The Brightness



A Novel

Chad Harbach

New York Times bestselling author of *THE ART OF FIELDING*

Digital Galley Edition

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Praise for

The Art of Fielding

“It’s left a little hole in my life the way a really good book will, after making room in my days for reading it—which is also what a really good book will do.”

—Jonathan Franzen, *Time*

“Chad Harbach has the rare ability to write with earnest, deeply felt emotion without ever veering into sentimentality, and to create quirky, vulnerable, and fully imagined characters who instantly take up residence in our hearts and minds.”

—*New York Times*

“A triumphant first novel...Like a great baseball game, this book manages to feel traditional and contemporary all at once.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“Harbach writes with a tender, egoless virtuosity...There’s just something so easy and riveting about the way this book’s layers unfold; not since *Lonesome Dove* have I been so sorry to let a group of characters go.”

—*GQ*

“Precious and altogether excellent...It seems a stretch for a baseball novel to hold truth and beauty and the entire human condition in its mitt—well, *The Art of Fielding* isn’t really a baseball novel at all, or not only. It’s also a campus novel and a bromance (and for that matter a full-fledged gay romance), a comedy of manners and a tragicomedy of errors.”

—New York Times Book Review

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—USA Today

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Also by Chad Harbach

The Art of Fielding
MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction (editor)

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A NOVEL

Chad Harbach

LITTLE BROWN
NEW YORK

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Contents

Cover

Disclaimer

Praise for The Art of Fielding

Also by Chad Harbach

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

I

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24

II

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13

14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22

III

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16

17
18

IV

V

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9

Acknowledgments

About the Author

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FOR ANSEL

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Merrily, merrily, shall I live now,
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

—*The Tempest*

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I

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1

Irma opened her eyes. Without her glasses the room looked fuzzy and vague, but a pale gray rectangle surrounded the darker rectangle of window shade, suggesting dawn was near. Iambs of robin-song, cheery and irregular, fluttered past the shade. Through the farmhouse wall she could hear her brother's muffled grunts, the thump of elbows against padded chair as he jabbed the controls of his video game.

The robin and Jacob paused in concert, as though they'd planned it. Irma's truck was packed and pointed toward the highway, and she felt eager to hit the road, but first she lay and listened to the silence. It was the medium she'd grown up in, a deep, familiar emptiness that smelled in summer of sun-scorched hay, the sharp stink of the chicken coop, and her mom's nettle tea. That silence seemed one moment to hold and comfort Irma, the next to sweep her out to the edge of a vast abyss. From within it she could hear a car *shush* by on the highway, half a mile off. She could hear the beat of her heart.

She shifted beneath the sheets, and her foot disturbed the soft weight of Anderson Cooper, who meowed. Another pair of tiny iambs, pa-*pa,* pa-*pa,* as four paws hit the floor.

She felt along the nightstand till her fingers found her glasses. She put them on and slipped out of bed and into her clothes. Tiptoeing around her childhood room, she felt less a grown woman, finally turned twenty-one, than a furtive child. Her mom had come down with a migraine yesterday, as often happened before Irma's departures.

She opened the closet and slid from the shelf the cat carrier she'd bought at Walmart yesterday. It was the nicest one in the store, an elaborate mesh-and-fabric device that converted into a backpack. Call it a splurge, after a

summer of waiting tables and buying nothing but books. Zipped inside the carrier was a baggie full of hard-boiled eggs.

Anderson pawed at the bedroom door, asking to be freed. Irma scooped him up and, with apologetic murmurs as he groused and squirmed, placed him inside the carrier. Before he could belt out a meow, she broke off a chunk of egg and popped it into his mouth.

From beyond the wall came a volley of grunts and thumps. You might think twenty-four was too old to stay up all night playing video games, but you might think a lot of things. Age had never much applied to Jacob. Irma fed Anderson the rest of the egg, zipped the carrier, and slid her arms through the backpack straps. She stole down the hall and descended the gray-painted stairs, the center of each worn shiny and slick.

She tugged on her boots and stepped outside to a pale pink sky and a ragtag chorus of chirping birds. From the highway came the fading drone of a semi, that weary complaint of displaced air and engine rumble. The dawn retained a note of nighttime coolness.

She walked down the winding dirt path that led through spiky, dew-spangled clumps of foxtail and pigweed and thistle to the gravel drive, rounded the front bumper of the Ram, and placed Anderson's carrier on the passenger side of the bench seat. "Sit tight," she told him as she shut the door. "There's an egg in it for you."

It would be too romantic to say their falling-down farmhouse perched atop a hill, but the dirt path, not much wider than one of Irma's Doc Martens, twisted upward as she returned to the house. She slipped inside, climbed the stairs, and knocked on her brother's door. She couldn't make out his grumbled reply, but it didn't sound like *Go away.*

The bedroom was as dark as Jacob could make it, the curtains drawn against the daybreak, his monitor the only source of light. On it, knights in panoply lay sprawled across a stone floor, blood oozing between the stones. On the desk sat the cardboard shell of a six-pack, five empties scattered around his keyboard, the last full bottle held in one hand.

Jacob removed his headphones. She'd always thought him handsome, with his wide, ruddy cheeks and benevolent eyes.

"Hey," she said. "You're up late."

He scraped at the label on his bottle, crumpling a thumbnail's width of damp, gluey paper. "Yeah."

“I’m heading out. See you at Thanksgiving?”

Jacob nodded. “Sure.” The word seemed to travel an arduous distance just to reach his lips.

Irma paused, a sadness welling within her. She used to pick fights with Jacob to lure him out of himself, but that was years ago. She felt guilty to be saying goodbye, but why? They’d barely hung out all summer.

Sometimes she wondered what had happened to Jacob, but the question itself felt wrong. Maybe nothing had happened—maybe he had always been Jacob, serene and unreachable. He worked his shifts at the warehouse; he came home and played his games.

There was a time, though, when they’d been close, in the casual way of siblings. They would sneak through the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the Olsons’ dairy farm, and Irma would traipse after Jacob all afternoon. They romped through the forest that abutted the pastures, climbing trees, striking poses on stumps, pretending to be cartoon heroes. They caught toads by the pond, pretended to lick them, and let them go. Jacob said the Olsons would shoot them if they got caught, and though the Olsons did like to shoot things, this was pretending too. Irma could still feel those toads between her hands, knobby and coarse, pulsing with alien life.

“I’m taking the cat,” she said.

Jacob’s glance reached her, his interest gently piqued. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I need a roommate.” The roommate she had in mind wasn’t the cat, exactly; the roommate was Dahlia, whom Irma hoped would be enticed by Anderson’s presence, but this was too much to explain. “Don’t tell Mom. Just let her figure it out.”

“I won’t.”

“Bye,” Irma said, and touched the arm of his chair.

As she headed downstairs, she heard footsteps in the kitchen, followed by a series of familiar sounds: A cabinet door swinging closed. The *thunk* of pipes as the sink turned on. The glassy squeak of the coffeepot’s rim against the mouth of the faucet.

“Hey Dad,” she said as she entered.

Matthew Friske dumped the water into the top of the machine, placed the pot on the burner, and pressed the round orange rocker switch. “Hey sweetie,” he said. “All packed?”

Irma nodded. “Yep.”

Her dad wore pale green scrub pants and the T-shirt she'd bought him freshman year that said WESTISH DAD. If her dad liked a piece of clothing he wore it to actual tatters, and this shirt was well on its way, the puffy letters faded, their edges cracked and gnawed.

"What time do you work?" Irma asked.

"Not till eight." His smile was sheepish, as though he were embarrassed to be caught in the act of having arisen to see her off. He was, as of two years ago, a medical assistant at the hospital in Platteville. Before that he'd been a pet-store manager, an office-park janitor, an assistant greenskeeper at a golf course. He nodded toward the coffee maker, which was just beginning to perk. "Assuming you want some."

"Sure," Irma said with a yawn. In theory, she enjoyed being up at this hour. There was a prefatory peacefulness all around, and the water squeezed from the muggy air lay on the fields and trees as dew. But she'd stayed up reading until two a.m. all summer long and last night lay awake even later, texting with Pammy and Dahlia, refining their plan for tonight.

"Senior year," said her dad, a kind of open-ended prompt.

"Senior year," Irma agreed.

"How's the Ram running?"

"Like a dream," Irma said with affectionate irony. Her old truck rumbled along, demanding minor repairs without ever dying.

"Those hoses did the trick, huh?"

"It sounds good," Irma said. "The hiss is gone."

Last weekend, she and her dad drove out to the junkyards that lined the interstate frontage and foraged for hoses and connectors to replace the cracking, dried-out rubber that held the Ram's insides together.

Neither of them knew much about engines, but they'd so far managed to keep the Ram from joining its fellows in the junkyard. She'd bought it the summer before college for six hundred dollars of waitressing money. It was a crazy idea, the truck being not just enormous and older than Irma but without power steering, so when she took it for a test spin, she could barely turn a corner. Her dad shook his head, but Irma would not be deterred, and she handed over her money. Early on, she'd arrive at every destination wet with sweat, her arms so tired she could barely roll up the window. But gradually she'd grown stronger, and the truck had lasted through three years of college so far, including innumerable six-hour treks to and from Westish.

Irma, herself so small, enjoyed being in charge of a vehicle so large. It reminded her of a brain atop a body. Or those birds on elephants' backs.

"Penny for your thoughts," her dad said.

"I was thinking I'd better go say goodbye to Mom."

"Good idea."

Irma climbed the stairs and paused outside her parents' room, feeling the obscure heaviness of the silence inside. She nudged open the door and made her way to the sleeping form that was her mom.

"Hey," she whispered as she reached down and touched her mother's hair.

Once touched, Ada took a moment to stir, but once stirred, she passed instantly into a state of total alertness, as though unwilling to admit to the vulnerability of sleep. When she spoke, her voice was pure and clear, a midday voice: "Irma."

She reached up and wrapped her arms around Irma as Irma bent over the bed. Ada was thin and firm like Irma but several inches taller, so her thinness took on a different character, her arms long and her legs long. As her face aged into angles and creases to match the gray of her hair, her body continued to be itself, defiantly youthful, and it felt strange to Irma to be pressed against that body now. She'd always felt that her mom, whether or not she was beautiful, was somehow a creature of sex, whereas Irma was decidedly not, and Irma, in her mind, associated her own association of Ada with sex with Ada's tendency toward hermitage and thwarted anger, as though to be mixed up with sex were reason enough to refuse to live in the world, while Irma, unmarked, could come and go as she pleased.

In a low, quick voice, into Irma's shoulder, her mom was reciting a prayer.

"Blessed are thou among women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

"Amen," echoed Irma.

Ada relinquished her grip on Irma's shoulders and gazed into Irma's eyes.

"Be good," she said.

Irma nodded. "I will."

Downstairs the coffee maker groaned. Her dad stood on tiptoe, feeling

along the top cupboard shelf for a travel mug Irma could take with her. He found one, but it was missing its lid. Irma lingered in the doorway and watched him nod with knowing glumness, as though such tiny failures were his birthright. He reached up, felt through the clutter again, and pulled down a yellow Brewers mug, its lid furry with dust. The giveaway keepsake of some long-ago trip to the baseball stadium in Milwaukee, the kind of dad-and-kids excursion he'd insisted on whenever they could afford it.

He fingered the sliding piece of plastic that covered and uncovered the opening to make sure it worked. Satisfied, he washed and dried the mug, then filled it with the first of the coffee.

"Before you go," he said, and reached for the butt of his scrub pants as though his wallet were there.

"Dad," Irma said. "Don't."

"Don't what? Just a sec." He handed Irma the mug of coffee and left the room. Through the circular opening she took a scalding quarter-sip.

He returned and handed Irma a bank envelope. It contained three fifties, stuck together with the tackiness of brand-new bills.

"Dude," Irma protested.

"It's nothing," he said. "It's a little something."

"I worked all summer. I don't pay tuition. I have enough money."

"Good," he said.

Her dad would be supporting Ada and Jacob for as long as he could manage; he did not need to support her too. The feel of those starchy, stuck-together fifties, which Irma had to rub apart with her fingers, struck her as an index of her dad's lostness, his inability to navigate the world even as he held the family together. He'd never made money farming, nor had he built a career.

If he needed to make a gesture, couldn't he simply have gone to an ATM, let it spit out a thin sheaf of tens and twenties? It pained her, somehow: The way he'd parked the car, ambled into the bank, waited in line. The way he'd explained, in a slow-talking way that tried the teller's patience, that his daughter was a student at Westish College, the winner of a scholarship so special it was awarded only in alternate years, and would be needing some pocket money—fifties, please, your finest fifties, three of them.

"Thanks," she said as she hugged him.

THE RAM'S AIR-CONDITIONING no longer worked, and neither did the radio. Irma cranked her window down. She'd just have to deal with the highway noise. She plugged her headphones into her phone, slithered the cord beneath her T-shirt where it wouldn't interfere with her gear-shifting arm, and popped an earbud into her ear.

While driving she usually listened to audiobooks of old novels that were in the public domain. The recordings were narrated by volunteers, many of whom had Midwestern accents not too different from Irma's own. Right now she was listening to *The Egoist* by George Meredith, which she'd picked because Kate Millett called it as good as a Jane Austen novel. George Meredith wasn't one of those sneaky nineteenth-century female Georges—he was just a guy.

She gave the Ram's sluggish engine a rev and accelerated down the drive, leaving it in first too long. Gravel kicked up from her wheels and sprayed the culvert weeds. Her dad planted pumpkins that in October he sold out of an old wagon bed at the head of the drive. They'd come in poorly this year, but she spotted a few orange spheres among the vines, ready to be cut and cured.

As she slowed to turn onto County H, she tapped the dainty gold cross that rested against her neck, then reached up to tap the chunky wooden rosary wound around the rearview mirror. The gold cross had belonged to her great-grandmother and was Irma's most prized possession. Why she'd bought the other, with its two-tone brown beads like a chessboard, was a mystery to Irma. She'd found it at a yard sale for a dollar, and it seemed to suit the Ram somehow. It was a joke she couldn't explain. Perhaps only God would get it, except that He didn't exist.

Before H met the freeway, Irma pulled into the truck stop. A vast plaza of sodium lamps burned down through the dawn. Around the edges of the lot, the long gray bodies of semis slumbered.

"Hold on, Andy," she said as she killed the engine. "I'll be back."

She swiped her card, unscrewed the gas cap, and jammed in the nozzle. She set the latch pin and hustled inside the station to grab snacks: greenish banana, chocolate bar, bag of roasted almonds. "You have quite an appetite" was something Ada, while giving her side-eye, liked to say. Irma would have interpreted this as a comment about her weight if her weight ever

varied from ninety-nine pounds. Instead it seemed to convey a general suspicion about her capacity for sin.

By the time she returned, forty-six dollars had been sucked from her debit card. Speaking of sins, the Ram's gas-guzzling was one. But what was she supposed to do, carpool to college? Drop thirty grand on a Prius? The planet would have to forgive her.

She climbed back in the cab and fed Anderson slivers of eggs. Her phone dinged in her pocket.

Safe travels, I! Can't wait to see you.

The little ellipsis showed Pella was still typing. There came a second ding:

Eggplant parmesan in progress. See you 8ish? Unless you're headed to the Parties. ;)

Irma clicked her phone dark, floored the Ram, and merged onto the freeway.

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2

From high above—from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator, such as existed in the nineteenth century, or one of those camera-equipped drones that exist in the twenty-first, which certain male students love to fly among the maples and conifers of Westish College, past the grassy practice fields and big stone bowl of the football stadium, far out over the rippling blue-gray water of Lake Michigan—you could see, in the early September dusk, amid the dark rectangles of roofs and the deep green treetops, the bustle of preparations for the Parties.

Ribbed aluminum kegs were loaded out of trucks and vans and hauled through gaps in fences into backyards scorched tan by late-summer heat or up the peeling steps of porches and through the propped-open doors of ramshackle manors. Ladders leaned against garages. Young men perched in the Vs of trees, stringing the boughs with holiday lights. Workers in the matching shirts of a rental company inflated a bouncy castle two stories high, one orange turret after another snapping to attention.

Oblong bags of ice were slung like sandbags from hand to hand. Kegs were tapped and sampled, the froth poured into the dirt. Draped across the upper stories of the manors hung banners made of stitched-together bedsheets, all of which bore the same three words, painted in navy capitals: WE ARE ONE.

A few blocks away, Pella Affenlicht stood in the narrow kitchen of the bright yellow bungalow she shared with her fiancé, Mike. She was turning twenty-eight soon but had just this past June graduated from Westish, having embarked on an ill-fated marriage when she was eighteen, which delayed her starting college. The boys out there lugging kegs had recently been her classmates, but because they were several years younger than Pella, she tended to think of them mostly as Mike’s charges on the football

and baseball teams. The bustle of their preparations registered as a slight disturbance of energy superimposed on the quiet of a Sunday evening, like the gathering of the thunderstorms that, in muggy weather like this, rolled in from the west to stun and stagger the town, then dissipated over the lake in a dumb show of lightning.

Her own preparations were different. The chunky brick-red sauce bubbled and spluttered, and the fragrance of sweet basil wafted up from the pan. She swirled a spatula through the sauce, scraped the sides of the wok, and turned down the heat. Eggplant parmesan was a simple meal to make, but she and Irma both loved it, and Pella relished the fact that most of the ingredients—eggplants, tomatoes, basil—came from her backyard. Her bare feet bounced on the linoleum. She'd missed Irma all summer and felt almost giddy about her return.

Mike appeared in the archway that separated the dining room from the narrow kitchen, his close-cropped brown hair damp from the shower. As always, he was dressed in pleated khakis and a navy polo shirt bearing the emblem of the Westish Harpooners: a featureless spearman balanced in the prow of a boat. Mike worked for the athletic department as a coach and assistant director. He insisted on tucking in his shirt above a beat-up leather belt, an arrangement Pella found dorkily charming.

"Hey babe," she said.

"Hey."

Having shifted her attention from the eggplant to the ice cream sauce, she tossed the last cherries into the pot and rinsed the bright red juice from her hands. She opened the pantry to find what else she needed: box of sugar, packet of vanilla beans, bottle of Shiraz.

Mike put a hand on her waist and squeezed behind her. He opened the fridge, pulled out a Pabst, and cracked it.

Pella lifted an eyebrow teasingly. "Getting a head start on the evening?"

He nodded toward her hands, which happened to be twisting a corkscrew into the top of the Shiraz. "Looks like you're doing the same."

"This," she said, "is for the cherry sauce."

"Yum. Save me some."

"I will." Mike, she could tell, was in a good mood, as he always was on the day of the Parties, and doing his best to disguise it.

"I should head out soon," he said.

“Already?” The kitchen window still admitted a trace of late-summer light. “What time do these kids start partying?”

“I need to drop by the office,” Mike said. “What about you? Big plans later?”

Pella shrugged. “Irma’s getting in today.”

Mike grunted as he slugged his beer. If Pella felt compelled to downplay her excitement about Irma’s arrival, he seemed equally compelled to stress his grumpy indifference.

“She’ll probably show up looking for dinner.” Pella tipped the wine bottle toward the stewing cherries. The recipe called for half a cup of wine; she eyeballed it. “I’ll feed her, we’ll watch some pretentious movie.” She said this with a hint of being put upon, as though it weren’t precisely what she wished for from the evening.

“Maybe you and the Irminator should go to the Parties,” Mike joked. “Teach her how to loosen up a little.”

“I’m all for Irma loosening up. But I’m not sure the Parties are quite the right venue.”

“How would you know?” Mike said cheerfully as he crumpled his beer can and tossed it toward the recycling bin. “You’ve never been.”

He opened the fridge, grabbed another Pabst, and jammed it into a pocket of his khakis.

“Don’t get too drunk,” Pella said as he leaned down to give her a kiss.

“Please. I’m on duty.”

“Like I said.” In truth she didn’t care whether Mike got drunk or not, but it was impossible for her to understand why he liked the Parties so much—so much that, when President Molina threatened to curtail them for liability reasons, Mike stepped forward to defend their wholesome necessity and wound up becoming the head of a committee that vouched for their safety. The committee, as far as Pella could tell, consisted of him alone.

It was impossible for her to understand why he’d not only added a sleepless night during football season to his already endless duties but also seemed almost giddy about it. It wasn’t as though he’d be cutting loose tonight—he’d never stoop from his lofty stature as Mike Schwartz, Campus Legend and Mentor to All. He wouldn’t be slurping shots off an ice luge or doing the worm on a muddy lawn or dabbling in any of the other dubious

pursuits that, based on Pella's beer-fogged, long-ago memory, people got up to at the Parties.

No, he'd just amble up and down Grant Street in his khakis and boat shoes and tucked-in, too-small polo, past the big party houses and the dumpy bungalow he'd been living in when they met, one meaty hand holding a Pabst, the other ready to fist-bump every student he passed, all of whom, save the newly hatched freshmen, knew his name as readily he knew theirs. And simply because he was doing that, a certain order would obtain among the chaos.

It must be nice, she thought, to have a job you loved so much in a place you loved so much.

"Have fun," Pella said.

PELLA WENT TO track down her phone. She'd received only two texts from Irma all day, sent in quick succession. Running behind :(read the first, followed by Call you later. :) She wandered through the dining and living rooms, up the stairs, and into her study before realizing she'd left the phone outside.

The sun had dipped below the tops of the neighbors' trees. Contango was sunning himself on the still-warm flagstones of the patio. One leg at a time, like a rusty folding table being set up, he rose to his feet and ambled over to greet her. Pella scratched his furry head as she picked up her phone from the patio table.

Still no word from Irma.

She resisted the urge to text again; she didn't want Irma to think she was fretting. That was an important aspect of having a best friend almost seven years your junior: Never let her see you fret, lest you be cast in the role of clucking parent. Irma, to her credit, never texted while she drove. More than likely she would roll into town and come straight here to eat and hang out, sipping mint tea during the movie while Pella polished off the wine. She would sleep on the twin bed in Pella's study, get up early to go unload her truck, and return at noon for their lunch with Judy.

Pella put the eggplant parmesan in the oven and resumed her cooking, listening as she did for the sound of Irma's truck pulling up to the curb, that rhythmic *flup-flup-flup* of flywheel chug.

She cut a lemon, squeezed both halves into the cherry sauce, and fished out the slender brown body of the vanilla bean. She stirred in the lemon and tasted a warm spoonful. The cherries were dark and rich; the tartness curled her tongue. She transferred the sauce to a dish and put it in the fridge to chill.

Mike's words about the Parties were spinning in her mind: *You've never been*. But that wasn't true. Every year she thought about telling Mike the story, and every year she kept it to herself. It felt strange to have a secret from him.

It happened the summer before she turned fifteen. She and her dad lived in Cambridge then, in the townhouse they'd shared since her mom died. One night, after months of coldness and discord between them, he insisted on taking Pella to their favorite sushi restaurant. She knew right away that something was up.

Sure enough, over unagi and seaweed salad, as she stole sips of his sake, he told her he was flying to Wisconsin to interview for a job. The presidency of Westish College, his alma mater.

Pella was stunned. "You won't get it," she said, and defiantly drained his sake.

Her dad explained that he'd already had multiple phone interviews. The chair of the trustees had flown to Boston to meet him. He hadn't applied for the position but had been approached, sought out, more or less handpicked. He was going to get the job.

"Then you won't take it," Pella said.

"We'll see," he replied.

It was incomprehensible to adolescent Pella that her dad would want to leave Harvard, leave the East Coast, ruin his career and both their lives. His only conceivable motive, she thought, was to spite her. She refused to fly to Wisconsin with him for the interview, and she refused to speak to him when he returned. Finally he came into her room and sat down on the bed. "I have to take it," he said. "It's calling me."

His voice was contrite but determined. Pella felt a surge of rage unlike any she'd known—and that was saying something.

"I think a fresh start would be good for us," he said. "We haven't been getting along."

For a decade they had been inseparable. As a kid, Pella went everywhere

with her dad except when she was at school, and he'd never been a stickler about school. Instead, she roamed the Harvard campus, lugging her yellow backpack full of books and art supplies. She sat in her dad's lectures and sections, drawing the students in her sketchpad. Groups of freshman girls vied for her attention; to have Grant Affenlicht's daughter at your lunch table was, somehow, the epitome of cool. Her dad took her to readings, concerts, ball games. He took her to faculty parties as his date.

From an early age, he'd instilled in her an abundant sense of freedom; she'd used it to stay close to him. When she reached eighth grade, she began to use that freedom for other purposes. She found older kids to hang out with. She stayed out late. She drank, she smoked, she smoked pot. She'd always been precocious—verbally, socially, intellectually. Now she became precocious at all the things parents don't want their children precocious at. When her dad tried to rein her in, she went even further. She got a tattoo on her upper arm—an exact replica of his beloved Moby-Dick tattoo, a leaping sperm whale with twisting flukes. It was a fucked-up thing to do.

From this vantage—a grown woman standing in her kitchen, her father four years dead—it felt painfully clear she'd inflicted all kinds of misery on him. At the time, she'd been convinced it was the other way around.

"You think I'm moving to Wisconsin?" she scoffed, eyes wide with scorn. "I am *never* moving to Wisconsin."

"You might like it," her dad suggested mildly.

"I might like what? Going to high school with a bunch of actual *cows*?"

"I believe it's called a herd." With effort, he summoned a familiar twinkle into his gray eyes.

"I'm staying here," she said.

"You can't stay here by yourself, Pella."

"Fine. Then I'll go to boarding school."

What did she expect to happen? She expected her dad to cave and decline the job, thereby proving the extent of her power. Or she expected him to drag her to Westish against her will and thereby prove, as he'd proved so many times before, the endurance of his love. In the event, neither happened. Her dad remained steadfast. So did she. He chose his path, and he let her choose hers. Pella enrolled at an expensive-if-not-quite-elite boarding school in New Hampshire called Tellman Rose, which was

what she said she wanted. As she got what she said she wanted, her anger only grew.

She did travel to Wisconsin that August, because the dorms at her new school weren't open yet and because she relented and agreed to go. Even amid her anger she was a keen observer of her father, and it perplexed her to see the change that came over him in his new surroundings—which were, hard as it was to imagine, surroundings he'd known before.

She'd only ever known him as Professor Affenlicht, striding across Harvard Yard in his tailored suit, books beneath his arm, tie dancing in the wind, reenacting a tableau that stretched back to the Pilgrims. Her dad was not of that favored stock, but he certainly looked the part. Easygoing and sophisticated, with his striking silver hair, he might have been, not what he was, a grandson of Scottish and German immigrants who had grown up milking cows in southwest Wisconsin, but the scion of some exalted Boston Brahmin family.

At Westish, he looked different: softer, less shiny, more at ease. He *sounded* different. A flatness crept into his vowels, as though he were trying to mimic the native accent, but the truth was even stranger: He was a native. He looked out at Lake Michigan and smiled.

Some latent quality was lifted to his surface; a scaffolding of pretension, so finely woven she'd never known it existed, made itself apparent by falling away. Her father was different from what she'd always supposed—better, perhaps, but different, and the difference felt like betrayal. He loved something other than her.

The night before she left for boarding school, she lay awake in the guest room of the president's quarters. Confusion and anger thrummed through her, and she sensed, beyond the thin-paned windows of that nineteenth-century building, a corresponding thrum. Something was happening out there.

She climbed out the top-floor window and down the fire escape that clung to Scull Hall. It ended at the second story. With a deep inhale, she dropped down into the darkness. She would have taken the stairs, but at midnight she could still hear her dad pacing the apartment, testing aloud the sentences of his convocation speech, the method he'd used to write his lectures since she was a girl. He was determined to succeed at this job that had wrecked her life.

She followed her instincts, and the subwoofer hum that made the sidewalks vibrate, toward the blocks that hosted the Parties. She told everybody she was an incoming freshman, which was technically true, omitting only that the place she was an incoming freshman was a prep school in New Hampshire. She looked older, and less stupid, than she was. She got trashed, hooked up with some guy, and snuck back into the quarters at dawn.

Her dad was at the kitchen table, his note cards spread before him, his long legs crossed at the knee. He didn't bother to chastise her, just gave her a look of infinite sadness. A few hours later, they drove in silence to the airport so Pella could begin her pricey exile. That was their big goodbye.

Now she pulled the eggplant parmesan out of the oven and set it on the stovetop. She'd confessed to Mike most of her reckless adolescent adventures back in the early, truth-telling phase of their relationship, but she'd never told him about the Parties. Mike would be aghast: a not-quite-fifteen-year-old drunkenly whipping a condom out of her pocket in a back bedroom of a run-down frat house. Pella was aghast recalling it, but it made sense at the time.

She glanced at her phone; still no word from Irma. Night fell swiftly in September, and it was fully dark outside.

In her mind's eye, Pella saw her best friend stranded on a narrow highway shoulder, smoke pouring through the hood seams of her dilapidated truck as darkness rendered the billboards illegible. Irma could fend for herself—she might even be able to fix the truck—but there were predatory people out there, and Irma, for all her grit, was a hundred-pound girl. In Pella's dark reverie an eighteen-wheeler roared into view, lights ablaze, burrowing a big square hole in the countryside. Its long white wall shuddered recklessly close to the Ram. The driver pulled over, a menacing glint in his eye.

She dialed Irma's number. After several rings came a recorded version of that familiar voice, in all its ornery delicacy: "Hey, I'm Irma. This is my phone." At least she seemed to have service. At least her phone wasn't dead. Pella hung up and tried again.

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3

The sunlight had faded from the west-facing windows. Irma was kneeling beside her bookshelf, unpacking a box from basement storage, when she realized her phone was shuddering on the rug. It fell silent, then started shuddering again. She glimpsed Pella's name.

"Hey, Mama Bird!" she said, with extra chipperness.

"Irma!" said Pella. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's great. I just walked in the door."

"What happened? I thought you were leaving bright and early."

"Oh, you know..." Irma trailed into silence, as though Pella might forget the question. Eventually, though, she had to find a way to continue. "The further adventures of Ada Friske."

"Is she okay? Did something happen?"

"No-no-no," Irma said. The worried shiver in Pella's voice was far past anything she wished to induce. She already regretted the compound sin she was about to commit—lying to Pella, blaming her mom. "Just...the usual. I tried to leave early, but she guilted me into going to Mass with her. Then she insisted on making chocolate-chip pancakes, which was literally the only meal she cooked all summer. Then she got all weepy about my departure and I had to let her beat me at Scrabble. Not that I ever win—she's crazy-good at Scrabble." This was less a fabrication than a quick collage of past departures.

"It must be hard for her to let you leave," said Pella sympathetically. "Was the drive okay?"

"Same as always. Corn and adult bookstores."

"Adult bookstore," Pella repeated. "Such a funny phrase."

"I know, right? I wish there were an actual bookstore for adults on the way. I could stop and browse."

“Or a bookstore for kids,” Pella said. “A young-adult bookstore.”

“Ha,” said Irma, and stopped herself from continuing the joke. The more pleasant her banter with Pella, the guiltier she felt.

“Well, I’m just here drinking wine by myself,” Pella said. “Mike’s gone, dinner’s cooking. What time do you think you’ll come by?”

“Oh,” said Irma. “Um.”

She cast around in her mind. She could say she’d decided to go to the Parties with friends, which had the advantage of being true, if not the whole truth, but Pella would find that too bonkers to believe. Pella barely knew Irma had any friends, other than Pella and Judy, and she certainly didn’t think Irma would, in a million years, attend the Parties of her own volition.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “I’m beat from the drive. And I’ve got a ton of stuff to lug upstairs.”

“I’m happy to come help lug.”

Irma glanced guiltily around her room, which was 90 percent moved into, the houseplants in place, the minifridge humming.

“That’s super-thoughtful of you. But—”

“Seriously, it’s no trouble,” Pella said. “Dinner’s basically ready. When we’re done lugging, I’ll just toss on the cheese and pop it under the broiler.”

Argh, Irma thought. *Please stop being so nice!*

Not for the first time, an urge flickered through her: to come clean to Pella about what she and her friends were planning for tonight, which would explain not only why she couldn’t come for dinner but also why she’d been behaving differently toward Pella all summer. Irma hadn’t intended to behave differently, but she sensed it happening, and she sensed that Pella sensed it too.

It would be a relief to tell Pella. But there were reasons Irma hadn’t told her already, and those reasons still held. Pella might not understand what they were up to and might feel compelled to try to dissuade them—or, worse, to tell Mike. And if she *did* understand, that might be even more awkward. Heck, she might even offer to tag along, like an aunt in an old novel chaperoning a tour of the Continent. Albeit a very cool and pretty aunt.

“Honestly,” Irma said—*Honestly?*—“I’d better just crash. It’s been a long day.”

“Oh.” A forlorn-sounding silence ensued, in which it was dawning on

Pella that Irma wasn't coming. "I see."

"Judy and I will be over at noon tomorrow," Irma reminded her consolingly. "We'll have all afternoon to catch up."

"Okay," Pella sighed with a kind of glum valor. "Can't wait to see you."

"Can't wait to see you either." Irma hung up the phone and went back to shelving books. She hated to tell even a half-lie, and she hated the dejection in Pella's voice, but she didn't have time to chastise herself. A pair of swift-moving footsteps passed the third-floor landing and continued up the stairs.

"DING-DONG!" CALLED DAHLIA as she flung open the door to Irma's room.

"You're early," Irma said, unable to conceal her excitement.

Dahlia laughed. "You sound surprised."

Irma was surprised—surprised and happy. Dahlia was never early. Dahlia was late, when she showed up at all. You waited and waited, you tried to focus on your schoolwork instead of checking to see if she'd texted, and then, when you'd mostly given up, Dahlia waltzed in, full of lame apologies. And you didn't mind at all but were simply happy to see her. At least, that had been Irma's experience. Most of her waiting for Dahlia had been done way back in the winter of freshman year, during their first bout of friendship, before Dahlia left school for a long while.

The heavy door swung closed behind her, and Dahlia bounced into Phumber 405, square-bottomed shopping bags slung over both shoulders. She plopped the bags down on the *W* rug and made an ironic little plié or curtsy as though being presented at court. "How do I look?"

"You look amazing," Irma said, and meant it. "But I thought we were supposed to blend in."

Dahlia laughed. "What do you want to do, skulk around in ninja costumes? We're going to a party. The way to blend in is to stand out."

Irma had never been to the Parties, but she thought Dahlia would certainly stand out. She'd gained weight over the summer, which pleased Irma to see, and the dress she'd chosen fit her frankly. It was short and prismatic and made of tasseled beads that caught the light. Her dark blond hair was pretzeled atop her head in a way that showed off her face and neck and made her eyebrows, which were darker than her hair, pop in a way Irma loved. The best part was Dahlia's fire-engine-red lipstick, which she wore

as well as a person could possibly wear it, so that the word *siren* leaped to Irma's mind.

Irma could never tell how pretty Dahlia was—that is, how others, especially men, might assess her looks—so impressed and even overwhelmed did she tend to be by Dahlia's presence. She sat spellbound on the rug by her bookshelf, holding her copy of *Gravity and Grace*, gazing up at her old/new friend.

As Dahlia turned her head, the glare of the halogen lamp caught one of her cheekbones, scattering iridescence across a swoop of teal. Irma knew nothing about makeup, but she knew this was theater makeup, designed to be seen from the balcony. Combined with the energy that pulsed through Dahlia's expressions and gestures, it summoned memories of the first time she'd laid eyes on Dahlia, back in the fall of freshman year when Dahlia starred in *The Tempest*.

"You look amazing," she said again.

Dahlia rummaged in her bags and brought out a box of vodka seltzers. She cracked two raspberry-colored cans and handed one to Irma.

"Za zdorovye," she said in her old-Russian-man voice. They clinked their cans together.

Irma, who rarely drank, tilted the can to her lips and counted to nine.

Dahlia scooped up Anderson Cooper, who was nosing through her bags, and carried him over to Irma's closet, where she flipped through the hangers. There wasn't much to see—baggy earth-tone dresses, stained jeans, flannel shirts from Farm & Fleet.

"What's this?" she asked of the lacy white dress on the end.

"That belonged to my grandmother," Irma said. "I've never actually worn it."

Dahlia fingered the straps at the shoulder. "Kind of gutsy for a grandmother."

"There used to be more of it," Irma explained. "I tried to alter the sleeves, but I wound up having to lop them off."

Dahlia stepped back to give the dress a lingering appraisal. "It's cool," she decided, "but you don't want it covered in puke"—a remark that only increased Irma's apprehension about the evening ahead. Dahlia shut the closet door and moved to the dresser.

The outfit she selected, after much rummaging, was a simple one: Irma's

denim cutoffs and a white tank top. Dahlia tipped her head in assessment, shifting her updo perilously far to one side. “You have a killer body,” she said. “Try taking your bra off.”

“What?” said Irma. “No way.”

“Why? I thought you were a radical feminist.”

“I am,” Irma said. “One who wears a bra.”

“You’re hilarious. Do you have a red one?”

“No.”

“Or a black one? We need to create a little drama.”

“Those are all my bras,” Irma said as Dahlia rifled through a drawer of embarrassingly worn and dingy gray-tinged undergarments.

Maybe it was her almost-empty can of vodka seltzer or her relief that she didn’t own a red bra, but Irma felt she’d entered nirvana as Dahlia faced her on the bed and, with a series of pencils, brushes, and powders and an expertise Irma didn’t know she possessed, began to do Irma’s makeup.

“You look hot,” Dahlia kept saying as she held Irma’s chin in her hand and, with an expression of deep concentration, swiveled Irma’s face from side to side. “*Hot.*”

Irma felt anything but, but she enjoyed hearing Dahlia say it. What she enjoyed even more was Dahlia’s proximity, the gentle sweep of the mascara brush against her eyelashes, Dahlia’s fingers tucking Irma’s hair behind her ear.

“It’s so cool you never got your ears pierced,” Dahlia said.

Irma’s eyelids fluttered. “My mom wouldn’t let me when I was younger. She called it female mutilation.”

Dahlia’s thumbs traced Irma’s cheeks. “But didn’t you ever just, like, sneak out to the mall and get it done?”

“The mall was really far away,” Irma murmured. *She* felt really far away, aloof from her finicky mind, ensconced in a bliss of Dahlia’s attention. It was a shame this part of the evening couldn’t last forever; it was a shame they had to go to the Parties at all.

“Voilà,” said Dahlia, and placed a mirror in Irma’s hand.

Irma opened her eyes. It wasn’t theater makeup—less showy, less wild. She had eyelashes now. Her lips weren’t red like Dahlia’s—they were basically the color of lips, but fuller and glossier. A slight sheen had been added to all her features. If she squinted, she could almost think she looked

good. Irma wasn't entirely sure she wanted to look good—but then again, it was only a disguise.

She figured they would rehearse their plans—what to do, and how, and when—but Dahlia didn't mention the project at all. Instead, they bounced around Irma's room listening to songs Dahlia put on while Anderson Cooper darted between their feet, and Dahlia drained another seltzer.

Not since freshman year had Irma seen her friend so cheerful and animated. Dahlia scooped the cat up into her arms and waltzed him around the room, her forehead glistening with sweat in the sultry top-floor heat of Phumber Hall, and Irma thought how different college might have been had Dahlia been like this all the time. Or half the time. Had she simply been around.

"Party time," Dahlia announced.

A NIGHTBIRD TWITTERED in the branches above them. The Small Quad, surrounded on all sides by squat buildings of weather-beaten stone, with its modest dimensions and dense roof of maple leaves, felt so familiar and cozy to Irma as to constitute an extension of her attic room. "It's quiet," she remarked.

Dahlia nodded sagely. "Everyone's already out." She had brought along another seltzer. "Want some?" she asked, and turned toward Irma with a broad smile, her lipstick slightly blurred by the rim of the can.

"Just a taste," Irma said. With a thumb she wiped a ruby smudge from the aluminum.

The seltzer, given the bitter sting of the alcohol, didn't taste good to Irma, but its cloying raspberry flavor contained a bright artifice that felt like the province of childhood and that she associated with Dahlia. She took a tiny sip and handed back the can. The purse Dahlia had lent her bounced against her hip bone as she walked. Hard to believe she'd woken up this morning at her parents' house, six hours' drive from here, in the distant part of Wisconsin known as the Driftless Area.

"This year is going to be amazing," Irma ventured. Generally she tried not to talk in empty words—*amazing amazing amazing*—but right now they felt like the purest vessels for her joy.

"It is," Dahlia agreed. "It thoroughly is."

They passed between buildings and out into the neighborhood beyond the campus. Dahlia led them up Concord Street and turned onto Grant. The houses along this stretch were large wooden boxes painted ecru with peeling navy trim around the sashes of cracked windows, their sagging porches cluttered with recycling bins and cushioned swings creaking on rusty chains.

The entire student body seemed to be out, thronging the street and flowing in and out of the biggest tumbledown houses, across whose upper stories hung navy and ecru banners that read WE ARE ONE. Voices buzzed like hordes of insects behind the fences that girdled backyards. Students milled on weedy front lawns, sipping from giant cups, the sparse grass already churned to mud by footsteps and spilled beer.

Several raucous games of cornhole were in progress. A beanbag the color of Dahlia's lipstick sailed through the air, its lumpiness shifting and contorting in flight, and skidded up the gentle slope of a wooden ramp. It brushed through a tight gap between bright blue enemy bags and plunged, vanishing, into a round ice fisher's hole. The red bag's chinless tosser held his follow-through, fingers upstretched, frozen and triumphant as an arrogant statue, the tendons in his neck protruding as the game's giddy spectators mobbed him in celebration, cheering, pounding him on the back and arms, and finally dumping over him cups of beer that cascaded down his unmovable face.

A car alarm whined in endless repetition. A black-legged drone zizzed overhead, presumably filming. On a side lawn loomed an inflatable castle of sherbet orange, its turrets swaying as bodies bounced within. A group of girls skipped down the middle of the street, elbows linked as though in a musical, long strands of colorful beads swaying across their dresses. They looked so young to Irma—freshmen, she guessed, who'd met last week at orientation and glommed together with sleepaway-camp intensity. The boys they skipped past wore gaudy party shirts splashed with toucans and pineapples or T-shirts that read, like the banners, WE ARE ONE, or no shirts at all, their chests hairless and tan. A football thrown from a rooftop clipped a power line, spun like a helicopter seed, and dropped into the crowd.

A pale brown sedan with a PETE'S PIZZA sign inched along the packed street, honking politely as it tried to nudge through the flow of bodies. Finally the driver gave up, hopped out, grabbed from the back seat two

huge red soft-sided cubes, and, peering around his teetering cargo, trotted awkwardly toward his destination. There were speakers everywhere, pointed out upper-story windows, throbbing on porches, wedged in the crooks of trees, and the sum of so much blasted music comprised a surprisingly gentle mélange above which burbled the happy shouts and shrieks of classmates greeting each other after a summer apart. So this, Irma thought, was the Parties.

Dahlia turned up the walk of a ramshackle house whose massive double doors stood open, admitting a steady stream of partygoers. She slid aside to let the boys behind them enter and plunked down on the porch swing. Smiling, she undid the clasp on her purse and unflappably, as though at home alone, peered into her compact mirror as she reworked her magnificent lipstick. Satisfied, she smacked her lips and set about combing her eyebrows.

Far out over the lake, unharried by human light, hung a white half-moon with a pumiced convex edge. A surge of nervousness washed over Irma.

“Do I look okay?” she asked.

“You look great,” said Dahlia without glancing up.

From an Altoids tin in her bag, Dahlia fished out an oblong white pill and snapped its middle seam. She held out her palm, offering Irma one of the chalky semi-ovals. Irma shook her head. Dahlia shrugged and tossed both halves in her mouth. She wore a look of steady purpose Irma had never seen. “Ready?” she asked.

Irma felt her shoulders stiffen as they had been stiffening for blocks. “Sure. But...” She searched for a way to stall without seeming to stall. “Aren’t we meeting up with Pammy?”

“Pammy’s at two-twelve.”

“Where?”

“Two-twelve Grant.” Dahlia gestured down the block. “Meathead Central.”

This shorthand way of identifying the party houses by number was familiar to Irma only from overheard talk in the dining hall. She was surprised to find Dahlia conversant in it. “We’re not meeting her?”

Dahlia shook her head, a firm enough *no* to dislodge a strand of her lopsided bun. “Divide and conquer.”

“Okay.” Irma nodded. “So how do we proceed?”

“With what?”

“You know.” Irma dropped her voice to a whisper and patted her borrowed purse: “The project.”

Dahlia shushed her with a stern flick of her eyes. “You,” she instructed, “stick close to me.”

They entered a house thronged and throbbing with bodies, one disorderly column entering and the other departing, the hallway lit only by bobbing smartphones and the pale parallelograms of open doorways. A beefy, shirtless guy came pushing through the columns and caught Irma with his massive elbow. She stumbled, lost her footing, and slammed shoulder-first into the newel post of a staircase. Wincing and cursing, she turned to upbraid the culprit, but he was already gone. Irma pushed through the crowd to catch up to Dahlia and, like a child in a grocery store, gripped Dahlia’s purse strap so as not to be separated again.

Dahlia led her toward the light that marked the far end of the hall: a kitchen, incongruously bright compared to the rest of the house, fluorescent panels blazing in the drop ceiling. The room’s occupants, all large and male, were seated around an oval table. They wore filthy navy ball caps inscribed with spear-pierced capital *W*s, their facial topographies of sunburn and stubble cast in surreal relief by the steady light. Cards slapped down on the table with violent speed, marking the action of a breakneck drinking game.

“How does a girl get a drink around here?” Dahlia asked as she approached the handsome, square-shouldered boy who sat at the head of the table. He jerked his head without glancing up from his cards. “Kegs are out back.”

“I know,” Dahlia said. “But I want a drink.”

The boy leaned back and appraised Dahlia from head to toe with predatory candor. It was unclear to Irma whether he found what he was seeking. “What kind of drink?”

“Vodka.”

With a sigh, he fanned his cards face down and rose from the table. From the freezer he produced a large clear bottle, its glass clouded and crystal-furred like the Ram’s windshield in January. Into small wax-coated cups that reminded Irma of childhood soccer games, he poured out shots, letting the nose of the bottle slide from cup to cup without stopping. The

vodka, slowed to a gel by the cold, gurgled sluggishly. The boys, with grumbling ceremony, stood from the table. The cups were handed around.

Dahlia lifted her cup. “Hell is empty,” she declaimed, her voice lifting to a battle cry. “And all the devils are here!”

Her delivery was perfect, and the boys, impressed, hooted their approval. Everyone tossed back their shots—except Irma, who clenched her lips around the wax paper so the frigid liquor bounced off her teeth and retreated. She pitched the cup toward an overflowing trash can.

Dahlia grabbed her hand and whisked her into the backyard, which was somehow even denser with bodies than the house. A half dozen girls wearing star-shaped dollar-store sunglasses reclined in a kiddie pool, drinking out of coconuts with giant straws. Balloons bounced through the night air, kept aloft by the slaps of partygoers. The guy beside Irma seized one and popped it. In the general din, it barely made a sound.

An extravagantly tall girl charged through the crowd shouting into a cell phone she held before her face like a mirror. Irma recognized her from her English courses. In lecture halls, the girl was usually asleep, but now she brimmed with imbalanced vigor. Her ponytail erupted from the crown of her head like a platinum fountain, and her loose pink minidress struggled to keep pace with the jerky movements of her broad athletic body. A miniature golden volleyball dangled on a chain around her neck. Abruptly, she stopped in front of Dahlia and lowered her phone.

“Do I *know* you?” she said.

“Do we know *each other,*” replied Dahlia—and though the words were nonsense, her burbling delivery was again so perfect that the towering girl leaned down to embrace her.

Irma followed Dahlia to the kegs, where a tattooed guy wearing a cheese-wedge hat handed them foam-topped cups. As they circulated through the muddy yard, Irma thought she noticed other partygoers checking out Dahlia—trying, she imagined, to solve the knotty problem of who Dahlia might be, with her beaded dress and silver shoes, her clover-honey hair looped atop her head, her bright red lips and perfect self-possession. Dahlia had been absent from the daily flow of Westish life so long, either hiding out or not enrolled, that no one younger than a senior was likely to recognize her, and many of the seniors wouldn’t connect the striking red-lipped woman before them with the blond-bobbed cherub of

freshman year. Until one did: a tanned guy in a half-buttoned Hawaiian shirt, not tall but thickly built, with a mass of dark curls and eyes whose whites were hazy pink with inebriation. He approached Dahlia in the backyard beneath a basswood hung with holiday lights.

“Do you remember me?” he asked.

“Nope,” Dahlia said.

“We took Intro to Creative Writing together. Freshman year. I remember the story you wrote from the point of view of the girl whose dad leaves her mom. My parents are divorced, and I really connected to it.”

He seemed sincere, or at least sincerely drunk. His pupils were dilated, his eyes unblinking, as he fixed them on Dahlia.

Dahlia yawned. “I dropped that class.”

“I know,” he said. “I always wondered what happened to you.”

“Now you know.”

The boy paused, his drunken faculties taxed. Dahlia wasn’t giving him much to work with. At least not verbally. Irma, as she strained to hear their exchange over the party-burble and bass, could sense the energy crackling between them.

“So how was your summer?” he said.

“Terrific,” Dahlia replied in a voice of facetious joy that, as Irma could attest, could lift and carry its listener like a current. “I spent it looking forward to tonight.”

“The Parties are epic,” he agreed. “What else did you do?”

“I volunteered with a group that does harm reduction.”

His nod was full of confidence: He knew what harm reduction was. “For heroin addicts.”

“For persons who habitually use drugs,” Dahlia said in a tone of gentle correction. “I spent a lot of time packing safer-use kits.”

“With needles and stuff?”

Dahlia nodded. “That’s mostly what volunteers do—pack kits. But if you hang around long enough, you wind up doing lots of things. Drive the van—the whole operation runs out of vans that move around the city. Run errands for the nurses. Or you just chat with people. People like to chat. Don’t tell my mom, though. She thought I was interning at a marketing firm.”

The boy laughed at this. Dahlia smiled. “You’re a good listener, Josh.”

“It’s Ben.”

“It’s been what?”

Believing she couldn’t hear him, he leaned in close and enunciated to the point of shouting: “My name’s Ben. Benjamin.”

“Oh, Josh.” Dahlia reached out and tapped him playfully on the chest. “So you’re from Hawaii?”

He stepped back and eyed her with wary esteem, like she’d performed a magic trick. “Say what?”

Dahlia stretched out an arm again, this time to finger the loop of his collar. Ben-Josh glanced down at his turquoise shirt, which was covered in coral-billed toucans and girls in grass skirts. “Oh. Ha. This is my party shirt. I was confused about what you meant, though, because my dad lives in Maui now.”

Dahlia nodded. “Since the divorce.”

“Since the divorce,” he confirmed. “I lived in California till I was ten—I loved it there. I still have dreams about it. But after the divorce my mom wanted to be close to family. So we moved to Kenosha.”

“That must have been hard,” offered Dahlia.

Ben dropped his eyes toward his cup. With his handsome flat nose and mop of curls, he might have been a Grecian statue, a blessedly hale one bronzed by summer sun. “It was.”

Irma couldn’t tell whether Ben’s mawkishness was for Dahlia’s benefit or an earnest kind of self-regard. Nor could she tell what Dahlia was up to. Was this all part of the project or did Dahlia’s voice contain genuine sympathy? So incomprehensible were their purposes to Irma that they might have been a duo of humpback whales, clicking ethereal songs.

“Will you move back to California?” Dahlia asked.

“That’s the plan,” Ben said. “After graduation. Provided I can get a job.”

Dahlia leaned close and cupped her hand to whisper into his ear. Ben, as he listened, lifted his gaze to the boughs overhead. He smiled when Dahlia finished, his eyes aglitter.

“I’ll be right back,” Irma muttered.

Unheeded, she slipped away. She maneuvered through the milling crowd and, once inside the house, climbed the broad staircase and locked herself in a second-floor bathroom. She dumped her beer down the sink, peed, and washed her hands. She Cloistered Pammy to say u ok?—Cloister was the

traceless-messaging app Dahlia insisted they use because it had the most advanced encryption and the best emojis—but Pammy just sent back a long string of emojis ending in a party hat and a unicorn pooping a pile of gold.

The project, Irma thought, had sounded much easier in theory than it could ever prove in practice. Tucked into her borrowed purse, and into Dahlia's and Pammy's purses, were sets of tattoo letters they'd ordered over the summer and, by phone and Cloister from their separate hometowns, talked about how to deploy tonight. Their summertime plotting had been a blast, but what was she supposed to do with these tattoos? As much scenario planning as Dahlia had put them through, as much as Irma had supposedly known what to expect and what was expected of her, the reality felt very different. Someone was knocking on the bathroom door. Then whoever it was stopped knocking and started rattling the knob.

Her phone buzzed. It was a Cloister from Dahlia.

You can head out, Irma. I've got this

Are you sure?

Yes. I have a plan. So easy

Irma didn't want to abandon Dahlia, but she really, really wanted to head out. If you're sure, she replied. Be careful.

She unlocked the bathroom door and slunk through a gauntlet of cutting looks from the growing line of bathroom-waiters. She hurried down the stairs. During her absence—how long had she been in there?—the cavernous living room had transformed into a jam-packed dance party. The music, an ancient Prince song set to a machine-gun beat, pulsed and pounded. Pink and lime glow sticks waved through the dark. Irma paused at the foot of the stairs to plot a path to the front door. As she glanced into the mass of bodies, she caught a glimpse of Dahlia. Dahlia's hair, now down and freed from its bobby-pinned strictures, slashing through the dark and bright of the strobe. Dahlia dancing in a different way than she'd danced in Irma's room. Lofty, sinuous, dominant, summoning unknown powers. Ben-Josh, stunned at his luck, with his hand on the small of her back. It fell to the curve of her butt. Dahlia slashed her hair.

