Fall 12-20-2017

Play Dead

Ann Hackett
University of New Orleans, ahackett@uno.edu

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Creative Writing
Fiction

By
Ann Hackett
B.A. New York University, 2010

December 2017

I: Formation

II: Synthesis

I: Formation

10/15

Ricky,

The storm surge came yesterday, washing away all the eggs. I got up at dawn. Maybe I never went to sleep. It's hard to tell when you're out here all alone. It's hard to remember what you do day to day. You are entirely in the moment. People used to get up with the sunrise before there was electric light. It seems smarter, less wasteful. You can do that here at the outpost. You are completely alone. You can reset yourself however you like given enough time.

I went outside and walked along the dunes on the edge of the beach, and when I turned and looked back at the outpost, it reminded me of a tugboat. Its hull was submerged in the sand, and the dunes were like waves cresting on the deck. It's a small, rectangular building, rising two squat stories above a wraparound deck. There is a railing running all the way around the deck, and on the second floor, there is a small balcony.

On the beach there was a thin skin of water covering the sand all the way up to the palmettos at the base of the dunes. Water was down from the day before. The mother terns were all circling, screaming down at the flooded beach. Under the water there were divots in the sand where their nests had been. This storm will cut the population next year, maybe by a quarter, maybe by half. I don't know if I told you about the terns before, but they come here once a year to lay their eggs on the beach. Their nest is simple a simple one, only a depression in the sand. I like to come and see them when I'm out here by myself. It fills up my day, which is generally spent watching the equipment, water level, temperature, wind, acidity, and waiting for the alarms to sound. In case of an emergency, the equipment mostly does it for us. Sometimes, after being out here alone for a few days, I feel I am nothing. I am only another button among many

on one of the machines. I erase myself. The equipment would do everything for us if we let it, but still we cycle through here in shifts of five days. Five days on. Fifteen days off. On and off. Just like the offshore men. But there always has to be a human here just in case something happens, something means a storm or a spill, and also because we've written in our funding applications: scientist present at all times. It's as if we were policemen, body guards, people who are capable of acting to prevent something from happening. But we just watch. There is no preventing what's coming. We let the machines do their work and send it off to NOAA. If they are online, they're going to send it off either way.

It's funny. We know that most likely our end will come from rain, the slowly rising water, the overflowing lakes and bayous and what the water brings with it. It will creep up slow as ever like the skin of water on the beach, and it will cover this island and the rest of south Louisiana. We'll boil like a frog in a pot, or whatever that old saying is.

I'll send this to your Franklin address. Remember that place? You used to hold court at the big dining room table under that crazy broken down chandelier. You probably don't live there anymore.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 1

Ricky and I were born in the year of the dragon, 1988, the hottest year on record, according to Dr. James Hansen who said as much when he testified before the Senate that June. The air had gone out in the Capitol Building. The Senate chamber began to stink of old men perspiring into their polyester shirts and their wool suits, and Hansen said, “Global warming has reached a level such that we can ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause-and-effect relationship between the greenhouse effect and observed warming.” Hansen said that we should expect heatwaves and drought in the heartland, the Midwest. Two months later, we were born at the University Hospital in Chicago in the middle of a heat wave. It was the hottest August on record.

* * * *

In those days I did everything alone. While bright parkaed girls, with synthetic fur hats and boots, waited on snowy street corners for each other, bundled to the hilt, leaving only their wet

eyes and raw cheeks open to the cold wind, so they might face the neighborhood together on the walk to school, I passed them by without a nod.

DeLillo said that childhood was a series of indistinguishable pleasures. This parade of one happiness after the other causes memory loss in the child, he said. I don't remember much of what happened before I turned eighteen, but I know it wasn't an endless procession of pleasures. I remember creeping boredom that mounted and mounted toward inevitable stasis. I felt I was already dying.

I remember that my parents hated toys. They had more important clutter to keep around. My mom couldn't throw anything out, so my dad created systems for storing papers and greeting cards and little figurines that we received as gifts on Christmas. He bought desk organizers and sock drawer organizers and mail sorters from places like the Container Store, and he was always coming up with new organization systems to manage the accumulating clutter. They had no room for things that would be outgrown in a few years. I didn't understand this as a child. Our apartment was very small, only two bedrooms and a continuous hallway that served as office, living room, dining room, and kitchen. We rented from the University like everyone in the building and everyone on the block, a kind of company town.

Now I hate toys as well. I hate the way a plastic car sits on a hardwood floor. I hate its crash of primary colors. I hate the way the plastic disobeys the laws of craftsmanship that govern the rest of the house.

I did, at one time, have a couple hundred stuffed animals: bears, wild cats, rabbits, and a few roughly sewn, soft-sided creations that were supposed to look like little girls, piled up in a hammock that hung above my bed, so that when I slept they were all resting a few feet from my face. My grandmother was the primary contributor to my stuffed animal collection. I named

them after their common names: Cottontail Rabbit, Tibetan Blue Bear, Snow Leopard, but my grandmother pressed me to be creative.

"Why not Peanut?" she asked.

But what is a peanut to a Northern Screech Owl? Nothing useful. Certainly not a name.

One evening when I got home from school, I walked into my bedroom to find the hammock hanging flaccid in the corner of my bedroom. My grandmother had snuck into the apartment during the day and collected all of the animals into black garbage bags and taken them off to the orphanage, the homeless shelter, somewhere where there were children more deserving than I was. I had outgrown them, she said. She said it many years later when I demanded an explanation.

My parents didn't buy any replacements. I would have to give them up eventually, wouldn't I? And they disliked board games very much as well, saying that they were a waste of their time, but maybe not a waste of mine. So when I came home after school, with the apartment to myself for three or four hours, I would get out the Monopoly board, set four or five pieces on Go, and start them all off. I prayed I would remain the impartial administrator of my little experiment until the game was won, and one of the little metal pieces had subjugated the others, claiming all of the property on the board for herself. But after an hour or so, I always started to like the car a little more than the ship or the shoe, and I would end up helping her, very slightly, by choosing for the other pieces to pass up what might be an advantageous property purchase even when they had enough money in the bank to buy. And later, when Hasbro updated the game, I loved the bag of money above all else.

And sometimes I would leave the board a few hours into the game and crawl into my parent's closet, shaking dust from my parent's old clothes, and suitcases, and camping

equipment, which they hadn't touched in years, and wedge myself into a corner next to their laundry hamper and slip off into a magical world of afternoon sleep and imagine that my car was continuing on around the Monopoly board without me, bending the other pieces to her capitalist will.

My parents gave me many books though, and I believed them absolutely. They were the lives that I could have if I just positioned myself correctly. Once in position, I would move to the passenger seat, and the greater story would take hold.

* * * *

My father had a book in his office. On the dust jacket, there was a black and white photo of a group of men in white shirts and thin black ties with blood streaming down their fronts. They held their hands to their chests like they'd each been shot through the heart. Or maybe they were standing in a line, and one bullet passed through all of their chests, one after the other, before they spread out to face the camera again. The whole photo was tinted red. Their ties were a deep wine color, their hair was a shade lighter, maroon like our school's gym clothes, and their blood was bright scarlet like the petals of an opium poppy. Their knuckles and their lips were the same blush color, the skin of their cheeks even lighter. And their shirts and the whites of their eyes were a pale ballerina pink.

I spent a lot of afternoons standing in front of my father's big aluminum desk, in a room that seemed impossibly large compared to the tiny apartment we shared with my mother, looking up at that book on his bookshelf. I remember my father sitting behind his desk. The sunlight streamed in behind him from windows that spanned the entire back wall, and he was staring into

the beige plastic cube that was his computer. I remember myself standing in front of him staring up at his bookshelf. He had placed the book in front of his others, with its cover facing out toward the room, like it was on display. Such a luxury, I thought, to place a book with its cover facing out.

At home we had books; we had books filling the bookshelves that lined the walls of every one of our rooms. We had a bookshelf in the kitchen that held mystery novels. We had a bookshelf in the dining room for cookbooks. We had floor to ceiling bookshelves against three walls of the living room, and half sized bookshelves under the windows that were stacked two deep with thick, hardcover academic texts; I remember Churchill's *Memoirs of the Second World War*, four, five, and six only, Zinn's *A People*'s *History of the United States*, and Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, a bottle of scotch, and my grandmother's ashes in a cardboard box.

In my bedroom I had a shelf of tall, gaunt picture books that I never touched but couldn't bring myself to throw away because of their beauty: a mint green jacket for *Make Way for Ducklings* and a cream-colored jacket covered in scratchy hand drawn figures for *The Zillionaire's Daughter.* And I had a bookshelf for children's and adolescent's novels, which I read over and over to myself, and I had a shelf for adult literature.

My parents had bookshelves on two opposing walls of their bedroom and so little room left over that their bed was always pressed flush against one shelf or the other depending on which shelf they had most recently gone to for a title. When they ran out of room on the bookshelves, before my time, they piled the books on the floors and on the chairs, but every single book was placed spine out, except if it was lucky enough to be the book on top of a pile, to

conserve space for future books and so that no single book was given an unfair advantage by showing its cover.

Out in the world, my father was an accommodating, polite man, but at work my father was a manager. He had employees. They asked him what to do, and he told them. So in this office where my father was a king, he had placed this book with its cover out for anyone to walk in and wonder at, and I spent many afternoon hours wondering at it, at the meaning behind the men who were bleeding from their hearts all in a line. And I wondered what advantage this book afforded my father when his co-workers entered his office and stood before his desk and saw it. Were they afraid?

One afternoon in seventh grade, I put the thing in my backpack and walked out. It was enormous, at least a thousand pages and large enough for me to place both of my hands spread out on the cover. I began to carry it along to school with me. And I would bring it to English class with me. I left the jacket in my locker. I wanted to bring it, but at the climactic moment of slipping the immense tome out of my backpack and into my hands and looking up and down the hallway to see who might be peaking in on me, I always lost my nerve, and I pulled the dust jacket off and left it on the top shelf of my locker where it wouldn't be crushed by my textbooks.

* * * *

That was 2001. School began the day after Labor Day. A week later it was September 11th. The first plane was between seven and eight, and when I got to my locker in the morning, my neighbor was just leaving. I don't know who she was, someone whose last name ended in L, I guess. My name was Katz. She slammed the door of her red metal locker and started to walk

away without saying hello. That was par for the course for me. But then she turned back, and she said, “By the way, did you hear there was a terrorist attack?” It sounded so casual, *by the way*, as if she were imitating the cocktail party gossip of adults.

I was silent.

“They’ve flown a plane into the World Trade Center.”

I must have nodded. I didn’t know what the World Trade Center was. And then I laughed. I was trying to match her congeniality. And at the beginning of seventh grade, terrorism was a nonsense word. She might as well have been quacking.

“That’s funny,” I said.

And then she started laughing too.

* * * *

Our school was part of the University. It began in nursery school and ended in twelfth grade for those who made it the whole way, which was almost everyone. By seventh grade, the one hundred students in our class had spent every school day together for nine years. The time in third grade when I wore my bathing suit to lunch after gym class and dropped a pair of cartoon covered days of the week themed cotton underwear, yellow for Tuesday, on the floor of the cafeteria and walked into the middle of the crowd of students forming around them howling and pointing and bent over to pick them up, and the time in fourth grade when I sat on a log in the courtyard, and scooted over to allow another girl to sit down, and stood up to find a long splinter sticking out of my ass and splotches of blood growing on my white and pink polka dot leggings, all misspeaking’s, all stained, mismatched, or cheap clothing was remembered and recorded

indelibly in the empty minds of children. And these scenes of disgrace were present in every conversation, every exchange of glances, in the way that memory is always present, like a shadow that stands beside you always even in the noon sun.

I brought the book to Ms. Green's English class, with its two-inch black spine that read in shining, red, uneven text: PLEASE KILL ME. I brought it to class and perched it on top of my slick, imitation wood grain desktop, along with all my other books, and I slid it over to the far edge of the desk so that all the other students seated in a circle around the classroom could read the red text of the title. I wanted to create the kind of ripple that takes off into a grander story line.

These students, who were at the very brink of adolescence, were not depressed, or they had no knowledge of their own depression and that of their parents. Most of them were the children of tenured academics who worked at the University and made somewhere around $200,000 a year. Their tuition was free if their parents were tenured. No one expected them to turn into anything other than another well-paid academic. And there were also about a third who were born into the top one percent, who had paid $40,000 every year since nursery school, whose parents didn't have anything to do with academia, whose parents were hedge fund managers or the heirs of large Midwestern manufacturing empires, and they were often prominent political donors, and for that reason, they would often mix with congressmen and senators at their Fourth of July barbeques. And even though I was not either of those things, everyone at school fully expected me to be nothing more than another academic, and that would have been a step up for my family, which was made up of music teachers, dental assistants, salesmen, and women.

Two days after I first brought the book to class, a boy, Jacob Kaplan, edged his chair over to mine during orchestra. He was in the viola section, and I was in the violins. It was during a break from Bach when Ms. Olson was explaining a fingering shift to the cellos. Ms. Olson was enormously pregnant at the time. To me she is always pregnant. I can't remember her any other way. She could barely reach the bridge with her bow, but she tried, for several minutes, to demonstrate a fingering shift that was so far down the neck of the cello that she had to rock up onto her swollen feet to reach it and then fall back into the chair, slamming the metal feet into the ground when she finished.

Jacob whispered in my ear, "I heard you wanted to kill yourself."

He was a handsome boy. It was that moment in preadolescence when boys are shorter than girls, when they are either pudgy or skinny, but he was none of those things. He had pale blue, deep-set eyes and a sort of penetrating stare, as I remember it, as penetrating as you can be as a twelve-year-old.

"Would you mind if I watched?" he asked.

He was known to be very intelligent, which meant a lot. And if I was a little bit smarter, I might have stared straight ahead and watched Ms. Olson struggle to connect bow to string until he edged his chair back over to the viola section.

But I wasn't smart. I was curious. I was waiting for a ripple and I said, "Sure."

* * * *

Later that day the school nurse called me into her office. She was a tall, curly haired woman, in her mid-forties, the mother of a student in the grade below us. We didn't treat her son so well. He

liked to dress up in old-fashioned clothes, turn-of-the century stuff. Earlier that year a couple boys tricked him into drinking urine. Theirs of course. They told him it was apple juice. When he realized what he was drinking, he spit the urine up all over the ruffled collar of his white shirt. I laughed about that. Much later, in high school, he accidentally emailed the entire sophomore class photos of his girlfriend naked, her hips rigged up with a clear blue silicon strap on. It looked medium sized. I wouldn't have known. They had met in model UN. They were the two stars of the club. They were beating Exeter, Choate, all those private schools out east.

I had always wondered about the nurse, if she looked at the students who came into her office who had been cruel to her son, and if she relished pouring rubbing alcohol over their scrapes when she could have used Neosporin, or if she refused them an aspirin when they complained of a headache.

When I arrived in her office, she was sitting behind a stack of files with one, mine, splayed open across the top. She asked me to sit, and I sat. Without picking her eyes up from the file, she asked me how I was, and how was school going this year, and how was I feeling about myself and getting along with the other students.

"And how is everything at home?"

I said it was fine.

"Are you getting along with your parents?"

I said yes. My mom was almost never home. She worked as a nurse at the University Hospital until around eleven or twelve every night. My father and I would pick her up in the car, and we'd say a quick goodnight before she went to bed. On her days off, she went to doctor's appointments. She had three or four doctors out in the suburbs, and she was on a lot of pills, I noticed that, enough to have one of those day-of-the week boxes for pills that sick people have.

When she was home, she stayed in her room watching television, or she said she had a headache, and she lay in bed with the lights out.

The nurse nodded and pursed her lips into a frown, her eyebrows huddling together in a cluster that said *I am empathizing with you*. I'm sure she spent long hours in her office practicing. "I have just had a call from your mother," she said. "And I recommended to her that you see a therapist. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes," I said.

* * * *

My mother started sending me to therapy at age eight. It was something her mother's family had been doing with their women for generations all the way back to Germany and the advent of psychoanalysis. It was always a woman thing for my family just as it had been back then. After her sister's suicide at twenty-three and the suspicious death of her maternal grandmother at age seventy, they continued the practice. I'm not sure why. I guess they felt that if they didn't, more daughters would die. My mother sent me to a woman, not a therapist, but a social worker, and I began thinking about my psyche. It seemed to me that it was some unconscious part of my brain that didn't necessarily want what I wanted. I equated it to the person I was when I was asleep, when I wasn't checking myself. Or there was a force that lived somewhere in my genetic code, just waiting to pounce on my boring but healthy life. That seemed to be what my mom was afraid of. How could I figure out what my psyche wanted? It was a lot to think about.

My mother had other reasons for wanting me in therapy, though. I was afraid of life after death. I was afraid of heaven, afraid of hell, but I didn't completely believe in either. On the

nights when I managed to fall asleep, I would wake up screaming from a dream about drifting untethered through blank space, not dead, not alive, just nothing, but still conscious. And I tried to believe in heaven for my father who was devout, but I couldn't quite get there. Hell was too absurd. My father was a good Protestant boy. He grew up in rural Indiana.

When I woke up screaming from one of my dreams, my father would drive me up and down Lake Shore Drive, humming along to the atonal music that was on the student radio station at two in the morning, and eventually I would fall back asleep.

The social worker my mother sent me to was good with kids. That was her tag line. I never heard my mom talk about her, with her friends or with my grandparents, without following up her name with, "She's good with kids."

I went to her office on the northside every Tuesday with my father as if it were a weekly father-daughter excursion. I always remember it in the winter with snow on the grass and ice on the sidewalks, and my father and I would huddle under the heat lamps at the L stations, our breath making momentary clouds in the air, his big, mine little. It must have been summer or even spring some of the times, but I only remember winter. Once we got on the train, the brown line, I begged my father, repeating in a whisper a request to let me skip the appointment, crying noiselessly. With each stop my heart banged a little harder against my rib cage. I wasn't dumb. No matter how many times my mother said that therapy was perfectly normal, I knew that they had identified some sort of defect in me. I knew it from the way my mom cried when she talked about it. And I knew it from the way my father acted on the train. He didn't understand what it was to have mental illness somewhere behind you in your ancestry, hoping to grab hold of you, as my mother, and her mother, and her mother did. He didn't understand the terrible inevitability

of it. He would have preferred to send me to Sunday school, or maybe he would have preferred to send me away altogether, but he wasn't going to go against my mother.

That train ride was the worst part. That was where the real work was done. I cried. I begged my father. I watched him frown about it. If we never went to the actual appointment, maybe he wouldn't have to frown about it anymore. Maybe he could go back to smiling. I confronted my fear on that train, my new fear of therapy not my fear of the afterlife. And I made it off the train able to walk into the social worker's waiting room. And of course in the waiting room, I might cry again if I saw another patient, another fucked-up eight year old, but only out of shame.

Once I was inside the social worker's office, she asked me what I would like to do that day. Would I like to play a game? I would like to play games, to have someone to play with, and so we played Checkers and Connect Four, which were very boring, and we played chess sometimes, which, I suspect, neither of us knew anything about because I could usually win. She was a mostly silent opponent. She was in her fifties, older than my parents. She had dyed her hair dark brown, but it showed gray at the edges. She wore a lot of make-up, foundation, eyeliner, clumpy mascara, lipstick and lip liner, and all of it cracked when she smiled. All the new lines on her face made her look so happy.

"Would you like to be red or black today?"

"Red." And after an hour, I walked out of her brown carpeted office feeling very calm and very warm in my stomach. My father would take me to get pizza at the restaurant next door, and we would sit in silence until the thin, rubbery pie arrived and we could jam it into our mouths in continued silence. And then I had a week of waiting for the horrible train ride again.

* * * *

"Yes," I said. Did I know what that was? The school nurse must have thought I was a very stupid seventh grader. My eyes began to water, and I knew I might cry if I had to stay any longer. "Can I go now, please?"

"One more thing," she said. "Your mother says your family has a history with this stuff."

"Yes," I said. "Can I have my note?"

"Do you know what I mean by that?" She put on her concerned mask again, double strength.

"Can I have my note please?"

She looked at me for a long time. Then she pulled out her pad and signed her name, and past her hand, in the back room where the nurse kept a few hospital cots, sitting on a cot in the dark room, holding a book on her lap, poking her head out of the shadow to stare at me, was a girl with chubby cheeks, pale gray glasses, and long, straight brown hair that was almost black. It was Ricky.

11/11

Ricky,

I texted the intern on Wednesday morning saying that I wouldn't be coming in to the office. She responded that no one else bothered to come in either, not the office manager, none the scientists or the other graduate students, and not even Jack, who is deputy director. And furthermore no one else bothered texting. I guess Jack might be on island at the outpost right now. He's probably happier out there. We had a meeting scheduled this morning, but nobody showed up. I imagine we're all in our rooms, curled up in bed absorbing the election results. The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) may not exist next week. I don't know. I suppose you can be relatively confident in the sciences that your coworkers share your political beliefs with some variance about third party candidates and the rare religious believer.

I'm not sure about the intern, though. She's rural. She's from here, from Canton, Mississippi, where CGS is located, a town of fifteen hundred. Jack found her at Mississippi State where he teaches a class once a week.

She's a sweet girl. That's what people say about girls her age. Wants to be helpful. You would like her. She would worship you. She has a happy, round face. Sometimes I look at her and I see how her face will fall away under the eyes and at the jowls when she makes it to middle age, if she makes it. Her hair is a sort of non-color between red and purple and black and brown. Dyed too many times, I assume. Dyed too many times before she's even 20. Do you remember when I dyed my hair the first time? I was twenty-two. After I bleached it, it fell out for months. I thought I was dying when I had just begun to live.

It almost makes me feel hopeful when I think about the intern coming up to Jack after lecture and telling him she wanted to intern at CGS. It's funny. From here she will have an excellent view of her town's slow sublimation. She will learn every minute detail. She will look at it from every angle. She will anticipate its coming for months and months. Most people would want to distance themselves. Maybe she just has a crush.

And there's something nice about her driving here from Mississippi State on a day when everyone else, salaried people with benefits, felt it was their civil right not to. You remember when we used to be interns? It was just another thing making us feel worthless. It's so easy to slip into the role of someone you once would have despised. You know that.

