetry lies open on the table. "To a Skylark," soaring into the blue—painful, thrilling—replays in my mind as I stare at the still life of last night's dinner. "*The world should listen then, as I am listening now*." He read it so beautifully. "For Anna." And we all sat there, spellbound, remembering her. I could look at him and nothing else for eternity and be happy. I could listen to him, my eyes closed, feel his breath and his words wash over me, time and time and time again. It is all I want.

Beyond the edge of the table, the light dims as it passes through the screens before brightening over the dappled trees, the pure blue of the pond, the deep-black shadows of the tupelos at the water's edge where the reach of the sun falters this early in the day. I ponder a quarter-inch of thick, stale espresso in a dirty cup and consider drinking it. The air is raw. I shiver under the faded lavender bathrobe—my mother's—that I put on every summer when we return to the camp. It smells of her, and of dormancy tinged with mouse droppings. This is my favorite hour in the Back Woods. Early morning on the pond before anyone else is awake. The sunlight clear, flinty, the water bracing, the whippoorwills finally quiet.

Outside the porch door, on the small wooden deck, sand has built up between the slats—it needs to be swept. A broom leans against the screen, indenting it, but I ignore it and head down the little path that leads to our beach. Behind me, the door hinges shriek in resistance.

I drop my bathrobe to the ground and stand naked at the water's edge. On the far side of the pond, beyond the break of pine and shrub oak, the ocean is furious, roaring. It must be carrying a storm in its belly from somewhere out at sea. But here, at the edge of the pond, the air is honey-still. I wait, watch, listen . . . the chirping, buzzing of tiny insects, a wind that stirs the trees too gently. Then I wade in up to my knees and dive headlong into the freezing water. I swim out into the deep, past the water lilies, pushed forward by exhilaration, freedom, and an adrenaline rush of nameless panic. I have a shadow-fear of snapping turtles coming up from the depths to bite my heavy breasts. Or perhaps they will be drawn by the smell of sex as I open and close my legs. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the need to get back to the safety of the shallows, where I can see the sandy bottom. I wish I were braver. But I also love the fear, the catch of breath in my throat, my thrumming heartbeat as I step out of the water.

I wring as much as I can from my long hair, grab a threadbare towel from the clothesline my mother has strung between two scraggly pines, lie down on the warm sand. An electric-blue dragonfly lands on my nipple and perches there before moving on. An ant crawls over the Saharan dunes my body has just created in its path.

Last night I finally fucked him. After all these years of imagining it, never knowing if he still wanted me. And then the moment I knew it would happen: all the wine, Jonas's beautiful voice in ode, my husband Peter lying on the sofa in a grappa haze, my three children asleep in their cabin, my mother already at the sink washing dishes in her bright yellow rubber gloves, ignoring her dinner guests. Our eyes lingered one beat too long. I got up from the noisy table, took my underpants off in the pantry, and hid them behind the breadbox. Then I went out the back door into the night. I waited in the shadows, listening to the sounds of plate, water, glass, silver clunking together beneath the suds. Waited. Hoped. And then he was there, pushing me up against the wall of the house, reaching under my dress. "I love you," he whispered. I gasped as he shoved himself into me. And I thought: now there is no turning back. No more regrets for what I haven't done. Now only regrets for what I have done. I love him, I hate myself; I love myself, I hate him. This is the end of a long story.

1966. December, New York City.

I am screaming. I scream and gasp until, at last, my mother realizes something is wrong. She races with me to the doctor's office, imagining herself Miss Clavel as she runs up Park Avenue, terrified, clutching her three-month-old baby. My father is racing, too, briefcase in hand, up

Madison Avenue from the Fred F. French Building. Thoughts stammering, afraid of his own impotence, now, as in everything he does. The doctor tells them there's no time—if they wait, the baby will die—and rips me from my mother's arms. On the operating table, he slices me open across the belly like a ripe watermelon. A tumor has snaked itself around my intestines, and a toxicity of shit has built up behind its iron grasp, pushing poison into my tiny body. The shit always builds up, and surviving it is the key, but this I will not learn for many years.

While the doctor is inside me, he cuts off an ovary, careless, rushing to carve the death out of life. This, too, I will not learn for many years. When I do, my mother cries for me for the second time. "I'm so sorry," she says. "I should have made him be more careful . . ."—as if she'd had the power to change my fate, but chosen not to use it.

Later I lie in a hospital cot, arms tied down at my sides. I scream, cry, alive, livid with rage at this injustice. They will not let my mother feed me. Her milk dries up. Almost a week passes before they free my hands from their shackles. "You were always such a happy baby," my father says. "Afterward," my mother says, "you never stopped screaming."

7:30 A.M.

I roll over onto my stomach, rest my head on my forearms. I love the salty-sweet way my skin smells when I've been lying in the sun—a nut-gold, musky smell, as if I'm being cured. Down the path that leads from the main house to the bedroom cabins I hear a quiet slam. Someone is up. Feet crunch on dry leaves. The outdoor shower is turned on. Pipes groan awake for the day. I sigh, grab my bathrobe from the beach, and head back up to the house.

Our camp has one main building—the Big House—and four one-bedroom cabins along a pine-needled path that hugs the shoreline of the

pond. Small clapboard huts, each with a roof pitched to keep the snow off, a single skylight, long clerestory windows on either side. Old-fashioned, rustic, no frills. Exactly what a New England cabin should be. Between the path and the pond is a thin windbreak of trees—flowering clethra, bay and wild blueberry bushes—that protects us from the prying eyes of fishermen and the overenthusiastic swimmers who manage to make it across to our side of the pond from the small public access beach on the far shore. They aren't allowed to come aground, but sometimes they will tread water five feet away, directly in front of our tree line, oblivious to the fact that they are trespassing on our lives.

Down a separate path, behind the cabins, is the old bathhouse. Peeling paint, a rusted enamel sink covered in the beige flecks of dead moths drawn to the overhead light at night; an ancient claw-foot tub that has been there since my grandfather built the camp; an outdoor shower—hot and cold pipes attached to a tupelo tree, water pooling straight into the ground, runneling the sandy path.

The Big House is one large room—living room and kitchen, with a separate pantry—built of cinder blocks and tar paper. Wide-board floors, heavy beams, a massive stone fireplace. On rainy days, we close up the doors and windows and sit inside, listen to the crackle of the fire, force ourselves to play Monopoly. But where we *really* live—where we read, and eat, and argue, and grow old together—is on the screen porch, as wide as the house itself, which faces out to the pond. Our camp isn't winterized. There would be no point. By late September, when the weather turns chilly and all the summer houses have been shut down for the season, the Back Woods is a lonely place—still beautiful in the starker light, but solemn and sepulchral. No one wants to be here once the leaves fall. But when summer breaks again, and the woods are dense, and the blue herons come back to nest and wade in the bright pond, there is no better place on earth than this.

The moment I step back inside, onto the porch, I'm hit by a wave of longing, a quicksilver running through my solar plexus like homesickness. I know I should clear the table before the others come in for breakfast, but I want to memorize the shape of it—re-live last night crumb by crumb, plate by plate, etch it with an acid bath onto my brain. I run my fingers over a purple wine stain on the white linen tablecloth, put Jonas's glass to my lips and try to taste him there. I close my eyes, remembering the slight pressure of his thigh against mine under the table. Before I was sure he wanted me. Wondering, breathless, whether it was accident or intention.

In the main room, everything is exactly as it has always been: pots hanging on the wall above the stove, spatulas on cup hooks, a mason jar of wooden spoons, a faded list of telephone numbers thumbtacked to a bookshelf, two director's chairs pulled up to the fireplace. Everything is the same, and yet, as I cross the kitchen to the pantry, I feel as though I am walking through a different room, more in focus, as if the air itself has just awakened from a deep sleep. I let myself out through the pantry door, stare at the cinder-block wall. Nothing shows. No traces, no evidence. But it was here, we were here, embedding ourselves in each other forever. Grinding, silent, desperate. I suddenly remember my underpants hidden behind the breadbox and am just pulling them on under my bathrobe when my mother appears.

"You're up early, Elle. Is there coffee?" An accusation.

"I was just about to make it."

"Not too strong. I don't like that espresso stuff you use. I know—you think it's better . . ." she says, in a false, humoring voice that drives me insane.

"Fine." I don't feel like arguing this morning.

My mother settles herself in on the porch sofa. It is just a hard horse-

hair mattress covered in old gray cloth, but it's the coveted place in the house. From here you can look out at the pond, drink your coffee, read your book leaning against the ancient pillows, their cotton covers specked with rust. Who knew that even cloth could grow rusty with time?

It is so typical of her to usurp the good spot.

My mother's hair, straw-blond, now streaked with gray, is twisted up in an absent-minded, messy bun. Her old gingham nightgown is frayed. Yet she still manages to look imposing—like a figurehead on the prow of an eighteenth-century New England schooner, beautiful and stern, wreathed in laurels and pearls, pointing the way.

"I'm just going to have my coffee, and then I'll clear the table," I say.

"If you clear the table, I'll do the rest of the dishes. *Mmmm*," she says, "thank you," as I hand her a cup of coffee. "How was the water?"

"Perfect. Cold."

The best lesson my mother ever taught me: there are two things in life you never regret—a baby and a swim. Even on the coldest days of early June, as I stand looking out at the brackish Atlantic, resenting the seals that now rear their hideous misshapen heads and draw great whites into these waters, I hear her voice in my head, urging me to plunge in.

"I hope you hung your towel on the line. I don't want to see another pile of wet towels today. Tell the kids."

"It's on the line."

"Because if you don't yell at them, I will."

"I got it."

"And they need to sweep out their cabin. It's a disaster. And don't you do it, Elle. Those children are completely spoilt. They are old enough to . . ."

A bag of garbage in one hand, my coffee cup in the other, I walk out the back door, letting her litany drift off into the wind.

Her worst advice: *Think Botticelli*. Be like Venus rising on a half shell, lips demurely closed, even her nakedness modest. My mother's words of advice when I moved in with Peter. The message arrived on a faded postcard she'd picked up years before in the Uffizi gift shop: *Dear Eleanor, I like your Peter very much. Please make an effort not to be so difficult all the time. Keep your mouth closed and look mysterious. Think Botticelli. Love, Mummy.*

I dump the garbage in the can, slam the lid shut, and stretch the bungee cord tight across it to keep out the raccoons. They are clever creatures with their long dexterous fingers. Little humanoid bears, smarter and nastier than they look. We've been waging war against each other for years.

"Did you remember to put the bungee cord back on, Elle?" My mother says.

"Of course." I smile demurely and start clearing plates.

1969. New York City.

Soon my father will appear. I'm hiding—crouched behind the built-in modular bar that separates our living room from the front hall foyer. The bar is divided into squares. One houses liquor, another the phonograph, another my father's record collection, a few oversize art books, martini glasses, a silver shaker. The section that holds the liquor bottles is open through to both sides like a window. I peer through the bottles, mesmerized by the blur of topaz—the scotch, the bourbon, the rum. I am three years old. Next to me are my father's precious LPs and 78s. I run my finger along their spines, liking the sound I make, breathe in

their worn cardboard smell, wait for the doorbell to ring. Finally my father arrives and I don't have the patience to stay hidden. It has been weeks. I hurtle down the hallway, throw myself into his bear-like embrace.

The divorce is not final, but almost. They will have to cross the border into Juárez to do that. The end will come as my older sister Anna and I sit patiently on the edge of an octagonal Mexican-tiled fountain in a hotel lobby, transfixed by the goldfish swimming around an island of dark-leaved tropical plants in its center. Many years later, my mother tells me she called my father that morning, divorce papers in hand, and said, "I've changed my mind. Let's not do this." And though the divorce had been entirely her choice, and though his heart was broken, he said, "No. We've come this far—we might as well finish it, Wallace." *Might as well*: three syllables that changed the course of everything. But in that moment, as I sat feeding the goldfish crumbs from my English muffin, kicking my heels against the Mexican tile, I had no idea a sword hung over my head by a hair. That it could have gone a different way.

But Mexico hasn't happened yet. For now my father is falsely jolly and still in love with my mother.

"Eleanor!" He sweeps me up in his arms. "How's my rabbit?"

I laugh and cling to him with something approaching desperation, my loose blond curls blinding him as I press my face to his.

"Daddy!" Anna comes running now like a bull, angry that I got there first, shoves me out of his arms. She is two years older than me and has more right. He doesn't seem to notice. All he cares about is his own need to be loved. I nudge my way back in.

My mother calls out from somewhere in our sallow prewar apartment, "Henry? Do you want a drink? I'm making pork chops."

"Love one," he booms back, as if nothing between them has changed. But his eyes are sad.

8:15 A.M.

"So, I thought that was a success last night," my mother says from behind a battered novel by Dumas.

"Definitely."

"Jonas was looking well."

My hands tense around the pile of plates I'm holding.

"Jonas is always looking well, Mum." Thick black hair you can grasp in your fists, pale green eyes, skin burnished by sap and pine, a wild creature, the most beautiful man on earth.

My mother yawns. It's her "tell"—she always does this before she says something unpleasant. "He's fine, I just can't stand his mother. So self-righteous."

"She is."

"As if she's the only woman on earth who has ever recycled. And Gina. Even after all these years, I still can't imagine what he was thinking when he married her."

"She's young, she's gorgeous? They're both artists?"

"She *was* young," my mother says. "And the way she flaunts her cleavage. Always prancing around as if she thinks she's the cat's pajamas. Clearly no one ever told her to hide her light under a bushel."

"It's bizarre," I say, going into the kitchen to dump the plates. "Self-esteem. She must have had supportive parents."

"Well, I find it very unattractive," Mum says. "Is there orange juice?"

I take a clean glass from the dish drain, go to the fridge. "As a matter of fact," I call out, "that's probably the reason Jonas fell in love with her.

She must have seemed so exotic to him after the neurotic women he grew up with. Like a peacock in the woods."

"She's from Delaware," my mother says, as if this closes the subject. "No one is from Delaware."

"Exactly," I say, handing her a glass of juice. "She's exotic." But the truth is, I've never been able to look at Gina without thinking: *That's* who he chose? *That's* what he wanted? I picture Gina: her petite, perfect little bee-sting of a body; curated dark roots growing into peroxide blond. Evidently, stonewashed is back.

My mother yawns again. "Well, you have to admit she's not the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"Was there anyone at dinner you *did* like?"

"I'm just being honest."

"Well, don't be. Gina is family."

"Only because you have no choice. She's married to your best friend. You've been oil and water from the day you met."

"That's completely untrue. I've always liked Gina. We might not have a ton in common, but I respect her. And Jonas loves her."

"Have it your way," my mother says with a smug little smile.

"Oh my god." I may have to kill her.

"Didn't you once throw a glass of red wine in her face?"

"No, Mum. I did *not* throw a glass of wine in her face. I tripped at a party and spilled my wine on her."

"You and Jonas were talking the whole night. What were you talking about?"

"I don't know. Stuff."

"He had such a crush on you when you were growing up. I think you broke his heart when you married Peter."

"Don't be ridiculous. He was practically a kid."

"Oh, I think it was more than that. Poor creature." She says this idly

as she returns to her book. It's good she isn't looking at me because, in this moment, I know my face is transparent.

Out on the pond the water is absolutely still. A fish jumps and, in its wake, leaves a trail of concentric circles. I watch them bleed out around the edges until they are reabsorbed, as if nothing ever happened.

By the New York Times bestselling author of From the Corner of the Oval

Rock the Boat

A Novel

Beck Dorey-Stein

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Road to Nowhere

Kate Campbell opened her eyes but couldn't see a thing. It was the middle of the night and, like a young Miss Clavel only less French and more ginger, she knew something was not right. Recalling the details of the previous evening, however, she realized it was just the opposite—nothing was wrong, and everything was finally about to be extremely right.

Kate smiled in the dark as all the evidence accumulated to form an arrow pointing at a singular fact: Thomas would propose to her in the morning. Wriggling back under the covers, Kate grinned as she imagined what everyone would think besides *It's about time.* Of course it was about time; it had been twelve years.

Despite—or maybe because of—the countless, candid conversations they'd had about how and when to get engaged, Kate was shocked that Thomas would spring this on her. It was impressive, really, to still surprise someone after more than a decade of dating (never mind those two rocky

ever ago that the only real incentive to marry would be if they wanted to start a family, and they hadn't even discussed children in the last six months because Thomas's fellowship was basically *Kill Bill* only in long, white coats and with far more blood.

But the end of the fellowship was finally in sight with an offer at the same hospital, and their conversation the night before was undeniable evidence of an imminent proposal. They'd been in a cab crossing back over the Brooklyn Bridge, Kate watching the fare tick up and up, when Thomas had asked if she'd like to go to brunch at Norman's in the morning.

"Before New Hampshire?"

"Mm-hmm," Thomas said, looking at his phone.

"With Aggie and Marta?" Thomas's sister and sister-in-law lived above them in the building Thomas's grandparents owned. They would carpool to New Hampshire together for Easter Sunday, just as they'd done every Easter since they were twenty-two.

"Just us," Thomas had said, as he continued to stare down at his phone. This calculated attempt to plan a casual brunch without Aggie and Marta seemed odd to Kate, like inserting a key only to find the door already unlocked. It momentarily jostled her out of her midnight stupor, but she had been too tired to explore what Thomas's suggestion might mean—until now, hours before dawn, when his odd behavior had, poof, turned into proof.

But proposing in *April*? Kate wrinkled her nose. April in New York was horrific—an open sewage drain of a month with damp clothes and nagging colds, everyone trudging through the office as bedraggled and psychotic as the Times Square pigeons. Kate had assumed that if this was going to be the year, Thomas would have waited for May, and asked while they were on vacation with his friends.

As the sun rose, however, Kate warmed to Thomas's strategy: He would pop the question now so they could then drive up to New Hampshire to celebrate with the Mosby clan over Easter. She hoped but doubted that

Thomas had thought to include her family in some way, which was not his strong suit, only because his family was big and fun and . . . a lot. All three generations and extended branches of Mosbys lived here in the city, mostly on the Upper East Side but everyone in Manhattan, or what Thomas jokingly referred to as "the only island that matters." It was easy enough to forget that Kate did come with her own small family of four from a tiny beach town in New Jersey. Technically, Sea Point was only a three-hour drive from the city—the same distance as New Hampshire—but it felt worlds apart from her life in New York because the rest of the Campbells found the city as daunting as Thomas found Sea Point "quaint."

Kate closed her eyes and hoped the sleepless night wouldn't show on her face when they asked a stranger to snap their picture after she'd said yes—or maybe Thomas had hired a photographer to hide in the bushes for candids? She wondered if he had thought to size his grandmother's engagement ring just before emitting a low groan: She had become the kind of person she despised, and she wasn't sure whether to blame her work, her generation, or herself.

As a rising star at Artemis Public Relations, Kate's craft was bending stories into taglines. Recently, she'd caught herself treating her own life like a client's portfolio, and her online profile reflected her professional life's permeation into the personal—her photos were flawless, her captions simple and clever. Kate envisioned colleagues, acquaintances, and ghosts from the past viewing her engagement photo with envy, even googling Thomas. In two days, she'd post a cute photo—the ring tastefully included but not prominently featured—with a low-key caption, something along the lines of: *We did a thing*.

Three hours later, Kate encouraged Thomas to take his time in the shower so she could strategize her caught-off-guard look. Each hanger held a jacket or sweater that wouldn't be good enough for her future mother-in-law, Evelyn, who would apologize to her friends for Kate's poor taste as they pinched her phone screen and zoomed in to inspect every inch of

the engagement photos. But here, this wasn't bad—a blue-checked dress Thomas had once said made her look like a sexy Raggedy Anne. The dress showed effort without letting Thomas know that she knew.

"Almost ready?" Kate yelled through the bathroom door.

"Done yesterday," Thomas called over the high-pitched groan of the pipes. The water pressure was barely more than a sad dribble, but Kate wasn't about to complain after four years living rent free. Then again, Kate thought, maybe she could raise the issue once she became a Mosby.

Running a brush through her hair and a rake through her thoughts, Kate found herself feeling triumphant rather than joyful—or maybe joyfully triumphant. She'd put in so much time, given all of her twenties to this relationship, and endured a decade's worth of saccharine smiles from ancient strangers inquiring, "So when do you think you'll . . . ?"

The imminent proposal felt validating in a way that probably wasn't especially feminist, and yet, wouldn't anyone feel victorious when they finally saw the big return on their risky investment? And it had been downright dicey at times—after twelve years, the bottom had dropped out more than once, usually in direct correlation to where Thomas was in the medical gauntlet. Even last night at the party, Kate had worried they were heading toward the red when she'd gestured to the spinach stuck in his front teeth and Thomas had rolled his eyes before skulking off, leaving her alone in the kitchen.

Now, Kate gave herself a once-over in the mirror: Her strawberry-blond hair rippled down in obedient, tame waves, the freckles across her nose were visible but not chaotic like they would be by mid-June. The dark, pronounced eyebrows she'd hated as a kid were cooperating today, and after she'd drawn a bronze rim around her wide green eyes, Kate took private delight in the double takes that her heart-shaped face so often invited.

Just last week, she'd been confused for the breakout actress from that Netflix show while ordering at Barney Greengrass. Kate no longer blushed when she disappointed strangers bold enough to approach her—in fact,

she wore big black sunglasses to encourage such speculation. Tourists came from small towns like hers to gawk at the city's glamour and so Kate indulged in their celebrity-sighting fantasies not only because it was fun but also because it proved just how far she had come since arriving in New York fifteen years ago as a college freshman.

The toilet flushed and the bathroom door opened.

"You look nice," Thomas said, checking his hair in the mirror. "Where's my putty?"

Kate handed him the hair product half hidden under her brush—it arrived every month from a tiny shop in Vancouver and cost more than their utility bills—but he wouldn't know that. Thomas dropped his keys twice before successfully tucking them into his jacket pocket. *Nerves*, Kate deduced, flashing him a well-glossed grin. "We haven't been to Norman's in ages!" she announced to Thomas's reflection in the hallway mirror.

"Back to where it all began," he replied, slipping his bare feet into the walking loafers to which the entire Mosby clan subscribed.

The spring of their junior year of college, Kate and Thomas had met in the bathroom line at Norman's just after two a.m. According to Kate, he'd complimented her purple Shark watch and according to Thomas, he'd made fun of her purple Shark watch. Several hours later, they'd staggered out of the diner and straight into each other's world.

Now, as Kate clutched Thomas's hand on the walk back to where they'd first met, she surrendered to the overwhelming affection she had for New York, the greatest of cities that she'd come to see as hers. In the West Village, beautiful strangers swirled around her like gorgeous pieces of moving furniture—enriching the milieu with their statement pieces, their curated indifference. The anonymity among other well-heeled intellects is what Kate loved the most—even more than that woman's vintage handbag as they crossed Greenwich. Her hand in Thomas's, Kate smiled at ten-year-old twins clad in thousand-dollar down jackets and beamed with the knowledge that she'd never felt more at home than she did here, among the

ambition and creative genius that charged the city with its own electricity. Joan Didion had been right when she'd written, "New York was no mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself."

Kate knew that each one of these power-walking New Yorkers would arrive at the café or yoga studio or sound bath and untuck their scarves as they shed their aloofness, exchanging it for the cultivated mindfulness they'd been practicing in therapy. Changing identities in New York was easier than renting bowling shoes in New Jersey, though both would give you break-in blisters. The birthplace of the rebirth, the key to making it in Manhattan was believing you belonged—along with easy access to a dependable dry cleaner.

"I'm so sorry to bother you but aren't you—" a tourist in her early forties asked as she grinned at Kate while they waited to cross Hudson. The woman was gripping her phone and Kate saw her camera app already open, the lens in selfie mode.

"No, she isn't," Thomas interjected; he had zero tolerance for out-of-towners, except for his West Coast friends and the easily placed Eaton type.

Turning the corner and spotting the diner's iconic neon sign, Kate sped toward it, appreciating how her future was waiting inside her past—she'd have to play around with that idea for subsequent content captions or maybe even her vows. Like the city itself, the best thing about Norman's was that it weeded out the weaklings. The diner achieved this through an impossibly heavy glass door that, like everything else at Norman's, hadn't changed in the last seventy years. If you were a regular and of a particular age, the hostess would hit the handicapped automatic button from the inside—if you were anyone else, you were on your own. Kate ignored Thomas as he swore under his breath and used both hands to yank open the door. Inside, while Thomas massaged his shoulder, Kate scanned the room and approached the hostess stand with a request: "May we have that corner booth?"

The hostess followed Kate's finger past the servers and bussers racing

around with big brown trays, narrowly avoiding collisions. Thomas had once joked that navigating Norman's reminded him of driving in Rome—harrowing, and safer to do a little buzzed.