There weren't any boys at Westish capable of understanding Irma; there weren't any boys at Westish she cared to understand. Dahlia had always seemed to feel the same. She hadn't had a boyfriend since the fall of freshman year, and that guy was an obscure figure back home in Illinois. In

the first flush of Irma and Dahlia's friendship, the two of them spent many evenings hanging out in Irma's room, and Irma felt ecstatic to have a friend who was immune to the allure of boys and parties and yet as wickedly sly as Dahlia. Dahlia would fulminate, in a way both angry and funny, about her unsuitability for sex. She talked nonstop about her irregular tides of menstruation, her zits and pimples and persistent itches, her odors and flaking, the furry moss on her tongue, which she was always sticking out for Irma to inspect; on and on, so anyone within earshot would know her body was not a thing to desire or be desired. She'd made herself extravagantly, depressingly thin for a time, to drive home the point.

Irma caught only a glimpse of Dahlia's dancing as she squeezed her way through the crowd, but in that glimpse a world was revealed. She felt certain that no one in the history of house parties had ever danced with as much assurance and abandon and command—in a word, as erotically—as Dahlia had been dancing.

She slipped out the front door and double-timed down the porch steps. A breeze kicked up as she turned onto the sidewalk. Which houses were hosting the Parties was evident now, scattered up and down these blocks, pulsing with music and light. Trails of partygoers traipsed between them like ants. Irma shivered, though it wasn't cold, and rubbed her aching shoulder. She felt relieved to have escaped the party, glad to no longer be bumped into, spilled on, and ignored. But she also felt like a failure.

Now that the plan wasn't theoretical anymore—she had little doubt that Dahlia, at least, would do what she'd set out to do—Irma began to wonder how much trouble they might get into, which led to the thought that, if they might possibly get in trouble, perhaps it was for the best that she had snuck out; which led to the further thought that she was a coward and a Goody Two-Shoes who lacked the courage of her convictions and cared more about her full scholarship than the fate of womankind.

Up ahead, on the far side of the street, a figure caught Irma's eye: big and still as a boulder, indistinct in the darkness, sitting on a porch step, sipping from a can. Her heart jumped. It could only be Mike Schwartz, Pella's fiancé, the last person she wanted to be spotted by. She veered through a yard, turned onto a side street, and hastened back to campus.

As she climbed the dark stairs of Phumber Hall, she felt both relieved to be alone and horribly, bitingly lonely. Anderson Cooper hopped into bed

with her, and she squeezed him tight to her chest. As a rule she turned her phone off before she slept; tonight she tucked it beneath her pillow and left the ringer on in case Dahlia or Pammy texted. Around four in the morning, both did, almost simultaneously:

Veni, vidi, vici.

Cowabunga, dudes.

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4

Pella had been awake since Mike's heavy flop into bed at dawn. The smell of cheap beer, sweat, and whatever weird stuff college kids smoked—vape juice, hookahs, cloves—along with the ruckus of his drunken snoring, like a leaf blower roaring and stopping, made it plain she wasn't going back to sleep. Might as well make the best of it. It would be nice to have an extra hour, what with Irma and Judy coming for lunch today and her own departure early tomorrow. Her *long-awaited* departure, she thought as she slipped from bed.

She headed to the bathroom and then downstairs, presuming more than seeing, obscured as they were by the meager light and her own familiarity, the crook in the staircase three steps from the bottom, the shadowy shape of Contango curled on the couch, the pile of Mike's paperwork at one end of the dining table. Almost without looking, she grabbed the empty beer can from beside his laptop and, when she reached the kitchen, dropped it in the recycling bin. Even at five a.m., he would have cracked a nightcap and checked his email when he came in.

There it was, held to the ancient refrigerator by a laminated magnet on which was printed the Westish football schedule:

Stephen Martin Tilly
&
Owen Elias Dunne
invite you to join us on
Block Island
to celebrate our sempiternal,
oh-so-tempestuous,

and recently decriminalized love

September 12, 2015

Four o’clock

Owen’s sensibility permeated the invitation’s details—not just the wry text, on which he’d clearly spent some time, but also the old-fashioned design, which, Pella thought, reflected his old-fashioned notions about romance and love. The card was printed on heavy handmade stock, and behind the text was debossed a faint silhouette of Block Island. The colors were sedate and traditional as well: navy lettering against a background whose color many of the recipients would no doubt describe as off-white, eggshell, or cream but that Pella knew to call ecru, navy and ecru composing as they did the color scheme of Westish College, Owen’s alma mater and, as of three months ago, her own.

She took the sack of beans from its spot in the freezer door, ground enough for a cup, and tapped the sparkling red-brown coffee shards into a cone-shaped filter. When the kettle gurgled, she poured over the grounds a clockwise whorl of water. Bubbles burped to the surface. She waited for the bloom to reach her nostrils, and when it did, she smiled. The light through the screen door was acquiring a rose-orange tint, and the day stretched sweetly before her.

She’d felt downcast and lonely after Irma begged off last night as she plowed sedulously through a double portion of eggplant parmesan and listened to the distant noise of the Parties. But she was determined not to let the feeling linger. She was eager to see her friends, who’d both returned to Westish over the weekend, Judy from Manhattan, Irma from her parents’ farmhouse in southwestern Wisconsin. The three of them would have a boozy lunch. Pella would pack for Block Island, squeeze in a nap, and meet Mike at Carapelli’s for dinner.

Contango shambled in from the dining room. His arthritis was getting worse, and his right hind leg seemed to catch as it came forward. There were mornings when they still took their ambling walk along Lake Michigan and even days when, seized by brio, Contango sprinted down the waterline like a puppy, paw prints barely denting the dark wet sand. But those days were getting rarer.

Today he played it cool, barely acknowledging her presence as he squeezed behind her in the narrow kitchen. His soft fur tickled the backs of her thighs. He stopped his prune-leather nose just shy of the back-door screen and gazed out at the patio, the garden, the crabapple tree. “Hey, buddy,” Pella chided him as she opened the door to let him out, “you don’t even say hello?”

When her phone buzzed on the kitchen counter, she didn’t need to look at the caller ID. Not even Irma would call this early. It could only be Owen, an hour ahead and frantic about his wedding. “My dear,” he said. “I hope I didn’t wake you?”

Something in his tone suggested the opposite—that he had indeed hoped to wake her, because only by rousing her from a dead slumber could he convey the importance of what he was about to say, and only by being roused, while still managing to answer on the very first ring, could she prove her fitness and devotion as his friend and maid of honor.

“Mike beat you to it,” she said as she filled her mug with coffee.

“I have remarkable news. Are you sitting down?”

“I am not.”

“Maybe you should sit down,” Owen said. “It’s pretty big news.”

“I’ll risk it,” Pella said.

Owen let a sullen beat pass to register his dismay. Then his voice brightened: “The *Times* is coming!”

“I thought we already knew that.”

Owen sighed in exasperation. “We knew they planned to run a notice, but we did *not* know they’d be sending a reporter. And a photographer. We’re going to be the featured wedding! An entire page of the Style section. Can you believe it?”

“Of course I believe it,” Pella said. “You’re Owen Dunne. He’s Martin Tilly. It’s the wedding of the year.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Owen said. “I’ll be thrilled if it’s the wedding of the week.”

“Sounds like it will be.”

“The moment we decided to do it here, I gave up all hope of the *Times*. Block Island isn’t exactly the Hamptons. But here we are!”

“Here we are,” Pella agreed.

“Prepare to be famous, my dear.”

“Oh, please.” Pella knew better than to believe that Owen’s fame could be her own. Owen had become one of the most celebrated young writers in America, while she, who’d served as the first reader and editor of his book-to-be, not to mention one of its central characters, remained steadfastly anonymous.

She was, nonetheless, a faithful subscriber to the weekend *New York Times*. On Sundays she and Mike ate omelets and swapped sections. It was the one morning they spent together, and Pella relished it. Despite her own ambivalence about the institution of marriage—divorce by twenty-three will do that to you—she always turned straight to the wedding announcements. She loved the parodic lists of degrees and accomplishments, the funds, clubs, and firms, the grand American names that adorned big-city concert halls and Ivy League libraries, the lingering odor of upper-crust privilege. She loved the potted stories of the couples, and she loved trying to figure out which ones had met online, though increasingly no one bothered to hide it.

Across the page half-familiar names would float—a girl she swam with at Tellman Rose, a fellow Harvard faculty brat she’d known when she was six—and Pella would do a double take over her toast. Was that really so-and-so? Or some other bland blond member of the not-quite-ruling class?

So there was, admittedly, substantial pleasure in the thought that if, come Saturday, she looked just the right amount of startlingly beautiful and laughed at one of Owen’s jokes with the right mix of knowingness and delight, her hand on his arm to signal the intimate companionship that existed between them, she might wind up with her picture in the *Times*. And various persons from her long-forgotten past (it scarcely mattered who), having checked their memories against the caption, would turn to their breakfast companions and say, through the haze of their Sunday hangovers, with grudging ruefulness: *She looks good.*

“There’s so much to do,” Owen said. “I wish you were already here.”

Pella felt a familiar flicker of pleasure—she enjoyed being needed by Owen. “I’ll be there tomorrow,” she said.

“And yet—what if you came today?”

“Today?” Pella said. “It’s today right now.”

“It so often is.” A pause came down the line, followed by Owen’s quick

rough cough in a way that suggested he'd inhaled his first marijuana of the day. "What do you say? I'll pay the change fee."

"Do you always smoke this early?" Pella asked.

"When my wedding is days away? When my best woman has abandoned me? Yes, under such circumstances, I always smoke this early."

"It's hardly fair to say I've abandoned you," Pella said. "I've been helping all summer." While Owen was abroad on his book tour, Pella had kept up with the caterer, the florist, and everyone else to such a degree that she felt a certain proprietorship over the wedding.

"I know," Owen said. "And I'm grateful. But an extra day would mean the world."

Again, Pella felt flattered by the thought that she was indispensable to Owen's *Times*-worthy wedding. Maybe she was so indispensable that it was heartless for her not to have arrived already. It was true that Owen had invited her for a longer stay, but she hadn't wanted to miss Irma's return.

"I'm sorry, Owen. I'd love to, but it's just not possible. Irma and Judy are coming to lunch."

"Lunch?" said Owen. "How can you think about lunch at a time like this?"

"I haven't started thinking about it yet," Pella said. "Right now I'm thinking about breakfast."

"Ha! I'm glad this is hilarious to you, my dear. My life hangs in the balance, and you're going to lounge around drinking cocktails with the ladies?"

"Owen, are you really this flipped out? Or are you just messing with me?"

Owen, to his credit, stopped to consider the question. "A little of each, I suppose. But the anxiety is real. I've been up for hours, trying not to call. You know I rely on you."

"You rely on Martin as well," Pella reminded him.

Owen sighed. "Of course I do." Whether it was Pella's gentle reprimand, the pot kicking in, or both, his manner suddenly relaxed. "Speaking of fiancés, how's yours?"

"Fine," she said. "Fast asleep."

"Asleep? That doesn't sound like the Mike Schwartz I know. Why isn't

he out putting the ephebes through their paces? I thought you said he woke you."

"He woke me when he came home," Pella said. "The Parties were last night."

"Isn't Michael a little old for such debauchery? Did he stumble in at dawn and vomit in the trash can?"

"I haven't checked," Pella said. "But he did come home at dawn. He's basically become the administrative chaperone for the Parties. One small corner of his endless duties."

"How did he get roped into that?"

"Same as always—he roped himself."

"Tell Michael," Owen said, "that this weekend we'll provide a blowout more suited to a man his age."

"He looks forward to it," Pella said. "As do I."

Silence ensued, and Pella, believing the conversation complete, was about to say goodbye, but Owen, as his soft cough revealed, had merely been taking another pull on his little marijuana kazoo.

"Before you go," he croaked, "should we discuss the brunch?"

"Oh God." The morning-after brunch, which Pella had long ago offered to oversee, was turning into a quagmire. She'd thought she'd be making a few batches of muffins for Martin's family, but every time Owen called, the list of guests and demands had grown. "What now?"

BY THE TIME she hung up the phone, it was necessary to make more coffee. Then she nudged open the misfit screen door, which stuttered against its sill, and followed Contango into the backyard. Her mug steamed in her hand. The gray bricks of the patio, disheveled by subterranean upheaval, abraded her bare soles. Contango meandered to the crabapple tree, cranked one creaky hind leg in the air, and peed on its trunk.

Scattered in the scraggly grass beneath the crabapple lay brown puckered fruit, much of it hacked and splintered by Pella's hand-push mower, though she hadn't mowed in weeks. She enjoyed the length and wildness of her grass and took a kind of pride in the dark looks shot at it by her fussier neighbors, the ones who sprayed poison on weeds and mowed

their carpetlike lawns twice a week as though maintaining a high-end golf course.

Even after four years here, she was sometimes surprised to find herself a member of that staid and savage species, the Homeowner. She and Mike had bought this place, not on a whim exactly—the mood had been too somber for that—but without much deliberation. They'd known each other only a few months, though much had been packed into those months, and Pella's divorce from David was not yet final.

The previous spring, Pella had mustered the energy to leave her marriage. She'd been too depressed toward the end to get out of bed. Until suddenly, one cloudless morning while David was away on business, a wild energy surged through her. It felt like possession—a bodily takeover by some outside force. She roamed their loft in the Buena Vista neighborhood of San Francisco, her hands trembling as she tossed seemingly random items—swimsuit, deodorant, chocolate bar—into a wicker bag. As she tossed, the items grew more portentous. The bottle containing her sky-blue SSRI. The stationery box that housed her photos of her mom.

She—though *she*, at that moment, seemed more observer than doer—jogged down the hill toward Castro Street, not bothering to lock the door behind her. She was trying to outrun not David, who wouldn't be home for days, but the leaden logic of her depression. If she didn't go now, she might never go. She hailed a cab to SFO and phoned her dad from the plane to tell him she was coming. Hugging him hello beside a baggage carousel in Milwaukee was one of the happiest moments of her life.

She met Mike, a senior soon to graduate, the morning after her arrival. She felt wary of the timing; she hadn't intended to solve the problem of her failed marriage by getting involved with someone else, especially someone who pursued her with a solemn ardor that suggested, alarmingly, that he too wanted to marry her. But she felt drawn to Mike, who was calm and gentle and steadfast, with a soulful look in his big amber eyes.

They dated for a while that spring, and then Pella ended it. She wanted to see whether she could exist outside of a dyad. She'd been torturously lonely throughout her marriage, but she'd rarely been alone. Perhaps Mike's steadfastness scared her. He was a decade younger than David but far more mature. He was ready to settle down.

That June, her dad died of a heart attack. When Pella heard, she left

Mike a series of panicked messages. He was in South Carolina, where the Westish baseball team was playing for the national championship. He flew back after the game, leaving his teammates to their victory celebration, and came straight to her from the airport, baseball gear in tow. She could still see the reddish dirt rubbed into his cheeks, the flecks of eye-black beneath his eyes that, in his haste to reach her, he had not washed away. His entire life had been building toward that celebration, and he'd left it to come to her.

Her reconciliation with her dad had been a work in progress, full of lingering hurt, but Pella still gave thanks that it had happened at all. Deep down she believed an uncanny foreknowledge, an intuition of the approaching catastrophe, compelled her down the hill that cloudless day. *She* didn't know what was coming, but the force that moved her did.

She and Mike spent the summer living in the president's quarters with Contango, whom her dad had adopted not long before. Pella spent much of her time in bed. Too much time. The nights were exhausting, the darkness laced with endless menace. Each morning she resolved to resume normal life—to run an errand, go for a jog, cook a meal. Each morning she failed. On her best days, she walked the dog. Then she fell into bed and slept away the afternoon.

It was Mike who helped her through the worst of her grief—who rocked her while she sobbed and brought her pints of frozen custard when it was the only food she could bear. Who handled every bureaucratic detail of her dad's estate, the lawyers and banks and insurance, the credit cards, the car, all of which was impossible for Pella to confront. Her mind was so addled, her senses so raw, she could barely scrawl her name on the papers Mike placed before her. He even handled much of the paperwork for her divorce.

That fall, as her twenty-fourth birthday approached, Pella enrolled at Westish as a freshman. Mike accepted a job in the athletic department as an assistant director and football and baseball coach. One afternoon he came home from football practice and woke her with a kiss on the forehead.

"Would you be up for a walk?" he asked.

He led her north across the campus, past buildings of chunky gray stone and the long glass facade of the library. They passed the VAC and the football stadium and emerged into a neighborhood lined with maples and beeches.

It was the farthest Pella had been from campus since her dad died. Her body felt awkward and leaden, a burden to drag along. The slightest incline left her out of breath, and she was glad whenever Contango stopped to sniff at a bush or mailbox.

They made a left onto Groome Street and walked a little more. The neighborhood shifted from run-down student rentals toward manicured lawns. Contango paused to explore the yard of a beat-up bungalow with a For Sale sign.

At least, Pella thought it was Contango who stopped. But when the husky headed on, tugging her by the leash, Mike stayed put by the picket fence. He wore a strange expression, intense and sheepish at once.

“Here’s what I wanted to show you,” he said.

Still she didn’t get it. “What?”

“This place.” He pointed to the For Sale sign. “I thought you might like it.”

Pella looked up at a small house in blatant disrepair. Old white paint peeled from the facade like birch bark. The rusty gutters were heaped with mulch. A downspout ended in midair. The absence struck Pella as eerily poignant, like the empty sleeve of an amputee.

“It’s nicer inside,” Mike said.

“You’ve been inside.”

“It’s nice,” he repeated. “It just needs a little love.”

Everything about this was so outlandish that Pella didn’t bother to protest. She followed him through the gate.

They weren’t looking for a house; they certainly weren’t looking for this house. They’d never discussed living together, though they’d done so all summer long. They’d been sharing a strange cloistered life of grief and tenderness, the former hers, the latter his.

On the front stoop sat a black box with a combination lock. Mike squatted down like the baseball catcher he’d been and with a big thumb spun the small silver numbers. He pulled out a key and unlocked the door.

The room Pella entered looked like it had stood empty for years. The paint bubbled and cracked. Every surface was slathered with dust. Dried mouse droppings were scattered across the floorboards along the walls. Still, there were elements of beauty. The windows were cased in thick beams of oak, as was the fireplace and the shelves fitted around it.

“Look at that wood,” Mike said proudly.

They climbed the half-turn staircase to the second floor. There was a bedroom in front and another in back. The same dust and grime, the same chunks of oak. A bathroom in between.

“The second bedroom could be yours,” Mike said. “To study in.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be at the office.”

They went back downstairs and through the living and dining rooms. “We need to be out of your dad’s place,” Mike reminded her. “The new president’s coming soon.”

The new president. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to Pella that her dad could be replaced. In the kitchen, she pawed at the filthy linoleum with a flip-flop. “Shouldn’t you clean the floor before you try to sell a place?”

Mike nodded. “If you don’t, it means you’ll negotiate.”

He explained how it could work. She’d make the down payment from the proceeds of her dad’s estate. He’d pay the mortgage while she was in school.

“What about Contango?” Pella joked to ease the nervousness she felt. She reached down to stroke the husky’s head.

“He’ll chip in whenever he can.”

Pella looked around. It wasn’t much of a kitchen—more like a narrow linoleum passageway between the dining room and the back door. But the window above the sink admitted the afternoon light, and the back door opened onto a flagstone patio where she could sit and drink coffee and read.

Mike was looking at her fondly. “I’d rather do this than rent,” he said. “I’d rather put down roots.”

Pella wasn’t sure she wanted to put down roots—not in a small town in northeast Wisconsin. It was a place she’d never dreamed she’d wind up in. It was a place where, when her father proposed it, she’d flat-out refused to live.

But if she was really starting college next week—and, strange as it seemed, she was registered for classes—then she’d be here for four years. She’d need some kind of roots to stay upright that long.

“If you ever want to leave,” Mike said, still looking at her fondly, “I’ll figure out how to buy you out.”

She decided to paint the house yellow. She couldn’t say why. But when

she flipped through the huge book of swatches, back and forth, forth and back, standing in the middle of Groome Street with one eye closed, she always came back to one color. Not some classy Dijon shade; this was yellow like the sun in a child's drawing. The same way she'd never dreamed she would move to Wisconsin, or attend Westish College, or be without her dad, she'd never dreamed she would live in a bright yellow house with a white picket fence. It all seemed so bizarre, so unlike her—but maybe unlike her was better.

Now she rounded the crabapple tree, feeling the chill of the dew underfoot, and approached her little garden with the same flutter of joy and suspense she felt every morning lately. The pale dawn light pitched a scalloped fence shadow over the plants. The late-summer weather had been perfect, clear blue days punctuated by soft rain in just the right proportions, and everything was growing.

She squatted beside the cherry tomatoes, screwed her coffee mug into the dirt, and riffled the back of her hand through the caterpillar-soft leaves. She'd resisted picking these over the weekend because she'd wanted to have enough for the salad today. Little pops of red were everywhere.

The guiding principle of her life, it seemed, had been to stay ahead of everyone. It hardly mattered what she was ahead in, as long as she was ahead. At six she'd roamed the Harvard campus with a backpack full of books and felt herself in no way inferior to the undergraduates who vied for her dad's attention, which she commanded without effort. At ten she accompanied him to black-tie dinners and symphony openings, handling every interaction with solemn grace. At fourteen she'd dated eighteen-year-olds. At eighteen she'd dropped out of prep school to elope with David, who'd come to deliver a weeklong seminar on Roman ruins. At the end of that week, she went with him. Her classmates would spend four years at fancy colleges; she, having skimmed those chapters, would jump straight to marriage and domesticity: *First!*

Even losing her mother at the age of three amounted to a kind of precocity. Perhaps that had been the first firstness, the one that started it all. Afterward, she'd sensed in adults a deference to the gravity of her experience. They seemed afraid of her. She'd played to this by adopting a grave, all-knowing manner—a tiny oracle in touch with fathomless depths.

But she was not first anymore. By speeding ahead, she had fallen

behind. Leaving her marriage, admitting her mistakes, enrolling at Westish at the ripe old age of almost twenty-four, was an admission that firstness had failed. It was hard for Pella to think of graduating from Westish as an accomplishment—it wasn't as though her schoolwork had been difficult. But she'd stuck with it for four years, and that was something.

Today was Labor Day, and it felt strange not to be readying herself for the start of classes. She felt unanchored, at risk of floating away, as though the force of gravity had diminished. Thank God for Irma's and Judy's return; thank God for Owen's wedding.

She moved on to check the lettuce. The kind coming in was wavy and kinky and tinged with red, not unlike her own hair. She'd chosen it from the seed catalog because it was called Drunken Curly-Headed Woman. Irma and Judy would get a kick out of that.

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5

Benjamin Morris, Westish College senior, awoke to the atonal din of the chapel bells. It felt like somebody was pounding a meat tenderizer against the backs of his eyeballs. His room's two shades were pulled. Rectangles of painful daylight seeped in around the edges.

He rolled over, pressed his face into his pillow, and wrapped his other pillow around the back of his head. His stomach sloshed and heaved.

When the bells clanged again, he staggered to the bathroom and emptied his guts with as much accuracy as he could muster. When he'd finished, he lay on his side on the bathroom tile, his body curled in a fetal C around the base of the toilet. The fingers of his left hand reached up and wrapped around the toilet rim, gripping it for dear life.

A rap came on the bathroom door. "Benjy," called his roommate Z. "You okay in there?"

Ben tried to issue a grunt that sounded like *Come in*.

The door swung open. "You were retching so hard, you woke me up," Z said gently. "Feeling any better?"

"Uhhhng," said Ben.

"Attaboy. Let me get you some water."

Z retreated to Ben's room to retrieve the Brita pitcher. Ben, still nauseated, stared at the pee-splashed base of the toilet where, through the stickiness, a small red spider crawled. Z came back in the bathroom.

"Benjy," he said. "I'm sorry, but the puke smell is overwhelming. I need to flush the toilet. You might want to cover your ears."

The toilet roared beside Ben's head, a sound followed by the curt, efficient *whish whish whish* of a fumigant being sprayed into the air. Ben smelled a bright gardenia sweetness. He shivered as a spritz of fine particulate settled on the hairs of his arm.

Z reached down and freed Ben's fingers from their rigor mortis grip around the toilet rim. "All right, Benjy. Can you sit up now? Have a sip of water?"

Ben could not imagine sitting up, but he sighed and felt a little life return to his body. "What happened?" he asked weakly.

"I was going to ask you the same question. Seems like you got shit-faced and are now in a compromised state."

"I was planning to take it easy," Ben said. "Spend today prepping for the job fair." Several Silicon Valley companies were visiting campus this week as part of President Molina's new job far, and Ben had made appointments with them all.

"Sometimes plans go awry," Z said. "What's the last thing you remember?"

The attempt to remember anything sent poisonous bolts of pains shooting behind Ben's eyes. "We went to the Parties," he ventured.

"Well, sure," replied Z. "Then what?"

Then what? He remembered fat orange paper lamps like swollen full moons, swinging from the trees. The clang of the horseshoe-shaped latch of the gate as they entered the yard. Saying hellos, slapping hands, maybe procuring a beer from the keg, maybe dancing...and then blackness and waking up in his bed. That was all.

"Sounds like somebody went Black Irish," Z said.

In his younger days, circa freshman and sophomore years, Ben had a reputation for drinking himself into oblivion. Black Irish, his friends called this condition and Ben when he was in it. He'd inherited from his dad dark curly hair and a tendency to have a switch flipped when he overindulged. Actually, though, he was Irish only on his mom's side. "I swear I didn't drink that much," he said. "Did I drink that much?"

"Not that I saw. We parted ways early, though."

"Do I have a fever? Am I sick?"

Z chuckled. "Sit up and I'll tell you."

Slowly, carefully, to avoid cracking his head on the toilet's undercurve, Ben made his way to a sitting position on the bathroom floor. The room tilted and swam. "Man," he said as he rubbed his temples. "I'm in rough—"

"Dude," said Z.

"What?"

“Nothing,” Z said. “Don’t move.”

Ben slumped against the radiator. Z pulled a towel from the rack, dampened one corner in the sink, and squatted beside him.

“What’s wrong?” Ben asked.

“Nothing,” Z said. “Hold still.”

The fluffy towel covered Ben’s face and fell to his lap as Z scrubbed at his forehead. Being tended to in this way reminded Ben of long-ago things: Bright sunshine bouncing off water, his legs pressed into warm sand, the smell of baking sunscreen. His mom wetting a napkin with a bottle of water, his dad in sunglasses laughing. He closed his eyes and dozed into the memory.

Z stopped scrubbing.

“All done?” Ben murmured.

“Almost,” said Z. “Let me get a dab of soap.”

The faucet ran. The towel returned. This time Z scrubbed twice as hard, like when Ben’s mom got angry at Ben’s dad and cleaned Ben like he was a bathroom, not a boy.

“Dude,” said Ben, his complaint muffled by the towel draped over his face. “That hurts.”

“Sorry, Benjy. Hang in there a minute.”

Finally, Z finally withdrew the towel. Ben opened his eyes. “What’s going on?” he asked quietly. Only now did he see something in his roommate’s eyes that spooked him—befuddlement, distress, even fear.

“Don’t freak out,” Z said.

“Why would I freak out?”

“You won’t. You shouldn’t.”

“Dude,” Ben said. “*You’re* freaking me out.”

“I’m sure it’s just a joke,” Z said. “A prank.”

“*What* is?”

Z’s eyes swiveled around the room, his expression fluctuating by the nanosecond. Ben could see how badly Z wanted to find some magic solution to whatever the problem was, but he was a roommate, not a magician. He held out a hand, having resigned himself to saying what he’d been trying to avoid: “Maybe you should look in the mirror.”

Ben grasped Z’s hand and let his friend haul him to his feet. He took two shaky steps and lifted his eyes to the glass.

“What—”

“There must be a per—”

“—the—”

“—fectly good explana—”

“—fuck?”

BAM BAM BAM

Monroe Devine, Westish College senior, through the pleasant haze of a dream about muskie fishing in a brand-new boat, became dimly aware of a pounding on the bedroom door. “Mmmmm,” he said.

Warm fingers jabbed between his ribs. “Wake up, poser,” the fingers said, their voice melodic. “One of your bros seeks an audience.”

“Mmm.”

BAM BAM BAM

The voice, the fingers—they belonged to Pammy. Pammy Chang. He remembered, now, the magnificent things they’d done at dawn. Over the summer he’d had an inkling this might happen. He rolled toward her and hooked a bare leg over her bareness.

“Monty!” The fingers jabbed harder. “He’s going to break the door.”

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM

“Okay, okay.” Monty, now fully awake and annoyed, raised his voice: “Come in.”

The door flew open and smacked against the wall, doorknob denting plaster. There stood—who else?—Vic Robinson, panting and fuming.

“Devine!” he shouted as he pointed at his forehead. “What the fuck is this?”

Monty squinted at the thick black marks between Robinson’s eyebrows and hairline. “I don’t know,” he said. “What is it?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, you dumb piece of fuck!” Robinson was not a small guy. He was pretty much the antithesis of a small guy, a lumbering defensive lineman with apelike arms who was listed at two sixty. He was Monty’s least favorite football teammate and his housemate to boot.

“Yikes,” Pammy said, and let loose a low, musical whistle.

“Who did it?” Robinson bellowed.

Before Monty could hazard a guess, Robinson pointed a giant index

finger at him. “You did, you puny spunkwad! Put on some pants so I can pound your ass!”

“Bobinson, that’s an enticing offer,” said Monty. “But please note there’s a lady present. We should be respectful.”

“Respect this!” shouted Robinson. He grabbed from Monty’s desk a textbook, the four-inch-thick *Principles of Chemical Equilibrium*, fresh from the campus bookstore, its spine uncracked. He lifted it over his head with both hands and, using the same downward-swinging motion a gorilla would use, slammed it into the water-stained carpet.

“That book cost ninety-four dollars,” Monty informed him. He was enjoying the heck out of this. Someone had pranked the cretinous Robinson, and for once it was not him. With an anguished bellow, Robinson hoisted *Distillation Design* overhead and slammed it down on top of *Principles*.

Pammy, the sheet wrapped togalike around her bare torso, was fiddling with her phone, which she’d fished out of her spangly gold pocketbook on the nightstand. Monty admired the cool self-possession that enabled her to check her messages while Robinson stormed around.

Then he realized she wasn’t checking her messages but discreetly filming Robinson’s tantrum. Now *that* was cool.

“What is it?” Robinson demanded. “How do I get it off?”

“I don’t know,” Monty said truthfully. “It wasn’t me.”

“I put bleach on it.” A note of pleading interfered with Robinson’s rage. “I put the scouring stuff for the bathtub. That blue-crystal shit.”

“It wasn’t me,” Monty repeated.

“The hell it wasn’t. What is it, a tattoo?”

“There are plenty of people who don’t like you,” Monty pointed out. “Maybe it was Morris.”

“Screw Morris.” Robinson leveled a giant finger at Monty again. “It was you.”

“Bobinson, I’m telling you.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“It’s a messed-up prank,” Monty said. “I wouldn’t do that to you. Or to anyone. Sexual assault isn’t something to joke about.”

Robinson’s gigantic chest, which had been heaving noticeably beneath his WE ARE ONE T-shirt, heaved a little more slowly. He seemed to be calming down.

Monty looked at him. “You weren’t sexually assaulted, were you?”

Robinson glared. “Me?”

“Yeah, I mean...you’re sure nothing happened? I mean...you were probably pretty drunk, right?”

Robinson shook with rage. His chest heaved harder than ever. There was one more book on the desk—*Physical Gas Dynamics*. Up it went, and down. “I’M A DUDE!” he roared. “I WAS *NOT* SEXUALLY ASSAULTED!”

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6

The doorbell rang at one o’clock sharp, just as Pella was mixing the cocktails—gin fizzes with rosemary from the pots that flanked the patio.

She wiped her wet hands on a dishcloth and yanked open the finicky oven. The cobbler’s crust had turned the proper gold. Crimson filling sputtered up over the edges and hissed on the rods of the rack. She slipped a hand inside an oven mitt and pulled the cobbler onto the stovetop to cool. One hand turned on the broiler while the other drizzled the marinade over the bruschetta. She wiped her hands again, high-stepped over a drowsing Contango, and headed for the door.

She assumed it would be Judy, who was always punctual, and that Irma would slip in late, but they’d arrived together and let themselves in.

“My dear!” exclaimed Judy. She pressed into Pella’s hands a bottle of rosé, followed by a bouquet of thick-stalked sunflowers and delicate blue branches of Russian sage. Both flowers, Pella knew, grew in the field behind Judy’s farmhouse out on Highway C, though Judy, being Judy, never cut her own flowers but bought identical ones from the stooped and hardy Polish couple next door, who fretted and clucked over Judy’s naïveté, which they assumed would lead to her downfall, as they accepted her ten-dollar bill.

“Your hair,” Pella said as they brushed cheeks over the gifts. Judy’s hair was, at all times, an intricate mix of grayscale hues, a black streak here, a white flash there, pixelated salt and pepper underneath. This new cut was Judy’s shortest since Pella met her—tapered tightly above her ears and to her neck, with a sweep of bangs in front. Pella imagined that, when students asked silly questions in lecture, Judy would blow those bangs from her eyes in mock exasperation that wasn’t entirely mock. Many parts of her

professor’s inner life remained opaque to Pella, but Judy had a hopelessly cool way of being fifty-five.

Judy’s fingers riffled the short feathery stuff above one ear. “Too boyish?” she asked with proud nonchalance.

“It’s perfect. You look like a ballerina.”

Judy waved this away with an approving chuckle. “What is that delectable smell?”

“Cherry cobbler,” Pella said. “I just took it out of the oven.”

“My goodness. Is this one of those real estate tricks? Are you trying to sell us the house?”

“I’d entertain an offer,” Pella joked.

It was part of Judy’s graciousness as a guest to arrive with a remarkable haircut so that her host, by remarking on it, could prove herself equally gracious. Irma, by contrast, looked as inscrutable and intransigent as ever. Was it a coincidence that all the adjectives she brought to Pella’s mind began with *I*? It wasn’t that Irma was selfish; in fact, she could be exceedingly generous. It was more the stern self-sufficiency of that capital letter, thin and erect as an iron filing.

“Hey,” Irma said. “Nice rock.”

“Oh.” Pella glanced down at her left hand and the chunky diamond that had perched there since June. “Thanks.”

In most outward respects, Irma looked exactly as she had since Pella met her: same tattered knapsack dangling from the same narrow shoulder, same oversize tortoiseshell glasses, same drab sack dress that drooped and billowed around her hard pale body, and, above all, the same voluminous mass of light brown hair. Same slightly vexed expression, same elfin nose. Same small round mouth and candy-pink tongue that poked between her lips when she was nervous or wholly absorbed. Same boots.

And yet it was Irma, by virtue of being twenty-one, and by virtue of being Irma, who commanded Pella’s attention and demanded a full appraisal after a summer away. She was always changing, changing, changing, in ways Pella could sense more than see.

The sight of her friends rendered Pella, who’d admittedly been sampling the gin, a little misty-eyed. The summer had been long and dull, and she’d missed them.

As they walked through the narrow kitchen toward the backyard, she

turned to Judy. “Do you remember the email you sent me?”

“Which email, dear?”

“The very first one—after I asked if you would teach an independent study.”

“Ah.” Judy nodded vaguely. “*That* email.”

She clearly didn’t remember—but that was okay. Pella still thought about it all the time. It was the email that had brought both Judy and Irma into her life.

Three months after her dad died, Pella attended freshman orientation at Westish, where she sat alone in the back of the sweltering tent, drinking booze from a travel mug, scanning the assembly of cherubic teenagers and proud bored parents who were listening to the welcome speech of the woman who’d replaced her dad. Then she went home and wept. “I don’t think I can do this,” she told Mike.

Her voice must have contained some extra note of anguish or misery. Mike, for the first time since her dad’s funeral, looked worried.

“Just find one thing,” he urged her. “One thing you’d like to do.”

His worry worried her; she saw her own wasted life reflected in his eyes. The only thing she could think to do was email Professor Eglantine, a few of whose lectures she’d attended in the spring. She’d been impressed by Judy’s all-black outfits and neon accessories, the riffs she delivered with theatrical relish even as their content was cagey and subtle.

Dear Professor Eglantine,

I audited your Modernist Poetry course last spring and am now officially enrolled at Westish. I admired your lecture and was wondering whether you would consider facilitating an independent study for a motivated student. Apologies for the late request—I know classes are about to begin. All best,

Pella Affenlicht

The following evening—the interim felt like an eternity—she received a reply:

Dear Pella,

Shall we meet at my office Tuesday at two? You bring your thoughts, I'll bring mine.

Delightedly,
Judy

They had met every Tuesday since. The office itself, a small basement room in Tinsletter Hall, had a provisional air, as though Judy had inhabited it for hours instead of decades. It contained a standard-issue dormitory desk, its blond-wood surface occupied only by Judy's steepled hands, and two Westish-insignia chairs. Even the blond bookshelf was bare save for a slender sky-blue library book, *Modern Origins*, by P. D. M. Evans. At first Pella assumed Judy had needed the book for research purposes and would soon return it to the stacks, but it lay there week after week, a watchful talisman, its implacable buckram face revealing nothing of the reason for its presence. Pella could never quite bring herself to open it, as though doing so might make Judy disappear.

That first semester, at Pella's request, they read Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick and Marianne Moore, and then Judy suggested they retrace their steps toward George Eliot, whom Arendt and McCarthy discussed in their letters. On the Friday before Christmas break, Judy invited her to lunch at Maison Robert, where she steepled her fingers and asked, "So whom shall we tackle in the spring?"

Pella felt so relieved and happy that come spring, she and Judy would constitute a *we* who could tackle *whom*s, she didn't pause to consider the question. "More women," she said immediately, and this became the principle of their ongoing course.

Their Friday lunches became a regular occurrence, and Pella slowly began to suspect, with surprise and waxing pride, that Judy enjoyed her company and considered her a friend. At first this seemed implausible, too much like a dream come true. But every Friday Judy lingered at lunch as long as Pella did and ordered as many glasses of prosecco, if not one more. She didn't share any deep confidences during their talks, and Pella didn't

ask for any. She felt content, even when sitting across from Judy, to admire her from afar.

Judy struck Pella as both devoted to Westish and remarkably distant from it. When school was in session, she performed her duties with diligent care, her lectures densely plotted and delivered with brio, her handwritten comments on student papers essays unto themselves. And when school was not in session, she vanished. She spent the holidays with her ailing father in Arizona and her summers in Manhattan in a downtown loft that belonged to an old grad-school classmate. Where Judy's innermost compass pointed, Pella couldn't tell. It didn't seem to be toward her father, whom she spoke of with weary ambivalence. Perhaps Judy was oriented toward New York, but what New York might mean to Judy remained mysterious to Pella. Did she return, time and again, to some particular person? Or not one person but a metropolis full of them, a summerlong spree of dates and entanglements unavailable to a woman of Judy's age and taste in a remote Wisconsin town? Or did it have nothing to do with sex or romance—was it a kind of sustained fidelity to the promise and potential of the young Judy who'd moved to New York City, that emblem of endless possibility, so many years ago? Or was it less nostalgic and irrational than that, more mundane and also more lovely—a fulfilling, present-tense life of friends and thought and art?

Often, Pella had noticed, a sensitive and intelligent person whose life lacked an outwardly discernible orientation was in fact oriented toward—even if blocked by a crippling fear from finishing—some all-consuming project. It would have been comforting to suspect that Judy was, say, one of those long-suffering biographers who spent decades submerged in their subjects and that she would soon emerge to publish her Pulitzer-winning life of P. D. M. Evans, whoever that was, or some other forgotten thinker. But there was no indication that Judy was at work on any such project, and Pella slowly came to understand that when she found herself dwelling so relentlessly on the mystery of Judy's life, she was trying to figure out her own.

Then, in December of Pella's sophomore year, on the second prosecco of the final Friday of their third semester of independent study, Judy set down her glass and cleared her throat. "I have the most remarkable freshman in

my poetry course," she said. "I've been wondering if we should ask her to join us."

"Ah," said Pella.

"She's a bit green, but she has a rare mind," Judy went on. "Quite sui generis. I think you'd enjoy her—"

Panic flashed through Pella. In an instant, the outlines of her relationship with Judy had been redrawn. Yes, they were buddies, full of bonhomie, as once she'd dreamed—and why was that? Because Pella, by then in her mid-twenties, was stable and domesticated, safe and undemanding. A capable lunch companion who could hold three cocktails and her end of a conversation. A reader of decent journals, an espouser of decent opinions, a wearer of decent clothes. *Finished,* in more than one sense of the word. Whereas this remarkable freshman was something else. Some kind of blazing comet of boundless promise.

"And I think she'd benefit from spending time with you."

Would *I* benefit from it? Pella wondered. A second objection, the inverse of the first, arose in her mind: What if this talented freshman turned out be as dull as most of her classmates? Or just a smidgen less so, enough to briefly fool Judy?

Even as Pella teetered between opposing fears—that this rare green freshman would crush her or prove a crushing bore—there wasn't much she could do. She didn't intend to gainsay Judy, who'd been so kind to her.

"You know," Judy mused as though she hadn't prepared the line, "there's really no one else around on whom she could model herself intellectually."

"I've always wanted to model," Pella replied, and that was that.

When January came, a third chair appeared in Judy's office, and Irma Friske perched on the edge of it. She wore a baggy brown dress, red wool tights, and a dainty cross of gold. Her spiral notebook and pen sat pertly on the corner of Judy's desk. Her boots dangled in space.

Irma was a tiny, upright person. Two things were massive about her: her glasses and her hair, which was dense and frizzy, pale brown in color, and covered the entire back of her chair. It was heavy, burdensome hair, and it conjured in Pella an urgent desire to chop it off. She often wanted to edit the appearance of Westish's young ladies, but usually that entailed a straightforward urge to remove makeup and add fabric. This was a more

complex case. Prairie hair, premodern hair—it was the girl equivalent of a waist-length beard. Combined with the cross, it made Pella assume that Irma was a strongly religious person. She was not, as it turned out, but when Pella began to learn Irma's history—that she'd grown up on a farm and had been homeschooled for long stretches; that she rejected many aspects of her mother's fervent and homespun Catholicism, especially the existence-of-God aspect, but retained all the homespun fervor—she reflected that she had, at a glance, gotten certain things right.

It was the hair of a girl who had her own weird thing going on. Pella, having intuited this, resolved to respect it. Still, she couldn't stop herself from envisioning Irma's new haircut. It would be so easy to set her free.

"Hi, Pella," Irma said, twisting in her chair. "Professor Eglantine gave me your paper on *The Waves* to read over winter break. I thought it was excellent."

"She did?" Pella said. "You did?"

Irma nodded and nudged her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Professor Eglantine says your prose is lucid, whereas I write like mud, and I agree. It's nice to meet you."

"Well," said Pella, disarmed. "It's nice to meet you too."

Pella was required to write a long paper during her sophomore spring on an author of her choosing, and she'd somewhat arbitrarily chosen Edith Wharton, of whom she'd read little. Judy suggested they spend a few weeks on the major novels, contemplate Wharton's oblique relation to the artistic currents of her day, and then move on. Pella, who prided herself on being a swift and thorough reader, ordered the assigned books and headed to the library to gather secondary materials, determined to prove that she could keep up with Judy's remarkable freshman.

But as the weeks went by, Pella found herself falling behind. Irma, in her straightforward way, kept referring to unassigned stories and poems and pointing out inconsistencies between the two major biographies, neither of which Pella had read. *Does this girl have other classes?* Pella wondered. *Does she sleep? Does she eat?* Pella downloaded every Wharton book that existed in audio form so the pace of her own reading wouldn't be curtailed when she was cooking dinner or walking Contango. Sadly, she'd found no way to read in the VAC lap pool, where she spent an hour most afternoons.

Their Wharton reading turned into an all-consuming exercise, the kind

that required enthusiasm and effort and swaths of unblemished time; in other words, an undergraduate project, ideal for a stage of life in which your duties were few and your self a fugitive, protean thing—a stage of life Pella believed had passed her by, and that Irma was squarely in.

To have to fight to keep pace was maddening but also motivating for Pella. Her mind worked nonstop to generate talking points for each upcoming Tuesday. Sometimes she wondered whether Judy, with a secret ruthlessness behind her slow-blinking eyes, was purposely whipping up competition and, if so, who was meant to win. Had Pella been brought in to season the young prodigy, or had Judy found someone to spur Pella toward her true potential? She feared it wasn't the latter. But these were goofy, paranoid musings that coursed through Pella as she dug hard for the far wall of the pool, attempting to burn off the frustration she felt at being faced, for the first time in her life, with the presence of a decidedly brighter and younger thing.

Midway through the semester, Irma called Pella. They'd never spoken outside of class. "Do you have a backyard?" she asked.

Pella glanced out the window of the rear bedroom, which had become her study. Bare-branched crabapple, matted March grass, gray ripples of leftover snow. "Yes," she said.

"Would you like to start a garden?"

"A garden?" Pella said.

"Not, like, an Edith Wharton garden with dolphin fountains and lime walks," Irma said. "Just some vegetables."

"Huh." Pella felt a prickle of desire, but she'd never tended a plant in her life, and she felt unsure why Irma was asking.

"I'm going home for spring break," Irma said. "I could get some seedlings while I'm there."

"That's kind of you," Pella said. "But it sounds like a lot of trouble."

"It's not," Irma said.

When Irma returned from spring break, the bed of her truck was full of supplies: Spades and hoes with splitting wooden handles and rusting blades that smelled of musty barn. Sacks of soil and mulch. Flats of inch-high transplants, labeled baggies of seeds. Lavender leather-palmed gloves with the price tag still on.

Soon they'd covered all the radiators with black plastic flats of fledgling

plants. “We’ll get them in the ground after the last freeze,” Irma said as a late-March snowstorm raged outside. “Before I leave for the summer.”

When the snow melted, they spaded up a chunk of yard along the fence line. Grunting and sweating, they rolled up strips of sod like carpet, the grass roots straining and popping. Pella shivered with illicit pleasure. Grass was sacred among her neighbors, and she’d just murdered half of hers.

Soon Irma was over every afternoon. One day she arrived with a borrowed rototiller in the bed of her truck and taught Pella how to pilot it through the rain-hardened mud of the plot they’d staked out, her firm arms shuddering. She showed Pella how to plant, and stake, and rig netting to keep the rabbits away. At first Pella assumed that Irma was doing all this for her own benefit. A farm girl consigned to the dorms, she wanted a community garden and had conscripted Pella to host it.

But once the seeds and seedlings were in the ground, Irma took only a glancing interest in their progress. The garden was a gift she’d bestowed on Pella. Not a monetary gift, but a gift of time and effort. Of understanding, though they’d only just met, what Pella would enjoy.

What Irma enjoyed was studying. Each afternoon, after they did some garden-related chore, she would plunk down at the dining-room table to read. It pleased Pella to have her there, eyes fixed on a book, fingers flying over her laptop as she took notes. Pella invited her to dinner day after day until there was no need to invite her.

During her first year and a half at Westish, Pella had stayed aloof from her fellow undergrads, as seemed to suit a “nontraditional” student who was shacked up with an administrator. In lectures she sat alone in the front row, like a graduate assistant. The male students avoided her with a comic cautiousness because she was Mike Schwartz’s girlfriend, or, for the same reason, brazenly chatted her up, like puppies who craved to be smacked on the nose. Ambitious senior girls tried to befriend her, and Pella drank coffee with them at Café Oo and dispensed advice about cities, boys, city boys. Then those girls graduated while Pella stayed behind. *Nontraditional* meant she was the oldest student on campus and would grow older by the day while the student body remained the same age. It felt like an ironic reversal of her upbringing in Harvard Yard. She was far from precocious now. She was, if imperfectly, mature. By the time she met Irma, Pella had turned

twenty-five—the age of unfolding Herman Melville described in the speech that her father had kept taped above his desk:

> It was not before my twenty-fifth year...that I took up my pen in earnest, and began to live; since then, scarcely a week has gone by when I do not feel myself unfolding within myself.

As a girl, Pella loved this quotation. She loved the use of the word *unfolding*, as of the petals of a flower, to describe an internal process of self-becoming; loved the idea that this process could begin at twenty-five or, by extension, at any age; loved the way self-becoming was entwined with the making of art. But this inspiring conceit was as depressingly masculine in the 2010s as it had been in the 1880s. Men were allowed, encouraged, to be late bloomers. Women had better bloom, bloom, bloom.

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7

Now the three of them were arranged around the latticed iron table on the back patio. Contango presided, sleepy and Sphinx-like, from the flagstones at their feet. Pella uncorked Judy's rosé and splashed it into jam jars while the sweating pitcher of gin fizzes stood at the ready. It was a lot of alcohol, especially given that Irma never drank more than a sip.

Judy lifted her jar. Sunlight bounced pinkly through its hexagonal facets. Carbonation sparkled in the air like tiny fireworks. "We have so much to celebrate," she said. "Let's begin with our incomparable hostess."

"Hear, hear," said Irma.

"And her engagement."

"Hear, hear."

"And the fact that we get to keep her even though she's graduated."

"Hear!"

"I don't know what we would have done without you," Judy continued as they clinked glasses.

"You would have had to learn how to cook, Jude," Irma joked.

Judy smiled. "At my age, I'm resigned to popcorn and wine."

"That's what we would have done for Friday lunches," Irma said. "Popcorn and wine."

"Oh, if I weren't here to cook, you'd just go to Green Rooster," Pella said. "You'd be happy as clams."

The silence that followed did not qualify as awkward, but Pella might have preferred her statement to be contradicted. Irma reached down into a pocket of her backpack and pulled out her phone, which had been softly dinging. "Whoa," she murmured as she gazed at the screen.

Gently Pella tried to reclaim her attention: "How was your summer, I?"

Irma shrugged without lifting her gaze. "Same as ever. 'Hello, welcome

to Cracker Barrel.’ ‘Hello, welcome to Cracker Barrel.’ ‘Hello...’”

“It’s still hard to picture you waiting tables,” Pella said.

“That’s because I’m so bad at it. Four years in and I’m worse than when I started.”

“I doubt you’re bad,” Pella said. “You just don’t like it.”

Irma did not reply. Beneath the edge of the table, her thumbs flew over her touchscreen. Pella glanced at Judy, hoping they might exchange a look—*Kids today, always on their phones*—but Judy, though phoneless, seemed as distracted as Irma. She gazed toward the crabapple tree and tapped a finger against her glass, which she’d already drained.

“It’s not difficult, if that’s what you mean.” Irma finally paused and looked up. “One guy—this happened last week, so it’s fresh in my mind—said to me, ‘Sweetie, why do you have your uniform buttoned up like that?’ And I was like, ‘Well, I don’t have *breasts*, if that’s what you mean.’ And he said—he literally spoke these words—‘I’ll be the judge of that.’ This is a guy who’s sitting there with his wife.”

“What did you say?” Pella asked.

“Nothing. I just did what I always do—waited ten minutes, then dumped a Coke in his lap.”

Pella smiled. “I take back what I said. You’re a terrible waitress.”

Irma returned to her phone. Meanwhile Judy was speeding through her second glass of wine as though she had somewhere to be and needed to be drunk when she got there.

“How’s Anderson Cooper?” Pella asked.

“Oh, yeah.” Irma glanced up. “I brought him.”

“To school?”

“Yep.” Irma laid her phone face down on the table. This tiny triumph was mitigated by Pella’s sense of a growing distance between herself and Irma, who’d been halfway out of touch all summer. How had she not known Irma was bringing, or thinking of bringing, her family cat to school?

“Was it hard to smuggle him in?” Pella asked.

“Smuggling him in was easy,” Irma said. “I carried a forty-pound bag of cat food past Dean Melkin and all he did was wave. Smuggling him out, on the other hand.”

“Past your mom,” Pella said.

Irma nodded. “There’s a forest across the road from our house.

Sometimes Anderson spends two or three days out there. *Going on location*, we call it."

"Soon Ada will figure it out."

"Soon Ada will *freak* out." Irma took a tiny sip of wine. "The sky will be rent, the earth will cringe. But it's not like she's going to drive out here and collect him. That would require leaving the house."

"She won't send your dad?"

Irma shook her head. "He won't get involved. Besides, Ada will enjoy it. Every day she can call and complain about how I stole her cat."

Pella slipped a hand through the arm of her chair to scratch Contango's head. The husky peered out at the darting wrens with sleepy, slitted eyes. He looked so at home there on his flagstones. Pella worried that something would happen to him while she was at Owen's wedding. She knew it was irrational—he wasn't that infirm—but he was getting old, and she didn't like to leave him.

"You don't feel guilty about taking Anderson so far from home?" she asked. "He can't hang out in the forest anymore."

"He's better off," Irma replied. "That place is dangerous."

"The forest?"

"The *house*."

Pella had never met Irma's mom, and it was hard to know how far to trust Irma's stories about her. Ada Friske was, in her daughter's telling, a brilliant woman. She knew the Bible from front to back. She also knew the Koran, the Vedas, the Sutras, and so on, though only for the sake of disputation. Did Irma exaggerate her mom's fractious and exasperating qualities as well as her brilliance? It was hard to tell. Irma professed a constant desire to be rid of her, and then spent every Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break, and summer at home. She and her mom talked and argued on the phone every day. For motherless Pella, there was abundant fascination in this fraught bond.

Irma picked up her phone again. As she hunched over it, typing away, her glasses slid so far forward, they threatened to fall off her nose. Before Irma's forefinger guided them back up, Pella realized her eyes were rimmed with smudgy eyeliner. Was this a style she'd adopted over the summer? Or something she was testing out at their lunch? The messy liner contrasted

sharply with Irma's pale skin, yielding a slightly sickly look, but Pella was pleased to see her trying something new.

"Irma!" she blurted. "You're wearing makeup."

"Oh," said Irma with a startled expression. "Yeah."

"It looks great," Pella said.