She came to the bar last night. I took the ferry out. It's somebody's little motor boat that they use to carry people back and forth across the wetlands from the road, but we call it the ferry. When I got inside, only the East Coast was reporting. Florida was still up in the air. It was 49.7% blue with 30% of precincts reporting. Everyone from CGS was still on their first or second round, paired off flirting with each other barely watching the television, confident that things would go our way. I don't know how these people are still so stimulated by each other. They live in the same house. They work in the same office. You'd think they would have gotten all that out of the way by now. You'd think there'd be no tension left. Maybe it's just something to do. Maybe it was a special night.

All the other televisions in the bar were turned to a sports game. In here it is always a mix of oil men, fishermen, and us. The other side keeps its distance. We keep ours as well. They are not all one or the other, these men. They have watched the water rising and the storms longer than us. It effects their bottom line. But they don't watch the votes coming in. Whoever they voted for or if they voted at all, for them it's not a horserace. It's a foregone conclusion.

The intern walked in and sat down with me at our empty table. I asked her what she wanted and she said, "A vodka cranberry."

The bartender gave me a funny look when I ordered, but he poured it. Everyone else was drinking whiskey or beer. I set it down, and I asked her, "Why did you want to work with us anyway?"

She produced this dirty old sock and set it on the table. She reached her hand inside and pulled out a blue-gray egg with black speckles. "It's a tern," she said.

"I found it on top of one of the dunes stuck in the grass."

I picked it up and I said, "But why did you really want to work here?" Because I thought I knew.

And she said, "I want to save my town."

I nodded. I didn't tell her that on every single one of our projections, even if this election had gone our way, and we got all the funding we needed, and the EPA got all the funding they needed, and even if the entire world stopped producing carbon emissions tomorrow, Canton will be outside the seawall. No one is going to save Canton, not scientists, not public officials. It's like we're meeting in this middle ground where we all agree that the people living there are too stupid to be protected, that they should have left ten years ago, and that we're okay with letting them be the first climate casualties in the continental US. I made a note to lock her out of the five year projections when I could get back on the server. She'll figure it out eventually if she keeps working at the center though.

By the time Jack got there, Ohio had gone red and North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan were all up for grabs. "I guess it's over," he said.

"I don't believe that. You shouldn't believe that," I said. He's a bit of a pessimist. He would just say realistic I guess. I still haven't learned to be realistic.

He shook his head. "It's over," he said, and he gulped down his beer.

That's when people began doing shots. I would have wanted tequila if it had been good news, but Florida never turned blue, not even for a second.

I couldn't find Jack at the end of the night, so I went home with a townie, a man who lived right on the edge of the bayou. He took me back to my car in his boat the next morning.

I've been staying very close to my bed the entire day, only peeking out to hobble over to the kitchen and grab a beer. I had forgotten what it's like to be hungry and drunk all day. It's almost a comfort. It reminds me of us hanging around the Park Slope apartment drinking sparkling wine and forgetting to eat (or maybe we just couldn't afford it), and going for walks around the neighborhood in those months after college.

I managed to tell the intern to produce a water report and send it through to Washington, probably to a desk that's already vacant.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You probably didn't even vote. You're like those oil men. You couldn't give a damn.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 2

When I was in seventh grade, I wanted to be a junkie. It was my Dad's fault. My father's book, *Please Kill Me*, turned out to be about New York City punk. I didn't just bring it around with me for show. I needed to read it. It was all interviews: VU, The Ramones, The New York Dolls, Television, all of those and many others. I read it, but it took me months. I liked the pictures in the middle though, full of beautiful, thin people. They looked like they didn't care about anything. It made them bulletproof. I didn't want to be the women. They were all groupies except for Patti Smith and Debbie Harry. Their best bet was to have a child with a famous man, but mostly terrible things happened to them. They died of overdosing on whatever, of AIDS, of alcohol poisoning, of living on the street and being too poor to feed themselves, of being raped and left to die, of being robbed and left to die. They all died alone. No one bothered remembering them, not the men they attached themselves to and not anybody else either. I guess I remembered them then, and I guess I am remembering them now. They could get pregnant. That was always an out.

As I read, I understood that my dad wanted to be one of these people as well. He was born in 1958, and he had just missed out on that generation of music; he was fully New Wave when he came of age, and having missed out, he could pretend he would have been one of them if he'd only had the chance. It was only being born to late that kept him from it.

I started reading the book, and I stopped being scared, dreaming of the nothingness of life after death, and I started dreaming about bringing myself to the edge of death. I woke up. I went to school. At night I pretended I was dying. I started dreaming about being a junkie. And so every night after I went to sleep, I found myself in a burned-out warehouse on a filthy mattress, cooking heroine with a candle and a spoon. Everyone around was straight out of that book, vague and skinny, wearing black and playing instruments or just standing around. This was 2001; the opioid epidemic was a long way away. These people looked romantic. My dad must have thought so too. And now my dad sat behind his big particle board desk every day and stared at his computer screen. And then he came home, and he put my mom to bed, and he had his one glass of wine, and that was it.

I had some experience with opiates already. I did a report in fifth grade. We all had to choose a pretty racy topic because my teacher, Mr. Johnson, was an old hippy. That's what we called him: old hippy. And he would laugh. He loved it. He wanted us to learn about everything that was bad about the world before we had to face that kind of thing ourselves. He had white hair and a white beard. I thought he was seventy or eighty, but he could have been fifty. When you're ten, you think everyone over thirty is impossibly old. Mr. Johnson made us do a final project about something bad, which to us was sex and drugs. I used to really believe that not having sex and not doing drugs would make you a good person. I made it part of my prayers

every night. I promise to never have sex. I promise to never do drugs. I promise not to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes. For my project, I picked drugs. I could not pick sex.

My parents were still having sex. I thought I was one of the only kids like that. Most of the parents were divorced. If they were together, they always seemed to hate each other. When I tore myself from my warm bed to walk to the bathroom in darkness, I could hear them through their bedroom door, and I would freeze and stare into the dust that collected in the grooves of the clumped, white paint, listening to their sighs and the creaking of their old spring mattress. And once I heard it, I couldn't stop hearing it even when I was back in my room. It could have been the apartment. It was so small that everyone heard everything, but it could have just been my brain unwilling to stop playing the sound over and over.

One girl, Eve, did a report on female circumcision. Eve had platinum blond hair that was always cut into a bone straight bob. She used to wear those wrap around ballerina skirts to school with her leotard still on, and she would make a big show of going into the bathroom to change into her jeans, like she wanted to make sure that we all knew she was a ballerina, as if it wasn't already obvious from looking at her. She looked exactly like Olivia Newton John from *Grease* (before the makeover). She had the same haircut. And she had these foam platform sandals in pale blue from Old Navy that I also had, but they looked different on her, and when I saw she had them, I didn't dare wear mine to school. I just wore them around my bedroom. I was not an Eve. Nobody in that class was prepared for her project. I don't think any of us knew how to prepare. I didn't even know what a clitoris was. I don't think I was alone in that.

I should have known because my mom was always trying to talk to me about sex at the dinner table. She would lean forward and say, "Honey, your father and I just want you to be safe." Like she was straight out of a teen pregnancy commercial. But I would just drop my fork

and walk away, sometimes walk right out of the apartment door and down the stairs to the street. My father never stopped me. I'm sure he was relieved.

And once, when my mom was dropping me off at sleep-away camp, a French immersion camp in North Dakota, she bent down to hug me and whispered in my ear, "I put a box of condoms in your suitcase just in case." And I, just barely able to access the definition of a condom at the very edge of my consciousness, felt all the skin on my head start to burn red, and I stared out at the camp not looking at my mother, pretending to be totally alone with the steeply peaked roof of the cafeteria building and the matching cabins that dotted the gradual hill that led down to the lake. Everything was blue and yellow in the afternoon light. Counselors in shorts and T-shirts were tearing down banners that said, *Jesus is my Light* or *God is Good to ME*, and replacing them with banners that read *Paris, Lyon, Port-au-Prince, Dakar,* and other French and Francophone cities. And I tugged my suitcase out of her hand and walked away without a word. I was eleven.

Later that night I snuck out of my cabin and walked down to a clump of willows that grew along the lake. I ducked under the curtain of leaves and walked to the shore. I took out the box of condoms. They were called: Durex Extra Safe. I tore open the cardboard box, and I pulled out the entire folded pack, and threw the whole long thing into the lake. They sat floating on the surface for a couple of minutes and then began to drift back into shore with the tide. I walked down to the edge of the water, picked them back up, dripping, folded them up so tightly that they fit in my curled fist, and walked back up to my cabin. That was the only transgressive thing I did all summer. Of course, my counselor, Sylvie, found them in my bag the next morning. They were still wet and they smelled like the lake. She could barely touch them. She pinched the top corner of the top condom package between her thumb and her forefinger, and she pulled them up

out of my bag, and the entire roll was unfolding, so it just grew longer and longer as she pulled them up out of my bag like some sort of magic trick she was performing for the rest of the cabin. She was probably only sixteen. She walked me straight to the camp dean, and then a bald man named Bastien, his chosen French name, who spoke French with a Midwestern accent, accused me of trying to have sex at camp. He had to say it in French. That was the rule.

He kept asking me, "*Pourquoi est-ce que tu les as?*" (Why do you have them?) *"Pour forniquer?"* (To fornicate?) "*Est-ce que tu essayes forniquer?"* (Are you trying to fornicate?) Over and over.

But I didn't know the verb *forniquer*, so I had to say, "*Je ne veux pas faire l'amour."* (I don't want to make love.) "*Je ne veux pas faire l'amour*."

My mother didn't give up though. Not long after I returned from summer camp, she told me that she had purchased another box of condoms to keep in the linen closet. We always left the doors of linen closet open because it was too packed with towels and sheets and various bath gels and lotions to close, so the box sat it plain view on the shelf right in front of the bed sheets where I, and even my father, would have to see it almost every day. And sometimes two of us or three of us would see it at the same time. She told me that she was not keeping count. She would not betray my trust that way, she said. It was not that she feared I was having sex; it was that she was certain I was. But I counted them. They were dwindling. Then they disappeared. And then my mother's diaphragm appeared on the shelf in the shower.

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There wasn't a single noise from the audience during Eve's project. I just tried to keep my eyes open while she stood at the chalkboard and taped glossy eight and a half by eleven photographs onto the blackboard and pointed to hanging bits of flesh. "Here are the minor and major labiums," she said.

And Mr. Johnson corrected her. "Labia, Eve, Latin plural, labia, carry on."

I think we were all very impressed. Mr. Johnson was very proud. He kept nodding and nodding and clapping and clapping for what seemed like thirty seconds, and he clapped her on the back so hard she nearly fell over. She left school after fifth grade. After that we didn't have any more perfect blondes.

But in fifth grade we weren't all entirely innocent either. I remember this one girl, Janet. Janet gave this new guy a blow job in the fifth-grade hallway. It was the constant refrain of that year: did you hear that Janet gave a blow job in the fifth-grade hallway?

The fifth-grade hallway was on the third floor of the middle school, and it had these two lounges that overlooked the courtyard on the opposite side of the hallway from all the fifth-grade classrooms. There was burgundy colored carpet that looked nineties to me, not that I would really know. The nineties were something we all talked about a lot. Having just left them behind, we all cherished them. There were banks of windows on three of the walls. I think that's where it happened. Janet was in sixth grade at the time, and she decided to use that hallway because it was deserted in the afternoons after school was over, but I'm sure the fifth graders knew what went on.

The middle school was the only place I had ever seen carpet. My friends certainly didn't have carpeted floors; they all had hard wood, sometimes covered in a lot of rugs but still the real thing underneath. Nowhere else in the school was there carpet. The rest of the school was in this

neo-gothic building that was built in the late nineteenth century at the same time as the rest of the University. It was four stories tall, gray stone, with a terra cotta roof and towers rising out of it every two hundred feet, each culminating in a stone cross. It looked like Carcassonne. It took up an entire city block.

The inside was gothic vaults, ceramic floors, and wide limestone stairways with flowery ironwork and shiny mahogany hand rails. But the high school looked like it was built in the fifties, brutalist. The ceilings were shorter and the floors were a nasty red-brown, polka-dotted laminate. They were made of one of those mid-century composites I can never identify, and the tiles looked dull, almost soft, but they were totally unforgiving if you fell down on them. And the middle school was perfectly of our era: dark carpets, fluorescent lighting, long walls of windows and stainless steel everywhere.

Janet wasn't so bad. I remember this one time in the eighth grade when we were all on lunch period, and we were sitting around in the hallway, and Janet had worn this Red Sox shirt to school because she had just returned from a trip to Boston with her family. The shirt was red with a blue B on the front, ribbed cotton with a little bit of stretch, so it really clung to her body, which was very developed for middle school. She had these great big breasts, maybe double Ds, maybe even Es, but her waist was tiny. I remember boys used to put their hands around her tiny waist to see if they could touch their fingers together at the thumb and the middle finger, and they always could. I guess it was an endorsement of their hand size as much as it was her waist. The shirt had snaps all the way up the front, maybe twenty or thirty snaps. At the beginning of lunchtime, a boy named Michael started following her around trying to get a hold of her shirt. And then more boys joined in, following Janet around trying to unsnap her shirt. She was very calm and flirty about it. She skipped around the room just outside of their reach, laughing to

herself like she found the whole thing really funny. Then the girls started joining in with the boys following Janet around and trying to grab onto her shirt. Then this one girl, one of Janet's best friends, pushed her down on the ground, and everyone caught up and everyone got a hand on the shirt because it was so stretchy and ripped it open snap by snap. Then everyone stopped laughing, stopped talking altogether, and they were all looking around at each other because they knew they had really crossed some line now. Nobody was really looking at Janet who was lying on the ground in a teal, silk bra looking up at everybody like a cornered animal. And then Janet saved the day by starting to laugh. She buttoned up her shirt snap by snap, got up from the ground, and walked out of the crowd and down the hall into the bathroom, laughing all the way. But we didn't expect anything less from Janet. She was every teacher's favorite student. In many rooms, she was the smartest kid in the room, but she wasn't a jerk about it. She liked to include people in the conversation, make them feel smart. There was nobody like her. She was a slut with substance. That's what we would have said about her. She was really a hero. I think she's a sociologist now.

When I turned around and pulled myself out of the crowd, there was Ricky again, standing in the doorway that led into the high school and watching all of us. I knew her as I knew all my classmates; I knew their faces. I could tell you some of the clothes they liked to wear. Maybe I could tell you who their best friends were and how those friendships broke apart and reformed with other people, other social groups, but I hadn't spoken to her even once in the nine years we had been going to school together.

She was not pretty. In the eighth grade, almost no one was. There were a couple of girls who had matured. Their bodies swelled and narrowed like a woman's should. They had waists and breasts and asses. Their faces were lean. But they were rare. Most of us fell into two

categories: either we had the bodies of little boys or we were covered in a lumpy layer of fat that blunted all the angles of our bones and turned us into shapeless skin sacs. Because we were entering puberty, that layer of fat was impossible to lose. It was like our hormones had locked us underground inside a bunker of our own flesh.

Ricky was the second type. She wore a pair of small, purple, wire-rimmed glasses. Her hair was cut in a rigid librarian's bob, and her mother dressed her in cargo pants that were too long and pooled at her ankles, and oversized long sleeved T-shirts that made her look even shorter and bulkier than she was.

That day she was wearing a blue long sleeve shirt, and affixed to the chest was a soft plastic chamber that was filled with blue gel and silver glitter. Swimming in the gel were metallic figures of different types of fishes and seahorses, all in miniature, all sitting on the shelf of her fatty chest.

I walked up to her and said, "*The Rainbow Fish*."

"Yeah," she said. "Do you know the story of the rainbow fish?" she said.

"Yes," I said. I had the book on my picture book shelf.

She started to tell a story in a low voice. "I had a rainbow-fish-themed birthday party once. I was seven years old. I invited all of the kids in my second-grade class over to my apartment. When they came in the door, my mother told them to sit on the floor. My mother put *Swan Lake* on the turntable. I came out in a shining silver leotard. And velcroed onto the leotard were scales made of shiny fabric in teal, and blue, and purple, and silver, and I began to dance. And as I danced, I ripped the scales from my costume and gave them away to my classmates until each classmate had a scale and I had none, and then I danced back out of the room."

"Wow, that's a nice birthday party," I said. I had not been invited. That kind of hurt even though it was six years ago.

"They each walked up to me and gave me a gift wrapped in paper. What a beautiful party this is, they said. I blew out the candles on the cake. And at the end of the party, as each little boy and little girl was walking out of the apartment with his or her parent, I stood on the threshold of holding out my hand. And one by one, I asked them to give me back the scale I had given them."

"And?"

"And they did," she said.

"Were they upset?" I said.

"Some of them cried, but they gave me my scales back."

"That's not really the point of *The Rainbow Fish*," I said.

"No," she said. "The rainbow fish was stupid."

"What about your shirt?" I looked down at her shirt. "Can I touch it?" I said.

"Sure," she said.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "I want you to touch it."

I pressed my fingers into the gel patch in her shirt and watched the glittering fishes swim from one side of the patch to the other side. And I pressed my fingers to the other side and watched them swim back. "I'm sorry," I said, laughing.

"This shirt is a piece of shit my mother makes me wear. Everyone touches it. Soon I will never have to wear it again."

I saw something staring out at me from underneath the glasses and the baggy clothes, and the formless pre-teenage body, something shining out from behind her eyes. There's something

teachers are always saying in yoga classes. They always tell you, “Let your heart shine forth!” I never really understood what that meant, but if anyone could do it, it was Ricky.

11/21

Ricky,

Jack's coming home today. I know because he texted asking me if I drank all of his beer. I had to say yes. I was a little worried, I guess. The day after the election, I walked over to the men's side of the house, and I found his room empty. His car was gone too. I thought he would have come home after the bar. He's been gone for over ten days. His shift at the outpost ended several days ago.

We all live here in Canton, in an old farmhouse on the edge of town. It's a Victorian: lavender with moss colored accents. There's a barn, a greenhouse that CGS constructed, a garden where I grow some palms and citrus trees, a big field, and a bayou with a corridor of oaks running along it. Behind that is the swamp. It's been so long since somebody's cut the grass that the house looks abandoned, rising out of the field like an apparition with its faded purple and green paint. At dawn and at dusk it looks as if it would disappear if you took your eyes off of it for a second. We aren't required to live here, but most of us do because it's free, and we aren't paid very much, and because it's beautiful in its own way. We have six scientists living and working here, including Jack and six graduate students, including me. The office is a fifteen-minute drive away in a mostly abandoned industrial park. Here in Canton we are about seventy miles from the other part of our operation, the outpost, which is a weather station on an island in southeastern Louisiana. Well, we call it an island, but if you looked at a map, you'd think it was solid ground. Just another example of what climate change is doing to this place.

The grad students mostly man the outpost, although some of the scientists enjoy going down there. The foundation of the outpost is made from blocks of buoyant plastic, so ideally, it

should float in a storm, but it could drift if the tracks holding it in place broke. Or it could capsize. Inside, it's small. There's the machine room, which takes the most space by far, a small lounge with a couple sofas and a television, a kitchen with a table, a bathroom where we can take navy showers (thirty seconds with the running water), and one bedroom on the second floor. When there's two people, one of us usually sleeps on the couch. It's nice though. There's floor to ceiling windows in every room, and you can get lost staring out at the Gulf all day watching the oil platforms. Some of them are so close that you can see men walking around on deck. We are so much like the oil workers even though we think we're their opposites. We can all go a little crazy staring out at the Gulf. Outside on the deck, I planted a little vegetable garden, though sometimes the others don't water it. Sometimes they splash salt water on it, which, from a bunch of scientists, is just unfathomable. We've got the generators on the roof. And behind the building, there's the marshes, which are all shredded up because the oil companies have been cutting canals through the swamp for decades. Well, it's not swamp anymore. Some grasses that can take the brackish water still grow, but there are no trees. I can't think of the marshes as land. They are the promise of more subsidence in the years, or even months to come. They are a promise that this island will be ocean soon enough.

I used to go to the outpost with Jack on his shifts (he would not come with me on mine), but now the intern comes with me sometimes. That girl has latched onto me. She filled a bowl with sand from the dunes and put the tern egg in it. She set it under an LED in the machine room, so we don't have to be bothered in our sleep. She even bought a little feather duster that she sets over the thing to simulate a mother bird.

The subsidence of the wetlands is so obvious out there, you can see it day by day, but when Jack and I come out here alone, it's like a retreat at the very edge of the world. At night the

lights from the oil platforms ring the horizon like Christmas lights. I always think, some people would pay for this quiet. But that's all over now.

This morning at dawn when I was walking around the garden barefoot, trying to feel some sort of human connection with the earth (I keep thinking this will make me better, but maybe it will make me worse), I saw Betty, one of the scientists, sitting in the dirt under the willow, and even from behind I could tell she was crying. I'm sure we're all breaking out into tears all the time. That's the life of climate scientists, or anyone whose job it is to warn people of impending disaster. Things just get worse and worse. We're devastated. I wouldn't be surprised if we all just gave up and left.

Betty was curled up in a ball rocking back and forth. (Remember what that yoga teacher used to say: make a rocking chair out of yourself. You don't need anything but your own body.) She was making a rocking chair out of herself. Her head was on her knees, and I could hear little sobs emitting from her ball of a body. I was going to walk away, but she sensed me or something, and she uncurled herself and stood up all at once.

"Do you know where Jack is?" I said. "He's been gone for ten days."

"That's just his way," she said and nodded like I was supposed to leave.

I walked back down toward the bayou.

And then I wondered, how many of these other women, other scientists, had he had before me? Betty is older than me, but not by much. She studies tidal ecosystems. The only thing that made me any different than the rest of them was that I was the newest member of the collective, the newest house resident and scientifically and professionally, an ingénue. Soon enough someone else will come (Maybe they already have.), and then I will be like Betty, having to buy my own beer.

Jack texted me back a picture of a whale lying in on the beach. "I need you down on Barataria Bay." I guess he was driving around the Louisiana coast. He dropped a pin for me. "Be here by three," he wrote.

I wish you would write back Ricky. Hasn't it been long enough?

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 3

At the end of eighth grade, our entire class went on a field trip to Washington D.C. This was our reward for making it to the very brink of high school. Our focus in humanities that year was government. We had a blond teacher; I can't remember her name or her face, just an empty head of honey blonde hair cut in layers and a row of straight bangs. We worked for the last month of the year to memorize the constitution, and if we passed a test at the end of that year, we were invited on the trip to the capital to tour all of the buildings and the monuments that proved our government was the greatest one in the world and the first one to get it all right.