"You know them?" she asked, looking at the two willowy blondes sipping coffee through straws, occupying the booth to which Kate pointed.

"No," Kate ceded, "but we'll wait. We've done it before. It's kind of our booth."

At this moment, Thomas looked up from his phone and met the hostess's disgust with an apologetic smile. "Kate, they haven't even gotten their food yet."

Acquiescing only to disguise her comprehension of what today meant—would mean forever—Kate followed the hostess to the vacant, freestanding table by the jukebox, closest to the restrooms. "First time for everything," she sighed, forcing a smile and ignoring a man's phlegmy cough at a neighboring booth.

Glenda, the notoriously grumpy server who seemed to despise Kate as much as she adored Thomas—who was never Thomas but always *Baby* or *Honey* or *Honey Baby* on especially frisky days—asked Baby what he'd like to drink and walked away without looking at Kate. Until *The New Yorker* had featured what they termed "The Glenda Phenomenon" in their "Shouts and Murmurs" column, Glenda had been unaware that she'd starred in so many ungraduated short stories that the NYU English Department had unanimously voted to place a moratorium on the use of her likeness.

Glenda returned with two coffees, two orange juices, and the infamous attitude that made her so vital in preserving the city's folklore. After ordering their usual, Thomas leaned forward and said he needed to ask Kate something.

"Are you," Thomas began, reaching across the table for her winter-white hand. Her caramelized skin from Mexico, Kate silently lamented, had blanched as soon as they'd touched down at LaGuardia. "Happy?" Thomas stared at her, waiting for her response, with the bluest eyes Kate

had ever seen. Mayflower blue, she liked to joke, because his grandmother never missed an opportunity to mention their Plymouth forebearers.

"The happiest," Kate crooned, arching her back to sit up straight, basking in the moment like a cat in afternoon sun.

"Really?" he said, drawing slow circles on the back of her hand with his thumb.

"Really," Kate said. "I am the happiest."

She felt Thomas's hand retreat to retrieve the ring from the pocket in his jacket. But he didn't reach for the pocket. He just sat back, his eyes so wide that they became two Mayflower blue islands surrounded by an ocean of white shock.

Thomas held out his hands again and she met him halfway, ignoring some primordial sense of panic. He flipped her right hand over and traced the lines of her veins across the pale underbelly of her wrist. Kate waited. She felt light-headed before realizing she hadn't taken a breath since she'd said "happiest." Leaning forward and speaking slowly, in a low voice that would haunt her for months, Thomas confessed: "I'm not happy. I'm really, really not happy."

Six hours later, Kate's parents flanked her as they walked out of the Jane Street apartment and toward their parked car, which offended passersby with its flashing hazard lights and yellow Jersey plates. Buckled in the back, Kate closed her eyes and tried to understand what had just happened, how this implosion of her life had occurred.

In the diner, she'd actually laughed when Thomas had said he wasn't happy. She'd almost said, *This is a weird way to start a proposal*. But then Thomas's eyes had welled with tears and instead of asking "Will you," he'd said, "This isn't fair."

That's when time had sped up and stood still.

Kate had swallowed vomit before bolting from the booth and pushing through the hulking diner door like it was nothing but a string curtain. On the street corner, she'd put her hands on her knees and her head be-

tween her legs as Thomas stood behind her and calmly explained he would go to New Hampshire as planned; he was using his vacation days to stay up there for the week so she would have time to pack her stuff and figure out next steps. They'd walked up Eighth Avenue in silence, too stunned to speak. When a subway grate blew the city's bad breath up Kate's dress and Thomas looked embarrassed for her—like they were no longer on the same team, no longer a we—Kate broke into a run only to arrive back on Jane Street and realize the apartment keys were in Thomas's pocket.

Waiting on the steps, she'd called her sister.

"Can you go to a friend's place?" Bernadette asked. "You shouldn't be in that apartment by yourself—oh, Christ, and tomorrow's Easter."

"My friends are his friends," Kate whimpered.

"Is it Nora?" Bernadette dared.

"He swears there's no one else."

Bernadette scoffed and muttered a string of uncomplimentary expletives under her breath before saying she'd figure something out. They hung up just as Thomas rounded the corner and reluctantly offered that she could come to New Hampshire for Easter, as long as she could keep the weekend drama-free since his grandmother was in remission.

"He wants me to go with him," Kate lied.

"No, he doesn't," Bernadette said just as Thomas cleared his throat and clarified that he needed to be alone, that New Hampshire was only an option if she had nowhere else to go.

"Stay there," Bernadette growled. "Or book a train home and I'll pick you up."

After unlocking the front door, Thomas grabbed a pre-packed suitcase he'd hidden behind the white couch, kissed Kate's forehead, and explained he was being cruel to be kind before asking her to drop her Jane Street keys in the mailbox when she left. An hour later and alone in the apartment, Kate had cried herself to exhaustion. Staring up at the ceiling, she listened to the rhythm of the raindrops and Rolodexed her regrets:

She should have said yes to that puppy Thomas had wanted the previous summer, yes to another hour at the party the night before, and no to that early SoulCycle class when he'd been sleeping off his week of overnight shifts. The regrets poured down as the rain picked up, and the incessant tapping against the window reminded Kate of her least favorite client, Hal, who liked to express his annoyance by impatiently drumming his manicured fingernails on the conference room table.

Kate groped for her phone, ignored the incoming call from Bernadette, and composed an email to her boss and her boss's boss at Artemis PR, who just so happened to be Evelyn Mosby. In three lines, Kate quit her job. She didn't even bother to read through the memo before hitting "send." It was over. She'd lost the big investment so it was time to burn it all down. The momentary flex of independence felt good, like the warm licks of a bonfire—until everything inevitably turned to ash.

"You did WHAT?" Bernadette yelled into the phone five minutes later. Kate heard their parents, Sally and Dirk, gasp in the background when Bernadette relayed the latest bit of breaking news. "Write back and apologize or—wait, no, just put your phone down. You're out of your mind. Hold on—okay, Mom and Dad are going to drive up right now, but no more emails."

It was only when Dirk and Sally Campbell appeared on the Jane Street front stoop and her mom said "Oh Katie" that she let her body go slack and allowed her parents to organize the evacuation. Kate curled up in the corner of their queen bed that she realized was now just Thomas's and watched the clumsy pile of wire dry cleaner hangers spill off the down comforter and onto the hardwood floor. As her father loaded luggage, her mother worked to dismantle her closet, while Kate pored over Thomas's social media presence, trying to understand who could have infiltrated their life when Thomas worked all the time. Kate had met the other fellows in his program and felt a shred of comfort that they weren't his type before realizing she had no idea what Thomas's type was if it wasn't her.

From the closet, Sally scoffed about the kind of people who hung their jeans, knowing full well Thomas had turned her daughter into that kind of person. Locking herself in the bathroom, Kate secretly texted Thomas. If Bernadette had come up with their parents, she would have confiscated Kate's phone upon arrival to avoid this very situation, but Bernadette was at home with her daughter and so Kate was in the bathroom texting. Thomas replied immediately, proving to Kate that he still loved her and that this was just another dramatic hiccup. Taking a deep breath, Kate opened the message and saw it was the automatic reply she'd set up for him years ago so that he wouldn't be tempted to text and drive.

Three suitcases and countless overstuffed trash bags later, Sally barked out directions from the passenger seat like a Marine on a rescue mission as Dirk navigated their way out of the West Village. A sign above the Holland Tunnel warned in flashing lights and far too late, STAY ALERT! The city disappeared behind them and the road ahead narrowed into darkness.

It took several moments for Kate's eyes to adjust to the blur of white tiles erasing the life she'd built for herself. Leaving the city this way—worried parents in the front, all earthly possessions in the back—felt like a permanent sentence. Driving under the Hudson, away from New York, was the equivalent of crossing the river Styx, only without the romantic promise of an afterlife.

Emerging from the tunnel, the GPS mechanically welcomed them to New Jersey with as much enthusiasm as one could muster for the state. Dirk and Sally let out a joint sigh of relief as they merged onto 95 South. The sun had set and hundreds of red taillights idled in the stand-still traffic, reminding Kate of worker ants. Fifteen years in the city and she'd never had to commute.

Merging onto the Garden State Parkway, Kate listened to the steady grunt of her parents' rusty SUV that was bad for the environment but good for moving two daughters in and out of dorm rooms, group houses, and apartments. She let her forehead thud against the window with every bump in the road and watched with envy as oncoming traffic headed

north, toward the city, toward the epicenter of everything. One car's high beams temporarily blinded all of them and her mom squawked: "It's like they're shining a flashlight directly in our faces!" Sally Campbell didn't know, how could she, but at the mention of a flashlight, the memory rushed at Kate without warning. She closed her eyes and allowed the curtains to lift.

She'd been dating Thomas for six months when he'd surprised her with a trip to his parents' vacant ski lodge in New Hampshire the first crisp fall weekend in October. Kate had expected the lodge to smell musty, a thick layer of dust making her sneeze every few seconds, the cupboards bare except for mouse droppings. But when Thomas opened the front door, the exposed wood beams sparkled and a crackling fire in the great room beckoned. This wasn't anything like her uncle's double-wide in the Poconos, which he'd optimistically called his lodge—this was what happened when Martha Stewart masturbated to pictures of John Muir for a week and then designed a rustic-themed mansion accordingly. It was outdoorsy-chic, a cozy-rugged cabin meant for early-morning ski runs and twenty-person dinner parties. It was beautiful and all theirs for the weekend.

"I called ahead." Thomas shrugged nonchalantly before explaining that the caretaker had swung by.

After fooling around in the living room, under the direct supervision of a mounted moose head, they got dressed and bundled up for a walk through the idyllic gloam. Thomas wanted to show Kate the boarding school campus where he'd spent his formative years—a stunning hundred-acre sprawl that seemed more like a movie set version of a school than an actual institution. As they walked, Thomas tossed a flashlight to himself like the sweet Eagle Scout he was—he'd brought it so they could find their way home in the dark because an Eagle Scout was always prepared.

The school's gothic architecture, beginning with the twelve-foot-high stone wall that surrounded the campus, was designed to intimidate. "Our kids will go here," Thomas had said, hugging his arms around the flagpole in the center of the quad and grinning at her like a schoolboy with a crush.

"Our kids?" Kate smirked. They were twenty-one. *They* were kids. But

the vision of her own children attending a place like this . . . she could feel her insides shift and the throbbing wound from her own high school experience, buried yet still raw after all these years, seemed to finally quell as she imagined crossing this quad as a mother in a responsible green cardigan and espadrilles, a familiar figure heading to the school play, a contributing member of this community. She would belong.

"Yeah, our kids," Thomas affirmed. Kate could barely make out Thomas's outline as he launched himself from the flagpole, pulled Kate into a hug, and nuzzled his face into her neck. She heard him rustling in his pockets right before he pulled out the flashlight and held it below Kate's chin, clicking it on with his thumb.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to see your face when I tell you," he murmured.

"Tell me what?"

"I love you," he whispered. His lips against her ear as he said it, the way he sounded out of breath, and smiling. She couldn't see him but she knew the sound of his smile, and because he'd put that dumb flashlight under her chin, he saw that she was smiling too, maybe even tearing up because this was a moment she would remember forever—she knew it then, even as it was still happening. "I love you," he said again, squeezing her even tighter, "and we are going to make the most beautiful children, and they'll attend Evergreen, and they'll have your right brain and my left brain, so they'll all be valedictorians. But mostly"—Thomas gripped Kate's shoulders and spun her around so she faced him—"I love you. And I will always love you. Like Whitney Houston will always love you, but with blueberry pancakes and morning sex, even when we're in our nineties." He scooped her up just then and carried her across the quad like a groom whisking his bride across the threshold, bellowing "I Will Always Love You" so loud that his voice ricocheted off the stone walls. Thomas had shined the flashlight ahead of them through the woods and back to the cabin, their path clear and bright.

At the end of the weekend, Kate had grabbed the flashlight and taken it back to New York. It was sturdier and more pragmatic than an engage-

ment ring, but it promised the same thing: *I will always love you*. For years, they kept the flashlight on their coffee table, a centerpiece they hoped guests would ask after, which they did, until it disappeared during their New Year's Eve party the previous year.

"Dirk!" Sally shrieked as the entire car swerved, jolting Kate out of the memory.

"There was a turtle!" her father yelled back.

"Did you hit it?" Kate asked reluctantly, peering past her own reflection to outside the window. The Garden State Parkway had narrowed to two lanes and was empty. Tall, narrow trees stood guard on either side. They must be driving through the Pine Barrens now.

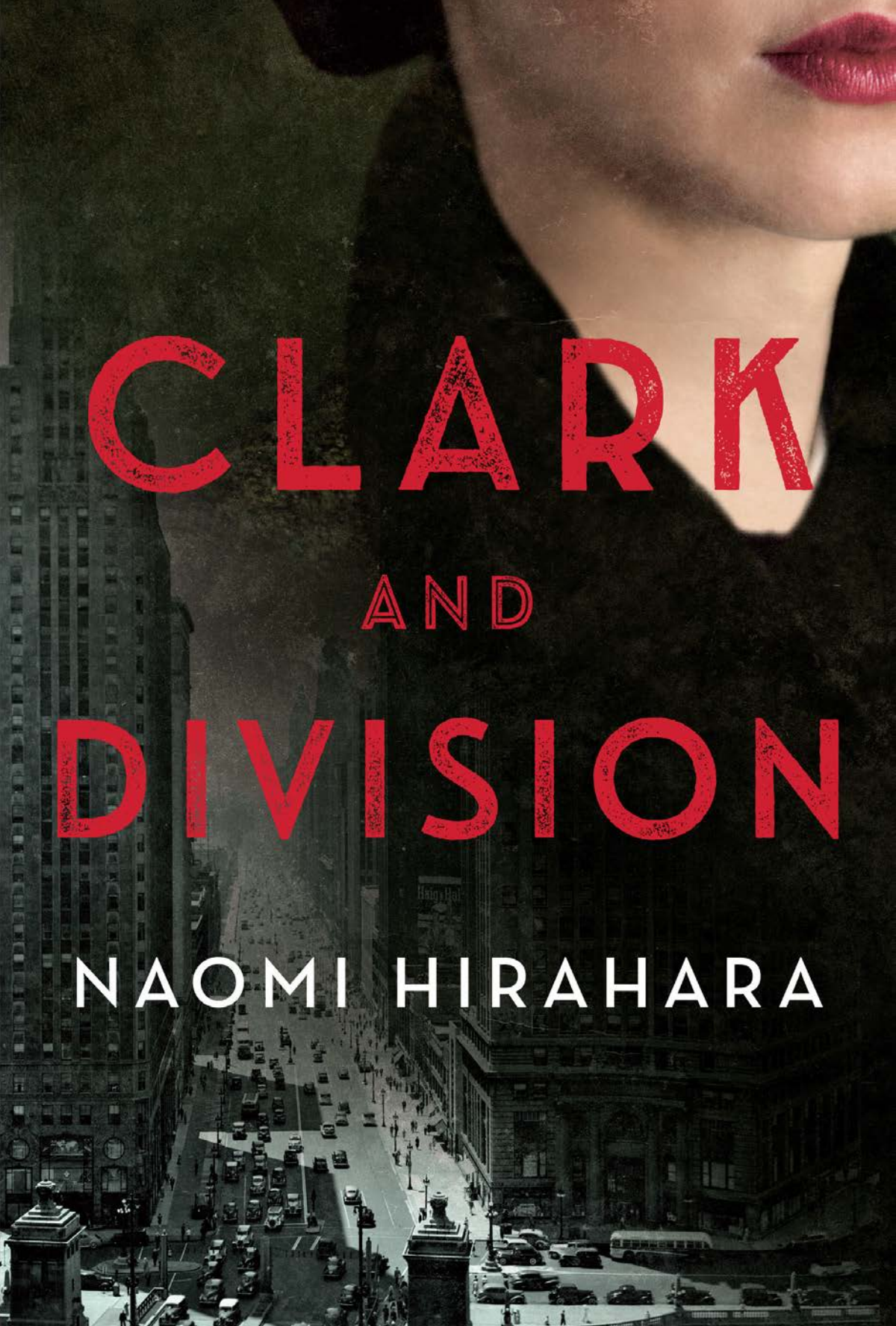
"Sure didn't," her father said proudly. "And he was almost to the white line of the shoulder, so I bet he makes it."

"Oh, so it's a he?" her mother asked. "How very twentieth century of you."

As her history-teaching parents sparred about pronouns, Kate tried to nestle back into the memory of visiting Evergreen for the first time, but she couldn't—it felt as awkward as trying to wriggle back into a wet bathing suit.

Now they took the exit for Sea Point, passing the billboard that reminded tourists in peeling turquoise paint: NEW JERSEY'S BEST-KEPT SECRET! The lighthouse illuminated the raindrops on the windshield so they shimmered like diamonds before continuing its revolution through the darkness. The salt in the damp air and the sound of the crashing waves were undeniable: Kate was back where she'd began. In real life, and in one day, she'd lost Thomas, quit her job, and returned to her least favorite place.

"Lots of construction happening," her father said as they coasted through the sleeping town. Kate peered out at the shops and restaurants—the windows that weren't still boarded up from the most recent hurricane were dark and empty—everyone somewhere warmer, better, until the high season.


CLARK
AND
DIVISION
NAOMI HIRAHARA

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

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CHAPTER 1

Rose was always there, even while I was being born. It was a breech birth; the midwife, soaked in her own sweat as well as some of my mother's, had been struggling for hours and didn't notice my three-year-old sister inching her way to the stained bed. According to the midwife, Mom was screaming unrepeatable things in Japanese when Rose, the first one to see an actual body part of mine, yanked my slimy foot good and hard.

"Ito-*san*!" The midwife's voice cut through the chaos, and my father came in to get Rose out of the room.

Rose ran; Pop couldn't catch her at first and when he finally did, he couldn't control her. In a matter of minutes, Rose, undeterred by the blood on my squirming body, returned to embrace me into her fan club. Until the end of her days and even beyond, my gaze would remain on her.

Our first encounter became Ito family lore, how I came into the world in our town of Tropico, a name that hardly anyone in Los Angeles knows today. For a while, I couldn't remember a time when I was apart from Rose. We slept curled up like pill bugs on the same thin mattress; it was *pachanko*, flat as a pancake, but we didn't mind. Our spines were limber back then. We could have slept on a blanket over our dirt

yard, which we did sometimes during those hot Southern California Indian summers, our puppy, Rusty, at our bare feet.

Tropico was where my father and other Japanese men first came to till the rich alluvial soil for strawberry plants. They were the Issei, the first generation, the pioneers who were the progenitors of us, the Nisei. Pop had been fairly successful, until the housing subdivisions came. The other Issei farmers fled south to Gardena or north to San Fernando Valley, but Pop stayed and got a job at one of the produce markets clustered in downtown Los Angeles, only a few miles away. Tonai's sold every kind of vegetable and fruit imaginable—Pascal celery from Venice; iceberg lettuce from Santa Maria and Guadalupe; Larson strawberries from Gardena; and Hale's Best cantaloupes from Imperial Valley.

My mother had emigrated from Kagoshima in 1919, when she was in her late teens, to marry my father. The two families had known each other way back when, and while my mother wasn't officially a picture bride, she was mighty close. My father, who had received Mom's photograph from his own mother, liked her face—her strong and broad jaw, which suggested she might be able to survive the frontier of California. His hunch was right; in so many ways, she was even tougher than my father.

When I was five, Pop was promoted to market manager and we moved to a larger house, still in Tropico. The house was close to the Red Car electric streetcar station so Pop didn't need to drive into work, but he usually traveled in his Model A anyway; he wasn't the type to wait around for a train. Rose and I still shared a room but we had our own beds, although during certain nights when the Santa Ana winds blew through our loose window frames I would end up crawling in beside her. "Aki!" she'd cry out as my cold toes brushed against her calves. She'd turn and fall back asleep

while I trembled in her bed, fearful of the moving shadows of the sycamore trees, demented witches in the moonlight.

Maybe because my life started with her touch, I needed to be close to her to feel that I was alive. I was her constant student, even though I could never be like her. My face was often red and swollen, as I was plagued by hay fever from the long stalks of ragweed that crept into every crack of concrete near the Los Angeles River. Rose's complexion, on the other hand, was flawless, with only a dot of a mole on the high point of her right cheekbone. Whenever I was near enough to look at her face, I'd feel grounded, centered and unmovable, less affected by any change in our circumstances.

While Rose was surrounded by admirers, she kept her distance just enough to be viewed as mysterious and desirable. This was something we learned from our parents. Although we were thought well of by other Japanese Americans, we were not indiscriminate joiner types, at least before the war. In school, our classmates were mostly white and upper-middle-class kids who attended cotillions or Daughters of the American Revolution events, activities that were off-limits to us. There were about a dozen Nisei offspring of florists and nursery operators—smart, obedient boys and immaculately dressed girls, who Rose remarked "tried too hard." Rose's style was effortless, and when she wasn't home, I'd shed my plaid dress and secretly try on her signature outfit—a white blouse, long knit khaki skirt and a thin lemon-yellow sweater, a color that most Nisei girls would avoid wearing. I'd study myself in the full-length mirror on the door of the wardrobe, frown at how the skirt bulged at my belly; it was also much too long, falling down to my ankles but covering my thick calves. And that shade of yellow made my own skin look sallow and sickly, further confirming that Rose's clothes were not for me.

When I wasn't in school, I spent time in Tropico going on long walks with Rusty. In those early years, we wandered past the tangles of deerweed, which resembled prostrate women, underneath willow trees where blinding-white egrets rested their elegant limbs, and heard the high-pitched song of the Western toads, which reminded me of the buzz of hot electrical wires. This was before the Los Angeles River flooded, causing the city to fill the riverbed with concrete. Afterward, we still heard the toads, but they weren't as loud.

I wished that my teen years could have been spent outdoors alone with my dog, but my growing up involved being around other people my age. As I didn't have that many opportunities to socialize with the *hakujin* girls outside of school, when I was invited to do so, it was a momentous occasion. One day in eighth grade, Vivi Pelletier, who sat next to me, handed me an invitation to her pool party. It was handwritten on off-white stationery with scalloped edges. The Pelletiers, who had moved to Los Angeles from Europe, were rumored to be connected to the movie studios. They lived in the Los Feliz Hills and were one of the first families in the area to get their own pool.

I held on to that invitation so tightly that it was moist when I showed it to Mom, who wondered if I should go. It would be a high-tone *hakujin* affair, and who knows how I could end up shaming the family. I was known to make faux pas, like running around with a stain on my shorts because my menstruation pad had shifted during an *undokai*, a sports event in Elysian Park for our Japanese-language school.

And then there was the matter of my swimsuit. I had an old striped cotton swimsuit whose fabric sagged around my *oshiri,* making me look like I was wearing diapers. That suit was good enough for Japanese potlucks at White Point, not far from the fish canneries on Terminal Island, where close to

two thousand Issei and Nisei lived. It would not do, though, for Vivi Pelletier's pool party.

"Just let her go," Rose told my mother. "I'll take her to get a new suit."

We went to the dry goods store in Little Tokyo on First Street. Their selection was limited, but I found a navy blue one-piece that covered my ample buttocks.

I brought the folded suit in a bag with my present, a bath powder puff set, which I thought was appropriate for a girl originally from France. I had never attended a party for a *hakujin* girl and carefully watched all the guests so that I didn't make any serious mistakes. Quite a few mothers were also in attendance but I was relieved I had come alone. Being the only Japanese, Mom would have felt awfully out of place, and Rose would have been bored out of her mind.

We had finished eating egg salad sandwiches with the bread crusts cut off when Vivi's mother pulled me aside into a room she referred to as the salon. I feared that I had done something wrong again.

"I am so sorry, but can you come some other day to go swimming with Vivi?"

Did Vivi's mother think that I had come unprepared? "I have my swimsuit in my bag."

"No, no dear. That is not the problem." Mrs. Pelletier had wide-set eyes and a high forehead, which made her look like one of the forest animals in Disney's *Snow White*.

I finally figured it out. It was like Brookside Park in Pasadena; the mothers didn't want me to go into the pool with their daughters.

I fled out the front door without saying goodbye to Vivi. It was a long downhill walk, and my body shook as I stomped on the asphalt.

When I let myself into our back door, Rose turned from

the dress pattern she and Mom were cutting at the kitchen table. "Why are you home so early?"

I couldn't help but to burst into tears, and relayed what had happened.

"I told you not to go," Mom murmured in Japanese. When she felt slighted by her Issei friends, fellow immigrants from Japan, her anger would manifest itself like a hot streak, but when it came to *hakujin* men and women, my mother became deflated, half believing what they thought about us.