"Thanks," Irma said in a flattened tone that declared this line of conversation moribund.

Already Pella realized her mistake: Irma wasn't going for a smudgy, slept-in look—her makeup was literally smudged and slept in. Was it possible she'd lied about staying in last night, that she'd gone to the Parties? Was that why she hadn't come for dinner? Was that who she kept texting—some boy she hooked up with last night?

It was impossible for Pella to imagine Irma at the Parties, dancing and drinking cheap beer. But it *was* possible to imagine Irma, her party makeup having been done by some more worldly friend, waking up late only to realize she didn't know how to wash off eyeliner.

Judy, meanwhile, had not said a word since her toast. She wore an air of glum distraction, her chin in her hand, eyelashes fluttering as she gazed aimlessly at some vague spot in the crabapple branches. She picked up the rosé and split the last of the dark pink dregs between her own and Pella's glasses, an irrelevant gesture that seemed designed to call Pella's attention to the empty bottle and encourage her to offer gin fizzes.

"How was New York?" Pella asked.

Sadness fell across Judy's face, and she said, with obscure import: "My trip was rather truncated this year."

"Oh. Nothing bad happened, I hope?"

Judy held out her empty jar, allowing this question to disperse on the afternoon breeze. Pella lifted and tipped the sweating pitcher of cocktails. The beads of rosé that remained in Judy's jar mixed into the gin, imparting a momentary tinge of pale pink, like a drop of blood in the bathwater. Pella kept pouring until the pinkness disappeared.

Judy took a long sip. Forcibly, as though adjusting a dimmer switch, she brightened her expression. "A truncated trip," she repeated. "But I did see Owen."

"Oh?"

"Back in July. He'd just returned from Japan, and he and Martin invited

me to see their new apartment. What a marvelous couple they are."

Judy, sidestepping her gloom as she warmed to a favorite subject—namely, the success of her star students—launched into a tipsy recounting of Owen's Japanese book tour. "He was supposed to be there two weeks," she explained, "but his publishers were fielding—ha!—so many requests that he stayed for a third. It seems the Japanese are absolutely mad for baseball, of all things, and correspondingly mad for Owen's novel. It's taken over the bestseller list! Apparently the press has latched onto the fact that Owen wrote much of the book while studying there, and it doesn't hurt that he speaks a bit of the language."

"Big in Japan," said Irma.

"Huge in Japan!" Judy agreed. "What else? He said it stirred up strong emotions to be back in Tokyo, where he'd done his fellowship year. And that he was a little forlorn, being away from Martin so long. I imagine it must be exhausting—traveling every day, giving talks and readings, being feted every night."

"I get a little fetid at night myself," Irma said.

"I warned you," Pella said. "It's that homemade deodorant."

Irma lifted one arm and plunged her tiny nostrils into the dress fabric near her armpit. "Mm," she said. "Now, *that* stirs up strong emotions."

Pella laughed, grateful for Irma's full presence in the conversation and also for her puncturing of the worshipful aura surrounding Owen. Judy could sometimes exhibit an intensity of pride in her students' accomplishments that Pella found unsettling.

But there was, too, ample admiration in Irma's attitude toward Owen; she was soaking up every word that Judy spoke. Irma and Owen had never met, but Irma, a fellow winner of the Maria Westish Award, was his natural successor on campus. She lived in his old room on the top floor of Phumber Hall, worked at the desk he had worked at, placed her books on the same blond-wood shelves. Owen's post-college triumphs were a harbinger of her own, a set of footsteps in the sand. This made her a more fervent fan of Owen's work than Pella might have expected her to be. Precisely because Irma felt destined to follow in those footsteps, she liked them to be as large as possible.

"Is he writing a new book?" Irma asked, eagerness in her voice.

Judy nodded. "Of course, he was reluctant to say much about it. You

know Owen—such a modest creature. He said he was writing for four hours first thing every morning while enjoying his pot of tea before turning his attention to the wedding arrangements."

Sure, Pella thought, that's exactly what he does—if *pot of tea* was a euphemism for getting high, and *writing for hours* meant calling Pella in a frantic whirl. She could see Irma scouring Judy's words for clues to the successful artist's workday—four hours, first thing, pot of tea—and filing them in her mind. Everyone wanted to know how he'd done it, this capital-*W* Writer who at the tender age of twenty-four had appeared on the *Today* show and been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

"Will we be seeing you at the wedding?" Pella asked Judy in an effort to bring the Owen-talk back to an earthier plane. The question served also to sideline Irma, who hadn't been invited—a slight Pella saw register in Irma's dispirited glance. She felt again an uneasy variance between herself and her best friend, to which she had now contributed.

"Ah," sighed Judy. "He and Martin were kind enough to invite me, though I can't imagine why."

"Because Owen worships you, of course."

"I should hope no one does *that*." Having briefly risen to the task of singing Owen's praises, Judy ebbed into glumness again. "I did make arrangements in a fit of optimism, back when I received the invitation. But now that the semester's starting, there's so much to be done."

"You should come," Pella said. "It'll be fun."

"Yes, yes," said Judy, and gazed into her empty jar.

Pella knew how slippery and stubborn Judy could be, even in her cheeriest moods. She would pummel you with *Yes, yes*es and do precisely as she wished. If Judy had decided not to attend the wedding, that was that. She would receive the invitation with a gasp of pleasure; she would be the first to RSVP; she would book the best room on the island and order the best item off the registry; but she would not, in the end, attend.

And yet, couldn't Pella talk her into it, just this once? She felt, for whatever reason, a strong desire to talk Judy into it. After all, she was the maid of honor—wasn't it her duty to try?

"Owen and Martin," she ventured, "would be thrilled if—*ow*!"

Beneath the table, a steel-capped toe crashed into her shin. Pella recoiled

in pain and annoyance. She shot Irma a miffed, questioning look, and Irma shot back a look that said, *Just drop it.*

What did Irma know? All Pella knew was that Judy was morose and swiftly drinking, and her summer in New York had been "truncated," which presumably meant she'd been back in Westish for a while but hadn't called Pella to tell her or seek her company—and now Irma was kicking Pella's shins as though she knew what to say around Judy while Pella did not.

"If you can't make it," Pella relented, "I'll give them both your love."

"Yes, yes," said Judy. "Please do."

"Speaking of which," Pella said, "I'm sorry to miss class tomorrow."

Irma looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"Just that I'm leaving for Block Island in the morning. But if you tell me what readings you choose, I'll track them down and dig in. I can read the whole plane ride home."

Irma's tongue poked between her teeth. "We never really talked about you being in class this year," she said in the same tone she'd used to beg off dinner last night.

"What's to talk about?" Pella said as a bolt of fear shot through her. "We'll do what we always do."

"But...you graduated."

"But," Pella said, with a small, apologetic flourish of her hands, "I'm still here."

They both glanced at Judy, squabbling siblings appealing to Mom, but Judy, her chin on her hand like a tipsy Rodin's *Thinker,* was gazing at the crabapple tree. Pella, uneasy, tried again:

"Obviously I'd just be auditing," she told Irma. "We'd structure the whole year around your thesis. But I could be a good sidekick."

Irma smoothed her napkin in her lap. "I appreciate the offer," she said. "But I was thinking I might go it alone this year."

"Oh," Pella said.

"It's just a complicated project," Irma said. "Some of the readings haven't even been translated. I'll have to do them in French, and—"

"I get it," Pella said. "I get it."

"We'll still have Friday lunches," Irma said.

"Sure." Pella took a long slug of wine. Irma grabbed her phone from her lap and resumed her furious texting.

“I’ll go get the food.” Pella scraped her chair over the uneven brick as Irma and Judy murmured their absent consent. She gathered up the empty wine bottle, the rind-littered cheese plates, the stubby knives. Arms laden, she tried to press the screen-door handle, but the wine bottle slipped from the crook of her elbow; she caught it just before it crashed to the flagstones. Finally she cracked the door enough to squeeze through.

She’d left the oven on, and the narrow kitchen was sauna-warm. She put the bruschetta under the broiler to crisp. Judy and Irma had found something to talk about in her absence. Their words, indiscernible, wafted through the screen.

She plated the salad, added the salmon, arranged hunks of bruschetta around the edges. She could see how nice the dishes looked, but the pleasure she usually took in her artistry, and in nourishing her friends, was missing. Irma’s indifference to their reunion wounded her; Judy’s speed-drinking confused her; the thought of not being involved in independent study opened a cavernous emptiness beneath the coming year.

Having navigated the screen door again, she set down Judy’s and Irma’s plates and retreated to the kitchen for her own. “Voilà,” she said when she returned.

Judy picked at her salad while continuing to vanquish the cocktails with impressive speed. Irma, by contrast, polished off everything and set down her fork. “Here.” Pella heaped more salad onto her plate. “There’s plenty.”

“Thanks,” Irma said. “So what’s going on with you? Did you find a job?”

“No,” Pella said. “Not yet.”

Irma dabbed an index finger into her jam jar, scooped out a breeze-blown speck, examined it on her fingertip. “I guess you don’t really need one.”

“I *need* one.” Pella could hear the defensiveness in her tone. “But I’ve been busy.”

“Busy with what?”

“Oh, you know...” Pella glanced around at what she’d been busy with—weeding the garden, walking the dog. Nothing that seemed likely to satisfy Irma’s notion of busyness or, for that matter, her own. “I’ve been helping Mike study for the LSAT.”

Even this was mostly a lie; she’d spent several slow afternoons studying

practice questions from the prep books she'd bought him so she could help when he got stumped, but she'd so far failed to transfer any of her knowledge to Mike. Even in the summer, he was always at work. "And there was the whole episode with Contango's hip—back and forth to the vet a half dozen times."

"Sounds like a lot," said Irma with a tinge of sarcasm.

Frustration shot through Pella, and she thought: What did *you* do all summer, I? Sure, you worked full-time and helped your struggling parents while prepping for the GRE and starting your senior thesis and fellowship applications so you can earn a full ride to grad school the way you earned a full ride to college so you can blaze through your PhD with the highest accolades so you can become the last tenured English professor in America. Fine. But what *else* did you do?

"And I've been helping Owen with the wedding," she said. "When he was in Japan, I was the point person on all the preparations."

"So many dudes to serve," Irma said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Irma held up her palms. "Sorry."

"I'm just wondering what you meant."

"What I meant was, what about *you*? Mike's off doing whatever he does, so you study for the LSAT—what are you going to do, take it for him? Owen's getting married, but he's off in Japan, so you plan his wedding for him. Even good old Contango here—just another dude you spend your time serving."

Pella's cheeks prickled. "I spend a preposterous amount of time worrying about myself. So that's not a concern. And of course I look out for Mike—he's my boyfriend."

"Your fiancé, you mean."

"Call him what you want," Pella said. "I don't *serve* him. If Mike does well on the LSAT, he'll have his pick of law schools, and that will be good for me. More options for my career. Left to his own devices, he'd probably just stay in this house forever."

"So let him."

"I don't want to let him. He doesn't want me to let him. That's what a relationship is. You nudge each other along. Look, I'm sorry I can afford to go without working for a little while."

“No need to apologize,” Irma said. “It sounds nice.”

“Speaking of *serving*.” Pella scraped back her chair. “Maybe I should serve dessert.”

She stood and, with more clatter than necessary, scooped up the lunch plates, the silverware, the empty pitcher. This lunch, she thought, was a mistake. If I’d taken Owen up on his offer, I’d be halfway to the beach by now.

With her armload of dishes, she stepped over Contango and prepared to battle the screen door again. At the last moment Irma popped up from her chair, her body like a slim iron spring inside her shapeless dress. She held the door and followed Pella into the kitchen.

Pella, needing a moment to compose herself, turned her back to Irma and slowly carved out three wedges of cherry cobbler.

“Would you take out the ice cream?” she asked.

“Sure.” Irma opened the freezer. “You mean this frozen custard?”

“Jesus, I. Is it literally the only thing in the freezer?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes. The *frozen custard*, please.”

Irma tugged the lid off the paper tub and, with a penitent air, set the tub on the counter.

“The scoop’s right there,” Pella said. “I’ll make the coffee.”

Irma dug the metal lip of the scoop into the custard, which curled in a slow-motion wave. “Look,” she said. “I’m sorry about independent study. It hadn’t occurred to me that you’d want to do it this year.”

“Well,” Pella said. “It’s not like I have much else going on.”

“You could join us if you like.”

“Thanks,” Pella said. “I’ll think about it.”

She knew better than to accept, but for Irma to extend the offer lightened her mood. “What’s up with Judy?” she asked when the whir of the coffee grinder subsided. “She’s, like, sliding in and out of the slough of despond. Not to mention getting blitzed.”

Irma nodded. “She and Doug broke up.”

“Doug? Who’s Doug?”

“Her friend.”

“Judy has a friend?” Pella said.

“Not anymore,” Irma replied.

Pella, bewildered, snapped off the burner to quell the rattling kettle. Judy had had a friend? That in itself was not bewildering—everybody needed a friend. What was bewildering was that Irma knew all about him, whereas Doug was news to Pella.

"She's been back from New York for weeks," Irma said.

"Doug lives in New York."

"Doug lives in New York," Irma confirmed.

Pella thought about this for a while as the coffee drip-drip-dripped into the carafe's lower bulb and Irma, with a cocked and pointy elbow, cranked the metal scoop into the custard. "Doug's married," Pella guessed.

Irma nodded.

"Can I ask how long you've known about Doug?"

Irma shrugged as if to say, *Longer than you'd care to know*. "I'm sorry I got on your case before," she said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay," Pella said.

"I just get the sense that you don't want to talk about your future. Your plans."

"Well," Pella said. "Maybe I was waiting to be asked."

"I'm asking," Irma said.

Pella fiddled with the coffee filter to shift the grounds around. She felt gratified by Irma's interest but also exposed and agitated. Perhaps she didn't actually want to talk about her plans—not in the concrete sense that Irma wanted to talk about them.

"Are you still thinking about grad school?" Irma asked.

"No," Pella said. "I haven't been thinking about that for a long time."

"You'd be good at it," Irma said.

"Not compared to you."

Pella had once harbored thoughts of applying to doctoral programs. After all, her two great mentors, Judy and her dad, were both professors. Meeting Irma had changed her mind.

"Maybe you could do something with food?" Irma suggested. "Lunch was phenomenal, by the way."

"I don't know." Pella sighed. "When it comes down to it, there's nothing on my résumé. I've never had a job except in the dining hall. I'm just a random twenty-seven-year-old with a BA."

"Yeah," Irma said. "A Bad Attitude."

Pella smiled. “A Big Ass.”

“Your ass is amazing.”

“Thanks.” Pella took three mugs from the cupboard and poured the coffee. “You know, sometimes I envy you. By the time you’re my age, you’ll be finishing your dissertation, getting a real job. You’ll be Professor Friske.”

Irma shrugged. “I have to do it that way,” she said. “I can’t afford to screw around.”

Pella carried the three mugs of coffee—black for her and Irma and a dollop of frozen custard for Judy, because Pella had run out of milk. Irma took the three dishes of custard-topped cobbler, balanced them on one forearm with waitressly expertise, and finessed the sticky screen door with her other hand.

“In all our lunches,” Pella said, “I’ve never seen you do that.”

“Yeah,” said Irma. “Sorry.”

THEY DRANK COFFEE and ate cobbler as the sun wheeled westward with the accelerating haste of September. Before long it dropped below the tops of the Beauregards’ maples, and the table was cast in shadow. Pella brought Judy a blanket to wrap around her shoulders. Judy patted her hand in gratitude.

An hour later, they parted on the sidewalk. Judy blinked her huge gray eyes slowly, slowly, the way she did when she was drunk. “Everything was marvelous,” she said. “Absolutely marvelous.”

“My pleasure,” Pella said.

“When do you leave for Block Island? Not till Tuesday?”

“Tomorrow’s Tuesday,” Pella reminded her.

“Oh. Of course.” Judy blinked another of her luxurious tipsy blinks, though this one contained a note of embarrassment. “I keep thinking it’s Friday. We usually lunch on Fridays. You’ll send Owen our love, won’t you?”

“I will,” Pella promised.

“Well...” Judy said, and squeezed Irma’s hand. “We’ll see you soon.”

The squeeze and the *we* lingered long enough to register on Pella’s mind, and to continue to register. Judy squeezing Irma’s hand. For support,

Pella thought. Poor Judy was swaying like a stunned boxer, her tall heels planted on the sidewalk while her body described small moony arcs in the afternoon air. She'd gone through a second bottle of wine during dessert with token help from Pella and none from Irma.

A bolt of suspicion shot through Pella. Was it Judy who had done Irma's makeup? Was Judy the worldly friend? Could Judy and Irma be—with Judy on the rebound from the mysterious Doug, could the two of them possibly —

The thought was outlandish. But was it more outlandish than the thought that Irma had gotten drunk at the Parties and gone home with a boy? Perhaps Judy, in her jilted post-Doug melancholy, had turned to Irma, and Irma had been ready to be turned to. Perhaps their separate disjointed distractednesses today were merely an elaborate smoke screen designed to throw Pella off the scent.

Pella knew she was being absurd. She was feeling left out, banished from independent study, and she was spinning a wild fantasy about her left-out-ness instead of letting it be.

And yet Irma's hand was still being squeezed in a way that seemed to contain a message. It was hard not to be envious of the adventurousness, the ambition, the expression of power on the part of nerdy beguiling Irma that it implied. Pella, by comparison, felt old and staid and hopelessly straight, with her chunky diamond ring.

Pella reined in her imagination. The intertwining of their fingers was intimate, but intimacy didn't have to mean sex. There was a quavering infirmity in Judy's grasp, a vulnerability Pella had never seen in her before. Irma's manner, in turn, was full of tenderness. It was a drunk friend leaning on a sober friend; it was a heartbroken friend leaning on a headstrong friend. It was a friend leaning on a friend.

"Wait," Pella said. "The vegetables."

Before their arrival, she'd filled a pair of grocery bags with vegetables from the garden. She dashed inside and retrieved them.

"Here," she said. "One for each."

"Oh my goodness," said Judy. "Can you spare all this?"

"Everything's ripening at once. And Mike will eat all his meals at Carapelli's while I'm gone." She handed both bags to Irma to carry. "If you want to pick more while I'm away, come on over."

“Thanks,” Irma said.

Pella’s guests walked off together, just as they’d arrived. Judy, in her heels, wavered above tiny Irma, who moved with assurance down the sidewalk despite the bulging grocery bags. Judy laid a hand on Irma’s upper arm to steady herself. They vanished around the corner. Pella went into the house to wash the dishes.

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8

Cowabunga," Pammy said. "This thing is blowing up."

She was sitting across from Monty Devine at a wobbly table for two in the center of the main dining room of Carapelli's, bloodred carpet underfoot. Carapelli's was quiet as could be. The families of Westish were barbecuing in backyards or rolling into town after a weekend away. Their classmates were hungover at the dining hall. Hardly anybody was out for pizza except Monty and Pammy.

"How many views?" Monty asked.

"Two thousand three hundred ninety...two thousand four hundred. Your friend Bobinson is way more popular than my drawings. I'm almost offended."

"He's not exactly my friend."

"Yeah." Pammy scrolled through the comments, which were arriving almost as quickly as she could read them. "What's the deal with that?"

"Nothing, really. You know we both play football, and I'm a tight end __"

She glanced up and smiled. "Yeah, you are."

"And Robinson used to play tight end, or wanted to, but he can't really catch the ball, is the thing, so eventually he had to switch to defense. Which pissed him off, even though he's crazy-good on defense and makes All-Conference every year. That's when he first started messing with me. And I started messing back. I've gotten his goat a few times."

"Like how?"

"Dumb stuff, mostly. If Robinson passed out at a party and woke up with his hand in a glass of warm water, that was me. If somebody got hold of Robinson's credit card info and made a monthly donation to NPR that he didn't notice for a year, that was me. If Robinson was sending Cassidy

Broward pictures of his tiny dick but they wound up spliced into the whole team's film study, it was probably because Cassidy forwarded them to me."

Pammy laughed. "No wonder he's convinced you wrote on his face."

"Especially since you posted that video, and he thinks that you and I are —" Monty paused. Pammy looked up from her phone, feeling highly curious about what word he would choose. "In cahoots."

They'd spent the day together, most of it in Monty's bed. After Bobinson stormed off, they had sex again, the exhilaration of which was heightened, as though it needed heightening, by the adrenaline that lingered when their intruder departed. On her phone, Pammy showed Monty her artwork—charcoal drawings and watercolor paintings, photographs she'd taken, planters she'd made in pottery class—toward which Monty displayed an earnest, almost grave admiration. She showered at his house and put on the same shorts and shiny asymmetrical shirt she had been wearing last night, and they walked around downtown and ate frozen custard and now here they were, sitting across from each other at a restaurant, on what appeared very conspicuously to be a date.

Pammy looked up from her phone. "This is *not* a date," she said.

"I know," said Monty. Here at this table in the middle of the restaurant, the fact of their togetherness felt splendidly exposed. Anyone who walked into Carapelli's would see them together, though no one was walking in. Monty found himself wishing somebody would—wishing for some third party to notice and possibly even spread a rumor about what was happening here.

"But you're housemates with that guy?" Pammy asked.

"Bobinson? Yeah."

"How'd that happen?"

Monty shrugged. "It's a big house—six bedrooms. Five of us signed the lease. We were going to put a foosball table in the spare room. Then Bobinson's housing fell through, and he begged to join us. And, out of the kindness of my heart, I did not blackball him."

"Such a mensch," Pammy said.

"Thanks," Monty said. "And now Bobinson, who'd be sleeping on the street if not for me, thinks I let him move in just so I can prank him all year."

"What will he do now?"

“Retaliate,” Monty said.

“Like how?”

“Who knows? Whatever his feeble mind can think of. If you hadn’t been there this morning, he probably would have come after me.”

A look of concern crossed Pammy’s face. “Will he hurt you?”

“He’ll need to be halfway subtle,” Monty said. “He won’t want to get suspended from the team.”

“Subtlety doesn’t seem like his strong suit.”

Monty smiled. “That’s true.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt because of this.”

“Thanks.” Their eyes met again across the table. Pammy wondered if she was blushing. She looked away, up into the corner of the room, where the music swam out of a mounted speaker, and returned to her phone. She’d gotten more likes in the past hour than she normally got in a month.

Monty watched her from across the table. Was Pam Chang hot? She was not regularly counted among the girls who were hot, but that kind of consensus view always tended toward the vanilla, and Pammy was not vanilla. She had all that glossy hair with the red streaks and the rough-chopped ends, and she had a wide, open face that was extremely expressive and seemed to hide nothing, or maybe it hid plenty but did so by showing you an abundance of other things. Her soft skin had a lovely bronze color even when she wasn’t bathed in the mellow lamps of Carapelli’s with the candle flickering under their chins. In this light, her skin looked gorgeous and almost unreal. He enjoyed looking at her upper arms coming out of her complicated shirt as she manipulated her phone. She had a certain round solidity to her body, a certain *presence,* and you wouldn’t say in theory that she had a great body, like if you saw her in a photograph, but now that they’d slept together multiple times in the past fourteen or however many hours, Monty would argue that she absolutely did have a great body—it *felt* great to him, was the thing. Running around the rim of her right ear was a long row of different earrings, dots and loops and staples, a dozen or more, one of which, right at the peak of her ear, was missing. It was probably in his bed.

Pammy dropped her phone onto the table with a sigh. “Sorry. I’m being rude.”

“I don’t mind,” Monty said.

“You’re sweet. I’m done.” She spread a white cloth napkin over the phone as though it were dead. “Let’s have an *awesome* conversation. Let’s, like, connect on the deepest level.”

Monty laughed. “I wonder who did do it,” he said.

“Did what?”

“Wrote on Robinson.”

“Hmm,” Pammy said. “What do you think?”

“In a way it seems straightforward. Guy gets wasted at a party, passes out, his buddies scribble something on his forehead. It’s probably one of his hockey buddies—the hockey guys are the worst. Somebody dumber than dumb who thinks it’s okay to make rape jokes.” Monty waited for Pammy to meet his gaze: He wanted to make exceedingly clear that *he* didn’t think rape jokes were okay.

“But,” he went on, “you saw Bobinson’s forehead. Those letters weren’t scrawled in Magic Marker. They were, like, stenciled. Or tattooed. It was *artistic*.”

“Mmm,” Pammy murmured as she chewed on the straw of her Coke.

“Artistic and also pretty mean, because Bobinson couldn’t get it off with bleach. Which suggests that it was premeditated, not just a spur-of-the-moment thing. Whoever did it might not’ve been drunk at all.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s where I get stumped,” Monty said. “Because the dudes who plan a prank and execute it with skill and probably some measure of sobriety are not the same dudes who think it’s funny to write something dark and offensive on somebody’s face.”

“Mmm,” Pammy said again.

“You’re thinking something. I can see you thinking something.”

Pammy shrugged. “I agree it was elegantly done.”

“And?”

“And...” Pammy looked at this guy sitting across from her, this Monroe Devine. He was wearing a stiff-collared golf shirt with a pocket on the breast. It was not a cool shirt, nor did he wear it with the winking self-awareness that might make it cool, but he did look blindingly handsome in it. He looked like a strapping blond football player who also liked golf. He was far from her type, insofar as she had a type, but he was divine. And she assumed she was far from his type, which made her feel proud to have

transcended whatever her type supposedly was: arty, big-boned, Asian. Fondly she recalled those thick chemistry textbooks stacked on his desk beside a neatly organized row of three-ring binders with printed labels, the work of a schoolboy excited for the semester to begin, which was precisely what he was. On their walk, he'd told her about the graduate course in chemical engineering he was taking at UW–Green Bay because Westish didn't offer anything that advanced. The class had already begun, and when he described the grumpy professor, the impossible problem sets, the hourlong drive each way, he sounded almost giddy.

She wanted very much for him to comprehend her—for Monroe Devine to be not only terribly handsome but also smart, and not only smart at chemical engineering and inventing pranks (she loved the NPR lark) but smart at understanding what the world might look like to a woman. Not even necessarily, say, a second-generation Chinese-American woman from Muncie, Indiana, but any woman walking into a frat party anywhere, smart at understanding the dangers and difficulties you might encounter in life if you weren't quite so tall and white and Devine. She sensed, tentatively, that Monty was capable of getting it, and she desperately hoped he would, on the one hand so that she could consider him smart and on the other for the sake of the project itself: Because if Monty couldn't figure it out, maybe nobody would. And if nobody figured it out, then why had it even happened?

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe it was more like a work of art. Performance art."

"As opposed to..."

"As opposed to a prank."

Monty tried to understand. "So you're saying that because the writing was elegant, it's performance art?"

Pammy drummed her shell-white nails on the tabletop. Even that small disturbance made the table wobble. "Not just the writing. The whole...*gestalt* of the project. For instance, the words that were written."

"Creepy words," Monty said.

"Definitely creepy. But who typically gets raped? Or sexually assaulted? At least at college parties."

"Girls," Monty said solemnly.

"Right. And your buddy Bobinson—"

“Ha-ha.”

“Is not a girl.” Pammy paused, stymied by the uncomprehending look on Monty’s divine countenance and by what suddenly seemed the insurmountable difficulty of guiding him step by step through the general concept of performance art and the specific version that had been perpetrated on Robinson. Though she felt a desperate urge to make Monty understand, she didn’t want him to understand too completely, nor did she want to explain what had happened to Robinson with too much authority, lest Monty suspect she had firsthand knowledge of what happened.

“Anyway,” she said. “How was your summer?”

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9

Pella!” Caroline Carapelli, who had been restacking menus below the hostess station, stood up with a swing of her thick black ponytail. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were coming. I just gave your booth to a random four-top.”

“Not your fault,” Pella said. “I should have called.”

Carapelli’s was the only establishment on earth where Pella received VIP treatment, and she had to admit she enjoyed it. An autographed photo of Mike in his baseball uniform holding the national championship trophy while his teammates thronged around him hung beside the hostess station, like a thought bubble rising from Caroline’s head.

“Put us anywhere,” Pella said. “We’re not *that*—”

Set in our ways, she intended to say, but Caroline interrupted: “Let me move them before they get settled.”

Caroline hurried off. She’d graduated from Westish alongside Pella, but Pella mostly encountered her here at the restaurant. She was the middle of three Carapelli daughters and the one most possessed of their mother’s brisk competence and chatty encompassing warmth. It seemed inevitable she would spend her life running this restaurant; Pella had not inquired about her post-college plans for fear the question would fall flat before the obviousness of the answer.

Caroline returned, having relegated the random four-top to a lesser booth while, Pella imagined, allowing them to feel she’d done them a favor.

“Thanks,” Pella said. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Anything for my favorite couple.” Caroline nodded at Pella’s engagement ring with a reverent expression that alluded to all the compliments she’d already paid it. “Have you guys picked a date?”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Pella said, which was literally true.

Carapelli’s would be catering their wedding, not only because of Mike’s attachment to the place, but because their banquet hall was the only place capable of serving as many guests as Mike would insist they invite. The thought of serving at her own wedding the same limply presentable dishes she’d eaten over and over at the receptions of Mike’s old teammates—linguine, baked chicken, an oblong dollop of prime rib—filled Pella with a feeling akin to dread. But she deferred to Mike’s enthusiasm about the wedding.

“Don’t worry,” said Caroline, having read one corner of Pella’s thoughts. “We’re going to do it up so special for you guys. Glass of pinot grigio?”

“I’ll have a negroni tonight,” Pella said. “I’m on vacation.”

“That’s my girl,” said Caroline.

By the time Mike arrived, Pella’s negroni had been reduced to a rubble of ice. He sank down across from her with a protracted sigh, as though a certain amount of air needed to be squeezed from his body before he could fit into the booth. “Hey babe,” he said, his big amber eyes bleary.

“Hey, stranger. How was last night?”

“Long,” he admitted. “I’m beat.”

“Poor guy,” she said. “Had to stay out all night at a frat party.”

Mike frowned pedantically. “The Parties are not frat parties. There are only two registered Greek entities on campus, and both are academic honor societies.”

“Got it,” Pella said. “Definitely not frat parties. I just hope you didn’t injure yourself doing keg stands.”

“I can still rock a keg stand,” he said. “But last night I was on duty.”

Pella knew that Mike’s being *on duty* did not prevent him from sampling the kegs, even if he’d sworn off the keg stands. Not that she disapproved. If she disapproved of anything he did—if Mike did anything to excess—it was work. Which, in fact, was precisely what he’d been out all night doing: his job, or the borderless, all-encompassing version thereof that existed in his mind. There were several hundred student-athletes at Westish, and Mike considered the success and well-being of each to be his business, which meant that his business was infinite.

“Well, well,” tutted Caroline as she approached. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

“Hey Caro,” Mike said.

“Don’t ‘Hey Caro’ me. Not when you’ve been keeping your fiancée waiting all this time.”

“Seems like she’s getting along fine without me,” Mike said.

“Well, duh. Anyone could do that.” Caroline caught Pella’s eye. “Another negroni?”

“Yes, please.”

Caroline scooped up the empty glass and turned to go.

“And a Pabst for me,” said Mike.

She shot him a look of playful scorn. “Did I ask if you wanted anything?”

“Sorry,” Mike said. “I thought this was a restaurant.”

Caroline laughed and dropped an easy hand onto his shoulder. She flashed Pella a smile of exasperated communion—*What to do with these men?*—and was gone.

“What’d you do today?” Mike asked.

“Judy and Irma came for lunch.”

“Oh, right. How was that?”

Weird, Pella thought. The image of Judy and Irma walking away—Judy’s frailty, Irma’s strength, their togetherness—had haunted her as she cleaned up lunch and began to pack for Block Island. It disturbed her to think that the ineffable mystery of Judy, which she’d been pondering for years, could boil down to an *affair*, an affair that had ended. Pella didn’t like this at all. She didn’t object to extramarital sex, or even extramarital love. But Judy seemed so fragile and blue today, and Pella couldn’t help thinking of her as a spurned other woman who’d squandered her life in limbo, waiting for an empty promise to be fulfilled. In her mind’s eye she watched Judy wobbling away down Groome Street, propped up by Irma, and for the first time ever, she thought Judy’s heels were too high.

“It was nice,” she said. “It was great to see them.”

“That’s good.”

Pella never found it easy to talk to Mike about Judy and Irma, but she felt reluctant to drop the subject. “One thing made me sad,” she said. “Irma doesn’t want me to stay in independent study.”

“To stay?” Mike looked puzzled. “But you graduated.”

“Well, exactly,” Pella said. “I won’t have other classes to distract me—I

could really focus on the reading. Bring some insights to our meetings."

"But you're not enrolled anymore." Mike's puzzlement seemed to deepen. "It's like..." He contemplated what it was like. "What if one of my football players graduated but didn't want to leave the team, so he came back in the fall and kept showing up for practice. Wouldn't that be pathetic?"

"So now I'm pathetic."

"No, of course not. It's just an analogy."

"Yes," Pella said. "An analogy between me and someone who's pathetic. But anyway, isn't that what you did—graduated and then kept showing up for practice?"

"I'm a coach. I get paid to show up for practice."

"That could be my role, essentially," Pella said. "Irma's literary coach."

"I don't know," Mike said dubiously. "I think you're more like her friend."

A busboy brought their drinks and a basket of battered cauliflower, courtesy of Caroline. Pella sighed as she reached for her cocktail. "I know. I'm just trying to figure out what to do with myself."

"You could do outreach for FAR," Mike suggested, of the Office of Fundraising and Alumni Relations. "They're always in need of someone to schmooze the donors."

"Schmoozing the donors, the oldest profession," Pella joked.

"Actually," Mike replied, "motherhood is the oldest profession."

Pella felt him glance at her with furtive hope, trying to gauge her reaction. It was no secret that Mike was eager to have a baby—which, practically speaking, meant he wanted her to have a baby. But generally he was too savvy to bring it up.

And Pella, generally, was too savvy to reply. But she heard herself say, "We're too young to have kids."

"I don't know," Mike said. "My mom was twenty-six when she had me."

I'm not your mom, Pella thought, but it wasn't as though Mike was confused on this point. "I haven't even started my career."

"All the more reason," Mike said. "We can use this gap year to our advantage."

Children, the Having Of, was a topic they'd discussed often in earlier

days, when Pella had always expressed a desire similar to Mike's. It felt easier to do so then, when she had years of school ahead of her, and the conversation could assume a lazy-river quality of dreams and maybe-somedays. "Let's have five," Mike would say with a naughty grin that suggested he was serious, and Pella would reply, "Maybe we'll start with one."

The closer she'd come to graduation, the less she wanted to talk about starting a family, and the less they talked about it, the more she felt the press of Mike's desire. Mike wanted kids, full stop, while for Pella, the wanting remained hazy and seemed to recede ever farther into the future. But was something you wanted far in the future something you actually wanted or something you didn't quite want? When Caroline asked whether she wanted another negroni, she didn't say, *Absolutely—in a few years!* That would be a complicated way of saying no.

Motherhood, whether Pella was rejecting or entertaining the prospect, felt like an endless abyss into which she might someday fall, causing everything she'd felt before to evaporate in a puff of otherness. She imagined, rightly or wrongly, that many women felt some version of this; she imagined, rightly or wrongly, that she felt it more strongly than most. She tended to become absorbed in other people's business; a baby would be the ultimate Other Person.

In the middle of the restaurant, at a small table with a stubby candle in the center, sat two students, a boy and a girl. Pella recognized the girl as Pammy Chang, with whom she'd taken a pottery class. Pammy was engrossed in her phone in a way Pella would have found rude in a dinner companion, but the boy seemed to relish the chance to lean back in his chair and gaze at her openly.

Pammy glanced up and, catching the boy admiring her, laughed with self-conscious glee. Pella could feel the electricity between them: They were full of new secrets. Everything about Pammy, from her one-shoulder top and lizard-print clutch to the confused state of her red-streaked black hair and the effervescent flush in her cheeks, bespoke the bedraggled radiance of a woman who had not gone home last night. The next time Pella looked over, the phone had been hidden beneath a napkin and Pammy was gazing deep into the boy's eyes, sucking and chewing on her straw with

such an outrageously forthright sense of well-fucked satisfaction that Pella could only smile. Ah, to be young again.

“Who’s that guy?” she asked.

“What guy?”

“Behind you.”

Mike turned to peer over the back of the booth. “Monty Devine. Good guy.”

“Football player?” Pella asked.

“What else?”

Mike tossed golden nuggets of fried cauliflower into his mouth and devoured them, one after the next. Pella sipped her drink. “So did you do a practice exam today?” she asked.

As Mike’s eyebrows pinched together, she watched possible responses cycle through his brain: mustering a lie, expressing indignation that she’d asked. Finally he said, simply: “No.”

“Why not?”

“I was busy with work.”

“It’s a holiday—you couldn’t spare an hour? Your LSAT score’s going to determine where we wind up living.”

Mike sighed his weariest sigh. “Pella, I’m taking off Friday. Saturday. Sunday. Monday.” He marked the days on his giant fingers “I’m missing a football game. It’s crazy.”

“What’s crazy is how hard you work,” Pella said. “Your job is grinding you down.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my job. The problem is skipping town at the busiest time of the year. Why couldn’t Owen and Martin just get married at Westish?” He tossed the last glistening chunk of cauliflower in his mouth. “This place is awesome.”

“Trust me,” Pella said. “It’ll be well worth the trip. I’m excited for you to finally see New England—my homeland. You’ve never even seen the Atlantic!”

“Yes I have.” He was wary of being seen as provincial, especially by her. “I see it every year on the baseball trip. It’s blue.”

“That’s Florida. It’s not the *Atlantic Ocean*.” A second negroni lent itself to lyricism. “The Atlantic is lobster and cold surf and whale-watching. The

Atlantic is gray waves and digging for clams. Bleak rainy beaches. Barnacles and ferries."

"I'm sure there'll be plenty of fairies," Mike said.

"Now you're making homophobic jokes?" Pella said. "Look, the football team will be fine. And you and I"—she reached across the table, rested her hand on his, and tried to approximate some fraction of a Pammy-like eros without actually fellating her straw—"will have plenty of time to ourselves."

Mike unleashed a yawn. "Speaking of your pal Irma," he said, though lately no one had, "did she have fun last night?"

"Fun? What do you mean?"

"At the Parties," Mike said.

"How do you know Irma was at the Parties?"

"I saw her." Having dropped this seductive tidbit in Pella's path, Mike twisted in the booth to scan the room. "Where's Caro? I need another beer."

"You *saw* her? Are you sure?"

"I think I know what the Irminator looks like. Like an angry prune with hair."

"At the Parties, though?" Irma's raccoon-smudge eyes appeared in Pella's mind. "That's hardly her scene."

Mike shrugged. "Maybe she's branching out. I saw her twice—early in the night, and later when she was headed home. She literally crossed the street to avoid me."

"Who was she with? Was she by herself?" Pella's curiosity was comically intense—she was practically lunging across the table—but she couldn't be bothered to disguise it.

"The second time she was alone," Mike reported. "The first, she was with another girl."

"What girl?"

"Didn't recognize her."

Pella frowned doubtfully. "You know every person on this campus—you can recite the directory forward and backward."

"Maybe so," Mike said. "But I didn't recognize her."

"What did she look like?"

Mike squinted up at the bas-relief squares of the pressed-tin ceiling. He

seemed legitimately to be trying to remember but also to be enjoying his haziness, which had the unexpected benefit of holding Pella spellbound.

“Red lipstick,” he said, having milked the moment. “Bright red.”

“Irma was with a girl with bright red lipstick.” Pella secured this astounding information in her mind. “What color hair?”

Again Mike entered a prolonged bout of introspection. “Her hair was in a bun.”

“A bun?”

“Yeah. A bun, or”—his hands swirled around his head—“a pile.”

“An updo,” Pella said.

“Sure.”

“Was she hot?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” Mike said sincerely. “I don’t look at other women.”

As he twisted in the booth to search for Caroline, she emerged from the kitchen’s swinging doors. Catching his glance immediately, she pointed a two-fingered *V* toward her own eyes and then Mike’s, assuring him they were on the same wavelength. She swerved behind the bar.

“Are you a thousand percent sure it was Irma?” Pella asked.

Mike shrugged. “Ask her yourself. Like I always say, the Parties are for everyone. Even the Irmas of this world.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s only one Irma,” Pella replied.

Mike sighed happily as Caroline slid his beer onto the table. “Thank God for that.”

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10

Pammy had resurrected her phone from beneath its white-napkin shroud and was eagerly thumb-tapping again. The bill lay on its plastic tray, pinned down by their bank cards.

She glanced up and noticed Monty's gaze turned toward the bar. "What are you looking at?"

"What are *you* looking at?" he replied with a nod toward her phone.

"Sorry. Lot going on."

Ever since Coach Schwartz had walked into the restaurant and acknowledged Monty with a nod as he made his methodical bowlegged way toward the back, Monty had felt uneasy. Here at last was a witness to his date with Pammy—but Schwartz was not going to like the prank that had been played on Robinson. Not after all the seminars and videos about consent and sexual assault presented to the team every August that Monty had endured four times now; not after the incessant drumbeat from the coaches about enjoying the Parties without getting caught up in anything dumb.

Monty could see only the back of Schwartz's head, with its bald spot gleaming in the goldish lamplight, showing the big fellow's age. Each time he glanced in that direction, as his unease kept making him do, Schwartz's fiancée was looking toward him and Pammy. She seemed almost to be keeping an eye on them, perhaps at Schwartz's request. Not that Schwartz had any particular reason to keep an eye on Monty. Pranks of Bobinson aside, he'd always been a model citizen.

Pammy swung her head, following the path of Monty's glance. "Do you think she's hot?"

Monty hesitated. What it would be like to get with Pella Affenlicht was a topic endlessly parsed among his teammates. The consensus was that it

would be life-altering, not because she was so hot, exactly, but because the hotness she did possess would combine with her age and experience and slight edge of bitchy hauteur to produce some unthinkable conflagration of sexual madness that would leave a man deeply changed. Monty did not feel a strong urge to share this assessment with Pammy.

"Come on," Pammy said. "She's hot."

Monty shrugged.

"If she's not hot," Pammy said, "then why do you keep looking at her?"

"I think she's looking at us."

"That's because *we're* hot."

A few more diners trickled in, filling booths around the fringes of the room. Monty felt the dissonance between his bone-deep weariness from having stayed up all night and the lingering daylight beyond the restaurant's front window.

"Would you like to come back to my house?" he asked. "Help me fend off Bobinson?"

"I can't," Pammy said. "I have plans."

Monty's disappointment took the form of a tender affection for Pammy's asymmetrical shirt. It was the official garment of their overnight adventure. He disliked the thought of her taking it off—or, rather, he wanted her to take it off, again and again, but only in his presence. He didn't want her to go home, change clothes, and thereby break the peculiar spell she and her shirt had cast over him.

"I like that shirt," he said.

"Ugh," she said, and dipped her nose to sniff at herself. "Please do not mention my gross wrinkly clothes that smell like beer. I'm on the world's longest walk of shame."

"Whatever. You look beautiful."

She looked at him for a long moment, as though evaluating his sincerity. "Thanks," she said.

"Just for a little while?"

"I can't. My friends are ready to kill me. One friend in particular."

"Oh."

His bright blue card and her bright red card were still lying on top of the bill, waiting for the waitress to collect them. Pammy looked at her phone. "This is nuts," she said. "Five thousand views."

When Pella Affenlicht slid out of her booth to head for the door marked SIGNORE, Monty found himself looking at Coach Schwartz's bald spot and thinking that, though normally he would never interrupt Schwartz's dinner, it might be prudent to go alert him to the existence of the Robinson video. The disturbing words on Bobinson's forehead, the video going viral, Pammy's suggestion that it might be more than a prank—Monty didn't know what was up, but it seemed like something was up. And when something was up, Schwartz liked to know. Monty began to push back his chair.

"My friend's not a guy," Pammy said. "In case you were wondering."

Their eyes met and locked. Monty sat back down.

His smile revealed a dimple like a parenthesis on the left side of his mouth—a very sexy dimple, Pammy thought. Everything about him was sexy. She was already late to meet Dahlia and Irma; a quick stop at Monty's, an extra half hour, would hardly matter. She drummed her white nails on the table and looked around for the waitress. "Do you have cash?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Sorry."

She dug in her lizard clutch, extracted two crumpled twenties, and tossed them on the tray. She slid Monty's bank card into the pocket of his golf shirt and gave the pocket, and the broad flat span of muscle beneath it, a lingering pat. "Come on," she said. "I'll walk you home."

MIKE'S BIG BODY lazed across the bed, Contango's across the shaggy white rug on the floor. Pella, as she finished packing, maneuvered around them in the dimness. All that breathing bulk made the room feel warm and peaceful. The shades were drawn, and the only source of light, apart from the lines of gray that leaked across the sills, was her dad's cut-glass lamp of dragonfly green that stood on her bedside table. Her carry-on lay on the bed, flopped open across Mike's shins. "What time do we need to leave?" he murmured.

"Five," she said. "Sorry it's so early."

"No worries," he said drowsily. "Sleep is for the weak."

Pella launched a sock ball into the ribbed interior of the suitcase, where it landed softly atop her new swimsuit. She picked up her phone and checked the weather in New Shoreham. The forecast looked glorious—

warm sunny days and chilly nights, with North Atlantic breezes sweeping through. A bonfire arose in her imagination and burned there beautifully; nothing would make her happier than a bonfire on the beach.

She thought of those undergrads at their little table. The way Pammy tucked the blond boy's credit card into his shirt pocket, patted his chest, and strode away. The way he trotted after her, imposing and puppyish at the same time. Something about them struck Pella as enviably sexy. Not just their youthful horniness, which was easy to find on a college campus, but something specific to the pair. Perhaps it was Pammy's buoyant confidence, which seemed inseparable from those red streaks in her hair. Buoyant but vulnerable, confident but not effortlessly so—plucky, attuned to the moment, eager to seize her good fortune, which had arrived in the form of this handsome ingenuous boy.

Pella flipped the suitcase closed and zipped it. The frequency with which she and Mike had sex, in decline for a while, had since their engagement fallen close to zero. Perhaps their beach trip would rekindle something. Perhaps they could start tonight. That bonfire, orange and beautiful, arose again in Pella's mind. "Mike," she said softly. "Are you asleep?"

"Nope," he replied, as his eyelids fluttered shut.

"Maybe you'd rather stay awake?" she asked, a suggestive lilt in her voice. "It's only nine fifteen."

"Mm," he mumbled. "Feels later."

"I really wish you were coming with me tomorrow," Pella said.

This roused Mike, but only because it exasperated him. "I have to work," he said. "Cut me some slack. I'll be there in a few days."

"I didn't mean it like that," she said. "Just that it would be nice to travel together."

"You and the Buddha need to do your thing. I'd just be in the way."

By the time she'd carried her suitcase downstairs, both boys were long asleep. She stepped gingerly over the one, slid into bed, and nestled against the other.

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11

The sudden swinging open of the heavy door spooked Anderson Cooper, who sprang from Dahlia's lap and dashed into the closet. "Dude!" exclaimed Dahlia before Pammy could cross the threshold. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?" asked Pammy with delight.

"Get that video. It's a-*may*-zing."

"It was a total accident," Pammy said, her delight only increased by Dahlia's exuberance. "Bobinson just stormed into the room." She spoke the name *Bobinson* with the sly relish of an inside joke, though it wasn't one she shared with Irma and Dahlia.

"Okay sure," said Dahlia. "But *whose room*?"

"Monty Devine. He's a tight end." Pammy grinned at this—another private joke of some kind.

"He's a what?"

"He's, like, a star football player. Tall? Blond? Slightly Ken-doll-looking but wildly hot? You must know who he is."

"I don't know who anyone is," Dahlia declared in a voice both lamenting and proud. She stuck two bobby pins between her lips. She was sitting cross-legged on the *W* rug before her laptop, its screen casting a blue-green light up toward her chin. Elbows lifted and splayed, she fiddled with her hair while her eyes stayed trained on the screen. "This is incredible," she said, her voice garbled by the pins. "You're deep behind enemy lines."

She glanced at Irma. "Are you reading these comments?"

Irma, glued to her own laptop's screen, shook her head no. Her fingers dabbed at the keys. "I'm working on the statement."

"Come look with me," Dahlia said. "This thread is getting wilder by the

minute.”

When Irma was told to do something, her usual response was to refuse and feel annoyed. How was it that Dahlia induced the opposite—a joyful, unquestioning compliance? She left off typing midsentence and moved to the floor, where she knelt beside Dahlia.

“Start at the top,” Dahlia instructed, her hands still busy with her hair. She rocked back so that Irma could reach her touchpad. “It’s so good the way it unfolds.”

It had been eight hours since Pammy posted the video of a football player slamming down books and bellowing. Immediately Dahlia had flooded their text thread with messages, begging for details, but Pammy didn’t respond and seemed not even to be online. Irma tried to match Dahlia’s enthusiasm by texting excitedly from under the table at Pella’s house and declaring the video a masterpiece. Deep down, though, she was starting to feel concerned. Pammy’s video proved that the plan they’d concocted over the summer had entered not only the realm of reality but also the realm of the internet, where nothing was ever forgotten.

She scrolled to the top of the thread. The earliest comments came from Pammy’s friends—friends from the art department, friends from her a cappella group, friends back home in Indiana. Random online friends, of whom Pammy had many.

what is this??? r u making a movie? (please say yes)

I have literally watched this 50 times

I heart everything you do, boo

Then someone recognized the angry book-slammer, and the video began to circulate throughout the football team, followed by the campus as a whole. Commenters began to refer to him by name:

Oh man somebody wrote on Robinson’s forehead. Fricking classic.

dude that is just cruel

Vic those are some gorgeous undies

Now as Irma watched, with Dahlia hovering over her shoulder, another shift was occurring in real time. Like a wildfire leaping a highway, the video had escaped the confines of Westish College and begun racing through a new, concentrically larger audience. Instead of one person typing a comment, there were a dozen. Each time Irma refreshed the page, the numbers of views and Likes surged.

This new audience was composed almost entirely of women. They were interested in the politics of the video, and a vivid debate sprang up. Was this a scripted scene and Robinson an actor playing a macho jerk? Or had some person or persons stenciled RAPE VICTIM on the forehead of an actual macho jerk, causing him to implode, and Pammy, in documentary fashion, had captured it? These commenters tended to assume that, scripted or not, the video was intended not as a goof but as some kind of declaration.

"Hit Play," Dahlia commanded.

Irma hit Play. The video stuttered to life. The lift and slam. The raw purple rage. The second slam. The fateful howl:

"I'M A DUDE! I WAS *NOT* SEXUALLY ASSAULTED!"

They watched it again.

Dahlia shook her head in awe. "Maybe we shouldn't put out a statement at all," she said. "This video is worth a bajillion words."

Irma could see Dahlia's point. The video was funny and multifaceted, easy to watch fifty times. It captured the wild indignation of men at the mere suggestion that they might face the same problems as women. But there was more to say, and Irma was eager to say it. She'd been no help at the Parties; she wanted to redeem herself.

"I've been working on the statement," she said. "The statement's almost done."

Dahlia pressed Mute. The video looped in silence. Bobinson slammed down book after book, his boxy face distorted by rage. Irma felt a little bit sorry for him. She turned to Pammy. "I can't believe you hooked up with a guy during all this."

"That's how she got the video," Dahlia said. "She infiltrated."

"But it wasn't part of the plan," Irma said. "After a certain point, you weren't even texting me back. You could have been in jail. You could have been dead!"

"Sorry," Pammy said.

"Were you drunk?" Irma asked.

"I had two beers."

Irma shot her a dubious look.

"I had an insane number of beers," Pammy said. "Sue me. I was nervous."

"Okay, okay," Dahlia said. "Let's just start the meeting."

Irma briefly held her breath in that way that helped her chill out. “I’ll finish the salad,” she said. “Speaking of beer, would anyone like one?”

“Me.”

“Me.”

She hopped to her feet and pulled from the fridge three bottles of the fancy microbrew she’d bought on the drive to Westish—her first-ever alcohol purchase. Phumber 405 was one of the biggest and nicest rooms on campus, with angled ceilings, two dormered windows that overlooked the Small Quad, and top-floor freedom from footsteps overhead. Rooms this size were typically doubles, but Irma, as part of her scholarship, had lived here alone since freshman year.

Anderson Cooper, who’d been napping in the closet, poked his gray and white head out to evaluate the scene. “Andy’s back!” Dahlia sang as she scrambled up from the floor and scooped him into her arms. She and the cat disappeared into the bathroom.

A dorm room wasn’t ideal for cooking, but Irma made do. A wooden cutting board lay atop her half-size fridge, and her Japanese knife, a gift from Pella, was clapped to the fridge’s side by a magnetic holster. She had an electric kettle for tea and a slow cooker for the winter. Now she began to dice a pair of canary-yellow peppers with ribs that reddened toward the stems.

“Those are gorgeous,” Pammy said as she leaned over the cutting board to frame a photo with her phone. “Did you go to the farmers’ market?”

“They’re from Pella’s garden.”

“I literally just saw her,” Pammy said. “At Carapelli’s. Monty and I went for pizza.”

“Pizza? I thought I was making dinner.”

“I’ll eat,” Pammy said as she flipped through the photos she’d taken. “Pella’s so pretty, don’t you think? What’s she like?”

Irma shrugged. “She’s like Pella.”

“Meaning?”

Irma paused her dicing to think. There was something newly confusing in her feelings about Pella, whose friendship had for some time been the most dependable aspect of Irma’s existence. Most every afternoon of sophomore and junior years found her wandering past the athletic fields toward Pella’s house, where she arrived at four on the dot as though for

soccer practice or some other mandatory extracurricular. Pella would brew two mugs of fancy handcrafted coffee, which to Irma just tasted like coffee, and in all but the foulest weather, they would carry their mugs out to check on the garden and walk Contango along the sand. Some days they talked nonstop, engrossed in the topic at hand; others they barely spoke, only communed with the blue-gray wisdom of Lake Michigan as they rounded the lighthouse and returned.