We took a couple of coach buses all the way from Chicago to D.C., starting around six in the morning. We were really slumming it considering the amount of money most of these kids had, but it was only a year after September 11th, and parents were nervous. Some were so nervous they didn't send their kids at all. I'm sure none of them had ever needed to take a long drive in their entire lives, their families preferring to fly to the Caribbean or to Europe on winter

and summer breaks. The whole thing smelled like McDonalds breakfast sandwiches from Indiana all the way to D.C.

We must have watched more than five movies in a row, and one of the movies we watched was *Dante's Peak,* a thriller with Pierce Brosnan from the late nineties about this volcano erupting somewhere in a made up Pacific Northwest town. At one point Pierce Brosnan and Linda Hamilton are trying to get two children down the mountain in an orange Jeep, and lava is flowing down all over the road, and volcanic rock is falling from the sky, and they can't drive anymore because they get to this lake, which they decide they have to cross in a metal boat that's just sitting right there, pulled up on the shore. So they put the kids in the boat, and there's also the kids' grandmother, and as they cross the lake, they realize that the water has turned to acid from volcanic activity. Someone actually says, "Acid dissolves metal." The acidic lake is getting into the bottom of the boat, and the boat is going to sink, so the grandmother climbs out and pushes the boat in front of her so that the boat makes it to the other shore before the kids get burned.

By that age I had a friend, Julie, a best friend because I didn't have many others. Julie and I lived next door. Sometime during seventh grade, there was a rash of afternoon home invasions in our neighborhood, and our parents decided that Julie and I should walk home and spend the afternoons together until any of our parents, who were all working full time, got home. We always went to her place. I'd watch her play the piano. We'd talk about people at school. I couldn't let her come to my house. Everything was dusty. There were piles of books and papers everywhere. We could barely see the TV when we were sitting on the couch.

Julie and I started the trip sitting together, but when I woke up in Ohio, Julie had found a boyfriend in the seat in front ours. They were making out. It was sloppy. They were novices.

When Pierce Brosnan pushed the boat up on the shore, he pulled the grandmother out of the water even though she didn't want to come, and the camera panned down, and both her legs were dissolving, and what was left was a couple of bloody stumps. They should have left her in the water to let her keep some sort of dignity. She could have bubbled away out of existence.

I had to watch the grandmother say goodbye to her grandchildren over Julie and her boyfriend's heads, which were attached at the mouth and struggling against each other back and forth in the partition between the seats. Julie had made me a participant in their sexual congress. And that's what always happens with kids and adolescents. No act is ever private. There's always a good friend somewhere nearby who has to watch or at least listen.

The drive was eleven hours plus two hours of sitting in traffic outside D.C. When we made it to the city, our driver pulled into a huge shopping mall parking lot that was packed with cars. Our chaperones told us that we were having dinner in the mall before we got to the hotel. We exited the bus one by one, and as we stepped off the stairway onto the solid ground of the parking lot, we were each handed twenty dollars to buy ourselves dinner. I also had two hundred dollars from my parents in case something happened. But in the case of the something that they were talking about, which must have been another terrorist attack, who knows what two hundred dollars would have done for me. But even with all our days scheduled to the minute and all of our chaperones, this felt like a real chance for something, a real moment for me to find out what I was, what I would be beyond my parent's supervision. As a child, I was almost never asked what I wanted to do, and even if I was asked, it was only a formality. And even if I answered, I was just trying to figure out how to please the asker.

So I wandered into the strange mall by myself ready to make my own decisions. It was unlike any mall I'd been to in the Midwest. The stores were all the same size with signs in the same old fashioned font and the same red and brown color scheme. No one store was privileged over another. They faced us as we walked in, on four separate floors, extending back into space like pigeon holes. On each level there were wrought iron railings with tracery underneath. It made you feel like you were outside at the entrance to a train station. And I was entirely alone walking from shop to shop, knowing I would be buying something with my two hundred dollars, something other than the oversized jeans my grandmother bought me at the Goodwill. I started to have a feeling I'd never had before, a feeling of self-possession, of authority over how I looked, and because it was so new, it came on as a physical sensation, a warmth on the surface of my skin, before I knew what I was thinking. I started to picture myself as more than a blob of tissue wrapped in sagging fabric, something with a waist, something with legs that were more than just vehicles.

* * * *

Earlier that year, I had traveled with my family to the Green Bay Packer Hall of Fame at Lambo Field. My father was a big fan. It was December and twenty below, but there was no snow on the streets, just an icy wind and stains on the sidewalks from when the last snow retreated. I walked the museum with my parents. It was no more than a hallway with blue carpet. There were old black and white photos of Curly Lambeau and Vince Lombardi and Packers teams of the past. The big climax was the three Super Bowl trophies, which were stainless steel, a football on top of a triangular pedestal, lit with a blue light as if the football was being beamed down to earth by

an alien spacecraft. After we passed through the hallway into the gift shop area, there was a photo booth. I asked my mom for two dollars, and I went inside to take a picture. There were a couple options for backgrounds. One was a picture of the stadium with the heading *number one fan*. One was a picture of Paris. And one was a teenage girl (I thought she was a teenager, but she was probably an adult). She was skinny, in a low-cut shirt, wearing what must have been a push-up bra. Her hair was dark and straight, and she wore glassy plum-colored lip gloss and dark eyeliner. She looked down into the camera with a serious pout in her thin lips. Behind her was a pink field, and dotted around the field were groups of cartoon chicks. The heading was *hot chicks*. I chose the *hot chicks* background. I tilted my face down like the other girl, trying to pout my lips. I saw myself on screen with my matted hair and my oversized, tie-dyed Green Bay Packers Super Bowl 32 T-shirt, and in the five seconds before the camera started flashing, I opened my eyes wider, I tipped my face farther forward, I pulled the neckline of my T-shirt as far as I could on my chest until I could see my knobby collar bones, and I pressed my lips together even harder.

Later that night, looking at the picture, thinking about the difference between myself with my dirty hair and my unformed face and my ugly T-shirt, and the woman in the sample background, the weight of what I had been trying to do hit me, that by taking the *hot chicks* background, I was trying to kill off the child that I was. But there was a way I could undo what I'd done. Sobbing, I brought the picture to my mother and confessed. Then we walked down to the hotel lobby and chucked it into the fire they had going in the fireplace.

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I walked the mall alone for what felt like an hour until I found an Express. This was a store where shirts were twenty or thirty dollars and jeans were at least fifty or sixty. This was not my grandmother's K-Mart or Kohl's. There were shiny red G-strings sitting unabashed on a table near the front of the store, completely visible from the window. And so I bought myself a pair of the smallest pair of jeans they had, which left red welts on my hips when I wore them, and a pink tank top that gripped my waist, and one shining G-string in a pale blue. The hardest part was paying. I couldn't look the cashier in the eye, even though she was a girl a couple years older than me. There was a huge distance between us, made up of foundation, and thick black eyeliner, and chunky mascara, and a deep red V-neck that showed off a pair of small round breasts, but I passed my money over the glass counter all the same. And I walked into the bathroom to put on my new uniform.

* * * *

The food court was nothing special. The basement of this fancy east coast mall was like any other dirty suburban shopping center. Julie and her new boyfriend were eating at the Panda Express. She had moved her chair right next to his, so that he could wrap his arm around her shoulders. They were hunched over a plate chicken like one indistinct organism.

Julie's boyfriend looked me up and down in my new uniform and said, "You almost missed lunch." He grabbed the plate of Orange Chicken from under Julie, and he pushed it across the table toward me. "Here, have my chicken," he said. "I'm done with it."

"No thanks." I said. I had never seen Orange Chicken before. I didn't want it. It looked like Cheetos that had been covered in clear nail polish.

“Really, you should have it,” he said. “You didn’t eat anything.”

He was staring so pointedly at me that I had to lift my gaze from his face and look at Julie instead. “I’m not hungry,” I said.

“If you don’t eat it, you have a problem,” he said.

He seemed like one of those guys that liked to tell women what to do. I didn’t know what he was talking about, and I wanted to leave. “Actually,” I said. “My family doesn’t eat chicken.”

Julie laughed and grabbed another piece. “You eat chicken all the time,” she said, without looking up.

The new boyfriend shook his head. “Look at her, Julie. Can’t you see she has a problem?”

Julie looked and me and then looked at him. “Would you please eat a piece?” Julie said.

“Why do you care what I eat?” I said.

“Because you should eat,” he said.

“I should eat? You don’t even know me,” I said. I looked at Julie. She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Sit down. Please,” she said, scratching at the table.

I turned to walk away. Sitting at the next table, listening to the whole thing, was Jacob Kaplan. He nodded to me as I walked out of the food court.

When we got back on the bus, I sat in the back near the bathroom. It smelled like urine, but no one was going to try to sit with me. I watched Julie and her boyfriend board the bus. I watched Julie look up and down the aisle, looking for my eyes or the top of my head, and I slumped down into my seat and pressed my face into the orange plush fabric of the seat in front of me, peering through the crack between the window and the seat, waiting for the pink sleeve of

Julie's shirt to come to a rest on the armrest several rows ahead to confirm that she'd finished looking for me. She sat down without raising an alarm with the chaperones. I guess she didn't care if I was left behind.

I heard the sound of my bag, which was occupying the seat next to me, hitting the floor of the bus and felt my seat shudder as someone sat down next to me.

"I assume this isn't taken."

I didn't look up.

"Are you hiding?"

"Yes," I said, in a low voice.

"Not from me, I hope."

I swiveled my head toward the aisle and found Jacob Kaplan sitting in the seat next to me.

I forced a smile. "Why would I hide from you?"

"You've got nothing to fear from me," he said, smiling like an adult, like someone who's in control, I thought, although I couldn't say of what.

I tried to flirt. "Don't I?" I said, as the bus began to pull away from the curb. I sat up in my seat.

"So, what I don't understand is: if you are planning to kill yourself, why do you care how you look?"

I must have looked blank.

"You should have eaten the chicken. That was a big mistake," he said.

I shook my head. "What?"

"Now you're an eating disorder. That's a pretty boring stance for a teenage girl."

“I’m not a teenage girl yet,” I said. The bus was pulling out of the parking lot and onto a street. “At least it’s something.”

He leaned his face toward mine examining it like he was looking for the source of something.

“What do you want?”

“We’re all here on this bus. We can’t go anywhere else.” He turned his eyes back to the front of the bus. “I’m just sitting.”

“There are plenty of open seats, and it smells back here,” I said. “I thought you were on the other bus, anyway.”

“That’s really sweet of you to notice which bus I’m on,” he said. “It’s true, I snuck back here just to sit with you.” He looked me up and down. “I feel like I haven’t seen you since that day in orchestra last year. I hope you haven’t forgotten your promise.” He mimed slashing his wrists.

And I began to feel two sorts of things at once: as if a small opening was forming in my chest even as I tensed all of the muscles in my body trying to hold it closed, and second, a gagging sensation that began in the back of my throat and grew until I placed my hand over my mouth.

“You know, Marion, there’s nothing wrong with Orange Chicken. It’s a great American creation.” He got up, picked up my back pack, and laid it down gingerly on the seat next to me. It seemed like a very stupid choice right then, pink and orange flowers splattered on a navy field, a pathetic attempt at femininity. He nodded goodbye and walked back toward the front of the bus and sat down next to his girlfriend. I don’t remember which one it was. He was dating a new one almost every month.

I don't remember very much more of that trip. I remember the names of the places we went: the Smithsonian, Monticello, the Air and Space Museum, the Library of Congress, and Mt. Vernon. I remember that I wore my new clothes every day. Sometimes I wore a yellow windbreaker over them. Sometimes I didn't. And I remember the new girl. She was strange, even stranger than me. She came to us that year in eighth grade. She was attractive, if you didn't know her I guess. All the parts were in the right place: breasts where there should have been breasts, narrowing under the breasts, tightish stomach, biggish ass, large green eyes, freckles under the eyes, brown hair, not a pretty color but straight at least, that was all that mattered in 2002, but she always seemed to be crying in class or complaining to a teacher that she wasn't being treated well by the other students and, though she had made her way between a few friend groups so far, they always got sick of her after a few weeks. She ran through everybody in our grade when she still had that new kid flush of possibility to her, and now no one could really stand to spend any time with her, but Julie couldn't bear being mean to anyone.

Julie, Ricky, the new girl, and I were rooming in the same hotel room. Julie and I requested each other, and when it came time to write another name on the request form, I put down Ricky. It was an experiment. I never thought that I'd get her. I thought she'd be rooming with her regular friends.

Ricky had been hearing from a lot of different people about the new girl's legs. She told Julie and me, and then we saw them for ourselves. It was cold most of the time in Chicago, and it was cold inside the school with the air conditioning, but June in Washington D.C. was hot. The new girl chose to wear shorts on our trip to Mt. Vernon. Her legs were pale and fleshy like her face, which wasn't unlike a lot of the other girls, except that from her ankle to her upper thigh,

covering her white skin and her freckles was a matted layer of brown hair, like a boy, not a man, but an adolescent boy's legs.

That night, Ricky asked Julie and me to join her in the bathroom. She pulled out a disposable Bic razor with a single blade, and said, "I got this from the front desk. We are going to have to make her shave her legs."

"Why?" Julie said.

"Because it reflects badly on all of us when she wears those shorts around," Ricky said.

"How?" Julie said. "They aren't our legs."

"Because we are rooming together--" Ricky said.

"When people think of her, they'll think of us," I said. I could barely get it out, I was so excited. It felt like the right answer. And I was in the market for a new friend. I didn't want to enter high school without one. I couldn't see myself forgiving Julie. The Orange Chicken boyfriend was a line in the sand, even if she didn't know it.

"Exactly," said Ricky.

"I mean, I guess," Julie said.

We asked the new girl to join us in the bathroom.

"For girl talk," Ricky said. When Ricky closed the door behind her. "You tell her."

I pointed to her legs with the razor. "You're going to have to shave them."

It was as if she was already crying, as if she'd known this was coming for her all along. She was against the bathroom door, hunching over and melting like the icing on a piece of cake that's been left in the rain.

"Don't worry," Julie said, patting her arm. "It won't hurt."

"Take off your shorts," Ricky said.

"No," she said. "Please."

"Are you going to wear shorts again?" Ricky said, bending over to look into her crumpled face.

"I don't have anything else," she said, inhaling loudly.

"You're going to have to grow up some time," I said, a line I'd heard on TV.

"Yes," they said, nodding in agreement. "You're going to have to grow up."

"And what if I don't want to?" the new girl said.

"You should just do it," I said. "It's easy."

"You'll feel better," Julie said, stroking her arm

"We don't want to be seen with you," Ricky said. "You won't be able to stay here tonight." She was ruthless, even as a girl.

"Here," said Julie, taking the razor from Ricky's outstretched hand. "We'll help you."

The new girl took off her shorts and stepped into the bath. We ran the shower over her legs, taking turns with the razor starting with her calves. She wailed louder and louder like a newborn baby.

Julie had the razor, and when she drew it away from the new girl's calf, a stream of blood appeared and started flowing down her shin. "I don't want to do this," Julie said. "Come on, Marion," she said. "Let's go."

I shook my head.

"I'm going on a walk," Julie said, and she slammed the door of the bathroom.

After every stroke the razor was matted with hair, and we had to walk over to the sink to wash it out, dropping hairy clumps of soap on the floor. The new girl continued to cry, sitting in the tub with her legs up on the sides. An hour went by. Her legs were crisscrossed with thin cuts,

out of which poured twiggy streams of bright red blood, but they were hair free. We left the bathroom. She stayed. We felt pretty good about ourselves. We'd done a nice thing.

Julie came back later. She had a bag of Cheetos. She offered them to the new girl through the door. She took the Cheetos, but she wouldn't let Julie in the bathroom.

We got a call on the hotel room phone. Ricky picked it up.

"Hello. It's for you," she said, pointing at me. She handed me the phone.

I took it from her and listened.

"Marion, is this Marion?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"It's Jacob."

I mouthed his name to Julie and Ricky's waiting faces. "What do you want?"

"I want you, I want you to meet me in the lobby at midnight."

"No," I said, without thinking about it.

"Please come," he said. "I just want to talk."

I hung up. We debated it. I was very against. Julie was strongly for. Ricky was mildly for. They dressed me up in their best clothes, the ones they had brought in case an opportunity like this presented itself to them: a denim mini skirt, a red spaghetti strapped tank top with a lace border, and a pair of leather boots with wooden heels.

"These were my mom's in the 70s," Julie said, stroking the leather. A peace offering.

"Don't have sex with him," Ricky said.

"I don't think that's what this is about," I said.

"Just don't," she said.

“Why shouldn’t she?” Julie brushed my hair behind my ear and swiped some blush across my cheek.

“He’ll lose interest,” Ricky said.

“What interest?” I said.

“You should do whatever your heart knows in right,” Julie said, and she walked me to do door.

The shoes were too big for me. I did my best to walk steadily out of the elevator into the lobby with my feet always sliding forward into the toe. There was no one in the lobby when I got there, just a couple of old women huddled together, drinking out of cocktail glasses. I sat in an armchair and stared at the automatic doors at the entrance. I had been stupid. He was only trying to embarrass me. I pressed my naked arms to my sides. I was sweating. I could hear my heart beating. Every second was terrible. I will wait five minutes, and then I will go, I said to myself. Maybe I said it out loud. I waited twenty.

I was about to get up and leave when he grabbed my hand. “Come on,” he whispered in my ear. He led me outside and asked an attendant for a cab. “Jefferson Monument,” he said when we got into the back seat. “You okay?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, and then we were silent. I watched the buildings outside the cab window, all the places we had been earlier in the week that I’d already forgotten. I wondered why I was in this cab. Jacob told me what to do, and I did it. Ricky and Julie told me what to do, and I did it.

When we got out, he led me around the structure to the steps that led down to the river. We didn’t go inside to see the man. We sat on the steps.

“Have we been here yet?” I said. I couldn’t remember.

“No. Do you like it?” he said.

"Sure." We couldn't see the river, but we could hear it moving at the bottom of the steps.

"I brought this," he pulled a flask out of his pocket. "It's scotch. I stole it from my dad." He handed it to me.

I took a sip and coughed.

"My father's kind of a drunk," he said, smiling.

"Mine's a Christian," I said.

"That's worse," he said, laughing. "My sister's a Catholic. I know."

"Yeah."

"She has this horrible Catholic fiancé too, and I keep telling them that we're Jewish, but…" he trailed off.

The conversation went like that. He kept telling me about his sister's fiancé, his grandfather, and the people that lived down the street from him. He didn't need me to talk. He was making me play the role of a sympathetic female. I was good at it.He was saying things, and I was absorbing them without judgement like a friendly pillow that you whisper your dreams into at night. Maybe he was testing out ideas and funny lines, things he could use again with his girlfriend or one of his other friends. The scotch burned my throat. I drank more of it. I knew I wasn't going to be able to talk anyway. It was one of those times when drinking made me shut up.

In the cab back, he said, "You should come back with me to my room. The other guys are gone. We can be alone. I promise."

It was the first time in the conversation that I'd been asked to contribute, so I said, "No, thank you."

That night I slept with Ricky in the queen-sized hotel bed. Julie slept in the other bed. The new girl slept in the tub.

11/23

Ricky,

This is what's happened here over the last few days. Around 1:00 PM on the 21st, the intern and I drove down to where Jack told me to meet him on Barataria Bay. We brought one of the boats in the trailer. When we saw his white F150 on the side of the road, we pulled over. His truck is actually an electric vehicle. The government commissioned five of them for us. We take turns driving them, and most of us have bikes. Near where he'd pulled off, there was a path leading toward the water. We launched the boat and headed toward where he'd dropped the pin. We were on the water for about five minutes before we came up on a little island, no more than a sandbar, really. Jack was sitting cross legged on the beach, drinking a Highlife. The intern said she hoped he had one for her. We got out of the boat and dragged it up on the beach. Jack didn't even say hello. He said, "Follow me." And he walked up over the crest of the island to the other side. Lying on its side in a pool of sandy water was an orca. The intern ran over to it and reached her hand up to stroke its dorsal fin. Jack broke into a run and grabbed her, pulling them both down into the sand. "Don't touch it," he said. "For fuck's sake. I thought that was obvious."

I walked up to the beast. When I was right beside it, it rose so high above me, its body blocked the sun. I walked around to the other side of the creature, toward the water, and as I turned the corner around its head, I saw that the lower abdomen was decomposing. There were gaping holes in the skin as if it was being eaten from the inside. All around the openings, the flesh was swollen and purple. The stench was incredible. I put my hand over my mouth and nose.

"What am I looking at?" I said, pointing to an area of flesh that was especially shredded from decomposition.

"The womb," the intern said. She was standing next to the fluke. "She was pregnant."

"How do you know that?" I said, turning around to face her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "See for yourself."

I walked over to the intern. "Where's the kid?" I said.

The flesh in front of us shivered. A low whistle filled the air. The intern hid behind me, pressing her head into my back.

"What is that?" I yelled at Jack. "I thought it was dead."

"It's basically dead," he said.

"What animal would eat the womb of a pregnant orca?" I said. "A shark?"

"Orcas would probably kill a shark. They hunt in packs, you know." The intern reached out her hand to the tail, and I slapped it down.

"Don't touch it." I said.

Jack walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Not an animal. Did you bring the camera? Take pictures," he said, without waiting for response. Jack pointed to the water that was pooled around the creature. "I need you to take samples," he said.

We worked in silence. I took out my pipette and gathered samples of the water. The intern took out the camera and carefully photographed the whale inch by inch, and Jack cut off a pieces of flesh from the edges of the rotting abdominal cavity and sealed them in biohazard bags.

That night I didn't sleep at all. Jack climbed into my bed the next morning and started kissing my neck. He's always frisky in the morning. "Betty's gone," he said. "You should get an email from the main office soon enough."

"Gone where?" I said.

"I don't know," he said. "But before the election, she was drinking with me and the others in the dining room, and she said that she would have to kill herself if we didn't win. She was joking though. I mean nobody thought it would go this way."

"You did," I said.

He put his hands on my hips and pulled my body until it was flush with his.

Ricky, do you remember when I told you my mother tried to kill herself? We were sophomores in high school. She told me about it the next day. She was standing in the dining room, looking out the window and she said, "Yesterday, I tried to kill myself." She was so casual. It was like she was telling me what we were eating for dinner.

And you said, "She shouldn't have told you that. Mothers should never do something like that."