Rose was not having it at all. "I didn't waste an afternoon shopping for nothing," she muttered. She demanded that I go with her to confront Mrs. Pelletier. I tried to resist, but as usual I was overpowered by my sister, who dragged me to the car. When she insisted on something, my whole family eventually went along with it.

Rose pushed on the Pelletiers' doorbell multiple times in rapid succession. On the doorstep, she cut a striking figure—dress cinched at her tiny waist and her skin almost glowing. She didn't even give Mrs. Pelletier a chance to say hello. "Did you invite my sister to your pool party and then tell her not to go into the pool?"

Mrs. Pelletier's face turned beet red. She tried to excuse herself by saying that it was fine with her, but her guests were uncomfortable. "Aki is welcome to come and swim at any other time," she said.

But Rose, as usual, didn't back down. "This is unacceptable. You owe my sister an apology."

"Oh, dear, I am so sorry. Truly I am. I am new to America."

But we're not, I thought.

Rose didn't make any speeches about racial equality or anything like that. We remained silent on the drive home. I went to sleep early that night and after sundown she climbed into my bed and wrapped her arms around me. Her breath

smelled sour from the *takuan*, Mom's prized pickled radishes, from our dinner. "Don't you let them ever think that they are better than you," she whispered in my ear.

The next Monday, Vivi, looking embarrassed, returned my bag with my folded bathing suit and a card in the same off-white stationery, probably a thank-you for my birthday gift. I barely acknowledged her and threw the bag in the hallway trash can without opening the card.

At school, I was able to make a couple of friends, but only with girls who seemed as isolated as me. The only thing that we had in common was our fear of being alone at lunch and recess. I couldn't wait until I was in high school, on the same campus as Rose. Our high school had been built five years earlier, a gothic structure that looked like Wuthering Heights, except it stood on a sunny hill instead of a foggy moor. When I finally entered tenth grade, I followed Rose and her groupies around like Rusty followed me from one room in our house to another. She'd barely acknowledge me in public—only occasionally remarking with an eye roll, "What can I do; she's my little sister."

Rose was the only Nisei girl in the drama club. One late afternoon she came into our bedroom carrying a bound script, her cheeks flushed. "I'm the lead, Aki, can you believe that?"

I waited for her to make an announcement at dinner, but she didn't, just gulped down Mom's *okazu*, a stir-fry of pork and tofu, faster than usual. "Why didn't you say anything to Mom and Pop?" I asked her when we both were in bed.

"I didn't want to jinx it. Or get Mom too excited."

That was indeed something to consider, as Mom was known to get on the phone or go into Little Tokyo or the

produce market to "accidentally" run into people to *ebaru* about our latest accomplishment—well, specifically Rose's. I didn't mind that I wasn't the subject of her boasting. By being under the radar, I was free to be completely average.

I practiced the lines with Rose every night. Babette Hughes's *One Egg* was a one-act comedy, which surprised me because my sister wasn't the type to crack jokes. The play featured three actors in a café—a male customer, a female customer named Mary, and then the waitress.

As I read the lines for the man and the waitress, it became clearer and clearer to me that the two customers were fighting over something more than eggs. There was some charge of romance and it disturbed me.

"Are you sure that it's okay that you are playing Mary?" I finally asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know." I couldn't put my apprehension into words. We were all used to invisible rules and taboos, breathing them in as they hung in the air of our houses, schools and churches. In California, Japanese could not marry whites, and I sensed that Rose's casting was a subversive act by the drama teacher. I was both excited and scared for Rose; her insistence not to be treated any different from anyone else could get her in trouble.

About a week before the production, Rose came into our room, her usually bright eyes red and puffy.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my stomach turning in anticipation of trouble.

"Nothing. Who said anything was wrong?" she snapped back at me. She stopped asking me to rehearse lines with her, and the script disappeared from our room.

The evening of the play, Rose made some excuse that she had to go to Doris Motoshima's house to plan a fundraiser for

the school service club. I couldn't stay back and took Rusty for a long walk all the way to the high school. There were no windows in our auditorium, so I snuck into the lobby, only to have one of the ushers, a senior like Rose, stop me to say that dogs were not allowed. I grabbed the program, though. Outside I saw that Rose was listed as the waitress and Sally Faircloth was Mary. After tying Rusty to a tree beside the auditorium, I returned to the lobby.

"I think that there's a mistake here," I said to the usher, who I remembered was in the glee club. "My sister is playing Mary, not the waitress."

The usher shrugged. It was a minor detail that he obviously cared little about. Finding him utterly useless, I took a seat in the back. The seats were only half-full, mostly with middle-aged parents. I watched another one-act play in progress; the acting was earnest and saccharine. And then came the start of *One Egg*. Rose entered the stage as the waitress, wearing a simple light-blue dress that you'd see worn by employees in any greasy diner. That was the only thing about Rose's character that seemed subservient. She wore a pair of shiny black patent leather pumps—her best shoes, in fact—and her hair was immaculately curled with a big royal blue bow tied at the top. Her lips were painted bright red, no doubt her favorite Red Majesty shade. As I had read the play in my rehearsals with Rose, the waitress was a maddening, irritating service worker. In Rose's version on stage, she was a siren, teasing the male customer—"no sir, yes sir," and diminishing the female customer played by Sally Faircloth.

When she climbed in bed that night, she was still wearing her lipstick from the play.

"How did it go?" I asked, my head still on my pillow but my eyes alert and searching.

"I saw you sitting back there," she said. "You shouldn't have come."

"The waitress was the better role, anyway," I said, almost convincing myself of it. Rose didn't have to tell me that the switch was the result of some complaint. By this time, we understood how the world worked for us. To articulate the attitudes against us would give them power and credence. We preferred to release the pain silently, let it rise in invisible balloons that we couldn't see but we could feel, bumping against our foreheads and shoulders, warning us not to stray too far from what was expected.

After Rose graduated from high school, she went to work as a clerk at Pop's produce market, typing out orders from grocery stores. Pop left for work at dawn, receiving the crates of vegetables that arrived in flatbed trucks, vans and huge transport vehicles. Rose took the Red Car into work at a more sensible time, around eight. After graduating from high school, I would sometimes accompany her downtown when I started taking classes at Los Angeles City College. I was proud to sit next to her and tried to keep my ankles crossed like she did. When we arrived at the subway terminal building on Hill Street, though, I would realize my legs were wide open, my skirt taking up most of the seat.

The boss's son, Roy Tonai, was officially listed as the owner of the produce market because he was American born. He had a mean crush on Rose, and everyone said that they probably would get married, especially because Roy was already twenty-four and ready to settle down.

"I hear there's going to be a dance at Nishi this weekend," Mom said after dinner one evening. "Roy's mother told me that he will be driving in their new car. He wants to take you."

"I'm sick of this talk of Roy and me." Rose threw her napkin on the table. "I'm not marrying him, Mom. I know that will ruin your plans to lord it over everyone at the market." Her response to my mother initially surprised me as I observed that other Nisei girls would have been delighted to be in Rose's position. Roy was handsome, with a square jaw and a thick mane of hair that he combed back with oil. In spite of being the boss's son, he hauled crates of vegetables like any other employee.

But Rose was like our father; she didn't like to be boxed in. Whenever you tried to trap her in a corner, she'd get out. I think about that often now. How she must have fought that day in Chicago. Even all these years later I sometimes shut my eyes tight and try to transport myself back, to pretend that by willing myself there in my mind she might somehow have felt less alone.

CHAPTER 2

December 7, 1941, wasn't a typical Sunday for us Itos, starting at dawn, long before we knew what was going to happen. I was feeling poorly and so was Rusty. He was twelve, ancient for a golden retriever. He was practically deaf and had a bum rear leg; when he walked, he jerked like a car with a flat tire. Yet he soldiered on, his big mouth open in a smile and his wet pink tongue sticking out whenever I took his leash off a nail in the wall.

Mom, Pop and Rose left the house at five in the morning to help prepare for a wedding reception at the local Buddhist temple. The bride was a distant relative on Mom's side; most of Mom's relatives were in Spokane, a thousand miles away from us, so even a second cousin once removed was valued as a close blood relative if they lived in Los Angeles.

I, with my high fever, could not attend, so Mom had prepared me a pot of *okayu*, rice porridge, before they left. In fact, I was eating a bowl of the *okayu* with a red pickled plum floating on its glossy white surface when someone pounded on our door. I ignored it and so did Rusty, who couldn't hear a thing.

More pounding. Annoyed, I put down my chopsticks

and tightened the belt on my bathrobe. Pop had drilled a peephole about three inches below the factory-made one to accommodate our height, and I pressed my eye against it. Floppy black hair and dark eyebrows. Roy Tonai.

I didn't want anyone, much less a man, to see me in my threadbare bathrobe, but Roy was practically family. I blew my nose in a handkerchief, stuffed it into my pocket and opened the door. "For God's sake, Roy, what's going on?"

My aching head couldn't grab hold of the words coming out of Roy's mouth. Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Killed American servicemen. This would definitely mean war. We knew plenty of produce workers who had come from Hawaii, dark men with melodious accents who had formerly worked on sugar plantations. I pictured Hawaii as a paradise of coconut trees and white sand beaches. It felt unbelievable that Japan would want to bomb such a place.

Within an hour, my parents and Rose had returned. The wedding had been called off because of the "incident." I felt faint. My mother put her hand on my forehead and ordered me to go straight to bed. I was happy to comply but I couldn't rest. Produce workers under Pop's leadership trampled in and out of our house expressing worry and dismay.

A day later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially declared that the US was at war with Japan. Our world shook and our friends began to disappear. Roy's father got picked up and was placed in a jail in Tuna Canyon with Issei Buddhist priests, Japanese-language instructors and judo teachers. Several days later the government sent him and the others on a train to who knows where. Since Pop didn't serve on any boards of language schools or other Japanese-type groups, he wasn't picked up, which he later took as an insult, as if he wasn't influential enough to be seen as a threat to national security like the others.

Even before this, after one too many cups of sake, our father had spewed vitriol about the ways the world pressed against us Japanese. The Issei were already barred from buying land in California, and by 1920 the state was making it hard for them to even lease. Now with the war there was the curfew, which restricted the movement of all Japanese Americans. It wasn't fair that he couldn't leave the house before six o'clock in the morning; all his *hakujin* co-workers, even the ones from Germany and Italy, were free to go anywhere at any time. By six o'clock he would have missed out on multiple orders from the Midwest and East Coast.

Rose, meanwhile, hated having to be at home by eight o'clock every evening. "They've even canceled the flower market socials," she'd complain to me. The Nisei gatherings at the cavernous building on Wall Street, a few blocks away from the produce market in downtown Los Angeles, hardly seemed like a threat to the government to me.

Rose's connections with Nisei groups helped us know how to toe the line in Tropico at the beginning of World War II. Richard Tokashiki, whose father owned a flower shop on Los Feliz, told her where we should turn in our radios and our father's hunting gun, which he used to scare off rabbits. Richard was also the one who got Rose on the bandwagon to support a patriotic Nisei group, the Japanese American Citizens League. They would set up tables at different daytime events to recruit members. She kept trying to get me to come with her but I couldn't bear to be away from Rusty, who had stopped walking entirely and refused to eat. It was like he knew what was going to happen to us—or maybe he was absorbing the unspoken tension in the house.

One day I finally relented and manned a table with Rose to sign up new members after a talk by a JACL leader from Utah. I felt like such a fraud because I myself didn't bother

to become a member. There was something about the oath of allegiance that we were supposed to sign, alongside our black-and-white headshot and a fingerprint of our right index finger. The statement announced that we supported and defended the Constitution, "so help me God." After getting their signature verified by a notary public, members were encouraged to carry the piece of paper in their pockets and purses, as if that documentation would be evidence that they were real Americans.

The campaign didn't sit right with me. Only the American-born could join the group. But what about our parents? They were the ones who'd had to struggle to build a life in America. They chose it, strove for it. Meanwhile Rose and I miraculously appeared here, magically American, without even having to journey across the Pacific Ocean.

I was among two hundred Nisei at Los Angeles City College. The other students were from Japanese communities in Uptown, South Central, Boyle Heights or Little Tokyo and often congregated in regional cliques. I didn't take school that seriously. Like Rose, I was spending most of my time working at the produce market in the winter of 1942. The market seemed different, as if a major earthquake had thrown it off its foundation. The men seemed rougher and more impatient. Some customers dropped their accounts for no reason. In one case, the operator of a chain of grocery stores specifically said it was because we were Japs.

Pop didn't seem overly worried. "Everyone needs food. They need to eat. And everyone knows our vegetables are number one," he told Roy and all the other workers. But his grin disappeared as soon as the men left his office.

I was afraid to bring up Rusty's decline in health because

everyone in the family was so preoccupied with this war business. One Friday afternoon I was watching him breathing so hard in the backyard that I couldn't stand it. It took me three awkward and painful attempts to hoist Rusty into a wheelbarrow from our shed. Bumping him down Glendale Boulevard past the rail yard, I transported him to a plain storefront where there was an animal doctor who usually treated horses.

The veterinarian delivered the bad news that I feared. My dog's heart was failing. Rusty looked up at me knowingly. He was ready to let go.

It was getting cool by the time we were home. Rusty lay under a cedar tree, his breathing becoming even more labored. "Rusty, I love you. I love you," I repeated as I buttoned my heavy coat and lay down next to him. I smelled his stinky breath together with the earthiness of dirt, a combination that still haunts me today.

Through the windows, I could see the silhouettes of my parents and Rose clearing off the dining-room table as it was getting dark. I couldn't discern Mom's staccato of Japanese words, but I did hear my name. I knew that I should get up and tell them where I was but I didn't want to leave Rusty's side. I was so tired and let myself doze.

When I awoke, Rusty's body was stiff and cold and I knew that he was no more. I couldn't bear the thought of raccoons or coyotes clawing or tearing at his flesh. Using an old shovel from the shed, I found a spot of loose dirt where Mom planted her *shiso* plants every spring. I began digging a hole, hitting hardpan about midway but using the nose of the shovel to break though. In the darkness, I buried him.

When I walked into the house, I was completely covered in dirt.

"What happened to you?" Rose asked, almost dropping the plate that she was drying.

"Rusty's dead."

No one said anything, not even scolding me for being out of the house during curfew.

I first saw the exclusion order nailed to a telephone pole near a popular Scottish-themed restaurant on Los Feliz Boulevard in March. I was terrified by the black type calling out, INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY. The order stated that we "aliens and non-aliens" had to report to a Civil Control Station at an address in Pasadena in the beginning of May. We were instructed to bring linens, toiletries and clothing, only in bundles that we could carry. Where was the government taking us?

Since many of the male Issei leaders were already gone, their wives came by our house, bereft, afraid, confused. Mom extinguished any flames of panic. There was no time for emotion. We had to cross an unknown body of water in a rickety rowboat. If we paused to cry or ask questions, we were bound to sink.

We packed up our belongings in cardboard boxes, the straw trunks that our parents had brought when they first came to America and, of course, wooden produce crates. One German farmer let us use his barn in San Fernando to store most of our boxes. A Mexican produce worker held on to our silverware and Pop's tools. A church in Glendale agreed to keep our photo albums. As parts of me were being cut off and scattered in different places, I was quickly learning not to be too sentimental about anything.

Roy, as the owner of a produce market, was privy to inside information from local politicians and businessmen.

One day he came by to tell us that he, his mother and sister were going to report early to an assembly center in the Owens Valley in hopes that we would not be displaced to an unknown location in another state. Called Manzanar, it was about a four-hour drive toward Death Valley, and surrounded by the Sierra Nevada mountain range. "At least we'll be in California," he said to my parents and Rose while they stood in the middle of our empty living room.

Rose, who normally wouldn't give Roy the time of day, listened intently and nodded. "Better to know where we'll be," she agreed.

Pop handwrote a list in pencil of where all our belongings were stored and slipped the paper in the ribbon band of his felt hat. "We will all come back before you know it," he said. Pop's emotions ran hot and cold, depending on how much he drank, but when it came to the family and business, optimism had been his key to success so far.

I had no such hope. I walked along the concrete riverbank in search of a last song from the toads. I laid some wildflowers at Rusty's grave, my mother's former *shiso* patch. Like Mom, I was pretty sure that we wouldn't be back again and in the remote chance we were, we wouldn't be the same.

The frames of the more than five hundred barracks were already standing when we arrived at Manzanar in late March 1942. We drove up in a caravan with military police tailing us. When I emerged from Pop's Model A, I felt my heart clamp down into my chest. The wind howled and blew through my hair, forcing my skirt to hide in between my legs. The military police immediately confiscated the Model A and Pop's face fell, as if he finally understood what would be taken away from us.

The camp was divided into thirty-six residential blocks,

which comprised fourteen barracks, twenty by a hundred feet in size, arranged in two rows of seven. Each barrack was divided into four rooms. We lived in a room with Roy's mother, widowed aunt and older sister, while Roy stayed in a bachelor barrack, also in Block Twenty-Nine. Through my window I could see the Children's Village, a special unit that housed orphans from three prewar children's homes, including one called Shonien, which wasn't far from Tropico. The orphans, who ranged in age from toddlers to nearly adults, were a mystery to us as they had their own kitchen and kept to themselves, for the most part. Issei nurserymen eventually planted a garden and cherry blossom trees around the Children's Village as if plants could heal the wounds of displacement.

Each block had a set of lavatories, separate for men and women. I was completely horrified when I first stepped into ours because there were no separations between toilets. Mom, Rose and I took our bathroom breaks together because we could take turns holding up our coats or towels to shield the person on the toilet. Our periods, which used to occur at about the same time while we lived in Tropico, disappeared altogether while we were in camp, a sign of the terrible stress that we were under. Even though we didn't voice our complaints out loud, our bodies knew our truth.

In the beginning our family stayed together, enduring the completely foreign environment as a tightly knit unit. But as the weeks passed, our ties loosened. Rose's cool magnetism attracted both sexes. It was only a matter of time before a Nisei group, Just Us Girls, known as JUGS, recruited her to be one of their members. Now most of her meals and evenings were spent with them. I was so hurt to be excluded

that instead of forcing myself on Rose and her new friends, I avoided her circle entirely.

Camp took its toll on my parents. Without his title of produce market manager, Pop began to wither and turn inward. Woodworking or gardening, which many of the Issei men embraced, were futile activities, he believed. Instead he started drinking more heavily, hanging out with other old miscreants who were intent on making the best bootleg alcohol out of corncobs or anything else they could find in camp.

Mom continued to keep up appearances. Little baby gray hairs began to sprout along her hairline, and she spent most mornings either plucking them out or having me or Rose do the tedious chore. She made sure to have a list of things to do every day. As she completed each task, she wrote a check mark beside it. I heard her explain to the other Issei women that's what they needed to do, too, to not lose their minds.

I got a job with the Supply Department, which issued jackets and blankets when the weather got cool. That's where I met Hisako Hamamoto, who was from Terminal Island. Hisako was a bit plump, but she didn't care. She even made fun of the extra roll of fat around her waist, poking it after we shared a meal. In the early mornings, we'd walk to the Victory Garden to help Roy and some sons of flower growers prepare the soil for seeds of lettuce or spinach. One day as we were sitting in the dirt, Hisako yelped in pain. The culprit? An evil scorpion, which I flattened with the heel of my shoe. Hisako's upper thigh, where the scorpion had injected its venom, was bright pink and swollen, and I helped her to the closest mess hall, where I cleaned the wound and made a cold compress of ice.

"No sign of its stinger, so you'll be all right," I reassured her, explaining that Rusty had not been so lucky on one of our walks by the Los Angeles River. Pop showed me how to

remove the scorpion horns from Rusty's paw with a pair of tweezers and treat the wound.

"You'd be a good nurse," Hisako complimented me as she pulled her skirt down. "You're good in an emergency. I myself can't think straight." Actually, I was a crybaby, but when immediate danger loomed, I was able to access another part of my brain and complete tasks that I never thought I could do.

Hisako's observation stayed in my mind and when I heard about the nurse's aide program at the Manzanar hospital, I enrolled. I never saw Rose much, anyway, as she would stay out late to make paper flowers for special events at the mess hall at night: weddings or send-off parties for Nisei soldiers in the US Army. Some of my father's roguish new friends eviscerated the JACL leaders who had lobbied for our boys to be drafted in the first place. Why did we have to spill our blood on the battlefield to prove that we were loyal Americans? Let us out of our cages first and then maybe we'd consider military service.

I was sympathetic to their viewpoint, but could not say anything to Rose, who was spending most of her time with the pro-JACL Nisei. I even heard rumblings that she was an *inu*, an informant who was ratting out the Issei or Nisei who had been educated in Japan, sending them to Department of Justice detention centers like the one Roy's father was in. That accusation was preposterous, but camp was becoming polarized between the accommodationists and the dissenters.

By the spring of 1943, the government was starting to push the "loyal" Nisei out of camp into the general population of free Americans, as long as they stayed away from the western military zone. Instead of returning home to California, we had to move into unfamiliar towns and cities in the Midwest or the East, anyplace that needed cheap labor to replace the men who had been sent to fight overseas.

Of all the regions, Chicago was the promised land. It

was the second-largest city in the US, full of factories and manufacturers that needed laborers. In camp we were shown a series of promotional black-and-white films about the merits of the city, "Hello, Chicago." Rose's eyes widened when she saw the skyscrapers and the river cutting through downtown, the *hakujin* and black women wearing hats and high heels as they crossed the busy streets. That scene frightened me, as I'd almost forgotten what it was like to be surrounded by *hakujin* people and boulevards. Somehow I had gotten used to the searing wind cutting through the haunting Owens Valley and the landscape of jagged mountains surrounding our barracks, the home for 10,000 Japanese Americans.

In June 1943 the War Relocation Authority recruited Rose to be among the early Nisei to go to Chicago. Responding to an official invitation, she attended an informational meeting and returned to our barrack with a resettlement pamphlet, which she tossed on top of her bedspread. I grabbed it and studied every instruction on how to best assimilate into mainstream life.

"Don't bunch up in numbers more than three," the resettlement literature stated.

There are four of us, I thought. *Would that make us one too many?* "I guess they don't want the Japanese to be too conspicuous."

"They want us to be invisible," Rose said and laughed. "That's plain impossible."

If we could not help but be seen, we had to be the best Nisei specimens, the ones with broad white smiles and spotless suits and dresses. I understood the resettlement agency's strategy. If I were working for the government, I would send

hundreds of Rose Itos out into the wide plains of the Midwest or the villages of New England. If anyone could convince a suspicious public that we Japanese were patriotic Americans, it would be my older sister. Judging from the shine on her face, I knew that she had accepted the call.

I have replayed the day that she left Manzanar in September 1943 over and over in my mind, as if I'd remember some new details if I thought about it enough. I'd cried because I didn't want to be separated from Rose. Everyone made fun of me for being overly weepy at twenty years of age. I wasn't known to say much of anything, but sometimes emotions welled up inside of me and escaped before I could shut that door.

"Take care of Mom and Papa," she said, gripping her tan suitcase. The dust swirled around her—on anyone else it would have look gross and dirty, but Rose looked like an angel covered in gold dust. She was wearing her favorite dress, white polka dots on dark blue, and a hat on her perfectly styled hair.

I nodded and swore that I would, not realizing how tough that would really be. I handed a farewell gift to her that I had been working on ever since she had announced that she had been approved to leave. It was a diary covered in some wood that I had salvaged from a box that once held toilets. From the old Issei who did woodworking in camp, I had received a bit of sandpaper and stain. He also used a drill to make three holes on the two wooden panels, which I threaded with an old shoelace to keep the notepaper together. On the cover I had burned in the name ROSE as well as the image of the flower.

"Oh, Aki, it's beautiful," she said. "Not sure if I'll write anything in it—you know me." Noting my crestfallen response, she tried to assuage my feelings. "Ah, but I adore it, I really do. I'm going to stick it in my pocketbook so it'll be with me the entire train ride."

She got on a bus with some Nisei men assigned to a sugar-beet farm a few states away. She waved furiously at us and at first I wouldn't lift my head to really say goodbye. I was afraid if I did, I'd wail and never stop. But finally when the bus began to move, I looked up. Rose's face was already fixed toward where she was going next.

"I'm going to be in Chicago soon, too," Roy announced as he delivered mail to our barrack around Christmas 1943. He had been voted our block manager and distributing the mail was probably the best part of his job. We never got much mail, but since Rose left, we received postcards from her. This one was of Chicago's Moving Stairs, an escalator to the newly built subway. Another one was of the Mark Twain Hotel, located at 111 West Division, the corner of Clark Street. The hotel was apparently walking distance from the apartment that she shared with two other Nisei girls. She had gotten a job with a famous candy company that made these chocolate logs covered with peanuts and caramel. I pictured her enveloped in sweetness as she filed papers or whatever she did as an office clerk. On this postcard she wrote that she'd been searching for a unit for our whole family for when we were to be reunited in Chicago.