But today at lunch, she'd felt alienated from Pella and somehow annoyed at her. Which made little sense, because Irma knew that she, not Pella, was the one who'd been pulling away. Ever since Dahlia resurfaced last spring, and she and Dahlia had started planning the project together, Irma had been having a harder and harder time engaging with Pella in more than superficial ways. She was keeping secrets from Pella, and doing so felt like lying. Lying caused Irma pain, and the pain could be lessened by staying away from Pella.

There was the secret of the project, which she hadn't told Pella for pragmatic reasons, but also the secret of Dahlia herself. Of having a friend whose company Irma craved, not in the right amount, but in an achingly total way.

"Pella's cool," she said, and resumed her dicing.

Pammy took a glug of beer. "That's not very descriptive, Irm."

Irma tried again. "She's smart and fun and surprisingly funny. She just has this natural charisma. Everywhere she goes, people fall for her, and yet she hardly ever goes anywhere. She just stays home. There's a sadness in her that runs deep. I sense it all the time, but we never really discuss it. Sometimes I think she's afraid."

"Of what?" Pammy asked.

Irma tilted the cutting board toward the wooden bowl and, with a brush of the blade, sent a confetti of red and yellow tumbling in. "I don't know. Of living, maybe. Living since her dad died. Sometimes I get the feeling she's in hiding—like her house is a minimum-security prison, a super-hygge one with beeswax candles and fluffy towels where the food is excellent and the sheets are always clean. I love hanging out there, but for her it's some kind of prison."

Irma had only ever made out with one person, a guy she met at a nerdy academic camp the summer she turned sixteen. But she thought, however

naively, that love, even long-term love, should contain some portion of bliss, and a person engaged to be married should seem more enthusiastic about the prospect than Pella did.

“She never looks sad,” Pammy said. “She *glows*. Every time I see her I think she’s pregnant.”

“Maybe that’s what she should do,” Irma said, her voice laden with levels of irony obscure even to herself. “Just have a baby.”

Pammy nodded cheerfully. “She seems like she’d make an awesome mom.”

Dahlia emerged from the bathroom, Anderson Cooper draped over one shoulder, and flopped onto Irma’s bed. “I call this meeting of the Witches of Westish to order. Madam Secretary, are you too busy to take notes?”

“Yes,” called Irma over the whir of the salad spinner.

“I’ll do it,” Pammy offered.

“Great,” said Dahlia. “You can use my computer.”

Pammy lowered herself to sit cross-legged on the rug. She leaned forward and probed at the top edge of the screen. “Why do you have tape on your camera lens?”

“Are you kidding?” Dahlia said.

“No...what, do you think someone’s spying on you?”

“Any third-grader can hack the camera,” Dahlia said gaily. “Google it sometime. I mean, never use Google, obviously, but look it up. Okay, here we go. Attendance. Four witches present. Irma Friske, Pamelamachangchang, Dahlia Breughel, and Anderson Cooper the Cat.”

“Noted.”

“First order of business: Report from Pammy. The hero of the evening. Tell us everything.”

“It was just luck and more luck,” Pammy said.

“Tell us,” Dahlia implored.

“Okay. Let’s see. I went to two-twelve with my roommates, like we planned. We got a beer and scoped it out. It was a fun scene, but I was super-nervous—like, am I really going to do this? I had the tattoos in my purse, and it felt like I was packing a gun.” Pammy paused to glance down at Dahlia’s laptop screen. “It’s kind of hard to tell a story and take notes at the same time.”

“The notes can be minimal,” Dahlia said. “That’s better anyway, in case

they fall into the wrong hands."

"Okay." Pammy described wandering around the party, strategizing, going upstairs to create a floor plan of the house in her mind. "And then, to be honest, I got distracted."

"By Mr. Tight End," Dahlia said.

"Mmm," said Pammy with a faraway smile. "He and I both took Shakespeare's Comedies last spring. I spent the whole semester low-key ogling him. Sometimes I thought he was looking at *me*, but other times I thought I was dreaming. In every class, he made two very thoughtful remarks, which you could tell he'd prepared in advance—always two, on note cards in his head. I was like, Dude, do you have any idea how hot you are? You don't need to work this hard. The whole semester we never even said hello. Then last night he walked right up to me, super-familiar, and was like, *Hey, Pammy, how was your summer?* I basically dropped dead. He was wearing the cutest—"

"But what happened?" Irma cut in as she shook the dressing in her travel mug.

Pammy's face fell. "I'm telling you what happened."

"You're doing great," Dahlia said. "Keep going."

After much description of her flirtations with Monty, Pammy came to the point:

"It was three thirty, maybe four, the party was winding down. Monty and I were on this gross couch in the hallway, canoodling. I excused myself to go use the bathroom, and I passed a door that was partway open, and I heard this incredible snoring. I peeked inside, and lo and behold, it was the extremely shady Vic Robinson, known groper. The room smelled like one big sock."

"Amazing," said Dahlia.

"He was sprawled on the bed with his boxers around his knees, like he'd passed out trying to masturbate, his little dingus just hanging there. And I thought, Okay, fine. I'm going in."

Pammy's voice fell to a hush as she described her adventure. She crept into the bedroom, shut the door, and opened her purse. The drunken ogre might wake up, catch her in the act, and do God knows what to her. Or Monty might walk in and find her alone with his naked housemate. Breath held, she unwrapped an exfoliating wipe and pressed it to Bobinson's

forehead. He shifted, he groaned—but he didn't wake up. He was truly zonked. The instructions called for thirty seconds of wiping. She did a speedy count to twenty-five. She tossed the wipe in her purse and pulled out a pair of the long-lasting jagua tattoos they'd had custom-made over the summer, each of which contained one word. Her beer buzz didn't steady her hand, but it narrowed the beam of her focus. "I was in the zone," she said.

She peeled the backing from the RAPE tattoo, matched it to the angle of Bobinson's forehead, and, holding it by its edges like a scroll, applied the sticky side to his skin. Bobinson stirred, sneezed a violent sneeze, and went back to snoring. Pammy peeled the backing from the VICTIM tattoo and aligned it with the first. The plastic film was supposed to stay in place for an hour while the ink soaked into the skin—she had no choice but to leave it altogether. She gathered her purse and tiptoed to the door. Dahlia cheered.

"But then," Pammy said, "just as I'm about to open the door, I hear my name."

"Oh no!"

"Monty was in the hall. Right outside."

"*Now* what?"

"I waited. But he wouldn't leave. He kept whispering my name, like he could sense I was nearby. Finally I decided to go out the window. There's a balcony that runs along the whole back of the house. There was a dude out there asleep in a chair."

"Should have tattooed him too," Dahlia said.

"The first room I passed, I heard sex noises. The second room, the window was locked. So I peek inside the last one, and it's empty, and I climb in—and on the nightstand there's a picture of Monty and four people who look just like him with their arms around each other on the deck of a sailboat."

Dahlia was laughing.

"I could hear him in the hallway, wandering around. He was pretty drunk. So I cracked open the door and started whispering his name. Like *Hey baby, I've been waiting.* And then in the morning, Bobinson stormed in, and I managed to film his tantrum."

"Brava!" Anderson Cooper sat pliantly in Dahlia's lap, and she clapped his front paws together. "Brava!"

"The cat is not a toy," Irma said.

But it was a joy to see Dahlia in such a cheerful mood. She was dressed in sweatpants, the pink acne-swirls had returned to her cheeks, but she looked even more radiant than she had last night.

Irma drizzled the dressing over the salad. “Hear ye, hear ye,” she said. “Dinner is served.”

They lowered themselves to the rug, and Irma handed around pilfered dining-hall bowls filled with salad and black beans. There was hummus and chips on the side. Dahlia dug into her salad and even scooped a gob of hummus into her bowl. Plus she was drinking a beer. All of this was good. The project, Irma thought, had been the catalyst: Ever since the Witches’ first meeting, Dahlia had been on a kind of high.

But even as Irma ate her salad, basking in the presence of her friends, she felt her uneasiness grow.

“Look,” she said. “The video’s terrific. But the plan was to be stealthy. Anonymous. To cover our tracks. And then you post this to your own account? What if we get caught?”

“It was a coincidence,” Pammy protested. “Bobinson happened to burst into the room I happened to be in, and I happened to film him. It doesn’t mean I did it.”

“But you did do it!”

Dahlia had devoured her entire meal. Now she lit a cigarette and exhaled a nimbus of smoke. “She’s not going to get in trouble.”

“How do you know?” Irma said. “She’ll be the first person who gets called into Dean Melkin’s office.”

“So what?” Dahlia said. “She’ll tell Melkin exactly what happened: The groper stormed in while she and Monty were in bed. And Monty will corroborate—he’ll give Pammy an alibi. They were together the whole night. Inseparable. Canoodling. It’s *perfect*.”

“You want her to lie.”

“It’s not lying,” Dahlia replied. “It’s maintaining the integrity of the project. Pammy saw an opportunity and she seized it.”

Whether Dahlia intended it or not, Irma felt rebuked for her own failure to seize any opportunities. She hadn’t spoken to a boy, much less tattooed one; had the execution of the project been up to her, nothing would have happened.

She felt upset—but she couldn’t tell what about. Was the project a

terrible idea, and she was upset with herself for participating? Or was the project a brilliant idea, and she was upset with herself for failing to participate? Could it somehow be both? “All I’m saying,” she said, “is it would have been better to post it anonymously.”

“Fine,” Dahlia said. “The collective acknowledges it might have been better to post it anonymously. Does that make you happy?”

Irma jabbed her fork at a leftover bean. It squirted away from the tines. “So what do we do now?”

“We wait,” Dahlia said. “We sit back and observe. This is how the project unfolds, through the ways these guys react. Do they meekly accept their fates? Do they lust for vengeance? That’s why the video is so great. What a reaction! I wish we had a video of my guy too.”

“Speaking of your guy,” Pammy said. “How’d it go?”

Dahlia pressed her cigarette tip into her empty bowl. It hissed against Irma’s rosemary vinaigrette. “*Awesomely,*” she said.

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12

Early Tuesday morning, Mike dropped Pella at the Appleton airport. He drove back to campus and parked at the Varsity Athletic Center, above whose entrance hung a gigantic banner:

WELCOME TO
WESTISH!
WE ARE ONE

An identical banner spanned the glass facade of the library. A version the size of a campaign placard had been handed out to the freshmen to prop in their dormitory windows. Everywhere you went, on campus and in town, you saw T-shirts, mugs, bumper stickers that read, in navy letters against an ecru ground: WE ARE ONE.

It was Mike who'd started it. He'd been flipping through one of his favorite books, *The Art of Loving*, and the phrase, which he'd previously highlighted, lodged in his mind. Whatever he read, he read with an eye toward what he could use with his players. That was part of being a coach. WE ARE ONE summed up his entire philosophy. On the football field, he wanted all eleven players to move in unison, as harmonious as parts of a body. Off the field, he wanted them to value the well-being of their teammates and friends, their college and their community, as highly as their own.

The football players took to the phrase, parroting it in the lightly mocking way that, among guys that age, was the surest sign of reverence. They adopted it as the chant that broke their huddles. In film sessions they called out each other's mistakes: *Hit the gap, Morris! We are one!* In the

weight room, amped by a max deadlift or squat, they would smack their chests and roar: *One!*

Mike asked a department intern to mock up T-shirts, simple ones with the three words stacked. They were printed in sizes from L to XXXL and distributed to the football team.

Athletes from other sports started asking for their own. Before long We Are One became the official motto of the athletic department, and from there it spread to the college at large. Now when you loaded the Westish website, those words, splashed across an aerial autumn view of the college and the lake, were the first thing you saw.

“Don’t you think you should get paid for that?” Pella said.

“Paid for what?”

“We Are One. The school built its whole marketing campaign around it.”

“It’s not some brilliant phrase,” Mike said.

“I’m not saying it’s brilliant,” Pella replied in a way Mike found a touch injurious. Even if it weren’t brilliant, his fiancée might find it in herself to think so.

“I didn’t invent it,” he said. “Erich Fromm did.”

“I doubt Erich Fromm invented We Are One,” Pella said. “It’d be like inventing I Love You or Go to Hell. The point is, you came up with it as a slogan. If they’d hired some PR firm to come up with a slogan, how much would they have paid *them*?”

“Couldn’t tell you exactly,” Mike said.

“More than you make in a year.”

This was one of those remarks that caused Mike to rub a hand over his scalp as though trying to find the place, ever more remote, where his forehead ended and his hairline began. Pella, in truth, didn’t mind how much money he made; it was Mike who cared about that. Four years of busting his ass for the department, and he’d barely gotten so much as a cost-of-living increase.

He hadn’t told Pella yet, but he hoped to be making more money soon. Over the summer Mike’s boss, Duane Jenkins, called him into his office, shut the door, and told him he was thinking about retiring. Mike was stunned. “Can you afford that?” he’d asked.

“Susan thinks we can. She wants to move to Sedona.”

“Where’s Sedona?”

Jenkins shrugged. “Got me. Apparently it’s made of magic crystals.”

Jenkins was probably joking about not knowing where Sedona was, but Mike knew that if Susan wanted him to retire, he wasn’t joking about retirement. Jenkins was both a good guy and a milquetoast, which was part of the reason Westish sports had sucked before Mike’s arrival. Now that Susan had spent the past two years fighting thyroid cancer, Jenkins would be doing as she wished.

“She’s in full remission,” Jenkins said. “She wants to live it up.”

“I’m glad,” Mike said. “But you’d be missed around here.”

Jenkins flashed a glance toward his office door. “Please keep this under your hat. Except for Pella, of course.”

“Sure,” Mike said.

“I’m telling you because I want you to get the job. It’d only be right after everything you’ve done, both for the WAD and for me.”

“I appreciate it, Duane.”

“*I* appreciate it. I know I’ve been distracted with Susan in treatment and all. And yet everything keeps chugging along. Five more conference champs last year, including football. I’d like to say hiring you was the best idea I ever had, but we both know whose idea it was.”

Mike nodded. It was Pella’s dad who, just a few days before his death, called up Jenkins and suggested a job might be created for the lunatic senior who lived and died by Westish sports.

“It’s not going to be my decision,” Duane told Mike. “And I know you and Pella are talking about moving to a city, going to law school, and so on. But you’d be my pick. We could spend this semester wisely—get you more face time with Molina and the trustees, make sure the bigwigs know you’re ready even though you’re young.” Duane looked at him. “If you’re interested, that is.”

Let me talk to Pella was what Mike planned to say. *Give it some thought*. But he felt himself nodding, as though in a trance, and heard himself say:

“I’m interested.”

It was strange, maybe, to have grown up on Chicago’s South Side amid concrete and smog, seeing grass mostly on football and baseball fields, and to feel so at home here. Or maybe that was why he felt at home—the whole campus, with its green geometries of Small Quad and Large, felt like a

playing field. Pella thought he worked too hard, and maybe he did. Pella was usually right. But Mike loved Westish College.

If he got the AD job, he'd be making three times his current salary. He and Pella could buy one of the big old houses on Michigan Street that overlooked the lake. They could have as many kids as they wanted. Down the line, they could get a summer cabin up on Washington Island or wherever Pella liked. He'd be the youngest AD in the history of the Upper Midwestern Small Colleges Athletic Conference. He'd be at Westish, the place he loved most, not on a year-to-year contract but in a durable way that depended only on his performance. His performance would not be a problem.

Not that he was sure he would get the job. That was one reason he hadn't told Pella yet—he wanted a better feel for his chances. He had supporters among the trustees, people who admired his playing career and coaching chops, but President Molina's view of him seemed to hover between suspicion and indifference. She'd fumbled his name repeatedly over the years or else just called him *young man*.

Now he made his way up the wide stone steps of the VAC, his left knee clicking as he climbed. Inside, he boarded the elevator, drew in a deep breath of stale sweat and rubber, and rode to the fourth floor.

The elevator dinged. At the far end of the empty corridor, a figure paced in tight, quick circles. It was Ben Morris, one of the captains of the football team.

Ben was one of those kids who relied on Mike's advice, and it wasn't unusual for him to drop by for a morning cup of coffee. But it was early for that—the sun had barely crested the lake. Mike could tell something was wrong. "Morning, Benjy," he called.

"Morning, Coach."

As he drew nearer he could see a pink, irritated wildness in Ben's eyes. Wrapped around his head, beneath a mushroom of dark bushy hair, was an elasticated bandage. "Did you get dinged at practice?" Mike asked. "Should we get you into the concussion protocol?"

"No," Ben said. "Nothing like that."

Mike flipped through his janitorial tangle of keys and unlocked the door. His office was not, by original design, an office; it was a huge conference room he'd repurposed. The rest of the WAD employees were housed in a

distant quadrant of the building, down on the second floor. “You’re really growing the Jew-fro,” he remarked.

Ben, who normally basked in any allusion to his and Mike’s shared heritage, could barely force a smile. “Half Jew,” he said. “All ’fro.”

He was by nature a forthright, confident kid, eager to share what was on his mind. Today, though, he seemed oddly nervous. Spooked, almost. Mike decided to let him come to the point on his own. He brewed a pot of coffee while Ben wandered the room, scanning old trophies and team photos. Only when they were seated on either side of the long conference table Mike used as a desk, mugs of strong coffee steaming between them, did Ben haltingly clear his throat.

“So, um, Coach...have you seen the video going around? Of Robinson?”

Mike frowned. Robinson wasn’t a guy you wanted to hear off-field news about. “What’d that chucklehead get up to?”

Ben pulled his phone from his shorts pocket. He cued a video and handed the phone to Mike. Mike’s frown deepened as he watched. He pressed a button and watched it again. He set the phone down on the table.

“Thanks for bringing this to my attention,” he said.

“Sure,” Ben said.

“Do you know who’s responsible?”

Ben shook his head. “All I know is, whoever did it to Robinson”—his hand lifted toward his bandage, and, after a hesitant pause, he unwound it from his head—“did it to me as well.”

Mike fixed his lips and eyebrows in place, trying to disguise his surprise. “You left that there to show me?” he asked. “Or you couldn’t get it off?”

“Couldn’t get it off.”

“I’m sorry, Benjy. That’s a dumbass prank.”

“It’s dumb,” Ben said. “But I’m not sure it was a prank.”

“What do you mean?”

Ben pointed toward the words on his scrubbed-raw forehead. “I mean, look at this. It’s not like some joker grabbed a Magic Marker because I passed out on the couch. This was premeditated. This was a *plan*.”

“You guys pull some pretty elaborate stunts on one another,” Mike said. “There’s a long tradition of that. Goes back before my time.”

Ben jabbed a finger at his forehead again. “*Rape victim*, though? There’s

no way. Every athlete at this school has been drilled so hard about this stuff. It's literally the last thing anybody with any sense would write."

"Not every guy on the team has as much sense as you, Benjy."

"I'm not saying they do. But everyone knows that if they wrote something like this, they'd have to deal with you."

Mike gave a look that acknowledged both the validity of this point and the nod to his authority. Ben went on:

"If it said *fuckwad* or even *faggot*, that'd be different. I know guys stupid enough to write those things—Robinson, for one. But this? Even as a prank, it'd be a death wish."

Mike leaned back in his chair and tapped a big thumb against the handle of his coffee mug. He mostly agreed with what Ben was saying. But no matter how many sensitivity trainings you ran, you could count on college kids to do dumb stuff.

Ben reached across the table and brightened the face of his phone. The video of Robinson appeared. Ben swept a thumb over the long scroll of comments.

"These people don't think it was a football prank," he said. "They think it's some kind of...guerrilla political thing. What if they're right?" He clicked the phone dark and shoved it in his pocket. "It's the only idea that makes any sense."

Mike frowned. "What idea?"

"That it's somebody who wants to shut down the Parties. Think about it—what do Robinson and I have in common? Nothing. We can't stand each other. But we're both dudes and we both play football. You know the talk that goes around, ever since the Dorr incident. The culture of the school is screwed up. Dominated by jocks. The Parties are sexist. They're unsafe for women. Et cetera."

Mike knew the talk better than anyone. Nothing in his tenure at Westish had shaken him more than what Brevin Dorr had done, that combined with the suggestion that the culture of Westish athletics was to blame.

Ben was growing more agitated and more convinced of his argument with every word. "Can you imagine if it went the other way? If I did this to a girl? It'd be mayhem. Total mayhem. I'd get thrown out of school."

"Benjy," Mike said. "Let's not jump to conclusions. I know you and

Robinson aren't buds. But you do share one trait, apart from being football players. And that's a tendency to drink to excess."

Ben looked injured. "In the past, that was true. But—"

"Don't you think you might be seeing a conspiracy where all that's necessary is some serious stupidity? You and Robinson each got hammered, passed out somewhere, and some morons decided to slap temporary tattoos on your head."

Ben frowned. "I guess that's plausible."

"It seems pretty likely to me."

"Coach, I'm telling you," Ben said. "I'm the victim of a feminist plot."

At this, Schwartz leaned back in his chair. He stroked his chin with a giant hand.

"Let's slow down," he said. "Stick to what we know."

He asked Ben a series of questions about what he'd done on Sunday, starting in the afternoon. Ben answered as best he could. He was able to recall some early moments of the Parties, including flagging down Schwartz on the sidewalk and proudly telling him he'd read *The Art of Loving* again.

But soon thereafter Ben's memories dwindled. He didn't know which house on Grant he'd gone to last or who he'd seen there. He didn't know how he got home. He felt ashamed to be unable to remember. But he also sensed within himself a deep, inexplicable reluctance—he did not *want* to remember. There was a barrier in his mind, and his thoughts massed behind it, not breaking through.

"It's hopeless," he said, exasperated.

Mike reached across the table and rested a hand on the young man's forearm. "Benjy," he said. "You're all worked up. Close your eyes and relax."

Ben felt too tense to comply. But once he shut his eyes, it felt good to sit there and to feel Schwartz's peaceful presence across the table. Soon he was immersed in a kind of meditation, feeling his belly move as he breathed, watching pastel amoebas twirl against the lab slides of his eyes. He watched them so long he began to worry he was trying Schwartz's patience, and then he let go of that worry too. He released a slow deep sigh.

As his shame and frustration subsided, thoughts began to bump against the barrier. He felt something there, something unexpected: a little crinkle

of joy. That was the phrase that spoke itself in his mind—*a crinkle of joy.* He realized the crinkle had been there for a while. It was already there, loitering beneath his hangover and confusion, when he awoke yesterday and stumbled to the bathroom to puke. Which meant the crinkle had been there the night before—it must have originated at the Parties.

There was no way to convey a crinkle of joy to Coach Schwartz, and no apparent reason to do so. Ben opened his eyes. “That’s it,” he said. “That’s all I remember.”

“You did great,” Schwartz said. “Have you talked to anybody else about this?”

Ben shook his head. “I figured I’d come to you first.”

Schwartz nodded approvingly. “That was the right move,” he said. “We’ll get this straightened out.”

“Good,” Ben said.

“Benjy.” Schwartz fixed his big amber eyes on Ben’s. They contained the same look they did during one of his fiery halftime speeches, designed to sear a message into your soul.

“Yes, Coach?”

“Focus on school. Focus on football. Keep wearing your bandage. I’ll talk to Robinson, I’ll talk to the girl who posted the video. I’ll get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, let’s keep this between ourselves. If you remember anything else or you just need to talk, I’m here. Understood?”

Ben nodded. “Sure, Coach.”

MIKE SHOVED BACK his chair and, mind churning, refilled his coffee mug. There were always pranks the night of the Parties, and as pranks went, the old write-on-the-drunk-guy’s-forehead stunt wasn’t exactly novel or troubling. What had been written, though, was another story. If he had to choose two words he did not want associated with his athletes, much less tattooed across their foreheads and their reactions captured on film, those would be the words.

Two years ago a Westish running back named Brevin Dorr raped a girl named Anna Marie Poplin. Both parties were extremely intoxicated, and there were no direct witnesses other than Anna Marie herself. But it was easy to conclude, both for Mike and the adjudicating panel, that Anna

Marie's version of events, though wobbly in its details, was overwhelmingly true.

There had been previous trouble with Dorr, though not of a sexual nature. Mike had stuck with Dorr not because Dorr was a talented athlete but because Mike thought that, given enough time, he could get through to every fatherless kid, no matter how insolent or hard-drinking or possibly disturbed. It was a kind of hubris on his part. He'd been beating himself up about it for two years.

But Mike also hated the suggestion, glibly repeated, that because Dorr had been a criminal who also played football, there was something inherently wrong with Westish sports. Some people noticed that the football and baseball teams had, in the past half dozen years, gone from losing to winning and now played in front of bigger crowds (not *big* crowds, but bigger) and leaped to the conclusion that Westish becoming better at sports was a problem. Athletes wielded power denied to other students; sexual assault was on the rise.

There was a tinge of delirium to such arguments, Mike thought, though he never said so aloud. Ever since he'd been hired, he'd been recruiting to Westish kids from his old neighborhood on Chicago's South Side and similar neighborhoods in other industrial cities within a day's drive of the college. This was the project that enlivened Mike, far more than winning games. What he wanted was to watch these kids succeed. And succeed they mostly did, the exception being a terrible one, goddamn Brevin Dorr.

Mike had served as Dorr's faculty representative throughout the adjudication process, because that was how the advisory committee worked: Any student who lodged a complaint or who had been complained against was encouraged to choose a faculty representative, and Dorr had requested Mike. The whole process sapped Mike's energy miserably; nothing he'd done in the past four years had been harder. Dorr got expelled. Anna Marie, after a leave of absence, transferred to a school in Iowa. No criminal charges were ever brought.

Mike paced the length of his office, his coffee sloshing, lost in thought. Ben was a bright, diligent kid, but he was also easily wounded. His reaction to getting pranked struck Mike as a touch overwrought—but when Ben used the phrase *feminist plot,* an image rose in Mike's mind: Irma Friske slipping away down a darkened street. Irma had been at the Parties—and

why? To have a good time with her friends? Or to perpetrate some bizarre prank for reasons not so different from Ben's paranoid vision?

Fuck, Mike thought. It was a good thing he hadn't agreed to Pella's original suggestion, which was that they spend the entire week on Block Island. He needed to be here; he needed to handle this. Priority one was to keep it off President Molina's desk. And that meant he needed to keep it off everyone's desk but his own.

BEN EMERGED ONTO the broad stone steps of the VAC, blinking at the glinting edges of parked cars catching the morning light. He'd been up all night stewing, trying to remember what happened. His one idea had been to talk to Schwartz, but talking to Schwartz hadn't helped as much as he'd hoped.

As he approached the stone arch that let onto the Large Quad, he bumped into Karl Jones, the student body president. He and Karl were both political science majors and had locked horns in many a classroom discussion.

Karl, a large guy, was dismounting from his bicycle. With a sigh, he struggled out from beneath his messenger bag to dig out his U-shaped lock. The bag's strap had imprinted a beauty-pageant sash of sweat into the powder blue of his shirt. His bow tie today was pink. "Benjamin," he said with grave politesse and nodded at Ben's bandage as they shook hands. "Did that freak bash your head against the wall?"

Ben just looked at him.

"Or the ceiling?"

Some sort of reply was required. Ben chose a soft ambiguous grunt.

"Don't be coy, now." Karl's rumbling belly laugh echoed off the stone. "I mean, don't get me wrong. Everybody needs a little crazy once in a while. That's what the Parties are for. But that girl was above and beyond."

"Which girl do you mean?" Ben asked as casually as possible. "There were a few in the mix."

"Dude, you're hilarious." Karl planted a heavy hand on Ben's shoulder to prevent his laughter from collapsing him. "Haley and I were dancing right beside you—not that you noticed. You were *entwined*. Legs, tongues,

whatever. It was quite a show. I was waiting for you to bring out the flying trapeze."

"I was a little drunk," said Ben with a cavalier shrug.

"She looks better than she used to, I'll give you that. Little meat on her bones. Remember when she used to just spin on the elliptical all day?"

This could describe any number of girls—or it could describe the girl who sprang to mind. Something broke open inside of Ben. A crack in the barrier let through a sliver of light. He was dancing, he was dancing under a disco ball to the beat of a blinding strobe, and someone was dancing with him.

"I didn't even know she still went here," mused Karl. "And I make a point to keep tabs on my constituents. What was her name again?"

They were standing, now, in the cool mossy shade of the arch. Ben gazed into the pattern of minuscule holes in the mortar between two stones. He saw a face interspersed with darkness in the staccato throb of the strobe. He felt that crinkle of joy.

"Dahlia?" he said. "Dahlia Breughel?"

"*Dahlia*. That's right. That's right." Karl hauled the strap of his messenger bag back over his head, matched it to his sweat-sash. He winked at Ben's bandage. "I hope it was worth it, dude."

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13

Irma's rug was the rug her dad bought for her the day she arrived at Westish, way back when, before freshman orientation—her first time away from home. They bought the rug at the campus bookstore. It was huge and square, covered most of her room's warped wooden floor, and its dense plushy fibers were dyed a deep navy color in which was embedded an ecru *W,* taller than Irma and wider then her spread arms.

It didn't take Irma long to realize, or to decide, that the rug had been a mistake. It was the kind of item that would decorate the room of a student nothing like her: A girl who attended every football game, lamented the school's lack of sororities, and wore head-to-toe Westish Harpooner gear. The kind of girl who knew everything about makeup, nothing about politics, and would by graduation be engaged to some polo-wearing bro. In those terrifying first weeks of college, this was the black-and-white way she thought.

She would have loved to ditch the rug, but that was impossible. It was the most expensive present she'd ever received. On that day of helping her move in, her dad had been as animated and unguarded as she'd ever seen him. They talked nonstop, with a new openness, and her dad ambled around the campus with wide-eyed amazement and pride. "Look at that," he said, gesturing between buildings at the blue expanse of Lake Michigan. "Just look!"

After they finished unpacking, he took Irma to the campus store, and they'd picked out the rug. She insisted it cost too much. "You need it," her dad said. "It'll keep your feet warm." Then Irma started to cry.

She could not, therefore, get rid of the rug—and it was, in addition to its sentimental value, a well-made, comfortable rug that would indeed warm her feet in the depths of the Westish winter. She told herself the *W* was so

big, its serifed edges obscured by the edges of bed, desk, and bookshelf, that the eye couldn't take it in whole, making it less a specific letter than an abstract pattern of angles.

Of course, all this anxious fretting about how visitors would interpret the *W* rug and, therefore, Irma herself was a kind of fantasy—a fantasy of having visitors at all.

Then one day someone visited, and that someone was Dahlia.

"OMG," Dahlia said upon entering and threw herself down on the rug. "I love this."

Irma winced. "Really?"

"Mm-hmm," purred Dahlia as she rolled in the high-pile plushness. "What does the *W* stand for?"

It could be hard to tell when Dahlia was oblivious and when she was being unreachably sly. Irma thought for a moment. "*Witches,*" she'd replied.

It was a moment of inspiration, a word that would never have occurred to her if she weren't talking to Dahlia. Sometimes it seemed that every act of speaking, every word and phrase by which the world unfolded, was an act of cocreation: The listener was just as important as the speaker. When Dahlia was Irma's listener, the words Irma spoke felt odder and more intuitive, voiced from deeper within.

"Yesss!" Dahlia exclaimed as she lay on her back and made wide sweeps with her arms and legs, tracing atop the *W* the rug-equivalent of a snow angel. "The Witches of Westish. That's what we are."

The idea that *we* were anything was a wild, improbable treat. "Like *Macbeth*," Irma offered.

"Yesss!" said Dahlia again. She'd committed an enviable amount of Shakespeare to memory. "The Wayward Sisters."

After that Irma didn't worry about the rug anymore; it signified something new.

THAT FIRST VISIT happened a long time ago—October of freshman year. Irma had just met Dahlia the night before, when, friendless and for once bored by the prospect of studying on a Saturday evening, she decided to take herself to the campus production of *The Tempest*.

Squeezed into the third row of the crowded theater, acutely aware of her solitude, she found herself mesmerized by the actress playing Miranda, who flung herself around the stage in her tattered white dress, projecting her melodic voice with an ease the other, mostly male actors lacked, laughing at herself and at the men who languished a step behind her. She brought, Irma thought, a kind of meta-awareness to the role: She seemed trapped inside this drab and earnest production the same way Miranda was trapped on the island. Without hope, but not without humor.

So enchanted was Irma that when, in the third act, Miranda said to the dumbo playing Ferdinand,

By my modesty
The jewel in my dower, I would not wish
Any companion in the world but you

Irma felt that Miranda was speaking to her, or that she was speaking to Miranda.

When the houselights came on, Irma flipped through her playbill until she found the actors' bios.

> A graduate of Evanston Township, Dahlia Breughel ('16) was the captain of her high-school field-hockey team and a charter member of Shakesperience, a band of teenage thespians who perform the Bard's work all over the Upper Midwest.

Irma did a double take at the *'16*, which meant that this splendidly self-possessed actress was, like Irma, a first-semester freshman. The possibility of befriending such a person would never have occurred to Irma, but to be in the same class brought Dahlia closer to the realm of reality, and it pleased Irma to think that they had something, anything, in common.

Outside the theater doors, in the brightly lit atrium of Thurgood Hall, an impromptu receiving line had formed. The cast milled about, exuding the afterglow of the stage as they harvested hugs and flowers. The crowd parted, and Dahlia stood alone.

Up close she had an imposing presence, her cheeks flushed and glistening, her chest heaving beneath her tattered dress and the nude bodysuit she wore under that. Her stage makeup sharpened her face into planes of vivid color, emerald and cobalt and rose, slick with sweat and Vaseline. Her blond hair was curled and lacquered into tangled rings designed to look tossed by a storm. The rips in her dress made Irma feel terribly shy.

"H-hey," Irma stammered, and held out her hand. "You were great."

"Thank you." Dahlia, still in stage mode, projected her voice past Irma's ear as she grasped Irma's hand.

"I mean it," Irma said. "You were the best thing in the show. I mean, not a super-high bar, but..."

At this deflationary statement, Dahlia laughed and looked relieved. Her voice took on a softer, chattier tone: "Pretty tedious, wasn't it? My junior-high plays were better. Does that sound too snotty? I just mean it in, like, a literal way—my junior-high plays were better."

She sighed and continued: "Miranda's not Shakespeare's greatest creation, but oh well. I can play her in my sleep at this point."

Irma nodded. "Because of your Shakesperience."

She shuddered as the words came out. What sort of weirdo quoted a stranger's bio to her face? But Dahlia gave a cheerful laugh. "Because of my Shakesperience," she agreed. "Anyway," she confided, "I wanted to play Prospero."

"Why Prospero?"

"Because Prospero's in charge," Dahlia said. "Prospero runs the show. But the director looked at me funny for even asking. You've seen Julie Taymor's *Tempest,* right?"

Irma shook her head no.

"Oh man, you need to see it. It's a kind of feminist version, where Prospero's a woman—Prospera, she's called. And Phyllida Lloyd's doing a big *Tempest* next year in New York—an all-female cast, and it's set in a women's prison! Isn't that perfect?"

"Totally," Irma said.

"I have to hand it to the drama department here. Doing this totally humorless boys-play-boys, girls-play-girls version of Shakespeare in 2012

—it’s so backward it’s almost refreshing. Especially when they pick *The Tempest*, which has a zillion parts for men and exactly one for a woman.”

“Plus some nymphs,” Irma said.

“Plus some nymphs!” Dahlia laughed. “It’s fucking avant-garde, is what it is. Anyway, what did you say your name was?”

“Irma,” said Irma, who hadn’t.

Dahlia suddenly produced a cell phone from somewhere within her costume and asked Irma for her number. Irma was so excited it took her several beats to recall her area code.

“Texted you,” Dahlia said. “We’ll hang.”

The following evening, Dahlia gave her blessing to the *W* rug. Sprawled on the floor making rug-angels with her limbs, she seemed to own the place, though she’d been there less than five minutes.

Irma had thought they were going to study for midterms and maybe talk more about Shakespeare. Instead, they talked about Dahlia.

Dahlia, Irma learned, was an only child. Her mother was an associate dean of the journalism school at Northwestern. Her parents were somewhat recently divorced. Her father was a personal-injury lawyer with billboards and a jingle and an easy-recall phone number. Her parents didn’t speak, and Dahlia hadn’t seen her dad in two years except on a billboard. “If he wants to talk to someone my age, he calls his girlfriend,” said Dahlia with inscrutable sparkling cheer.

Thereafter Irma and Dahlia embarked on a flurry of friendship, which entailed many such nights of Dahlia dropping by Irma’s room and hanging out for a few glorious hours. Dahlia introduced Irma to Pammy, and the three of them began to eat dinner together in the dining hall.

Irma had never met someone like Dahlia before, so bubbly and sharp at the same time, and so deeply serious without seeming to be. Irma never, even when they went to the library together, saw Dahlia crack open a book, and yet she could lecture at hilarious and well-informed length about any number of odd subjects: CIA experiments with mind control; why field-hockey teams wore Catholic-schoolgirl outfits; how to buy drugs on the dark web. She believed in the infallible power of astrology and, when Irma tried to scoff at this, delivered a lecture on tidal patterns and the influence of cosmic energy on plants so persuasive that Irma had been checking her horoscope ever since.

Irma was captivated. But even at the height of their friendship, she was never quite sure when she would see Dahlia next—when Dahlia would flake and not show or, contrarily, when she would show up unannounced and stay for a day and a half, sleeping on a raft of pillows on the *W* rug.

By the spring of freshman year, Dahlia looked very different than she had onstage in October. Her face was thinner, her clothes darker. From afar, Irma had noticed other students who seemed to be conjuring new identities on the fly; perhaps that was part of what college was for. But she found Dahlia's shifts hard to make sense of. In March, Dahlia told Irma that she was quitting *The Seagull*, despite having been awarded the lead. In April, when everyone returned from spring break—Irma with a truckful of gardening swag for her new friend Pella—Dahlia stopped coming over completely. Irma kept texting her, but their exchanges came to seem like judo holds that Irma was applying, trying to steer Dahlia into submitting to dinner tomorrow or lunch the next day, until Dahlia squirmed free and was gone.

All summer long and into sophomore fall, Irma didn't hear from her. She wondered what she'd done to drive her friend away. Then in October, she bumped into Pammy at breakfast and asked how Dahlia was doing.

"She didn't tell you?" Pammy glanced around the dining hall, lowered her voice: "Her mom picked her up last week. She's in rehab."

"Rehab?" Irma felt frightened by the word. It sounded medical and carceral, as well as related to drugs. Irma didn't even like to take Advil. "For what?"

"For not eating," Pammy said.

"Anorexia?" said Irma, alarmed.

Pammy shrugged. "She says her mom flipped out because she got put on academic probation. The rehab was an excuse to lock her up."

Irma's tongue poked between her teeth. "Is that true?"

Pammy sighed and paused for a bite of toast. "I don't know," she said. "Dahl can be tough to deal with. She's definitely lost weight."

"I haven't seen her in forever," Irma said, perplexed. "She hasn't been returning my messages."

Pammy drained her orange juice. "She's got four weeks of no phone, starting yesterday. But if you text her, she'll get them eventually. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

Irma sent several messages that were as upbeat and unconcerned as she could make them. She received no reply. In early December she tried again, and Dahlia answered instantly, as though they'd never been out of touch. Over the holidays they exchanged hundreds of messages. Some of Dahlia's were witty, essayistic riffs of the kind Irma remembered from freshman winter; others were endless repetitive complaints about her mom. Still others contained a new note of political ardor. Dahlia sent link after link about the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses and rape in prison and asked Irma for reading suggestions about patriarchal oppression. Every morning for a month she texted Irma a line from the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, which she considered a perfect and hilarious piece of performance art. Then she stopped texting, only to resurface a few months later. Whenever she delivered what seemed to Irma truly bad news—she was going back to rehab, she had pneumonia, her grandmother had died—she did so in a flat cheery way, as though everything was on the verge of being fine.

She finally returned to campus in the winter of Irma's junior year and a few weeks later called Irma. "Hey," she said. "Do you want to join a group?"

"What kind of group?" Irma asked, though it hardly mattered as long as Dahlia was in it.

"A group that doesn't just talk," Dahlia replied. "A group that *does* something."

"Who's in it?" Irma asked.

"Pammy and me," Dahlia said. "Maybe a couple other girls."

The meeting took place in Irma's room. Dahlia hadn't visited in nearly two years, but apart from all the books Irma had acquired, little had changed to mark the passage of time. There were indeed a couple other girls there—Meredith, who was Pammy's friend and edited the *Bugler*, and a senior named Rose. The five of them sat cross-legged in a circle on the *W* rug. Dahlia called the meeting to order.

"We're a leaderless organization," she said. "But we need a secretary."

Everybody looked at Irma.

"Okay," Irma said, and stood up to get her laptop.

Dahlia repeated what she'd said on the phone, about wanting to *do* something. She talked about what had happened to Anna Marie Poplin at

the Parties the previous year, when plenty of people must have seen Brevin Dorr carrying Anna Marie, who was totally passed out, down the street and must have known or at least suspected what was going on, Brevin Dorr being a total psychopath, but nobody—nobody!—did anything.

"*We're* going to do something," Dahlia insisted, though she seemed not to know what the something was.

An image popped into Irma's mind. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen; she felt, as she typed snippets of Dahlia's rambling monologue into a file on her laptop, that the image was intended for Dahlia's mind, not her own, and she was merely receiving it, the way you might accept a package for a neighbor. Unlike the vast majority of Irma's thoughts, the image arrived without any verbal or intellectual apparatus; it was a vision, as weird and vivid as any described in the Bible. It was one of those odd and intuitive cocreations that happened only in Dahlia's presence; she would never have thought it had her friend not been there on the rug.

Timidly, she raised her hand.

"Yes?" Dahlia said.

Irma hesitated. Maybe Dahlia's dream-image had been routed to her by some cosmic accident, a mistaken transmission to the secretary, or maybe it wasn't a dream-image at all but a piece of pure stupidity that she should keep to herself. "Uh," she said. "Never mind."

"You've got something," Dahlia said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Well," Irma said. "This might be totally stupid, but..." Sheepishly, she related what she'd imagined: a sleeping guy with RAPE VICTIM written on his forehead.

"Yesssss!" said Dahlia. "Oh my God, Irma, you're a genius." Her eyes were alight.

Pammy smiled and sipped her kombucha. Rose and Meredith squirmed in their cross-legged positions.

"We can do it in the fall at the Parties," Dahlia said.

"I'm a senior," Rose said. "I'll be gone by then." Her expression suggested that this came not as a disappointment but a convenient relief.

"Darn," said Dahlia with a snap of her fingers.

From that moment forward, as Dahlia planned the specifics of the project, she was never out of touch with Irma for more than a few hours, her

mood so exuberant that she seemed almost to hover above the ground like an actual witch. Irma felt like she was hovering too.

"WE'RE ON THE Brightness!" Dahlia crowed as she burst into Irma's room. It was seven thirty Tuesday morning, the light still low and rosy across the quad, and the Witches' meeting had broken up only a few hours ago.

"On the what?" Irma asked happily. She'd just stumbled from bed and thrown on shorts.

Dahlia laughed. "What rock do you live under, Irma?"

"The rock of my own interests."

"The Brightness should interest you," Dahlia said. "Not everything important happened in 1880. Come on, let's get breakfast."

Irma laced her boots and clomped down the stairs behind her friend.

"The Brightness is huge," Dahlia explained. "It only started last year, but it's taking over. You know how when we were in grade school, there were these different sites for women, like Termagant and the Napkin?"

"No," Irma said.

"Well, the Brightness is the modern version of those. Except way more popular."

"Is it good?" Irma asked.

"For now," Dahlia said. "It hasn't had time to get bad."

As they crossed the quad, morning birds still cheeping, Dahlia read aloud from her phone the Brightness post. Her giddiness made Irma glad. They marched into the dining hall boldly and even, Irma thought, with a touch of grandeur in their strides. They heaped white bowls with granola and strawberry yogurt, filled mugs of coffee from the bilgy urns, and found a sunny spot beneath the mullioned windows.

They each had a nine o'clock class. Afterward they headed back to Irma's room, where Irma assumed her habitual writing posture, feet tucked up on her chair, eyes flicking between notebook and screen. She needed to finish the Witches' statement—the weekly print edition of the school paper was about to go to press.

Dahlia was sitting on the left crook of the *W,* her laptop open before her. As new comments cropped up on the Brightness—they were coming at a furious rate—she shuddered with pleasure and read them aloud to Irma.

“Don’t you have homework?” Irma asked, pretending to be annoyed.

“It’s the first day of school! This *is* my homework.”

The worrywart part of Irma felt that, since Dahlia had God knew how many incompletes and dropped classes on her record in addition to two entirely missed semesters, it was never too early for her to start her homework. But that worry was for a more hapless Dahlia, not the one who knocked on your door to escort you to breakfast.

Besides, Irma was equally enthralled by what was happening on the Brightness, where a writer named Didi Cohen had linked to Pammy’s video and written an approving squib. (“Watch this video on loop for the rest of your life and you’ll understand the Sisyphean task of doing anything about sexual assault, on college campuses or anywhere else.”) Now the squib preceded several hundred comments of varying degrees of wit and righteousness. Irma couldn’t stop reading them. Her left hand, of its own volition, kept command-tabbing away from what she was writing and returning to the site. It was like being hooked on cocaine—not that Irma had ever been in the same room as cocaine.

“Have you ever done cocaine?” she asked.

“Not since high school,” Dahlia said.

“What was it like?”

Dahlia made a face. “I can barely drink coffee.” She reached out a hand and stroked the white-topped head of Anderson Cooper, who had cozied up beside her. “How does Andy like his new home?”

“He’s settling in,” Irma said. “What he really likes is you.”

Anderson rolled onto his side and lay perfectly still, his front paws lifted, offering the full length of his tubular belly for Dahlia to scratch.

“I’ve only ever seen him do that for my mom,” Irma said.

Dahlia, triumphant, wriggled both hands into his fur. “Sorry, Mom!”

Who do you love more, Irma imagined herself demanding of Dahlia, *me or the cat?* But she would never ask that for fear of getting too straight an answer. And anyway, love didn’t work that way; love didn’t need to choose or exclude. Dahlia derived comfort from having Anderson curled up beside her, and Irma, watching them from across the room, felt something resembling the same kind of comfort.

“Gosh,” Dahlia said, and appended a long slow yawn. “I feel so *alive*.”

Her tone tried to be ironic, to make light of the notion of feeling alive.

But Irma could tell she meant it.

Irma scrolled through her editorial and, for the first time, found nothing at which to wrinkle her nose. “Okay,” she said uncertainly. “It might be finished.”

“Hooray,” said Dahlia.

“Should I print it for you?”

“Print it?” Dahlia said as she stretched out a hand. “Like on a tree?”

Irma handed over her laptop. She bit her lip and watched Dahlia read. The statement was short, but Irma had spent half the summer writing it. She wanted to translate Dahlia into words; she wanted to make people understand. Perhaps this was a misplaced desire. Perhaps there were only two types of people: those who understood Dahlia and those who never would. But didn’t every political movement need its theorists? And didn’t every work of art? Irma wanted to describe and explain what the prank had meant against the backdrop of several millennia—and counting—of the subjugation of women. She wanted people to understand. If people understood, then who could fault them for what they’d done?

It felt scary to publish a piece of writing, especially such an important one, without showing it to Pella, who generally gave Irma feedback on all her drafts and pointed out gently where she’d gone wrong. But it was impossible to show the statement to Pella, so Irma had channeled her instead. The writing felt like a triple ventriloquism: She’d tried to use Pella’s sensibility to express Dahlia’s spirit, aided by ideas she’d drawn from Judy. If you connected your three closest friends like points in a triangle, could you find your identity in the center? Could triple ventriloquism yield something resembling a self? Irma hoped so. But most of all she hoped Dahlia would like it. Dahlia began to read aloud:

> One of the twentieth century’s great historians, Gerda Lerner, who fled the Nazis and settled here in Wisconsin, said: “The system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end.” Today we declare that the end is near.

Dahlia stopped reading and looked up, her face alight. “Irma, this is perfect.”

“It’s bombastic,” Irma said. “It’s kind of a mess.”

“Witch, please. You *did* it,” Dahlia declared. “Send it to Meredith.”

Irma’s heart swelled even as she demurred: “Let me at least proofread it.”

“Irma, it’s perfect. If you don’t send it this instant, I will.”

“I’ll do it,” Irma said, relenting, and held out her hand for the laptop. She moved one last comma and, with held breath, sent the file.

“Witches forever,” she said as she exhaled.

“Witches forever,” Dahlia replied.

Anderson Cooper detached himself from Dahlia’s hip and leaped onto the surface of Irma’s desk. From there he prance-hopped to the narrow windowsill and peered down over the quad.

Irma looked out the window, tracing the apparent line of Anderson’s gaze. There was only one person in the vicinity, a bushy-haired guy with a backpack, furiously pacing the walkway that cut between maples. His head was bowed, and he seemed utterly lost in thought—until, feeling Irma’s eyes on him, he abruptly stopped and looked up. A wide beige bandage circumvolved his head. It was Dahlia’s guy.

Despite the flights of stairs and length of sidewalk between them, their eyes locked, and Irma could tell he recognized her from the Parties as surely as she recognized him. She flinched and shrank from the window, but it was too late. His gaze had noted which floor she was on and on which side of the landing. He stomped toward the entryway door.

Irma whirled around. “Your boyfriend’s coming.”

Dahlia glanced up. “My what friend?”

“The guy from the Parties.” Irma was speaking hurriedly in the fretful voice she tried not to use around Dahlia. “The guy you were dancing with. The guy you—you know. I think he’s headed this way.”

Dahlia’s eyes lit up—whether with fear or excitement, Irma couldn’t tell. “He’s coming here?” Both hands were touching her hair.

“What do we do?” Irma said, half panicked. “Should I lock the door?”

With instant, actorly self-control, Dahlia composed herself. Her hands fell to her lap. Her eyes dimmed. “Why?” she asked. “Does he have a gun?”

Footsteps echoed on the stairs. A rapid knock sounded on the door. Irma looked at Dahlia, who made a rolling little hand gesture: *Let’s get on with it.*

“Come in,” Irma said meekly. She braced herself, expecting a scene like

Pammy's video: a big angry guy filling the room with his rage.

As Ben-Josh entered, he did look enraged: jaw set, nostrils flared, a throbbing artery peeking out from his bandage. But when his eyes landed on Dahlia, his expression turned soft and uncertain. Anger gave way to something else. He stopped in the middle of the rug, his backpack dangling from one shoulder.

"I know you did it," he said.

"Hold on," Dahlia said, her eyes trained on her laptop. "I'm in the middle of something." She shut the computer and slid it inside her bag. Her movements so slow as to be hypnotic, she extracted a tube of lip gloss, spun out its tip, and applied it to her mouth. It was a shiny peachy shade. "Okay," she said when she'd finished. "Proceed."

Ben-Josh opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He looked like he'd been dreaming of this confrontation, working himself up to a fever pitch—but now that the confrontation had arrived, it did not resemble his dream. "Why?" he said in a faltering voice. "Why did you do this to me?"

Dahlia peered at him in a neutral, curious way. "Are you going to cry?"

He steeled himself. "What I'm going to do is turn you in. But I thought the honorable thing would be to give you a chance to explain yourself."

Dahlia looked at herself in her compact mirror, swished her lips around, and tossed the mirror back in her bag. "I have nothing to explain."

"I came here to *talk* to you."

"So talk."

Irma found herself sitting perfectly still in her chair. Dahlia and Ben-Josh didn't resemble her parents in any discernible way, and yet she felt some distant echo of what she'd felt when she was little and her parents would argue. Now, as then, she absented herself by reaching for the nearest book. Ben-Josh was utterly focused on Dahlia. Dahlia was utterly focused on ignoring Ben-Josh, even as she shifted on the bed in a loose-shouldered way that Irma thought needlessly risqué.

"We took creative writing together," Ben-Josh said. "I really liked your stories."

"I know," Dahlia said. "You told me that the other night."

"So you admit it," Ben-Josh said. "You admit we were talking at the Parties."

Dahlia frowned. "Why wouldn't I admit it? We danced too. Don't you

remember?”

“Of course I remember,” said Ben-Josh with a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

“It doesn’t sound like you remember,” Dahlia teased. “Maybe you drank too much.”

“I remember,” Ben-Josh insisted. “But whatever! I want to know why you did this to me. I’m not Vic Robinson, you know. I’m not some Neanderthal moron creep.”

“Neanderthals were a highly developed people,” Dahlia said. “Their brains were bigger than ours.”

“I meant it as a metaphor.”

“That’s not a metaphor,” Dahlia said. “Anyway, I know you’re not a moron, Josh.”

“My name’s not Josh.”

“I meant it as a metaphor.” Dahlia nodded toward his forehead. “May I see what’s underneath your bandage?”

“What? No.”

“Are you sure? I might have some ideas about how to get it off.”

Ben-Josh’s face suddenly blazed with hope. “If you know how to get it off, you’d better tell me.”

Irma understood the nature of his hope: That Dahlia would produce from her bag the magic antidote. That the person who’d hurt him could also unhurt him. With a wave of her hand, his forehead would be restored to its original condition, wordless and lineless, clean and tan. His relief would be complete. Irma’s heart went out to him. He was bound to be disappointed and, by his disappointment, to be unstrung. Unless Dahlia wasn’t bluffing, and she did possess the antidote?

Ben-Josh and Dahlia looked at each other. He lifted a hand toward his temple. It hovered there, hesitating, for a long moment. Then, with a sense of irreversible decision, he pried loose the Velcro and unwrapped the bandage from his head.

Dahlia’s expression, when she saw Ben-Josh’s forehead, lost all semblance of control. It made Irma shy to see it, the way she’d felt shy to see Dahlia dancing at the Parties or standing outside the theater in her torn white dress. But this expression was weirder and more private than either of

those things. Her pale blue eyes bugged wide, her features slack with rapture. In a flash the look was gone. Ben-Josh seemed not to have noticed.