Betty was childless. She always said her work was her progeny. They cut her funding right after the election, so I guess her work was dead in a sense. She worked with tidal ecosystems. Her room was the one directly next to mine. I was lying in bed, staring at the wall that we shared with each other. How many times had I heard her deep husky voice singing along to Joni Mitchell songs? I told Jack to get out.

You know, Ricky, when my mom tried to kill herself, she said the only thing keeping her here, on earth, was her child: me. That was a lot.

That night we all had a couple drinks in honor of Betty. We were all amazingly drunk. I told the intern not to drive home and to sleep in my room. I slept in Betty's. I wasn't creeped out. I was too drunk to be scared. I think she's really dead because I didn't feel like I was alone in there. In the morning I woke up with the sunrise (Her room has an east facing window.), and I

found her journal in the desk. She had all of these detailed drawings of crustaceans and kelp and coral. There was a drawing of starfish. Under it she'd written: my kids will never see a starfish.

If Betty was serious about dying, why did she wait so long? It's like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but what was that shoe? Why didn't she just do it the day after the election? I hope Betty is just driving west on I-10. I hope she's going to California or Oregon, somewhere where there's still people willing to listen to her.

When I first drove down from the main office in Nashville to begin working at CGS, we all drove into New Orleans for a weekend. We were sitting on the roof porch of a beer garden that overlooks the port. It was that time of afternoon when the sun shines directly in your eyes. I was sitting there pretending to listen to everyone talking with my eyes almost completely closed. Betty walked up, blocking the sun. She had long, dark, straight brown hair, light brown skin, and green eyes. She was very small. Her clothes seemed to stand there all on their own, under their own musculature while she moved around independently inside of them. She smoked Winstons, bathed in light like a Madonna. You would have liked her face, Ricky, but you would have said she was weak.

Ricky, am I the new Betty, childless as I am?

Marion

Chapter 4

I did not go back to Jacob's room with him that night, but it was known throughout the school that I did. I came to his hotel room, barefoot in my T-shirt and pajama shorts. I wasn't wearing a bra. The points of my nipples were visible through my T-shirt. His roommates for the night, three more boys from my class, were hiding, with or without my knowledge, (different people told it differently), in the bathroom. They confirmed, having watched the entire saga through a crack in the door, that I smiled when Jacob offered me his dick to suck, that we had sex in two positions (Jacob lasted a long time for a teenage boy), and that the hair on my pelvis was shaved into a neat little landing strip. They examined the bedsheet later and confirmed that I was not a virgin. There was only a slick pool of semen left on the bed.

* * * *

Slut was a word that we loved to say. We loved the hiss of the S-L. We loved the gut punch of the U-T. We loved the flick of the tongue at the end.

The rumor didn't die over summer break. Every day of freshman year, as I walked through the halls, girls would lean over each other, whispering in each other's ears like a coil of snakes all hissing the word. Slut, slut, slut, slut. And then one of them would spit something audible in my direction, "I heard she begged for it," or something similar, as I walked through the group of lockers they had chosen to make their turf. Sometimes these girls were younger than me. And boys would extricate themselves from their bands of five or six and walk up to me, and ask, did I want to come over tonight because their parents weren't home, or did I want to come with them to their car at lunch, or did I want to meet them in the third-floor janitor's closet before third period, and then return to their group, causing a ripple of laughter like the quivering of a block of Jello. I did not see their faces when they spoke to me. I saw their clothes. The girls all wore boot cut Seven Jeans and white tees. It was our uniform. All schools have uniforms, even if they aren't mandated by the administration; that's something Ricky told me. Ours was boot-cut Seven Jeans, which retailed for about one hundred and fifty dollars, white V-neck T-shirts, North Face Jackets, and Birkenstocks. The whole outfit would set you back four hundred and sixty dollars. This outfit showed us who was on top. The outfit was as awesome as the people themselves. I didn't know the people at all beyond the outfit. I started to cultivate a fear of Seven Jeans. Fear of North Face fleeces. Fear of Birkenstocks. Fear of Juicy Couture sweat suits. Fear of mini Louis Vuitton purses and so on. The jeans were always low-rise. Low-rise was in style. Displaying the lower stomach under the belly button proved sexual fitness. I remember this girl had a pair of low-rise jeans that had drawstrings in the waistline that she could pull to make the waistline even lower. You could see about four inches of her lower belly with the drawstring

pulled all the way. I bet her mom bought them for her. I can just seem them walking through Bloomingdales and spotting them on the manikin. It didn't matter. She had a body like a knife. Nothing sensual about it.

* * * *

A slut was given certain latitudes. A slut could open doors where others were barred.

I tried to lean into my new reputation. I quit telling God I wouldn't drink or smoke. I started smoking all the time, weed and cigarettes, in the park behind the Museum of Science and Industry during lunch. I met a couple girls there, who were also smoking. They went to my school, but they were new. They lived in the suburbs. We would buy sour apple gin at a deli and drive to the lake and drink it. They both had fake IDs, but they probably didn't need them. My new friends didn't know the old me. And they liked what I had become. They lived in the southeastern suburbs, so they would come into Hyde Park on the train every Friday night and stay with me until Sunday. My parents didn't care. Friends were a good sign. We would stay in my room all together, drinking and talking until around eleven p.m. or midnight, and then we'd sneak out to go to a party. You could barely call it sneaking. We walked out the front door. My parents didn't have any reason to believe we would be anywhere else.

At these parties my classmates would turn into the inverse of their academically ambitious, bookish daytime selves. Sometimes, walking in the door, I wondered who among us would even survive four years of high school? There was always a lot of shots. There was always plenty of cocaine. There was always a table of Oxycodone and Vicodin and other prescription drugs. There was always Ecstasy. There was always Ambien. These kids would get high on

whatever they could find in their parents' medicine cabinets. There were kids drinking until they collapsed. There were kids getting taken away on stretchers. I'm sure there were rapes. And very often at these parties, the girls I came with would get drunk, or play drunk, I'm not sure which, and skulk upstairs with some boy. These houses always had lots of bedrooms. They were usually three or four or five stories tall, plenty of room for everyone. And I would sometimes walk upstairs, where all the hallways were cloaked in darkness, and I would feel like I was walking into a horror movie, walking right into the jaws of some monster. And I would halfheartedly try to find them, so we could go home, and I could go to sleep and dream of better things. I walked through the hallways in the dark, and in each room, the silhouettes of someone on their knees before other someone else or someone lying on top of another someone or behind someone, heads bobbing and bodies jerking and crashing together in the horrible graceless way of drunk kids figuring out how to have sex. I learned to look for my friends' clothing, their shirt or their skirt on the floor instead of their faces. Television had taught me that sex was just two people rolling over one another. Maybe you have a tank top on. Maybe it's even a bra and underwear. Just roll across the bed and then get up with your hair all messed up. That's how they showed it on *Friends*. I didn't want to see whatever this was. And I could usually find somewhere very out-of-the-way, a laundry room, or a walk-in closet, where I could sit with my eyes closed until they were done. Sometimes I found them asleep, and around three or four or five in the morning I'd wake them up, and we'd walk back to my apartment and sneak back in through the fire escape. We really didn't have to sneak. We just liked doing it. The next morning they were so happy, making conversation with my parents at breakfast. They were free.

* * * *

A straight male slut was a playboy, not a fuckboy. We didn't have the term fuckboy. We didn't have a way to shame a straight man for sleeping around.

Jacob benefitted from our encounter as only boys can. He was in the prime of his life. He dated four different girls in ninth grade. Three of them were very rich. Two of them were very beautiful. One of them was Ricky.

Jacob was part of a group of rich kids who went around spending money almost every night. They had elaborate parties, filled with expensive booze. They went out to dinner at fancy restaurants all the time. They were always hanging out at the University club where women were only allowed if they were accompanied by a man. But they weren't even men. They were thirteen.

* * * *

"Hey, slut," was a greeting. Or "hey sluts," when greeting more than one person. These sluts were like Janet, proud. A proud slut could be more than just a slut. A slut could be a slut and a good person. A slut could be a slut and at the top of their class. A slut could be of two minds. But if a slut was ashamed, she could only be a slut.

I was a good student, but not the best student in any class. I always ended up just missing the top spot by one or two students, and so I always sat in the plush seats of the university lecture hall at our end-of-the-year awards ceremony catching and re-catching my breath and feeling my heart quicken as each teacher walked to the podium to announce the award for their discipline, only to feel it slowing back down to a normal pace. None of us wanted to be engaged in

something that we didn't excel at absolutely. This is what comes from being told you are the brightest kids around over and over. But I never excelled absolutely at any subject, and it seemed obvious that I would never excel absolutely at any area of my life.

Ricky was a different type. She got Cs and Ds in math, and her father would be furious and scream at her mother, and her mother would cry and get her a tutor, but she would still get Cs and Ds. And when she talked about it, it was math that was worthless, not her. And in other things, in art, she was greater than anyone else.

Many of the winners of these awards won them on the loudness of their mouths, but there were some real geniuses, and one of them was Jacob. I remember the burn I used to feel in my cheeks and my forehead when he spoke in European History. The teacher would sometimes clap for him after he finished speaking. He understood things that the rest of us, with our unformed minds, could not understand or even recognize the vacancy where that understanding should have been. I don't think I said one word to him in public. Talking to him would only remind people of our encounter, and then they would make the inevitable unflattering comparison between the two of us: his gain in social capital and my loss. After what we'd been through, I couldn't speak to him at all. Conversation at all was difficult to pull off, but I wasn't helped by the fact that I couldn't stand to be in the same room with Jacob. My imagining of my peers' imaginings of what happened between us every time they saw us in the same room kept me sitting as far away from Jacob as I possibly could, leaving public spaces like the cafeteria line when I saw him—this hardly mattered since I hated to eat anyway—and transferring out of certain classes when it was possible to transfer. I transferred from gymnastics, where we spent an hour jumping up and down on a trampoline, to long distance running, where we ran ourselves to

exhaustion in a Chicago November until we ended up throwing up in the provided red metal bucket, our vomit mixing with that of over thirty other people.

Jacob didn't want to talk to me either. I thought he thought I was disgusting, having taken my slutty mantle and worn it without protest.

I hated him in a simple way where I could say, "I hate Jacob Kaplan," to myself before going to bed or in the mirror in the morning or when I walked through the halls of our school. But I knew that we were connected now. When I thought of myself, I thought of him. When other people thought of me, they thought of him. Well, other people didn't really think of me. I had this one English teacher. He was a very passionate guy. He was in his seventies, about to retire, and when he taught *Romeo and Juliet*, he was always saying, "Hate and love are two sides of the same coin." But when he said it, he would pound his fist into the desk on the stresses like he really had to get it through to us, like there was no way we were going to believe it. HATE and LOVE are TWO SIDES of the SAME COIN. Well that was perfectly clear to me already. I didn't need to be told.

* * * *

A slut could be like a mother. A slut could be a source of comfort.

I joined the high school theatre. It was a sort of refuge for misfits like myself, but it was also known for throwing the parties with the most drugs, with the most sex, with the most students getting carried away on stretchers. One history teacher was so adamant in her disapproval of the theatre that she suggested the school abolish drama altogether. And when that

didn't happen, she gave all of us a slip of paper with her cell phone number, and told us to call her anytime we were at a party, and she would come a take us away from there.

The theatre was a hierarchy too, but it was based on age, not on how much money people had. There was a universal understanding that you paid your dues as a freshman and sophomore, and then you got good parts as a junior and senior. There was one girl, a senior. I don't remember her name. Let's say it was Lauren. Lauren's body had matured far beyond most of her peers. She had large unwieldy breasts, and for this all of the freshman and sophomore boys wanted her. She towered over them in stature and in sexual experience. She doled out sexual lessons at parties. She would sit in an arm chair and these little freshman and sophomore boys would approach her like penitents with their heads bowed. And they would offer her a cheap bottle of alcohol. She liked Southern Comfort. And then she would lead them upstairs by the hand one or two at a time.

Lauren was always getting the leads in plays. She was Abigail in *The Crucible.* She was Alice in *Alice in Wonderland.* She was Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But when it came time for *Our Town*, the part of Emily was given to a freshman. No one could ever remember that happening before. The theatre functioned because people paid their dues, and in their senior year, they were rewarded. But the part of Emily was given to Ricky, and Lauren had to play her mother, Mrs. Webb.

The summer between eighth grade and freshman year, Ricky lost a lot of weight on her face and her torso. Suddenly she had cheekbones, wide almond shaped eyes like the eyes of a hawk, and a flat, even shelf of a brow. And she had brown hair, almost black, that fell straight all the way to her waist. Nobody else had hair like that. She had smooth black eyebrows, thick, even lines, shading her light brown eyes. She had become beautiful. And I didn't like her for it. I read

that when plastic surgeons reshape a woman's jaw, they are going for an egg-shape. A steep jaw. Ricky had that. All natural. She had it all along. It was just hiding. And so I wanted to be around her, hoping that some of her elegance and beauty would rub off on me. We weren't really friends. We talked to each other when we were in the same room. That's all.

Ricky and I used to sit in the costume shop of the theater, making clothes until late at night. It was a big room with twenty-foot ceilings, and old couches with the upholstery all ripped up, and piles of rugs, and lighting equipment, and different fabrics from different plays draped everywhere. These were the only times I saw her. Ricky made her own yellow gown for *Our Town* with a princess seam at the waist and a pleated skirt. She was talented already.

One evening I had to measure her waist, so she could make the pattern for the yellow dress. "Twenty-six," I said.

"I want to see if you're skinnier than me," she said, taking the tape measure and pushing me in front of the mirror. She wrapped the tape measure around my waist. "Twenty-six inches."

"I wish I was twenty-five," I said.

"I wish I was twenty-three," she said. "You're taller than me," she said. "If you lost thirty pounds, you could be a model."

"But you're prettier than I am," I said. After that we measured every evening, not just our waists, but our thighs and our hips.

I had taken what Jacob said to heart. *You are an eating disorder.* But I was kind of a sloppy anorexic. I wasn't very goal oriented. I was just winging it. I tried not to eat most days. Sometimes I failed. Sometimes I was spectacularly successful. Once I didn't let a crumb of food past my lips for seven whole days and nights. But periods like that were hard to pull off when I was living with my parents. Food was everywhere. Our refrigerator was stuffed. My parents

were always making me eat snacks in the afternoon. I had to fight to escape it. Ricky and I talked about those things. She would read tabloids and find out how many calories a certain supermodel or a certain actress ate every day, and she would report back to me. And then we'd try out these new diets, reporting back to each other every afternoon when we saw each other in the costume shop.

And once another girl left her pair of Seven Jeans in the costume shop. I put them on and walked back and forth in front of the big full length mirror.

"You should buy a pair of those," Ricky said. "You look good."

"My parents would never buy me a pair of Seven Jeans," I said.

"Mine either," she said. And then about five minutes later she said, "What do you think about half a pair? We could share."

"How will we share," I said.

"What about one week on, one week off."

I did have a couple hundred dollars. Anorexia was a boon that way. All I ever ordered at lunch was a diet Coke, and I pocketed the rest of the money. So that weekend we took the Red Line to the Nordstrom on Michigan Avenue and purchased a pair of Seven Jeans. I handed the cashier a bunch of ones and fives, and she counted them slowly on top of the counter. She wrapped the jeans in tissue paper, and Ricky put them carefully into her backpack, and we went home.

Anorexia felt good in other ways too. It was like what Simone Weil says in *Gravity and Grace*, there is only one fault: incapacity to feed on light. Having to eat three meals a day was just another way we gave up control of our lives. Eating made demands on our time. Not eating felt more free. If only we could just live on sunlight. I told Ricky that, and she liked it.

There were a lot of muggings happening in Hyde Park at that time. The head of the University Police came to our school to speak at an assembly. He was there to teach us how to be safe walking home. He wasn't in uniform. I guess he was trying to look relatable. He kept stalking back and forth on the stage repeating his mantra: *constant vigilance.* He said he always knew when someone was going to come at him. Why? He made us yell it out: constant vigilance.

And then a girl asked him what she should do if she wasn't vigilant, and she was attacked.

He laughed to himself. He said, "Well, to borrow a theory from the animal kingdom, there are a couple of theories about what do when you're attacked by a predator: you can run, you can fight, and if you can't do any of those things, you can play dead, but the best thing you can do for yourself is to never get in that situation in the first place. *Constant vigilance*."

Later when we were in the costume shop, I asked Ricky, "Why was he talking to us about getting attacked by animals?"

"I don't know," Ricky said, "but I loved his mantra."

Constant vigilance, that was Ricky's method for combating food. Always know beforehand when you are going to be confronted with food and have a way out.

And once when we were exchanging pants in the costume shop, Jacob walked in. He was playing George in *Our Town*. He didn't turn to leave, he just stared at us.

I hid myself under a piece of fabric.

"So you're a lesbian now?" Jacob said, as he walked toward me.

I looked at Ricky for a response.

And then Ricky walked up to him in only her underwear and T-shirt, and she reached up and brushed a piece of plaster from his hair. "You had this in your hair," she said, holding it up to his eye.

"Thanks." He looked confused. He walked out of the room.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm going to date him," she said.

"But he ruined my life." As I said it, I realized I was assuming that we were friends, that she cared whether he ruined my life or not. "And he has a girlfriend."

"Maybe I'm doing it for you. Don't worry, I'm just going to ride him to the top," she said.

"Ride him?"

"Socially, I mean," she said.

"And then?" I said.

"I'll dump him when I make it."

I did want her to destroy him, to make him fall in love with her and then dump him. I knew she could do it. "Make it to where?"

"Make it to where I'm popular." She fixed her hair in the mirror.

"I didn't think you cared about that," I said, pulling our pants back on.

"Is there anything else to care about? This is what there is in high school. There's no point in not trying."

"Well, what if you like him?"

"I do like him," she said.

"Well, what if you fall in love with him?" I said.

She looked at me in the mirror and shook her head. “Seriously, Marion. Love isn’t real.” She pulled on her pants and walked out of the room.

A few days later Jacob dumped his girlfriend and started dating Ricky.

* * * *

My mom found me a new psychologist in the spring term of my Freshman year. The woman worked out of an office in Oak Park in a building that looked like an old-fashioned mall, what a mall would have looked like back in the good old days when Oak Park was still just a small town an hour outside of the city. The floors were beige tile flecked with darker brown. It seemed like the kind of place where you might hire a film noir private detective with its rainwater glass doors with the names painted in gold and brown. I always went around 7:00 p.m. when all the other establishments—doctors, lawyers, shops that only sold expensive stationary and wrapping paper—were closed for the night. At that time I could imagine that the place had been abandoned for decades.

My new psychologist seemed very young. I’m sure she was in her thirties, but to me she looked twenty. She was not old enough to tell me what to do. She was a specialist in eating disorders, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, drug stuff, all of the adolescent girl stuff, she said.

I had read descriptions of people in novels, people with severe faces. Severe was the word that popped into my mind as soon as I saw her. Her eyes were large, close together, and rimmed in thick, black liquid liner. Her nose was long, straight, and sharp. And her ears were too long. She looked like a child whose face had been stretched vertically. Her hair was in tightly coiled curls, slick with gel, a dark brown that been lightened with bleach, but the brown still

showed around the edges. And whenever she made a statement that required emotion, four deep ravines would form on her forehead. She tried to combat the severity of her face with her clothes. She was dressed in a pair of tight flared jeans and a fuchsia scooped necked shirt.

As she stepped forward to shake my hand, she bent her knees like she was shaking the hand of a child. I offered her a limp hand in return.

"Our first session," she announced, "will be with your mom in the room."

My mother smiled.

Mixed in with the standard gray couch, gray armchair, metal and glass coffee table, and several brown and green lamps that produced dim circles of light, were items that were supposed to soften the psychologist, to give patients the idea that the psychologist was just like a them, a girl barely out of adolescence herself. There was a corner of the room that was carpeted with a fuchsia rag rug on top of which sat two throw pillows, yellow and shaped like lemons, and a blue bean bag chair. On the surrounding walls were black and white posters of men and women kissing on the cobblestone streets of Paris. One hung slightly askew, which made me think that she had pulled them out of a closet entirely for my benefit.

We each made our way to one of the pieces of furniture to sit. The psychologist chose her desk chair, no doubt emphasizing her dominance, my mother chose the couch, hoping that I would sit there with her, and I chose the grey armchair that faced the psychologist directly. It was important to confront her straight on. My strategy was to deny everything, so that nothing that would be called progress by these two could take place. I would have to go to war with this woman.

"Why don't you start with your name," she said, swiveling her chair to face me with a clipboard and a pen in hand.

"It's written right there," I said, without breaking eye contact.

She wrote something down on her paper.

"It's important that you tell me yourself."

"Why should I waste my breath?" I said.

My mother, whose eyes had already filled with water, said, "Her name is Marion, Marion Katz."

The psychologist turned to my mother and snapped back, "It's important that she tell me herself."

"And why is that important?" I said.

"We are not here to answer your questions. We're here to answer mine," the psychologist said.

The only things dividing me from this woman were several rites of passage: college, marriage, children. She displayed a diploma from Southern Illinois University in a wooden frame with real, glare-free museum glass, and on her desk was an 8 x 11 of herself holding a baby in her arms with an attractive brown haired man bending forward toward the camera, his arm slipped around her waist. Their little family was photographed against one of those backgrounds that was popular with school photographers in the nineties, emerald green with white bursts of light running through it. All of these things seemed like they were intended to reinforce the difference between me and her, and I wondered if, after she'd looked up on the internet *what do teenage girls like,* she went on to look up *stock father and infant son,* and went to work in Photoshop.

We had all been silent for what felt like fifteen minutes. It was upsetting my mother. Tears were pushing their way out of her eyes. “Marion, you have to talk. It won’t do you any good if you don’t talk.”

That phrase, coming from my mother, makes me angry when I think about it now because she went to two different therapists a week through most of my childhood, and must have known that it might do me some good to sit there and not talk or to sit there and wait to talk until I wanted to, and that the thing that made me most angry about the psychologist was not the office, but the fact that she allowed my mother to sit in the room when we were supposed to be discussing the most deeply submerged parts of my consciousness, parts that even I may not have understood.

“Actually she doesn’t have to talk if she doesn’t want to,” the psychologist said. But then she tried a more aggressive tact. She would say a question and follow that with what must have been thirty seconds of silence. After that she would write for thirty more seconds on her clipboard, “What is your name? What is your age? What do you hope to be right now? What do you hope to become in the next four years? Twenty years? Do you know why your parents brought you here today? Have you thought of killing yourself?” After finishing this set, she began again with, “What is your name?”