"You're not supposed to read our mail," I scolded Roy in jest.

"It's a postcard. I can't help but read it," he said.

"Has Rose been writing to you, too?"

Roy's face reddened, and I couldn't figure out if it was because Rose hadn't corresponded with him or perhaps because she had.

He didn't answer my question. "I gotta get out of here," he said, adjusting his mailbag. "A guy can die too early in this place."

Within a month, in January 1944, he had gone to Chicago. Eager to follow both him and Rose, I prepared our leave clearance papers, revisiting questions that didn't make much sense. Like would we foreswear any allegiance to the Japanese emperor— Who said that we bowed down to him in the first place? If you didn't answer the questions in a particular way, you would be labeled "disloyal" and forced into another exodus, this time to a harsher camp close to the Oregon state border. More than ever, we wanted to get out of Manzanar into the free zone.

As Rose had been the one who always handled our official family's English-language government paperwork, that responsibility now fell on me. I felt myself withering under the pressure. I kept crossing out certain answers and reread the simplest questions multiple times. Whenever I gave my parents instructions on what we needed to do next, they would gaze at me dumbfounded as if they couldn't quite recognize me. "And, Pop, no staying out late at night," I warned my father. We couldn't afford any kind of setback.

A week before we were due to leave, I noticed my father up in the middle of the night, slipping on his worn-out shoes.

"Where are you going?" I sat up in my bed but he was out the door before I could stop him. I lay down, unable to fall back to sleep, listening to the short and sharp breaths my mother inhaled in her slumber, as if there wasn't enough oxygen in the room.

Around dawn, our barrack shook with the arrival of two men—a drunken Pop with his arm around the shoulder of our local camp policeman, Hickey Hayashi. Mom immediately got to her feet and together they hauled him to his bed, where he collapsed in a drunken stupor.

"You know that he's not supposed to have this, Ito-*san*."

Hickey produced a pint-size glass container that I knew Pop stored his bootleg sake in.

My stomach fell. Could this criminal incident mean the end of early release for us? I was ready to get on my knees and beg for mercy when Mom stepped in. Using an elevated Japanese reserved for addressing kings, Mom apologized profusely while standing in front of Hickey in her nightgown. From underneath their bed, she retrieved a pair of new shoes for Pop that we had ordered from the Sears Roebuck catalog for our move to Chicago. Those shoes were supposed to replace his holey ones that he was wearing right now, on top of his bedsheets. Mom offered them in exchange for the camp policeman's silence.

Hickey shook his head. "No, Ito-*san*, no need for that."

"This is a token of our appreciation. We've benefited from your service to us over these months."

After three rounds of this back and forth, Hickey relented and departed with Pop's new shoes. A week later, we were on our way to Chicago.

We traveled by train. It was so strange to be on a train after being restricted to a square mile in the middle of Owens Valley for so long. After months of living in a concentration camp, I felt that our lives had been compressed in one of those snow globes and the world as we had once known it may have been a figment of our imagination. But no, here we were, with the glorious mountain ranges of Colorado and then the flatness of Nebraska passing by our windows.

We were close to the Iowa border when I got sick. A twisting pain grabbed my insides and it took all my strength to pretend that it wasn't there.

"Aki-*chan*, I told you not to eat that sweet that your

mess-hall friend made," my mother said, noticing my discomfort.

Hisako had pressed the *koge*, burnt rice, with a sprinkle of sugar—a most precious commodity—as a special treat for our long trip. Mom thought it was disgusting, but I was touched by the gift.

Finally I was able to make my way to the restroom. It was quite embarrassing as, by that time, sweat was dripping from the sides of my face and my legs were shaking. While I was in the ladies' room, I almost blacked out. I thought I heard my sister's voice in my ear, *Take care of Mom and Papa*, not as a memory, but as a new directive. *I am*, I thought, annoyed that my family's low expectations of me would seep into my subconscious.

When I returned to our seats, most of my makeup was on my handkerchief, as I'd cleansed my face with some cold water. Pop had already fallen asleep, the brim of his hat lowered over his eyes. Sticking out from the band was the edge of the paper, now completely yellowed, that listed the location of our earthly belongings in Los Angeles.

"I wonder if Rose will meet us at the station," Mom said. We hadn't heard from Rose for a couple of weeks. I had sent her a telegram with our Chicago arrival date, but didn't receive a response back. We weren't worried at the time. It wasn't like she could call us in camp. Mom suspected Rose was lovesick about some young man in the city. On the train, we saw Nisei GIs, handsome in their pressed uniforms, and I imagined that someone like that had captured Rose's heart.

As we got closer to our destination, I could tell Pop was getting excited. He was sitting straight up as the train lurched back and forth; he kept looking out the window and back toward the passengers leaving and entering. Oh, to see the flash of Rose's smile, that in itself would be enough for me.

When we finally arrived at Union Station, Pop was the first out the door with his one suitcase. The train station was so huge and grand, with majestic white-colored marble walls. A huge war bonds poster was on display below the clock while the flags of military allies—the United States, Great Britain, France, and Australia—hung down by the vertical beams. In the center of the station was a USO desk to serve all the soldiers who were on leave and needed instructions on the best accommodations and recreation.

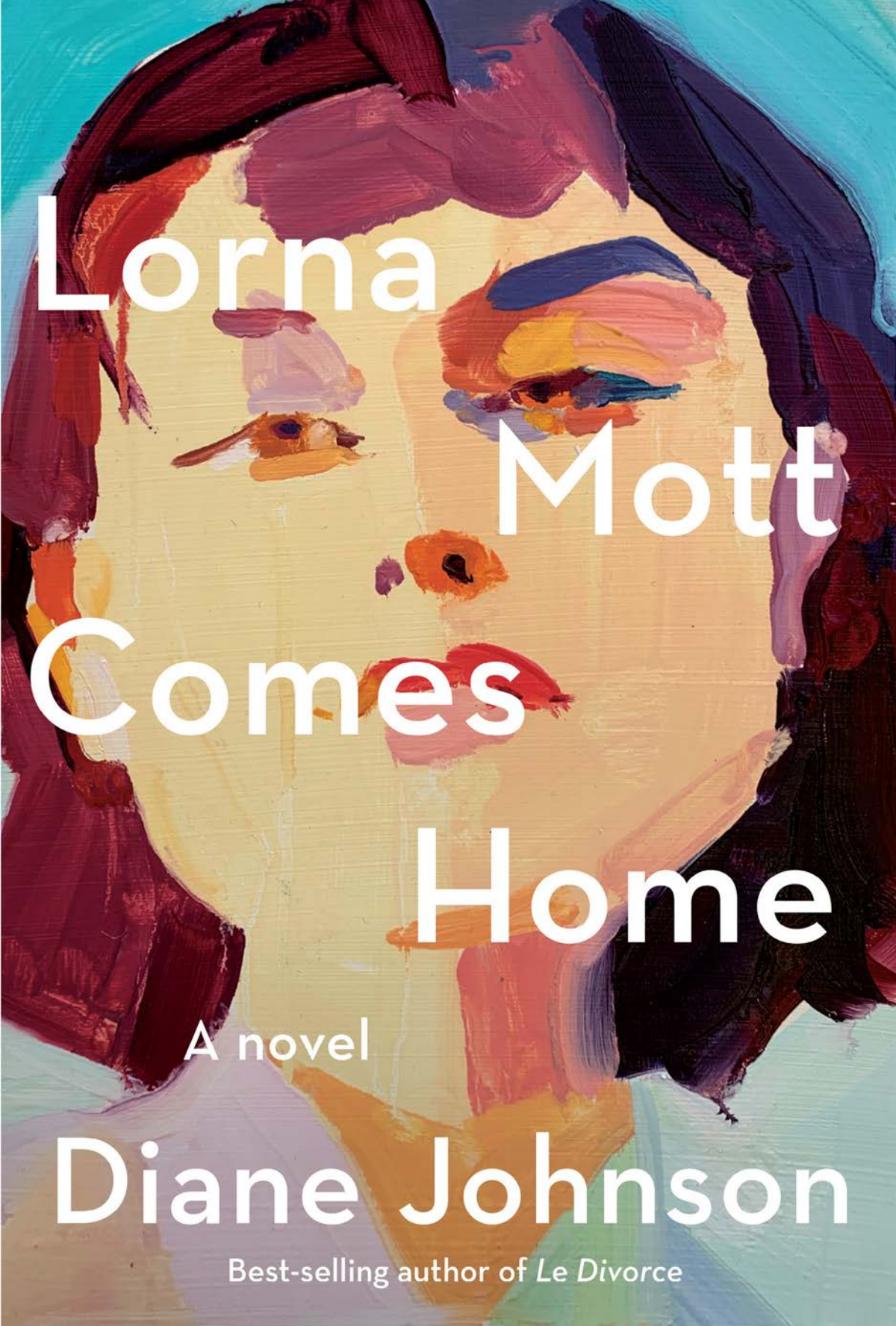
As we stumbled into this mass of humanity, we saw a group of Japanese Americans walking toward us. I recognized one of our former Nisei camp leaders, Ed Tamura. Ed had hightailed out of Manzanar as soon as he could. His face was round and smooth; if he had to shave every day, I would be surprised. Then I spotted Roy and his slicked-back hair, drooping a bit in the May heat.

I first felt embarrassed that there was this welcome party for us. We were simply the Itos, a former Los Angeles produce manager, his wife and younger daughter. I searched the group for my sister. But there was no bright smile, lipstick applied perfectly in spite of the humidity.

"Something's happened." I could barely hear Mr. Tamura's voice over the hubbub in the building.

Roy couldn't look at us. "There was an accident at the subway station last night," he said.

Before he could declare, "She's dead," I knew. I had felt it in my bones when I was getting sick on the train. Rose had departed this earth, as dramatically as only she could have done.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Best-selling author of *Le Divorce*

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1

Sometimes the metaphorical significance of a random event startles with its application to your life.

Lorna Mott was thinking this when she asked Monsieur Jasse to stop his taxi so she could walk a little way along the road above the graveyard of Pont-les-Puits. The whole village was talking this morning about how, in the darkness during last night's heavy rains, the cemetery had dislodged itself and with the stealth of a nocturnal predator slid five hundred meters downhill, where the astonished citizens this morning had discovered a huge, sticky hillock of treacherous clay, burst coffins, broken stones, corpses, and bones. Only the oldest gravestones remained standing with unseeing dignity above the sacrilegious chaos.

It was Lorna's last day in Pont-les-Puits, and she would leave with this ominous sight in mind as a kind of cautionary reminder of consequences unforeseen. Her departure—escape, as she was thinking of it now—was both impulsive and planned. Once she was safely on the train to Lyon, she could admit that subconsciously she had been planning awhile for a future in California without her husband, Armand-Loup.

They needed some time apart, and things she'd been doing could be construed as unconscious strategies to accomplish this, for instance recently publishing her collected art lectures and accepting a lecture appearance in Bakersfield, California, where she was headed now.

Bakersfield was hardly at the level of places she'd lectured before her marriage, but going there was a toe in the water of her return to professional life. She had been thrilled with the invitation, out of the blue, from Bakersfield, and it had been the impetus she had needed to take up her professional life again, revive, expand. These were gestures toward autonomy, surely, even if she hadn't thought of them that way.

In these her middle years, as people called the late fifties, early sixties, she was too old to cry about leaving. Armand-Loup was her second husband; she had been through marital difficulties before—why did she feel so near to a well of sobs as she neared the station? There are times you feel you've made a mess of your life, that was the sum of it, the harder to bear when you think of yourself as a basically competent person, even an accomplished one. Two failed marriages, and so late in the day, argued the opposite: incompetence. But, she told herself, marriage does not define your life.

The first to discover the upended condition of the cemetery had been children crossing through it on their way to school. They had burst into the classrooms with excited descriptions: "*Squelettes!* Skeletons! Bones sticking up, I saw teeth . . ." Skeptical teachers had gone to look for themselves, then alerted the mayor and members of the city council. The children had not exaggerated: dozens if not hundreds of graves stirred together in the muddy batter as if at the last trumpet; the righteous and sinners alike had burst their tombs. Among the villagers who came along to look, though most were revolted, horrified, some believed it to be a sign of the truth of the Resurrection. Or maybe a curse on the village. The mayor and several members of the village council of Pont-les-Puits, a village in the French Drôme Provençale, were meeting to discuss which and what to do.

The two events—grisly mudslide and Lorna Dumas's departure—tended afterward to become linked in people's minds in a cause-and-effect way and became part of the mythology of the village. Lorna Mott Dumas throwing suitcases into a taxi and driving off, Monsieur Dumas just standing there bemused while other citizens started looking for the bones of their ancestors.

. . .

Monsieur Armand-Loup Dumas (not descended from the writer) was one of the council members summoned to discuss the cemetery problem. Some younger citizens of Pont-les-Puits might have dismissed him as a raddled, amiable old raconteur who hung around the bar-buffet in Hôtel La Périchole, but he was reputed to have once been a noted museum curator; he had views on most things and, occasionally, useful knowledge. You could see he had been handsome, but now he was also stout, and his curly black hair had receded and was gray at the sides.

It was to Monsieur Dumas people turned now. No one discounted his opinions—he had published a book on the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School—though his anecdotes were sometimes doubted because of the name-dropping: How could someone from Pont-les-Puits have met Catherine Deneuve or Archbishop Tutu?

People had liked his American wife, Madame Lorna Dumas, the small, pretty, high-strung woman who had publicly left that morning. Everyone had seen trouble coming; in the last few months, their house had abruptly been leased to an English family and was also for sale, and Monsieur Dumas was negotiating pleasant temporary rooms over the boulangerie. Some said that before this final fracas, young Madame Trebon, wife of the baker, had been seen delivering brioches to Monsieur Dumas in the late afternoons when Madame Lorna was out. Next to the voluptuous Madame Trebon, Madame Lorna looked like a slightly desiccated sprite, seeming young until you looked more closely; then you thought, Young for her age.

Lorna and Armand-Loup had been married twenty years. It was unclear when during the preceding months her recent frequent absences, away doing her lectures, had become the status quo, but something in her manner made everybody predict that this time she wouldn't be back, and who could blame her? Everyone liked Monsieur Dumas, but he was a notorious *tombeur*—that is, skirt chaser, often with inexplicable success.

. . .

The problem facing the village council was how to clean up the mess in the cemetery while respecting the distress of people whose loved ones, in whatever state of putrefaction or petrification, now lay entangled and anonymous in literally a potter's field of the same clay the village used for making its famous sauceboats. Among the exhumed bodies in the cemetery were several whose disorderly reappearance might get noticed in the newspapers. These were Saint Brigitte Fauxbois, whose grave, according to local legend, sometimes manifested an aura of light, generally in summer; Russell Woods, the noted American painter, whose posthumous enormous prices at auction were making him a household name in the U.S.; and Roland Bussy de Larimont, a former mayor from a prominent local family.

"Woods, the American painter," Monsieur Dumas reminded the other members of the council, "the old fellow always up there daubing—hundreds of views of the church in the changing light? Alone, forgotten when he died, except by Lorna. He and my wife were good friends—the two Americans in town. She's an art historian, you remember. She thought highly of his work."

The names of dozens of others would have to be divined from the cemetery records, which would take time, but these were the few the council could remember off the tops of their heads. They foresaw that DNA expertise would be required, and other expensive technical assistance that in former days people would not have expected. Where they had the names of families whose loved ones or ancestors were likely among the jumble of bones, they would assume that such people, once contacted, would be responsible for picking up an appropriate proportion of the cost.

In the train, Lorna knew from experience, her spirits would rise, they always did, but right now she felt like she had forgotten something in the oven and would eventually have to deal with a charred, smelly mess, the remains of a fragrant, delicious concoction she'd slaved over. For a moment she felt failed, depressed, sad, slightly panicked, daunted by the practical problems she was facing, of supporting herself, reviving a career almost dormant for twenty years, and explaining to her adult

children her second marriage wreck. Where had twenty years gone? What had she been doing all that time? Visiting the sick, volunteering at the village library, giving art lectures to the American cooking groups that came to Pont-les-Puits for courses in mushroom picking or knife skills. Paltry pastimes. She had been happy, though.

People generally would have said that Lorna Mott was the epitome of a successful woman: lovely offspring, grandchildren, health, a French husband, a delightful house, and an independent career involving travel and public appearances—public appearances requiring expensive clothes (or clothes that appeared expensive)—an uncomplicated, sociable nature, and an intellectual life. She would say this herself, she was always grateful for her luck, except for now, perhaps heading to a second divorce—she was not going to think that far ahead—which she knew officially counted against your happiness score. And, of course, not so young anymore. Of a certain age. Or, face it, a bit older than the French meant when they spoke of *une femme d'un certain âge.*

Her plan was to take the train to Clermont-Ferrand, then the TGV to Lyon, and, from there, Air France to New York. She'd recover in New York for a couple of days, network a little, and get in touch with the publisher of her book in hopes of lining up some readings or publicity. From New York she'd contact her children—but how to tell them why she was there? Lorna had three children with her previous husband, Randall Mott: Peggy, Curt, and Hams. They probably had no suspicion of her difficulties.

Then to San Francisco, her hometown, soon to be her home base again, then overnight to Bakersfield to give her lecture. She had some cash in dollars in her purse, and her credit cards, and a small bank account in the U.S., where she had been stashing fees and royalties, unconsciously preparing her escape.

The French village of Pont-les-Puits had been her home for twenty years, or, rather, eighteen: when she and Armand-Loup first married they lived in Paris, and he was still at the Musée d'Orsay. But she'd loved Armand-Loup's ancestral village and was happy to move there when he retired to write his book on post-Impressionism in the delicate

period before Abstractionism set in. Guidebooks said of Pont-les-Puits that it was "favorably situated at a convenient driving distance from the sea, benefiting from a mild and healthful climate." It had the usual number of historical monuments, including Roman ruins, a tower from the thirteenth century, a doorway—the Portail de Fernande—from the fourteenth; ritual Jewish *bains;* the summer châteaux of les évêques de Die; chapels; fountains; and walls and so on. Now tears did come to her eyes as she glimpsed the shadowy ramparts of the château of the counts receding from the train window. Her dreams receding into the mists of the disappearing view.

Lorna loved Pont-les-Puits, even though by some standards it was a slightly run-down little backwater. In its heyday, the manufacture of a certain local form of earthenware double sauceboat, adapted to skimming fat from the gravy (a *puitière*), had brought prosperity, but recently its use had fallen off, and the town's young people had left for business schools or jobs as au pair girls and tutors of French in Scandinavia, where they propagated on their uncritical patrons the rough local accent, with its heavily rolled *r*'s so derided by Parisians.

The future held some promise for Pont even so—there was now a growing group of British expatriates drawn to the cheap and potentially charming run-down real estate. They in turn expanded the prosperity of the village by bringing an enthusiastic group of American cookery writers who didn't speak French, and also chefs enamored of a species of local onion, the *Allium tanisium*, related to the Japanese allium. Now there were numberless cooking residencies and classes, sometimes combined with French conversation tutorials, to the great delight of the people who kept the inns and restaurants. Lorna occasionally was asked to give an art lecture about the local monuments to the American foodies who subscribed so expensively to these courses. She was always glad to do it, and in that way kept her hand in. She was especially good on certain nineteenth-century neglected painters like Meissonier and Fantin-Latour, and she hoped to help her painter friend, the late Russell Woods, get his proper place in art history.

How could she leave this beloved place? But she had to, unless Armand-Loup would really change his ways. There was also the tragedy of having to sell their house, the sense of a beautiful idyll—twenty years

long—over, finished, done. But on the upside, in California she could be of help to her grown children, and, really, it would be nice to be in America again. She had a rosy view of it. No matter where you are, you don't stop being American.

On the train, she stole another look at the words she'd downloaded from the French consulate website:

> *It should be noted that a spouse who leaves the family domicile without a court authorization may be deemed under French law to have committed a "fault" giving rise to significant financial consequences. Thus a spouse should avoid doing so until it has been possible to consult with French counsel.*

Tant pis—too bad, so much for that—she was doing it. And now it was time to think of the future. She would prove, to herself if to no one else, that you can make a new life at any age.

As she was climbing into the train, Armand-Loup telephoned her cell and said in a cold voice, *"Chérie, tu as oublié ton argenterie."* She'd left the sterling silverware she'd taken with her from California when she married him and moved to France. He must have realized she might not be coming back for a while.

Tant pis.

2

We must be prepared for things turning out differently than we expect.

In the plane to New York, she had a plump, permanent-waved, chatty seatmate who pried things out of her, for instance that she had grandchildren. Lorna loved her grandchildren but didn't think of herself as a "granny," which was how the woman next to her put it. "I'm a granny," she said. "How about you? How old are yours?" Lorna had to think: it changed all the time. Julie must be about twenty, twenty-one, and Curt's twins, what, four? She didn't inquire about the ages of this other woman's grandchildren and, though she wasn't in denial, did wonder if her own age and grandmotherhood would detract or add to her authority as an art critic. For a man, it would add, or be irrelevant; for a woman, she didn't know.

"Where are you from?" persisted the irritating seatmate. "Were you on vacation?"

"Originally San Francisco," Lorna said, "but I've been living overseas." She had learned over the years to say "overseas," like a military wife, instead of "I live abroad" or "I live in Europe," which could seem elitist or excite the suspicion you were CIA.

"Are you happy there?"

Lorna thought it an odd, unanswerable question, and rather nosy,

too. What would most people say? Yes, when they really weren't, or no, though they were? Did people even know? Happiness was like one of those floaters in your eye that you can never focus on, intangible and fleeting. But she knew she was happy at the idea of wonderful America, its big mountains and expansive generosity—happy to be going there, to be home again permanently after all these years away.

In the twenty years she'd lived in France, Lorna had often been to America, to San Francisco to visit her children or, in the first years, to New York or Massachusetts or even South Dakota to give lectures, keeping her professional life going. Then her lecture engagements had begun to taper off, almost without her noticing. So, today, it wasn't exactly culture shock, arriving in New York, it was the new finality of her plan to stay that made her appreciate pleasant American things—the cheery man in customs who said "Welcome home" to people in the U.S.-citizen passport line; drinking fountains; the smiling face of the handsome new president, Obama, on posters in the reception hall.

She felt a surge of sentimental patriotism, of oneness with her native land. America was more suited to her temperament than the exigent rectitude of formal, hidebound France. She was home; maybe she'd been homesick these twenty years. Missing the open faces, enchiladas, Japanese cars.

She would postpone the unwelcome task of giving the news of her whereabouts to the children and facing their questions. But she did call Margaret, Peggy, her oldest child, who lived in Ukiah, California, and was recently divorced from her husband, Dick Willover, a man whom both Lorna and Ran (Randall Mott, Peggy's father) had been crazy about at first. *Tant pis.* Lorna predicted Peggy would be the most understanding. She telephoned her from the hotel.

"Peg, it's Mother. Are you there?"

"Mom! Where are you?"

"I'm in New York, honey." How to explain? "I'm on my way to San Francisco, then Bakersfield, where I give a lecture. I should be there by Wednesday. I'll explain it all in the fullness of time."

"Are you coming here? Is Armand-Loup with you?"

"No. Peg—I'll be staying in San Francisco awhile. Armand and I are taking some time off. Don't mention it to Hams or . . ."

Predictably, Peggy remonstrated. "Time off? Are you leaving him? That's terrible, Mother. Are you sure? Have you seen a counselor? What's the matter?"

"Please, Peg. I've analyzed my situation. With all its dismaying ramifications . . ." She spoke in a light tone. She herself would have to understand better before she could explain.

"I suppose you have," Peggy conceded. There were a number of negative ramifications Lorna was only now seeing. For instance, how much detail about all this was she really going to go into with the children? She had not been feeling that she needed to explain to them about her return, but now she was obliged to recognize that she was uncomfortable telling them her main reason for leaving Armand-Loup.

It was his wild infidelity. Infidelity at their age was embarrassing, maybe even comic, because at their age—the children probably thought—you were supposed to be not only beyond caring but beyond doing anything much, and way beyond enduring the rituals and incurring the expense of illicit sexual capers, in Armand-Loup's case the escalating expense of wooing demanding, ever-younger young women.