“It’s one of those extra-durable jagua tattoos,” Dahlia said. “You’ll just have to wait for it to fade.”

Ben-Josh’s eyes were rimmed with red. “You said you could make it go away.”

“No I didn’t,” Dahlia replied. She continued to gaze at his forehead, a private, fascinated smile on her lips.

“Damn it!” Ben-Josh yelled, his eyes wet with barely suppressed tears. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!” He stomped a foot on the carpet over and over, winding his putty-colored bandage around one fist and then the other. He gave his backpack a kick. “Shit!” For such a brawny, thick-chested guy, it was an oddly unthreatening tantrum.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” he complained. “I have six job interviews this week. And now I’m screwed.”

“Why are you screwed?” Dahlia asked. “You’re just as bright and enterprising as ever.”

Ben-Josh’s hands whirled around his head in a putty-colored cloud. He was trying desperately to put the bandage back on, but in his agitation and haste he kept fumbling it.

“Here,” Dahlia said, and held out her hand.

Suddenly obedient, he gave Dahlia the tangle of bandage and dipped his head. With motherly deftness and calm, Dahlia unraveled and smoothed the twisted fabric. She wound the bandage three times around Ben-Josh’s head, pulled it taut, and secured it. “There,” she said, and patted him carelessly on the ear.

“Thanks,” Ben mumbled.

Dahlia reached into her bag again, this time for the little rectangular tin that housed her pills. “Would you like an Ativan?” she asked as she proffered the tin. “They’re the white pentagons.”

Ben-Josh shook his head. “No thanks.”

Dahlia tossed one in her mouth and replaced the tin in her bag. “Now Josh—may I call you Josh?”

Her tone had softened, become inclusive and humorous, so Ben-Josh came dangerously close to smiling. “Absolutely not.”

“I think you’re taking this too hard,” Dahlia said. “It’s a temporary

tattoo. It’s not like you got raped.”

“You picked the wrong guy,” Ben-Josh said. “I don’t hate women.”

“I do,” Dahlia said.

“I’m serious. I’m not your enemy.”

“I never said we were enemies, Josh.”

“It’s Ben.”

“It’s been what?”

Ben-Josh flung up his arms. “You know, I didn’t have to come here. Once I realized it was you, I could have gone straight to the dean. But I thought we could work this out.”

“How would we do that?” Dahlia asked.

“By talking. By getting to know each other.” He looked at her, his brown eyes brimming with meaning. “I brought something I wanted to read to you. Would you mind?”

Dahlia opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. Irma could tell she’d been on the verge of uttering some caustic comeback but had thought better of it. Maybe Ben-Josh was getting through to her.

“Go ahead,” she said.

Ben-Josh undid the drawstring on his bag and pulled out a dog-eared paperback, its edges fringed by a purfle of colorful sticky notes. “It’s a passage from *The Art of Loving*. By Erich Fromm.”

He flipped to a page he’d marked and cleared his throat. With his curly hair and earnest expression, his book held reverently at heart level, he might have been a medieval swain about to plight his troth—albeit an unusually sturdy swain with a bandage around his head.

As he addressed himself to his audience, he seemed at pains to keep his eyes trained on Dahlia’s face, not letting them fall to the place where Anderson Cooper, having leaped into her lap again, hooked a claw into the V of her shirt and yanked it down to expose the edge of her bra.

“This is my favorite book,” he explained. “Coach Schwartz gave it to me on my first campus visit. I reread it every fall.”

He coughed into his fist and began.

“‘The most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love, is *brotherly love*. This is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is love for all human beings; it

is characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness. If I have developed the capacity for love, then I cannot help loving my brothers.’”

Dahlia waved for him to stop. “This is what you wanted to read me?”

“I haven’t gotten to the good part. But yes.”

“I’m not your brother,” she said.

“Just ignore the word *brotherly*. It’s not what’s important.”

“Ignore it? Give me that.” Dahlia thrust out an arm. Ben-Josh relinquished the book.

“This entire section is called ‘Brotherly Love,’” Dahlia complained as she flipped through. “And you want me to ignore the word *brotherly*? What about all of these *he*s, *his*es, *man*s, and *mankind*s? Should I ignore those too?”

“That’s how people talked back then,” Ben-Josh said. “But the ideas are eternal. You have to read past the surface to get at the essence.”

“Surface *is* essence,” Dahlia said. “That’s what you don’t understand.”

“But it’s not,” Ben-Josh said. “That’s what this book is about.”

“You’re a guy. You have the luxury of an inner life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means look at you,” Dahlia said, with a hand wave that encompassed him. “Your body is protection. It’s a wall between you and the world.”

“What about you and your walls?” Ben said.

Dahlia glared at him. “What about them?”

“I know you think I’m a dumb jock,” Ben-Josh said. “But we have a lot in common. Could I read a little more?”

Dahlia shrugged. “It’s a free country.”

Irma, switching to her laptop, found a scan of the Fromm book online. She followed along silently while Ben-Josh read aloud, so could see the places where he, conceding Dahlia’s point, altered the original language.

“‘Love,’” he began, skipping the *brotherly,* “‘is based on the experience that we all are one. In order to experience this identity it is necessary to penetrate from the periphery to the core. If I perceive in another person mainly the surface, I perceive mainly the differences, that which separates us. If I penetrate to the core, I perceive our identity, the fact of our shared’”—he modified the next word—“*personhood.”*

Ben-Josh paused and allowed himself a slight smile—pleased to have shared these words with Dahlia and to have successfully navigated this

minefield of midcentury rhetoric. It seemed to induce in him a shy blushing joy to say the word *love* in Dahlia's presence. Or perhaps it was the word *penetrate*. "Then he quotes from Simone Weil. Do you know Weil?"

"Not personally," said Dahlia.

Irma revered Simone Weil, as of course she would, this brilliant unbending bespectacled Catholic thinker, and she vaguely recalled having encountered the sentences Ben-Josh now read. But hearing them spoken aloud, in his heartfelt reading for Dahlia's benefit, their beauty lodged in her in a deeper way—which, as it happened, was precisely Weil's point:

"'The same words can be commonplace or extraordinary according to the manner in which they are spoken. And this manner depends on the depth of the region in a *person's* being from which they proceed without the will being able to do anything. And by a marvelous agreement they reach the same region in *she* who hears them. Thus the hearer can discern, if *she* has any power of discernment, what is the value of the words.'"

Weil, in her work, had also used the prevailing *he, him, man* of her day, and Ben-Josh had recast them in the feminine on the fly, seamlessly this time. When he finished, he smiled broadly. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Yes," Dahlia admitted. "It's beautiful."

A marvelous agreement, Irma thought, in Judy-voice. She could feel, as she had at the Parties, the current of energy flowing between Ben-Josh and Dahlia. She decided she should leave the room. She didn't especially want them to have sex in her bed, which seemed both gross and grossly unfair, given that she herself had never done so. But the more praise and attention accrued to the Witches of Westish, the more worried Irma felt about the backlash. What she wanted was for the whole thing to be quashed—and a marvelous agreement between Ben-Josh and Dahlia seemed like the fastest route to a quashing. She stood from her desk and grabbed her bag.

Dahlia looked at her. "Where are you going?"

"Out," Irma said. "I'll be back in"—how long did it take to have a ferocious bout of love-hate sex?—"four hours. Or five."

"I'll come with you," Dahlia said.

"You guys stay," Irma said. "There's beer in the fridge. Finish your conversation."

"It's finished." Dahlia uncrossed her legs.

Ben-Josh flashed Irma a look of disappointment and gratitude. He would

have been glad to be alone with Dahlia, but Dahlia refused to allow it. Irma sighed and sat back down. All she'd managed to do was wreck a promising moment.

Dahlia turned to Ben-Josh.

"I don't think you understand," she said. "Whatever happened to you after that party happened. You have to deal with it yourself."

"I'm dealing with it," Ben-Josh said. "That's why I came here."

"So what do you want from me?"

"An apology, for starters."

"But don't you see you're not going to get one? Worse things happen to people every day."

"If I turn you in, you'll be up a creek," Ben-Josh said. "You might get kicked out of school."

"For what?"

Ben-Josh jabbed a finger at his bandage. "For assault. For targeting me because I'm a man."

"Some things happen to women because they're women," Dahlia said. "Other things happen to men because they're men."

"I'm trying to be nice to you," Ben-Josh said.

Dahlia frowned. "I think that's a misplaced impulse."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"What do *I* want you to do?" Dahlia shrugged. "I want you to fight for justice. I want you to find whoever did this to you and punish them to the fullest."

"I see what you're up to," Ben-Josh said.

"I doubt it, Josh. I doubt that very much."

"You're messing with the wrong guy."

Dahlia smiled. "That's not how I feel at all."

Ben-Josh had come here to persuade through reasonableness and charm, but he had not persuaded. He'd been humiliated by Dahlia the night of the Parties, and now he'd returned of his own volition only to be humiliated again. Irma watched the yearning for vengeance enter his eyes.

"You're fucked," he snarled as he snapped up his backpack and stomped toward the door. "Utterly fucked."

"WHAT?" DAHLIA SAID in response to Irma's stern look.

It was easier for Irma to give such a look than to unravel the thoughts it contained. "Why were you so mean to him?"

"Mean?" Dahlia echoed with a dollop of incredulity. "We were just talking."

"Dahlia," Irma said. "Be serious. What are you doing?"

Dahlia shrugged. "I'm doing the project."

"We *did* the project," Irma said, exasperated. "The project's done. Now what we need to do is not get kicked out of school. You're already on probation."

"I know," Dahlia said.

"He was trying to give you an out."

"How do you know what he was trying to do? He was probably wearing a wire."

"So why didn't you pat him down?" Irma said. "Make him take his clothes off."

"Don't be gross."

"*Me* be gross? You two were practically making out on my bed. There hasn't been this much sexual tension in this room since I moved in."

"It's not sexual tension," Dahlia said. "It's animosity."

"Fine," Irma said. "I just can't tell the difference."

She gazed out the window, shaking her head. An orange Frisbee arced around a tree trunk and landed in somebody's hand. "He was trying," she said. "He likes you."

Dahlia scoffed. "Or he thought he could blackmail me into sleeping with him. He thought that might make him feel better."

"You *know* he likes you," Irma insisted. "That's why you picked him."

Dahlia looked at her, and the look, for an instant, contained an angry, glaring hardness. "Maybe so," she said.

"I DON'T FEEL safe," he told Dean Melkin.

Dean Melkin nodded furiously. "I can understand why."

Dean Melkin was taking notes as furiously as he was nodding. Ben relaxed a little. This felt right. He'd been reluctant to contravene Schwartz, who'd asked him to lie low, but now that he was unburdening himself to the

dean, it just felt right. “I have a game Saturday,” Ben said. “I have the football season ahead of me. It’s my job to represent Westish to the best of my abilities.”

Dean Melkin wrote that down. “I’m a senior,” Ben went on. “This is a critical moment in my life. Do I have a trust fund? Do I have resources?”

Dean Melkin looked at him, expectant, waiting for the answer.

“No!” cried Ben. “After my parents’ divorce, my mom cleaned bathrooms in a hospital. Then she became a nurse. I’m up to here in loans. Do you think this”—Ben tapped his forehead—“is a good way to go into a job interview? Do you think it makes a good impression?”

“No,” said Dean Melkin. “I certainly do not.”

“Me either.” There was something about the way Dean Melkin was recording his words on a piece of paper—a *form*—that Ben found soothing. Schwartz hadn’t written anything down.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” he said. “I missed class today. My academic performance is being affected. Adversely affected.”

Dean Melkin looked at him, his cheeks beaming pinkly, his pen poised. Ben went on:

“I’m afraid to go out in public. If I show my face, I’ll be subject to ridicule. Ridicule and judgment. It’s emotionally disturbing.”

Dean Melkin nodded. “Traumatic,” he suggested.

“I’ve been traumatized,” Ben agreed. “And I’ll tell you what else.”

He paused for dramatic effect. Dean Melkin’s pen hovered.

“I think she drugged me.”

“*Really,*” said Dean Melkin, prolonging the word with something approaching relish.

Ben nodded. “Absolutely.”

Dean Melkin set down his pen and folded his hands as if in prayer. “That’s a very serious accusation.”

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14

Pella, schlepping her pair of suitcases, was the last passenger to descend the latticed ramp of the ferry. She spotted Owen immediately, at the distant end of the lot, framed by the quaint shops that lined the street behind him. He leaned against a banged-up station wagon, scanning the crowd. Pella waved, but he didn't see her. His slim legs were crossed at the ankles, his arms folded over his chest, his black plastic sunglasses, casual and ultrafashionable, pushed up into his hair, which came close to qualifying as an Afro. Pella headed toward him across the concrete. After another long moment of lazy, fruitless scanning, his eyes landed upon her. With a slowly spreading smile, he detached his backside from the car and ambled her way.

"You made it," he said as they wrapped their arms around each other.

"I did." She gave him a squeeze. "Thanks for collecting me."

"You're very collectible," Owen said. "I'd like about twelve of you."

They released the hug. Pella could never see him without feeling charmed. "Your hair's so long," she said.

Owen, as though reminded of his hair's existence, lifted a hand to touch it. "I wanted to give the stylist some material to work with. Before the big day."

"It looks good like this," Pella said.

"Friday it gets lopped off." He nodded down at her left hand. "That's a lovely ring you're wearing."

"A boy bought it for me."

"Smart boy."

They hoisted the suitcases into the trunk of the boxy, rust-speckled Volvo. In a lower corner of the windshield, an X of blue tape masked a web of tiny cracks. Pella climbed into the passenger seat.

"There's beer beneath your seat," Owen said.

Pella reached between her legs and found a six-pack, still cold and dewy with condensation. She pulled a can from the plastic ring and popped the tab as Owen eased away from the curb. She downed a long gulp of lager and aluminum.

"Yum," she said. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. How was your voyage?"

"Long," Pella said. "You aren't making it easy on your guests."

"We only want those willing to put forth the effort," Owen said. "The people who *care*."

"Your three hundred fifty closest friends."

"Precisely."

With a happy sigh, Pella secured her beer between her thighs. The late-afternoon light against the gray clapboard shops of New Shoreham, which were as lovely and quaint as she'd imagined them, was just beginning to gather a hint of gold.

"Ah," she sighed. "I haven't been on vacation in forever."

"Strange, since you're free every summer."

"Try telling Mike that. It's all I can do to get him to go for a walk."

"You know, you are allowed to travel without Michael," Owen said. "Come visit us in Brooklyn. We're just getting settled in the new place."

"I'd love that."

"As would I. After all this book-touring, I'm looking forward to a quiet life."

"Puttering about the homestead," Pella suggested. "Cooking dinner for your man."

Owen chuckled. "I might need your help with that part."

They passed beyond the limits of the town and turned north up Corn Neck Road. Pella sipped her beer and shut her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. It had indeed been a long voyage—two flights, an expensive cab ride, and the ferry—as well as an emotional one.

The Point Judith ferry had been empty: It was the Tuesday after Labor Day, that most deskbound of all American afternoons, and the only folks headed toward Block Island were a few yawning locals. Pella had the wide sunny space of the top deck to herself. That was for the best, because as soon as the ferry sounded its horn and steered into open water, her heart

began to pound. Being back in the Northeast, a chill Atlantic breeze against her cheeks, suffused her with memories of her dad.

When she was a girl, they would rent for a few weeks each June, as soon as her dad finished teaching for the year, a little cabin on Nantucket, which in retrospect must have cost a handsome chunk of his salary, but her dad, a Melville scholar, loved Nantucket and loved taking her there. They would wander around in the tall grasses all day, and in the evenings, like a father and daughter in a literary storybook, they would read to each other from *Moby-Dick* by candlelight. ("Nantucket! Take out your map and look at it.")

And every spring and fall, from the time Pella was four until her dad moved to Wisconsin, they would go whale-watching together on a tourist boat that left from Boston Harbor. Always they would go on a slate-gray midweek day, when the camera-toting throngs of tourists would be at a minimum. Young Pella would scour the forecasts in the *Globe*, searching for an ideally miserable day. She wanted the smallest possible crowd so she could squint her eyes and cover her ears and pretend that she and her dad, the vessel's able cocaptains, had the foredeck to themselves. She also wanted, if not a full-on storm, at least the lingering threat of one. She liked to feel a dash of frigid Atlantic spritz against her cheek and imagine what orders she'd give when the rain started lashing in earnest, the lightning flashing, the flat ship lurching from side to side. It wasn't a whale-watching voyage, had been her conviction, if you weren't wearing galoshes and stem-to-stern rain gear.

The Volvo paused at a stop sign. The ocean lay hidden behind the grass-smattered dunes. Pella turned to Owen, who was tinkering with the rearview mirror.

She'd vowed before arriving to think of her father little this weekend and to speak of him less. But the vow itself had been an admission of the impossibility of the endeavor, and now, no matter where she looked, she was suffused more deeply and vividly by his presence. To one side, Block Island, in all its tangled beachy New England clapboard glory, composed in a palette that felt like her father's soul: slate-blue churned water, deciduous green, gray-and-white salt-battered wood. To her other side, Owen, her father's last lover and, Pella suspected, his most important—that is, his truest love.

"Does this place remind you of my dad?" she asked.

The question emerged with shy uncertainty; she was here to celebrate Owen's union with Martin, and she doubted there was room for her dad in the midst of such proceedings. Generally you didn't invite ex-lovers to your wedding, even in ghostly form.

But Owen turned to her instantly, a tender smile on his lips and a tear, which must have been at the ready, glistening in the corner of his eye.

"Everything reminds me of him," he said. "Especially seeing you."

PELLA AND OWEN had grown close the autumn after Pella's dad died, soon after she and Mike moved into the house. Pella, rattled by nightmares, would sneak downstairs in the wee hours to avoid disturbing Mike. She was sitting on the couch one October morning before dawn, staring idly at her computer, when an email notification popped up.

From: Owen Dunne <oedunne12@westish.edu>

To: Pella Affenlicht <ptaffenlicht15@westish.edu>

Subject: Konichiwa

Dear Pella,

I've thought of you often in recent weeks, and fondly. I hope you're feeling as hale as possible given all that's happened, and I send you the fondest wishes. (Subtract two style points for this ungainly repetition of "fond.")

Fondly,
Owen

Owen was in Tokyo; he'd won a fellowship to study there his senior year. He and Pella hadn't been in touch since Owen's departure.

Pella had learned of her father's relationship with Owen only shortly before his death, and the discovery stunned her. She'd never known her dad to be interested in men, much less a man Pella's age. His recklessness terrified her, and beneath her fears for his job and reputation, her lifelong

ideas of him were thrown into confusion. Even in times of estrangement, she'd believed she understood her father completely and that he did the same for her. But there was much she didn't know.

She wasn't sure how to feel about Owen and under other circumstances might have puzzled over a reply for days. But at that grim still hour, she felt grateful to Owen for thinking of her. The arrival of his message just when she felt most abysmally alone seemed like a sign.

Quickly, she typed a polite reply. She pressed Send and was about to close her laptop when, like an apparition, a chat box appeared in a corner of her screen.

Owen: Hi.

Hi! she typed.

Owen: Shouldn't you be asleep?

Pella: I always wake up around now. My dreams about my dad are so intense.

Owen: I know what you mean.

They typed back and forth until dawn lightened the living-room windows, and Pella heard the floorboards creak beneath Mike's feet.

The following night, when her nightmares jolted her awake and a pale chill terror devoured the bedroom, a beam of hope snuck in. She tiptoed downstairs and messaged Owen: You there?

Owen: Where else would I be?

They began to chat every night. Those first conversations were all about her dad. Owen spoke as though the two of them had been partnered for life. Not in a proprietary way, which would have annoyed her. But beneath his every word lingered a serene belief that, had her dad lived another thirty years, they would have spent those years together. Pella wasn't sure this was true; she thought Owen was being naive about his own youth and about how his feelings might have changed had her dad's death not arrested them. But it was plain Owen loved her dad. He talked about you nonstop, Owen typed.

He did?

He was so happy you'd come home. He said you were the most talented person he'd ever met—more so than any student he'd ever had.

Present company excepted, Pella wrote.

He did not say that.

Beyond the flattery, she was fascinated to talk to someone who'd known her father well, someone with whom she could triangulate a view of him. All her life it had been just the two of them, so deeply enmeshed, even when thousands of miles apart, as to make him hard to see.

Owen seemed equally fascinated—he peppered her with questions about her childhood and what it was like to grow up under the tutelage of Grant Affenlicht. The questions undammed her grieving memories, and she funneled, over the course of many nights, a full family history into that little chat box. She treated Owen as an ideal audience, an all-comprehending friend with the patience of a therapist. She feared boring him, but his swift, thoughtful responses and his prompts that elicited further stories assured her he wasn't bored.

Three a.m. was an hour for intimate disclosures, and the little chat box in the corner of the screen felt like a medium for the same. Like a Catholic in the shriving pew, Pella couldn't see her confessor, and she typed freely, as though to herself. Her words swung halfway around the globe and nestled safely there.

Owen shared confidences as well. He described his early years in North Carolina when his parents were together and the subsequent years with his dad and grandmother after his mom moved to California. He told Pella about his grandmother's tacit understanding that he was gay, and her love, and her death. He told her how he'd come out to his dad at sixteen, long after everyone else had figured it out, and how they'd lived together uneasily until he left for college and had not spoken since. That, it turned out, was how he'd wound up at Westish: He refused to ask his dad to fill out the financial aid paperwork that could have earned him full rides to fancier schools. He'd gone to Westish because he'd won the Westish Award, which wasn't based on need.

And because I love the snow, he added.

Pella: Really?

Owen: I adore it. Maybe because I've been terrified of global warming since I was a kid. It's silly, but the snow makes me feel safe.

Pella never spoke of these late-night conversations to anyone, not even to Mike, who'd played baseball with Owen and considered him a close friend. On mornings when Mike padded downstairs while she and Owen were still chatting, she would shield her screen from view, feeling sheepish

and guilty. To have left their bed to talk so intimately with Owen felt somehow like a betrayal, even if Mike wouldn't have seen it that way.

As the new year arrived, Pella's mood began to lighten. She walked Contango on the beach and watched the tardy winter sun poke its head above Lake Michigan. She worked her shifts in the dining-hall kitchen. She wrote papers for her classes and met twice a week with Judy. She returned to her physical body, to sex with Mike and laps in the VAC pool. She slept through the night more often than not and woke feeling refreshed. She and Owen exchanged messages that were more like mere hellos. She missed the feverish intensity of their autumn chats, but her life had gained momentum. Owen's, she hoped, had done the same.

One afternoon in May, her laptop dinged with an incoming call. Owen's face appeared on the screen, collapsed into broad vague squares as the connection faltered, then appeared again. He was returning to Westish for commencement, and Pella had invited him to stay with her and Mike.

"I bought my plane ticket," Owen said.

"I'm so excited," Pella replied. "I hope you're planning to stay awhile."

"I don't want to impose on you and Michael."

"Don't be silly," Pella said. "Mike is thrilled. Look, I'm in your room right now." She lifted her laptop and swiveled it around her little office, with its twin bed against one wall. "See how nice it is?"

He nodded. "I like the purple quilt. But there's something else I wanted to ask."

"Shoot."

Owen sipped his tea. "I've written something. I was wondering if you might read it."

"What kind of something?"

It was a kind of diary, Owen explained—one he'd begun over the lonely winter in Tokyo in an attempt to disperse the darkness he felt. He'd started before Christmas, in a Hello Kitty notebook he'd bought to amuse himself, its pink cover dashed with silver sparkle, and he found himself unable to stop. He wrote and wrote, to the exclusion of other activities; or, rather, there were no other activities, because until he began writing, he'd only been mourning and moping and talking to Pella. He filled his sparkly notebook. He went out and bought several more that looked just like it.

"It's all I've done since January," he said. "I finished today."

Pella wasn't sure how a person could "finish" a diary, a diary being in theory a project that never ended and in practice, at least in her own practice, one that barely got underway. "I had no idea," she said.

Owen nodded. "I didn't want to jinx it by talking about it. I just wanted to do it, for however long it lasted."

"It's about my dad." Pella phrased this in the declarative—clearly, it was about her dad—but her tone contained a host of questions.

"It's partly about your dad," Owen confirmed. "It may have some merit as a piece of writing," he continued. "Or it may have no merit at all. At any rate, it's helped to keep me sane."

"What are you going to do?" She gestured at the stack of notebooks in Owen's lap. "Mail me those?"

He laughed. "I'm in the midst of typing it up. I'll send it to you. And perhaps we could discuss it when I arrive?"

Owen sent the file just before he headed for the airport. It was massive. Pella felt perplexed and slightly annoyed that Owen thought she had time to read his thousand-page diary. But she was curious too. She plunked down on the couch, Contango at her feet, and began to read.

The early pages reminded her of their October chats: Anguished spasms and spewing of grief. More like vomiting than writing. It didn't possess any *merit as a piece of writing*, as Owen put it, but she shared his grief, and as she read, she wept.

Eventually she cried herself out—but she'd finished only a fraction of the document. Boredom took over, and she began to question Owen's judgment. It might have kept him sane to write all this, but it was hardly sane to ask her to read it.

But just when she was ready to give up, something shifted. Scenes began to emerge. First, scenes between Owen and Pella's dad. And Owen began to describe Westish in a kind of achingly lyrical tone that was, Pella thought, the province of exiles. She imagined him alone, in a sparse dormitory room in a high-rise in Tokyo, without Mike or Contango to console him, writing and writing to console himself. It was plain he missed Westish terribly, and Westish, as he rendered it, became a place so sweet and lovely Pella barely recognized it. Owen's version only obliquely resembled the mundane, run-down college she went to every day—it was better. And, in a sense, more real. Characters emerged, of whom her father

was a central one. So, to a lesser extent, was she. Much of the character of these two characters, especially her own, seemed drawn from her late-night chats with Owen and the lengthy stories she'd told.

She fixed herself a sandwich and kept reading. Clearly Owen had written at maniacal speed. There were wild shifts in tone and subject that could come only from a fast-moving pen and a mind that did not stop to rest just because it had, for the moment, exhausted a vein of thought. Tenderness flipped to rage, nostalgic reminiscence gave way to angry first-person rants, by turns brilliant and callow.

Her conversations with Owen had felt sacred and intimate: strictly soul to soul. But here they were, reproduced. He'd included details of Pella's life that he knew only because she'd shared them—at times in direct response to his questions. Had his plan all along been to write something? Had he been using her for research?

Hooked, both by the story and her wary ambivalence, she read through the night and finished at dawn, the tall stack of manuscript pages piled on the cushion beside her. Being curled on the couch in the gray breaking light, communing with Owen's words, reminded her uncannily of their autumn talks, which the document seemed to both honor and betray. Her astonishment that Owen had written so much and so well, and found words for so many of her own fleeting, half-conscious impressions, warred against her sense that he'd done something terribly wrong. Even if no one else ever saw what he'd written, its sheer existence felt like an abuse of trust. He'd taken what transpired between them, which Pella considered a spiritual gift, and turned it into something he hoped had *merit as a piece of writing*.

But the thing was, it did have merit. It was rough and ragged, erratic in its tone and self-understanding, but for stretches it was sublime. At moments it made her tremble, the way real art will do.

"Did you have time to read what I sent?" Owen asked as she pulled the Audi out of the short-term lot at the airport.

"I did."

"And?"

"It's remarkable," Pella said. "Thank you for letting me read it."

As she merged onto the freeway, she could feel him studying her from the passenger seat. The softness of his voice belied the quivering intensity that lay beneath the words. "Do you have any suggestions?" he asked.

“Suggestions?”

He nodded. “For how to improve it.”

“To turn it into a novel, you mean.”

“Yes,” Owen said softly. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Here was the crux of it. Pella’s mind began to churn. She’d read countless novels, and if she squinted, she could see how the story Owen was telling might, with pruning and plotting and rewriting, become one.

“It wouldn’t be easy,” she said.

Owen seemed delighted by this response. “I should hope not!”

She could feel how eager he was for her to continue. It was a pleasurable kind of power.

“The first order of business,” she said, her voice grave, “is to get rid of the first person. All the parts about you. The stuff about growing up with your dad.”

He nodded, equally grave. “If you say so.”

IT WAS MIKE who’d first suggested Owen should stay with them. Teammates for three years, they shared a brotherly bond that was fascinating for Pella to witness. When the three of them ate dinner together, she felt she was watching an old comedy duo, the husky jovial guy and the thin quick-witted one, regaling her with stories from their glory days.

Pella felt delighted to have another companionable presence in the house. While Mike was at work, Owen was upstairs in the guest room, door half shut, scribbling or typing away. It was inspiring and intimidating to see how hard he worked. Every morning he and Pella drank coffee on the patio and discussed his latest pages; every evening he slipped her a sheaf of fresh ones to read before she slept.

It was a joy to inhabit the world Owen was creating and even more of a joy to participate in its creation. Owen, as a writer, proved remarkably agile and free of ego. He wrote swiftly, without any need to cling to what he’d already written, and his trust in Pella’s opinion was thrillingly total.

Owen’s talent was undeniable, but he’d read a tiny fraction of the novels Pella had. She adored a well-wrought plot, and during her dining-hall shifts, as the rote tasks and droning noise of the kitchen freed some speculative part of her mind, she braided the strands of Owen’s manuscript more tightly

together. When she returned home and shared her ideas, Owen nodded and said little. Then he went upstairs and, with uncanny speed, put those ideas into practice. It was intoxicating to have so much influence. Without writing a word herself, she watched her sensibility acquire shape and form.

Her life felt balanced that summer—balanced between Mike and Owen, and the different rapports she enjoyed with each. The combination suited her. She adjusted her dinner-making to accommodate Owen's veganism and grilled hot dogs for Mike to have on the side. While she and Mike drifted to sleep, she could hear her office door opening and closing as Owen, still hard at work, tiptoed downstairs to make tea.

Mid-August arrived, bringing muggy weather and dawn practices for the football team. Her sophomore year would be starting soon. One evening after dinner, as Pella was doing the crossword on the couch, Owen came and sat beside her, laptop in hand.

"I have news," he said.

"Oh?" Pella said, failing to suppress a note of dismay. She did not want news; news meant change.

"There's a young agent in New York who wants to meet with me." Owen's face was quietly aglow. He seemed thrilled about his news, if unwilling to impose on Pella the full measure of his joy.

"Owen, that's wonderful!" Pella exclaimed. "Just wonderful." She faltered, unsure of how to continue. Every question she could think to ask contained a note of uncharitable doubt or confusion. She settled on a single word: "How?"

"No use dillydallying," Owen replied. "I sent the first chunk to a dozen agencies. And this was the first reply."

He plunked his computer in Pella's lap. The email from the agent was composed in an earnest, courtly style and full of ecstatic superlatives and personal anecdotes about how the manuscript resonated with his life. As Owen watched her read, Pella could feel the warmth of his happiness like a sunbeam across her cheek. She arranged her face into a smile as she handed back the laptop. "He really gets what you're up to."

Owen nodded, a dreamy look in his eye. "He's extremely eager to sign me up."

"Then maybe you should wait," Pella found herself saying.

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, what’s the rush? If he’s so eager to lock you down, who knows what else is out there? How old is this guy anyway?”

“He’s my age.”

“How many books has he represented?”

Owen gave her a look that suggested she was being unsporting. “Young is good,” he said. “Young means hungry. And anyway, it’s all decided. We’re meeting for lunch at the Algonquin. I’m flying out Tuesday evening.”

“But are you sure he has your best interests at heart?”

“My dear. You read the letter. He *loves* the book.”

“That’s true.” Pella’s overt fears were all on Owen’s behalf: The agent would prove inept, or unscrupulous, or both. Owen’s last-minute ticket would cost too much. His hopes were getting too high. What she really feared was losing him. What she really feared was that his hopes weren’t too high at all.

All summer, she’d assumed she and Owen were playing a kind of game. If she’d believed otherwise, she might have been less eager to help. Lots of people—too many, maybe—tried to write books about their lives and the lives of their friends. Few succeeded, especially at Owen’s age. He was dazzling, sure, but every college in the country had its dazzling Owen. Most of them fizzled, or flamed out, or subsided into some stolid form of success. Pella had gotten caught up in the project for its own sake—she derived joy and satisfaction from helping Owen shape his manuscript while assuming that the result, like the process itself, would remain between the two of them. But what if the result cascaded outward? What if the project took flight?

“Okay, Tuesday,” she said. “When will you be back?”

“We’ll see how it goes,” Owen said. “I bought a one-way ticket.”

Her disappointment must have been apparent. Owen grabbed her hands. “My dear, in case you haven’t noticed, Michael is more than ready for my departure.”

“Mike’s fine,” Pella said.

“He’s fine, and he’s ready for my departure. And who can blame him? He’s too loyal to both of us to complain, but I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“Nonsense,” Pella said. But she realized, belatedly, the truth of what Owen was saying. Mike did seem increasingly gloomy and had been staying later at the office. Their sex, with Owen’s keyboard clacking down

the hall, had become less frequent and more furtive. Perhaps, sex aside, she'd been reserving too much of herself for Owen and his book.

"Thank you for everything," Owen said as he squeezed her hands. "I couldn't have accomplished any of this without you."

"You'll keep sending me your pages?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "Of course I will."

Owen found a room to rent in Brooklyn. At first, the hole left in Pella's days by his departure was filled by the flow of his pages into her inbox. Eventually the flow slowed to a trickle, and then it stopped altogether. Some months later, Owen called to say the manuscript had been sent to publishers. "I can't eat or sleep," he said. "I'm too nervous."

"It will all go beautifully," she assured him. And it did.

In the fall of her junior year, a package arrived on the porch step. It radiated a special, prideful energy, and she knew immediately what it contained. With a thumping heart she carried it to the dining-room table and with a paring knife sliced through the tape on the box and the pebbled-plastic fascia within. The object she pulled out was beautiful and dignified, the dust jacket cleverly done in Westish navy and ecru. The back cover was full of praise from published authors—enough praise, Pella thought, to sustain a person for a lifetime.

She turned the book in her hands, full of terror and admiration. She pried it open and flipped to the dedication page.

For Grant & Pella

"That's us," she said as she traced a finger over the names.

This was no double-spaced document-in-progress meant to be quibbled with and scribbled on. This was a polished, published book. Everything from the colophon to the font to the pleasing heft of the whole bespoke a self-assured completeness. Love it or hate it, it could not—it would not—be changed.

She turned the page and began to read. Soon she found herself immersed in the world of Westish College, a world that was partly hers. But it wasn't, really. Owen had sweetened and changed it. Everything had been burnished and smoothed—even the hard Germanic *licht* of her last name had softened, turned to *light*, as though she'd moved to Hollywood.

Meanwhile Owen's life story had been purged from the book, as she'd advised. By minimizing himself as a character, he'd risen above the fray

and become a kind of sage saint overlooking the scene. He captured the love and agony of Pella's relationship with her dad—and his capacity to do so, Pella knew, stemmed from his fractured relationship with his own dad, of whom there was no mention. The Affenlights had been exposed, while the Dunnes remained in the dark.

She'd helped to shape this book, and now it was so shapely. When she finished, she closed the cover softly, carried it upstairs, and placed it on the shelf in her office.

A few weeks later, the book was published to excellent reviews. Owen called often, and Pella tried to rejoice in his success. But her enthusiasm faltered, and her expressions of delight rang hollow in her own ears.

She stopped looking at the bestseller list, stopped searching Owen's name and her own online, and when asked how she felt about *The Art of Fielding*—for a time, most everyone asked—she pretended to be Judy and smiled a smile of obtuse grandeur until the person went away.

She and Owen began to speak less and less often. She felt saddened by the distance between them, but more immediate was her relief at no longer needing to feel happy for him. Slowly, over a long period of not needing to feel happy for him, she began to feel happy for him again. When he called to tell her he and Martin were engaged and to ask her to be his maid of honor, she felt relief of a different kind. Now they could forge a new bond, based not on Owen's success but on the solider ground of their adult lives and the excitement of Owen's wedding. And so they had.

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15

The station wagon continued northward, but the road eased away from the beach, or the beach from the road, so that Pella's sense of open windblown sky was supplanted by denser, greener environs. "Here it is," Owen said as they turned up a gravel drive. "And here *he* is."

Martin stood silhouetted behind the screen door of a small gray house. As they climbed out of the car, he stepped onto the worn footpath. He wore a baggy polo shirt with a bleach stain on the belly, a crumpled dishtowel draped over one shoulder. "Need a hand?" he called.

"Not at all," Owen replied. "Our strength is formidable."

Martin held the door as they approached with Pella's luggage, a broad, lopsided smile on his face. His watery blue eyes were at once lively and vague. "Hi, Pella."

"Hi, Martin. Thanks for having me."

"Thanks for being had. I'm afraid Owen is planning to run you ragged. He's drawn up a list of tasks a mile long."

"Of course I have," Owen said. "But you forgot to mention the tasks will be fun."

"I'm here to contribute," Pella said as she crossed the threshold and let her suitcase bang to the floor. She'd had to sweet-talk the gate agent in Green Bay out of charging her an overweight fee.

"It's been so long," she said to Martin.

"Too long," he agreed. "Come, sit down."

The front door opened into the kitchen of the house Martin and Owen had rented for the summer. A long driftwood table occupied half the room and was surrounded on three sides by a built-in bench. Once Pella scooted onto the bench, a fresh beer before her, she was able to take in her first full impression of Owen—an impression unbaffled by sunlight and unmixed

with memories of her dad. He looked, in a word, superb. He'd always been handsome and self-assured, though not quite as handsome and nowhere near as assured as he'd described himself to readers of his novel. Now it was as if he had blossomed into the person in the book, as if by writing that person, declaring that person's existence to the world, he had willed him into being.

And meanwhile he had turned into a man. Whether you were gay or not, the trend in menswear that year was toward an insinuation of gayness, in the form of slim striped tank tops and tight-fitting shorts. Owen, of course, was bucking the trend in baggy clamdiggers and a bright white tee identical to the one he'd worn in his book-jacket photo. He remained loose-limbed and oval-faced, with a boy's round cheeks, but much of his softness had turned to strength. The convex belly that, combined with his calm, inspired his baseball teammates to nickname him Buddha had been beaten into flatness by hotel-room planks and push-ups. And his skin—his skin was perfect, radiant and smooth.

He looked happy, surfeited, and thoroughly in his element. He looked like what he jokingly called himself: a beaming bride-to-be. One leg tucked on the wooden bench beside him, laughing with those clear gray eyes, one hand wrapped around his beer, the other unscrunching the collar of Martin's shirt, which had gotten tucked beneath itself. The look of his long hair was excellent, suitably bookish and mature. She would suggest he get it trimmed, not lopped, before the ceremony. The suggestion would be heeded but not needed; his taste was better than hers.

His hair was an elusive color that in certain lights looked, like his eyes, to be tinged with gray. Even the suggestion of grayness worked to his advantage; it lent him gravitas and made him seem more striking and formidable. His sunglasses were propped atop his head. He *projected* something—he projected his fitness to be who he was. It had been his destiny to become Owen Dunne.

Or was she the one projecting? If she hadn't known Owen and passed him in the supermarket or on the beach, would she see him as this radiant, superior being? Or was she guilty of bringing her knowledge of his success into the equation, of being too impressed? Was the nimbus she perceived around him the glow of fame? Writers, of course, were not necessarily famous or glamorous per se. But they were famous and glamorous to her.

“We’re invited to the big house for dinner tonight,” Martin was saying. “But don’t feel obliged. You must be tired from your trip.”

“Oh, I’d love to,” Pella said. “I’ve heard so much about your family.”

Martin rolled his eyes. “I hope you didn’t believe a word of it. Owen seems to find them unaccountably charming.”

“I should think it’s *they* who find *me* charming,” Owen said.

“Yes,” said Martin. “They’re especially charmed when you harangue them for eating their favorite foods. Which reminds me.” He cupped his hands over Owen’s ears and stage-whispered to Pella: “Do you like lobster?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’re having lobster.”

Pella had met Martin only once, when he accompanied Owen to Wisconsin for a book event, and she’d driven down to meet them for dinner. Martin was eight years older than Owen, pale and tubby, with boyishly tufted hair that had begun to thin. His eyes protruded a little too much, and his chin receded the same amount. Each cheek was home to an irregular salmon blotch that suggested a slight allergic reaction.

Pella had been mildly surprised that Owen had fallen for someone less than handsome. But there was a forcefulness to Martin, a sense of subdued but total assurance. He dressed sloppily, without interest in his clothes; he moved sloppily, without interest in his limbs; but there was something perfected at his core. Pella’s first impulse was to consider such self-belief the consequence of being rich. Who wouldn’t be confident, having amassed such sums as she vaguely understood Martin to have amassed? Past a certain threshold of wealth, she imagined, you didn’t have to worry about a bleach stain on your shirt.

It was equally likely, though, that Martin’s assurance was the cause, not the consequence, of his wealth and success. Money could make you forceful and assured, but a forceful assurance, combined with Martin’s type of shrewd, farsighted intelligence, could make you lots of money.

This forcefulness, Pella assumed, lay near the root of Owen’s love. Where the money fit in was a different question. Now, as the first time she’d met Martin, she was caught between opposing ideas of his and Owen’s relationship. One was that the pair, successful in unrelated spheres, were ideally matched. The other was that their union seemed strange. Owen

had a tendency to attach himself to older, powerful men who were also—dare she say it?—white. She had only two examples to cite: her dad and Martin. But given that those were the only lovers of Owen's she'd met, two seemed like a tendency. Especially when you considered that Owen's dad, by definition older and more powerful than his son, also happened to be white.

But perhaps these thoughts were too psychological. If she found Martin more attractive, she might not be thinking them at all.

"I need to head over to the house," Martin said now. "Do you two mind if I take the car?"

"We'll be happy to walk," Owen said. "The keys are in the ignition."

"Very well." Martin bent to kiss Owen on the forehead. "See you at eight," he said, and padded out of the room.

Soon Pella was sitting on the back porch with Owen, gazing out at the dimming ocean, getting ever so blissfully high. Their bare feet were propped on a battered metal cooler that read SAMUEL ADAMS on the side, and they were arguing nonsensically about who had prettier toes. Pella felt calmer than she had in days. Her phone, which lay on the porch railing, began to shudder and ring, and she glanced toward it without any special sense of urgency. It shuddered itself off the railing, clattered against the porch boards, and fell dormant. Owen handed her the joint. The phone shuddered again. Reluctantly, she scooped it up and answered.

"Hey babe," she said. "How was your day?"

"It was a shitshow."

"A what?"

"*A shitshow*. A thoroughgoing show of shit."

"I don't think we have a very good connection," Pella said. "Let me call you back."

With a yawn, she hoisted herself from her comfy perch. "Mike's having some sort of crisis," she said.

"For reception, try the driveway. Near the mailbox." Owen relit the joint, puckered his cheeks around it, and, while retaining the smoke, held it out for Pella to finish. She took the last drag, a biggish one by her standards. She seized her beer bottle by the neck, headed out front, and called Mike back.

"Hey babe," she said. "Can you hear me?"

“I can hear you fine,” he said. “I could hear you before.”

“Somebody’s grumpy.”

“I’m not *grumpy,*” Mike said grumpily. “I’m immersed in a shitstorm. A category-five hurricane of shit is crashing all over me.”

Pella had never understood Mike’s affection for the Weather Channel. “Tell me about it,” she said.

“Are you high?”

“Nope.”

“Then why do you sound like that?”

“Remote island. Lousy connection.” Pella pressed the phone to her chest so she could cough. “Tell me what happened,” she said coaxingly with only the slightest croak in her voice.

“What happened, first of all, is I get to my office after dropping you at the airport and there’s Ben Morris pacing in front of my door.”

Pella tried her best to engage with this. “Who’s Ben Morris?”

“What? You know Ben. He came to our house for Thanksgiving.”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” The jocks of Westish, a few shining Adonises aside, were a blur to her.

“Five ten. Bushy hair. Hangs out in my office a lot.”

“Oh,” Pella said. “The vain one.”

“What?”

“I said *the vain one*.”

“Vain? What’s vain about him?”

“I just remember he kept fixing his hair in the buffet glass all night.”

“Whatever,” said Mike, annoyed. “Morris is a good dude.”

“Go on.”

“So he’s pacing back and forth in the hall outside my office, all wild-eyed like he’s been up all night. And he’s got a bandage wound around his head. I make a joke about putting him through the concussion protocol, and he doesn’t even crack a smile. He’s truly in a state.”

Wow, Pella thought. I’m really getting the blow-by-blow on this one.

The clouds were tipped the loveliest shade of rose. Pella yawned at the open air. Beneath her bare feet, the rolling uneven pressure and sharp edges of the driveway’s white gravel dug into her soles like that kind of foot massage—what was it called?

Mike’s voice burbled in her ear. Vain Ben was having some kind of

issue. Possibly a concussion? Sometimes the football players suffered concussions or were feared to have suffered concussions. It was an area of concern. The pull tab of a beer can lay tucked in a crevasse between white chunks of gravel. She tried to dig her foot in far enough to pinch it between her toes.

"Are you even listening?" Mike said.

"Of course."

"And what? You don't think that's fucked up?"

"It's exceedingly fucked up," she assured him.

Reflexology. Were there any reflexologists on Block Island? Why not, since the place seemed like paradise? She should treat Owen and herself to massages—a massage was an ideal activity for a groom and his maid of honor. A massage and a pedicure. To ease their stress. She wanted to type a reminder note into her phone, but Mike was still talking.

"—So there's Robinson, I've been calling and texting and trying to hunt him down all day, no response, and there he is in the locker room not even bothering to try to disguise it with a hat or whatever. And before I can grab him to cuss him out, he goes berserk on Devine. Not the standard oh-you-want-some shenanigans. No, he coldcocks him in the nose and jumps on him like it's a goddamn MMA fight—"

What was an MMA fight? Pella wondered. MMA was not MDMA, which was ecstasy, which caused people not to fight but to kiss, and which Pella had not ingested since high school but felt she would happily ingest right now.

And why had Mike not asked about *her* day, which seemed, in the grand scheme of things, the far more momentous one—to have traveled by land, by air, by sea and arrived, at close of day, upon this enchanted isle? A glowing blackish-blue dusk, like shoe polish or a shining bruise, was assembling itself around her.

Mike was still talking.

"Eek!" Pella squealed. Startled, she clapped a hand to the back of her neck.

"What the..." Mike muttered.

"Sorry, babe." She turned around to find Owen grinning with delight at his mischief, a cold can of beer in his hand. He'd snuck up behind her and pressed it to her neck.

He gestured down the road: *Ready to go?*

Pella pointed at her face, made a ghoulish expression, gave a thumbs-down: *I can't go looking like this.*

Why? You look fantastic, Owen mimed back, with a connoisseur's smooch of his pinched-together fingertips.

Pella rolled her eyes, held up a finger: *One sec.*

"Babe," she said. "I have to go."

"This is important," Mike said.

"I know. I know how important it is. But I have to meet Martin's family. Can I call you after dinner? I'll find a spot with better reception."

Mike sighed a put-upon sigh. "Fine."

"How's our pup?" she asked. She missed Contango already.

"I haven't been home yet. I have to go back to the office and deal with this shitstorm. I haven't seen him since we left for the airport this morning."

"Poor guy."

"Who, him or me?"

"You," Pella said. "Both of you."

BY THE TIME she'd washed her face and put on makeup, Pella's moment of being truly high had passed. "Okay," she said to Owen. "I'm ready."

He pressed into her hand a travel mug.

"What's this?"

"It's a Gehbier."

"A gay beer?"

"No, a Gehbier."

"You're saying what I'm saying."

"But I'm not," Owen said. "It's merely a fortuitous homophone."

"No comment," Pella replied.

"I was introduced to the Gehbier on my German book tour," Owen explained. "In Berlin, when you go from one place to another, you buy a beer at the corner shop to sustain you on your journey. *Geh* means *go*. *Bier* means *beer*. It's a go beer."

"When in Berlin." Pella lifted her mug to Owen's. They set off toward the Tilly house, northbound in the failing light.

"By the way," Owen said as they strolled and sipped, "I received a letter

from your friend Irma the other day."

"Irma wrote you? What did she say?"

"She was very generous," Owen said. "She heaped upon my poor novel the most lavish praise. She wrote warmly, too, about our shared experience as Westish Award winners and about good old Phumber 405. Even her penmanship was lovely. I assumed you had given her my address."

Once again, Pella felt a pang of loss and envy where Irma was concerned. In prior summers she'd received many handwritten letters from Irma—long snail-mail missives full of Irma's thoughts about her reading, her family, the place where she'd grown up. Even when Pella failed to reply, she loved getting those letters and had a file of them tucked away. This summer, though, Irma had written exactly once. And only after Pella, tired of opening the mailbox to find only bills and circulars, broke down and wrote to her first.

"I didn't," she said in a sullen tone. "Judy must have."

"Ah, Judy," said Owen. "Are you sure she's not coming? She hasn't canceled yet."

"I'm sure," Pella said. "You know what she's like."

"I do. It's a little demented, though. She RSVPed with a plus-one, so it's two no-shows to deal with in the seating."

"When I saw her yesterday, she made it pretty clear she wasn't coming. And anyway"—Pella paused, wondering whether it was wrong to gossip about Judy's love life—"it seems she's parted ways with her plus-one."

"Oh?" Owen gave a commiserative lift of his eyebrows. "That Douglas fellow?"

"*What?* You know about him?"

"I know very little," Owen said. "But I did meet him about a year ago. He accompanied Judy to one of my book events. We all had dinner afterward."

"Who did?"

"Martin and I. Judy and Douglas. Some folks from my publishing house."

Pella was stunned. "And you didn't *tell* me?"

"Sorry," Owen said. "That was a crazy period, after the book came out—everything blurred together."

"It blurred together," Pella said in disbelief. "You hung out with Judy's

married boyfriend and it blurred together."

"Ah, is he married?"

"You didn't notice his ring?"

"He was definitely not wearing a ring," Owen said. "I guarantee you that whenever I meet a good-looking man, I conduct a thorough survey of his person, beginning around his zipper and concluding at his ring finger. I can't prevent myself."

"He was handsome?"

"Undeniably. Shaved head. Warm face. Sixtyish."

"You've always liked them old," Pella said.

"Hush."

"Okay, he was handsome. And not wearing a ring. Maybe he was separated?"

"Why, I should think that likely," said Owen with chivalrous indignation, "if he was squiring Judy about. But you know, many straight men don't wear rings. My father never did before Genevieve left him. Some men are simply averse to jewelry, though you could certainly find an uglier way of putting it—that the ring is a sign one is possessed, and only women should be possessed."

"Yes," Pella said.

"Although that's not about infidelity per se. My father, despite his ringlessness, would never have dreamed of cheating. He was very loyal to Genevieve."

"That's the most I've heard you talk about your dad since you were in Japan," Pella remarked.

"Yes, well. My therapist has been encouraging it."

Pella glanced down at her left hand. It did seem strange that she broadcast her status so loudly while Mike moved around incognito. Then again, Mike would probably be thrilled to wear a gaudy engagement ring, if she felt like buying him one. He adored his baseball national championship ring, a monstrous hunk of plated gold covered in stones like bits of candy and inscribed with baseball-team in-jokes.

"Did you talk to Doug?" she asked. "What was he like? What does he do?"

"We chatted briefly," Owen said, squinting down the road as though to

peer into the past. “There were a dozen of us at dinner, and I wasn’t seated beside him. I believe he was...a businessman of some sort.”

“Like a Wall Street guy?”

Owen shrugged. “Martin might know. I’m hopeless with such distinctions.”

“Pin-striped suit? Sharklike grin?”

“You watch too many movies,” Owen said. “He was a jeans-and-sport-coat man. We talked about a play we’d both seen.”

“How would you describe him?”

“My dear,” Owen said, leaning away to look at her. “You are positively obsessed.”

“You’re a *novelist*,” Pella said. “Describe him.”

“Okay, okay.” Owen paused to think. “He seemed cultured, and I don’t mean that in a condescending way. He was pugnacious in appearance but serene in temperament. He might have been an advanced practitioner of some monkish martial art. He had a short, burr-ish haircut that was nonetheless plainly expensive and very flattering. He was balding but made baldness seem an enviable condition.”

“That’s better,” Pella said.

Owen scratched at his chin and thought some more. “I remember that he impressed me as a listener. Whenever I glanced down the table, unable to hear what was happening at the other end, I noticed how closely he was attending to whoever was speaking, Judy not excluded. It was a high quality of attention. Not to generalize, but few men pay attention like that, and fewer successful men, and even fewer successful men of a certain age. I recall thinking he had the serenity of a man with the real goods.”

“Around his zipper, you mean.”

“That’s precisely what I mean.”

“I cannot believe you didn’t tell me this before,” Pella said.

“I’m sorry,” Owen said. “But had I given it a moment’s thought, which I did not, I would have assumed you already knew everything there was to know about the fellow. You’re the one who’s tight with Judy.”

“Apparently not,” Pella said, and added: “I can’t believe Irma wrote you.”

“It seems you can’t believe anything today,” Owen replied. “Why? Her letter was generous. It made me feel good.”

“But you’re *my* friend. She didn’t even *ask* me.”

“Is she required to ask your permission?”

“Yes,” Pella said. “No. I don’t know.” Her mind had become a tangle where Irma and Judy were concerned, and being high didn’t help her put the tangle into words. Why had Irma written to Owen? Because she loved his novel? Or was she trying to annex Owen the way she’d annexed Judy? Why had she gone to the Parties? Was it all the fault of the red-lipped girl?

Stop it, Pella thought. This pot is making you paranoid. Irma wrote Owen a letter because Irma liked writing letters, and Irma was ambitious, and a connection to Owen might prove useful someday. She’d done it because she could. But if extremely talented people always did everything they could simply because they could...well, those people would be unstoppable! Deep down, Pella believed unstoppable people should stop themselves, lest they sail too far ahead.