After four rounds of questioning, the psychologist let out a drawn out sigh. “Okay, let’s try something else.” She rolled her chair over to where my mother was sitting on the couch. “Julia, why don’t you tell Marion why Marion is here today?”

My mother nodded. Tears began to stream down her face in earnest. “Marion, your father and I believe that you are depressed. You are silent or rude at meal times. You lie to us about

where you go at night. And your school nurse called us a year ago and told us you were suicidal."

At this point, the session began to take on the character of an intervention. My mother was sitting on the couch listing off incidents, proof, while the psychologist sat behind her taking notes.

"You come home late at night. You are having sex, and you aren't telling me."

The psychologist cut in, "And?"

My mother took a deep breath, "And you are too skinny."

"And," the psychologist said.

"And we believe you are anorexic."

Even in this context, when that word *skinny* passed through her lips, I had to stifle a smile. Maybe I didn't succeed. I loved hearing that from my mother. It was the one thing I always wanted to hear people say about me even if they meant it to be insulting. And the psychologist made another entry on her clipboard.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" my mother asked.

I shook my head.

"Okay, you can go," the psychologist said.

"What?" I was just becoming more and more comfortable.

"Go out into the waiting room. Your mother and I have to talk." The psychologist dismissed me with a wave of her purple gel pen. "Alone."

I could hear my mother's sobs through the door as I sat in the waiting room, so I decided to walk around the building. I walked into the hallway. All the lights were off, and the hallway was taken over by a silent half-light. I walked until I found a door that was labeled: bathroom.

When I tried the doorknob, it was locked, so I waited, leaning against the wall and listening to the sound of the toilet flushing and the faucet turning on. The door opened, a man's shoes stepped into the hallway, well a boy's shoes, Sambas. I examined Jacob's body in the dim light as he turned to slowly close the door making very little noise at all. He wore a pair of chinos and a blue button up shirt. He was taller now than the last time I'd seen him close-up. He was more muscular, but not overly so. He had begun to lose some of the fat in his face around his cheekbones and his chin. His nose seemed bigger. He was not so cute as he had been, but he had acquired a seriousness that could be called adult. Instead of the familiar sinking hatred mixed with fear that I usually experienced when I heard his name mentioned in conversation, I felt light. And I began to laugh.

He looked up. "You scared me! What are you doing here?"

"I don't know. Why don't you just let me know what your story will be."

"I'm sorry," he said, looking down.

I laughed again. "I could ask you the same question."

A pair of high heels clicked towards us.

"Jacob?" a voice called out.

Jacob grabbed me by the shoulders. "She can't see you," he said. "Get in here." He thrust me through the bathroom door and closed it on us.

"Why?" I said.

He looked out the rainy glass window as if he was looking at a faraway skyline.

"Who is she?" I said.

"My mother. My mother hates you."

I turned to look at myself in the mirror, as if I could find there the source of her hatred.

"Yeah," he said, and looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. "They don't believe me when I say it's not true."

"Or you would rather nobody knew the truth," I said.

"I didn't make up that rumor," he said.

"I don't believe you."

He raised his head and looked at me in the mirror for a long time the same way he had that first time I spoke to him. "What are you," he swallowed, his voice caught in his throat. "What are you even doing here?"

"I'm sure I'm here for the same reason you are," I said.

"There are plenty of psychologists in Hyde Park."

"My mom thought I could use some space from the University. Probably see our whole grade there or their parents. And they could call me a dirty little slut just like your bitch mom."

He didn't flinch at the word. He didn't seem to mind at all.

By now the heels had reached the door to the bathroom. His mother began pounding on the door. "Jacob, what are you doing in there. It's time for your session! Jacob?"

"Your session," I repeated, in a whisper.

The pounding increased two-fold. "Are you in there with someone?"

He put his hands back on my shoulders and maneuvered me into the corner behind the door. He put his finger up to his lips, and then he opened the door. "Hi, Mom."

I could hear his mother's heels walking the length of the bathroom.

"Sounded like you were talking."

"Just to myself," he said.

“You are your father’s son, rather talk to the damn toilet--” She petered off. “Come on, she’s waiting for you.”

Her shoes hurried out of the room and down the hallway. His shoes were slower, plodding, and as he left the bathroom, he pressed his hand into the door pressing it into my nose, my breasts, and my feet.

1/15

Ricky,

I'm sorry it's been so long since I wrote you. I want to tell you what happened with the whale. I took the water samples down to the office. I looked at them under the microscope, and I found green algae. I told Jack. Green algae is only supposed to grow in fresh water, meaning there must have been fresh water in the vicinity of the whale at some point. Jack thought the nearby lakes and bayous must have overflowed in the storm surge. If his hypothesis is right, the whale was attacked by a flesh-eating bacteria that lives in warm fresh water: Necrotizing Fasciitis. It's a tropical disease. Generally, it can't survive in the United States because of the cold, but with temperatures rising, there have been cases reported in Florida. Jack was telling me that the samples of flesh he took had almost completely decomposed in the two days since he took them when the intern came in. The intern showed me and Jack a picture of the whale's abdomen.

"See this?" she said. "I think the bacteria entered her body through a tear in the vaginal wall. During childbirth." She knew all about the bacteria already. She's a smart girl.

After Betty disappeared, everyone settled. It's as if we all resolved to keep going with our separate projects, finish out our funding, and keep trying to speak out, even though no one is listening. Every morning I wake up and make scrambled eggs for the whole house. And then we sit down to breakfast with each other and discuss our work. All day at the office, I hear the clicking of computer keys.

The intern hatched the tern egg. Now we have a little tern in the green house. She lives on grasshoppers. Soon the intern will have to switch to minnows. She clipped its wings so it cannot

fly away. Most nights the intern stays here in my room. I have moved into Betty's room permanently.

Jack went to Avery Island to look at the lingering effects of the last oil spill. He was one of a crew of scientists that helped pull a 2500-square-foot tar mat out of the Gulf. After that we came back together in our way. When Betty disappeared, I didn't want to talk to him. He was just so calm about it. And I know that he's capable of outrage. When we used to go to the outpost together, and he always had his news radio or his television on every night from 5:00 p.m. until 2:00 in the morning, and he would walk back and forth across the little building yelling about how the CEO of Exxon is making $100,000 a day and how are we supposed to compete with that. Or he'd yell about something else that he couldn't fix, but he couldn't generate any type of emotion for his friend, his housemate, and his colleague who just disappeared one night. I don't know. But after I moved into Betty's room, things clicked between us again. It's as if Betty's spirit reanimated my desire for him. And I stopped going to the outpost with him as well, which makes the time we have with each other rarer.

Ricky, I wanted to come to Chicago around Christmas to see if you were there. I couldn't make it, but you wrote me a letter. Do you remember what you wrote?

> *I am back in Chicago for Christmas. Last night I am walking down the street and I hear someone calling my name. I turn and see that it's Aaron. He's the same. He's still short, but he's standing up straighter. His thin brown hair sticks to the sweat of his forehead even though it's winter. He is wearing a long black wool coat, the kind that Wall Street men wear. He wears the same glasses with the small wire frames and they're all fogged up. He's wearing Ferragamo shoes. I can tell right away. I watch the*

snowflakes hitting the leather and turning to droplets of water. He doesn't deserve those shoes.

"I thought that was you." he says.

"It is me," I say.

"Well, how are you?" he says, shaking my hand.

We have never greeted each other with a handshake before. He wants to catch up. He wants me to have a drink, one drink at the bar around the corner. I say yes because I was going there anyway to have a few drinks by myself. I try to order cheap red wine, but he insists on a special scotch. "Leave the bottle," he says, when the bartender brings the drinks over. He talks most of the time about his iron man competitions and his investment banking job. He makes money, yes, but not as much as he would like. He'll break seven figures in the next few years. "I want to make my first million by thirty," he says. "That's my goal, and I never miss a goal."

I tell him I know plenty of twenty-nine-year-olds who have already made their first million. Then I tell him I have to go.

He walks with me toward my parent's house. I am walking before him. He is trailing behind me like a dog. We walk past the apartment where his parent's live. He would invite me up if he had the keys. He grabs my arm, so I have to turn around or drag him behind me. "I don't have a bed anymore but there's a couch in the living room, which would be fine. But I don't have the keys," he says, defeated. He looks up and down the deserted street. "Or I could just bend you over right here between these two cars," he says, now smiling again. "Don't tell me you weren't thinking it. I'm supposed to get something for all those glasses of scotch."

Then you wrote:

Tell me, Marion, what do I do now?

Ricky, I want to give this letter back to you. I want to rewrite it and change the ending. I want you to have told him to go fuck himself, to have kicked him in the balls, or to have never gone out with him in the first place. When I knew you, you wouldn't have needed to ask me what to do. I wish I had been with you or I wish I was you and you were me. I wish we could switch places so that you wouldn't have to deal with the Aarons of the world.

I will be better about writing,

Marion

Chapter 5

After a few sessions, my mom let me go to therapy alone. She called the psychologist to make sure I was showing up. I was sure of that.

I was not a good patient. Sometimes we would spend the entire session in charged silence. Sometimes she would scream at me and tell me I was a liar. And my junior year, when I, like all the other kids at my school, was applying for college, she said she wouldn't let me go. "I'll tell your parents that you're not ready, and they will make you stay here."

Jacob still went to the same psychologist. His appointment was still the hour after mine, and I couldn't help thinking he kept it that way on purpose.

I started hanging around in the hallway, trying to catch a bit of what he said in session with his parents. Usually his father didn't bother coming, but when he did, his parents were easy to hear because they were screaming. I don't know why I listened in on them. Maybe it was the thrill of waiting in the dark hallway just outside of the waiting room with my ear against the wood paneling of the office door, listening not to what was going on in the next room, but the

room beyond that, just a single word, or even just the tone of a word, waiting to be found out by another doctor working late, or a janitor, or a patient. Or maybe I believed that he owed me his secrets. Or maybe I had found in myself some respect for him.

I don't know, but once, maybe a year or two after I started going there, I heard a high-pitched shriek, and then, in the same register, "Emily Marshall, can you believe that, Jake? The woman across the fucking street. You used to play in her blow-up pool." A door slammed, and Jacob's mother came running out of the waiting room, her face buried in a silk scarf. Hermes, Gucci, I couldn't tell, but it looked expensive. She walked right past where I sat on the floor and turned the corner toward the bathroom without saying a word. She was a petite woman wearing a gray suit that had grown a size too small, and as she walked, she just crumbled. Her shoulders sunk forward into a hunch. She took awkward, tender steps in her high heeled stilettos. She looked like me and my two friends when we walked through Hyde Park early in the morning after a long night of partying, and we couldn't pretend that our feet weren't killing us anymore. I could see her sliding down on to the floor, taking off her shoes and licking her stockinged feet like a cat.

I laughed, and then I felt a little sick for laughing. I hadn't eaten since the night before.

Jacob walked out of the waiting room a few minutes later. I watched him from around the corner. He looked left and right, sniffed the air, and walked off in the direction of the bathroom.

The next week, I didn't wait around. I walked straight out of the waiting room and down to the street, but he was waiting for me at the corner smoking a cigarette.

"Come get some dinner with me," he said.

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"Yeah, you are."

“Aren’t you supposed to be in session right now?” I said, turning away.

“I changed it,” he said, catching up to me.

“Why?”

“I wanted to meet you,” he said.

“And how did you know I would be here,” I said.

“I smelled your perfume,” he said, and held up a box of Marlboro Reds. He took one out and offered it to me.

I took it.

“Come on.” He took me by the hand and started off down the street.

We went to a diner a couple of blocks down. He ordered a plate of fries. I ordered coffee.

“It’s not that they are in couple’s therapy, or divorce therapy. It’s that they’ve made me sit and watch them, working out twenty years worth of problems. I wish they would just say fuck you to each other and get it over with. Is that what you wanted to hear?” he asked.

“No,” I said. I hadn’t even asked him a question. He had just offered it to the silence between us.

“No?” he said, and he picked a French Fry from his plate. “Eat this.”

I took it from him, put it in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed. I hadn’t had a French Fry in three years.

“What did you want to hear, then?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you want to hear that my father is a drunk who beats me?” he said, smiling.

“No. Is he?” I took another fry. This could get out of control very easily.

"No," he said. "Did you want to hear that my parents think I'm depressed? Did you want to hear that they think I have a sex addiction and that I like to terrorize helpless teenage girls?" He smiled again.

"I didn't want to hear anything."

"If you listen at a door, you are trying to hear something. Have more fries. My father doesn't beat me, you know. He's a nice guy. He's just a drunk. He walks around in his underwear and says weird things to my girlfriend."

"Ricky," I said.

"Yeah, you guys are friends?"

"Sort of," I said.

"And once he drove into a pole, and we had to say that I was driving." He said. "I think I'm going to order a burger. Can I get you one?"

"I hate burgers," I said.

"Okay. I'll get you a turkey sandwich. Girls like things like that."

"I guess." We were sitting in the window.

"And you?" I said.

"What?"

"Are you a drunk?"

"Not yet. And I don't have a sex addiction," he said, loudly enough for the next booth to hear him.

"That's disappointing. All of the rumored sex you've been having is a lie?"

"Yeah. I mean…" He looked down at the table. "Ricky and I haven't had sex."

"Oh." That wasn't what she told me.

"Nope," he said. "We make-out in her car sometimes."

"I don't care."

"And she blew me once."

"That's great. In the car?" I said.

"By the lakefront."

"Gross," I said, and I ate another fry.

"My father does, though, have a sex addiction, I guess. He's cheated on my mom tons of times. Way more times than she knows about. And now she's just starting to find out."

"Why are you telling me this?" I looked down at the fries. They were almost entirely gone.

Jacob nodded at the waitress. She came to our table and he ordered another plate of fries, a burger, and a turkey sandwich. "So are you going to be telling the entire school that my father cheated on my mom with Elsie's mom?"

"She's a bitch," I said.

"Elsie or her mom?"

"Both, probably," I said.

He smiled. He made a waving motion with his hand like he wanted me to continue.

"We vandalized her car once, and she yelled at me. I was high so, it was a little traumatic."

"Tell me about it."

"We were walking home from school, smoking a joint. We were across the street from your house, and Ricky and I saw Elsie's mom's Lexus."

"What did you do?"

“She had a Bush/Cheney ’04 bumper sticker. Ricky took out an Xacto knife and slashed it up.”

He nodded.

“She came out on the porch and started screaming at us.”

“What did she say?” he asked.

“I don’t know. She called us little bitches. Then she said she was calling the police.”

“And?” He looked out the window.

“And then she said if we wrote her an essay, she wouldn’t call the police.”

“And now you hate her?”

“Yeah, I hate her,” I said.

“Did you write it or did Ricky write it?” he said.

“I wrote it,” I said. “And every word was pathetic and humiliating. So how long?”

The waitress set down another plate of fries. I went for them.

He wasn’t eating. “What?”

“How long was your father cheating on her?” I asked again.

“Is that any of your business?” he said.

“It will add legitimacy to my story if I know how long. You know? For when I tell the whole school.”

“Ah, so you are going to tell?” he said.

“So you are depressed?” I said. “Me too. My mom says I am. And that horrible woman.”

He nodded. “Everybody’s depressed. Everybody’s parents are depressed. Everybody’s medicine cabinet is full of antidepressants and pain killers. You walk into any bathroom at any party, and you’ll find that out.”

“I guess I’ll have to remember that for next time.” I said. I fixed my gaze on a passing school bus. “I think you want me to tell, so you can really tell your parents off.”

“No,” he said.

“What are you going to do about it?” I said.

“What?”

“About your dad and your mom?”

“I’m going to get into Columbia’s Journalism School, and I’m going to leave and go to New York. And I’m never going to come back to Hyde Park.” He reached his hand across the table and grabbed my cup of coffee. “Hey, can I have a sip?”

“How about your mom?” I said. “Won’t she be sad?”

“My mom’s like a cockroach,” he said. “She’ll survive.”

“I can’t tell because no one would believe.” I said, taking a handful of his fries and setting them on my napkin. “Nobody believes me about anything anymore. That’s your fault.”

“I’m sorry. So are you still planning on killing yourself?” he said. “Because you look like you’ve almost succeeded.” He wrapped his fingers around my bicep, bringing his thumb and forefinger together

The waitress set down our burger and turkey sandwich.

“Here,” he said, and he pushed the plate of fries over to my side of the table. “I’m getting a milkshake. Can I get you a milkshake?”

“Chocolate,” I said. And then I got up from the table and walked to the bathroom because I knew I was about to throw up.

* * * *

Jacob and I kept meeting up. I could tell he was watching me, but I didn't care. Once, during my senior year, I saw something when I was at my job at the University Hospital, clearing out someone's office. I could tell they were important because they were in old wing of the building, and their office was expansive, with wood paneling, oriental rugs, a heavy wooden desk, and a seating area. And sitting on a pedestal in the middle of the room was a bust of a man with glasses, and on the brass plaque on the statue, it said: Jacob Kaplan. I took it. I snuck it out of the hospital in a rolling trash bin, and I put it in my trunk. I gave it to Jacob on his birthday three months later. We were sitting across from each other at our usual diner, drinking milk shakes. "That's my grandfather, Jacob Kaplan Senior." he said. "He was the head of the sociology department, and then he was president of the University. People are still dedicating buildings to him around the University. It drives my dad crazy anytime he sees one."

"So is your dad Jacob Kaplan junior?" I said. "And you are?"

"Jacob Kaplan the third. Don't tell anyone that."

* * * *

When Ricky and I were both seventeen, she dumped Jacob. I guess she thought he'd reached his social peak. She was already thoroughly enmeshed in his social circle, and she wasn't going to take a step back out of respect for him. He didn't come to school for a week. He didn't come to therapy either. He didn't really go anywhere anymore.

After that she started dating a boy named Aaron. He was a small boy, short and small, who wore glasses. His body was still covered in a layer of baby fat that folded over itself at the

insides of his elbows and his knees. Everyday he would beg her to go out with him just once. She gave in, and it was one of those mistakes that snowballed. It took her over a month to break up with him.

One day she and I were riding in the back seat of Aaron's Honda Civic. Aaron was in the driver's seat. The passenger seat was empty.

We were sitting in the back seat of the Civic passing around a joint and I was looking out the window trying not to stare at her, trying not to give away how I thought she was so beautiful, when Aaron turned left onto Lake Shore Drive and floored the gas. When I looked up at the speedometer, we were driving one hundred and twenty.

Aaron was telling us what a great car it was, his Civic. It was new. He'd just gotten the windows tinted so he could smoke weed while driving. And while he was talking he would turn his head to look at us in the back seat. He said he could probably get it to go one fifty if we wanted, did we want that?

It was nighttime, but the Drive was still crowded, not bumper-to-bumper, but there were plenty of cars, and we were weaving in and out of traffic.

I was looking out the window, watching the trees fly by and the lake storming behind them, daring myself to keep looking as my hair lashed at my eyes and face. At least I'll have my eyes open, I thought, when Aaron spins this car out over the guardrail.

That's when she grabbed my hand and pressed it into the car's upholstery. Her eyes were closed.

Here was a beautiful thing that needed my protection. "There's a cop a few cars behind," I said. There wasn't.

Aaron slowed down and turned off the highway at the next exit ramp.

Aaron didn't last very long. He was always trying to get us to come back to his place and watch *Seinfeld*. Boys were always doing that, asking you to come over and watch them watch *Seinfeld* in their parents' basement or watch them play video games. Our options as girls were limited.

* * * *

By the end of my senior year, I decided to play the psychologist's game. I went and talked, and when I was about to graduate, she gave me a life-sized teddy bear, and congratulated me on all of my progress. I was going to graduate from her as well.

The next evening, when I was sitting around in the costume shop, putting on make-up in the mirror, Jacob walked in. "Who are you going to prom with?" he said.

"No one." In that moment, it was like I built a whole house of possibilities in my mind. We would go to prom. We would start dating. We would both go to college in New York and on and on.

Ricky walked in carrying a sewing machine.

He started toward me, but then he turned and left, slamming the door on his way out. I waited for the next two weeks to see whether he would call or come find me, but he didn't.

The night of prom I went into the shower with my mother's Lady Bic razor, one blade, and I tried to carve up my wrists. It was a copy of Deborah's suicide attempt from *Empire Records*. An attempt at an attempt, but I didn't know really what it took to slash your wrists. I thought that even the smallest cut to your wrist would kill you. I thought you could brush up against the ragged edge of a chain link fence and it would kill you. I thought we were all in

danger of slashing out wrists all of time. As Deborah says, “A pink Lady Bic razor with daisies on it, I didn’t even make it through the skin.” The same went for me. My wrists were bleeding a little when I plunged them into the warm water of the bath. My phone rang, and I jumped out of the tub. I thought it might be Jacob. I don’t know. Magical thinking, I guess.

It was Ricky. Her voice was measured and calm. She said that Aaron had tried to force himself on her. Force himself, that’s what she said. “He was drunk,” she said. “He wasn’t even my date.”

I bound my wrists up in toilet paper, and I shoved a couple of red bangles over the whole mess. I put on a big sweatshirt and my coat and drove up Lake Shore Drive to the north side to get her. This was it. I was finally going to be a hero. When I got to the house where the after party was, she was sitting on the cement steps outside wearing a blue hoody over her prom dress. The orange silk of her pleated skirt was spread over her knees. Her make-up was intact. I assume she had taken a moment to reapply it.

3/15

Ricky,

I was at the outpost last week. I was working in the machine room, and I raised the blinds to look out at the Gulf, and I saw the intern standing outside on the porch, lifting her shirt up and looking at her profile in the window. Her belly was round and distended. She is pregnant. She must be in her second trimester already. I don't know if she saw me looking, but she dropped her shirt and started watering the vegetables on the deck.

At that moment I got a call from Jack. He wanted temperature data from our buoy that's off the coast of Cancun. The water was eighty degrees. Last week it was at seventy-eight. Too hot for this time of year. That could mean that hurricane season will start three months early.

I know I have to ask the girl about her pregnancy, but for now I will only tell her about the storm. If you were here, we could figure out what to do together. Maybe you could tell the girl to go home to her family. People always did what you told them to do.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 6

Jacob called me early one morning during undergraduate orientation and told me that he loved me (loved me or was in love I can't remember). It felt inevitable. It seemed to mean that if I spent enough time with someone, talking about real things instead of filling the conversation with small talk, they would eventually have to love me. That was funny, so I laughed. I laughed while lying on the blue carpet of my dorm hallway with my legs propped up against the wall. My legs were shaking with laughter. Maybe I would have been nicer if I wasn't drunk.