She had been surprised by his infidelity. She knew the reputation of French husbands, but she had believed it was overstated, Frenchmen being more or less like other men, with normal physical capacities and the normal wish to avoid trouble. Besides, she had thought that she and Armand-Loup got along very well in that department of life. She also knew that French wives would, or would have in the past, turned a blind eye, or exacted some domestic price in private, to compensate for the dinners, the flowers, the concerts, and the weekends spent with *poules de luxe*. Lorna begrudged both the time and the expense of Armand-Loup's adventures. And in his case, the costs had risen with his weight, and he was now rather plump—he who had been such a beauty, and a fantastic skier. Now the girlfriends were younger, plainer, and more expensive, especially a couple of expensive medical events involving these young women. With their cost, eventually, had come the need to sell the house, though this exigency was disguised even in their private conversations as sensible downsizing.

And though she understood that he was trying to fend off age, *bon,* as a result of his betrayals she had become less and less motivated to throw herself into her assigned duties as helpmeet—why would you want to slave for a man who was weekending with some chick in Marseilles? And there were larger cultural issues: whatever she did, in their village, she'd always be the awkward American woman, never quite right, said to once have had some career in America, but never, ever getting the cheeses straight. All was failure.

And yet—and yet wasn't there more to it? A more positive force had also prompted her to leave. Her own sense of adventure? Of not wanting to feel that life was just reaction to fate, or to the infidelity of someone else? Was it wanting to have a new life while there was still time? Was she having a midlife crisis in an interesting way? Okay, too late to become an opera singer or a congresswoman, she still looked forward to the new chapter.

Twenty years ago she had gone off with such glee with her hot French husband, leaving the children to their adult lives: the newly married Peggy with her baby, Curt and Hams in college. Over the twenty years, all of her kids—Peggy, Curt, Hammond—and in time their spouses and kids had loved their holidays and summers in France, in her postcard-perfect stone farmhouse, *mas,* in Pont-les-Puits. They loved to loll in the sun of its courtyard, hike the pretty mountain paths, and feast on the special foie gras and fragrant chèvres of the region. She had had little reason ever to come back to America.

How much did a grown-up like herself need to reveal to her adult children anyhow? Did she owe them explanations? Had the balance already tipped on the dependence scale toward her being more dependent on them than they on her? She didn't think so, but maybe they thought so.

She was unwilling to struggle with the matter of her official story for too long and thrust it from her mind, giving Peggy the cheerful version: grown apart, missing America, never really at home in France, lonesome for you children, also the grandchildren, wanting back into her intellectual life while she still had her wits about her . . . Armand-Loup, she explained, was selling the charming village house. There had been no question of her staying in the house at the time of the separa-

tion discussions, as it had been his to begin with, and his to sell, as he was now trying to do, very reluctantly.

At moments when her positive spin collapsed, she knew that coming back to the U.S. was a question of supporting herself, and she painfully foresaw that her career, however well she could manage to reestablish it, would with age inevitably wind down, along with the enthusiasm she felt now for writing new material, doing research, and keeping up with art historiography.

Now, sitting in a hotel in New York City, she was overtaken again by other negatives of what she was facing—the hurly-burly of the lecture tour, of mediocre library venues in Bakersfield or Fresno, even fears about her physical stamina; she'd been so tired last night, and she wasn't a tired person. What if she was coming down with something, the onset of some condition appropriate to her age that she would henceforth have to think about? People her age got diabetes, they got arthritis; they had to allow for their health, had to carry an embarrassing doughnut cushion with them, or an oxygen bottle, or excuse themselves to take medicine, or sneak pills into their mouths at table with that furtive sidelong look.

And yet, wasn't America the better place, where opportunity beckoned at any age, and people were not so conscious as the French of what other people thought? *Ça ne se fait pas,* said the French. That isn't done. In America, you could do it.

3

Thinking of others spares you thinking of yourself.

Apart from her own personal life, Lorna had another reason for coming back to America: her children. Though they were adults, they seemed to need her in practical ways that their father apparently ignored. Lorna's children with Randall Mott, in order, were Peggy, the oldest at forty-four; Curt, the older son, forty-one; the younger son, Hammond, called Hams, thirty-eight. All were in Northern California—well, Curt at this moment was in Southeast Asia somewhere.

Lorna reviewed her worries for each of them. They had the normal problems of adult life—the oldest, the divorced Peggy, was poor and in debt; the younger son, Hams, also, to a lesser extent, because he lived on the fringe anyway, sort of an ex-hippie; and there was Curt, her most promising child, who had been on the cusp of launching a start-up, already crowdsource funded and ready to go, when he had a serious bicycle accident with unforeseen consequences. Lorna could not be free of fears for any of them—first of all for Curt, of course, and then for the others, and then for the grandchildren, new hostages to fortune who continued to arrive, like the baby Hams's wife, Misty, was expecting. She was sure they all needed her. She was also aware that she must not interfere with their lives or give the slightest sign of being bossy.

. . .

The recently divorced Peggy Willover lived in a little house in Ukiah, California, where she kept herself going with various craft enterprises, like personalized dog collars, thus contributing to her daughter Julie's college expenses, and bought nothing for herself. She had a little venture in Internet commerce, buying bargain items, especially handbags, on eBay, fixing them up, and reselling them to RealSteal or private customers. She also made earrings to sell at craft fairs, sold cheese and jam made in her backyard shed, and worked in the local library. By nature optimistic like her mother, she nonetheless, when she really thought about her situation—early forties, alone, and stone poor—could get fits of despair. She was aware that her mother, Lorna (the well-known art historian Lorna Mott Dumas!), was probably hard up, too—men had been difficult for both of them. Peggy sometimes thought that Lorna hadn't prepared her correctly for a world with men in it. Peggy had tried to tell her own daughter Julie (age twenty) certain realities while avoiding cynicism or bitterness, and so far Julie had been so free of man troubles, Peggy had started to worry the other way.

"Don't you know any boys, honey?"

"Mother! The boys"—Ukiah High School, UC Berkeley—"are revolting here."

"I can't believe there isn't one nice one at least."

"Not even one, always pawing you, or else ignoring you."

If Peggy worried about Julie, Lorna in turn worried about divorced Peggy's own nunlike and low-paid—rather dreary, in fact, to Lorna's view—humdrum days beset with financial problems, Julie's expensive schooling, for example, and Peggy's increasingly old-maidish way of worrying about small things like the garage-door opener being broken. Peggy's ex, Dick Willover, was no help with any of this.

"If you moved to San Francisco, there'd be art and music at least," Lorna prompted Peggy.

"Mother, it isn't that easy. Anyway, art and music are not what I need."

. . .

Curtis Mott, second child of Randall and Lorna Mott, had always been the star of the family, at school, in college, and in his professional life. Happily married, with a thriving software enterprise, young twins, and a beautiful house—all was going well until almost a year ago, when he had suffered a near-fatal bicycle accident and for a while seemed to be destined to die young, the fabled doom of such golden boys. But he hadn't died.

For nearly five months, he had lain in a coma, occasionally appearing to wake or stir. Lorna, who had flown to his side, had regretfully gone back and forth from Pont-les-Puits, asking for constant updates in between. There had been despair, or moments of hope, once when he had sat up and said "Donna!" before lapsing back into his former unseeing state; and some then began to believe he would recover.

Some did not. His pessimistic wife, Donna, had once said—no one could believe she could say such a thing—"Do we need to discuss, um, whether this goes on forever?" Was she talking about the plug? The others had gasped at her cold realism. Donna was not their favorite, but this was beyond imagination. No one else had even thought of pulling the plug—there was no question of anything besides waiting. What was in her heart, really? Arrangements were made to put him in a facility where people would manipulate his limbs to maintain his muscle mass and monitor his breathing. Luckily he hadn't terminated his hedge-fund day job, so his workplace insurance had paid most of the stupefying costs.

There had been enough good signs in the situation of Curt Mott, beginning with the fact that he was alive, to stanch the fears that Lorna had reserved for him since his childhood. Her sturdy daughter Peggy had never worried her, the younger boy, Hams, was Hams, no altering that; but Curt, the firstborn son, had had such a penchant for danger, and such bad luck, and, as she imagined, frail health, though outwardly the picture of wellness, and had so much promise that anxiety was almost her automatic response when she heard his name, even without his serious case of measles (had she forgotten to get him vaccinated?), his first bicycle accident (was he too young to have had that bicycle?), his fall off the rings in gym class, breaking his arm, his getting lost at camp, and much more. The long grim weeks of his coma had

thus in a way been no surprise, his awakening a joyful exception to her expectations, his vanishing right in line with her fears. But he was alive.

Then, something strange, breathlessly imparted to Lorna by Donna on the phone to France: Curt had woken miraculously from his coma and, after a few days of regaining strength, announced a spiritual quest that required him to go to a jungle somewhere in Southeast Asia, inaccessible by Skype or FaceTime. A few days out of his sickbed, frail and diminished though he was, he bought an airline ticket and began his packing to go to Thailand, giving the impression that he had spent his coma months gestating like a larva some elaborate plan that drew him away. If she didn't come right now, Lorna would just miss him.

The family believed that his bicycle accident had damaged his brain some way, obliterated the site that controlled ethical behavior and probability and affections, making it possible for him to go off, without concern for his wife and small children. His twins were boys aged four. His wife Donna, fanatically attentive during his illness, had actually despaired and had begun building a new life, rather surreptitiously out of consideration for his parents and siblings. She did endless yoga classes and video-coached sessions on her stationary bike, in case she met someone. She studied the want ads from Silicon Valley start-ups, even those known to be hostile to women. His waking up surprised her more than anyone.

At first, with globalization, Curt's trip to Thailand could seem almost normal, business related. But he hadn't returned. Donna claimed to get the odd postcard from time to time, but never Skype, FaceTime, or an email address. He had closed his email account, there were no credit card charges that might give a clue to where he was, he never called, but he did considerately reassure them by sending postcards with blurry, unreadable postmarks, and these usually said things were going well. Donna's priest (Donna, his wife, from an Italian family, was Catholic) counseled patience, while Donna, in despair, tried to wrestle with the problems of a huge mortgage and the lively four-year-olds.

That was Curt. After Curt, it was her second son, Hams, whom Lorna worried about most among her children; Peggy, after all, was balanced

and resourceful. How glad she would be to see Hams. Despite his rumpled, bag-person aspect, she had an especially soft spot for him, saw into his inner sensitive self, his unexploited musical ability, remembered the tears that came to his eyes as a child whenever they read something sad aloud, "King of the Golden River," wasn't it? Or the Oscar Wilde story about the statue who gave up its jeweled eyes and ended in pigeon shit?

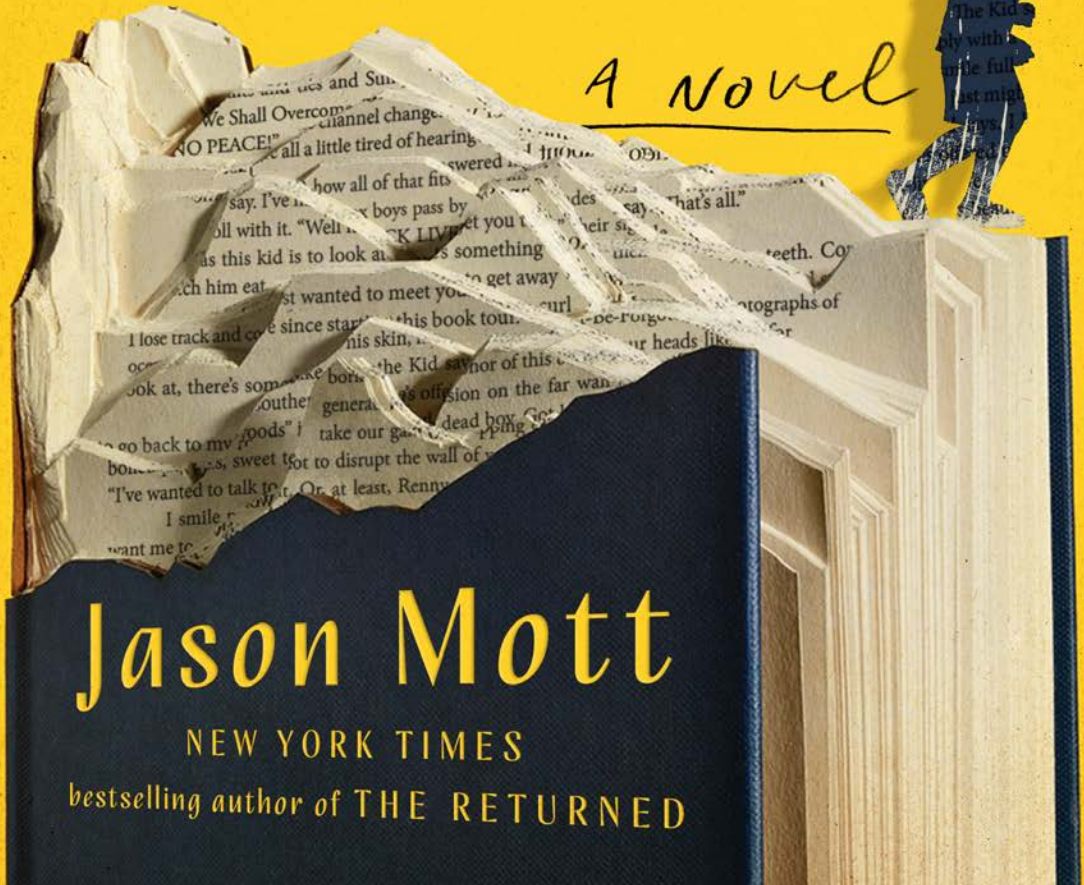
Hams had married a woman, aptly named Misty, who had flirted with Scientology, but now they were both in a Brazilian religion that Lorna gathered had something to do with sacrificing goats and enabled you to fix your vacuum cleaner with beams radiating from your hand. Peggy had seen Misty do it.

Misty and Hams were expecting a baby, their first. Misty, though she'd done graduate study in psychology, worked in a dry cleaner's. Lorna had always found Misty a little scary, with her several piercings and hair dyed a startling red not found in nature, a look widespread in their East Bay set. Lorna also found it hard to imagine someone with those nose rings and studded eyebrows pushing a baby stroller, but knew she was old-fashioned, and that Misty was at bottom a normal middle-class girl. She also knew Misty and Hams would need help with the baby and asked herself how she could help when the time came.

After Peggy, she telephoned Hams. Not home. However much she loved him, she was slightly relieved not to get him on the phone, as Hams always had some problem to discuss that was usually expensive and beyond her means to help, especially now, with life on a shoestring. Though helping him, and her other children, was her principal resolve.

HELL OF A BOOK

A Novel



Jason Mott

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

In the corner of the small living room of the small country house at the end of the dirt road beneath the blue Carolina sky, the dark-skinned five-year-old boy sat with his knees pulled to his chest and his small, dark arms wrapped around his legs and it took all that he had to contain the laughter inside the thrumming cage of his chest.

His mother, seated on the couch with her dark hands folded into her lap and her brow furrowed like Mr. Johnson's fields at the end of winter, pursed her lips and fidgeted with the fabric of the tattered gray dress she wore. It was a dress she'd bought before the boy even came into this world. It aged with him. Year upon year, the blue floral pattern faded, one shade of color at a time. The threads around the hem lost their grip on things. They broke apart and reached their dangling necks in every direction that might take them away. And now, after seven years of hard work, the dress looked as though it would not be able to hold its fraying fabric together much longer.

"Did you find him?" the boy's mother asked as her husband came into the room.

"No," the boy's father said. He was a tall man with large eyes and a long, gangly frame that had earned him the nickname "Skinniest Nigga Breathing" back when he was a boy. The name had stuck over the years, lashed across his back from childhood to manhood, and, having never found a cure for his almost mythological thinness, the man had taken to wearing long-sleeved clothes everywhere he went because the empty air held within the sleeves made him look larger than he was. At least, that was what he believed.

He was a man who had been afraid of the eyes of others for all of his life. How could he not want his child to learn the impossible trick of invisibility?

"It's okay," he said. "We'll find him soon. I know it. I'm sure that, wherever he is, he's fine. He can take care of himself. He's always going to be fine." He took a seat beside his wife on the tired brown couch and wrapped the spindly reeds of his fingers around the fidgeting doves that were her hands. He lifted them to his lips and kissed them. "He's a good kid," the father said. "He wouldn't just up and leave us. We'll find him."

"He's the best boy in the whole world," the mother said.

"Maybe he just went off into the woods to find some briarberries. I bet that's where he went."

"You think so?"

The father thought for a moment. "Not sure, but I'm hopeful, Dollface."

The boy's mother chuckled at "Dollface" and dabbed the corner of her eye. Was she crying?

The groundswell of laughter that had been tickling the boy's throat for so long finally—as he sat, invisible and unseen only an

arm's length away—faded at the sight of his mother's tears. His arms tightened around his legs.

He shouldn't have done this. He shouldn't have made them worry like this. They were good parents and they hated worrying about him. A lead ball of regret formed in the boy's stomach. It rang and drummed through his entire body. He needed to stop this trick he was playing on them . . . but how?

What could he do? He was less than two feet from where his parents sat, but guilt over his mother's tears pushed down on the hands that would reach out and touch her and let her know he was there. It weighted down the tongue that would sing her name and free her from fear.

There was no way, his five-year-old mind figured, that he could let them know that it had all been a joke. He could never explain to them that this was all meant to be fun. Not just fun, a celebration! After all, he had done it! For three years now, his mother and father had been trying to teach him to become invisible, to become "The Unseen." That was the name the boy's father gave to it. He said the words with a fantastic tone. He spoke with his hands in the air, sweeping back and forth gently like he was playing some magical instrument. "You will become The Unseen," the boy's father said. He added an almost spooky "Oooooooo" to the end of it sometimes. "You'll be unseen and safe for as long as you live," his father said. ". . . Can you even imagine it?"

It was the words "unseen and safe" that made his father smile. It was the boy's favorite smile, like he was watching his father gain everything he had wanted out of his life.

Unseen and safe.

Sanctified words.

"What should we do?" his mother asked her husband.

"Should we just call it quits?" replied the boy's father. He put a spindly hand on his forehead and looked very dramatic all of a sudden, the way people in movies sometimes did. And, yet, the boy thought he saw the beginnings of a smile hiding in the shadows of his father's face. "I mean," the boy's father continued, "if he's gone, maybe we should make like a banana and split. We could pack it all up and head out west somewhere. I hear they got tons of kids out there who need a fine set of parents like us."

The boy's mother smiled as though her husband had told a joke. Humor was one of his gifts. His jokes painted the walls of his family's home in brushstrokes of laughter.

But, in spite of the fact that he knew his father was trying to be funny, the boy heard his words and imagined his parents leaving him and, once again, the sea of fear swelled up inside of him.

"No, no, no," said his mother.

And just like that, the fear ebbed.

"You're right," his father said. "We could never leave him. He's just too great. No other kid in this world like him. So what should we do?"

"I have an idea," the boy's mother declared. Excitement filled her voice and spilled over into the boy. His mother always had the best ideas.

"We'll cook everything he likes to eat. All of it. One big meal like they used to do back in the old days. And the smell of it will go out all over the world and find him. That'll bring him home!"

The boy almost cheered. A great dinner of all his favorite things. All of it spread out on the kitchen table, one dish after the other. The idea that the smell of the foods he loved could go out into the world and bring him home . . . it was like something from one of the books he read at bedtime: all myth, and dream, and splendor.

The boy's father leaned back for a moment and looked at the mother through squinted eyes. "His favorite foods?" he said, stroking his dark, narrow chin. "You reckon that'll work?"

"I know it will," his mother said. "He'll smell them. The chicken. The macaroni and cheese. Maybe even a sweet potato pie or two. He never could turn down sweet potato pie."

"Pie you say?" The boy's father licked his lips. "You could be onto something with this scheme of yours. It's got legs, I think. Just like you." He kissed his wife's neck and she laughed the light, lilting laugh that she sometimes did late at night when the two of them were alone in their bedroom with the door locked.

"Stop that," she giggled.

"I don't know," the father said, his mouth a wry grin. "I still think we might could go out west and find a new kid. I hear they make some out there that actually like to eat their vegetables."

The mother laughed and the boy almost laughed too. "No," she chuckled. "We'll cook and he'll come back to us. Just you watch."

She stood then and brushed off her old dress as she always did and she went into the kitchen. For a moment, the father stayed in the living room and stroked his chin again. "Well, kid," he mused, "wherever you are in this world I hope that you know that I would never move out west and try to find another son. You're the only ankle-biter I could ever want."

Then he stood and went into the kitchen and began helping his wife.

Before long, the house billowed with the smells and sounds of the boy's favorite food. The chicken fried in a heavy black skillet and the macaroni bubbled and baked in the oven. There were sugared strawberries, and muscadine grapes, and leftover pound cake that the boy had forgotten was still in the house. Even though he

was still hidden, his stomach growled so loudly that he feared it would give him away. But his mother and father didn't seem to hear and so he was able to continue to sit—even with the hunger in the pit of his stomach—and close his eyes and smell all of the dancing aromas.

In that moment, invisible and buried in his parents' love, he was happier than he had ever been. And soon, in spite of his hunger, he was asleep.

He awoke to the feeling of his father lifting him in his arms.

"There you are," his father said.

He carried his son into the dining room, where the table was covered with all of the boy's favorite foods.

"There he is!" the boy's mother screamed at the sight of her son. Then she hugged him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. That was always his favorite type of hug. It was like melting into the summertime earth.

And when the hug was over, his mother kissed him and asked, "Where were you?"

"I did it," the boy exclaimed. "I really did it!"

"Did what?" his father asked.

"I was invisible!"

His parents' eyes went wide as star magnolias.

"No!" his father exclaimed with joy, looking very dramatic like TV people again.

"You really did it?" his mother asked, equally elated.

"Yep," the boy chirped, almost laughing. "I was in the living room this whole time. Unseen just like you said. It really worked, Mama!"

Then his mother hugged him and the three of them danced and laughed and smiled like they never had before. In that moment, the

worries that had always hung over their heads were suddenly gone. It was as though all three of them might suddenly levitate off of the floor, float up into the blue sky that sprawled itself out long and wide above the small country house that the family called home.

The next day, the boy, still drunk on sweets and wonder, asked his father: "You really couldn't see me, could you?"

"It doesn't matter if I saw you or not," his father said. "All that matters is that you felt safe."

The thing to remember is this: above all else, this is a love story. Don't ever forget that.

But now that that's out of the way, let's get acquainted: It's 3 a.m.

It's 3 a.m. and I'm somewhere in the Midwest—one of those flat states where everyone seems nicer than they should be. I'm in a hotel. In the hallway. I'm running. No, actually, I'm sprinting. I'm sprinting down this midwestern hotel hallway. Did I mention that I'm naked? Because I am.

Also: I'm being chased.

About fifteen feet behind me—also sprinting, but not naked—is a very large man wielding a very large wooden coat hanger. Sometimes he holds it like a baton. Other times he holds it above his head like a battle-axe. He's surprisingly fast for a man his size.

The very large man with the very large coat hanger is draped in Old Navy couture: beige straight-fit stain-resistant khakis, argyle sweater vest, brown twill boat shoes that may or may not be faux

leather. He's a family man for sure. 2.3 kids. Dog named Max. Cat named Princess. Aquarium that's on its twelfth goldfish named "Lucky." He drives a Camry and lives on a cul-de-sac in a home surrounded by a picket fence. There's an in-ground pool in the backyard. He's got a healthy 401(k).

He's everything a responsible adult should be.

He looks to be about the same age as I am—leaving the decadent comfort of thirty and reluctantly knocking on the grizzled front door of forty. And for an instant, as the two of us sprint down this luxurious hotel hallway—feet thumping on the carpet, lungs burning, arms pumping like oil wells—I think about stopping and asking him how he built that life. How he made it all come together so perfectly. How he managed to do everything I've been unable to. I want to hear his secret.

But as I take a look back over my shoulder, I see him raise that coat hanger of his into a battle-axe position and shout, "My wife! That's my wife! We made babies together!"

No. This won't be the day I find out the secret of people like him. All I can do now is try to stay ahead of that coat hanger. So I put my head down and try to remember what my high school track coach told me: "High knees. High head. High speed."

It's in moments like this that I remember why I don't have encounters with married women. Inevitably, it leads to encounters with married men.

Anyhow, the angry man behind me has a damned good stride, but I've got better turnover. Being fast is all about turnover. That's another thing my old track coach told me. "Pick-'em-up, put-'em-down. Bam-bam-bam-bam! Hustle! Hustle!"

And that's what I do. I hustle.

I also like to think that being naked affords me some sort of

advantage as well. Wearing no clothes means you're carrying less weight. That always makes you faster.

And, sure enough, I'm slowly pulling away from both him and his coat hanger. But the problem is, all hotel hallways, like all lives and stories, eventually lead to an end of some sort. Either an elevator or a fire door. In this case, it's an elevator. Those shiny sliding doors peek out from the distance as he and I round a bend in the hallway.