“Mike and I should have left Westish this fall,” she complained. “Now it feels like I’ll never get out of there.”

“It’s a lovely place,” Owen said consolingly.

“Every year the kids get younger and I get older. Why did I let Mike talk me into moping around a college town where I have nothing to do?”

“It’s a marriage,” Owen said. “Marriage requires compromise.”

“Yes,” Pella agreed. “Endless compromise. They should just call it that instead. ‘When are you getting compromised?’ ‘How long have you two been compromised?’ ‘Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve dreamed of being compromised!’”

Night was falling, and they strolled down the shoulder of the road in peace and darkness, the insects fiddling loudly, a bicycle tooling by. Until suddenly an engine roared behind them, and a blinding cone of white headlights engulfed them. Together, Pella and Owen jumped down into the culvert. Their feet splashed and sank in the marshy grass. Owen squeezed her hand as the truck blew past.

They regained the road, their shoes and ankles soaked. A few yards on, Owen paused at a crumbling stone wall. “Here we are. The venerable Tilly homestead. Please, whatever you do, try to make a good impression.”

“Hey,” she said.

“I’m kidding, my dear.”

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16

It wasn't fancy, and the trip to the bathroom was long, but Mike loved his office. Seven years ago, when he was a sophomore who played both football and baseball, it had been an abandoned conference room where coaches chucked old equipment. Mike tracked down a key and more or less moved in. Why trek all the way home when you could study at this conference table, catch a nap on that couch, and get back to training and watching film? After he graduated, when Jenkins hired him, they'd run a departmental landline into the room, and everything else stayed pretty much the same. A faint smell of swimming pool drifted through the vents. On any given evening a dozen kids from different sports were scattered across the secondhand furniture, studying and chatting, while Mike presided.

Tonight, though, the door was closed, and Mike was not the one presiding. He was sitting at his desk, hands contritely folded, while President Molina patrolled the room. She wore her usual uniform of shin-length navy-blue skirt and matching blazer with a gold whale pin on the lapel. Back and forth across the worn carpet she went in her thick-heeled shoes, moving slowly but giving a great impression of briskness. Her hands were clasped behind her back, fingers of one hand wrapped around the wrist of the other, and she looked like she wanted to gaze out a window and down over her dominion, but the room's only window was slender and high up the wall. Mike couldn't recall her ever having been in here before.

Neither, apparently, could Molina. "Remind me," she said, "why your office is here on four instead of down on two? With the rest of the department staff?"

"When I was hired," Mike said, "there was no room for my desk on two."

Molina dragged her eyes up and down the conference table. "I suppose

that makes sense if your desk is twenty feet long. My own office is nowhere near this large. It might give people the wrong idea about the size of your"—she waited for Mike to meet her gaze—"*role.*"

"The student-athletes congregate here," Mike said. "It fosters a sense of community."

"If you're so plugged into our community," Molina replied, "then you know we're facing a serious problem. I am *alarmed*."

The slowness with which she pronounced that final word, the long press of the *l* against the roof of her mouth, made clear that she was not easily alarmed, but responded forcefully when it occurred.

Mike nodded. "I know."

"Apart from the situation itself, this type of publicity can be extremely damaging."

"I know."

"How long have you known about this so-called prank and the existence of this video?"

"Since this morning."

"And you didn't feel compelled to bring it to my attention?"

"I handle delicate situations regarding our student-athletes on a daily basis," Mike said. "I try not to trouble you with them."

"Did you inform your supervisor, Athletic Director Jenkins? We have a chain of command here, you know."

Mike bit the inside of his cheek. When a delicate situation needed handling, Jenkins brought it to him, not the other way around. "I did not tell Duane."

"Nor the dean of student affairs?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Because I didn't want *you* to find out about it, Mike thought. "My impression was that it was a prank that originated within the team," he said. "I thought it would be best to handle it internally."

"I have rarely found," said Molina, "that the thoughtless pursuit of a first impression was rewarded."

The day could hardly have gone worse. As soon as Ben left his office, Mike dug up the phone number of Pam Chang, who'd taken his two-credit course on Sports and Stoicism. Pam answered on the first ring and

responded readily to Mike's questions about her whereabouts during the Parties and how she'd come to shoot that video of Robinson slamming down books. In a tone of friendly but incontestable authority, Mike explained why the video needed to come down. Pam listened and agreed. He hung up, waited half an hour, and checked her social media accounts. The video was not only still there but garnering Likes and comments at accelerating speed, having been linked to by a popular website called the Brightness. Mike's subsequent calls were not returned. Probably Pam Chang was one of Irma's accomplices.

Meanwhile Robinson, despite being a football player directly subject to Mike's command, had not responded to Mike's increasingly adamant voicemails and texts. Nor, as it turned out, had he made any effort to conceal what happened to him; he was walking around campus with his forehead exposed. When a two-hundred-sixty-pound guy with RAPE VICTIM written across his forehead walks into a lecture hall, it causes a stir. Mike had already heard several versions of the story. Just before beginning her lecture, the professor of Nutrition and Physiology, one of the school's largest courses, noticed a louder-than-usual murmur in the hall. She looked up from her notes to find all eyes turned toward Robinson, his giant body crammed into a back-row desk. "Mr. Robinson," she said. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Sitting here," Robinson said. "Waiting for you to start."

"I'll start as soon as you erase that disturbing phrase from your forehead."

"No can do. Sorry."

"What is this about?" asked Professor Yeager, her voice sharpening. "I won't have your football hazing, or whatever it is, disrupting my classroom."

"I'm a senior," Robinson replied, by which he meant he was ineligible to be hazed.

"Then you should know better than to attend class in such a state. There may be persons in this room who are deeply triggered by your presence right now. I hope you intend to apologize."

"Apologize for what?" Robinson groused in amazement. "*I* didn't do anything."

Yeager brushed her gray-blond hair behind one ear. "For the last time,"

she said tersely, “I ask you to go to the restroom and wash that offensive phrase off your face.”

To which Robinson replied that it wouldn’t wash off, so good luck with that, and if anyone was triggered they could talk to Monty Devine. Professor Yeager regretted that she needed to ask him to leave. Robinson said he couldn’t leave because if he missed class he couldn’t practice, and if he didn’t practice he couldn’t play Saturday. Professor Yeager said, “Be that as it may.” Robinson said, “Fine,” and stomped out of Nut and Fizz.

An hour later, while the football team was dressing for practice, Robinson coldcocked Monty Devine. It was not a warning punch but packed the full weight of Robinson’s discontent. Devine staggered backward, blood gushing from his severely broken nose. Mike drove him to the hospital. Now the Harpooners would be down two of their best players for the opening game and beyond, because Devine was out indefinitely and Robinson would have to be suspended.

The evening was deepening outside the sliver of window. Mike hadn’t been home since dawn. He needed to feed the dog.

“So tell me what you *did* do,” Molina said, “to handle this delicate situation.”

Mike had no choice but to try to explain how he’d asked Ben to lie low while he looked into the matter. How he’d tried to get in touch with Robinson but failed. How he’d contacted Pam Chang to ask her what happened the morning after the Parties and to persuade her to remove the video—

Molina interrupted with a frantic, side-to-side hand motion, as though scraping ice off the windshield of her car. “Hold it right there. You telephoned a female student to ask her about a sexual encounter?”

“No, of course not,” Mike said. “I only asked whether—”

“Young man, are you *insane*? You are a *football coach*.”

Mike bit his tongue. He was, in his opinion, far from insane and more than a football coach. But Molina wasn’t interested in his opinion.

“The instant you learned of this matter, you should have been on the phone to my office. Valuable time has been lost.” Molina jabbed her arms out before her, shooting the cuffs of her white shirt from beneath her blazer. “Do you have any idea what kind of firestorm this could create? It has all

the makings of a national story," she said. "Today it's a website for young women, tomorrow it's the *New York Times*."

Mike nodded.

"I am confused," Molina went on, "as to how this happened under your supervision. I have been repeatedly assured that these off-campus parties were not a threat to student safety. And yet here we are. Two students have been assaulted, and it's fast becoming national news."

"*Assaulted* seems like a strong word," Mike said.

"*Assaulted* is a precise word," President Molina said. "Mr. Morris has registered with the dean of student affairs a complaint of sexual assault."

"But that's not what—" *Sexual assault is*, Mike intended to say, but Molina cut him off.

"Violation of personal boundaries. Physical contact without consent. Harassment based on gender. Incapacitation, which Mr. Morris alleges to be drug-induced," she said, ticking off the criteria on her fingers.

Mike steadied his face, trying to betray no sign of surprise or dread. An official complaint meant a full investigation. It meant Title IX reports and countless meetings. It meant revving up the bureaucratic machinery that, once revved, moved of its own accord. The perpetrators could be in serious trouble—and so, Mike suspected, could he.

"Again, I am confused as to how this happened," Molina said. "After all the assurances." She nodded down at the table near Mike's elbow. "Perhaps you have other priorities."

Mike followed Molina's gaze. He saw with dismay the stack of LSAT prep guides Pella had bought him—thousands of onionskin pages of practice problems he hadn't done. They ranked so low on his list of priorities that he hadn't even thought to hide them when Molina walked in.

He gazed into the cold dregs of his coffee mug. "With all due respect," he said, "my priority has been to ensure that our male student-athletes hold themselves to the highest standard of conduct. It wasn't to keep them from being assaulted."

"I believe the message that has been delivered here," said Molina, "is that if the college cannot protect its young men during these events, it certainly cannot protect its young women."

Goddamn Robinson. Goddamn Morris. One of them was a moron, the other a bright guy with a future, but Mike was equally pissed at both.

Robinson socking Devine. Morris losing his cool and blabbing to Melkin. They should have focused on football. Instead they'd taken the bait.

"The overriding accomplishment of my tenure," said Molina, "has been to nudge this institution toward national prominence. I won't have that progress derailed because you can't handle your football players."

"My football players seem to be the victims here," Mike protested.

"I didn't say they're not victims," Molina replied. "I said you can't handle them."

She moved to the door, laid a hand on the knob, turned back to look at Mike. "From this moment forward, I will be handling this matter," she said. "And you will be staying out of it. You will have no contact with any student involved in this investigation. Are we understood?"

"I'm a football coach," Mike reminded her. "Some of these students are under my direct supervision."

"You will recuse yourself from supervising them," Molina said. "Perhaps you can find some paperwork to do."

"I keep up with my paperwork," Mike said.

Molina fixed him with a cool, pitying glare. "Then perhaps you should take some time to prepare for the LSAT," she said. "We all need to think about the future."

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17

After dinner at the Tillys', Pella walked out into the sloping backyard, where the wedding would be held, to call Mike. "Hey babe," she said. "Wish you were here."

"Did you *know* about this?" Mike demanded.

"About what?"

"I told you already. This quote-unquote prank."

Pella couldn't admit she'd been too high to understand a word he'd said earlier. "No. How would I?"

"Because it was Irma. I know she's behind this."

Slowly, indirectly, as Mike ranted, Pella began to half understand what had happened. Mike's rant circled back to Irma. "I knew something was up when I saw her at the Parties," he said. "Why would she be there except to cause trouble?"

"The Parties are for everyone," Pella reminded him, but she didn't know what to think. Was this why Irma had turned down dinner, flat-out lied to Pella, and shown up to lunch in smutted makeup? To quote-unquote cause trouble?

"It had to be Irma," Mike said. "Nobody else at Westish could come up with this crap."

The night sky felt cavernous and empty, unhampered by atmosphere. Dark ocean merged with dark sky. From the sea came the red blink of a distant vessel.

"If Irma was planning something like this, she would have told me," Pella said.

"Not necessarily," Mike said.

Pella had wandered to the end of the long backyard, where the lawn gave way to a bluff overlooking the beach. Lost in thought, she bumped

into the split-rail fence and almost tumbled over. She did not want Irma to have kept this from her. She imagined herself, for a fleeting, enjoyable moment, as the admired adviser to a coven of radical Westish girls.

But Mike was right. Irma wouldn't have told her—because if she had, Pella would have tried to talk her out of it. She would have told Irma not to play a prank but to start a petition. She wasn't some feminist elder or doyenne of mayhem; she was Mike Schwartz's fiancée.

"It's a tempest in a teapot," she said, softening her tone. "It will all blow over soon."

"I don't know," Mike said uncertainly. She could feel him craving her reassurance.

"It will," she promised. "You'll see."

The night had grown frigid, and by the time they hung up, Pella was shivering. Still, she didn't feel ready to rejoin the party. Mike had mentioned a post on the Brightness—she searched for it and, upon seeing the video, understood instantly the nature of the prank. It was about shame, the shame that women felt. It was about waking up and looking in the mirror and knowing, with a dread that confused past and future, that something terrible had happened to you and might well happen again. Something that would be awful to hide but might be worse to disclose. And about what it would be like to give men a taste of that experience, and how a man would respond.

Was Irma involved? Pella could see why Mike believed so. The sharpness, the smartness, the preference for justice over mercy. It squared with the flinty, militant aspects of Irma's personality—and of course, it would explain why she'd been at the Parties. But Irma walked the straight and narrow path. The liberties she took were the liberties allowed the A-plus student, and she had an A-plus student's feel for how far she could safely go. Sneaking a cat into the dorm: That was the right level of mischief for Irma.

Pella scrolled through the comments, of which there were thousands. It was strange to see Westish from afar, through the eyes of these young women mainly from the coasts who knew nothing of the place. They seemed to imagine it as the site of a grand inland battle between male privilege and female courage. The commenters were younger than Pella; they'd been in junior high when she married David. It was only a few years'

difference, but those years had proved crucial, and these girls had new prerogatives. She looked at them from across a gulf.

Figures, Pella thought. I’m away for one lousy day and something actually *happens*.

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18

Wednesday at dawn, Owen drove Martin down to the thick southern chunk of lamb-chop-shaped Block Island and dropped him at the airport so Martin could fly to New York for work. Soon thereafter, Pella was awakened by a knock at her bedroom door. “Yes?” she mumbled as she burrowed beneath the blankets.

Owen poked his head in, looking chipper and freshly showered. “I’m glad you’re up,” he said. “We’re meeting the florist at nine, and we should finish the seating chart first. Meet me in the kitchen.”

When she reached the driftwood table, Owen slid a cup of coffee before her. “So!” he said. “What did you think of my in-laws-to-be?”

Pella knew he was eager for her approval. The dinner had been pleasant enough; spurred by her long day of travel and Owen’s marijuana, she’d devoured two lobsters and basked in the respect her expert shucking earned while drinking copious amounts of wine. But she’d felt underwhelmed by the Tillys. Whether this was merely relative to how effusively Owen sang their praises, she wasn’t sure. They made her a touch uneasy, in both obvious and less obvious ways. *Obvious*, for instance, was the word for how Martin’s ponytailed brother, LJ, with whom she’d be walking down the aisle, cornered and propositioned her before dinner even began while wearing a scarlet-faced newborn strapped to his chest. Apparently *LJ* was short for Little Jabez, though he was six three and nobody called him anything but LJ.

More complicated was the Tillys’ attitude toward Owen, which Pella didn’t wish to criticize, given that Owen clearly adored them. It merely struck her that they were somehow too proud of Owen’s presence and treated him more like an exalted stranger than a member of the family. They were certainly warm and friendly, especially Martin’s father, who spent the

whole evening toting an acoustic guitar by the neck, his large handsome face bursting with eager hope for a singalong. But Pella couldn't shake an uncomfortable sense that too much value was being assigned to some nonessential aspect of Owen's being—his gayness, his blackness, his writerly fame, or all of these combined. All questions of art and culture were routed through him: "Owen told me yesterday *The Atlantic* was headed downhill." "Owen, how many times did you see *Boyhood*?" "Owen's the writer. Let's ask *him*." President Obama, adored by all present with the possible exception of Martin, was mentioned as though he and Owen were probably friends. The Tillys seemed cheerfully dazed to find an openly gay man in their midst and to believe that Martin didn't quite count, whether because they'd known him too long before his coming-out, which had happened well into his twenties, or because they assumed all gay men possessed some baseline amount of style or snark they found lacking in their frumpy brother, brother-in-law, uncle, and son.

Late in the evening, Martin's younger sister, Shuba, arrived with her boyfriend, Tony, who played in a bluegrass band with her, and the singalong Martin's dad had been hoping for did in fact materialize. Everyone gathered on the back porch, and Tony and Mr. Tilly played guitar while Shuba fiddled, and the entire family, save silent Martin and the sleeping newborn, harmonized on old folk songs with a beauty and simplicity that brought tears to Pella's eyes, so that she regretted and recanted all the slightly mean or dismissive things she'd been thinking throughout the evening.

"I thought," she said, "that they were marvelous."

Owen nodded moonily. "They are."

While Pella waited for the coffee to slice through her hangover, Owen covered the splitting driftwood table with note cards containing the names of the guests. "Katrina," he murmured as he picked up a card. "I wish I could find a nice straight boy for her. Perhaps among Martin's finance pals..."

"Henry's a nice straight boy," Pella said.

"Ha, that he is," said Owen. "But not the kind to turn Katrina's head, I'm afraid. She's been in New York too long; she only goes in for the utter sophisticates." Owen tapped the card against his chin. "She's obsessed with Nick Byrnes, for instance—I mean, who isn't, a man that charming and

unreliable—but with her it's almost a medical condition. It feels cruel to seat them together, though if Kat had her druthers..."

"I'm not much help in this task," Pella said with a yawn. "I don't know anyone."

"Don't be silly," Owen replied. "I value your input. We'll circle back to Katrina." He set the card on the table. Idly, Pella spun it toward her.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Who's Katrina Barker?"

"My dear, try to keep up. Without belaboring the point, she's Katrina Barker. We've spent the past five minutes trying to marry her off. Without much success, I should add."

"Not Katrina Barker-Fleig?"

"Gesundheit," Owen said.

"Because Katrina Barker-Fleig despises me. She was two years ahead of me at Tellman Rose. We used to be best friends."

"Well, I don't know any Fleigs," Owen said.

"I'm glad. But who's Katrina Barker?"

"She's an editor at *The New Yorker,*" Owen explained. "I met her when they published an excerpt of my book."

This information didn't appease Pella; it sounded like precisely the kind of prestigious job the Katrina she knew would hold. "What does she look like?"

"She looks," Owen said, "like a twenty-nine-year-old woman who looks like a forty-year-old woman who looks twenty-five."

"Raven hair?" Pella said.

Owen nodded. "It shimmers like an oil spill."

"Alabaster skin?"

"The alabasterest."

"Fuck," said Pella. "Do *not* put her at my table."

When Pella arrived at Tellman Rose to begin ninth grade, she identified within moments, as though by spoor, the school's most influential clique of girls. Those girls were juniors who, being cooler than the seniors, were poised to be in charge for two long years. The best of them, to Pella's mind, was Katrina Barker-Fleig. Katrina possessed every physical attribute Pella lacked and therefore craved. She was tall and slender, whereas Pella, depending on her mood, felt stumpy or voluptuous. She had glossy shampoo-commercial hair (it really did shimmer), whereas Pella's was

kinky and unmanageable. She had an unvarying Old Master complexion, whereas Pella's skin was ruddy and rude and subject to every bite she ate. Katrina's features were plain to the point of blandness, which might sound like a strike against her but in context simply meant those features were as prudent and decorous as Katrina herself. Blandness was the perfect backdrop for such hair and self-control; anything original, whether in nose or cheekbones or chin, could only have disturbed the flawlessness of the impression.

Katrina ruled both her friend-group and the school newspaper, the *Tellman Telegraph*, with a firm, almost wordless authority—a dictatorship of propriety and perfect taste. Her manner seemed cut from the haughtiest Manhattan cloth, but in fact she hailed from the suburbs of Pittsburgh, and being self-taught made her all the more formidable. Converts and autodidacts were the keepers of every flame.

Pella's first sustained encounter with Katrina was in her first-semester geometry class, because Katrina, while exceedingly good at everything else, was not very good at math. Pella's fascination mounted. She could see not only the signs of Katrina's social power (everyone could see those) but also the endless inner efforts behind the power. Such ruthless self-discipline! And who knew what yawning abyss behind it. Previously, Pella would have considered the school newspaper a refuge for sedulous dorks, but now she signed up eagerly, because Katrina was in charge.

In retrospect, Pella's Katrina Period corresponded to a very specific phase of her adolescence. When she arrived at Tellman Rose, she brought with her a precocious wealth of knowledge about sex and drugs and what older guys liked. She also brought her recently acquired tattoo—a large twisting whale on her upper arm that no other ninth-grade girl would dare to possess and that seemed to Pella the proof of her savage maturity. Above all, she brought a scornful determination not to be impressed by the freedoms of boarding school. To puke up tequila on Friday nights, to sneak away to do mushrooms in the mountains, to let some sophomore or junior boy clumsily explore your orifices—such activities, even the fun ones like doing mushrooms, smacked of an adolescent rebellion that was behind her and therefore beneath her. She was past all that. What was cooler than rebellion was transcending it. She was going straight.

Before long, Pella had made herself discreetly essential to Katrina's

success, both in geometry class and at the *Telegraph*. She elucidated Euclidean concepts in passing, without seeming to be elucidating them at all. She subtly improved, without ever criticizing, Katrina's editorials about what should be done to keep al-Qaeda from bombing their sleepy New Hampshire campus. By the time Katrina, with Pella's help, improved her math SAT score enough to be a dead-certain lock for Princeton, they had become best friends in a quiet way that wouldn't disrupt the careful hierarchy of Katrina's established alliances.

Emulating Katrina did wonders for Pella's academic performance—she earned glowing reports from her teachers, concealed her success from her father whenever possible, and finished freshman year at the top of her class. She joined the swim team and became a passable butterflyer. She bought modest dresses in quiet colors and devoted large amounts of attention to small amounts of makeup. She spent long sunrise hours straightening her hair à la Katrina—who, of course, did not.

Pella desperately craved Katrina's straightness, that arrowlike sense of purpose and self-control that could be aimed at Princeton or anything else. Eventually, though, it became clear that Pella had not actually finished her phase of wild experimentation—she'd merely decided it was finished, which was far from the same thing. Her newfound rigor and chasteness were themselves a wild experiment that could last only so long before she swung the other way.

Francis DeMeer, a young English teacher at Tellman Rose, was the type of pedagogue who held himself showily aloof from the female students so as not to fall into what he apparently perceived as a bottomless chasm of willing teenage sex slaves. He arrived on campus the same September as Pella; by the following autumn, Katrina was so besotted with him that (Pella thought) she'd utterly abandoned her poise. DeMeer, floppy-haired and cherubic, had a master's degree in medieval poetry and was earnest and impassioned in the classroom. Beyond that, his personality remained obscure. Katrina gave herself headaches fluttering her lashes at him. DeMeer dominated her thoughts; she dominated his office hours. She talked incessantly about their wedding—not to him, of course, but to Pella.

"But you're going to Princeton," Pella pointed out from her perch on Katrina's bed. "That's like a five-hour drive."

Katrina looked at her as if she were daft. "It's a six-hour drive. But do

you really think Francis is going to teach high school forever? He's planning to earn his doctorate—he told me so—and there's no better place to do that than Princeton. Joyce Carol Oates teaches there. Toni Morrison teaches there. *Jonathan Safran Foer* went there."

Pella rolled her eyes. "Why don't you marry Jonathan Safran Foer instead? He's like a famous DeMeer."

"Whatever." A confused grimace crossed Katrina's face as she warded off the unwelcome thought that there could be an even higher calling than marrying DeMeer. "We'll move in together when I'm a senior. My mom will disapprove, but I don't care. After I graduate, we'll get married. Princeton's a beautiful town, and I'll be happy to live there until Francis finishes his dissertation."

"At what point will you frame his DeMeer?" Pella asked.

"Don't be crass," Katrina replied. "He gave me two of his poems to read."

Where, Pella wondered, was the lofty, strategic Katrina who always achieved total victory? Love, it seemed, had reduced that impressive person to mush. Or maybe the approach that brought Katrina success in every other endeavor—fixating on an object and pursuing it with dogged insistence—was not well suited to love. In any case, Katrina's behavior was a turnoff to Pella and, she assumed, to Francis DeMeer. The way to seduce your English teacher was not to compliment his poems. You had to make him *want* it.

Pella couldn't teach Katrina this the way she'd taught her geometry. She was the junior partner—life advice could flow only one way. Smidge by smidge, she began to lose respect for Katrina. In a development that felt unrelated, she began to gain respect for DeMeer. He played naive, with his floppy hair and letter-perfect recall of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, but he was not naive. He was, Pella suspected, the kind of earnest cherub who did coke on the weekends, the kind of skilled seducer who floated through a boarding school in equal hopes of passing and failing the stern moral test it implied. Every morning that he tied himself to the mast was a kind of beautiful torture. DeMeer had a New England poet's lust for the agony of temptation. Pella, sixteen and anarchical, was just the girl to tempt him.

"You didn't," Owen said.

"Actually, I did," Pella said sheepishly. "But that came later. Senior year,

I flew back early from winter break because I'd had a big fight with my dad. I called up DeMeer and he drove down from his mom's house in Vermont and we did ecstasy at his little poet's cottage and he went down on me for like fourteen hours straight. I think he thought that not fucking me would save his job if I turned him in. Or that it would keep me from turning him in in the first place. Or maybe it would save him in the eyes of the Robert Lowell–style God he longed so badly to believe in." Pella sipped her coffee. "I don't know—guys are super-weird about sex."

"You're telling me," Owen said.

"You haven't really slept with that many men."

"No," Owen agreed. "But I'm super-weird about sex."

"The cottage incident was a denouement," Pella said. "By that time Katrina was long gone. The way I'd betrayed her was subtler. I was a sophomore in DeMeer's Shakespeare class. I slowly tortured him, day after day after day."

"How so?"

"It's a little hard to describe. I made myself by far his best student—my essays were remarkable. Smart and provocative. Redolent of sex. Written from the point of view of DeMeer's soulmate. Whereas in person, I never once licked my pencil or tossed my hair. I barely even looked at him while he was teaching. I condescended to him constantly but so gently he couldn't tell it was happening. It helped that I was a sophomore; it put me beyond the pale of possibility. Being beyond the pale took the sex out of it; taking the sex out of it made our connection pure; the purity of the connection made everything sexy. How was it possible I was only sixteen? It drove him nuts. He'd finally found his soulmate, and he couldn't pursue her. It was a cruel and unfair trick of the gods. Guys like DeMeer are big on getting slighted by the gods. It speaks to their sense of importance."

"You're a terrible person," Owen said.

"I was then," Pella admitted. "Katrina wasn't in that class, of course; she'd taken it years before. But everyone knew DeMeer was obsessed with me. Katrina was furious. We had one crazy fight where I denied doing anything wrong and she threw all my shoes out the window. Then she iced me out, in the high Katrina style, and eventually left for Princeton and never spoke to me again. Last I heard she was dating the captain of the crew team."

“I’m sorry to report they’ve broken up,” Owen said. “She’ll be attending the wedding alone.”

“Does she have to attend at all?” Pella asked. “Doesn’t the maid of honor get one veto?”

“My dear, you almost sound like you’re not joking. I’m sure these youthful hijinks are long forgotten.”

“Wrong,” Pella said. “Katrina never forgets.”

The seating chart complete, they set about writing the names and table numbers on place cards. As they worked, Owen explained how he and Martin knew each guest, delivering a vivid sketch in the time it took to calligraph the name, so the weekend began to take shape before Pella’s eyes. Soon the Tillys’ rear meadow would overflow with accomplished and interesting people. She felt thrilled and intimidated at the prospect of being among them.

They were seated side by side on the bench, Pella writing with her right hand and Owen his left, their nonwriting shoulders pressed together. She could feel the tautness in Owen’s muscles, like tightly twisted ropes. “You’ve gotten strong,” she remarked.

“Mm,” he said. “I’ve been working with a trainer.”

“Here?”

“One here and one in the city. Martin teases me nonstop. I think he prefers me soft.”

“You look good,” Pella said.

“My trainer here is ferocious,” Owen said. “You should see what she makes me do. Sprint down the beach, lug rocks, hop over logs.”

“If you want to hop over logs later,” Pella offered, “I’d be game.”

“I did a sunrise round,” Owen said, “before I dropped off Martin. Too nervous to sleep, you know.”

Of course he had: Beneath the gentle radiance of his skin and smile, there were few things more adamant than Owen’s ambition. You didn’t become Owen Dunne by sheer dint of talent. There were too many talented people for that to be the deciding factor. His discipline was manifest in myriad small ways. After drinking a few sips of coffee, he’d switched to a tea of seeds and fruits that was probably the secret to his complexion. Pella, meanwhile, pounded coffee after coffee, for which her appetite was boundless.

Owen glanced at the ship's-wheel clock that hung above the stove. "Ah," he said. "We should leave in five minutes."

"Five! I'm not even dressed."

"Chop-chop, honored maid."

"I'm almost done with my stack," Pella said. "Ah, here's Judy."

"Yes," Owen said. "I shunted her to the fringes. Forgivable, I thought, since she'll be here only in spirit."

Pella dashed off *Judy Eglantine* and *Guest of Judy Eglantine*, then hurried upstairs to put on clothes. She returned in time to catch Owen, his little kazoo between his lips, placing a cardboard box in the freezer. She held out two fingers.

"Are you sure?" he said. "It's early."

"If you want me to work," she said as she pinched the kazoo, "you have to feed me."

"This is my breakfast blend," Owen said. "It's fairly mild. But be careful nonetheless. We have much to do."

Pella, obedient, took a tiny puff.

"What we'll be serving at the reception," he said with a devilish smile, "will be significantly more potent. And aphrodisiacal."

"Sounds great," Pella said. "Serve plenty to me and my fiancé."

They stepped out into a sunny, breeze-whipped morning and climbed in the Volvo. Owen lowered his plastic sunglasses, wrapped a long arm behind Pella's headrest, and they crunched in reverse down the gravel drive.

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19

The campus was in an uproar—a word that, it turns out, shares only a loose post-facto association with the Anglo-Saxon *roar;* it comes from Dutch and means a rise (*op*) in confusion (*roer*). There was, all over Westish, a definite rise in confusion. And a fair amount of roaring. One of many ways Irma tried to calm herself when she was feeling anxious was to look up stuff in the online *OED*.

Overnight on Tuesday, Pammy's tires had been slashed. Pammy sent photos via Cloister. The photographs were beautiful—she couldn't help but make them so: her dinged-up white Civic, its tire bottoms flattened as though sinking into the earth, bathed in morning sun. Pammy loved her barely functional car, which had Indiana plates and no gas cap, both its bumpers covered in colorful stickers promoting Tibetan freedom, female candidates for local elections, and a lighthearted approach to life.

OMG so sorry, Irma wrote. U ok?

I'm fine. Kind of scary tho. Glad Monty's here.

Pammy sent a photo of the Civic's windshield. Tucked under the lone wiper blade (the other had long gone missing) was a flattened bag of yellow and white paper trimmed in royal blue: DOMINO SUGAR.

They wrecked the whole car.

No, don't worry! Irma typed. Sugar in the gas tank doesn't work.

Really??? I thought it turned to goop and wrecked the engine.

Nope. Old husbands' tale.

Back came a celebratory string of emojis: Race car, sugar bowl, race car, race car. White couple smooching, Black couple smooching, Asian couple smooching. Girl in a bathtub drinking champagne.

Oops, Pammy added, forgot this photo.

She attached a closely framed shot of a sticker the culprits had pasted

across her bumper. Block navy letters on an off-white background. The stark simplicity of the sticker's design, surrounded by the tilted edges of older stickers slapped on in Pammy's artistically haphazard, overlapping way, their vivid limes and pinks and yellows like a rubber-band ball or a bowl of candies, made for a glorious composition: WE ARE ONE.

So perfect, said Dahlia. Did you post?

Not yet, Pammy said. Wanted to check w/ u first.

Fire away, wrote Dahlia. The more chaos engulfed them, the happier she seemed.

THAT EVENING, IRMA was at the library trying to work on her thesis. Her carrel this year was down on 2B, a windowless underground level where couples supposedly came to have sex, library sex being one of those arduous, quasi-mystical experiences, like swimming from the lighthouse to the breakers in the dead of winter, that you were supposed to have before graduation or risk not having lived.

The basement-level light, which came in a sickly flux from long fluorescent fixtures, was the same smeary yellow as Irma's callused heels. She pulled her phone from her bag to see if Dahlia or Pammy had texted. As she did, it began to ring.

"Hi, Mom," she said, and cringed at the guilt trip to come. She hadn't spoken to Ada since her Sunday departure.

"You're on TV," Ada said, her voice screwed up into an ecstasy of rebuke.

"What?" said Irma. "Who is?"

"All of you. Westish College. Do you know a boy named Ben?"

"No," said Irma. "What are you watching?"

"Hunter Stroman."

"What?" Irma wouldn't have recognized Hunter Stroman on the street, but she knew him to be the rising star of partisan cable news. "You told me you didn't watch that junk."

"I use the remote," said Ada with a hint of umbrage. "I click around."

"Okay," said Irma. "So Ben-Josh—I mean, some guy named Ben who goes to my school—is on Hunter Stroman?"

"Yep," Ada replied. "Nice-looking boy. Except some lunatics ruined his

face. Don’t you have a friend named Dahlia?”

“Me?” said Irma, aghast. Aghast that her mom had asked that, and her only options were to lie or decline to answer; aghast that Dahlia’s name, apparently, had been uttered on Hunter Stroman.

“No, my other daughter who goes off to her fancy college, steals my cat, and doesn’t return my phone calls.”

Irma waited a beat, knowing her mom would continue.

“I swear I remember you talking about a girl named Dahlia. I think she acted in plays?”

“Oh, *her*,” said Irma, as though dimly recalling. “That was eons ago. She graduated and moved to Scotland.” *Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.*

“Hunter’s back from commercial,” Ada said. “I’ll call you later.”

Irma navigated to Hunter Stroman’s home page and found the live feed, but the show was playing its exit music. She caught, as the camera cut back to the host, a fleeting glimpse of Ben-Josh wearing a navy sport coat and gazing with a dazed expression into his webcam. At least her mother hadn’t lost it entirely.

MY ROOM, she texted Pammy and Dahlia. NOW.

BY THE TIME she sprinted across both quads and up the entryway stairs, the door to her room stood open and Dahlia was perched on her bed, the cat curled up beside her.

“How’d you get here so fast?” Irma asked as she tried to catch her breath.

“I teleported.” Dahlia looked at Irma and grinned. “Hunter Stroman! Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“You heard?” Irma felt a flash of disappointment. It was rare to have intel so weighty that it could support an all-caps summons, and she’d been looking forward to letting Dahlia and Pammy stew in suspense while she cued up the video. Still, it was a thrill to have conjured Dahlia’s presence so swiftly.

“The football team found out when you did,” Dahlia explained. “Monty told Pammy. Come on, let’s watch!”

“Should we wait for Pammy?”

“She said go ahead. She’s watching with Monty.”

Irma opened her laptop and hopped on the bed beside Dahlia, who was wearing thick marl socks, sweatpants, and a fleece zipped tight to her chin. Irma glimpsed, on the bottom of one of Dahlia’s socks, bits of grass and gravel ground into the wool—she’d dashed over here without stopping to put on shoes.

Irma scrolled through the *Hunter Live* site to find the clip. Dahlia scooted closer to better see the screen. Irma could feel, through her own wool tights and Dahlia’s sweatpants, the gentle ebb and swell of Dahlia’s being. “Ready?” she said.

“Ready,” Dahlia said, and shivered with excitement. “I wish we had popcorn.”

Irma pressed Play.

“And now,” began Hunter Stroman, “we return to a familiar topic: The takeover of our nation’s universities by radicals so *faaaar* from the mainstream”—bracing his hands on his desk, he flung head and shoulders to the left, sending the boyish flop of his hair past the camera’s frame; Dahlia chuckled—“that they might escape the Earth’s orbit.

“This latest round of nutballery comes from a little college way up in Wisconsin. That’s right, Wisconsin, a place that used to be home to regular folks—farmers, brewers, autoworkers—but now, apparently, is as whacked out as everywhere else.

“Joining us via video from Westish College, Benjamin Morris. Ben, welcome to the program.”

“Thanks for having me,” Ben-Josh said solemnly as his eyes flicked around his webcam without finding a spot to land. He was wearing, beneath his navy sport coat, a white shirt and a navy Harpooner tie, which was how football players dressed for class the day before games. Beneath his freshly combed curly hair marched those black block letters. The sight of them caused Hunter Stroman, as the camera cut back to him, to do a perfectly timed double take that threatened to capsize his chair.

“Whoa!” he said. “And I thought I had a rough weekend.”

Dahlia burst out laughing. “Incredible,” she said. “This is beyond my wildest dreams.”

“What dorm do you think that is?” Irma asked. It felt strange to be

watching on TV someone who was clearly sitting in a nearby building in front of a blond-wood bookshelf just like hers.

“Gansevoort,” Dahlia murmured, and motioned for Irma to shush. Irma realized—how could she have forgotten?—that Dahlia did not have to guess where Ben-Josh lived. Dahlia had been in Ben-Josh’s room; their encounter there was the source of all this madness.

Irma glanced toward the windows. Gansevoort Hall was right there, kitty-corner across the Small Quad. If it weren’t for the glare of her halogen lamp against the panes, she’d be able to see it through the trees.

Hunter Stroman seemed underprepared for this interview and perplexed by what had happened to his guest. He eyed Ben-Josh and stroked his chin as though Ben-Josh were a puzzle the producers had created to stump him.

“So you’re saying this was an art project?”

Irma, not unlike Hunter, was having a hard time concentrating. This much closeness to Dahlia, their legs pressed together, their shoulders touching, was almost too much to bear. She glanced down at Dahlia’s hand and felt a sudden urge to grab it.

On the screen, Ben-Josh frowned and fumbled his words—he was struggling to describe the project. “I mean, that’s how they would describe it.”

“And who exactly are *they*?”

“The girls who did this. The Witches of Westish.”

“Free advertising!” Dahlia said. “I knew I picked a winner.”

“You’re a football player,” Stroman said. “I assume you’re bigger than these girls, unless they’re serious heifers. How were they able to overpower you?”

Ben-Josh, to his credit, cringed at the phrase *serious heifers*. “I remember very little,” he said, and added: “I may well have been drugged.”

Hunter Stroman’s eyebrows went up. Dahlia, with a cry of delight, grabbed Irma’s hand. “He’s really going for it!” she said. “I can’t believe it.”

Irma couldn’t believe it either; it was as though she’d willed Dahlia’s fingers to wind through her own. She lost all sense of what was happening on the screen.

Timidly, tenderly, barely perceptibly, she gave Dahlia’s hand a squeeze.

Dahlia's eyes were glued to the screen. Her hand, after a beat, squeezed back.

For the first time, it occurred to Irma to wonder what had happened between Dahlia and Ben-Josh the night of the Parties. Pammy had related in great detail the story of how she'd tattooed Robinson; Dahlia, in her enigmatic way, had said of Ben-Josh only that she bewitched him. But what did bewitchment entail?

"Look!" Dahlia cried. "There are two of them."

As easily as she had seized it, Dahlia let go of Irma's hand. Unable to contain her merriment, she bounced up off the bed. "He looks like a bronze statue of Ben-Josh."

A new figure appeared on the screen. His tan was eternal and burnished, his hair tightly curled, his chest muscles thickened by weight lifting and mottled by middle age. He did indeed look like a bronzed Ben-Josh. From between the plackets of his deeply unbuttoned shirt, chest hair cascaded like smoke from a live volcano.

"Joining us from Honolulu," Hunter Stroman announced, "Ben's father, Emanuel Morris."

"Thanks, Hunter. I'm actually on the Big Island at the moment."

The host let this irrelevant correction slide. Ben-Josh's dad was smiling a soft ready smile and looked much more at ease vis-à-vis his webcam than did his son. Behind him were plate-glass windows offering a panoramic view of rock and ocean and midday sun that resembled in every way a computer-generated backdrop but that was probably real.

"Tell me," Hunter Stroman said. "How does it feel to send your son to an *elite institution*"—his fingers carved scare quotes around the phrase—"that costs forty grand a year only to have him call and tell you he's been attacked by radical feminists?"

"I'll be honest with you, Hunter. Feels like munching on manure."

"I understand you're a high-powered lawyer."

Ben-Josh's dad nodded. "Entertainment law. One of the best in the biz."

"So what are the legal consequences of all this?"

"Great question," said Ben's dad. "These young men—football stars, I might add, dean's-list students, pillars of their community—were targeted because they're men. It's harassment. It's a hate crime. No different than being targeted because you're a woman, or you're Black, or you're Jewish."

At the word *Jewish*, Hunter Stroman's lips puckered quizzically, as though he'd found something unpleasant between his teeth. "Or for being Christian," he suggested.

"Whatever floats your boat, Hunter. Point is, it's sexual harassment according to Title IX, which is a federal law. So if the school doesn't act, they expose themselves to massive liability."

Hunter Stroman nodded. "And the school hasn't done anything."

"The school has done jack," Ben's dad confirmed. "These girls are out there strutting around like peacocks, proud of what they've done."

"Strut-strut!" cheered Dahlia.

"You could sue the college," Hunter Stroman ventured.

"We could absolutely sue the college," Ben-Josh's dad agreed. "Or the assailants themselves. Don't know why I said *or*. We could sue 'em all."

"God bless America," said Hunter Stroman. "We'll be right back."

"I can see why your mom watches this show," Dahlia said as a fit elderly couple waterskied through a commercial for blood pressure medication. "He's terrific."

"What?" said Irma. "Who?"

"Stroman," Dahlia said. "The delivery, the physical comedy—he's got it all."

Irma frowned. "Hunter Stroman has contributed as much to the decay of discourse in this country as anyone."

"See?" said Dahlia. "You're already talking like him."

Irma felt too agitated to be entertained—not that she would ever, under any circumstances, find Hunter Stroman entertaining. "Aren't you worried?" she asked. "Ben's dad sounds like he wants to take us to court."

Dahlia laughed. "For what? It's a temporary tattoo."

"But he's a high-powered lawyer."

"So what?" said Dahlia.

Irma felt her tongue poking nervously between her lips. "So what if he decides to sue us? I can't afford a lawyer."

"If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you," Dahlia quipped.

Despite herself, Irma issued a tiny whimper.

"I'm kidding," Dahlia said quickly. "Nobody's going to sue you. Nobody's going to know you had anything to do with it."

Disastrous scenarios flooded Irma's mind; she couldn't share them with Dahlia for fear of seeming too fearful. She and Pammy and Dahlia would be named in a lawsuit. Irma would hide it from her parents, but Ada would find out from Hunter Stroman. The family would lose their house in a futile effort to pay a lawyer. They'd wind up in a trailer somewhere, a place so small and flimsily constructed that Irma would never, except when she was waiting tables at Cracker Barrel, which she would do for the rest of her life, be out of earshot of her mother's continuous and totally valid recitation of how Irma had driven the family to ruin. And worse than Ada's carping would be the way Irma's dad, devastated by the loss of his tractor, his onions, his pumpkins, would never chastise her at all.

"But the whole thing was my idea," she said.

"People don't get sued for ideas," Dahlia said. "They get sued for what they *do*."

The commercial ended. Hunter Stroman reappeared, the sleeves of his blue oxford rolled. One hand reached up to smooth the muted arboreal plaid of his wool tie. His sad eyes gazed at the camera. Youthful but weary, freighted with cares, he looked like the nation's overworked assistant principal who regretted the need to call America in for this chat. Ben-Josh and Ben-Josh's dad hovered in inset boxes above his shoulders. AFTERTHOUGHT read the chyron.

"Let's start with the obvious," he said. "We know there's a fake rape panic on college campuses."

"We know?" exclaimed Irma, as Dahlia nudged her ribs to shush her. *"We know?"*

"What we haven't discussed is the endgame—men being banned from higher education altogether. As of today, sixty percent of college students are women. Sixty percent! That's millions of young men left out and left behind. And it's only getting worse."

Hunter Stroman seemed, at last, to be warming to his topic. "We're at a tipping point in this country. Men are getting their butts handed to them. We're dying at record rates, our life expectancy is in decline, our jobs are getting shipped overseas. And that's why what happened at Westish College matters. It's not just some harpies with Sharpies showing off for their sicko friends."

"Harpies with Sharpies!" Dahlia crowed, and held up a hand for Irma to

slap. When Irma demurred, Dahlia high-fived herself.

“It’s a campaign of intimidation, and the goal is the end of men. Young Ben here didn’t exactly come over on the *Mayflower*. His people have had their troubles. But because he has a penis, he’s not allowed to talk in class. And apparently he’s not allowed to go out and have a few beers without being turned into a laughingstock.

“Well, I for one won’t take it anymore. I stand with Ben. And you should too.”

Hunter Stroman, spent from his efforts, blew a puff of air from his rosy cheeks and subsided toward his desk. “Young man, great to have you on the program.”

“Um.” Ben-Josh seemed a little stunned, perhaps partly because his penis had just been mentioned on national TV. “Thanks.”

The camera lingered on him, looking subdued and forlorn, his forehead marred, two fingers of his right hand pinching a sliver of white shirt that poked out of his left sleeve—the closing shot Irma had caught a glimpse of live.

Irma pressed Stop. Dahlia leaped up from the bed and applauded.

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20

President Molina tried to remember if she'd ever seen the young woman sitting across from her before. She was of medium height and build but gave off a fluctuating sense of presence, like a flickering light bulb, that at one moment made her seem much larger, as though lifting up over the room in a kind of supernatural expansion, and the next much smaller, as though she'd become a child. Immediately upon plunking down in the spindled visitor's chair, she'd tucked one leg beneath her buttocks in a manner Molina deemed combatively casual. Her outfit—yoga pants, oversize sweatshirt, no brassiere—was clearly designed to communicate the same insouciance. Emblazoned on the sweatshirt were the words NO COMMENT. It was not what Molina would have worn to a disciplinary meeting. "Thank you for coming in," she said.

"Thank you for having me," said Dahlia politely, as though she'd been invited to tea.

"I'm sure you know why you're here."

This time Dahlia did not respond but regarded Molina with an absent expression that conveyed a maddeningly obscure sense of irony, as if to say, *How sure are you?*

Molina, in response, recalibrated her own gaze, which had been perhaps too intense—that is, too direct an assertion of her authority to be truly authoritative. She had allowed herself to become keyed up by this whole inane affair. She glanced at the bushes outside her window and sought a more open-ended tone. "It's been quite a week," she mused. "Quite a way to return from the summer holiday."

She paused in case the young woman wished to interject, then continued: "I imagine you're aware you've twice been on academic probation."

“I am,” Dahlia said.

“And that Westish has a firm three-strikes-and-you’re-out policy. Therefore any violation of the college’s code of conduct or any further academic issues would be grounds for, at the very minimum, a yearlong suspension.”

The young woman examined one hand’s pale pink fingernails to indicate that this line of discussion and its implicit threat commanded only a fraction of her attention.

“Such a punishment,” Molina continued, “would not require, say, that you be found culpable of sexual assault of another student. Although that is one very serious allegation that has been leveled against you. It could be a lesser offense. A quite minor offense. And the administration would have no choice but to put you on leave.

“Given such circumstances,” Molina went on, “I can’t imagine why you would be willing to participate in such a foolhardy prank. Let me rephrase that: I can imagine you must have had very strong reasons.”

Dahlia shrugged. “It was just a prank,” she said, bending Molina’s word through a lens of ironic disdain.

Molina met her eyes. “Then it was a prank with serious consequences for both individual students and the college itself. Westish has become the subject of much unwanted publicity. A sizable mess has been created, and it’s my job to clean it up.”

Molina had not slept. Even before last night’s cable-news debacle, the story of the tattooed football players had been spreading like wildfire, first by way of a website called the Brightness and from there to an array of less sympathetic outlets, including those concerned with something called men’s rights. The PR director had handed Molina a printout of headlines —“Westish Girls Gone Wild,” “Feminist Terror at Westish College,” “The Prank That Divided America”—that were being aggregated and promoted by sites called Fuzzbuck and Hypetrash and fired out to the feeds on people’s phones. The PR director’s eyes were glassy with horror; such articles could float to the top of the search engines and stay there forever. Type in Westish, get this mess.

The trustees—Molina’s bosses—ranged from nervous to furious. The phones were ringing off the hook with parents of football players demanding to know what was being done to protect their boys;

#IStandWithBen was trending all over. Molina had spent an hour on the phone with Ben's father, who kept yelling, "It's five a.m. in Hawaii," threatening to sue everyone in sight, and in general acting like such a pompous, unbearable ass that Molina felt a newfound sympathy for Ben, who'd been forced to deal with this man all his life.

The school paper had published an impassioned defense of the perpetrators written anonymously by the perpetrators themselves, though presumably not by Pamela Chang, with whom Molina had spoken earlier in the day. It was obvious Ms. Chang had tattooed Mr. Robinson—she'd nearly fainted when Molina pretended to believe Monroe Devine was responsible. But Ms. Chang struck Molina as more a doer than a thinker and unlikely to have authored the—Molina had to admit—eloquent and rousing op-ed in this morning's *Bugler*.

"I think it's provoked an important conversation," Dahlia said.

"There I would agree with you," said Molina. "Though *provoked* is an unfortunately accurate term. Such conversations can be begun in better faith—they can begin as conversations. Not violent provocations."

"Violent?" Dahlia swayed up out of her slouch. "We both know that if some drunk bros had written on some other drunk bros, nobody would be using the word *violent*. Nor would anybody be sitting in your office."

"I'd be sitting here," replied Molina. "I have a lot of work to do."

Her flat delivery forced Dahlia to pause and look at the president. Seeing that it was indeed a joke and that the joke implied a partial concession to Dahlia's point, she returned a tiny nod of acknowledgment.

"It's politics that are considered violent," Dahlia went on, her tone softening a touch. "It's feminism. These guys are enraged to have been bested by women. It demolishes their pride."

Molina leaned back in her nineteenth-century chair, which she found too large and stiff to be comfortable. "Mr. Robinson seemed equally enraged when he thought a football teammate was responsible."

"True," said Dahlia. "But Mr. Robinson's not the reason I'm sitting here."

"Mr. Morris is."

Dahlia gave a small shrug that meant *Duh*.

"He told me he approached you after the incident," Molina said.

"So true."

“He said he wanted to discuss the incident and try to understand it from your point of view. Would you agree with this characterization?”

“Indubitably,” Dahlia said. “Josh is a fucking mensch.”

Molina calmly ignored this profanity. “He indicated that had you been willing to apologize, he might have been willing to let the matter drop. But even as you tacitly admitted responsibility, your manner remained—how did he phrase it?” Molina looked at a sheet of paper. *“Dismissive and cold.”*

“Poor guy. That must have been hard.”

“He also said you offered him drugs.”

“What? Oh.” Dahlia, with a pinch of her lips, dismissed the charge. “Prescription drugs.”

“Prescription or not, distributing narcotics is a federal crime,” Molina said. “Tell me, had you ever met Mr. Morris before the Labor Day parties?”

“Objection,” Dahlia said. “Entrapment.”

Molina smiled. There was something undeniably magnetic about this girl in her conviction and controlled antagonism. Molina could see how she might have persuaded other students to join her as coconspirators. “That’s not what entrapment is. But I’ll reframe the question. When did you first meet Mr. Morris?”

“We took a class together. Years ago.”

“A class you dropped.”

“I’ve dropped a lot of classes,” Dahlia said.

“That’s true. Excuse the indelicacy of this question, but did you and Mr. Morris have any personal or romantic interaction outside this class?”

Dahlia grimaced. “Are you serious?”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“No,” Dahlia confirmed.

Molina leaned forward and folded her hands atop the vast expanse of the mahogany desk. “The reason I ask—and I apologize for prying—is that this whole brouhaha, as broad and outrageous as it has become, strikes me at its core as being vexingly personal. Mr. Morris seems fixated on you and on your slights of him.”

“Well, I’m not fixated on him,” said Dahlia with a disgusted flutter of her hands. “He misunderstands the nature of the project.”

“And what *is* the nature of the project?” Molina lifted her gaze to a

corner of the ceiling as though this were a sheerly philosophical question to ponder.

“That it can happen to anyone.”

“Ah,” said the president, and returned her eyes to Dahlia. “Tell me, are you surprised that Mr. Morris has filed a sexual-assault claim against you?”

“I’m not surprised at all.”

“And why not?”

“Why would I be surprised to see a powerful person co-opt rules that are supposed to help the powerless?” Dahlia folded her arms. “That might be the least surprising thing I’ve heard.”

“I wouldn’t call Mr. Morris powerful,” Molina replied. “He’s a student like yourself.”

“He’s a white guy and a football player. There are things he doesn’t have to worry about.”

“That’s a rather facile view of Mr. Morris,” Molina said. “Or, frankly, any young man.”

“I’m aware that he’s the brotagonist of his own particular story,” said Dahlia.

“If I didn’t know better,” mused Molina, “I might think you wanted to get into trouble.”

“Although actually, I applaud him,” Dahlia said. “I think it’s a model of how to respond to a *violation*, as you call it. Somebody else might have been too ashamed to come forward. Somebody else might’ve felt like it was his own fault.”

“His own fault?”

“You know. For being too drunk. For being too trusting. Somebody else might’ve just worn a hat for two weeks, kept to himself, tried to forget about it.

“But not this dude. This dude knows how to stick up for himself. And the other dude too—he dusted himself off and punched his presumed attacker in the face. He was wrong about who his attacker was, but hey, that didn’t stop him. I applaud it. These dudes know how to stick up for themselves. Dudes often do.”

“As opposed to young women,” said Molina.

Dahlia shrugged.

“I’m listening,” Molina said.

“I know you are.”

The knee Dahlia had been sitting on she now drew close to her chest. She pulled the baggy sweatshirt over her legs to form a kind of cocoon. She clasped her hands around her shins.