Jacob didn't get into Columbia. He was waitlisted. His father called them and got them to take him off the waitlist, but he couldn't stomach that, and he stayed at home and went to the University. I guess Jacob didn't dream of a dramatic end. He died in one of the ways any teenager can die, one that didn't require his charm or his intellect. Maybe a year after our last conversation, he opened his father's liquor cabinet, poured himself tumbler after tumbler of scotch, got in his mother's Subaru, drove to the Dan Ryan expressway and entered the northbound side via the exit ramp.

I took his dream though. I was in college in New York. I was never going back to Hyde Park.

II: Synthesis

5/15

Ricky,

A lot has happened in the last three days. Two days ago we got a call from the NOAA Airfield in Mississippi. They wanted Jack to go up in the NOAA plane for their first fly through of what we're calling Hurricane Judith. The intern begged me to let her go with him, but I said no. I told her she shouldn't be flying in her condition. It gave me a weird kind of pleasure to say that: in your condition. Almost as if I was bragging. She won't tell me who the father is. She won't move back home. She told me that there's nothing for her at home, just an empty house. I don't think she goes to class anymore. She's fallen out of her life and landed here. I'm not sure what she expects me to do when she has her child.

A meteorologist should go, but the two that we had on staff left last week. Jack told me I would be going up with him.

We flew into the storm yesterday. They dressed us in orange flight suits. You would have loved it. We took off at 5:00 a.m. from an air base on the Mississippi coast. For the first three hours, we flew above the clouds, and I chatted with the other two scientists, two middle-aged women who worked at NOAA's Mississippi headquarters. There was coffee and there were bagels. Not good ones. They were from the supermarket. Jack was staring out the window, clutching his armrest. He's so terrified of flying. He wouldn't talk to anyone. We chatted about who went where and who studied with who. I had to avoid politics. It was clear that the administration has slashed their budget. The team is much more diminished than I thought it

would be. There were only two pilots, when usually there are three. And there were four instrument panels manned out of sixteen.

Then we got an announcement from the pilots. "Three minutes until impact." I took my place behind the wind speed monitor and strapped myself into the x-shaped harnesses. Out the window I watched the storm below us, churning like a vat of vanilla frozen yogurt. We dove into the cloud wall, and we were enveloped in gray. We couldn't see anything. The whole plane started to shudder. My seatbelt was the only thing keeping me from bouncing right out of my seat, and I was afraid that all of the screws on my instrument panel would shake out and clatter to the floor, and the entire thing would fall to pieces on top of me. Wind speeds on the outside edge were at seventy miles per hour. As we reached the eyewall, they increased to one hundred and twenty miles an hour. And then everything was still again. It was as if we weren't even moving, and all around us was the hollow column of air that was the eye of the storm. We continued on. The must always plane make it to the center of the storm. Knowing the location of the center helps us map the storm's route. Suddenly, Jack was up and standing over my station. "Look down," he said. "Do you see it?" he said.

I looked, but all I saw was the circular wall of cloud and the blue gulf below. "No," I said.

"The water is sparkling. It's shining in the sun," he said.

I looked up through the circular hole in the clouds, but there was no sun, just blue sky. "Are you sure? I can't see anything."

"I saw it," he said. "I saw a spill."

When we got back to the office that evening, Jack called a local pilot. They are going to fly back there tomorrow in the man's Cessna and look for the spill. They will try and skirt the storm. I can't help thinking it might be a suicide attempt.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 7

My father always talked about college as if it were the best time of his life. He was a bit of a misfit. He went from a rural Indiana town to Chicago. At the University he was exposed to all these intelligent and liberally minded people, and that just blew his mind. He was so happy to be a part of their group, to have them want him. He got to take out all the things that he'd kept hidden from his family and his friends in Indiana, his intellect and his opinions, and show them off. And as I was growing up, so many years later, the people he met in college were still his closest friends.

My mother was in college for eight years. That's what she would say. She didn't like the people, and she didn't like the work. The one thing she liked was getting up early in the morning for crew practice on the lake. She said she loved the lake early in the morning.

She kept leaving. She left to work on a ranch in Wyoming. She moved to Germany and lived in a commune with her high school foreign exchange student. She went to San Francisco and got a job as paralega. She did anything to get away from college. Her parents had to pay her

to come back and finish up. That was normal for my grandparents, though. They went through a period when they loved to solve problems with money even though they held on to it so tightly later in life.

* * * *

I went to college in Manhattan. Graduation was at Radio City Music Hall. The entirety of the graduating class of the College of Arts and Sciences walked across the stage that day. I sat with my peers, in my violet hat and gown, my high-heeled pumps, and a blue, polka-dotted dress, in the auditorium, watching graduates walk across the stage, receive their diploma, and shake the hand of the dean. That handshake didn't mean anything. None of us had ever met the dean. None of us even knew her name. I watched from my seat in the Biology section as one by one, they each took their tassel and moved it to the other side of their cap. And so many of those tassels were gold, meaning graduating with honors. Over four thousand people were graduating. There were so many gold tassels. My tassel was purple. My parents had even sprung for a "super tassel" which was heftier than a normal purple tassel, and it came with a silver charm of the year 2010, but it was still purple. I didn't make it to the 3.5 GPA required for an honors graduate. I had a 3.49.

College had been challenging. I wasn't a natural talent in the sciences, so I spent almost every day from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m. in the library making outlines and doing practice problems. And when I got back to my dorm room around 3:30 a.m., I was so hyped from all the Adderall that I'd taken that I couldn't really sleep. And even with all that studying, I could barely

eek out a B or a B- in most of my science classes. I was almost dropped from the program during my freshman year and again during my sophomore year.

I worked at a restaurant in Union Square, a diner where only tourists ate. They never tipped, probably because the food was so expensive. A hamburger was fifteen dollars. I couldn't afford to eat there.

I met people, the people I lived with, or the people who lived down the hall from me, or the people in my classes, but I didn't love them like true friends. I didn't take them with me from year to year. I started over. I didn't love college like my father or run away from college like my mother. I simply got through it.

By the end of my four years, I had a degree in Biology, but I couldn't continue to graduate school, knowing that it would be more of the same struggle at an even higher level. I didn't make any plans to apply for a PhD. I was going to have to start again.

6/15

Ricky,

We have an exodus on our hands here. The rest of the collective is evacuating ahead of the storm. Every day I see someone packing up their car and driving away. Who knows what will be left of us, of the house, the office, the outpost, CGS itself, after this storm, but they won't be here to rebuild it. The intern is still here though. She's due in a couple months. She has one of those pregnancies that makes you put on weight everywhere like armor. I begged her to go home to her mother, and to evacuate west with everyone else, but she won't leave.

Jack left three days ago to go check out the oil spill he saw when we were flying through the eye of Hurricane Judith. He was supposed to be back yesterday, but he is not, and he hasn't called. People used to fly small planes into hurricanes all the time. That's how hurricane chasing started. But this storm is so large and unpredictable. Judith has strengthened. You probably know. The model predicts wind speeds of up to one hundred and seventy miles an hour when she reaches land. I keep hearing news anchors saying, "Wind speeds are unprecedented." Unprecedented is such a mild word. This is much more than that.

Someone will have to man the outpost during the storm, Ricky, because we have never seen one like this before. Before Jack left, he said future habitation on the Gulf Coast depended on it. He was worked up. He'd taken a couple Adderall to stay up all night. With Jack gone, and everyone else leaving, I think that someone will be me. The outpost is on Isle Saint Therese, near the Little Lake, right next to the old fort. I'm telling you this so you know where I am.

Pray for me, Ricky, if you remember how to do that.

Marion

Chapter 8

I finished college. I found my first real apartment, an apartment that was mine, not belonging to my parents or to my university. I could live with any and as many people as I wanted. Their genders didn't matter. Their pasts didn't matter. The place was off the 4th Avenue 9th Street N/R. I lived there with two women and one man.

When we went to see it, it was July in New York. I took the R from Union Square with Thomas. We were still nervous around each other even though we'd known each other off and on for a year. But we were never really alone with each other. We were always two people in a greater crowd. It was one of those living arrangements that came out of nowhere. I mentioned to someone I knew that I needed a roommate, and she needed one as well, and she also mentioned it to another girl, who also mentioned it to Thomas, who we all knew very casually. Suddenly we

were four people looking for an apartment without really knowing each other. The two others were out of town, so they asked Thomas and I to do the work of finding and securing a place.

Thomas and I talked to each other cautiously on the train, saying bland things, asking how were you spending your summer and have you seen that person or this person, talking as people who weren't yet certain of each other's reaction. We stood across the crowded R train from each other grasping the same pole, him propelling his chest forward across the invisible line delineated by the pole and me leaning back from it. He had a large face that, when he leaned forward, floated above his shoulders ringed by a messy crown of dark brown curls. His face was the color of almond skin, but just under the collar of his black t-shirt I could see his tan line. He had big dark gray eyes with an under eyelid that rolled up when he smiled. It made him look so happy, like he was sparkling around the eyes.

I can't say what I wore, but I imagine myself in a red, flowered dress, although I know I didn't own one at that time, but all the same, it's the only way I can picture myself at twenty-one. Something with the same effect then. We rode all the way to 4th Avenue 9th street on the R in this way, never stopping to think about taking the express, imagining that we were going to the very end of the world. Neither of us was familiar with Brooklyn. When we stepped out of the subway, there was no race up the stairwell, no crush of people going in every direction, just the two of us and a couple walking in front of us about twenty feet ahead. We walked up the hill on 4th Avenue toward the park until we came to a narrow, three-story, brick building and entered through a steel door that was hanging open. I remember the carpet, a dingy floral with painterly bouquets of burgundy roses and pale pink peonies, petals wilting, evergreen leaves and ambiguous scarlet berries, on a mushroom colored field, all overlaid with a layer of dust and dirt

from people's shoes and the scent of mildew wafting up in waves. It looked like something you might find at the Kennedy Compound circa 1985, a dingy Ralph Lauren rug for the dog's room.

The apartment was on the second floor. The landlord met us inside. He was nervous, short but muscular, wearing a white shirt that ended half way down his thigh. He was sweating from his armpits and from his hand as I shook it. Later Thomas told me the guy used to go around collecting rent with a bulletproof vest on. The guy was some type of slum lord. The place was a railroad with four bedrooms, a living room, small kitchen, a dining room with a chandelier, and parquet floors in every room. The light was all yellow inside. There weren't any windows in the common spaces, the dining room or the living room, or the hallways. It made me feel a little woozy. I know this now, but when I lived there, I felt only that something was different in that apartment, that I had passed into another dimension, where some of my senses were taken from me. I know now from looking at pictures, seeing the yellow light, and the clumpy white paint on the walls, and the dilapidated radiators with their silver paint flaking and revealing a rusty dermis, and the particle-board cabinets with doors hanging on one hinge, that it was a shitty place, but for me and Thomas, who had never lived anywhere of our own choosing, it was lavish and mysterious and held the potential for experiences that people would look at in pictures and say they look beautiful and mysterious too.

We filled out the applications on the kitchen counters. The applicant was required to have ninety times the rent, $2400 a month, in assets. We both had to use our parents as guarantors. It kind of decapitated the idea of our first apartment, but then we went downstairs with the sweaty landlord, who couldn't leave fast enough, and went across the street for a celebratory drink, my first drink alone with Thomas. The Mexican restaurant across the street had two-for-one

margarita happy hour every weeknight with free homemade chips and salsa. This was a good omen.

* * * *

I moved into the apartment alone while Thomas lived out the last few weeks of his sublet in Williamsburg. I had nothing but my clothes, an air mattress, and a yoga mat. I slept on the air mattress in the corner of my room, a bedroom at the back of the house that jutted out from the rest of the building, possibly an addition. It heated up in the summer, and nothing could keep it warm in the winter. There were three whole windows, more windows than in any bedroom where I'd ever lived, and a long narrow hallway leading to its door like my own royal approach.

During the daytime I wrote, hunched over the kitchen counter, working on an article that my last college professor had suggested I submit to an academic journal. It was the last thing I'd have to do for college. I wanted it finished. At twenty-five pages, it was fifteen pages longer than anything I'd ever written. I fueled myself with cigarettes and four dollar cups of coffee from the place down the hill, Root & Ridge, Pulp & Bean, Bone & Bowl, some sort of South Brooklyn parataxis. Sometimes I would listen to the muffled conversations of the people that lived downstairs, a man and woman living platonically. They were in their mid-thirties, but they seemed impossibly old. The idea that someone would still need a roommate at thirty-five was depressing. They were weird. We found out later that the man was a freelance taxidermist. He used to get all these weird chemicals shipped to the place, pickling agents and rehydration fluid. And then me and Thomas would sit on my bed and watch him sew up animal carcassses in the back yard.

At night I lay on the air mattress, trying to be still, trying to ignore the creaking of the rubber mattress or of the wooden floors, listening for the pater of cockroaches or mice running around the vast empty apartment. It would, for them, be like a wide-open field full of possibilities.

I showered with no curtain. I drank water from empty beer bottles. I didn't buy any lightbulbs. There were a couple that still worked, one in the bathroom and one in the kitchen. When it got dark outside, I stood around in the kitchen or I went somewhere else, a bar if I could afford it, a walk through the neighborhood if I couldn't. I was totally alone for the first time in my life, living in the darkness of my empty four-bedroom apartment with the mice and the cockroaches. The floors creaked in the apartment upstairs even though it was empty. Sometimes I thought the floors were creaking in my apartment even though it was empty. I started to think about home invasions. I have never worried about them in Chicago. I felt Thomas's absence acutely. I dreamt of the weeks to come when he would move in, and we would have our apartment all to ourselves before our other roommates joined us in September. And we would have nothing to do but drink beers, and smoke weed, and climb up to the roof to smoke cigarettes or get two-for-one margaritas across the street, and I could see us doing these things, both of us very young, very thin or thinnish and vital enough in the summer sun, and very poor, and these scenes were the making of a movie I would watch. So from these dreams, I created a little crush for myself, that helped me forget about the noises and being alone.

When he finally came, he brought five boys with him to help move his furniture. I watched them walk up and down the stairs in their slim jeans and T-shirts, and the apartment that had been empty and silent save for the clicking of my computer keys was filled with male smells and male speech. So now I had a glut of men. All five of them wore sunglasses in and out of the

house. I remember that three at least were in Wayfarers. It was a safe choice. At any given time, two would move furniture, and the other three would stand in a circle and smoke because there wasn't that much furniture to move, just a blue corduroy futon, a television, a television stand, a bedside table, a couple guitars and guitar stands, two or three amps, some sheets, a blanket, and a suitcase full of clothes.

The imagined Thomas who had kept me company while I was alone in the apartment was more vivid than the real one. So I looked for indicators of goodness in the real Thomas, trying to fill out his personality, in the way he folded his shirts on his futon, the way he washed his dishes after he ate, and the way he treated his cat, how he held her on his lap as he watched his television, patting absentmindedly at her back, how he came home with potatoes and cheese intending to make pirogues and saying red faced as he walked in the door, "You are really going to love this." And he smiled triumphantly, as if he knew anything about what I loved. I let him try to teach me to play Bob Dylan songs on the guitar. And then I watched him give up and play them himself, singing along softly. Once I turned my ankle in my platform shoes and tumbled down the stairs, the floral carpet, one entire story, and he wedged his body between the railing and the wall and caught me before my head slammed into the ground. He seemed like he might be good. That night I sat up in my bed in the dark, waiting to hear his footsteps coming down my long narrow hallway. My heart pounded against my ribs. I was ecstatic. I was in a trance, playing the day over and over in my head. I can't imagine what I would have done if he'd walked down the hall and opened the door.

* * * *

This was the embryonic love story that Ricky entered, calling me one night as I walked out of the subway and saying that she had a job in New York for the summer, and she needed a place to stay.

6/20

Ricky,

Well, we are here. We drove from the office to the outpost in Jack's electric truck. We were slipping all over the road. I thought we were done for already.

The girl, the intern, her name is Andrea, is with me. I wanted to drop her in a hospital and leave her, but she refused to stay behind. I think she's going a little crazy. When I told her I wasn't going to take her, she took off walking through the field behind the house toward the bayou an into the swamp beyond. I had to drag her back to the house. She said if I left her, she's going to walk out into the swamp and spend the storm there. So I took her. And she brought the damn bird. It was screaming into our ears the whole drive down here.

We are reading the winds at two hundred miles an hour now. Have you ever seen an animation of that wind speed? It flattens a normal building. We can already feel the building moving up and down on its floating foundation. We closed all the hurricane shutters, and now we can only look outside using the cameras. We took all the plants inside. The Wi-Fi is gone. Cell service is gone. Jack has the satellite phone. We have enough food and water for about two weeks. We still have one generator, so the machines are running and I've been recording all the data that's coming in by hand in my notebook. The intern's lying on her back among the plants, singing to the bird, trying to get it to calm down. She let it out of its cage, and it's hopping around on the ground with her.

I don't know when I can send this to you, Ricky. Maybe I'll just put it in a bottle and chuck it into the Gulf.

I love you,

Marion

Chapter 9

Ricky's boyfriend, Eric, delivered her to my apartment, and the two of them were in turn delivered by his parents. She had stayed for a week in the parents' apartment on East 79th street. It was time for her to leave. I went to their apartment once. It was small in that Manhattan rich person way. It was a desirable address with a doorman. The fixtures in the bathroom and the kitchen were new. There were beautiful views of other high-rise apartment buildings in every room. There was a kitchen, a dining room, closets, two bathrooms, and a living room, which was rare in New York. There was usually some big room that was the kitchen and the dining room or the kitchen and the dining room and the living room. But it was still a small apartment. It was bigger than the place I grew up, but I knew that these people could afford a lot more if only they didn't have to live on the Upper East Side. And I wondered whether the reason that they sent their son away to boarding school was so they didn't have to hear him listening to music, playing video games, or having sex through the walls like they were living in a tenement building.

Ricky's boyfriend's room overlooked the East River. Ricky showed me the view. She said it was the view she got when she was fucking him, when she was on top. She could look over at Long Island City and watch the apartment buildings going up on the riverfront, identical steel and glass towers, growing before her eyes.

The boyfriend did not want Ricky traveling to Brooklyn on her own, and the parents did not want their son traveling with only Ricky, so they all four came together. They did not like the idea of Brooklyn. I could say that it wasn't a good time for me, that I was pretty depressed ever since school ended. I missed having something to do every day like every college student post-graduation. There weren't any highs or lows, just a series of mild disappointments. I couldn't get a well-paying job. I couldn't get a job I liked even if it was poorly paid. Thomas was in Florida for a few weeks. I was unemployed, too poor to go outside, and completely alone inside.

When they showed up, I was drinking a sparkling rose, Barefoot Bubbly, a deli purchase. I thought she might want some when she got here. I didn't think she'd be coming with the whole family. I was sitting on Thomas's futon in his empty room. Would they like a glass?

"No no." A chorus of nos.

One, "Yes," from Ricky. She would take a glass. She was dressed in a rugby shirt, maroon and green, matching her boyfriend.

"I don't have cups," I said. "Sorry."

They all kind of turned around like they didn't want to see, and Ricky took a swig from the bottle.

"What are you celebrating?" the boyfriend said.

It hadn't occurred to me. "Everything, I guess."

He tried to smile. He ended up sneering.

I could tell the parents wanted to be released from this interaction. “I’ll show you the room,” I said. And I led the four of them, Ricky dragging her suitcase behind her, through the windowless living room and dining room to where two French doors, the glass had been painted over in the same dirty white of the rest of the house, opened onto a small bedroom. The paint was flaking from the ceiling, creating a small pile on the floor. I waved my arm, ringmaster style. “Here we are.”

Ricky walked into the room and pulled her suitcase over the pile of paint to hide it.

“Will you be all right here?” the mother said, rapidly moving her gaze across the room. She had a starved, nervous look to her, wearing a black stretch V-neck that emphasized her rail thin body. Later, when I went to dinner at their house, I watched her eat only a plate of spinach while the rest of us had two pieces of chicken each, and I realized she had made it all the way to middle age, and she was still an eating disorder.

“Yes, will you be all right?” said her boyfriend.

“Of course,” Ricky said. “It’s nice,” she said and smiled at me.

I could hear the father walking the rest of the apartment, knocking on the walls, listening for faulty wiring, I assumed.

The boyfriend turned and shook his head. He walked out of the room with a hunched determined gait to find his father and follow him like a dog, knocking where his father knocked, and putting his ear to the plaster to listen for electricity.

“Well, then let’s get out of here, then,” the mother said, shooting a warning look in the direction of her husband and son.

“Yes, let’s leave,” said the father when he came back to the room. “Everything seems up to snuff,” he said, his voice gaining an octave at the end. Not a very good liar.

The two of them walked out of the bedroom through the rest of the house and out the front door, leaving Ricky alone with me and her boyfriend. I thought I might be getting in the way of something, so I walked back to Thomas's room to stare at the parents as they walked to their car, an Escalade that they hadn't bothered to pull into a parking space. It filled the narrow street easily.

I heard her boyfriend saying in a whisper, or an attempt at a whisper, "You know you can always call me if you feel unsafe." He talked slowly, emphasizing unsafe as if he was talking to a child. I imagined his six-foot frame hunched over Ricky's five-foot one. "You can always come back to the Upper East Side." I never saw him in that apartment again.