That's where he's going to catch me. At the elevator doors. I know it. He knows it. That large wooden hanger in his right hand knows it.

I'm not generally the praying type, but there are no atheists in foxholes or in the path of a cuckold's rage. So I send up a little prayer and try to focus on keeping my knees high.

I manage to open up a little more distance.

"Our daughter was almost in a Target commercial!" the angry husband behind me yells. "We're a family! You don't boink a man's family!"

In any other context I'd high-five the guy. That's a hell of an accomplishment. I mean, we're talking Target! To almost land that . . . man, that's something!

Just as I'm getting close enough to that dead end where the elevators stand and where I'll have to come to a stop and this angry, large man and his coat hanger will finally be able to have their way with me, just then, the elevator dings and the silver doors glide open just as smoothly as the gates of heaven.

My personal savior steps out of the elevator. She's eighty if she ever danced a jig. Short. Thin. Wispy blue hair crowning her head like dandelion spores. Makeup thick as stucco. Her arthritic back

bent with the burden of two fistfuls of grocery bags and octogenarian existence itself.

Why she's out grocery shopping at 3 a.m. doesn't seem to be an important question just now.

"Ma'am!" I shout.

She looks up. Sees me—my high knees, my high head, my high speed, my nakedness. She sees the man behind me with his hanger battle-axe. She shrugs her shoulders, turns on her heel, turns and steps back into the elevator.

"Would you hold that elevator, ma'am?" I yell.

The angry man behind me shouts something about the high cost of two daughters with braces.

The elevator doors start to close and I kick it into a gear higher than I knew I had. I'm just a blur of knees, and elbows, and naked flesh. Even my genitals have pulled themselves into an aerodynamic tuck.

I'm just close enough to make a dive as the elevator doors begin to close. I take the leap.

It's all slow motion. I sail through the air for what seems like an hour. As I soar past the Blue Hair—just before my face meets the back of the elevator—I can see from the smirk on her face that this isn't her first late-night rodeo. She's been around. She's danced on water in life's late hours.

My face meets the elevator wall a split second before my body does. Momentum holds me there like a bug on a windshield, then gravity shows up again and I thud to the ground.

"Thirty-second floor, please," I say as soon as my naked body has come to rest on the floor of the elevator. The Blue Hair complies and pushes the elevator button.

The two of us watch the doors grind closed just as the husband with bloody murder in his eyes—who probably isn't a bad guy when you really get to know him—reaches the elevator a moment too late and can't do anything other than watch me leave. He shouts something indecipherable as the doors close in front of him. Something to do with responsibility. Something to do with family, and marriage, and love.

Then he's gone and there's just me and the Blue Hair. The two of us watch the elevator count off the hotel floors one by one. I imagine the silence is awkward for her. Most people don't like silences. I learned that at my old job. I used to answer phones for a living. All day long, that job was nothing but talking to people. I'm not what you might call a people person. I hated that job. But the irony is that by working there, I found out how to talk to people really well. One thing I know is how to make folks feel comfortable.

"Hell of a night," I say.

"I could tell you stories," the Blue Hair replies, quick as a whip.

"I'll bet you could. You've got that look about you."

"Life's chaos," the woman says, sounding suddenly like an oracle. "It's all just a runaway mule hell-bent on destruction."

"That's some mule."

"You bet it is."

I give a nod to indicate her grocery bags. "Good haul?"

"Capital," she says. "Just capital." She gives a nod to indicate my exposed genitals. "You wax?"

"No, ma'am. Razor."

"Gets that close?"

"Five blades. Pivoting head. Marvel of the modern age."

The woman nods in agreement. Then she clears her throat and

contorts the corners of her thin, old lips into a thin, old frown and says "Did you hear about that boy?"

"Which boy?"

"The one on the TV." She shakes her head and her blue hair sways gently like the hair of some sea nymph who's seen the tides rise and fall one too many times. "Terrible. Just terrible."

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

The truth is that I haven't heard about whatever boy on the TV she's suddenly so sad about, but I don't have to know about it to convey the appropriate amount of sadness and concern. I turn the corners of my mouth into a frown that matches the one the Blue Hair's got. I don't want to frown too much and make it look like I'm trying to make this terrible thing—whatever it is that happened—about me. But I also don't want to not frown enough and come off uncaring. There's an art to knowing how sad you're supposed to be at moments like this.

"A terrible shame," I say. "Just can't believe such a thing could happen in this world." I shake my head.

The old woman sucks her teeth in pointed disapproval. "So sad," she says. "Just so sad."

I don't say anything for a while. I let the air grow cold between us. A moment of silence for whatever boy's sad tale we're both grieving over right now. I want this wonderful stranger to know that I cared about this boy, because caring about people is what good people do. And more than anything, I want people to think of me as a good person.

The elevator chimes, breaking the silence. The doors open at my floor.

"Well," I say, stepping out into the soft, empty hallway that has no angry husbands or wooden coat hangers, "I guess this is

goodbye. Thanks again for your help. And God bless that poor boy." I give one final nod. I feel like I should say something meaningful about chance meetings, the allure of strangers, serendipity . . . all those sorts of things. But nothing comes to mind so I turn on my heel and begin my naked walk back to my room.

After I'm a few steps down the hallway, I hear her call out: "Hey!"

"Yeah?"

"You look familiar. Have I seen you before? Are you famous?"

"Aren't we all?" I say.

She nods and retreats into the elevator. The doors close and I'll never see her again. Not because I don't want to. But just because that's how it goes. Life decides.

I walk the rest of the way back to my room feeling pretty good about life. Tonight's been an adventure. Met a lovely woman. Met her husband—who I'm sure is just as lovely when you get to know him. Even met a sweet old lady with a flair for conversation. I've got fresh air on my naked skin.

What more can a person ask for in this life?

It's only when I get to my hotel door that I realize I've left my key in my pants back in the bedroom of the angry husband's wife.

WITH IT BEING AS LATE AS IT IS, THE HOTEL LOBBY IS NEARLY EMPTY. It's one of those big hotels where the floor is overly polished and the ceiling is so high you can hear yourself breathing if you really stop and listen. It's an eerie place, especially when it's crowded. The whole room sounds like some grand train station. Voices blend together into that familiar assonant murmur, suddenly sounding like every conversation you've ever had has come rushing back to you and, in spite of yourself, you can almost believe that at any moment

a train might come rumbling up right in front of you, right behind the concierge's desk, carrying every person you've ever known. It's strange, but I get that particular feeling six days out of seven in my life.

"How can I help you?" the woman working the front desk asks. From the calmness in her tone, you'd think she's spent every day of her life dealing with naked hotel guests.

"I seem to be locked out of my room," I say.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," she replies brightly, her voice almost in a singsong. "I'll definitely help get that straightened out for you. Which room?"

"3218."

She clicks on her keyboard.

"Do you get a lot of naked people in your hotel lobby at this hour?" I ask.

"Define 'a lot,'" she says, smiling a toothy, slightly crooked smile that's as warm as sunlight in August. After a few more keystrokes, she says, "Now, I'll just need some type of identification."

I reach past her and into the nearby magazine rack. I pick up a copy of *Entertainment Weekly.* My beautiful mug is right there on the cover, larger than life, even overshadowing the headline about Nic Cage's newest Cagetacular film, beneath the looming demi-Helvetica headline: AMERICA'S HOTTEST NEW AUTHOR. I hold the magazine up next to my face and say, "How's this?"

BECAUSE MY FACE AND A COPY OF *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* don't qualify as "acceptable identification," the receptionist and I are in the elevator together. I'm still naked. She still doesn't seem to mind. Hotel policy says she needs to see a driver's license, which,

luckily, wasn't in my pants—which are still in the room of a certain married woman and a coat-hanger-wielding husband. So she's riding up to let me into my room so I can show her that I am who I and *Entertainment Weekly* say I am.

She smells of vanilla.

"You smell like apples, Sport," she says, maybe reading my mind, maybe not, and she glances at me with a grin—being sure to keep her eyes above the waist. It's the kind of grin that I sometimes don't know what to do with. The kind of grin that says maybe she likes me. And, believe it or not, I'm never really sure how to act when a woman throws me that kind of attention. So I just stand there, thinking about what a random thing what she said is to say to someone. "I know that's a pretty random thing to say," she continues, continuing to be uncanny. "But I think it's a pretty random thing to experience. You know?"

"I do know," I say. I want to tell her that "a pretty random thing to experience" would make for a fitting send-off on my tombstone one day, but I think that might come around as a bit morbid, and I don't think morbid is what this moment calls for. So, instead of the headstone remark, I just say something along the lines of "It's amazing the things we notice sometimes. Makes us wonder if they've always been there."

"I know what you mean," she says. "Also, I read that if you meet someone and they smell like apples, what you're really smelling are pheromones. You know what pheromones are, don't you, Sport?"

"Pheromones, huh?" I spend a second just thinking about the word "pheromones." A good word, that one. Looks sharp on the page and feels good on the tongue. "Why do you keep calling me Sport?" I ask.

"What's the matter?" she replies. "Aren't you a sporting kind of guy?"

Somewhere around the sixteenth floor I start to figure out that maybe she's flirting with me and even before the sixteenth floor I knew that she was beautiful in that managerial way and so I think it's time I let her know that, hell, I think she's pretty swell too. So I put on my best Bogart brogue and I give it to her right down the middle:

"Nice set of pillars you're standing on."

"They hold me up," she says, not missing a beat. She says it like she's read the same script as me. She's a caricature and so am I and right now in my life that's, well, that's pretty aces in my book.

"I always knew heaven had to stand on something," I say.

"Is that a quote or something?"

"Or something."

This is one of those times when I can't tell how much of this moment—or almost any moment of my life, honestly—is real and how much is imagined. I've got a condition. I've got several conditions, actually. The most interesting one is this thing I got where my mind runs away with itself. It's like daydreaming except it doesn't really go away when I want it to. It lingers. Sometimes people call it a disorder, but I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy so I don't go in on that dime-store wordage.

Basically, I'm a daydreamer. But my daydreams tend to persist longer and more intensely than most people's do. At least, that's what I've been told by every doctor I've ever seen. The end result of it is that reality is a very fluid thing in my world. It's probably the reason I got into this whole writing thing to begin with.

Another thing you should know about me, beyond my tendency

to have an overactive imagination, is that I'm a sucker for old black-and-white movies. You know the type. The ones with fast-talking men and even faster-talking women.

Right now, my imagination and I could easily change the lighting in this elevator and it would be a scene fit for *Double Indemnity.* The same hard-shadowed lighting and machine-gun dialogue. Nobody today talks the way those characters talked in that movie. Maybe they never really did. So maybe this isn't exactly how the exchange between her and me went. Or maybe it is. Like I said, I get the sense that she's read the same script as me. I rarely worry about the facts, only about the reality that my imagination and I choose to see.

"You're confident," the receptionist who smells like vanilla says.

"And a confidant to those who need it. You got something you wanna share with me?"

"You always drive this fast?"

"You should see me in the curves."

And then she smiles.

WE TUMBLE THROUGH THE BEDROOM DOOR. IT'S HARD TO TELL where my body ends and hers begins. It's all just skin, and nerves, and warmth, and those little butterflies that come bubbling up in the pit of your stomach when you know—I mean really KNOW—that you've met someone special. Someone who will endure. Someone whose face you'll see again and again for years and live a life all the richer for it.

She could be *the one.* This could be love.

That's how alive all this feels. But love happens like this some-

times, doesn't it? A lightning strike rather than a rising tide. You meet someone and everything goes warm inside you and when they put their hand in yours, you can feel every inch of their body, like dipping your finger into a river and being able to feel the whole ocean.

And I feel that with this woman. At least, that's what my imagination tells me.

THE MORNING COMES AND I WAKE UP AND STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT midwestern city I'm in and the receptionist is already up and gone and she's left a little note behind on her pillow that reads, "You're a good sport, Sport!" And in the light of this new day I don't feel like last night was love at all, but it was a hell of a fun way to interact with another soul. Think about it: it took over 4 billion years for her life and mine to come together in that elevator. If that ain't special, I don't know what is.

So right now I'm feeling pretty good about fate and kismet and being a good sport, and I'm also feeling pretty hungry. I want pancakes, and orange juice, and maybe a little bit of vodka to get the aforementioned orange juice up on its legs.

I put on my clothes and ease out the door.

DOWNSTAIRS, BREAKFAST IS IN FULL SWING. THE HOTEL IS A BIT ON the swanky side but when it comes to feeding people they aren't much better than the usual Holiday Inn—a fine establishment, by the way; I'm just saying that for $300 a night—even when the publisher's footing the bill—I expected a little more than what's presented to me. But since I'm not the picky sort, I move through the

buffet breakfast line and grab my plate and take a seat in the far corner and I look out into the city—whatever city this is—and I wonder what the day will bring.

It's about this time that I feel myself being watched. It's one of those animalistic feelings. Something that rings of alarm and worry in the softest of ways. Like standing in the shade of an oak tree and getting the feeling that it's all about to come crashing down on your head.

"Hey," a voice says.

I turn to find a kid standing beside my table.

I peg him at about ten years old. A little gangly, meek, and nerdy-looking, you might say. Like the kind of kid who's spent too much time in books and not enough time grabbing life by the short and curlies. Sometimes you see kids and you just know. You can just see their entire future in their eyes. That's who this kid is: he's his entire future seen at a glance.

But all of that is secondary to his skin. It's black. But not just black, he's impossibly dark-skinned. The darkest skin I've ever seen. It's like a clouded ocean sky in the dead of night. It's like burrowing into old caves where sunlight has never set foot. It's the kind of black that makes me think he's got to be wearing some sort of makeup. The kind of black that makes me question if what I'm seeing is real or if I'm in the beginning stages of some kind of ocular or neurological crisis.

His lips are moving but I'm so startled by the color of his skin that I can't hear a word he's saying. "What was that?" I say.

"Can I sit here?" He points to my chair and begins seating himself before I have time to give him permission.

The kid has a plate of pancakes and sausage that's so much like my own I've got to respect it. As he starts eating, I look around,

trying to lay eyes on whoever it is among the rest of these fine breakfast goers that might be his parents. The last thing I want is to have some terrified parent come up to my table screaming at me about why I'm having breakfast with her son. That kind of publicity can kill a book tour.

When I can't find anybody that looks like they might be the progenitor of this dark-skinned splendor, I resign myself to having met a new friend and I jump into the same type of banter I would offer anyone else in this world. "You look like someone who's had his fair share of adventures, Kid."

"Yeah, I guess," The Kid says. He keeps his eyes on breakfast as he talks, which I'm glad about because it allows me to look at the inky depths of his skin without making him feel awkward. It's hypnotic, The Kid's blackness. The kind of thing that has to be seen to be believed. Staring at this kid's skin makes me feel like I'm falling. Like it's pulling me into him. Like I was never separate from him to begin with and his skin—all shadow and shade—is only trying to take me back where I belong so that it can keep me safe.

"It's cool," The Kid says.

"What's cool?"

"Staring like that. It's cool. Everybody does it." He shovels another forkful of pancakes into his mouth and I imagine that they taste like embarrassment.

"Nonsense," I say. "I shouldn't be staring at anyone. I've got no grounds for it. Why, just last night I was down here in this very lobby naked for the world to see. Naked as a jaybird, as my dear, departed father might say. If anyone deserves to be stared at, Kid, it's me."

The Kid nods but continues to keep his eyes aimed at breakfast. I know shame when I see it. A twinge of guilt runs down my spine.

"So, to what do I owe the honor of this breakfast?"

As I talk, I look up at the television on the far wall just in time to catch the tail end of a report about some dead boy. Got himself shot by somebody but I don't know who because the television switches to ESPN and suddenly there are grown men slamming their heads into one another and shouting about first downs. "Tired of hearing about that shit," says the gentleman apparently responsible for the channel change. From the reaction of the others in the dining room, they're all a little tired of hearing about that shit too. So I turn my attention back to The Kid, who still hasn't answered my question.

"Well?" I say.

"Just thought it was time we met," The Kid says. "That's all."

"Well, that sounds ominous," I reply with a smile.

"Nah," The Kid says, flashing a smile full of marble-white teeth. Contrasted against the darkness of his skin, it just might be the most beautiful smile I've ever seen. "It's not like that," The Kid says. I begin to hear a drawl in his words. Something southern Black. He's offered up more than a few "y'alls" and "my neck of the woods" in his short-lived life. He sounds like old Cadillacs and boiled peanuts, sweet tea and home. It's as beautiful as his skin and his smile. "I've wanted to talk to you for a while now," The Kid says.

I smile my best "Always good to meet a fan" smile and I say, "Do you want me to sign a copy of your book?"

The Kid grins. "Nah," he says. "Not a fan. Just wanted to meet you."

"Alright," I say. I've met a few fans like this since starting this book tour. I'm learning to roll with it. "Well, it's great to meet you too."

As interesting as this kid is to look at, there's something unsettling about him too. As I watch him eat, I'm filled with the urge to get away from him. I want to go back to my room. I want to go back

to my room, and curl up in my bed, and fall asleep and not see him in my dreams.

I realize that I can't just sit here with this kid anymore. My mind won't stand for it. I keep staring at his skin and I keep telling myself not to do it. I want to stare at him as much as I want to never look at him again. Something about him fills me with an immediate sense of love and hate. I want to hug him and push him away at the same time. And I know that all of this stems from the impossible color of his skin.

I wonder what growing up with skin like that must have been like. Going to school looking like that? Must have been hell. Pure fucking hell.

"Well," I say, "it's been good meeting you and I hope you enjoyed meeting me. I would love to say something about fate and the power of chance meetings, the allure of strangers, serendipity . . . all those sorts of things."

"It's cool," The Kid says. "You ain't gotta stay. I just wanted you to see me. That's all."

"Well, consider yourself seen," I say. I aim a pair of finger guns at him and "Pew-pew!"

I offer one last smile at The Kid in honor of his gentle yet eloquent phrasing. "I just wanted you to see me." That's a beautiful thing to say to someone. I mean, don't we all want to be seen?

Before I leave, I lean in close and say, in my sincerest voice, "I see you."

Then I head back to my hotel room.

I STRETCH OUT ON THE BED AND TRY TO GET SOME REST BEFORE THE next leg of the book tour. The last thing I see in the darkness before

sleep takes me is the darkness of The Kid. I see his skin. It's darker than the darkness of sleep. And then he grins and his pearly whites shine like snow on dogwoods.

Then The Kid fades away. His smile lingers, but then it's gone too.

As sleep finally gets its fishhooks into me, I offer up a heartfelt "Poor kid" for the pitch-black boy I met today. Living a life looking like that in a world that works the way this one does? . . . I wouldn't hang that noose around anybody's neck.

By the *New York Times* bestselling author of

DAISY JONES & THE SIX

MALIBU RISING

A NOVEL

TAYLOR JENKINS REID

Malibu Rising 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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1956

Our family histories are simply stories. They are myths we create about the people who came before us, in order to make sense of ourselves.

The story of June and Mick Riva seemed like a tragedy to their oldest child, Nina. It felt like a comedy of errors to their first son, Jay. It was an origin story for their second son, Hud. And a mystery to the baby of the family, Kit. To Mick himself it was just a chapter of his memoir.

But to June, it was, always and forever, a romance.

• • •

Mick Riva first met June Costas when she was a seventeen-year-old girl on the shores of Malibu. It was 1956, a few years before the Beach Boys got there, mere months before *Gidget* would begin to beckon teenagers to the waves in droves.

Back then, Malibu was a rural fishing town with only one traffic signal. It was quiet coastline, crawling inland by way of narrow winding roads through the mountains. But the town was coming into its adolescence. Surfers were setting up shop with their tiny shorts and longboards, bikinis were coming into fashion.

June was the daughter of Theo and Christina, a middle-class couple who lived in a two-bedroom ranch home off one of Malibu's many canyons. They owned a struggling restaurant called Pacific Fish, slinging crab cakes and fried clams just off the Pacific Coast Highway. Its bright red sign with cursive type hung high in the air, beckoning you from the east side of the highway to look away from the water for just one moment and eat something deep fried with an ice-cold Coca-Cola.

Theo ran the fryer, Christina ran the register, and on nights and weekends, it was June's job to wipe down the tables and mop the floors.

Pacific Fish was both June's duty and her inheritance. When June's mother vacated that spot at the counter, it was expected that it would be June's body that filled it. But June felt destined for bigger things, even at seventeen.

June beamed on the rare occasion that a starlet or director would come into the restaurant. She could recognize all of them the second they walked in the door because she read the gossip rags like bibles, appealing to her father's soft spot to get him to buy her a copy of *Sub Rosa* or *Confidential* every week. When June scrubbed ketchup off the tables, she imagined herself at the Pantages Theatre for a movie premiere. When she swept the salt and sand off the floors, she wondered how it might feel to stay at the Beverly Hilton and shop at Robinson's. June marveled at what a world the stars lived in. Just a few miles away and yet impossible for her to touch because she was stuck serving french fries to tourists.

June's joy was something she stole between shifts. She would sneak out at night, sleep in when she could. And, when her parents were at work but did not yet need her, June would cross the Pacific Coast Highway and rest her blanket in the expanse of sand opposite her family's restaurant. She would bring a book and her best bathing suit. She would fry her pale body under the sun, sunglasses over her eyes, eyes on the water. She would do this every Saturday and Sunday until ten-thirty in the morning, when reality pulled her back to Pacific Fish.

One particular Saturday morning during the summer of '56, June was standing on the shoreline, her toes in the wet sand, waiting for the water to feel warmer on her feet before she waded in. There were surfers in the waves, fishermen down the coast, teens like her laying out blankets and rubbing lotion on their arms.

June had felt daring that morning and put on a blue gingham strapless bikini. Her parents had no idea it even existed. She'd gone

into Santa Monica with her girlfriends and had seen it hanging in a boutique. She'd bought it with money she'd saved from tips, borrowing the last three dollars from her friend Marcie.

She knew if her mother saw it, she'd be forced to return it or worse yet, throw it out. But she wanted to feel pretty. She wanted to put out a signal and see if anyone answered.

June had dark brown hair cut into a bob, a button nose, and pert bow lips. She had big, light brown eyes that held the giddiness that often accompanies hope. That bikini held promise.

As she stood at the shoreline that morning, she felt almost naked. Sometimes, she felt a little guilty about how much she liked her own body. She liked the way her breasts filled out her bikini top, the way her waist pulled in and then ebbed out again. She felt alive, standing there, partially exposed. She bent down and ran her hands through the cold water rising up to her feet.

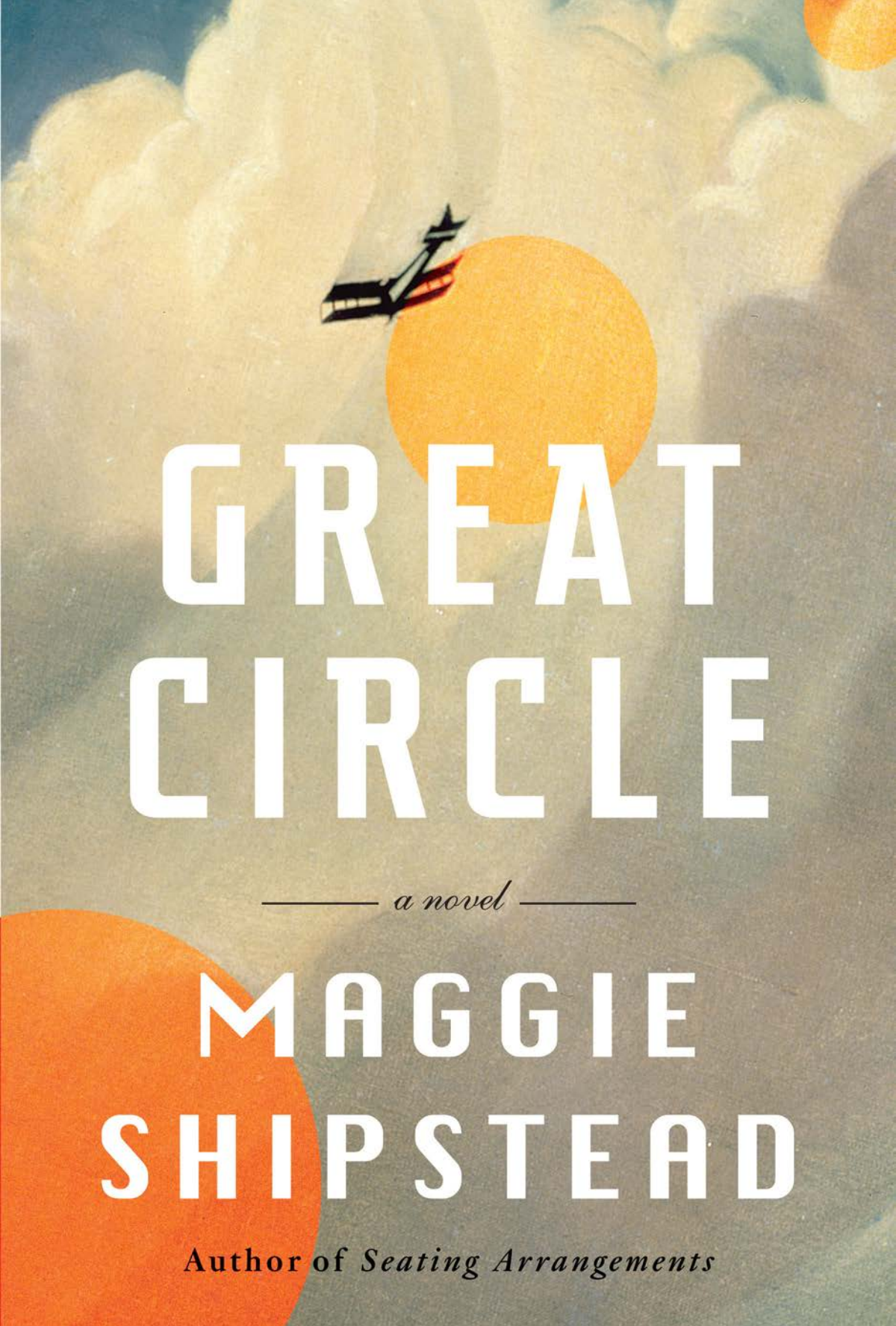
A twenty-three-year-old, as-yet-unknown Michael Riva was swimming in the surf. He was with three of the friends he'd made while hanging out in the clubs of Hollywood. He'd been in L.A. for two years, having left the Bronx behind, running west in search of fame.