“The college’s enrollment is fifty-six percent female,” Molina said. “Women are hardly a powerless minority.”

“We’re not a *minority*.” Dahlia straightened and released her shins. “We’re an underclass. Fifty-six percent female means if everyone were straight and paired off, there’d be hundreds of women fighting over the last douchebag. It makes the men feel even more entitled. They believe they’re embattled because they’re surrounded by women who win all the prizes and get better grades. They don’t quite realize they’re becoming obsolete, but deep down they’re aware, and it unsettles them.

“But luckily for them, the real world doesn’t work like college. In the real world, women don’t get prizes, they don’t get promotions, they don’t get equal pay. They get fucked and fucked over and then they get pregnant and then they get old.”

“Ms. Breughel,” said Molina.

“Pardon my French,” Dahlia said. “The dudes know they just need to hold on for a few years. And meanwhile they avenge themselves socially. The fewer of them there are, the more they get to behave like idiot princes: Bring me this girl. Bring me that girl. Bring me that one’s pussy on a platter.”

“Ms. Breughel,” said the president.

“Sorry,” said Dahlia. “But that’s what it’s like. Have you been to the Parties?”

“I have not,” said Molina drily.

“You should go sometime. They’re where your students’ educations mostly take place.”

“You know a lot about the *real world*,” Molina remarked, quoting Dahlia’s phrase in a way that began in irony and rebuke—this full-tuition girl from a fancy suburb, her mother a university dean, telling Molina what it was like for women in the real world—but emerged as candid regard.

Dahlia shrugged. “I’m only saying things that are obvious.”

“So what *is* it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“For a young woman. A freshman, say. At these parties.”

“Oh, it’s *very* exciting,” Dahlia said. “You get dressed up with your friends. You put on makeup. You try on each other’s clothes. You dress alike but differently. Different flavors, so to speak. You organize a tableau.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You don’t tell your boyfriend back home you’re going. Or you do, but not how excited you are. Then you go to a party run by a bunch of older men.”

“They serve you alcohol.”

Dahlia waved a hand. “You’ve served yourself plenty of alcohol before you get there. That’s crucial to the enterprise. All wounds must be self-inflicted.”

“Wounds,” Molina repeated. But with that single word, she’d gone too far, pushed too hard, implied that Dahlia had wounds she wished to show.

“Figure of speech,” Dahlia said, and subsided into a silence of mistrust. Molina gazed out the window, allowing the conversation to reset and acknowledging her mistake.

As part of the investigation, Molina had been granted access to Dahlia’s campus-counseling records. They sketched, however clumsily, a picture of troubles that spanned Dahlia’s time at Westish and stretched back to high school: One semester abandoned and two others spent on medical leave, what remained of her transcript a sprinkling of As and incompletes. The medical records were confidential, but Molina had poked around enough to know that concerns had been expressed by faculty members about Dahlia’s well-being.

“Tell me,” Molina said when it seemed enough time had passed, “do you think this campus has a problem with unreported sexual assault?”

Dahlia rolled her eyes.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Sexual assault is everywhere,” Dahlia said. “It’s like microplastics in the water. It’s completely unremarkable.”

“And how would you address the problem? If you were me?”

Dahlia squirmed in her chair. She seemed for the moment to have shrunk again and almost become a child. “Stop pretending the bro culture patrols itself. It doesn’t. It perpetuates itself.”

“It’s a cultural problem.”

“It’s a cultural problem,” Dahlia agreed. “Is Westish worse than anyplace else? No. It’s exactly the same. It’s a monoculture. An endless field of genetically modified bullshit.”

“One problem from my point of view,” Molina said mildly, “is that this incident and the publicity surrounding it make Westish *seem* much worse than other places. The media are portraying us as an institution at war with itself.”

“Sorry,” Dahlia said.

“This is an extremely serious situation,” Molina continued after what she hoped was a weighty pause. “Benjamin Morris has retained a lawyer. He has threatened to file a civil lawsuit against you. He maintains that you drugged him, and that’s why he has no memory of the incident.”

“Ha,” said Dahlia.

Molina examined her levelly. “Did you drug him?”

Dahlia smirked. “What do you think?”

“I think you’ve embarked on a mission of self-destruction,” Molina replied. “And I would like to know why.”

“So he files a lawsuit,” Dahlia said. “It’s his word against mine. He accuses me of assaulting him—his word against mine. He claims that I drugged him—his word against mine.”

Molina paused to take this in. She sensed the uncomfortable delicacy, even the paradox, of her position. Here she was, investigating a complaint of assault against Dahlia, of which Dahlia was certainly guilty. But across that particular assault, she suspected, fell the shadow of another, one that might have taken place years ago, perhaps also at the Parties, and that had presumably gone unreported. Molina found herself wishing that Dahlia would confide in her, but why? It would not change the facts of the current case. And anyway, the question was moot, because Dahlia, she could tell, had no intention of confiding the details of her own “unremarkable” assault. There were few things a remarkable young woman liked less than to be thwarted by what seemed unremarkable.

What Molina needed to do was stick to the script: Extract a confession and an apology, thereby appeasing the Morrises and tamping down this public relations crisis. And then, in the punishment phase, she could perhaps find a way to be lenient. But first the confession.

“If I set up a meeting, would you be willing to apologize to Mr.

Morris?” she asked.

“For what? No.”

Molina leaned forward and folded her hands on the desk. “Ms. Breughel, I am trying my best to help you. To make it possible for you to someday graduate from this institution. If you apologize to Mr. Morris, perhaps he will drop his complaint and we can make this go quietly. Otherwise, I fear your future here is in jeopardy. These matters do not rest entirely in my hands.”

Dahlia sullenly lifted her chin, rising to an even taller perch in the wooden chair.

“There will be punishments meted out,” Molina said. “Mr. Robinson needs to be punished for assaulting Mr. Devine. The persons who slashed Ms. Chang’s tires need to punished. Ms. Chang needs to be punished, as do you, as does your other accomplice.”

“Other accomplice?” Dahlia said with a note of true consternation. “There was no other accomplice.”

“Mr. Morris says you arrived at the Parties with Irma Friske.”

At the mention of Irma, Dahlia’s eyes went wide. “So what? We’re friends.”

“And that the offer of ‘prescription drugs’ took place in Ms. Friske’s room.”

“Irma had nothing to do with this,” Dahlia said firmly. But for the first time in the conversation, she looked shaken and overmatched.

“Come now.” Molina patted the folded newspaper that occupied a corner of her mahogany desk. It was the new issue of the *Bugler,* containing the editorial by the Witches of Westish. “I may not be a literary scholar like some of my...” She paused to let her eyes roam over the stately, old-fashioned comforts of her office: two walls of dark built-in bookshelves, the warping knotholed floor, the men’s-clubby oak and leather furniture, the deep, unshakable library smell. “Esteemed predecessors. I’m a lawyer and a businesswoman. But I have read *Macbeth*, you know. Witches come in threes.”

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21

The approaching ferry—white, ornate, and quadruple-tiered, decorated with bite-size human figurines—might have put Pella in mind of a wedding cake under any circumstances. It rocked grudgingly into the dock, sloshing green ocean against the piers. The ferry employees roused themselves from the ticket booth to secure the lines and lay down the ramps. The weekenders queued on the stairs.

Pella already felt like a local. She'd parked where Owen had parked, aloof from the crowd, and like him left the Volvo to lean against its sun-warmed side. She wore her swimsuit under her clothes and could feel the dig of its bow-tied straps into her sunburn. It was cloudless and hot. She lowered her sunglasses to shade her eyes.

The week had been a merger of indulgent pastimes—wine, weed, ocean swimming—with the mounting, wave-rolling-toward-them reality of Owen and Martin's wedding. Pella had been preparing for Sunday's brunch and otherwise helping Owen in any way she could. Her life at Westish, after four days away, seemed as unimaginably distant as another planet, lit by a separate sun.

And yet here came that life now: Mike, dressed in the vast monochrome navy of a matching sweatsuit, Harpooner logos emblazoned on chest and hip, stepped out onto the ramp and paused, blinking against the glare. Pella waved. It took him a while to spot her. When he did, his gait as he started toward her was halting and weary. His duffel bag banged against his hip.

"Hey babe," she said, and rose on tiptoe to kiss him. "I missed you."

"Missed you too."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Hurt myself? What's that mean?"

"You looked like you might be limping a little."

He shrugged dismissively. “I sit at a desk all day. How would I get hurt?” Mike had a slew of old football and baseball injuries, but he preferred not to grant them space in his mind.

She lifted the Volvo’s tailgate. Mike heaved his bag inside, closed the trunk, and squeezed into the passenger seat.

“I brought you a beer,” she said with a nod toward Mike’s footwell.

Mike, with a grunt of approval, reached down to the Volvo’s floor mat and found the Narragansett tallboy, which had rolled back against the lever that slid the seat. He cracked the tab, releasing a loud whistling hiss. Spray rocketed up. White foam cascaded out of the can’s mouth and all over Mike’s sweatshirt and lap while he tried to slurp up the overflow.

“You didn’t tell me to shotgun it,” he said grumpily.

“Sorry,” Pella said.

As they drove in silence, Mike gazed out the passenger window at the dunes that lined Corn Neck Road, his beer-damp clothes only deepening the gloom that emanated from him.

“How’s our pup?” Pella asked, trying to draw him out.

“He misses you,” Mike said. “He moped around all week.”

“Good,” Pella said lightly. “I missed him too. What have you guys been eating?”

He shrugged and stared out the window. “Carapelli’s, mostly.”

“Well, you’ll be eating great this weekend. Martin—”

“Carapelli’s is great,” Mike interrupted.

“I’m not insulting Carapelli’s,” Pella said. “What I meant was, we’re having lunch with Martin and Owen. Martin’s making lobster. Of course, he’s super-busy, with all of his relatives arriving and the rehearsal tonight, but since you’re in the wedding and one of Owen’s closest friends, he really wanted to meet you beforehand. So, lobster.” She felt like she was making a sales pitch to a skeptical customer.

“Great,” Mike said indifferently, and pulled his BlackBerry out of his pocket.

Pella tapped the steering wheel with the heel of her hand, a miniature gesture that contained a growing frustration. She knew Mike’s gloom was connected to the kerfuffle back at Westish, but even calling it a kerfuffle highlighted how distant she felt from his view of it. She wanted to rise to

her role as his confidante, but instead she felt herself recoiling from his vexation and resisting his blue mood.

The island was drenched in sun, deep green with the full leaf of September, surrounded by blue. Pella, setting aside her annoyance, drove north with a bliss-adjacent feeling of belonging—a sense that she and the banana-seated bicyclists she eased the Volvo parenthetically around, slowing to a crawl so as not to disturb them with engine noise, were orbiting the same idea. Mike will adjust, she thought. We'll get him out of that sweatsuit and into swim trunks, into vacation mode. We'll get him a beer that doesn't explode. She reached across the T-shaped gearshift and squeezed his hand.

Soon Pella, Mike, and Owen were arranged along the wooden benches that flanked the kitchen table, beers cracked, bibs tied. Martin, wielding a flashing pair of aluminum tongs, hoisted shining lobsters onto their plates. Pinprick patterns of vulnerable pink in his pale cheeks, brought on by the heat of the grill and his exertions, seemed to reflect the hue of the lobsters. His thin, light brown hair cowlicked every which way. His job complete, he plopped down on the bench and held aloft his shandy. "To old friends."

"And new friends," Mike added.

"Hear, hear." They all tapped cans and sipped.

Pella, her love of lobster only whetted by Tuesday's meal at the Tilly house, cracked into a red claw with her hinged silver tool. She dunked a forkful of soft white flesh into her ramekin of melted butter and lifted it to her mouth. "Martin," she sighed. "It's heavenly."

Martin's heavy-lidded expression suggested he was communing deeply with his first bite. He'd eaten a lot of lobsters on this island, and each possessed its own merits and flaws. "Not bad," he decided. "Not bad at all."

Owen turned to Mike, who was observing his own lobster from a wary distance. "How's Henry doing? I haven't heard from him in a while."

"He's okay," Mike said. Pella could see him wavering between his paternal-protector mode, in which he'd never admit Henry was doing less than perfectly, not even to her, and his desire to confide in Owen, who after all knew Henry well.

"When I don't hear from him," Owen said, nudging Mike along, "it usually means he's down."

Henry Skramstad had been Mike and Owen's teammate at Westish, and

their shared affection for him was one of the pillars of their friendship. Henry and Owen had been roommates throughout college, and Mike still considered Henry his best friend, though it was to Pella an interesting kind of best-friendship that seemed to entail no emotional disclosures and very little talking.

Early in her and Mike's relationship, Pella had attended many Westish baseball games, and Henry remained the most mesmerizing athlete she'd ever seen. Slenderly built, no taller than five ten, his every movement bespoke an uncanny beauty and grace. Pella knew almost nothing about baseball, but watching Henry field ground balls was like watching Mozart play a few bars on the piano—you didn't have to be an expert to be amazed.

"He's been having a rough go," Mike admitted.

"Throwing woes again?" Owen asked.

Mike shook his head. "The Cards got fed up with his throwing woes and moved him to the outfield. But Henry's whole reason for being is to play shortstop. In the outfield, there's nothing to distinguish him. He's just another guy, and not a big one. He's been riding the bench a lot."

Owen absorbed this with a pensive expression. "Do you think this season might be his last?"

Mike dragged a big hand over his scalp; the question pained him. "It's possible."

"How old is Henry?" Martin asked.

"My age," Owen said.

"When does a baseball player reach his peak? Isn't it usually later than that?"

Mike nodded. "In a sense, Henry's just hitting his prime. But that's not much consolation when you're stuck in single A. Many of his teammates are teenagers, drafted out of high school. They have *potential*. Whereas twenty-five—it's borderline ancient. The powers that be get bored and move on."

"It's not like being a writer," Martin remarked. "I'm forever reading profiles in the *Times* of hot young novelists older than me." In a sideways way, his tone suggested pride in Owen's accomplishments—the rare artist who hadn't lazed around until the age of forty.

"It's not like being a writer," Pella agreed. "It's like being a woman."

"What is?" Martin asked.

“Being an athlete.”

Everyone turned toward her, quizzical blankness in their eyes.

“Well, it is,” she said. “In fact, you know what it’s like? *The House of Mirth*. When you read the first page, how do you know Lily Bart is screwed? Because she’s twenty-nine and single. She’s still a total babe, but that doesn’t matter. She’s on the wrong side of ‘eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing.’

“As a human being, she’s just hitting her prime, but she hasn’t built a career—that is, she hasn’t gotten married. She missed her chances and didn’t cash in. Now she’s up against a bunch of dewy eighteen-year-olds, and she has no shot. That’s what being a woman’s like.”

The silence that followed suggested a general uncertainty about how to receive this speech. “In that case, my dear,” Owen said, “it’s a good thing you’re getting married.”

His jokey tone annoyed her; she seemed to have absorbed Mike’s sullen mood from the car. “I’m not talking about *me*. I’m talking about Henry. That’s what it’s like, right? For an athlete? You keep one eye on the clock—your time is running out before it begins. You’re obsessed with your body and what other people think of your body—how it compares to some eighteen-year-old’s. Everybody stands around and openly judges your body. And when they decide to stop judging it—what did you say, Mike? When the powers that be get bored and move on, that’s when things get really bad. Then you have to figure out how to be something other than the thing you’ve spent your whole life trying to be.”

Pella felt persuaded and even impressed by her analogy, but her lunchmates looked baffled. Maybe it was impolite to air the problems of a group she alone represented. Or maybe they wanted to talk about Henry, a real person with real problems, and not about analogies and old novels. She wished Irma were here. Irma would no doubt find some counterintuitive way to contradict Pella for reasons that would annoy her, but that very combativeness would urge Pella toward some kind of illumination.

“Buddha, you’re looking ripped.” Mike, eager to change the subject, reached past his untouched lobster to give Owen’s biceps a squeeze.

Owen gave a pleased shrug. “I’ve been getting in shape for my wedding.”

Mike turned to Martin. “I could never get him into the weight room back

in the day. With guns like this, he would have been hitting home runs instead of singles. Sweetest lefty swing you ever saw."

At this, both Owen and Martin beamed. It was interesting for Pella to see Mike's casual assertion of alpha status, his easy way of taking charge while making his charges feel good. Owen might be the star of the weekend, but Mike would always be the captain of the team.

The two of them chatted to Martin about old times and old teammates—Mike kept tabs on all of them, Owen on none. Pella allowed her attention to bounce between her lobster and the bright yellow ear of sweet corn Martin had laid beside it, both of them swooning in butter. Her ears pricked up when she heard Owen say: "So how do you like President Molina?"

Mike shrugged heavily. "I don't know that she fits the culture very well."

Did Owen arch a perfectly groomed eyebrow? Or did Pella impute that to him because it struck *her* as absurd and eyebrow-raising, to say that the first woman and the first minority to become head of a hundred-and-fifty-year-old college was a poor fit for the culture?

"She's very smart," Pella said. "Very professional."

"She's smart," Mike allowed. "But she could care less about Westish. She's from Silicon Valley. She'll hang around till she gets a better offer, and boom—she'll be gone. It's a way station for her."

"So what?" Pella said. "It's a college."

He frowned at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean it's a place people move on from. No matter how much they love it. Owen loves Westish—he graduated and moved on. You and I love Westish—soon we'll be moving on. Maybe President Molina will move on too."

Mike peered down sadly into his beer. He lifted his gaze to meet Pella's eyes. "What about your dad? Was he planning to move on?"

"No," Pella replied softly. "He wanted to stay forever."

"Just because you don't stay somewhere forever doesn't mean it's a way station," Mike said. "A place you give your heart to is never a way station."

"That's true," Pella said, and rubbed the back of the T-shirt he'd changed into, which clung to his torso in spots, darkened and dampened by an obstinate blend of sweat and shower steam. The T-shirt, big even on him, read WE ARE ONE.

“You may have heard,” he said, directing his words to Martin, “some of my athletes were assaulted last weekend.”

Oh boy, thought Pella as her tender feelings dissolved. *Here we go.*

“Assaulted?” repeated Martin. “How awful. I hadn’t heard.”

Owen looked at him. “You know—the prank with the tattoos.”

“Ah, of course. The tattoos.”

Mike’s dense eyebrows contracted. “Owen, you know Westish sports as well as anybody. Do you think our school has some kind of”—he searched for the phrase he’d repeatedly heard—“*toxic jock culture?*”

Owen turned a translucent potato chip in his hand. “The party scene wasn’t really my scene,” he said.

“But you knew all the jocks.”

“I knew them as *I* knew them,” Owen said mildly. “Not the way a woman might.”

Pella, a woman, devoted herself to savoring her tail meat and sipping her beer. She knew that any remark she made would lead her and Mike toward an argument that would be embarrassing to conduct in Martin and Owen’s company. She felt an obscure sense of injury at the thought that Mike would never solicit her opinions as keenly as he was soliciting Owen’s, or receive them with such curiosity.

“Do you really think Westish is an unsafe place?” Mike asked Owen.

“Safer than most,” Owen said. “But I imagine this prank was meant to have a broader resonance. It happened at Westish, but it’s not necessarily *about* Westish. It’s about the world we live in. There’s an element of symbolism to it. Of abstraction.”

“It’s not abstract for the guys it happened to.” Mike shook his head in dismay. “To me, this crap has nothing to do with what Westish College stands for. It has nothing to do with what your book stands for.”

Owen, intrigued, folded his hands. “Which is what?”

“Your book is a defense of the liberal arts,” Mike said. “It’s an argument for the importance of the college experience—of belonging to a community where people talk, and reason, and try to persuade each other. A community where people trust each other. Those places are dying out fast. For the moment, Westish is still sort of one of them.”

Owen, as he pondered this, gazed at the heavy beam that buttressed the

kitchen ceiling. “That’s interesting, Michael. I hadn’t quite thought of it that way.”

“And then,” Mike continued, his voice growing hot, “these girls sail in with no regard for anything, vigilante-style, and tear that trust to shreds.”

“You’re acting like they raped these guys.” Pella, despite herself, had spoken. “They wrote on their foreheads—period. You probably did the same thing at some team initiation. Wrote something crude on the drunkest guy’s head with a Sharpie. Snapped some photos. Had a laugh.”

“I’ve seen it done,” said Mike. “But that’s different.”

“Different how?”

“When teammates play pranks on one another, it brings them closer together. They’re expressing a kind of love.”

“Oh, please,” said Pella.

“It’s true. Whereas what these girls did was the opposite. The goal was to divide.”

“Maybe the goal was to show we’re already divided,” Pella said.

“We’re all on the same side,” Mike said. “Or we’re screwed.”

“But you can’t just say we’re on the same side. It has to be true.”

Mike turned to Martin and Owen. “Pella has to defend the perpetrators. They’re her closest friends.”

“Oh, they are not,” Pella said. “I have one friend who’s a student, and I’m not convinced she had anything to do with it.”

Mike scoffed. “You know it was her.”

“Who?” inquired Martin.

“Irma,” said Pella and Mike in forceful, exasperated unison.

“She’s behind the whole thing,” Mike added, and glanced at Pella as though daring her to contradict him.

Mike still hadn’t touched his lobster. It sprawled across his plate, massive and ruddy and intact, while he chomped his way through the bowl of chips in the center of the table. “Do you need help getting the meat?” Pella asked, and reached toward his plate, silver tool in hand.

“I’ve got it,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Pella, eager to share her knowledge, or perhaps to show it off, cracked open the lobster’s head. Mike scowled down at the green-black slime. “That’s tomalley,” she explained. “It’s the best part. Here, dip a bit of meat

in it.” She reached toward his plate again. His glare sent her hand scuttling back.

“You can skip the tomalley,” Martin said helpfully. “In fact, the FDA recommends you skip it.”

“Hey Buddha,” Mike said. “What are you having?”

“A bean-and-flax burger. Or as Martin calls it, grillable cardboard.” As Owen lifted the burger toward his mouth, he noticed the keenness with which Mike was watching him. “Would you like one?”

“If you’ve got a spare,” Mike said.

Martin hopped up from the table. “The grill’s still hot.” He opened the freezer and pulled out a slim red box. “Whoops,” he said as he peeked inside. “Not that one.”

“Here, darling,” said Owen. “We’ll take that.”

With an awkward fling, Martin sent the box sailing wide of the table. Nimbly, Owen stretched to catch it. Martin pulled a second, identical box from the freezer and opened the fridge. “Ah, we have bacon! How do you feel about bacon?”

“Tenderly,” Mike said.

“Me too. Here, you’ll be needing this.” Martin handed Mike another beer, and the two of them carried their supplies to the backyard grill. Pella swapped plates and prepared to tuck into Mike’s lobster.

“My dear,” said Owen as he commenced his meticulous joint-making, “may I ask what’s happened to Michael?”

She squinted at him, trying to discern the thrust of the question. “I don’t know. He’s had a hard week?”

“I don’t see how that could happen in a week,” Owen said.

“How what could happen?”

“My dear, don’t play dumb. He’s become extravagantly fat.”

Pella felt a surge of puzzled defensiveness—the embarrassment of an unnoticed truth. “He’s a big person,” she said. “He’s always been big.”

“You couldn’t have reined him in a little?”

“Me? What can *I* do?”

“When it comes to Michael?” Owen said. “Whatever you want. He worships you.”

“He’s a grown man,” Pella said.

“He’s an overgrown man. Is he trying to sabotage my wedding? He’ll

obstruct the view of half the crowd."

"Owen, you're being cruel. Do you really think—"

"I wonder what *he's* thinking," said Owen, the joint jutting from the corner of his mouth, his gray eyes ablaze with a sudden ferocity. His fingers crawled along the windowsill until they found a pack of matches. In a single unbroken motion he folded back the cover, struck a match, and cupped his right hand around the flame as he lifted it to the twisted joint tip. He took a deep pull, closed his eyes, released a vast white cloud, and opened his eyes on a renewed world.

"I'm sorry," he said. "These days I'm either very high or very high-strung. There's little in between."

"That's okay." Pella took the joint and puffed on it gently. "You're nervous about your wedding."

"I am." His softened eyes sought Pella's and held them. "I'm thrilled to see Michael. But he has gained weight. What if we can't squeeze him into his suit tomorrow?"

"Do you really think that's a possibility?" Pella said.

Owen shrugged. "He sent me his measurements months ago. I guess it depends how much has changed since then. If all else fails, we can wrap him in a topsail."

"Hey," Pella said.

"I'm kidding, my dear. It will all be fine."

Pella flashed back to the moment when Mike stepped off the ferry. She'd noticed at once the way he favored one leg; she'd supposed it to be the effect of a day spent crunched into airplane seats. But maybe he'd been walking like that for a while; maybe it was the glare of an alien setting, the psychic distance of four days apart, that enabled her to notice. What else was she failing to see?

HALF AN HOUR later, she sprawled across the bed in the cozy guest room, her eyes slipping shut, her thoughts rolling in gyroscopic loops. This particular strain of Owen's pot was stronger than the others. It had a black-hole pull at the core of its charms. The door creaked open.

Mike sat down on the edge of the bed. "Sleepy?"

"Me? No." She had pinched off the end of the joint to save it for him. It

lay atop the matchbook at the base of the lamp on the little nightstand. “Here,” she said. “I thought you might want this.”

Mike grimaced. “No thanks.”

“It’s the tiniest smidge. It’ll help you relax.”

His rigid head shake reminded Pella of a child being asked to eat vegetables. She felt frustrated in advance at all the ways he was going to refuse to enjoy the weekend.

“You like pot,” she said. “You kind of love it.”

“You know I don’t smoke,” he said. “And you know why.”

“Because”—she put these words in quotes—“‘it’s in your contract.’ But when was the last time you got tested?”

“When I started the job.”

“Right. So you could easily—”

Mike interrupted. “That’s not why I don’t smoke. I don’t smoke because my athletes aren’t allowed to. I’m always on them about the rules, and I’m not a hypocrite. If you don’t speak from a place of integrity, they feel it.”

“You’re a grown man.” Owen’s voice echoed in her head: *an overgrown man*. “Not a student-athlete.”

He shook his head again. “Molina’s got it in for me. I’ll show up for work on Tuesday and there’ll be a cup on my desk to pee in. One misstep and I’m gone.”

Pella was still holding the little wrinkled pyramid of the not-quite-cashed joint. She wanted to light it but she knew she was already high, and the slightest bit more would send her tumbling into a ticklish abyss.

“She’s not going to *fire* you,” she said.

“How do you know? She blames me for not policing the Parties—like I was supposed to be on the lookout for girls with tattoo kits. She blames me because some football players put stickers on Pam Chang’s car.”

“And slashed her tires,” Pella said. “I saw the photos.”

Mike turned and glared at her. “What do you mean, you saw the photos?”

“On Instagram.”

Mike’s face twisted into a wary scowl. “So, what? You’ve just been sitting here on the beach all week staring at your phone, watching my life fall apart?”

He lifted himself from the bed. He liked to pace when he was agitated,

or thinking, or both. Now the smallness of the room stymied him. He took two steps toward the dresser and turned around.

“Goddamn internet,” he muttered. “Turns everybody into spectators at the Colosseum. Cheering for blood.”

“Nobody’s cheering for blood,” Pella said.

“Sure they are,” Mike said. “Those girls—why do you think they did it in the first place?” He took his two steps and turned again. “They did it so they could post the pictures, post the videos. They did it to get their names on the Brightness.”

“Maybe they’re appealing to a community outside Westish,” Pella said, “because they can’t find the right community inside.”

“Your friend Irma? Who gets free books and free tuition, and the whole administration eats out of her tiny hand? These are the sad, lonely girls who are so put-upon? Who can only find solace online?”

“They don’t have to be sad and lonely to seek out like-minded people,” Pella said. “Westish is conservative in some respects. If they’re interested in feminism, if they’re interested in activism, they have to look elsewhere.”

“If they’re interested in feminism and activism, they should do those things. Not assault innocent people in their beds.”

“You think Irma’s a weirdo and a loner,” Pella said. “You don’t think she’s part of your precious Westish community.”

“What’s toxic isn’t sports,” Mike said. “It’s the internet. Everybody on their phones constantly. It messes with their brains. People should pay attention to what’s in front of them. What’s wrong with living in the actual world? What’s wrong with living in your body?”

The phrase struck Pella, and she wondered: Did Mike live in his body? She was beginning to see that body as heavy and broken down. How did a man not yet thirty who’d devoted his life to athletic excellence stray so far from his own ideal?

“You know what?” she said. “You’re right.”

He eyed her dubiously, surprised by this volte-face. “About what?”

“About paying attention to what’s in front of you.” Pella gestured toward the open window. “Look—look how beautiful that is.”

Grudgingly, Mike glanced past the curtains at the blues of sky and sea.

“I know there’s a lot happening at home,” Pella said. “We’ll get back

Monday and deal with it. Until then, we're here to celebrate Owen and Martin. And to enjoy ourselves—to enjoy each other."

She reached toward the nightstand and tugged open the slender drawer.

"I love what you said," she went on. "People need to be where they are. So let's start with us. Let's make a pact to be *here*. Together, on this beautiful island." She grabbed her phone off the nightstand and tossed it into the drawer. "Deal?"

One of Mike's hands pressed against his thigh, protecting the phone in his pocket.

"Come on," she urged. "Break free."

"Easy for you to say," he said. "Nobody needs to talk to you."

She ignored this. She pointed her eyes toward the open drawer.

"Tomorrow's game day," Mike said. "I'll need to check on my guys."

Now that Pella had hit on the nature of this agreement, she was prepared to be infinitely reasonable. "You can check in tomorrow morning," she said. "Before our wedding duties begin."

Mike moved the guarding hand away from his thigh. With an air of sad ceremony, he pulled his phone from his pocket and laid it beside hers. Pella closed the drawer.

Having achieved this small victory, she felt flooded with affection for him. Mike cast a lingering, uncertain look at the drawer. He looked miserable, but it was for his own good. Once he'd enjoyed a few Westish-free hours, once his mind had joined his body here on Block Island, he'd relax. The trick would be to distract him until then.

"Did you get enough to eat?" she asked.

"One veggie burger?" Mike scoffed. "I've been up since three a.m."

"Martin told me about a barbecue place," Pella said. "Kind of a roadside shack. Owen won't go, so he was excited to take me, but we never got around to it. He recommends the brisket."

At the word *brisket*, Mike's expression took on a quality of religious ecstasy. Pella hopped up from the bed.

"Come on," she said. "We'll bike to the barbecue place. We'll go to the beach. Then we'll hustle back and get ready for the rehearsal. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

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22

The rehearsal evening, as Pella imagined it, was an occasion for her dress. She'd bought it months ago, after being tugged back, time and again, to the website where she'd come across it. It seemed too expensive, too peculiar, and possibly too risqué to purchase, but she felt a flutter of longing each time she clicked through the photos. It could always be returned.

No matter how many summer afternoons she'd tried it on, that flutter always returned as she knotted the sash and looked in the mirror. The dress was a kimono-like mini-wrap in a polychrome pattern. Vintage, the real deal, 1973. It fit better than any dress she'd ever worn and was made of the most thrillingly luxurious silk she'd ever felt, a heavy silk, as though the fabric were falling asleep as it draped itself drowsily across her breasts and hips. Throughout the summer, while puttering about the house, she not infrequently found herself standing in front of the closet in her office, gazing at the new member hanging among her small jazzy squadron of dresses, wondering whether it was (a) too perfect for words or (b) a little much.

What she loved best were the colors, foremost among them a shimmering background of stoplight red that clashed with Pella's coppery hair in (she hoped) a way that worked, that was chaotic, a little hectic, a clash that created a higher synthesis; a clash that led to art. The secondary color was swimming-pool sapphire, which comprised the sash and the margins that overlapped to form the Y of the neckline. That same electric hue was wound into the swirling, psychedelic pattern of the rest, mixing with lurid acid-trip yellows that bloomed through deeper strands of ultramarine.

The overall effect was of a shimmering peacock richness. She felt a bit

childish to be so smitten with a dress, but it was the coolest dress she'd ever seen.

After she and Mike returned from the beach, Pella took her time getting ready. It had been ages since she'd dressed for a party, ages since she'd been anywhere. Her perpetually messy nape-length hair was coaxed and blow-dried into a temporary semblance of order, or at least a more calculated disorder, or maybe, if she really wanted to give herself the benefit of the doubt, an alluring half-havoc. She took one last look in the tiny mirror of the tiny bathroom and headed across the hall to the guest room, where Mike was sitting on the bed with an air of guileless obedience, his phone nowhere to be seen, his palms pressed against the duvet. Doing nothing, waiting for her.

"Wow," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You look great."

Despite the compliment, he gave her a rather indifferent once-over with his sad eyes. "Am I underdressed?" He was wearing his usual uniform of pleated khakis and Harpooner-logo shirt.

"Oh, I don't know," Pella said lightly. "I'm probably way overdressed." As she scrunched one bare foot into the torpedo-shape of a carmine stiletto, she lay a hand on his shoulder for balance. "Tomorrow I have to wear the horrid bridesmaid's dress Lydia chose," she explained. "So I want to look good tonight."

"Who's Lydia?"

"Martin's older sister."

"I thought you and Owen planned the wedding," Mike said. "Why is Lydia in charge of the dresses?"

"That's a great question," Pella said.

When Owen sent her photos of the bridesmaid's dress—a frothily ruffled, puffed-sleeve, one-shouldered number the pallid green of doctor's scrubs—she'd begged him to reconsider, mostly by appealing to his vanity. "Owen, that dress is hideous. You want that thing in your wedding pictures?"

"I'm afraid it's out of my hands," Owen replied. "I let Lydia choose the dresses, and this is what she chose."

That conversation had triggered Pella's search for a rehearsal dress. If

she looked good enough tonight—if she planted a dazzling enough image in the minds of Owen's guests—she could coast through the wedding on that image. Instead of a woman of dubious attractiveness crammed into an ugly prom dress, she would register as a woman of beauty and taste, selflessly willing to cram herself into a prom dress for the sake of a close friend's wedding.

"Come on," she said. "We're going to be late."

IT DIDN'T TAKE long to realize her mistake. The party was almost too casual to be called a party; it was a family affair populated not by glamorous friends of Owen's from New York but by scads of Tillys, a vast sallow crew in boat shoes with fraying seams, eating breaded fish. Owen had invited no one from his dad's side of the family and would be represented at the wedding only by his mom, Genevieve, whose flight from California had been delayed.

Pella felt not just overdressed, but comically so. To compensate, she was drinking glass after glass of red wine. Martin's paternal grandfather, owner of the Tilly house and patriarch of the present company, known to everyone as Big Jabez, had trapped her in a corner of the fenced-in yard, against the rear wall of the restaurant.

"So who might you be?" he demanded, having spotted Pella across the courtyard and beelined toward her, displaying a surprising agility. Despite his nickname, he was a compact rooster of a man, wiry and upright, and no taller than Pella stood in her heels, which were proving a poor match for the courtyard's shifty sand. His posture was erect, even puffed, and gave no impression of having contracted with age, though he had to be well into his eighties; clearly he had always been a small proud man. Around the crown of his head ran a snow-white fringe of hair that fell with louche boldness to his collar. On someone else, such a fringe might have seemed countercultural, a hearkening back to a long-haired sixties heyday; on him it suggested more of a seventeenth-century heyday, fitting for a man whose ancestors had settled Block Island.

Nonetheless, he looked undeniably sharp in his forest-green blazer and blinding white shirt; he was, disappointingly, the only person at the party dressed anywhere near as well as Pella.

“I might be any number of people,” she said breezily. “But in fact I’m Pella. A friend of Owen’s from college.”

Big Jabez took this in—took *her* in, head to toe and back again, with a nod that dipped his formidable beak into her cleavage. “Couldn’t straighten him out, eh?”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know much about this Westish College. But if there are girls like you there, I can’t imagine turning around and batting for the other side.”

Pella decided to construe this as a compliment. “*Thank* you,” she said, and tucked her hair behind one ear.

“In the military, I could imagine it. With no women around.”

“There are women in the military,” Pella pointed out.

“Nowadays there are, sure. I was an officer in Korea, you know. Didn’t see a woman for months at a time. Or out on board a ship. Not a lot of women in that racket. Or those boarding schools in England where everyone’s always banging their dicks together.”

One of the agile, wrinkled hands that protruded from Big Jabez’s crisp white cuffs brushed through the air to dismiss the banging dicks his imagination had, for obscure reasons, conjured. His other hand held a lime-bedecked glass. Pella could smell the juniper on his hot raw breath.

As she grew drunker, she became more and more attuned to the sounds that filled the grassy-sandy courtyard: the shudder of the loose-hinged door in the wide-planked wooden fence and the jingle and clank of the latch as Martin’s relatives tromped in from the parking lot, the cheerful exclamations, the clink of glasses and bottles at the outdoor bar, the roar of an industrial exhaust fan expelling grease smells from the kitchen, the rustle and chink of a metal scoop as it chopped through clumps of ice, the cheeping of dusk-birds in overhead boughs, and the incongruous gunning of a motorcycle engine out on the road. Now through the din, one sound reached her ears that stunned her with its clarity. How long had it been since she’d heard Mike laugh like that?

She peered over Big Jabez’s shoulder, looking for Mike—or, rather, for the person who’d made Mike laugh. Through the crowd, she glimpsed a sleeve of his navy polo. She inched to the left for a better view, her heels tilting in the sand. Martin’s grandfather mirrored her movements, the ginny

wind of his breath maintaining a constant velocity against her cheek. Mike was standing at a makeshift bar of pallet crates holding a pale glass of beer, talking to the bartender.

The woman, from this angle and distance, did not appear to be beautiful and might even have qualified as ugly. Her chin was a touch too strong, and a knot of muscle protruded from her jaw below the ear, as though she'd made a lifelong habit of chewing too much gum. Her long straight nose angled downward, and she had capacious nostrils—or at least, *a* capacious nostril; Pella could see only the one—whose flare, as the woman buttressed Mike's laughter with her own, opened against the soft sunlight of early evening a surprising breadth of darkness.

The word *woman* had popped into Pella's mind, and pointedly so. She tended to think of any woman shy of middle age, herself included, as a girl. But this was a woman. She was Martin's age, Pella guessed, or a little older, her whole manner settled confidently into herself. Whatever kind of woman she was, she wasn't the kind you tended to find at Westish College. If you did, she might be a newly minted anthropology professor, arrived after years of adventurous fieldwork. Her face, on further scrutiny, albeit from a distance, could not be described as ugly; it looked lived in, not cosseted, and all the more striking for that.

"I'll admit we're an unconventional family," Martin's grandfather was saying, with a wry lift of eyebrows that reminded Pella of matted sheepdog fur, "but this wedding takes the cake."

"How do you like Owen?" Pella asked.

Big Jabez nodded his approval. "A fine young man. Very successful, very polite. But I'm not sure what happened to Marty. He always had girlfriends, prom dates and so on. There was one I hoped would stick—Rachel, Raquel, something like that. He seems to be going through some kind of phase."

"Isn't he a little old for a phase?" Pella said.

The wild white eyebrows lifted mischievously. "*I* think so."

There was that sound: Mike's belly laugh. Pella wondered again how long it had been since she'd heard it. The sound induced in her a wistful nostalgia, like a favorite song from a long-ago summer, that formed an uneasy contrast to the present. She blamed Mike for withholding that laugh

from her; she blamed herself for failing to evoke it; she blamed this bartender for succeeding where she had failed, or failed to try.

"Marty's a special boy," Big Jabez was saying. "We still talk every Sunday." He slurped at the straw of his vanquished drink. "Got himself into Harvard. Graduated top of his class. And *he's* not going to pass on the family name?" He shook his white-fringed head in sorrow.

"Maybe Martin and Owen will have a child."

Big Jabez, grunting happily at this audacity, stepped back to give Pella another once-over as he rattled his glass at a passing waiter. "Are you volunteering?"

"HOW ARE YOU, my dear?" Owen looked coolly equal to the environs in his jean shorts and white linen shirt. As he approached, he sipped what looked like a cocktail but was no doubt sparkling water with a floating slice of cucumber. He might have been the soft-spoken leader of some salubrious California cult. "I thought red wine didn't agree with you."

"You can't associate only with those who agree with you," Pella said. "It's too limiting."

"True enough—that's why I'm marrying Martin. Are you enjoying the party?"

"Of course," Pella said. "It's lovely."

"*But?* I sense a *but*."

"I suppose I thought there might be a few more...people."

Owen glanced around the courtyard, indicating with a soft lift of his eyebrows that it did in fact contain a fair number of people.

"I mean besides Martin's relatives," Pella said. "Not that Martin's relatives aren't lovely."

Owen nodded. "It's September, you know. Busy time in publishing, busy time for the theater folk, busy time for the finance crowd. Much harder to get away. Everyone's dashing up late tonight or in the morning."

"Oh," said Pella, unable to hide her disappointment. "I see."

"We're lucky they're coming at all," Owen declared in a tone that suggested his stellar guest list did not depend on luck. "Besides, it's better this way. When the city folk arrive tomorrow, they'll encounter us at our apex. Our moment of maximum radiance."

Pella understood from this that Owen had dissuaded the very people she'd hoped to impress from coming tonight. Perhaps he hadn't invited them at all.

"I wish you'd told me," she said glumly.

"Told you what?"

"That it was a family party. Before I bought this ridiculous getup."

"Don't be silly," Owen replied. "You look divine."

"Hardly," she said. "I look like the local tart."

"That's what everyone orders, isn't it? The local tart?" Owen cocked his head. "Are you drunk, my dear?"

"I don't know." She thrust her empty wineglass toward the makeshift bar. "Who's Mike talking to?"

Owen peered across the courtyard, a hand shading his eyes against the sunset. "Ah, the beer lady. What was her name again? Vivian, I believe."

"Does she work here? She's not dressed like the other staff."

"She runs a little brewery in Brooklyn. I gather Martin has some investment in it. She came down for the evening to drum up interest."

"She's certainly drummed up Mike's interest," Pella said. "He's been hovering around her all night."

"To cause Michael to hover," Owen said, "is quite a trick."

"No more fat jokes," Pella said. "I can't take it."

The woman—*Vivian, I believe*—wore a faded denim jacket over a cotton dress that suited its surroundings perfectly, a rustic prairie pattern of brown and blue. Pella, a thousand dollars' worth of dialectically clashing art barely covering her butt, felt chastened and overmatched. What had she been thinking? Her dress was too revealing, too costly, too clamorous. Her heavy makeup irritated her skin. Her heels were all wrong for this dunelike courtyard. Her perfume annoyed her. Her whole look was crude—the kind of look that appealed to horny old men whose time was short and whose eyes were failing, for whom the franker the display the better. If you flashed unsubtle messages, you got unsubtle replies.

Owen patted her arm and moved on. The bartender plucked two petite tasting glasses from an inverted stack and leaned over a keg, smiling and talking as the glasses filled with amber liquid. Mike broke into laughter again, his broad handsome face relaxed into contentment. She handed him one of the glasses, and Mike took what was, among the thousands of beers

Pella had seen him drink, the single daintiest sip. The woman continued her story, her left hand's ringless fingers drawing circles through the dusk. Mike listened, entranced. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

The bartender refilled Mike's glass with a wheat-colored beer and held it toward him. Their hands met in the twilight above the bar—Mike's as ringless as hers. It was only Pella, unseen and furtively spying, who was sporting a gaudy diamond.

Both Mike's hand and the woman's were touching the glass, and for Pella the moment seemed to freeze. If they each leaned forward, bending slightly at the hips, if their lips came together in the twilight about the bar, Pella wouldn't have been surprised. She might even have been elated, such was the charge that twilight contained. It was almost as though she craved such a thing, was willing the space between their lips to close, or imagining it so vividly that it seemed already to be happening.

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23

Hey babe,” she said as she squeezed Mike’s forearm.

She felt ready to soldier through a sullen pause—Mike’s fun flirtation interrupted by his no-fun fiancée—but when he turned to her, his face was alight. “Hey,” he said, and touched the small of her back. “This beer is incredible.”

The bartender held out her hand. “Vivian.”

“Pella.” As they shook, Pella could feel the cabled strength in Vivian’s long fingers and the ridges of callus at the top of her palm. Up close, Vivian confirmed the impressions she’d made from afar—striking, strong-jawed, slightly weathered—and added myriad new ones. Her chin-length hair was of varying shades of brown, leavened in spots by the summer sun and threaded with single strands of silver-white that looked festive, like veins of Christmas tinsel. Between the lapels of her denim jacket, an intricate tangle of tattoos—green vines dotted with leaves, razor-sharp thorns, roses in shades of purple—curled across her collarbones.

“I *love* your dress,” Vivian said.

Pella glanced down and sighed. “It’s a little...” She scribbled a hand in disdainful circles over herself. “Much.”

“Bah,” Vivian said. “You look terrific. What sort of beer you do like?”

“I’ll drink anything,” Pella said as she wrapped an arm around Mike’s waist. She was feeling a little tipsy. “What are you having?”

“Nothing at the moment,” he said with a chiding, jocular glance at Vivian.

Vivian reached beneath the bar and produced an unlabeled glass jug from which she removed the stopper. She poured three small glasses of thick inky liquid with a paper-thin head of beige foam. “Here,” she said.

“You can try my private obsession. I’m still fiddling with the recipe, but I couldn’t resist bringing some. It’s an old ale.”

The three of them clinked glasses and drank. Mike sipped his and set it back down; he didn’t like dark beers. Pella swirled it in her mouth. It was creamy and dark and strongly alcoholic. The flavors kept changing as she tried to pin them down.

“Yum,” she said. “It tastes like, I don’t know...port? Raisins?”

Vivian nodded. “You have a good palate. It’s young, though—the flavors need to harmonize. A beer like this won’t hit its prime for years.”

Pella’s thoughts were getting a little scattered. She was thinking of Henry’s prime, and Lily Bart’s, and her own. The years of unfolding, and the years of indefatigable dancing. “So you run this brewery?” she asked.

“I pretty much am the brewery,” Vivian said. “It’s very small.”

“What’s it called?”

Vivian’s chuckle contained a touch of melancholy. “I guess I’m not doing a bang-up job with the marketing if you have to ask.” She pointed to the banner draped across the front of the bar, which was blocked by Mike’s and Pella’s thighs. Against a striped sunset background of earthy browns and oranges it read DARK FARM BREWERY, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK.

“My last name’s Darke,” she said. “But with an *e* on the end.”

“You’re from New York?”

“New Jersey, originally. The brewery’s in Brooklyn now, but Jack and I live in Queens. We just bombed out here for the night.”

Pella felt relieved to hear of Jack. Relieved and also curious; she glanced around the courtyard in search of the kind of man—tall, dark(e), rugged—she imagined would make a partner for Vivian.

“You’re not staying for the wedding?” Mike asked.

Vivian shook her head. “It was tough enough to sneak away for a night. Work is twenty-four-seven these days.” She poured another glass of the inky old ale, slid it in Pella’s direction. “I love your tattoo, by the way.”

It seemed right to return the compliment, Vivian’s colorful tattoos being much more ornately realized than her own, but Pella hesitated. The tendrils of vine that emerged from the neckline of Vivian’s dress seemed somehow too intimate to mention, as though to remark on them was tantamount to asking to see where they led.

“Who did it?” Vivian asked.

“Some random guy.” Pella glanced at the whale on her upper arm, his tail atwist. “Feels like a million years ago—I was fourteen.”

“Wild child,” Vivian said approvingly. “Well, you picked the right random guy. Clean, classical, but expressive too. A real sense of motion.”

“Thanks.” Pella was thinking of her dad, who’d had the same tattoo. Tears rose up in her eyes. “So—Jack?” she said, to steady herself. “Does he brew with you?”

Vivian chuckled as though at an inside joke. “He does pretty much everything with me.”

Clarice, Martin’s eldest niece, nerdy and regal in her sailboat-patterned dress, strands of waffled hair trapped in her halo of orthodontic wires, trotted into view, a small child shrieking in her arms. Pella had noticed her earlier, dandling the same little boy in the effortless way of a girl with several siblings. Now, though, his piercing cries were reaching epic states of agony, and Clarice, as she hurried toward them, the boy’s limbs thrashing against her loosening grip, wore a look of wounded embarrassment.

She approached the bar. Craning her neck to address Vivian above the boy’s wild writhing, she said, with shy self-reproval:

“I can’t get him to stop.”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey,” said Vivian. “He’s had a very long day. It’s not your fault.”

Vivian stretched out her arms to collect him, but Clarice couldn’t lift him over the bar. Mike grabbed the boy beneath the armpits to pass him to Vivian, but as soon as he hit Mike’s giant hands, the tenor of his crying changed. His eyes widened and fixed on Mike, and his wails turned perplexed and tentative, as though ending in question marks. Mike slung him high overhead, dipped him upside down, spun him like a wad of pizza dough. The boy submitted to this in watchful, half-amazed silence. Vivian broke into laughter.

“Man,” she said. “He does *not* know what to make of you.”

“Few do,” Mike said proudly.

“Jackie,” said Vivian. “Say hi to Mike and Pella.”

The boy peered at Pella, deciding whether to obey. “Hi,” he said.

Vivian patted her jacket pockets until she found a wad of bills and a business card. The cash she handed to Clarice; the card she slid in Pella’s

direction. “Call me if you’re ever in the city,” she said. “I’ll give you a tour of the brewery.”

Clarice vanished. Vivian stretched out her arms, and Mike handed Jack over the bar. The boy squirmed a quick one-eighty to resume his awed study of the mysterious giant. Pella drained her portion of old ale and held out her glass for more.

MARTIN AND OWEN, in keeping with the old proprieties, were spending the night before their wedding apart. Martin headed back to the Tilly house. Mike and Pella shared a cab with Owen. They were the last to leave the party, but it was early still, eleven o’clock, when they pulled into the gravel drive.

They bade Owen good night and headed up to the guest room. Pella, her stilettos in hand, clicked the door shut behind them. Only a few specks of sea-light entered at the margins of the curtain. A dense wall of cloud had massed above the island, blotting out the stars. In the darkness, Mike let out a huge yawn. She heard the clack of his belt buckle hitting the floor, followed by the complaint of the bedsprings.

She turned on the bedside lamp. Mike was already beneath the covers. He groaned at the light. “Do you need that?” he mumbled, his eyes shut.

Did she need it? Her plan had been to undress while he was watching, to untie the sash of her art dress and unwrap it from her body in a way that would move and arouse him. If the dress had proved good for nothing else, it could at least be good for taking off.

“Not really,” she said, and switched off the lamp.

Her art dress slid to the floor in darkness. She slipped into bed beside him. She sought out Mike’s face and kissed him. Her tongue slipped through his lips. Did his lips resist? Her head swirled. She’d drunk too much. She grabbed his hand and guided it between her legs—she was, for the moment, not unwet. Wetter than she’d been in a while.

“You were so into that woman,” she murmured.

“What woman?”

“You know. Vivian.”

“I was into her beer,” Mike said.

“You didn’t think she was sexy?” Pella asked. “You can tell me if you

did.”

“Didn’t notice,” Mike said gruffly.

Pella felt something approaching a flash of real jealousy—perhaps he’d been so attracted to Vivian that it seemed dangerous to admit it. “Come on,” she insisted. “She was sexy.”

“If you say so.”

“And she was into you.” She ran a hand along the fly of his boxers, tracing the half-hard curve of his penis. “She was flirting with you all night.”

“She’s a lesbian,” Mike said.

“Why would you say that?” Pella felt abruptly indignant. “Because she owns her own business? Because she works out?” She could see the breadth of Vivian’s shoulders beneath her denim jacket, the tendrils climbing out of her dress.

“She told me about her girlfriend,” Mike said.

“Oh.” Pella was too tipsy; she was losing the thread. “Would you like to be with both of us together?” she murmured, her lips to Mike’s ear. “Would that turn you on?”

Only silence answered.

“We’ve never talked about that,” she said. “A threesome.”

No response. She climbed atop him and began to move in rhythm. She rocked back and forth. She arched her back, elbows high, and ran the fingers of both hands through her tangled hair. She let out a long low moan. She pitched forward and planted a hand in the hair of his chest. She rocked in a circle, pressing her pubic bone against him. She moaned again.

“Pella,” Mike said in the toneless voice you use to interrupt someone.

She leaned down over him, her hair against his face, her voice a breathy whisper in his ear. “Fuck me, baby. However you like.”

“Pella.”

She stopped her grinding, or whatever she was doing, and waited.

Silence.

“What?” she said.

“It doesn’t really bend that way.”

“Mmm,” she purred, her voice cheap and playful. “Which way does it bend?”

He wasn’t inside her anymore, if he ever had been. His penis was more

or less behind her as she perched on his belly. She reached back and found it with her hand. He was half hard, firm but not fully erect. She tried to stroke him into fullness.

“I’m serious,” he said. “You’re hurting me.”

“Am I?”

“Pella. Stop it. You’re crushing me.”

She came partway out of the trance she’d been in, a mixture of willful playacting and straight-up drunkenness. “I’m crushing you?” she said. “You’re three times my size.”

“You’re on my bladder,” he said. “It’s painful.”

She rolled off him. She wasn’t aroused or wet anymore, but she didn’t want to give up. She went back into her trance. “I want you to fuck me,” she purred, or slurred, as her hand found his penis again.

“Pella. Why are you—”

“I need you to fuck me,” she said. “Hard.”

“Pella!” he said, his voice loud enough to startle them both into a different awareness. She felt glad Martin wasn’t home. It was only Owen who, on the far side of the paneled wall, might hear them.

“What?” she said.

“I’m exhausted,” he pleaded. “I’ve been up since three a.m.”

“Okay,” she said, relenting.

I need you to fuck me was not how they talked to each other. Their erstwhile sex, the sex they used to have, was all tenderness and solicitude. The words loitered contritely in the air as though embarrassed on her behalf.