* * * *

I became Ricky's next protector. I was scrappier than her boyfriend and his family. They had the apartment on the Upper East Side and the house in White Plains. And I had my room in South Park slope. It was all lux to me. But I was very poor, barely making my rent each month by picking up some shifts at a couple restaurants, and moving more and more debt onto three separate credit cards, and begging my parents for help. They could give some, but it wasn't enough to really live. They would have been ashamed if they knew how I ate, stealing meals from the places I worked or from grocery stores. Grocery stores, it seemed to me, were the ultimate capitalist evil. In a city where so many people were trying to survive on a couple bucks a day, a couple bucks which would be spent by just taking the subway to work, walking through the mountains of apples, and eggplants, and avocados, and grapes, and the infused water, and the barrels overflowing with coffee, and the trays and trays of steaming food under the spit guards—

the chicken, fried and roasted, the tofu salads, the macaroni and cheese—in the basement of the Union Square Whole Foods, and watching the business people in suits, shopping on their way home from work, or the rich stay-at-home mothers in leggings and brightly colored running shoes, or the fake hippies with their dreads and their loose clothing made of burlap and hemp, no kids, nobody brought kids into that Whole Foods, was hard. I hated them, all of those types of people, and I also wanted badly to be them, any one type of them. I wanted to be someone who stops by Whole Foods for a vegan dinner before heading home. How much of this food would be thrown in the dumpster at the end of the night? How much of it never even made it to the shelves. I knew how much because I'd been to the dumpsters in the alley behind Whole Foods. There were ten or fifteen. They were padlocked, but there was one lock that was broken open, and I lifted the heavy lid, and I looked inside, and there inside were bags and bags of netted clementines, and pink waxy apples that were more oval than round, and eggplants with two bodies instead of one, and I reached my hand in and pulled out one hard pink apple, a Pink Lady, one that would have cost me $2.29 inside. And I took it home and left it on my kitchen counter, checking on it every day, and after ten days it was still firm and fresh. I wanted the apple, but I also wanted to contribute, to be part of this food waste cycle. When I knew that I was wasting as much as they were, then I would know that I had finally made it, that I didn't have to worry about money anymore. And when I eventually bit into that apple, it didn't taste like anything. It was like chewing paper to stay alive. I was surviving. There was something about being hungry. And this time I didn't have the luxury of choosing to be hungry. It gave me this armor. I knew how to be hungry. I was good at it. I had finally achieved the kind of food independence I was looking for in high school. But I knew how to get what I needed, which stores sampled cubes of

cheese and what time to go. I knew they put out pizza samples at the organic market down the street half an hour before closing.

* * * *

For the first two weeks, we slept together in my full-sized bed. I had a bed by then. I bought it on Craigslist. Ricky had an air mattress, but I didn't want to make her sleep on it, or I didn't want to sleep alone. And my bed seemed so large then. It seems smaller now.

In those moments right before sleep when I should have been clearing my head, I was talking to Ricky. I told her about my dreams. These were not the dreams that came during REM sleep. These were the dreams that came when my mind was just beginning to dose, when it was still partially in control.

I began having the first type of dream around age five. There is a kid who saves her entire class from a fire. The kid is a hero. Maybe she's dies in the fire, and everyone shows up at her funeral. There's a line around the block.

The second type of dream, starting when I was about eight, was about true love. This was King Arthur and *Anna Karenina*. It was complete devotion to another person. It is complete erasure. It survives every type of obstacle, even death, breaking and remaking itself endlessly.

In middle school and high school, I dreamt about bringing myself to the very brink of death with drugs. I dreamt about being a junkie.

The dream I dreamt that summer was one long garden party. It took place in a world where there was always enough money, where friends were generous and calm, where every

interaction was filled with a mild type of good will. There was no tragedy, but there was also no great happiness.

"Seems like you're in a rut," she said. "That's my dream not yours."

That was true. Her dreams were boring. She dreamed about making breakfast for Eric. She dreamed about vacationing with his parents in the Hamptons. She dreamed about not having to clean up after dinner. She dreamed of owning a tiny apartment for rich people on the Upper East Side. She dreamed of having his children.

"But once I have them, they'll be mine," she said. "Understand?"

I said yes.

* * * *

I began to follow Ricky to work sometimes and just sit in a coffee shop, waiting for her to get out. She would follow me too, depending on what I was doing. The city felt dangerous, maybe not physically, but maybe physically, but more often in that way where you are in danger of getting lost, of disappearing if you don't have someone accounting for you every day. It was true. Who would have accounted for me that summer if Ricky had not? Other cities don't feel that way. Other cities have fewer steps. In New York there were a lot of things that had to go right if you were going to get home safe at night. You took one train to another train to somewhere and then you did something that would give you enough to eat something if you were feeling faint, and to get you back on that train. And if you messed it up, even once, one of the steps, you could be lost. If you went into the city with too little money, you could be stuck there. Or if you went into the city without cash, and you couldn't find a subway machine that would

take a credit card, and your account had less than twenty dollars in it, you would be lost. Or your credit card company could call you and tell you they were cancelling your card because you hadn't paid your bill, and they would be taking legal action to redeem your debt, and you had to ask them, "How will I get home from Manhattan?" That happened to me. I walked into a Bank of America and opened up another credit card on the spot. My face was red and splotchy from crying. I can't believe they approved me after hearing my story. And at that time in my life, the walk from Manhattan to Park Slope seemed impossible. Or if you go into the city, and your phone runs out of battery, you would be lost because you'll miss the people you were supposed to see because no one could be relied on to be where they said they would be on time now that they had cell phones, and maybe they were going to buy you dinner or a drink. You really didn't know. It could be anything. It was better to go in twos. You could put your resources to greater use.

Ricky and I woke up every morning, and we'd open up our closet, and we'd pick out an outfit from among our clothes. Clothing was everything to her. Walking down the street was a performance piece. If she could just go outside in a good outfit and show it to one person, she would be happy. She loved to be seen. It was her good deed for the day.

And then sometimes we'd go to our job. Ricky and Eric met at film school, and moved to New York to produce Eric's films. Ricky was his production designer, art decorator, set decorator, props master, wardrobe department, and make-up artist. She handled everything that wasn't acting or cinematography, and he paid her nothing or almost nothing. He put everything he had back into the company. Sometimes I would go to Ricky's work, and eventually it became my work too. I wasn't very artistic, but I could use a hammer, and I could do what she told me

to. We began to work on other people's independent films, and sometimes we made a little money. They always paid us like one person. "What is your hourly rate?" they would say.

For food we sometimes shared a plate of Lo Mein and a cheap bottle of red wine. We'd eat it on the roof of our apartment building. But if we couldn't get afford it, I'd steal from my work. At my restaurant job, when a plate came back to the kitchen with a half sandwich, I wrapped it in a napkin and stuffed it in my purse. Ricky taught me how to palm candy bars and pieces of fruit at the grocery store. We had to buy the wine, though. We never figured out how to steal it.

After college all these twenty-two-year-olds moved to New York from colleges and universities all over New England to try to find a job. After the 2008 financial crisis, none of us could get jobs. All of us had been told our entire life that the sure fire way to a steady career that we could be proud of, to an upper middle class income was to go to a respected college. So we did. But college was just a cliff we all fell off of. We all woke up afterward in a mountain of student loan debt. There were no jobs after college. I had a friend who worked as a puppeteer. For her interview she had to hold her arms out in front of her for two hours. I had a friend who made his money letting the NYU psychology department give him electric shock treatments. He worked as an unpaid intern for Jasper Johns on the side. He moved art around Johns's New Jersey mansion. He met incredible artists. He went to brunch at Cindy Sherman's house. Everyone was doing something to subsidize their real careers, the ones they were passionate about, but that didn't pay. And this nebulous mass of underemployed people wanted so badly to be a community.

I remember one party we went to. It could have been any party. It was in the same neighborhood of converted warehouses where we always went. The walls of the apartment were

all made out of plywood and two-by-four DIY construction. There were lofted rooms and ladders that extended up through holes in the ceiling to crawl spaces above. People were living in those crawl spaces. The place was so packed that people were hanging off of ladders and straddling window sills. In the back of the place, a hardcore band was playing, and a mosh pit was forming in front of them. Ricky had dressed us both in pleated plaid skirts. We found them at a thrift store. I'm sure they were someone's old school uniform. She wore a huge, plaid button up on top, making this continuum of plaid that looked like a lampshade. I was, like everyone else, desperate for a community. And so we went to parties like this, and we talked to people, and they talked to us because we usually dressed to match each other. We were a novelty. And the next day, we considered them friends. We'd see them again and we'd consider them close friends. But that time Ricky got drunk and felt sick, and she wanted to go sleep at Eric's. I walked her down to the street to get a cab. Then I went back up to the party. I loved parties. Sometimes I went to three of four a night. I loved being in rooms that were filled with people. I got a beer and stood in the opposite corner from the band. I watched people crossing the room to talk to each other, moving from one group to the next, and then a guy came up to me. He was tall with glasses. He put out his hand to shake and told me his name. "What do you do?" he said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't say anything. "Nothing," I said. And I turned and left him with his hand hanging in the air and walked back down to the street. It was impossible to answer without Ricky.

Lots of things were abandoned on the streets of Park Slope. On the weekends, we walked around and carried them back to the apartment. We found wooden chairs that looked colonial with skinny posts and woven seats and side tables even though we had no couch, no real reason

for a side table, and we found books that we stacked in piles in the corners. And when we got paid, we bought clothing.

It was like this episode of *Cops* that I saw once. I remember that the cops walked up to a car where a man, maybe in his thirties, but ragged from drug use, was shooting up with a woman who looked like she was on the verge of passing out. The cops thought they were going to expose the woman turning a trick. They banged on the window and asked the man what he was doing, and he replied, as an explanation, "Her drug of choice is crystal. My drug of choice is heroin. I was just trying to introduce her to my drug of choice. Bring her over to my drug of choice." He said this as if that was a perfectly legal explanation. "Carry on," the police would say.

Well, Ricky and I were introducing each other to our drugs of choice.

* * * *

One of the sets we worked on was in the lobby of an old hotel in the financial district. The floors of the hotel had been ripped down to original concrete, and the walls had been knocked down to make the inside rooms into vast echoing spaces that stretched the entire width and length of the building. In the center of the building was a lobby. In the lobby, the original black and white tile still remained. There was no ceiling above the lobby only floor after floor, each with an open-air walkway and a gilded iron railing, for fourteen stories up to a skylight on the roof.

This set, like many of the sets we worked on, was almost entirely men. The only other women were the make-up stylist and the actresses. Whenever anyone had a problem with a costume, they would call both Ricky and me over to fix it. I liked that they wanted me at all. If

they asked me what tie to wear, and I said blue, and they said okay, that meant that I meant something. But it was also as if, to them, Ricky and I weren't two people at all. They needed both of us to say something as if each of us only knew half the answer. The two of us were taking up the space of one person. I can't say I would be happy about it now, but at the time, I guess I was.

During lunch, Ricky and I walked up the stairs toward the skylight. We walked each floor, the empty caverns that had once been thousands of hotel rooms. Most of them were covered in broken glass and concrete dust, but the walkways that faced the lobby still had their original tile flooring. Some of them had bits of colored paper, confetti, lying on the floor. When we got to the roof, we sat on the green copper railings of the building's skylight and ate sandwiches in the sun.

Ricky set down her sandwich on the silver asphalt of the rooftop. "I think the reason we're such good friends is because we're different than other friends. You know?"

"Different how?" I said.

"I think it's because we're a little in love with each other."

I squinted at the sun.

"I mean I'm a little in love with you," she said.

"I know." I lay down on the roof and closed my eyes.

She lay down next to me. "It's not like I want to have sex with you," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "Me neither."

I don't know how long we stayed that way.

"How did you ladies find your way all the way up here?" The cinematographer was coming toward us with a half-eaten sandwich.

"We walked," I said.

We didn't talk about it again.

And then I dreamt a new type of dream. I dreamt that I was walking around the floors of the old hotel. The tile floor in the center of the lobby was set up with desks but otherwise the interior was unchanged, bare concrete. People were sitting at the desks, their faces colored blue in the computer light. I was the only one standing. Every once and awhile I would bend down, rest my hand on someone's shoulder to tell them something. They would smile at me, nod, and I would move on knowing that all of them were working for me, and that when I spoke to them, they listened.

I looked up at the skylight expecting to see Ricky standing on a balcony a couple of stories above me, or leaning against the skylight and smiling through the glass. But she wasn't there. There was nothing above me but blue sky.

6/21

Ricky,

Judith is like a wool blanket nestled all around us. You know, like in a hotel when they tuck the sheets into the corners of the bed, and it feels like you're in a strait jacket. The wind is howling. The rain is lashing the storm shutters. That's what newscasters always say: lashing. It's something about the cyclonic motion and the curve of a whip. We can feel the foundation of the building struggling from side to side against the rails that hold it in place. The water is up to the deck, but the building is floating just as it should. Andrea joined me in the machine room. We have been watching the storm through the cameras that are mounted on the roof. When the eye passed, the bird quit making noise. She walked over to Andrea quiet as a mouse and pecked at her swollen ankle until she drew blood. We opened up the door just a crack and looked up at the circle of blue sky above us and the wall of cloud that was coming for us, and we let the bird out into the storm. She hopped over to the edge of the deck and jumped into the Gulf. She will certainly die.

I wonder whether the wreckage of Jack's plane is churning around up there, about to dump out onto some poor soul.

I miss you,

Marion

Chapter 10

When the summer was over, Thomas and I were joined by our two other roommates. A year went by with Ricky moving in and out of the Park Slope apartment, breaking up and getting back together with Eric. I hated him. Everyone we knew hated him. I hated introducing him to people, knowing they would connect him with me. I wanted to say: please don't infer that I enjoy spending time with this man just because I know his name. Eric broke up with her after they moved in together. She moved back in with me. He wanted her back, and she took him. She couldn't shake it, her dream of having a waspy upper class life. And the fact that people couldn't stand him, and he rejected her made her even more determined to be with him. After they got back together and moved in again, he broke up with her again. She came back, not really with a room of her own, but occupying my room either on the couch or the bed depending on who else was sleeping there. I didn't have a relationship. I didn't know how to get one. I didn't know how to make it clear that I wanted something more than sex. Or maybe I just chose the wrong people to be interested in. Or maybe all I wanted was sex. I don't know.

* * * *

On my twenty-second birthday, I had a party, and one of my younger cousins came to stay with me. She was still in college, only twenty years old. The day of the party, she was very anxious. She kept walking up to Ricky and me breathless, asking if we were sure we'd gotten enough champagne, or would we please help her clean up the kitchen, or were we sure that we had written the right address on the event and did we add instructions for how to get to the apartment on the subway? And then she came into my room crying, saying she didn't have anything to wear. She opened my closet, and she picked out a short, pink dress, that I had bought with Ricky just for that day. Ricky had a matching one in blue.

"Can I please wear this?" she said.

Ricky and I looked at each other.

"Please, please," she said. "You have so many nice clothes." She started throwing dresses and skirts out of my closet and onto my bed where Ricky and I were sitting smoking.

"Wear whatever you want," I said. I just wanted her to leave.

An hour before the party started, I knocked on Thomas's door to tell him that we were going to the bar across the street for a drink. The door swung open when I knocked. He was standing before his futon, pulling up his boxers. My cousin was kneeling before him. He pointed to a pool of semen on the futon, and he said, "Clean it up."

He didn't see me, but my cousin did. She looked up at me, but I just stood there stone-faced like some sort of vindictive matron, all my features echoing what Thomas had just said to her. Clean it up. And she did. She got up in my little pink dress, got a wet paper towel, and she

rubbed the stain out of the futon, crying, and all the while little white bits of paper towel were rubbing off and depositing themselves into the blue corduroy fabric.

That really soured me on him. I didn't really know it at the moment. It was always that way with me. I could never figure out what I wanted, what I liked or disliked, but right after that happened, I got really sick. I started shaking. My head got hot and I had to go to bed in the middle of the party, and I knew that my body was telling me that I was angry.

Or maybe it soured me on myself. I don't know. The next year I moved to Williamsburg with my other two roommates. Ricky had a place of her own by then.

After we'd lived in Williamsburg for about six months, Thomas called one of my roommates and told her he was out of a job and he needed a place to stay for a little while. They wanted to help him out. I felt okay about it. I didn't like him anymore. I didn't even think about him at all.

He moved into the room next to mine in the basement. There was no door, just a plum colored velvet curtain hanging over the entrance way.

One night I was at a music video shoot with Ricky. The video took place at this party, where everyone was walking around in animal masks, drinking and dancing. The director came up to me and Rickey and said, "Some of the actresses haven't shown up, and I need some video hos."

I shook my head.

"I think you guys would be perfect," he said, looking us up and down. "Come on, please. Otherwise, we are going to have to shut down."

"Absolutely not." I said.

And Ricky said, "Let's just do it. It will be easy."

"No," I said. "I want to leave."

She told me to come into the bathroom with her. She poured out a little pile of cocaine onto her make-up mirror and fashioned it into two fat lines with her credit card. She held the mirror up and pulled my hair out of the way. "Have one of these," she said. "You'll feel better."

She couldn't set it down on the sink. It was one of those modern renovations that landlords like to do where the sink is a glass bowl sitting on a tile vanity and the faucet is a rectangular thing. Water falls out of it like a fountain, really slow. It's so hard to wash your hands.

I took the line. Then I started drinking whiskey. We kept doing lines. We did the scene. It was a sex scene, a POV. The two of us were in bed with the camera man. We weren't naked, but we were close. I left immediately afterward.

I walked home to my new place in Williamsburg. I walked silently through the kitchen, ignoring my two roommates and Thomas drinking and playing cards at the table. I walked down the stairs to my bedroom in the basement, collapsing in my bed. Their laughter drifting in from the room upstairs formed a sort of canopy for me as I wove in and out of consciousness replaying the video in my mind. I hadn't felt that ashamed since high school. After some amount of time, Thomas came down the stairs and walked to his room. And some amount of time later, he walked back, dragging his bare feet on the linoleum and pushed aside the velvet curtain and stood in the doorway, and then he climbed into my bed, and he started kissing my face, saying isn't this what we've always wanted, and he feels so good about this and didn't I feel good about it too. It was perfect you know, a perfect romance? I tried to push him off, but it was like he didn't notice. And then I told him to please stop, but he just repeated. "Isn't this perfect. Aren't we just a perfect romance." And then I wasn't even there in my body. I could see him from

above as if I was floating on the ceiling of my basement room, and I could see myself with my eyes closed not inhabiting my body, not inhabiting anything at all. And I thought, if I'm dead he'll go away. If I just keep perfectly still. People think they can tell what you want. Those are the ones you really have to look out for. The ones that know you. The ones who you let into your life. That's where you should be most afraid. In your own home and in the homes of your friends.

Starting the next morning, I didn't speak to him anymore. If he spoke to me, I just shuffled off somewhere else. There weren't that many places to go in a four-bedroom apartment, so I ended up hiding in my other roommate's bedrooms when he was in the house. I stayed in the city until very late, and then came home with Ricky to sleep in my bed.

It was my first rape. I would have at least one more, from a stranger this time. A man who followed me home from a bar and into my apartment one night. I remember the bar. It was a place you should never go, a room with only one high little window above the door. It must have been an illegal gambling spot before they turned it into what it was when I saw it, a sort of Norwegian style den, walls of paneled wood, hanging lamps, shaded red and dimmed to their lowest, turntables and fabric covered speakers that were from the 1970s or looked like they were from the 1970s, and a row of men lined up at the bar just waiting to pick you off. The bartender was the source of GHB. We know this. We have learned it since. He was chubby with long blond hair that he tucked behind his ears.

I don't remember the man, but I remember him saying, "I don't want to do this to you," over and over into my ear as I lay face down on the bed. I should have known by then, really that this is the sort of stuff that goes on.

Ricky said we wouldn't let it happen again, but what could she do? She couldn't do anything. She couldn't even protect herself. I couldn't protect her either. Neither one of us could protect each other or ourselves really.

But these are things you can't do. It's what they say. They all say you can't do them. You can't drink whiskey. You can't walk home alone. You can't. You can't. You can never go to the bar with only the one little window above the door. That's crazy. That's walking right into it. That's asking for it. You have to know that if you do, you are complicit. That's what they will say, and that's what you'll believe. That's the worst part, being complicit, being the rapist, when it's you who betrays your body.

6/22

Ricky,

We went out on the deck this morning. The island has been unmade and made again. The Loblolly Pines were all flattened, but the Palmettos are still up, sometimes missing all of their fronds, but still standing. The entire back wall and deck are now blocked by a dune that rises almost to the roof. Andrea and I walked to the peer. We call it the marina, but the truth is, there are only a couple of small docks. We looked for our boat. We had chained it up to the pier, but the docks were empty. She spotted the boat about forty feet behind the outpost in the marsh. I walked out there to get it, my feet sinking into the mud as I went.

The boat was capsized, so we had to tip it up to the right side. I tried, on my own, to turn the boat over, but I couldn't. I didn't want her to come help. I had this vision of debris hidden beneath the water piercing her pregnant belly. And then she would start bleeding from her stomach. It was horrible. But she came through the water to me. She is very strong now. She righted the boat almost all by herself. I think it's from the pregnancy. That was the first time she saved me. We dragged the boat back through the marsh, and we packed everything up, including my notes on the storm and the food and water we had left. I took a couple water samples. Then we got in the boat and went toward the shore, or where the shore used to be.

We're going to try to go back to the office in Canton, Ricky. I don't know if we'll find anything at all.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 11

I had a kind of war with Ricky's full-length mirror. I thought it widened me. Ricky thought it was accurate. She told me to be happy with what I was. She was a realist. But I just couldn't do that. I had to hide from the mirror when I was at her apartment. But then one day, I came over, and I liked what I saw. It's always a shock. It always happens that way. You change yourself overnight. It can be a change that you fought for your entire life, but it still happens overnight. And then you can't stop looking. You're looking for the seams that will tell you that it's not you you're looking at but someone else. Maybe I lost weight or maybe I just decided to be happy, like Ricky said.

Things began to happen faster after that. I found a job at a new restaurant, one where I made a lot more money than I was used to. It was like the mirror, the shock of having enough to pay the bills, to buy the clothes I liked, to buy curtains. I had lived for years without curtains, always changing in the dark. I bought a shoe rack and chairs for the dining room table. I had everything I needed. I could buy the six-dollar wines at Trader Joe's instead of the three-dollar wines. I could eat avocados and tomatoes instead of rice and beans and tuna from a can. At this

little restaurant, I found two men. I felt like I found them, like they were the end of a long a journey, a journey through all of the men I had ever spoken with because they were the perfect kind of men, the only men I could really love, really trust. They didn't want me at all, and so I trusted them absolutely. I never had any siblings, but this felt filial. I wasn't very good as a waitress. I wasn't nice, but I could be fast. I could be fun. I could be a horrible snob, which can be good. If you can't smile at them, you can at least make them feel like you know what you're talking about. And so after work I went out every night with these two men, and I began to believe that they were better than everyone I already knew, who acted so much like everyone I went to high school with.

Both had grown up in far Queens. Neither had a bachelor's degree, and when you asked either of them what they did, both said, "I am a waiter." It was so simple. No qualifications. There was no saying I am not really this waiter, I am an artist, I am a musician, I am an innovator. Please do not take me for just this waiter. I loved that. I really loved learning to introduce myself saying, "I am a waiter."