He was finding his footing coming out of a wave when his gaze fell on the girl standing alone along the shore. He liked her figure. He liked the way she stood there, shy and companionless. He smiled at her.

June smiled back. And so Mick ditched his friends and headed toward her. When he finally made his way over, a drop of ice-cold water fell from his arm onto hers. She found herself flattered by his attention even before he said hello.

Mick was undeniably handsome with his hair slicked back from the ocean, his tan, broad shoulders shining in the sun, his white swimming trunks fitting him just so. June liked his lips—how the bottom was so full it looked swollen, and the top was thinner and had a perfect little v in the center.

He held out his hand. "I'm Mick."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CIRCLE
a novel
MAGGIE
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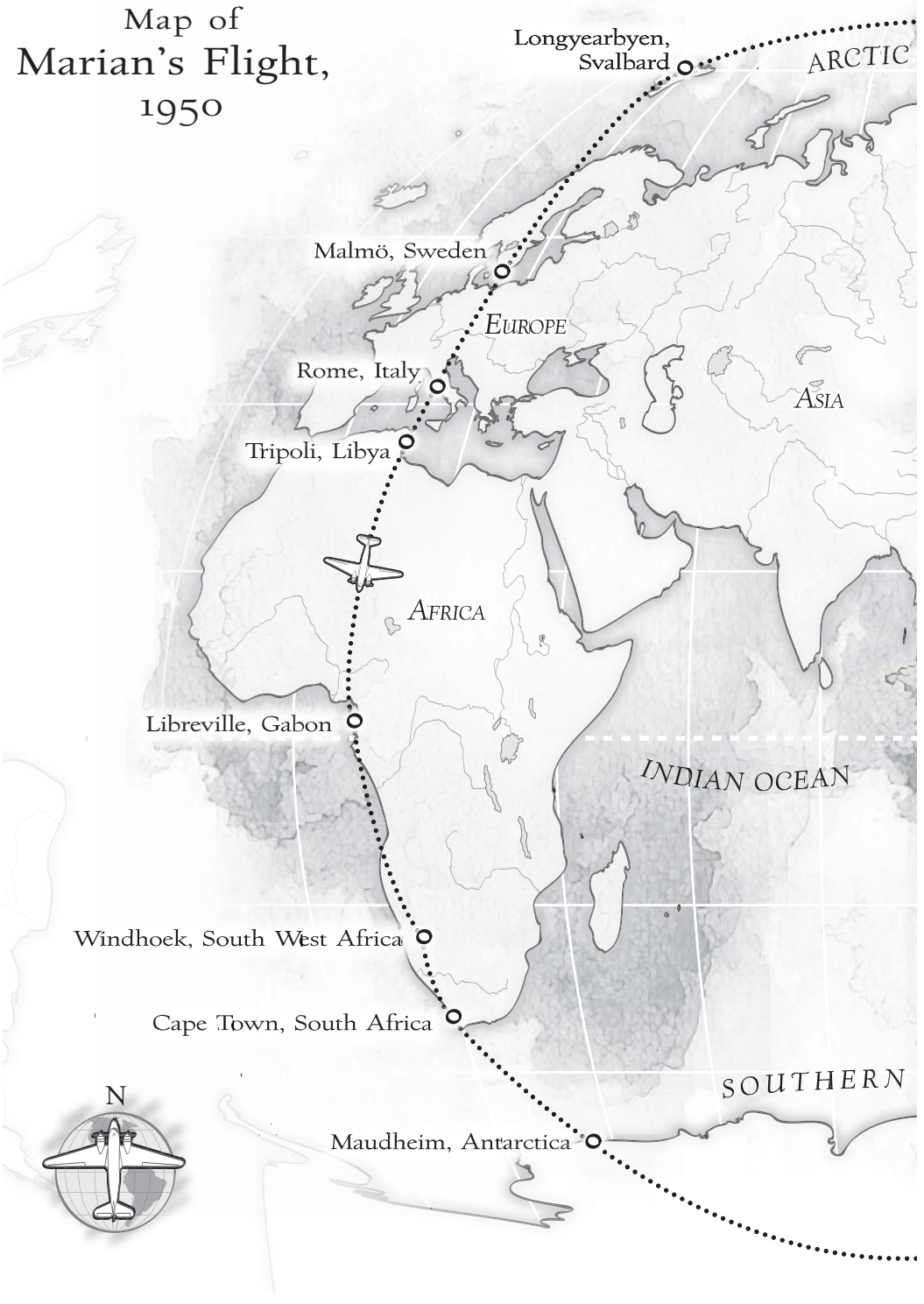
If you were to put a blade through any sphere and divide it into two perfect halves, the circumference of the cut side of each half would be a great circle: that is, the largest circle that can be drawn on a sphere.

The equator is a great circle. So is every line of longitude. On the surface of a sphere such as the earth, the shortest distance between any two points will follow an arc that is a segment of a great circle.

Points directly opposite each other, like the North and South Poles, are intersected by an infinite number of great circles.


Map of
Marian's Flight,
1950
Longyearbyen,
Svalbard
ARCTIC
Malmö, Sweden
EUROPE
Rome, Italy
ASIA
Tripoli, Libya
AFRICA
Libreville, Gabon
INDIAN OCEAN
Windhoek, South West Africa
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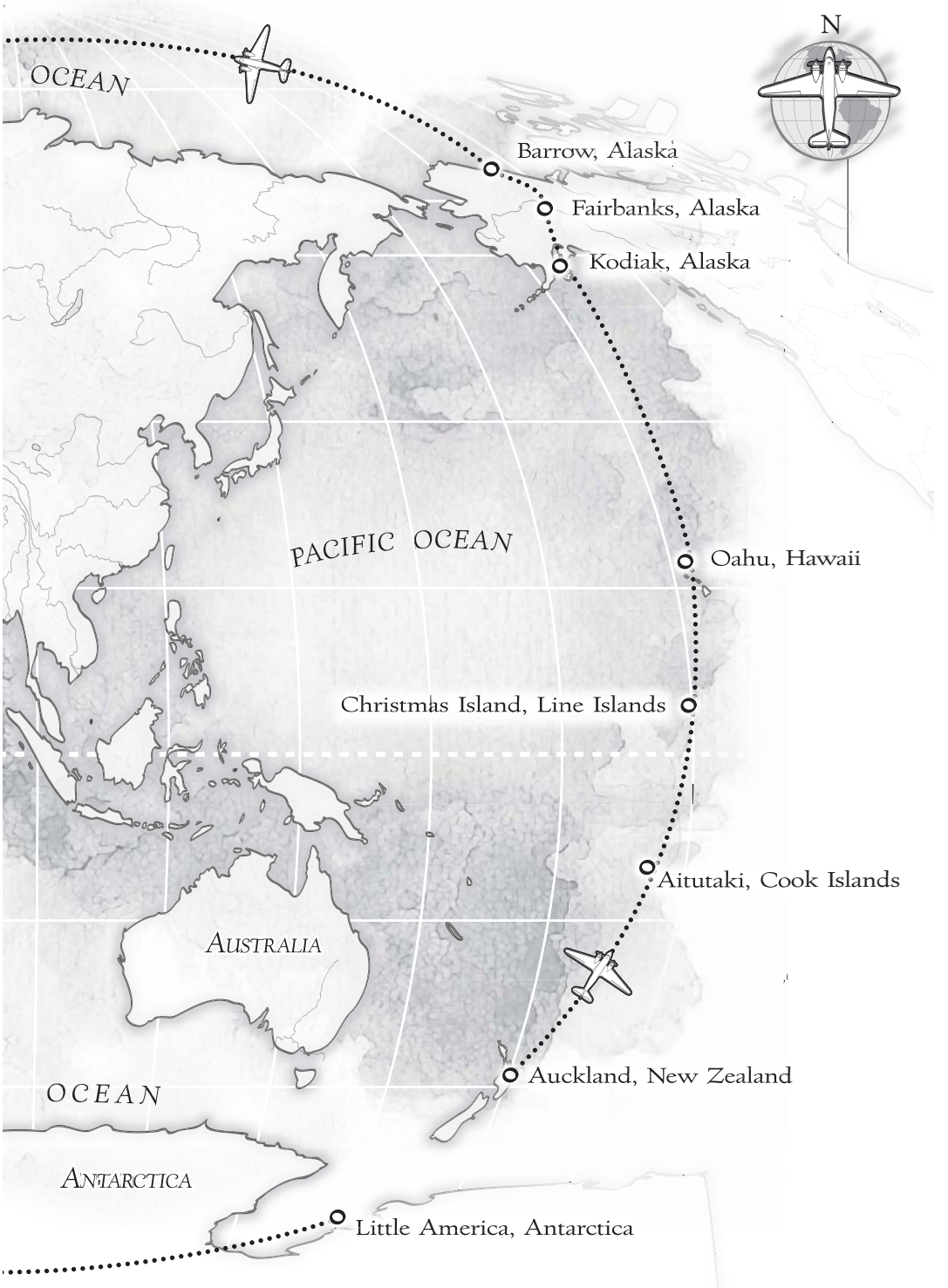
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Auckland, New Zealand
OCEAN
ANTARCTICA
Little America, Antarctica

Little America III, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica
March 4, 1950

I was born to be a wanderer. I was shaped to the earth like a seabird to a wave. Some birds fly until they die. I have made a promise to myself: My last descent won't be the tumbling helpless kind but a sharp gannet plunge—a dive with intent, aimed at something deep in the sea.

I'm about to depart. I will try to pull the circle up from below, bringing the end to meet the beginning. I wish the line were a smooth meridian, a perfect, taut hoop, but our course was distorted by necessity: the indifferent distribution of islands and airfields, the plane's need for fuel.

I don't regret anything, but I will if I let myself. I can think only about the plane, the wind, and the shore, so far away, where land begins again. The weather is improving. We've fixed the leak as best we can. I will go soon. I hate the never-ending day. The sun circles me like a vulture. I want a respite of stars.

Circles are wondrous because they are endless. Anything endless is wondrous. But endlessness is torture, too. I knew the horizon could never be caught but still chased it. What I have done is foolish; I had no choice but to do it.

It isn't how I thought it would be, now that the circle is almost closed, the beginning and end held apart by one last fearsome piece of water.

Final entry from *The Sea, the Sky, the Birds Between: The Lost Logbook of Marian Graves*. Published by D. Wenceslas & Sons, New York, 1959.

I thought I would believe I'd seen the world, but there is too much of the world and too little of life. I thought I would believe I'd completed something, but now I doubt anything can be completed. I thought I would not be afraid. I thought I would become more than I am, but instead I know I am less than I thought.

No one should ever read this. My life is my one possession.

And yet, and yet, and yet.

Los Angeles
December 2014

I only knew about Marian Graves because one of my uncle's girlfriends liked to dump me at the library when I was a kid, and one time I picked up a random book called something like *Brave Ladies of the Sky*. My parents had gone up in a plane and never come back, and it turned out a decent percentage of the brave ladies had met the same fate. That got my attention. I think I might have been looking for someone to tell me a plane crash wasn't such a bad way to go—though if anyone actually ever had, I would have thought they were full of shit. Marian's chapter said she'd been raised by her uncle, and when I read that, I got goose bumps because *I* was being raised (kind of) by *my* uncle.

A nice librarian dug up Marian's book for me—*The Sea, the Sky*, etc.—and I pored over it like an astrologist consulting a star chart, hopeful that Marian's life would somehow explain my own, tell me what to do and how to be. Most of what she wrote went over my head, though I did come away with a vague aspiration to turn my loneliness into adventure. On the first page of my diary, I wrote "I WAS BORN TO BE A WANDERER" in big block letters. Then I didn't write anything else because how do you follow that up when you're ten years old and spend all your time either at your uncle's house in Van Nuys or auditioning for television commercials? After I returned the book, I pretty much forgot about Marian. Almost all of the brave ladies of the sky are forgotten, really. There was the occasional spooky TV special about Marian in the '80s, and a handful of die-hard Marian enthusiasts are still out there spinning

theories on the internet, but she didn't stick the way Amelia Earhart did. People at least *think* they know about Amelia Earhart, even though they don't. It's not really possible.

The fact that I got ditched at the library so often turned out to be a good thing because while other kids were at school, I was sitting in a succession of folding chairs in a succession of hallways at every casting call in the greater Los Angeles area for little white girls (or little race-unspecified girls, which also means white), chaperoned by a succession of nannies and girlfriends of my uncle Mitch, two categories that sometimes overlapped. I think the girlfriends sometimes offered to take care of me because they wanted him to see them as maternal, which they thought would make them seem like wife material, but that wasn't actually a great strategy for keeping the flame alive with ol' Mitch.

When I was two, my parents' Cessna crashed into Lake Superior. Or that's the assumption. No trace was ever found. My dad, Mitch's brother, was flying, and they were on their way to a romantic getaway at some friend's middle-of-nowhere backwoods cabin to, as Mitch put it, reconnect. Even when I was little, he told me that my mother wouldn't quit fucking around. His words. I'm not sure Mitch believed in childhood. "But they wouldn't quit each other, either," he'd say. Mitch definitely believed in taglines. He'd started out directing cheesy TV movies with titles like *Love Takes a Toll* (that was about a toll collector) and *Murder for Valentine's Day* (take a wild guess).

My parents had left me with a neighbor in Chicago, but their last will and testament left me to Mitch. There wasn't really anyone else. No other aunts or uncles, and my grandparents were a combination of dead, estranged, absent, and untrustworthy. Mitch wasn't a bad guy, but his instincts were of the opportunistic, Hollywoodian variety, so after he'd had me a few months, he called in a favor to get me cast in an applesauce commercial. Then he found my agent, Siobhan, and I got consistent-enough work in commercials and guest spots and TV movies (I played the daughter in *Murder for Valentine's Day*) that I can't remember a time I wasn't acting or trying to. It seemed like normal life: putting a plastic pony in a plastic stable over and over while cameras rolled and some grown-up stranger told you how to smile.

When I was eleven, after Mitch had stepping-stoned from movies of the week to music videos and was white-knuckle climbing into the indie

film world, I got my proverbial big break: the role of Katie McGee in a time-travel cable sitcom for kids called *The Big-Time Life of Katie McGee*.

On set, my life was squeaky-clean and candy-colored, all puns and tidy plotlines and three-walled rooms under a hot sky of klieg lights. I hammed it up to a braying laugh track while wearing outfits so extravagantly trendy I looked like a manifestation of the tween zeitgeist. When I wasn't working, I did pretty much whatever I wanted, thanks to Mitch's negligence. In her book, Marian Graves wrote: *As a child, my brother and I were largely left to our own devices. I believed—and no one told me otherwise for some years—that I was free to do as I liked, that I had the right to go any place I could find my way to.* I was probably more of an impetuous little brat than Marian, but I felt the same way. The world was my oyster, and freedom was my mignonette. Life gives you lemons, you carve off their skins and garnish your martinis.

When I was thirteen, after the *Katie McGee* merch had started selling like crazy and after Mitch had directed *Tourniquet* and was rolling around in success like a pill-popping pig in shit, he moved us to Beverly Hills on our shared dime. Once I wasn't stuck out in the Valley anymore, the kid who played Katie McGee's big brother introduced me to his rich dirtbag high-schooler friends, and they drove me around and took me to parties and got in my pants. Mitch probably didn't notice how much I was gone because he was usually out, too. Sometimes we'd bump into each other coming home at two or three in the morning, both messed up, and we'd just exchange nods like two people passing in a hotel corridor, attendees at the same rowdy conference.

But here's a good thing: The on-set tutors for *Katie McGee* were decent, and they told me I should go to college, and since I liked the sound of that, I weaseled my way into NYU after the show ended, with substantial extra credit for being a B-list TV star. I was already packed and ready to move when Mitch overdosed, and if I hadn't been, I probably would have just stayed in L.A. and partied myself to death, too.

Here's something that might have been good or bad: After one semester, I got cast in the first *Archangel* movie. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if, instead, I'd finished college and stopped acting and been forgotten about, but it's not like I possibly could have turned down the colossal amount of money that came with playing Katerina. So everything else is irrelevant.

In my blip of higher education, I had time to take Intro to Philosophy and learn about the panopticon, the hypothetical prison Jeremy Bentham came up with, where there would be one itty-bitty guardhouse at the center of a giant ring of cells. One guard was all you needed because he *might* be watching at any time, and the idea of being watched matters way more than actually being watched. Then Foucault turned the whole thing into a metaphor about how all you need to discipline and dominate a person or a population is to make them think it's *possible* they're being watched. You could tell the professor wanted us all to think the panopticon was scary and awful, but later, after *Archangel* made me way too famous, I wanted to take Katie McGee's preposterous time machine back to that lecture hall and ask him to consider the opposite. Like instead of one guard in the middle, you're in the middle, and thousands, maybe millions, of guards are watching you—or might be—all the time, no matter where you go.

Not that I would have had the nerve to ask a professor anything. At NYU everyone was always staring at me because I'd been Katie McGee, but it felt like they were staring at me because they knew I didn't deserve to be there. And maybe I didn't, but you can't measure fairness in a lab. You can't know if you *deserve* something. Probably you don't. So it was a relief, too, when I quit school for *Archangel*, to go back to having a million obligations I had no choice about and a daily schedule I didn't decide for myself. At college I'd flipped through the course catalog, as fat as a dictionary, in complete bafflement. I'd drifted through the cafeteria, looking at all the different foods, at the salad bars and the mountains of bagels and the bins of cereal and the soft-serve machine, and I'd felt like I was being asked to solve some monumental, life-or-death riddle.

After I'd wrecked everything and Sir Hugo Woolsey (*the* Sir Hugo, who happens to be my neighbor) started talking to me about some biopic he was producing and pulled Marian's book from his tote bag—a book I hadn't thought about in fifteen years—suddenly I was in a library again, looking at a slender hardback that might hold all the answers. Answers sounded nice. They sounded like something I wanted, not that I could ever quite unravel what I wanted. Not that I even really knew what wanting meant. I mostly experienced desire as a tangle of impossible, contradictory impulses. I wanted to vanish like Marian; I wanted to be more famous than ever; I wanted to say something important about

courage and freedom; I wanted to *be* courageous and free, but I didn't know what that meant—I only knew how to pretend to know, which I guess is acting.

Today is my last day of filming for *Peregrine*. I'm sitting in a mock-up of Marian's plane that's hanging from a pulley system and is about to be swung out over a giant tank of water and dropped. I'm wearing a reindeer-fur parka that weighs a thousand pounds and will weigh a million once it gets wet, and I'm trying not to let on that I'm afraid. Bart Olofsson, the director, took me aside earlier, asked if I really wanted to do this stunt myself, given, you know, what happened to my parents. *I think I want to confront that*, I said. *I think I could use the closure.* He'd put his hand on my shoulder, done his best guru face. *You are a strong woman*, he'd said.

Closure doesn't really exist, though. That's why we're always looking for it.

The actor who's playing Eddie Bloom, my navigator, is also wearing a reindeer-fur parka and has waterproof blood makeup on his forehead because he's supposed to be knocked out by the impact. In real life, Eddie usually sat at a desk behind Marian's seat, but the screenwriters, two aggressively cheerful brothers with Hitler Youth haircuts and Hitler Youth faces, thought it would be better if Eddie came up front for the death dive. Sure, fine, whatever.

The story we're telling isn't what really happened, anyway. I know that much. But I wouldn't say I know the truth about Marian Graves. Only she knew.

Eight cameras will record my plunge: six fixed, two operated by divers. The plan is to do it once. Twice, at most. It's an expensive shot, and our budget was never enormous and has now been exhausted and then some, but when you've come this far, the only way out is through. Best-case scenario, it takes all day. Worst-case scenario, I drown, wind up *In Memoriam*, wind up like my parents except in a fake plane and a fake ocean, not even trying to get anywhere.

"You're sure you want to do this?"

The stunt coordinator is checking my harness, all business as he digs around my crotch, feeling for the straps and clips among bristly reindeer hair. True to type, he's got a leathery face, a leathery wardrobe, and a stop-action way of walking from a few imperfect repair jobs.

"Totally," I say.

When he's done, the crane lifts us up, swings us out. There's a scrim at the end of the tank that makes a kind of horizon with the water, and I'm her, Marian Graves, flying over the Southern Ocean with my fuel gauge on empty, and I know I can't get anywhere other than where I am, which is nowhere. I wonder how cold the water will be, how long before I'm dead. I think through my options. I think about what I've promised myself. *A gannet plunge.*

"Action," says a voice in my earpiece, and I push on the fake plane's yoke as though I'm going to fly us down into the center of the earth. The pulleys tip the nose, and we dive.

The *Josephina Eterna*

Glasgow, Scotland
April 1909

An unfinished ship. A hull without funnels, caged in her slipway by a steel gantry above and a timber cradle below. Beyond her stern, under the four impotent blossoms of her exposed propellers, the River Clyde flowed green in unexpected sunshine.

From keel to waterline she was rust red, and above that, specially painted for the launch, she was white as a bride. (White made for better newspaper pictures.) After the flashbulbs have popped, after she has been moored lonely in the river for her fitting-out, men will stand on planks hung down her sides on thick ropes and paint the plates and rivets of her hull glossy black.

Her two funnels will be hoisted up, bolted down, lashed in place. Her decks will be planked in teak, her corridors and salons paneled in mahogany and walnut and oak. There will be sofas and settees and chaises, beds and bathtubs, seascapes in gilded frames, gods and goddesses in bronze and alabaster. The first-class china will be gilt-edged, patterned with gold anchors (the emblem of L&O Lines). For second class: blue anchors, blue edging (blue, the line's color). Third class will make do with plain white crockery and the crew with tin. Boxcars will arrive full of crystal and silver and porcelain, damask and velvet. Cranes will hoist aboard three pianos, dangling in nets like stiff-legged beasts. A grove of potted palms will be wheeled up the gangway. Chandeliers will be hung. Deck chairs hinged like alligator jaws will be stacked. Eventually the first load of coal will be poured in through apertures low in the

hull, down into bunkers below the waterline, far from the finery. The first fire will be lit deep in her furnaces.

But on the day of her launch she was still only a shell, a bare and comfortless wedge of steel. A crowd jostled in her shadow: ship workers in rowdy clumps, Glaswegian families out for the spectacle, urchin boys peddling newspapers and sandwiches. A brilliantly blue sky flew overhead like a pennant. In this city of fog and soot, such a sky could only be a good omen. A brass band played.

Mrs. Lloyd Feiffer, Matilda, wife of the ship's new American owner, stood on a platform edged with blue-and-white bunting, a bottle of Scotch tucked under her arm. "Shouldn't it be champagne?" she had asked her husband.

"Not in Glasgow," he'd said.