And people would usually say, "And?"

And I would say, "And nothing."

Lucas was beautiful, tall and muscular with shining black hair, from Corona, or out by the airport, as he always said it. He used to come into work before we opened, take off his ratty street shirt and put on an ironed oxford that he had brought from home on a hanger. He would give each button a moment of pure concentration as he put it on, and then he would straighten out his sleeves from the cuffs as if he was putting on an four thousand dollar suit instead of a forty-dollar oxford from American Apparel that didn't quite reach his wrists. I biked five miles to work every day. I never changed. In fact, I usually wore the same clothes for a week, the

stains building up on top of each other, a palimpsest of mussel juice, and chili aioli, and foie gras would form from day to day until I washed my clothes at the end of the week. But Lucas was always clean, always deliberately scrubbing at stains in the bathroom. I went to his apartment once, and in his bedroom, he had a bookshelf, and on that bookshelf, instead of books, he had his clothes, all folded neatly. In one cubby was a sleeve of caps, maybe twenty caps, all in perfect condition, all fitted over each other like you would find them in a store.

The other boy was Patrick, who had been a writer, and then an actor, and then a writer again. And now he was a waiter. Patrick is hard to think about. I thought we were similar when I met him, when I tried out at the restaurant for the first time. He was a listener. He was always asking loads of questions about my life. He would ask me something, and I would respond, and he would say, "I knew it." It was as if he had figured me out way before I walked in the door.

One night the dimmer broke on the overhead lights. The dimmer was everything, the restaurant's most important trick. It made people believe in the experience. With the dimmer, the interiors were tasteful, your companion was beautiful, your food looked elegant, artfully arranged, like something you want to put inside you, and the wait staff is charming, young, and handsome. Without the dimmer, you understood that you were in an old Chinese take-out place, like the ones that have bullet proof windows at the counter. They had taken out the counter in the conversion, so the place was now one long corridor leading to nothing. The white walls were dirty and scuffed. They weren't real wood, but linoleum woodgrain. The windows were streaked. The chairs were the type that you find in big banquet halls or convention centers, heavy black metal with turquoise vinyl seats. And the waitress's apron was filthy with stains. I tried washing those aprons once, but the stains never came out. If it were my restaurant, I would have closed without the dimmer, but it was a Saturday, and the owner usually took home about five thousand

dollars on Saturdays even after paying his chefs, and so he didn't want to close. At six people began to flood into the cramped space in front of the hostess stand. The hostess seated them, group by group, as if all was well, and they ordered and began to eat like all was well. Pretty soon the restaurant was full. I couldn't believe that people were sitting down, looking at the prices on the menu, looking at the dirty walls, and saying to themselves, "Okay, I will pay for this experience." I wanted to yell at every group the hostess seated. Get out of here. Please get out of here, I wanted to say. Please, I'm begging you to leave. It was as if all of us, me and my two perfect beautiful new friends were all showing our asses to the world.

As the night went on, the temperature went up and up. People were crowding in. People were very drunk. I had to run up and down to the cellar to get cases of wine. People were yelling. The noise was incredible. At 7:30 p.m. a woman threw up on the front door. She vomited standing up as she was trying to push it open. I had to wipe it up with a dishrag. It was as if the entire night was rushing toward some horrible climax. Every time I set down a check, I believed I would hear, "How can you be asking for money for this experience?"

Around nine Ricky came to eat with three of our friends. She was in all black. Her hair hung straight to her waist, and her make-up was gray around the eyes and purple at the cheeks and lips. She was in her witch phase. They were here to see what my work life was like. They were far from their normal stomping grounds, all the way in Queens, taking a tour of our lives, me and my new friends, who were out here working as waiters. I was a tourist too, I would realize later, just a longer-term visitor, hoping for glimpse of a life away from visionaries, artists, graphic designers for the greater good, of innovators, change-makers, self-starters, and whatever else. I didn't want to serve my friends. They seemed like very ugly people to me.

Patrick took their table. He was drinking the whole night. He was having a great time. We ran out of wine glasses; we couldn't wash them fast enough. The wait was two hours, and so Patrick started pouring wine in water glasses. He gave my friends water glasses. It was one of his tricks: never let your friends order a bottle of wine; always pour them glasses from open bottles; then, at the end of the night, you can charge them for only one glass, and no one will be the wiser. And your friends will inevitably pay for their uncharged glasses of wine in their tip. Just one of the ways Patrick shifted a little bit of the night's profits from the owner to himself. Patrick kept pouring glass after glass of wine in water glasses. They got drunk. Ricky, who was small, was especially drunk. Toward the end of the meal, she lay her head down on the table and went to sleep. Our friends had to shake her awake. That was then. She hadn't learned how to really drink.

At the end of night, as the final tables were finishing up and only Patrick was still working, while the rest of us sat and counted money in the back, I saw Ricky walk up behind Patrick as he stood at the host stand, creeping up to him in her platform shoes, until she stood directly behind him and tapped him on the shoulder and got on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear. And a moment later he turned and kissed her, even as service was still going on.

I felt okay about it. I couldn't think of a better person to give her too. I couldn't think of a better person to keep her safe. At our table all the way in the back, counting out our money, the owner, and the manager, with their beers, and Lucas and I with our glasses of wine, we may have clapped. I'm certain that we did.

* * * *

A week after that, the restaurant manager sat me down at the table in the front while everyone else was setting up for service. He told me that he didn't think I had a future at the restaurant. "Last Saturday night some of your tables thought you were not very attentive," he said.

"Everything was going wrong," I said. "It was a horrible night."

"Yeah, but Lucas and Patrick didn't freak out. They were fine."

I didn't want to tell him that they were fine because they were drinking the whole time.

"I don't want to be mean, but why do you even work here?" he said. "Don't you have a fancy degree?" He was a nice guy. He told me I could work until I found a new job.

A few weeks later I took a job working at a start-up. It was a service for small business owners, usually rich moms with business ideas who wanted a personal assistant to organize things once or twice a week. I was paid more, but it was a tiny fraction of what the clients were paying the company. The company took seventy-five percent.

Ricky and Patrick began to date seriously. She had been a serial online dater ever since Eric broke up with her for the final time, sometimes dating two or three men at once. That ended with Patrick. She moved into his basement apartment. They got a dog together, and they started talking about marriage and kids. They even set a date.

One evening, Ricky showed up at my apartment soaked in rain. Before she even made it through the door she said, "You have to tell Patrick when he gets here that I have been with you all night."

"Okay, why?"

She said she spent the evening with Eric, helping him with a film. "Patrick hates him. He won't let me see him," she said.

"He won't let you?" I couldn't believe that Patrick would try to tell Ricky what to do, and I couldn't believe that she would listen to him.

"He says I spend all my time with other men. He said I'm a hussy," she said.

"He said hussy?" I couldn't help laughing at the old-fashioned word.

And then Ricky was shaking with laughter and dripping water all over my entryway.

"It's like he's playing the jealous boyfriend in a movie."

"Yeah, if the jealous boyfriend were eighty years old," she said, and walked off to the shower.

And even though they were mostly happy over the next few months, Patrick had a bad temper and he hated when Ricky hung out with men. He even hated when she hung out with female friends. I guess he didn't trust us to keep her away from other men.

More than once, he started screaming at her at a party or a bar before walking out without her. On those nights, Ricky would try to chase him down. She would usually end up sleeping over at my house.

Around Thanksgiving, the two of us always had a party. Ricky and I loved the drama of the holiday. We used to collect American flags at flea markets and drape them around my apartment. We pinned orange gels to all of a lights, to give the apartment a warm glow. We went to the garment district and search for fabrics in deep red and orange and yellow, and she would make us dresses. I invited some people who I considered to be friends. I invited some people who I wanted to get to know better. And I invited some people that I knew peripherally just to be bodies in the room. We'd all come together in my tiny apartment and eat a thanksgiving feast. That year I invited Eric. I know why I did it now. I wanted to expose Ricky and Patrick for what they really were. I wanted Ricky to see it played out in front of her like a tableau.

Eric came. And then Ricky and Patrick came. Eric was standing by the kitchen sink. And when Patrick saw Eric, he walked up to him and beat him until his nose was bloody and he was lying on the floor whimpering. It only took two punches. Eric didn't fight back. It was almost too good a performance.

Patrick walked out. Ricky ran out after him without her coat. We carried Eric to my bedroom to lie down. Lucas was there. He was the first one to go back to the table and fill his plate with turkey, and stuffing, and vegetables. People lined up after him. At first they avoided walking through the spot by the sink even after I wiped the blood from the floor, but eventually new people came in the door. Everyone started talking to each other. People moved closer and closer to the spot by the sink. Groups moved as people walked back and forth getting food and drinks. And eventually the party absorbed the disturbance.

Lucas came up to me and clinked glasses. "Congratulations."

"What?" I said.

He walked away.

* * * *

Unless they are rich enough to have a driver, everyone in a giant city like New York has a public breakdown at one time or another. It's because of how we move around. We are always part of a crowd, even in our own homes. But there's something people will do to make it a little easier. They will ignore you. If you are hysterical or you're talking to yourself or you're screaming into thin air, they won't look at you. They won't try to help you. They'll just walk right by you.

Ricky wouldn't speak to me. After work I walked the streets alone until one or two in the morning. I walked by bars I'd been to hundreds of times. I walked by the places where I had been to parties and where I had worked. I couldn't go inside. I couldn't go to any parties. I couldn't see anyone. I didn't want to go home where I'd have to talk to my roommates. I couldn't even trust myself on the subway, but I had to take it. And once when I was taking the train into Manhattan, I felt so empty to be on the subway without her, that I doubled over in my seat trying to feel more compact and less empty. I started sobbing. The people in the car train angled themselves away from me. They gave me what privacy they could, but the man sitting next to me must have been new to the city because when I got off to exit the train, he followed me, and he asked me if I needed to get a cup of coffee and talk. His name was Jack. He said he was an assistant professor at the University of Miami in Florida in the Biology department. Jack and I went to an Italian café on Washington Square Park, and drank cappuccinos and then red wine. He thought he'd discovered it himself, but it was one of the oldest and most famous cafés in Greenwich village. He told me about his work with storm systems and his project on the coast of Louisiana. And I saw an opening, flashes of another life, and I took it.

There were only two paths out of New York. I could go to Chicago and live with my parents and try to get a job. or I could go to graduate school. I applied to the University of Miami in Florida on Jack's suggestion, thinking that I wouldn't get in, but six months later, I left New York in my twenty-seven-year-old Toyota with Ricky sitting in the passenger seat. We weren't really friends anymore, but I asked her to drive with me, and she agreed. We always liked road trips. Maybe she wanted to close the book on us.

6/23

Ricky,

When we got back to the shore, we couldn't find the truck. We started walking down the road toward the nearest town. The road was flooded in some places. In others, trees, power lines, fences, siding, and glass were strewn everywhere. After a few hours of walking in the sun, Andrea started to breathe heavily from the heat. Her shoe came undone, and she tried to bend down to tie it, but she couldn't reach the laces. I bent down to tie it for her, and I saw it. On her ankle, where the bird had pecked her, her skin had turned dark purple. "Is that normal for you now?" I said, gesturing to her pregnant belly.

"No," she said. "It's not."

When we got to the first town, it's really just the headquarters for an oil company with a couple of mobile homes set up in a parking lot, we found a man with a plow affixed to his pick-up truck. He offered to drive us back to Canton. And then he said, for a small fee. That's when I knew he was a creep. But then he saw Andrea, pregnant and sweating in the sun, and he said never mind. He'd take us wherever we needed to go. I told him we needed to get Andrea to the hospital, and he said he hadn't heard of any hospitals that were operating anywhere near here. "They all evacuated when the storm came," he said. That was the second time she saved me.

The ride back to the office wasn't easy. The sky was yellow from the dirt carried by the fringes of the storm. Sometimes we had to get out of the truck and pull a downed tree or a piece of debris out of the road. When we were driving along the bayou, there were dead fish and shrimp all over.

We got back into town around 11:00 p.m. The storm had taken most of the roof of the house and some of the second floor. I walked two hours to get to the office to see if we could send our data to NOAA. The power was all of,f though, and we still didn't have cell service.

We went back to the house and sat at the dining room table. I drank some left over red wine. She had water. Eventually she put her head down on the table and went to sleep. I sat up night, staring into the darkness.

Just as the sun was rising, Jack walked in. He looked ragged. He was covered with cuts and bruises, but he was alive.

"We found the spill," he said. "It's all the way out in the Deep," he said.

"What happened after that?" I said.

Ricky, the Deep is a trench in the middle of the Gulf. It's a natural dead zone. Nothing can live all the way down there. And nobody can drill for oil that deep. They can't make a well cap that will withstand the pressure. There's nobody licensed to drill that far out. Once someone starts drilling out there, those wells will never be sealed.

"Coming back the storm took part of our wing," he said. "We went down near Tampico. After eight hours in the water, the Mexican coast guard got us."

"How'd you get back here?" I said.

"I flew to Houston and rented a truck," he said. "I had to make sure you two were all right."

"Can we drive it back there?" I said. "We need to get her to a hospital."

"I'm out of gas," he said.

He picked Andrea up out of her chair and carried her upstairs to a bedroom that wasn't damaged by the wind. All the furniture down here is wet. I put my head down on the table and went to sleep.

All my love,

Marion

Chapter 12

When we got to Miami, Ricky wanted to go out, but I wanted to stay in and set up my new apartment.

Ricky had a friend in Miami, and she called him. He came over to the apartment. He was a big guy, muscular and hairy, with narrow blue eyes. “Jon,” he said, and he crushed my hand in his. “We’re just going down the street. I’ll have her back by midnight.”

I waved. Ricky didn’t say goodbye. She didn’t come back that night.

When she returned to the apartment the next morning, she seemed upbeat. She had an iced coffee for both of us. She asked me to take a walk along the beach.

We walked out onto Miami beach, took off our shoes and walked along the water. Everywhere along the beach, buried partially in the sand, there were Man of War jellyfish, their blue and pink, translucent bodies looked like inflated plastic bags tucked into the sand, and their long tentacles trailed behind them. She crouched down to look, taking off her sunglasses. Her skin was soft like putty. I could see striations on her cheek where she’d slept on her hair.

She said, “Well, I fucked everything up. I’m really just as bad as Patrick always said.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Don’t touch it!”

“I slept with another man last night,” she said, nodding and looking down at the jellyfish. “Patrick always accused me of sleeping with other people. I guess he was right.”

“What man?” I said, but I already knew it was her friend with the narrow blue eyes. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember anything. I was drunk, I guess.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Patrick was right.” She was crying now. Her tears rolled down her face and dropped down onto the jellyfish’s translucent stomach pouch.

“How do you know what happened if you don’t remember?” I said. I knew what was coming next. I had already seen the red welt on her collarbone.

“I woke up in his bed,” she said, crying. “I have bruises all over my body,” She stood up and lifted her dress. There were red spots on her thighs, on her hipbones, on her chest and arms. She dug her finger into the welt on her left thigh. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“But you don’t remember,” I said.

“So. You know how I get when I’m drunk.”

“So, how do you think you got the bruises then?”

“I don’t know, maybe it was just intense.” She pulled her dress back down. “How am I going to hide these from Patrick?”

“Maybe you should stay down here with me for a while,” I said.

“No.” She looked back at me. “I can never come back here.”

"Okay," I said. I knew I should tell her that it wasn't her fault, that her friend had raped her, but I didn't. I thought it might be easier for her to get over it if she thought about it this way. Patrick was not a good partner. She needed to leave him anyway. Or maybe I thought it would be easier for me. I knew that if I told her, if I really convinced her, I would have to defer my enrollment and go back to New York. I would have to talk to Patrick and explain. And I thought that maybe she would come to it on her own, and I would be there then to help her, but I wasn't.

We walked along the beach a little further. She bent down over another jellyfish and touched her finger to the pink comb on top of its body. "See, it doesn't sting," she said.

When she got in the cab to go to the airport, she kissed the air next to both of my cheeks. "I love you," she said.

I put her bag in after her.

Patrick found out. He kicked Ricky out of their apartment in the middle of the night. He left her stuff on the curb for anyone to take. She started living on a friend's couch. Patrick still called her to scream at her, calling her a whore, a drunk, a whole lot of worse things, and she would listen to him until he wore himself out and hung up. He always hung up when he started to cry. She deserved it, she said. It was her form of aversion therapy.

Over the next few months, I talked to her less and less. Instead of calling her, I would call one of our mutual friends and ask how she was doing. I heard that she was in and out of rehab. I heard that she was having trouble keeping a place to live. I heard that she was going through guy after guy. I heard that nobody saw her anymore.

The last time I saw Ricky, I was at a coffee shop in her neighborhood. I was in town for a wedding. It was March, the weather was in the forties, and when I opened the door of the coffee

shop, my sunglasses fogged up so much so that I couldn't see a thing. I felt someone grab my hand and pull it gently. Another hand on my shoulder guided me into a seat.

"Hi," she said. She had a cappuccino. There was a notebook open on the table with drawings in it. She closed it when I took off my sunglasses.

"Hi."

"I didn't know you were in town," she said.

"I'm only here for two days, a wedding."

"Whose wedding?" she said. She pulled her coat more tightly around herself.

"Jordan," I said. "You don't like him."

"Jordan," she said. "Who's he marrying?"

"This girl, Olivia, you don't know her," I said.

"Olivia, no, I don't know her. Do you have a minute to talk or do you have to run?" she said.

"Sure."

She told me about her last relationship. She had met him for the first time in art school when he was thirty-five. He used to hang around with all of the undergrads. Eventually he married one of them, and eventually they divorced. Ricky ran into him on the subway a few months earlier.

"The relationship was beautiful at the beginning. He would text me beautiful things every day," she said. "He bought me gifts. But even then, I knew that he was going to figure out what I was, and he would leave me."

"And what's that?" I said.

“I’m not really a good girlfriend, you know. I’m a mess. I’m a drunk. I’m kind of a slut. I’m a hussy.” She looked down at the table and laughed. “Remember?”

“He didn’t say that.” It was too late for me to tell her that none of this was her fault. She was so invested in her narrative.

“No, but he would have said it eventually,” she said and stared at the condensation dripping down the windows.

“Don’t use the language of the patriarchy,” I said. It was a worthless thing to say.

She nodded.

I told her I was fine. I told her that I didn’t mind living in Miami. I told her I wasn’t bored anymore. I told her that I was making enough money to eat well and live well. I told her that I was finally growing up. I told her that every single night, I was dreaming of having children.

7/15

Ricky,

I have to tell you what happened here. The day after we made it back to the house, Jack and I woke up to the sound of Andrea screaming upstairs. I ran into her room. She was sitting up in only her underwear. I told Jack to stay outside. The skin of her right leg was purple and swollen from her ankle to her knee.

"What happened?" I said. "Did you fall?"

"No," she said.

"We need to get you to a hospital." I walked out of the room. Jack was in the hallway. "You need to call NOAA and get a plane down here right away," I said.

"What is it?" he said.

"I don't know." But I thought I did. "I'm going to the lab."

"I thought we were trying to get her taken to a hospital."

"If you can get an airlift out of here, just go without me," I said.

I went downstairs and picked up my bag from the dining room. I walked to the office. The sky was still yellow. Some of the roads were still flooded, but the water was retreating.

When I got to the office, I took out the water samples that I had taken from the outpost. I made slide after slide and looked at them under the microscope. I was at it for half an hour before I found something: a long thin green filament made up of ten or twelve plant cells. I took out the slide I made when we found the whale and looked at that again. It was green algae.

I practically ran back to the house. When I got to Andrea's bedroom, Jack was sitting there on the bed behind her. You know Ricky, in Renaissance art, you often see a pyramid

composition. It's when an artist arranges his figures, so that the eye is drawn somewhere specific. Usually it's that face of someone important. You see it in the Mona Lisa, in the Primavera, and in Michelangelo's Pieta. Sitting there on the bed with Jack behind her and to the left and her belly jutting out to the right. The three of them were a perfect pyramid, a perfect family, and I remembered that night when Betty left, and we were all drunk and I let the girl sleep in my bed, and I knew who the father of her baby was, and I knew what Jack meant when he said, "I had to make sure you two were all right." Maybe I knew all along, but I wouldn't let myself believe it.

But there wasn't time to think about all that. "It was fresh water," I said. There was fresh water overflow from the storm surge."

"We know," Jack said. "Necrotizing Fasciitis."

Andrea lifted the blanket and revealed her leg. The skin had begun to die on her calf, revealing the muscles and blood vessels underneath. In this house full of rotting furniture, even if we could stop the bacteria, she might lose a leg to infection.

"How far has it gotten?"

"It's on my upper thigh," she said. "You need to give me a C-section."

"What about the plane?" I said, looking at Jack.

"They're doing their best. They said probably tomorrow night," he said.

"Well then we should wait," I said.

"Look how fast it's moving," Andrea said. "In the five hours you were gone it got my entire thigh."

"You'll die," I said.

"I can show you how to do it," she said. "I've seen it done on a horse."

"You'll die." I said again.

"If you don't do it, then she will die," she said, pointing to her stomach "I'm already dead anyway." She pointed to a scalpel that was lying in a tin full of brown liquid.

"Whiskey," she said.

"I'm not going to kill you," I said.

Ricky, I wish I could tell you that we did the right thing. I wish I could tell you that they found a plane to take us out. I wish I could tell you that we found the last doctor within fifty miles and that they amputated her leg. Jack did go out searching for a doctor. We used the last bit of charge on the satellite phone to call the EPA and FEMA, trying to get a lift out. I gave Andrea what remained of a course of Cypro that I'd gotten for a kidney infection. But mostly I waited, sitting in that bedroom with her. At first, she was moaning and screaming the whole time, but then she was quiet. Around midnight, she called my name. "Marion," she said. "Promise me you will get her. You can leave me here, but promise me, you'll take her with you."

The next morning, the infection reached her liver. Her skin turned yellow with jaundice, and she died that evening.

Her entire torso was infected. First the skin died, revealing a layer of yellow and white fat, and then the bacteria took that as well, and started on the muscles of her abdomen.

In a couple hours, the plane will be here to take us out. And maybe, by that time, we'll have a new little girl.

Vita

The author received her Bachelor's degree in Art History from New York University. She joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in 2014 to pursue a degree in fiction.