Matilda was to break the bottle against the ship, christening it with the name she could scarcely bear to think of. She was impatient for the cathartic shattering of glass, for her task to be done, but now she could only wait. There was some kind of delay. Lloyd fidgeted, making occasional comments to the naval architect, who appeared rigid with anxiety. A few unhappy Englishmen in bowler hats milled around the platform, and a pair of Scotsmen from the shipbuilding firm, and several other men she couldn't identify.

This ship had already been half built when L&O Lines, founded in New York by Lloyd's father, Ernst, in 1857 and inherited by Lloyd in 1906, acquired the failing English line that had commissioned it. (Commissioned *her*; Lloyd was always correcting. But, to Matilda, ships would always be its.) The sheathing had been under way when money ran out and was resumed once Lloyd's dollars were converted to sterling, then steel. The men in bowler hats, up from London, remarking morosely among themselves about the glorious weather, had conceived of the ship, argued over its blueprints, chosen a sensible name that Lloyd had disregarded. All that, only to have ended up obsolete: cuckolds in carefully brushed hats on a bunting-swagged platform, the brass band's rousing march bubbling around their feet. Tallow had been smeared on the slipway to grease the ship's path, and Matilda could feel its thick animal odor permeating her clothes, coating her skin.

Lloyd had wanted a new liner to reinvigorate L&O. When Ernst died, the fleet had been tired and outdated, mostly tramp steamers ply-

ing the coastwise trade, plus some passenger-cargo ships chugging across the Atlantic and a few tired windjammers still running the Pacific grain and guano routes. This ship would not be the largest or fastest or most opulent liner crossing from Europe—no threat to the White Star Line monsters being built in Belfast—but Lloyd had told Matilda it would be a respectable ante at the fat cats' table.

"What's the news?" Lloyd barked, startling her. The question was addressed to Addison Graves, *Captain* Graves, who was standing nearby—looming, really, though his habitual hunch seemed intended as a preemptive apology for his height. He was thin, almost gaunt, but with bones as massive and heavy as cudgels.

"It's a problem with the trigger," he told Lloyd. "Shouldn't be much longer."

Lloyd frowned at the ship. "It's like she's in shackles. She's meant to be at sea. Don't you think, Graves?" He turned suddenly ebullient. "Don't you think she's absolutely magnificent?"

The bow towered over them, sharp as a blade. "She'll be a fine ship," Graves said mildly.

He was to be the ship's first captain, had come across for the launch with Lloyd and Matilda and the four young Feiffer sons—Henry, the eldest at seven, and Leander, the baby not even a year old, with Clifford and Robert in between, all being cared for somewhere out of the way by their two nannies. Matilda had hoped to warm up to Graves on the voyage. He was not unkind, never impolite, but his reserve seemed unbreachable. Even her boldest attempts to discover something of his inner workings had yielded nothing. *What drew you to the sea, Captain Graves?* she'd asked one night at dinner. He'd said, *Go far enough in any direction, and you'll find the sea, Mrs. Feiffer,* and she'd felt reproached. To her, he'd come to represent the basic impenetrability of male life. Lloyd loved him with a wholeheartedness he didn't seem to lavish on anyone else, certainly not Matilda. *I owe him my life,* Lloyd had said many times. *Your life can't be a debt,* she'd countered once, *or then it's not really yours, and nothing has been saved.* But Lloyd had only laughed, asked if she had considered becoming a philosopher.

They had crewed on a barque together as young men, Graves and Lloyd. Graves had been a working sailor and Lloyd, just graduated from Yale, was half pretending to be. Ernst, Lloyd's father, had said he

needed to learn the ropes (literally) if he was to inherit L&O. When hapless Lloyd fell overboard off Chile, Graves was quick and accurate enough to throw him a line and haul him back aboard. Since then, Lloyd had always venerated Graves as a savior. (*But you're the one who* caught *the line*, Matilda said. *You're the one who hung on.*) After Chile, as Lloyd ascended through the firm, so, too, did Graves.

The platform was no longer in the shade. Sweat was making Matilda's corset stick and chafe. Lloyd seemed to think she'd been born knowing how to christen a ship. "Just break the bottle on the bow, Tildy," he'd said. "It's very simple."

Would she know when the moment came? Would they remember to tell her? All she knew was that she'd apparently be signaled (by whom, she wasn't sure) at the moment the ship began to slide, and she was to crack the whiskey against the bow, christening it *Josephina Eterna*, after her husband's mistress.

When, months before, at the breakfast table, she'd asked Lloyd what the ship would be called, he had told her without lowering his newspaper.

Matilda's cup had not rattled when she returned it to its saucer. At least she could be proud of that.

She had been young but not too young when Lloyd married her, twenty-one to his thirty-six, old enough to know she was being chosen for her fortune and breeding potential, not love. All she asked was that Lloyd behave with respectful discretion. She had explained this to him before their engagement, and he had listened kindly and agreed there was much to be said for individual privacy within marriage, especially since bachelor life had suited him so well for so long. "We understand each other, then," she had said and offered him her hand. Solemnly, he had shaken her hand and then kissed her, full on the mouth, for quite some time, and she had begun, in spite of herself, to fall in love. Bad luck.

But she would not go back on her word. As best she could, she made peace with Lloyd's wanderings, directing her passions toward her children and the maintenance of her wardrobe and person. Lloyd regarded her affectionately, she knew, and was more tender in bed than she gathered some husbands were, though she also knew she was fundamentally not to his taste. He preferred temperamental, unappeasable women, usually older than Matilda, often older than even himself, older certainly than the ship's namesake, this Jo, who was only nineteen, dark and

flighty. But Matilda knew enough to know it was often the lover who went against type who undid people.

The ship's name had seemed a poor repayment of her tolerance and generosity, and as soon as she'd found a moment alone, away from rattling china and servants' eyes, she had shed a few tears. Then she'd pulled herself together and soldiered on, as always.

On the platform, Lloyd turned to her, wrought up. "It's almost time."

She tried to ready herself. The bottle's neck was too short for her to get a good grip, especially not through her silk gloves, and it slipped from her grasp, landed with a thud perilously close to the platform's edge. As she picked it up, someone touched her shoulder. Addison Graves. Gently, he took the bottle. "You'd better remove your gloves," he said. When she had, he wrapped one of her hands around the neck and set the other palm flat against the cork. "Like this," he said, demonstrating a sideways arcing motion. "Don't be afraid to take a good swing because it's bad luck if the bottle doesn't break."

"Thank you," she murmured.

At the platform's edge, she waited for her signal, but nothing happened. The bow stayed where it was, the immense upturned nose of a proud and haughty thing. The men were talking urgently among themselves. The naval architect went rushing off. She waited. The bottle grew heavier. Her fingers ached. Down in the crowd, two men were shoving each other, causing a commotion. As she watched, one struck the other in the face.

"Tildy, for God's sake!" Lloyd was tugging at her arm. The bow was sliding away. So quickly. She had not expected something so large would go so quickly.

She leaned out and hurled the bottle after the retreating wall of steel. Awkwardly, overhand. It thudded against the hull but did not break, only bounced off and dropped to the slipway, shattering on the concrete in a splat of glass and amber liquid. The *Josephina* receded. The river rose up behind the stern in a green bulge, collapsed into foam.

North Atlantic
January 1914
Four years and nine months later

Josephina Eterna, eastbound in the night. A jeweled brooch on black satin. A solitary crystal on the wall of a dark cave. A stately comet in an empty sky.

Below her lights and honeycombed cabins, below the men toiling in red heat and black dust, below her barnacled keel, a school of cod passed, a dense pack of flexing bodies in the darkness, eyes bulging wide though there was nothing to see. Below the fish: cold and pressure, empty black miles, a few strange, luminescent creatures drifting after flecks of food. Then the sandy bottom, blank except for faint trails left by hardy shrimp, blind worms, creatures who would never know such a thing as light existed.

The night Addison Graves came to dinner and found Annabel seated beside him was the second out of New York. He had descended without enthusiasm from the masculine quiet of the bridge into the dining room's trilling, sparkling cacophony. The air felt hot and moist, smelled of food and perfume. The ocean cold clinging to his wool uniform evaporated; immediately he prickled with sweat. At his table, he stooped in a bow, cap under his arm. The passengers' faces radiated a predatory eagerness for his attention. "Good evening," he said as he sat, shaking out his napkin. He rarely gleaned pleasure from conversation, certainly not from the self-congratulatory chitchat demanded by passengers wealthy or important enough to wrangle seats at the captain's table. At

first he registered nothing beyond the pale green of Annabel's dress. On his other side sat an older woman in brown. The first of a long series of fussy dishes arrived, borne from the kitchen by tailcoated waiters.

Lloyd Feiffer had promoted Addison to captain as soon as he'd inherited L&O, when the turned earth was still fresh on his father's grave. Over a steak dinner at Delmonico's, Lloyd had given him charge of a ship, and Addison had only nodded, not wanting to betray his elation. Captain Graves! The miserable boy he'd been long ago on that farm in Illinois would finally be gone forever, ground to nothing under the heel of his polished boot, tossed overboard.

But Lloyd had raised one small concern. "You'll have to be *genial*, Graves. You'll have to *converse*. It's part of what they pay for. Don't look like that. It won't be so bad." He paused, looking anxious. "Do you think you can manage?"

"Yes," Addison had said, his ambition outweighing the dread in his heart. "Of course."

Waiters swirled around delivering bowls of consommé. On Addison's right, Mrs. Somebody-or-Other in the brown dress was relating her sons' life histories in great detail and with such slow and deliberate enunciation that she might have been reading out the terms of a treaty. Lamb with mint jelly appeared and was eaten. Then roast chicken. Over the salad, during a brief intermission in his neighbor's recitation, Addison turned, finally, to the woman in the pale green dress. Annabel, she'd said her name was. She appeared quite young. He asked if it would be her first time in Britain.

"No," she said. "I've been several times."

"Then you enjoy it?"

At first she did not reply. Then, when she spoke, her tone was matter-of-fact. "Not particularly, but my father and I decided it would be best if I left New York for a while."

A curious admission. He studied her more closely. Her head was lowered; she seemed intent on her meal. She was older than he had initially thought, in her late twenties, and extremely fair, though the careless application of her rouge and lipstick gave her a blurred, feverish appearance. She had cream-colored hair like the mane of a palomino horse and eyelashes and eyebrows so pale as to be almost invisible. Abruptly, she looked up and met his gaze.

Her irises were light blue, filigreed with bright, pale interlocking rings like sun dapples. In them he recognized a proposition, brazen and unmistakable. He knew the look from women in the South Pacific lounging bare-breasted in the shade, from whores half hidden in the gloom of port city alleys, from *karayuki-san* ushering him into lantern-lit rooms. He glanced at her father across the table, a florid, wiry man talking boisterously, seemingly oblivious to his daughter.

"You despise this," Annabel said in a low voice. "Talking to these people. I can tell because I do, too."

Addison begged off dessert. Something needed his attention, do forgive him. He made his way out of the dining room and up two flights of stairs, clanged out through a door—CREW ONLY—onto a patch of open deck behind the bridge.

He rested his elbows on the railing. No one was around. The sea was lightly chopped. The marbled seam of the Milky Way arced through the clear, moonless sky.

He had politely denied despising anything, had turned away from the young woman and asked his other neighbor if she had any more amusing stories about her children. But Annabel had continued to burn at his periphery. Green dress, pale eyelashes. That look. So unexpected. A blue flame, unwavering and alien.

There was some relief in the workmanlike atmosphere of the bridge and, later, in the midnight pot of coffee brought to his cabin, but still she burned. In his bath, his bony knees poking out of the water, he had let his hand drift to his groin, thinking of her flushed cheeks, the loose wisps of pale hair at her nape.

It was well past midnight when she knocked at his door. She was still in the green dress, an apparition. He didn't know how she had found his cabin, but she stepped briskly inside as though she had been to see him many times before. She was smaller than he'd thought, her head only reaching the middle of his chest, and she was shivering violently. Her skin was bluish and very cold, and for the first few minutes he could barely stand to touch her for the chill.

New York City
September 1914
Nine months later

The babies were crying.

Annabel did not move. She was standing at her bedroom window in Addison's redbrick townhouse (black trim, black door with a brass knocker, near the river) and looking across the street at a black cat sleeping in a third-floor window. Often it was there. Sometimes, tail flicking, it watched pigeons pecking in the gutters below. When the cat flicked its tail, Annabel was compelled to wag one finger. When the cat stopped, she stopped. At night, lying sleepless, she would wag her finger until the digit was painfully tight and sore. A scold's gesture. Tick-tock.

In overlapping bursts, the crying built to a furious peak.

Better not to move from the window than risk the visions that bubbled up, smelling of brimstone, when she went near the twins. She should not go in the kitchen where there were knives. She should not venture near down pillows or basins of water. She should not hold the babies in her arms because she might bring them up to this window and drop them from it. *Wicked*, came her mother's voice. *Wicked*, *wicked*, *wicked.*

During one of her stints at boarding school, the morning after an ice storm, she had taken cautious gliding steps off her dormitory's porch and into a blinding, brittle, splintery world. Each maple in the school's central green was locked in its own close-fitting glass case, toothed with icicles. When the babies cried, she became like those trees: first rooted,

then frozen. Their wails seemed as remote and unanswerable as the cries of birds circling their ice-filled nests.

Addison had been on the *Josephina* when they were born. Annabel had begun labor on September 4, three weeks early, and the twins were finally expelled more than a day later, an eternity later, before dawn on the sixth, the first day of the Battle of the Marne. No names had occurred to her, and she had waved a hand in acquiescence when the midwife suggested Marian and the doctor offered James, to be called Jamie.

For Annabel, the horror of the birth had merged with the horror of the war, now that she knew what it was to scream, to bleed. The birth had become the new trouble to which her mind returned when she let her guard down. The basin of red water reappeared, the doctor's knives and forceps and sewing needles. She saw again the purple infants smeared with blood and something like custard, as small as puppies, and she was revisited by her first horror at the sight of them, her fleeting, addled belief that the doctor was holding her organs in his hands, that she had been eviscerated. The midwife had told her the birth would be a trial, but, afterward, joy would overwhelm her. Either the woman had been lying, or, more likely, Annabel was an unnatural mother.

When the babies were five days old, Addison had returned. He had stood looking into their bassinet with a puzzled expression and then at Annabel where she lay, rank with sweat, her hair matted. She'd been refusing to bathe because the doctor said warm water would encourage milk production, and she was determined for hers to dry up.

"Cool water, then," the day nurse said. "To soothe your parts."

Annabel had told her she would rather die than take a cold bath. "Your business is with the babies, not with me," she said. "Leave me be."

She had matched Addison's silence, and the next day he left again.

"Only a touch of the melancholies," the day nurse said. "I've seen it before. You'll be yourself again soon."

Yourself.

A memory from the murk of her first years. Moonlight bluing the nursery curtains; her father beside her, holding her. No one ever held her. The warmth of another body was intoxicating. Instinctively, she had clutched the silk front of his robe and felt him trembling. There the memory ended.

Age seven. She was standing in the pantry in the house in Murray

Hill with her dress lifted while the cook's son, a boy of about eleven, crouched in front of her. A jagged cry from the doorway and a great, flapping rushing-in. Bosomy, bustled, black-skirted Nanny overfilled the small space like a crow jammed in a house for sparrows. The cook's boy yelped at being trampled. Nanny gave only that one cry, then nothing but agitated nose-breathing as she dragged Annabel upstairs and locked her in a closet.

Dark in there, but with a keyhole view across the hallway to the nursery, her yellow quilt on the bed and a doll abandoned facedown on the floor. "Was I bad?" she had asked Nanny through the door.

"You know you were," Nanny said. "You are the worst kind of girl. You ought to be more than ashamed."

What lay beyond shame? Annabel wondered, crouching among dustpans and tins of furniture polish. If what she had done was so abominable, why was it permissible for her father, the god of the household, vastly more powerful than even her mother or Nanny, to touch the part of her that the cook's son had offered her a piece of lemon candy only to look at, the part that Nanny called her cabbage? This is our secret, her father said about his visits, and Mother must not know because she would be jealous of how much he loved Annabel and how much Annabel loved him and how they were warm together.

The day she showed her cabbage to the cook's boy, her mother beat her on her bare legs and backside and called her *wicked*, *wicked*, *wicked*.

The first doctor prescribed daily baths in cold water, a vegetarian diet.

Nanny refused to answer any questions about the nature of wickedness. "That sort of talk will only encourage you."

Although, once, when Annabel had asked if boys' cabbages were bad, too, Nanny had burst out with, "Stupid child, boys don't have cabbages. They have carrots."

Wickedness, it seemed, had to do with vegetables.

Uneasily, guiltily, for reasons she could not have begun to explain, Annabel began, during unsupervised moments in the nursery or the bath, to touch her cabbage. The sensation dulled her mind in a pleasant way, built to an absorbing comfort, even had the power to drive off unwelcome thoughts: the skinned lamb, for example, that she had seen in the kitchen with its tongue hanging out or her mother calling her

wicked. It even muffled thoughts of her father. Her father said he was trying to do something nice. That his visits filled her with dread must mean there was something wrong with her. She would try to be better.

Age nine. She woke to a gust of cold air, morning light, her yellow quilt being snatched away. Her mother stood over her, clutching the quilt like a matador's cape. Too late, Annabel realized her hands had, in her sleep, migrated under her nightgown. *Wicked*, said her mother, rearing over her like an ax about to drop. The next night Nanny bound Annabel's wrists, and she slept with her fingers interlaced as though in prayer.

"Your mother is a good woman," her father told her, patting the cords on her wrists but not untying them. "But she doesn't understand how we want to be warm together."

"Am I wicked?" Annabel asked.

"We're all a *little* wicked," said her father.

The second doctor was old and houndish, with pouchy eyes and speckled skin and long earlobes. With tongs he extracted a solitary leech from a glass jar. He nudged her legs apart.

A ringing pressed in her ears. An obscuring white light swirled in like a snowstorm, was rent apart by a bright jolt of smelling salts. The doctor went out to speak to her mother, leaving the door open.

Overexcitement, he said. *Very serious . . . not cause for despair yet.*

More cold baths and a Borax solution to be applied weekly. She was to be kept away from spices, bright colors, quick-tempoed music, anything lively or stimulating. Before bed, she was to be given a spoonful of syrup from an amber bottle that sent her into a bottomless sleep. Some mornings she thought she detected the faint smell of tobacco on her pillow, but she remembered nothing.

The day she woke, twelve years old, terrified in bloody sheets, her mother told her that she would not die but the blood would come every month as a reminder to be always on her guard against, yes, again, always: wickedness.

Around then, two other events: First, she noticed she had not smelled tobacco on her pillow for some time, and, second, she was sent away to school. The sunny chatter of the other girls, their books and bedtime prayers and homesickness and letters to their mothers, the cheerful dances they practiced with one another, their fussing over their hair and

pinching of their cheeks for color—all of it made her feel like a small dark spider scuttling among their merry shoes. In a rush of fury, she understood she knew nothing of the world. She had been kept from it.

How to remedy her appalling ignorance?

Be attentive. Eavesdrop. Sift and strain for clues. Choose books at random from the library, steal more books from other girls, especially the forbidden ones they have kept hidden. Read *Wuthering Heights* and *Treasure Island* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Moonstone*. Read *Dracula* and have nightmares about the zoophagous madman in the asylum, Renfield, who feeds flies to spiders and spiders to birds and eats the birds and wishes to consume as many lives as possible. Steal *The Awakening* and dream about walking into the sea, though you have never been in any water but the bathtub. (Even at school, her baths are cold.) From these books, gradually piece together jumbled theories about how other notions of shame and wickedness exist besides your mother's. Intuit that some women wish to be touched by men. (The girls sighed over certain books, lying back on their pillows. *So romantic*, they remarked, though not to Annabel, whom they found strange.) When she was sure everyone else was asleep, she returned to touching what she no longer thought of as her cabbage but as her thing, not greenly inert but alive and animal. The sensation became sharper, a piquant fishhook that snagged on her nerves as though on a net, pulling her along. She found a flickering and thrumming, a pulse and flash.

Once a week a young man came to the school to instruct the girls in piano. He leaned over Annabel while she sat on the bench and with his long fingers sounded low, tolling notes. He was almost as blond as she, with arched, surprised eyebrows and comb marks in his hair. She took his hand one day and put it on her dress, over her thing. The terror in his face baffled her.

In disgrace, she was sent to another, lesser school, but within a month she was called home because her mother was dead. Her father treated her with distant, bewildered politeness, seemed not to remember that once he had wanted to be warm with her. Nanny was gone, and, when she asked, her father said Annabel was too big for a nanny, wasn't she? Annabel took a bath so hot she emerged looking cooked.

(Only later, overhearing gossip at the funeral, did she learn her mother had drunk a whole bottle of sleeping draught.)

A third school, the one with the maple trees, the ice storm. Her history teacher was older than the piano tutor and not afraid of her. He found reasons to summon her to his office. "Like a fish to water," he said after he had relieved her of her virginity on a sagging sofa. "I could see it in you. I could see you would be this way."

"What do you mean?"

"It's in your gaze. Didn't you mean to seduce me?"

"I suppose so," she said, though she had not *quite* known what she meant to do. She had simply returned his glances, allowed him to proceed, felt a dull, sawing pressure while both of them remained mostly clothed. Afterward, as she crossed the school green, the sadness that seemed to be the aftermath of any human contact settled on her, but the experience had not been unpleasant, and she returned to his office willingly when he next summoned her. He turned away and fumbled with himself beforehand, which he said had to do with avoiding a child. With practice, she could draw the flickering and thrumming from his ministrations, occasionally even the pulse and flash, though the sadness afterward remained.

"Let's run away together," he said, and she had gazed at him from the sofa, confused he would think there was anywhere they could go.

She was not expelled from that school but graduated at sixteen and returned to New York. As best she could, she adopted a life of outward respectability as spinster consort to her father, his companion to dinners and parties and on his travels. She tried to be good, to ward off her wicked need. But she could no sooner chase it away than she could chop off her own head and continue living. She found lovers. Their discretion varied.

"Maybe you should consider marrying," her father said.

They both knew no one in New York would dream of marrying her, despite his wealth.

Lovemaking brought relief, yes, but also shame, rumors, scorn. She wished to be different, to be someone who did not go with men, who was not oppressed by blackness or possessed by wanting. But she failed. She failed in New York, she failed in London ("Perhaps an *English* husband," her father had said), in Copenhagen ("Perhaps a *Danish* husband") and Paris ("Perhaps?") and Rome (no talk of an Italian husband). She failed

on the *Josephina*. She had not thought she could possibly have a child, had been certain her womb was rotten with wickedness.

"Addison Graves," she said to her father after she was certain of her pregnancy.

"Who?"

"The captain. The ship captain."

On the night she met Addison, her father had gone to the smoking room after dinner, entrusting Annabel to the ladies' parlor, which was easily escaped. She had stood at the *Josephina*'s stern, studying the black water, the silver clouds of bubbles welling up from the propellers. Fear had coursed through her, binding her hands to the railing. She imagined the rush of wind, the shock of the cold, the huge, slicing blades, the retreating lights of the ship.

Would she have time to watch the ship disappear over the horizon? Would she be left alone at the center of a starry black sphere, to have as her last sight infinite quiet points of light? Nothing could be lonelier. Or, she thought, more truthful. In her experience, proximity to other humans did not actually diminish solitude. She imagined herself drifting down, down, settling on the ocean floor. One final cold bath to extinguish what burned.

The wind cut through her dress. She could never predict when her willpower would give way, but on that night wickedness saved her, pulled her away from the ship's wake and drew her to Addison's cabin instead. At dinner, he had seen her for what she was. She'd felt the force of his recognition like a slap.

Perhaps, the day nurse suggested, if she held her babies, she would be reminded how beautiful they were. She was lucky to have two healthy children when some lost their babies at birth, poor souls. "God made women to be mothers," the nurse said.

"If you have any sense, if you love your God, you will keep them away from me," Annabel said, and the nurse, frightened, had taken the babies and gone, shutting the bedroom door behind her.

Against her doctor's advice, she had placed ads for wet nurses in the newspapers before the twins were born and hired the first two women

who applied. They both claimed to be married. Neither offered an explanation of how her breasts had come to be full of expendable milk, and Annabel did not ask. "In my opinion the practice is not far from prostitution," the doctor had said. "Often they place their own babies under the most appalling conditions so they may sell their milk. They are not likely to be good women." But goodness did not interest Annabel.

When she had left Addison's cabin and returned to her own at dawn, her father had been sitting awake in his room beside an empty tumbler and full ashtray, still in his tie and tails, waiting, the communicating door left open. "Annabel," he said. He looked old and tired, resigned. "What should I have done differently for you?"

"You should have let me sleep," she said, and shut the door.

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