“Such a rookie mistake to get drunk at the rehearsal,” Mike said. “A wedding’s a marathon, not a sprint. The goal is to be the last one standing tomorrow night.”

“I’m not drunk,” she said. “Anyway, enough sports metaphors.”

“Who said anything about sports?”

“You. Constantly. Marathon. Sprint. Goal. It’s relentless.”

“Now you don’t like the way I talk?”

“It’s a wedding,” she said. “Not a competition.”

“With you?” he said. “Everything’s a competition.”

The room felt stifling, warm and humid and still. The bed was too small —it gave her no space to roll away from Mike. She twisted toward the

window, but this just meant her back, not her front, was pressed against him. She felt the dull ache of a longing that came from her deepest core. Not the desire for sex, exactly. The desire for desire.

The bed creaked and shifted. Wood scraped on wood: the bedside drawer. A square of light flared in the darkness.

“Hey!” she said. “What are you doing?”

Mike was sitting up, his back against the headboard. “Reading my email.”

“But we made a deal!” An awful sadness welled in Pella.

“You said we could check our phones in the morning,” Mike said. “Feels like morning to me.”

He fell silent as he scrolled through his messages. Pella heard a distant rumble of thunder. The wind whipped through the trees. She imagined Owen asleep behind the wood-paneled wall—she envied him Martin’s absence for the night. His big bed, his air conditioner, his solitude.

“And there it is,” Mike announced. “I knew this would happen. Your buddy Irma got off scot-free.”

Pella, despite her curiosity, did not reply. The gauzy curtain, caught by a gust, eddied off the sill and brushed her face.

“Do you know a girl named Dahlia?” Mike said. “Dahlia Breughel?”

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24

President Molina, for all the stolidness of her appearance, worked with a sorcerer's speed. Dahlia had been suspended for the year. Pammy had been placed on probation. Irma had never even been contacted by the administration, her friends having refused to admit that she'd been involved. The statement released by the president's office made clear and even repeated, a moment of profligacy that, to Irma's mind, stood out conspicuously against the brusque concision of the statement as a whole, that Dahlia and Pammy had received equivalent punishments—that they were equally to blame; that both had made full apologies to the injured parties and the community at large; and that Dahlia's suspension was a technicality, stemming from "unresolved academic infractions."

"Moreover," continued the statement, "it is clear that our college must make real progress toward ensuring the equality of every member of our community."

The Brightness ran a story immediately, and a host of other outlets, including the *New York Times,* followed. In the comments section of the Brightness, two freshmen at a far-off college posted a link to the FREE DAHLIA sweatshirts they'd designed: white on pink and satiny black on black. The sub-commenters cheered and placed their orders.

Dahlia's departure was imminent. Her mom had already arrived and was packing up her room. Dahlia was at Irma's saying goodbye. "Beer?" Irma said, and opened the fridge. A sad final toast seemed appropriate.

"No thank you," came the chipper reply. "I'm going to have to drive. The other Ms. Breughel gets narcoleptic after ten."

"You're going tonight."

"Yeah. She has to work tomorrow." Dahlia nuzzled her nose against

Anderson Cooper's. "Andy, Andy, Andy," she whispered. "You're gonna miss me."

Well, hell, Irma thought, and cracked the beer for herself—that cold fizzy swig marked the first time she had ever drunk alone. She thought of the old hexagonal church at Sacred Heart where she'd gone to Mass as a girl—before parishes were reshuffled and that nifty building became a flea market and then an abandoned flea market—and of her mom's hearty sip of Communion wine. She looked at Dahlia and the cat. "Do you want to take him with you?"

Dahlia's head snapped toward her. "What?"

"Anderson. Would your mom let you take him home?"

Dahlia's eyes widened. Then she squeezed them shut, shaking her head in a vigorous way as if to ward off this idea before it could take root. "She's allergic."

Irma nodded, though this was clearly a lie. She sat down on the rug. "I'm sorry," she offered.

Dahlia, Anderson cradled in her arms, looked at her kindly. "What for?"

"For letting you guys take the blame."

"We deserve the blame," Dahlia said. "We're the ones who did it."

Irma felt her nose twitch. It seemed like maybe she wanted to cry. "I did it too," she said in an almost pleading tone.

"Not really," Dahlia said.

Irma sniffed in the salty drippage that was trying to escape her nostrils, then steeled herself with a sip of beer and thought about what she was trying to say. "It was my idea."

"That's true."

"And I wrote the editorial."

Dahlia smiled. "That's why it was so good."

"So..." Irma wanted to go on, to rehash and talk through it all, but she felt physically overcome, her throat closed, her eyes stuttering in watery blinks as they stared down at the *W* of the rug, and it was all she could do to lift and drop her shoulders in a helpless gesture she wished she could infuse with all the meaning in the world.

Dahlia—gone for the entire year. Irma couldn't believe it. When she'd dreamed of senior year, she'd dreamed only of Dahlia's company. Her classes, her thesis, her preparations for her future, even her friendship with

Pella—all of it faded into the background. But now that dream was over. Senior year would come and go, Irma would sell the *W* rug to a freshman for forty bucks, and Dahlia would never sprawl on it again. *It was my idea,* Irma thought. *And it's all my fault.*

Dahlia looked at her with soft curiosity and smiled. For her own part, she seemed calm and unfazed. Anderson Cooper lay on his back across her lap, his body looking comically long. One of Dahlia's hands cupped his head; the other strummed his stretched-out stomach.

"Blarggh," said Irma, and tried to slough off her weakness, or at least its outward signs. "What are you going to do in Evanston?"

"Become a cam girl," Dahlia said. "Kidding. I'm going to finish my incompletes. Valerie said my professors can be in touch while I'm gone, so I can do as much schoolwork as I like. I might even graduate faster. Only about nine years after you."

"You call Molina Valerie now?" Irma said.

"Why not? You call Judy Judy."

"That's true," said Irma uncertainly. But she'd known Professor Eglantine for over three years now, had eaten lunch with her a hundred times.

"Valerie doesn't really suit her, does it? She's more of a Jackie. Or a Louisa. Or something more ethnic—she's second-generation Mexican, you know."

"Everybody knows *that*," Irma said. "She says it in every speech."

"She gives speeches?" said Dahlia with surprise that was probably ironic, although who could say for sure. "Did you know she has two cats?"

"No," Irma admitted.

"One of them's a tabby. Where the heck is Changchang? My mom's going to be furious when I'm late."

"How is your mom, anyway?"

"Furious."

On cue, the heavy door of Phumber 405 swung inward, and there stood Pammy. One of her arms trailed behind her, and attached to it, via an interweaving of fingers, was a tall blond boy wearing an untucked flannel. A protective mask, pushed out by a mass of bandages, covered his nose and surrounded his light blue eyes. The mask was an odd pinkish beige that

reminded Irma of dental equipment. It made him look like a preppy serial killer.

"Dudes," Pammy said. "Sorry I'm late. Monty, this is Irma."

"Hey," said Irma.

"And this is Anderson Cooper." Dahlia puppeted Anderson waving a paw.

"Hi, Anderson," Monty said gamely. He cast a benevolent, apologetic look around the room. "I'm not staying. I'm just dropping Pammy off."

"Sorry about your face," Dahlia said in her girlish singsong that only pretended to be insincere.

"That's okay." Monty shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'm a feminist."

Dahlia nodded solemnly. "That's good, because feminists are impervious to pain. Your mask is amazing, by the way."

"Thanks," said Monty. "I have to wear it for a month."

"Would you like a beer?" Irma asked, trying to rise to the loose camaraderie of this banter, though deep down she felt annoyed that Pammy had shown up late with a boy in tow. Pammy and Monty had the entire school year to make out; Dahlia would be gone in an hour.

Monty, who'd clearly been told not to linger, looked longingly at Pammy. Their fingers were still entwined. Irma realized that they'd just finished having sex, and this realization, remedial as it was, struck her as a kind of progress: She had an embarrassing habit of remaining oblivious to the ambient signals of offstage sex or drugs. "No," he said sadly. "I'll leave you guys to it."

He leaned down to kiss Pammy goodbye. The kiss, due to the condition of his face, was quick and careful. He lay a hand on the doorknob and turned to Dahlia. "Sorry about Morris," he said. "I tried to talk him down."

"It's fine," said Dahlia.

"He's not a bad guy."

"Never said he was."

The door shut behind him. Pammy opened the fridge, took the last beer from the cardboard six-pack sleeve, and plopped down on the rug next to Irma. "Fuck," she said.

"That mask is hilarious," Dahlia said.

"I know, right? Poor guy." Pammy glugged her beer. "How are you, Dahl?"

“So creepy,” whispered Dahlia, still thinking about the mask. “He seems like a sweetheart.”

“He is.”

Irma, half tipsy from her sips of Spotted Cow, didn’t know what to believe and what not to believe. She saw now—*I’m seeing so many things,* she thought with grim self-mockery; *the scales are falling from this child’s eyes*—how driven Dahlia had been to enact a successful rape trial with Ben-Josh as the victim and herself as the assailant, complete with conviction and punishment and quote-unquote closure. Dahlia was always going to get in trouble—that, in a way, had been the entire point of the project. And Irma, with her usual high-minded blindness, had both abetted and been shielded from what was actually going on.

She wanted to believe that Dahlia’s apparent cheer and confidence was not an act, and not only not an act but something durable that would persist through a year in Evanston with her mom and stepdad. She wanted to believe that Dahlia would spend her time away finishing her incompletes and return to Westish next fall. She wanted to believe that Dahlia and President Molina were pals now and that Dahlia would trust the president as a surrogate mother figure, a resource and a comfort, and that this would help her to recover, to stabilize, to thrive.

But how realistic were such hopes? Irma feared they were unrealistic. Dahlia was Dahlia. Dahlia waxed and waned. She was as vividly flesh-and-blood as a person could be, and yet she was always vanishing. She could seem so vibrant and present when seated in front of you, so strong and plausible. She was, Irma thought, like a light that ran on a motion detector: When you waved your hand before her, she switched on. But, by the same process, she switched off when you weren’t there. She curled up in the dark, involute, alone, while moments and years ticked by with cemetery grace. She didn’t return your call or your text; her perfect silence made you feel you had erred in sending it. Dahlia’s promises, in the end, were worthless, but the fact that her promises were worthless was not due to any moral failing on her part, not to any maliciousness or urge to dissemble. Each and every promise was made in earnest. They were simply unkeepable, that was all.

What, Irma wondered, did it mean to be driven by something? Sometimes it seemed that when men were driven by something, the

emphasis was on the drive, and that was called ambition and applauded and rewarded, whereas when women were driven by something, the emphasis was on the something, and that was called all manner of names and treated, as a first step, with antidepressants and other legal drugs.

"I think it's a great idea to finish your incompletes," Irma ventured.

"Isn't it?" Dahlia said. Her phone lay beside her on the rug. Its rectangular face brightened and darkened, brightened and darkened, as her mom called and called.

"If I can do anything to help," Irma said, with a glance around her bookshelves, "I've taken some of those classes. I still have lots of the books."

"Thanks."

Irma knew she was being anxious and schoolmarmish, needing to know the *plan*, but she couldn't help it. If Dahlia would finish her incompletes, abide by the rules for once, then everything would be okay. "Or if you need anything from the library, I could check it out and mail it to you. Although I guess you'll have the Northwestern library."

"Yeah," said Dahlia. "I'll be there nonstop."

Pammy was tapping at her phone. "These sweatshirts are genius," she said. "Do you guys want black or pink?"

"Black," said Dahlia.

"Too late. The pink one's cooler. I mailed one to your mom's house."

"She'll be thrilled," Dahlia said as her phone flashed again. "Okay, I'm out. You guys don't miss me too much."

She hugged them each, saving her fondest embrace for Anderson Cooper, and clomped loudly down the stairs.

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II

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1

Pella swam way out. Far past where anyone else was swimming, as if she could go forever, and she felt she could. Just out, out, out, into the sparkling whiteness of so much water, its surface a hail of diamonds. The salt-laden ocean buoyed her body. Compared to Lake Michigan, it felt thick and supportive, like a cushion or even a trampoline. The harder she tried to bore through it, the more forcefully it flung her up.

She dove hard, cozied beneath the cushion, let it press on her from above. She scooted along the bottom, scraping her chest against the sudden rise of a sandbar. Her heart slowed to a pared-down, peaceful rhythm. The green opacity of the water mixed with the sharpness of her vision. The world hung suspended in purity, beyond the need to breathe. Her hangover, out here, simply did not exist.

At the surface, she flipped to her back and floated. Ears submerged, the golden sun framing and warming her face, she opened her eyes. Torn-cotton cirri chased by overhead. Any hint of drama about the day's weather had been dismissed. After midnight a storm raged over the island, and in its wake a southwest breeze, like a stealthy stage crew or catering staff, swept away the drooping fog and dark-bellied clouds and replaced them with this privileged blue.

Reluctantly, she swam toward shore. The wedding contingent had claimed a dune-backed stretch of Town Beach, at the edge of the area overseen by lifeguards, where guests could gather to swim and hang out before getting ready for the ceremony. Eleven o'clock, the designated meeting hour, had just arrived. The sun lay at Pella's back as she paddled landward. The crowd so far consisted of the same Tilly and Tilly-adjacent families who'd attended the party last night. Clarice, spindly and responsible, presided over her screaming, splashing brood of younger

brothers. Martin's sister Shuba swatted a rubber ball back and forth with her boyfriend, the small blue sphere arcing from paddle to paddle.

Big Jabez stood at the ocean's edge, waves lapping his ankles, arms crossed over his liver-spotted chest. His surfer's leggings hugged his skinny legs and fixed a square pouch like a picture frame around his ancient scrotum. The outfit produced precisely the right effect, Pella thought, ridiculous and indomitable. He watched her from the far side of the melee of children as she stopped paddling, stood in the waist-high water, and slicked back her hair with cupped hands. His blatant ogling should probably have filled her with outrage, or at least indignation, but Pella couldn't shake an odd affection for him, as though he were expressing some secret perversity of her own. She waved. He gazed at her woodenly, pretending not to notice. It was the category of horny old death-flouting man she felt affection for; she might have liked to become one someday. There being no female equivalent, it seemed unlikely.

"I'm peeing!" cried one of Martin's nephews as he bobbed nearby, four limbs clasped hungrily around a green-and-white-striped ball almost as big as he. There was triumph in the announcement. Pella, who'd peed into her own suit while swimming farther out, understood his joy, but she gave the boy a wide berth as she waded in. A gust swept along the water and goosefleshed her upper arms. She shivered as her eyes searched for the spot—at the edge of the gathering, a little aloof from the crowd—where Mike had set up their borrowed beach chairs.

As soon as she stepped out of the ocean, her hangover returned in force, and so did her memory of last night's awkward humiliation. Straddling Mike, bucking her hips, making porny faces and moaning in a cheesy, unconvincing way. She felt ashamed of her performance. Pretending to be present, immersed in her desire for him, while actually absent, seduced by an anxious thought: *Something's wrong and sex will fix it.*

Now she spotted Mike, farther down the beach than she'd expected—the current had swept her a good ways south. He hunched forward, one bare foot planted on either side of the woven reclining chair, his big hairy torso curled around his phone. He wore the same expression of utter concentration he wore while working deep into the night at their dining-room table, plus an extra sense of heaviness and gloom. He was worried about missing the football game today; he was worried about the upshot of

the prank; maybe, like Pella, he was worried about their encounter last night.

Pella knew what to do: Comfort him. Throw her arms around him, tell him she loved him, encourage him in his work. The idea cheered her. Instead of fretting about what was wrong, she could simply set things right. She headed toward him.

Beyond Mike, a tall, willowy woman emerged from between the dunes. She approached the beach quickly, her long legs gliding over the sand with enviable ease. Her milk-white skin reflected the sunlight in an oddly luminous way, as though she were the moon. She wore a gauzy black tunic that fell to the middle of her lean striking thighs, and a large-brimmed straw hat with a black band. Her plain gold jewelry glistened. Her straw bag matched her hat. Dark sunglasses hid her eyes. Everything about her whispered *Simplicity. Elegance. Perfection.*

Shit, Pella thought.

The woman's hair was tucked beneath her hat, but Pella felt certain that, once revealed, that hair would be a glistening raven black, and the woman's most elegant feature yet. She was thirty yards off, and Pella hadn't seen her in a decade, but distance and time were no match for the keenness of her attention when it came to Katrina Barker-Fleig.

When Pella first noticed her, they'd been equidistant from Mike, as though destined to converge where he was sitting. Now Katrina continued to breeze along the sand while Pella stopped dead. If she had to encounter her old nemesis this weekend, she'd hoped to do so in a dark corner of the wedding reception under cover of loud music and multiple drinks. She felt exposed and vulnerable—not just sober but brutally hungover, her flaws and blemishes sharpened by the same sun that seemed to consecrate Katrina.

Katrina kept gliding along until she stood directly behind Mike—she could have stretched out a long arm and patted him on the head. She removed her sunglasses, placed a temple tip between her perfect teeth, and rose on tiptoe to scan the crowd of beachgoers.

Like a lighthouse beam, Katrina's gaze swept up and down the sand. Finally, she found what she was seeking: a familiar face. She smiled broadly, and a pale arm waved. *"Pella!"* she cried, her voice full of joy. *"Pella Affenlicht!"*

Mike, startled, dropped his BlackBerry into the sand. He scooped it up and looked around in confusion. Who was shouting his fiancée's name into his ear? Sheepishly, Pella waved to them both.

Katrina hurried to Pella and wrapped her in a hug. The hug felt firm and stiff, but only because Katrina's arms were firm and stiff; the hug seemed to contain a good deal of affection. Pella suspected a trap. Katrina clasped her by the still-damp flesh of her upper arms, took a half step backward, and looked Pella up and down. The brim of her big straw hat shaded them both.

"You're not on Facebook," she said.

Pella shook her head.

"Such mystique! It's very canny of you. But you were always elusive, weren't you?"

Pella, who had no idea how to reply, just looked at her.

"At our tenth reunion," Katrina said, "Jordy and Lila and I talked about you nonstop. How weird it was that you weren't there. You couldn't have been there, of course—you were younger than us. But it never seemed that way. We were all so close. And then no one ever heard from you again. You look one hundred percent fantastic, by the way."

"Thanks," said Pella. "So do you."

"I love that suit. So forties. Very hip right now. I wish I could wear things like that."

"It's the first time I've worn it," Pella said.

"It's perfection on you."

Pella felt a thrill at the compliment even as she found it impossible to believe that Katrina didn't despise her and looked for a backhanded slight. *Perfection* because it was an unrevealing one-piece and hid the softness of her stomach? *Perfection* because the narrow mint-green stripes lengthened her stubby frame? But those were precisely the reasons she'd chosen it. And the suit had cost enough to suggest that it must, in fact, be very hip right now.

"Look at this place." Katrina pirouetted to take it all in: the twinkling ocean, the long tawny camber of beach, the steep clay bluffs behind them. "So beautiful and remote. Like we've all been shipwrecked together."

"It's nice," Pella agreed.

"Like the wedding in *The Tempest*," Katrina said. "'Come, temperate nymphs, and help to celebrate / A contract of true love.' I memorized that

entire play because we read it in Mr. DeMeer's class, and I was dying to impress him. Do you remember my insane crush on him?"

Pella, again suspecting a trap, said nothing. Katrina continued as blithely as she'd begun:

"God, Francis DeMeer. I haven't said that name in years, but now he pops right into my head. I literally believed we were getting married." Winningly, Katrina thunked herself on the forehead at the misplaced zeal of her youth. She looked at Pella fondly. "It's terrific to see you."

"You too," Pella said.

"Are Owen and Martin around? I should say hello before we get too deep into reminiscing."

"Martin's here somewhere," Pella said. "Owen's having brunch with his mom."

"How adorable."

"Owen and Martin are doing things the old-fashioned way," Pella explained, pleased to display her insider knowledge. "Avoiding each other before the ceremony. Ah, there's Martin."

She pointed toward Martin, who was wearing wave-patterned board shorts and smiling his lopsided smile as he chatted with one of his nephews.

"Let me run and give him a hug," Katrina said. "Are you set up somewhere?"

Pella pointed to Mike, who was hunkered over his phone, and their blanket and chairs.

"Perfect. I'll be back in a flash."

As Katrina strode away, Pella called after her: "Would you tell Martin to put his hat on?"

"Seriously?" Katrina looked tickled, as Pella intended, by the genial chutzpah involved in telling the groom what to do.

"Seriously. Owen doesn't want him to get sunburned before the ceremony."

"OMG," said Katrina. "They truly are the cutest."

Pella paced up the gentle slope of beach to where Mike was sitting. She roughed her skin with a Donald Duck towel, wrapped it around her waist, and plopped down in her chair. "Who's that?" Mike asked without slowing the pace of his texting.

"An old friend of mine. From high school."

“She sure seems happy to see you,” Mike remarked.

“I don’t know,” Pella said doubtfully. “Maybe she is.”

Not two minutes passed before Katrina returned. “Mission accomplished,” she proudly announced. “The hat is on the head.”

“Thanks,” Pella said.

“Katrina Barker.” She stuck out the knife-edge of a slender hand for Mike to shake.

“Mike Schwartz.” Mike’s personal code of conduct prevented him from shaking anyone’s hand, especially a woman’s, while sitting down. He jammed his phone into his shorts and rose to his feet. “Here,” he said. “Take my chair.”

“Oh, no.” Katrina smiled. “I couldn’t.”

“These chairs hurt my back,” Mike said firmly. “I’d rather be on the blanket.”

Katrina, clearly pleased by this bit of chivalry, nodded at Pella as though to compliment her on her choice of a well-mannered mate.

Mike lowered himself to the tasseled blanket, which was pinned down against the breeze by a cooler of beer and the starboard legs of Pella’s chair, and returned to his phone. The friarly bald spot atop his crown caught the glare of the sun.

On Pella’s other side, Katrina untied the knotted strings of her tunic and tugged it over her head. Beneath it she wore a simple, elegant black bikini, its top and bottom so remote from each other, separated by the pale length of her torso, as to be incommunicado. If it hadn’t been brand-new, it might have been the same suit Pella sat proudly beside in the summer of 2003, when they vacationed at Jordy Lachlan’s house in Bar Harbor.

Katrina placed her sunglasses and hat atop her straw bag, then unpinned and shook out her cascade of black hair. She unfurled her long body on Mike’s vacated chair and turned her face toward Pella. “I knew you’d be here,” she said. “But I can’t believe you’re here.”

Maybe Katrina’s right, Pella thought—maybe I am elusive. When she’d dropped out of Tellman Rose to marry David, she’d lost touch with every person from that phase of her life. She hadn’t intended to be mysterious, or to disappear; it just worked out that way. In the early days of her marriage, when life still had a certain breadth, she’d occasionally bumped into an old classmate in a restaurant or shop or on the streets of San Francisco. But

since moving to Westish, she'd seen no one and heard no news. Until, suddenly, Katrina.

What was Katrina like? It was hard to tell. She seemed at first glance perfect and ageless—she seemed not to have changed at all. Her hair, certainly, was the same: long and black and shimmering, simply, almost layerlessly, cut. The way she'd quickly arranged this shimmer to frame her face reminded Pella that as a teenager, Katrina had been eager to hide her ears, which she was convinced were pointy and strange. Pella had spent many a night assuring her that her ears were totally fine.

Pella looked at Mike, trying to catch in his eyes, as in an angled mirror, a glimpse of Katrina less preordained than her own, but Mike was thumb-tapping his BlackBerry, and anyway Katrina's kind of beauty was bound to be lost on Mike. He would dismissively call her skinny. He would mean it, but Pella would feel suspicious; she'd spent her life collecting evidence—the evidence was everywhere—of the superiority of the tall and thin. Beneath her suspicion she'd be flattered by Mike's implicit praise of her own body; beneath *that* she would feel indignation on Katrina's behalf, an urge to defend the diverse plenitude of womankind, and a further suspicion that Mike's preference for bodies like Pella's made him a philistine, as undiscerning about feminine beauty as he was about clothes and food. Pella—thought Pella—was a grilled cheese of a woman, salty, filling, and cheap, while Katrina was a gourmet meal.

The converse question—how would Katrina see Mike?—seemed easily summarized by the nut-brown pelt that covered his chest and shoulders, its dense curls smeared and matted with white sunscreen. He was too crude and earthy for Katrina's ethereal taste.

Pella felt immobilized, as though caught between two objects of equal gravity; she wasn't sure what to say, or how to say it, or to whom. Mike's phone fell silent, and he tossed it down on the blanket. He popped open the cooler and reached past Pella to hand Katrina a beer.

"How do you know Owen and Martin?" he asked.

"I was Owen's editor at *The New Yorker,*" Katrina explained as she nodded her thanks for the beer. "We published an excerpt of his novel before the book came out."

"The excerpt worked beautifully," Pella said.

"Didn't it?" Katrina replied. "Of course, the whole book is terrific. I

can’t take credit for that. But I can take credit for being one of the first to see it. When I proposed the idea, everyone in the office said, ‘Owen *who*?’ And then Owen and I were at it forever, tweaking and re-tweaking to make the piece stand on its own. That’s how we became friends,” she cheerily concluded, “and that’s why I’m here!”

Mike nodded. “Hard work pays off.”

“It does,” Katrina agreed. “My boss was skeptical about the whole endeavor. But when Owen was nominated for the Pulitzer, it was a feather in my cap that we’d been the first magazine to publish him. I got promoted not long after.”

“Sounds like you and the Buddha really helped each other.”

“I and who?” asked Katrina.

“The Buddha,” Mike said. “That’s Owen’s old baseball nickname.”

Katrina smiled. “It’s funny—you read things in Owen’s book, and you forget that some of them are true. He does have that Zen-like quality, doesn’t he?”

“At times,” Mike said. “But that’s not where the name comes from. In college he had a little potbelly—like a Laughing Buddha statue.”

“Not anymore!” Katrina said. “Now he’s taut as a drum.”

Pella listened in amazement as Mike and Katrina chatted easily across her chair. It was like one of those YouTube videos where a bear and a kitten become friends.

“How long have you been at *The New Yorker*?” Mike asked.

“Pretty much forever,” Katrina said. “When I graduated college, I decided it was the only place I was willing to work. So I moved to the city and applied for every position that came up. I interviewed for five—no, *six*—assistant jobs before they broke down and hired me.”

Mike nodded. “When you know what you want, don’t take no for an answer.”

“Exactly. We’re not all Pella Affenlichts, you know? We can’t slide by on boundless beauty and talent. I’m just a dogged grinder.”

“Sounds like you’re doing pretty well for yourself,” Mike said.

Katrina shrugged happily. “It’s a rewarding job.”

Katrina’s self-deprecating praise of Pella sounded earnest, but Pella couldn’t help feeling slighted. It was true, she reflected grimly as she

tugged at the thigh of her suit, that she wasn't a dogged grinder. Sometimes it seemed she'd never worked hard at anything. Or at least not hard enough.

"Do you edit Jonathan Safran Foer?" she asked.

"Ha," said Katrina. "I wish."

Mike's phone buzzed. He shot Katrina an apologetic look and punched a button. "Schwartz," he growled. "What? No. Can't run that action without Vic. Hang on." He scrambled to his feet and wandered down the beach, both hands cupped around his phone to block out the waves and the shrieking children. Pella felt sad to see him go; he'd done such a good job of facilitating the conversation while she'd been dumbly adjusting.

Katrina reached across the gap between their chairs and gripped Pella's wrist. "But enough about me already."

"Ah," said Pella.

"I want to ask how you and Mike met, but I feel like already know because of Owen's book! I mean, I know it's all fictionalized, artistic liberties and so on, but still."

"But still," Pella agreed.

"It's such a small world. Tiny, even. Imagine my surprise when I delved into Owen's manuscript—a friend at the publishing house slipped me a copy—and this name from my past popped up. *Pella!* It's not exactly Kate or Emily."

"No," Pella said.

"So what have you been up to?"

"Oh, not much." Pella could hear the light irony in her voice that seemed to suggest she'd been up to any number of brilliant things but was too modest to mention them.

"I'm sure *that's* not true."

Before her swim, Pella had removed her engagement ring, as the internet advised. Now, as though in response to Katrina's question, she reached into her bag, plucked the ring from her shorts' pocket, and slid it onto her finger.

Katrina let out a gasp. With a swift flutter of limbs, she swung toward Pella and cradled her hand. "Mmm," she purred. "It's perfect."

Pella looked at her ring—something she rarely did. Its straightforward opulence was the flip side of Mike's thrift. He insisted on buying the cheapest eggs, the cheapest coffee, the cheapest toilet paper, so much so

that Pella rarely let him go to the store. And then he blew two months' salary on the chunkiest diamond he could find.

Inflamed by sunlight, it looked slightly foreign on her hand. It seemed to belong to a different kind of woman.

"Do you really like it?" she asked. "Isn't it a tiny bit...basic?"

"Basic is *back*," Katrina said emphatically. "I mean, fine, if you want to get all hypercritical, it has a slight department-store vibe. But that just makes it more endearing. I mean, seriously, Pella, it's not supposed to be original. It's a symbol of ideal love. And that's what you *have*. In your *life*."

"Ideal love," Pella said.

Katrina nodded. "A ring like that—it's like poetry. Nowadays it's supposedly impossible to write a decent poem that rhymes. Rhymes are stilted and old-fashioned, rhymes don't reflect the times. But you know what my favorite poems do? They rhyme."

"Like what?" Pella said. "Elizabeth Bishop doesn't rhyme."

"Sure she does. 'But in between / a little cock is seen / carved on a dim column in the travertine.'" Katrina shook her rainbow-black hair from one shoulder to the other. "And anyway, all the good love poems do. Shakespeare? Petrarch? Keats? And it's the same with your ring. It's the Petrarchan sonnet of engagement rings."

With pointed toes, her movements as precise as those of the dancer she'd grown too tall to become, Katrina lifted her legs and reversed the cross of her ankles. "Besides, that great big man of yours was bound to give you a great big diamond. When's the wedding?"

"Next summer," Pella said.

"When next summer?" Katrina, hungry for detail, tore her eyes from the ring to look at Pella.

Normally Pella had little desire to talk about her wedding preparations, which felt like a gnarly series of tasks she'd been avoiding and a whole lot of work just to eat some chicken piccata. But with Katrina waiting eagerly, she had no choice but to try.

"Well," she said. "There's a lovely chapel at Westish that will be perfect for the ceremony. And we can likely rent it for free, because Mike's so plugged in at the school, which is good for our budget. We haven't finalized the date—sometime in July. June is busy for Mike, with the school year

ending, and in August we'll be moving to wherever he gets into law school."

Katrina nodded. "How many guests?"

"Oh, about three hundred," Pella said, surprised at her own sudden fluency.

"A good size," Katrina agreed. "Is Mike okay with that?"

"Depends what you mean," Pella said. "He'd rather have a thousand."

"A straight man who wants a big wedding—be still, my heart. Have you thought about your dress?"

Pella admitted she hadn't. This felt like a strange confession, and she worried Katrina's eyes would narrow—how could she not have considered her dress?

Katrina, though, seemed thrilled. She twisted in her chair and studied Pella's body intently, tapping a forefinger against her cheek. If no dress existed, she was free to invent one.

"I've got it," she said. "You want it to be sexy up here, of course. Show off those gorgeous shoulders." She traced around Pella's collarbones with her fingers. "And the cut of your swimsuit is perfect at the bust—you could mimic that exactly.

"You want a trumpet or a mermaid cut, I should think, tight and fitted all through this." She waved a hand over Pella's midsection and issued a series of obscure enchantments. "Break it here...hide it and show it off...hips, curves, old Hollywood...flare out here at the knee. Long. You're thinking long, aren't you?"

"I am now," said Pella, mesmerized by this expertise.

"Good. Not an endless train or anything, but your whole vibe demands a touch of drama. Anyway, I'll shut up now. You don't need *my* help—you've always known what looks best on you. Except when you're doing your trashy tomboy thing."

"No, please go on," said Pella. "You're a huge help."

"What's your budget? Is that a rude question?"

"Not rude at all."

Katrina waited.

"I guess I'm not sure, though," Pella said. "How much do dresses cost?"

"They cost twice whatever your budget is. But it's better to start with the

dress.” Katrina peered into her bag and pulled out her phone. “Let’s have a look.”

With a few quick taps, Katrina conjured a series of gorgeous fit-and-flare dresses, some of them from obscure boutiques in Australia, that Pella had to admit she’d look good in. For the first time, her wedding day began to acquire shape and color, a certain *reality*, in her mind. Perhaps a Carapelli’s-catered, Westish-chapel wedding wouldn’t be so bad. Perhaps Katrina would help her and Mike plan the whole affair—perhaps, if their friendship was really being renewed, Katrina could be a bridesmaid.

By the time they looked up from the phone, the sand around them had filled with beachgoers. “I’m so happy for you,” Katrina concluded. “Mike is amazing.”

“You think so?”

“I know so! Like a big teddy bear.”

Despite how well this reunion was going, Pella couldn’t shake her teenage terror of Katrina’s haughty verdicts. Sure, she thought, a teddy bear: squishy and covered in fur.

“And tall!” Katrina went on. “Tall is good. I can’t tell you how many dates I’ve been on with guys who claimed to be six two, and then I get to the bar and I’m *peering* down at them.”

“Mike’s tall,” Pella agreed. “What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

Katrina waved a hand. “No one of note. I’m just coming out of something, as it happens.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine. We broke up about a year ago. I’m glad to have more time to focus on my career. Without trying so hard to make something work, you know?”

“Mm,” said Pella.

“You said you two are moving? Where to?”

“Well, we’re not sure. Mike’s applying to law school. We’re hoping he might get accepted at Columbia.” *Or anywhere,* she thought, recalling the dust on Mike’s LSAT prep guides. There were nine law schools in New York City, and she could recite the admissions standards for each.

“Get. Out.” Katrina turned to gaze at Pella wide-eyed. “You’re moving to New York?”

“Nothing’s certain,” Pella said. “He’d have to get in.”

“Of course he’ll get *in*,” Katrina said. “This is so exciting.”

Pella shrugged, not wishing to jinx her yearning with too much presumption. “Fingers crossed,” she said.

“Will you get Columbia housing?” Katrina asked. “They must have apartments for married couples.”

“They do,” Pella said. This was one aspect of married life she’d not only contemplated but researched.

“Morningside Heights is nice,” Katrina said. “But I’d hate to have you so far away. Don’t you think you should live in Brooklyn? Everyone else does. Oh! Including Owen and Martin!”

Because of all the childhood excursions Pella had taken to New York City with her dad, from their first trip up the Empire State Building onward, and because of the weekends she’d spent there in high school, some of them in Katrina’s company, and the reports she’d heard from Judy and Owen, and the scores upon scores of novels and movies she’d consumed, Pella liked to think of herself as half a New Yorker. But in truth she’d only ever been a tourist, and that was long ago. Her knowledge of the city was minimal, and she couldn’t tell her Heights from her Gardens.

“Apartments, unlike wedding dresses, really are about budget,” Katrina said. “Rent is a wedding dress you buy every month for the rest of your life. But don’t worry—I can help you navigate. I have friends who are brokers.”

“Wow,” said Pella. “That would be terrific.”

“Law school at last for Mike Schwartz! As a fan of Owen’s novel, I love it. A storybook ending. And what about you?”

Pella admitted, fumblingly, that she’d just finished her undergraduate degree.

“You were an English major?”

Pella nodded. “I did a lot of Modernist stuff. I had this professor who—”

“Mmm,” hummed Katrina, with a vague nod toward the horizon to indicate that the particulars of what one studied in college were best left to float out there, far beyond the incoming ferries. “And what are you thinking now?”

“Not sure,” Pella said. “Maybe I’ll become a yoga teacher. Or an aging waitress.”

“Oh, stop! Tell me the truth.”

Pella shrugged. “The truth is I really don’t know.”

“Well, if *The New Yorker* ever sounds appealing, let me know. I don’t have the power to hire and fire, but I could put in a good word.”

“Oh, gosh,” said Pella—a Wisconsin locution she used to use ironically until the irony fell away. “That would be amazing.”

“You’d have to start at the bottom,” Katrina said. “But there are ways to move up if you knock the right people’s socks off.”

Pella, with her spotty record, didn’t believe she could ever be hired by *The New Yorker* or any other institution whose role it was to keep winnowing the bright insatiable kids who had spent their lives being winnowed. But Katrina’s offer of help moved her deeply, and she tried, without being too sentimental, to say as much.

“What are friends for?” Katrina lightly replied. “And I didn’t mean that literally about the socks, by the way. It’s not that kind of office.”

Katrina reached into her straw bag for sunscreen and began with long smooth strokes to reapply it. “Wouldn’t that be a blast? It’d be just like high school when I was editing the *Telegraph*, and you were my deputy. Do you remember the invasion of Iraq?”

“Of course.”

“The way we stayed at the office all day and all night, writing our magnum opus about how everything America had done since 9/11 was a scam? And we got like thirty condescending letters from prominent alumni mansplaining how bad Saddam Hussein was, and I almost wimped out but you made me stand my ground? You were really my best friend back then.”

“More than Jordy?” Pella said.

Katrina, as she placed the pale blue bottle between her thighs so as to have both hands free for smearing, peered deeply into the question. “More than Jordy,” she confirmed.

AS PELLA GAZED out at the waves, she glimpsed an utterly different life she might have lived. One in which she and Katrina had never fallen out—one in which they stepped into adulthood single file, Katrina leading the way. A life in which Pella had an older, wiser friend to emulate and learn from. In which she’d visited Katrina at Princeton during high school and in New York during college and, after graduation, crashed on Katrina’s couch while she looked for a place of her own, or even became Katrina’s roommate. A

life in which she was spurred by Katrina's half-demented stubbornness, ambition, and work ethic toward accomplishments of her own.

Perhaps, Pella reflected, she'd all along been misremembering what happened—perhaps she'd misconstrued what was happening at the time. Perhaps sixteen-year-old Pella, with her penchant for drama, only assumed Katrina was livid with her for diverting DeMeer's attention. Assumed it because that was what Pella was trying so hard to do. But perhaps Katrina had barely noticed. Perhaps some incidental fissure appeared in their friendship, and Pella, with her usual combination of vainglory and guilt, decided the cause was her own bad behavior. Or perhaps Katrina and Jordy and Lila were simply busy with senior spring and the sentimental rituals that season entailed and had, without quite realizing it, excluded their younger friend. In which case Pella had never committed some grand betrayal, and the falling-out over DeMeer had been strictly in her head.

Could she have been so wrong? Pella wasn't sure—it was so long ago. But wasn't that what mattered—that it was so long ago? How could either of them care about Francis DeMeer or anything else that had happened back then? They were adults, not adolescents. They could live drama-free.

Katrina, her thick coat of sunscreen complete, put her hat and sunglasses on and lay back in her chair. "What's funny," she said, "not funny ha-ha, but funny *something*, is that *The New Yorker* is moving from Midtown into the new tower. One World Trade. Ground Zero."

"Whoa," Pella said.

"The whole company's going. The men's magazines and the women's magazines and our little gender-neutral magazine too. Everyone's a bit freaked out. To be leaving the current office, which has so much history, for what amounts to"—Katrina shrugged—"a gleaming ghost tomb in the sky."

"Right," Pella said.

"But frankly I'm looking forward to getting out of Times Square," Katrina said. "If I get frottaged by one more dude in an Elmo costume, I'm going to shoot myself, you know?"

Pella nodded and closed her eyes, feeling the sun on her face. Feeling, somehow, sixteen in a way she'd never felt at sixteen. "Totally," she said.

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2

As the sun slid toward its apex, ferries motored across the horizon, importing the afternoon's guests. Pella and Katrina reclined in matching starfish chairs, their cans of beer twisted into the sand between them.

"How did Mike propose?" Katrina's voice rose out of the implacability of the ocean's noisy silence. A matrix of sweat had surfaced between Pella's collarbones.

"Oh," said Pella. "Very publicly."

"Sounds like a story, then."

"It was graduation day," Pella said. "*My* graduation day. This past June. I was wearing my polyester robe, my mortarboard with the tassel. Feeling very silly and self-conscious and old. For months I'd been threatening not to go, to let them mail me my diploma. Every time I suggested it, Mike had an absolute fit."

"Well, no wonder," Katrina said. "He had a plan."

"Yes, but he wouldn't have let me skip it in any case. No one loves Westish the way Mike does. Every year he goes to watch his players graduate, and every year he comes home crying."

"Ugh," said Katrina. "Such a teddy bear."

"So the speeches end, and they start calling names. Mine's at the front of the alphabet—"

"Not for long," interjected Katrina. "Or are you keeping your name?"

"I haven't decided," said Pella.

"Hmm," Katrina mused. "Pella Affenlicht. Pella Schwartz. Pella Affenlicht-Schwartz. Anyway, go on."

"They call my name. I walk up the steps to the stage and shake the president's hand. She hands me my diploma and they take the photo, and then she whispers in my ear, 'Just stay where you are.'"

“OMG,” said Katrina.

“And I’m like, ‘Huh? Why would I do that?’ And I see Mike walking up the steps.”

“I’m dying,” said Katrina. “I’m literally dying right now.”

“I should have understood what was happening, but I was baffled. I thought it was some kind of prank. Or an actual dream in which my gown was about to fly off and I’d be naked underneath. Mike climbs the little steps in his navy blazer and Harpooner tie and drops down to one knee and reaches into his pocket. And the whole crowd roars.”

“I’m dead,” declared Katrina. “I just died.”

“It sounded like a football game,” Pella said. “Although maybe it wasn’t the crowd—maybe I blacked out. I have no idea what he said. Or what I said. Next thing I knew, I was wearing this ring.”

“Ugh,” said Katrina fondly. “Such a good proposal.”

“So I guess we’re engaged,” Pella concluded.

“*I’ll* say.”

It was an enormous relief to talk to Katrina, who seemed to endorse every aspect of Pella’s life. Katrina approved of Mike; she approved of Pella’s ring and Mike’s proposal; she approved of a big wedding on the Westish campus. She approved of Mike attending law school and of a move to New York; she even seemed to think that Pella could find a reputable job.

“You should visit me this winter,” Katrina said. “My place is tiny, but I just bought a foldout sofa—it cost a fortune, so it better be comfortable. We can visit neighborhoods you might want to live in. And I can take you to parties and introduce you to everyone. Everyone who won’t be here tonight, that is.”

“Gosh,” said Pella. “That sounds amazing.”

Suddenly Katrina strained forward in her beach chair, rigid and alert, like a pointer who’d scented a quail. Pella worried she’d made a faux pas. Did she sound too enthusiastic about sleeping on Katrina’s couch? Not enthusiastic enough?

Katrina pushed her hat back from her forehead and whipped off her sunglasses. She stared out at the water.

“There’s Nicky,” she said.

“Who?”

“Nicky,” she repeated impatiently. “Nicholas Byrnes.”

Pella, following the line of Katrina's gaze, spotted a figure swimming low in the water—the flick of an arm, the flash of a calf. The sun played blindingly over the surface. This Nicholas—if that was him and not just a trick of the light—was as far from shore as Pella had been an hour ago. For Katrina to recognize him at such a distance, she must have been pretty nearly in love.

With a soft sigh, Katrina redonned her sunglasses and sank back against the starfish chair, stretching her body to its full extent and restoring its confident grandeur.

"Well," she said. "I'm glad he's here. I could use a good fuck."

Pella, who'd chosen that moment to sip her beer, spat a fine spray over her thighs.

Katrina reached across the space between their chairs and seized Pella's wrist. "Sorry," she said. "That was crude."

"No, no," Pella assured her once she'd stopped coughing and caught her breath. "We all could."

IT WASN'T THE profanity that startled Pella, or the frank desire behind it; it was the fact that it had been voiced by Katrina. In Pella's memory, Katrina had never once said *fuck*. Primness and restraint were her power. To Pella, Katrina's leggy height had always been inseparable from her high-mindedness. She looked down on the world, with all the judgment the phrase implied, from a lofty place.

Her love of Francis DeMeer, for instance, had been lofty; it was the supposedly rarefied nature of their English teacher's mind that allowed Katrina to want to be ravished by him. The ravishing itself, in Katrina's elaborate narrations, always ended in a clockwork marriage, a bevy of talented children, and a joint literary biography published by Princeton University Press.

But here was Katrina, gripping Pella's wrist and talking about good fucks! Pella wasn't sure what to make of it.

"You and Nicholas are..." She tried to sum up the conversation so far. "An item?"

"You *could* say that," Katrina replied, and her deftly equivocal tone conveyed all that needed to be known: That if Pella *did* say that, she'd be

right in one way (they were sleeping together), wrong in a more important way (they weren't in a relationship), and right in the most important way of all (they were soulmates).

"We just have a connection, you know?" Katrina pressed a forefinger to her temple, where the connection dwelled. "And we do tend to fall into bed on these occasions. This will be our fourth tryst just counting weddings."

Katrina described more occasions when she and Nicholas had hooked up —after *The New Yorker* Christmas party, after the party Knausgård attended, after the Pink Pony closed for good and everyone stayed until dawn to mourn. "We shared a cab after the PEN Gala. We got stuck in traffic on the West Side Highway, and before you know it..." Katrina shook her head in mock distress at the memory. "So bad."

With a series of busy, self-conscious movements, Katrina began to rearrange and ready herself, as though she'd spotted Nicholas walking into a bar where she awaited him rather than swimming a hundred yards off. She took a long sip of her beer, then spritzed some minty agent onto her tongue. She smoothed her eyebrows and resituated the strands of black hair that emerged from her vast straw hat. She plucked at the edges of her bikini, adjusted the brim of the hat, brushed specks of sand from her thighs. She coughed repeatedly into her fist to ensure that, at the crucial moment, her voice would be pure. She repeated the sip of beer and the minty spritz. Finally she produced from her bag a thick paperback, opened to her bookmark, and prepared a tableau of engrossed nonchalance.

"Is that the new Elise Jeegley?" Pella asked with jealous enthusiasm.

Katrina nodded almost imperceptibly so as not to disarrange herself. "It'll be out in October."

"How is it?"

Katrina gave the tiniest possible side-to-side bob of her head. "It's terrific," she said, "because it's Jeegley. The woman drips gold off her fingertips.

"*But,"* Pella said. "I hear a *but* in your voice."

"But," Katrina agreed. "It's set in London? During the Blitz? And it has this whole boring 'plot,' quote-unquote? It's not exactly the news about how we live."

"*Constraint* destroyed me," Pella said.

Katrina lifted an index finger to her temple, cocked her thumb, and blew

her own brains out with the ugly, fear-stained beauty of *Constraint*.

Pella laughed. Katrina gauged how many pages lay beyond her bookmark. “If I can finish this weekend,” she said, “I’ll give it to you.”

“Really?” Pella felt almost scandalized by the prospect. The discreet white cover made the book seem an industry secret. “You won’t get in trouble?”

Katrina laughed. “It’s just a bound manuscript,” she said.

“So what’s this guy’s deal?” Pella said. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Nicky?” Katrina sighed. “Where to begin?”

She seemed eagerly to be collecting her thoughts and deciding just where, exactly, to begin—but as she opened her mouth to do so, her manner changed again. “Speak of the devil,” she said. “No, don’t look.”

Pella looked. Some distance up the beach, a figure was emerging from the ocean. Pella saw tight blue trunks and dark blond hair, a golden, uneven tan. He seemed as aware of their presence as they were of his; without hesitation he headed toward them. Katrina, working quickly, found an ideal home for each glossy hair the breeze had displaced.

“*There* you are,” she called as he approached.

“There *you* are, Kat.”

“I wasn’t even sure you were coming,” she complained.

His smile accepted the charge and converted it into a wry shared joke. “I wasn’t sure myself.”

He leaned over her chair. Katrina leaned forward to meet him, and they planted double kisses on each other’s cheeks. Contented, Katrina lay back and unfurled her limbs with a sigh.

“This is Pella,” she said.

Up close, Pella could see that Nicholas possessed some of that quality the teenage Katrina had sought in men, a quality you might call *beauty*. His fine, regular cheekbones might have been drawn with a ruler and formed a perfect contrast to the rougher, somehow erotic bulge of his hawkish nose. His sandy hair, which glistened damply in the sunlight, was wavier than Katrina’s but just as glossy and full. The tan of his forearms modulated over his upper arms and shoulders through lighter browns and golds; his limbs and torso were muscled and lean. He was probably Martin’s age, thirty-three or so, though any physical comparison to cumbersome Martin would start and end there.

His eyes met Pella's for a moment, just casually, and his gold-spoked green ones seemed to project into hers notes of both humor and sadness. That sadness combined with the hangdog tilt of his head added a hint of crestfallen boy to the confident man. His lashes were impossibly long.

All in all, Pella thought, it wasn't the sort of beauty *she* admired or found exciting. Maybe he was too overtly handsome; maybe her tastes ran to the more offbeat, while Katrina went for the down-the-middle sort. His skin was drying quickly in the sun, but his trunks remained soaked and were plastered to his body in a way that plainly displayed the sideways run of his cock, which was as overtly handsome as everything else.

He gestured toward the blanket Mike had vacated. "May I?"

"Please!" said Katrina.

Pella scanned the beach in search of Mike, who'd yielded his chair to Katrina and was about to have his blanket annexed as well. She worried he'd feel cut out of this new little East Coast circle, but Mike, who liked to pace while on the phone, had wandered out of sight. Nicholas settled on the blanket, legs outstretched, and leaned back on his elbows.

"We were just discussing," Katrina said, "whether Pella should take her fiancé's name."

They hadn't, of course, been discussing that. Pella wondered whether this was Katrina's way of designating her as unavailable, but the thought seemed to overvalue her own charms compared to Katrina's black bikini and long slender limbs.

"What's your fiancé's name?" Nicholas asked. "Wait, let me guess: Mike Schwartz."

Pella had had this experience before of strangers knowing things about her because they had read Owen's novel. It was startling, nonetheless, in the moments before she understood what was happening.

"And yours is Affenlight."

"Affen*licht,*" Pella said. "Owen was kind enough to disguise my identity."

"Yes, you're practically in the Witness Protection Program," Nicholas agreed. "Well, I vote yes. You should certainly take his name."

"Why's that?"

"It's a rare opportunity to acquire a new identity. Don't you ever get tired of being yourself?"

“Yes,” Pella admitted. “Very.”

“Why not embrace it, then? Use your wedding as a moment of transformation. Become the person you’ve always dreamed of becoming. Bob Dylan. Pope John Paul the Second. Pella Schwartz.”

His words were appealing; to be reborn sounded beautiful. “Maybe Mike should take my name,” she said.

“If you can arrange that, sure. But my point is that sometimes the person who appears to be making the greater sacrifice is the one who most gains.”

“This from the man who would never sacrifice anything,” said Katrina.

“And that’s why I never gain,” agreed Nicholas. “Though I might not object to gaining one of those beers, if there’s an extra.”

Having invited Nicholas to help himself, Pella unscrewed her own forgotten beer from the sand and took a sip. Warm canned beer reminded her of kissing Mike after his nightly quota of Pabst, the warmth of his breath, the heaviness of his lips and tongue. Not that they’d been kissing with their tongues much lately.

“I see you’re reading Elise’s new book,” Nicholas said. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautifully written,” Katrina said. “And yet.”

Nicholas nodded. “It’s not exactly bringing the news, is it?”

“That’s what *I* said,” Katrina exclaimed, and flicked her eyes proudly toward Pella.

“Every decent writer should hang a sign above her desk,” Nicholas said. *“Thinking of writing a historical novel? Don’t.”*

“*Never Ever* is a historical novel,” Pella pointed out. “Don’t you think it ‘brings the news’?”

“Absolutely,” Nicholas said. “But that feels different, doesn’t it? Because when Elise was writing about New York and that whole generation of feminists, she was actually there. She was younger than they, too young to participate, but she was present when it happened. She’s writing about it, not reconstructing it.”

“Nicky’s mom is a character in *Never Ever,*” Katrina explained in a sidebar to Pella.

Nicholas’s expression both acknowledged this information and let it glide by. “Whereas this book,” he continued with a nod toward Katrina’s

galley, “is chock-full of *research*.” He pronounced the word with doleful resignation, as though research were the scourge of art.

“It does read like a period piece,” Katrina agreed. “The characters are always humming old advertising jingles. And the price of everything is repeated ad nauseam: ‘Oh, goodness! Three shillings six for a jiggery-joo!’

“The problem,” she added, “is that this book is going to sell like hotcakes. It’s good enough to be a Jeegley, but it’s bad enough to read on a plane. It might turn out to be her most popular.”

“Perverse incentives,” Nicholas agreed.

“*Coercion,*” Pella said, which happened to be the name of Elise Jeegley’s second-best novel, after *Never Ever*. This didn’t quite scan as an aperçu, but she felt a flash of pride when Nicholas laughed.

Nicholas and Katrina chatted about New York for a while—who was invited to the wedding, who was feeling miffed for not being invited to the wedding, what kinds of books and plays and parties the autumn season would bring. Another round of brutal layoffs was coming to one of the publishing houses; the superannuated editor of the *SoHo Review* was rumored, after many false alarms, to be dying in earnest. Katrina was brimming with well-sourced theories about who had been tapped to replace him. Nicholas knew them all to be untrue.

Pella listened happily to the words bandied from one side of her chair to the other. Only at wide intervals did she attempt to enter the conversation, preferring to let it engulf her like the sunlight.

“But wait,” said Nicholas. “I just realized—we’re rambling on about our boring provincial lives when we have an emissary here from the white-hot center of the universe.”

“*Yes,*” said Katrina. “I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Nicholas smiled. “The Witches. The jocks. The eloquent manifesto.”

“Oh,” said Pella. “You heard about that?”

“Heard about it?” Nicholas said. “Everyone I know talks about it nonstop. I wake up in the morning and start refreshing the Brightness.”

“You read the Brightness?” Pella said. “I thought that was a site for women talking to women.”

“That’s a conversation I like to be privy to,” Nicholas said. “And anyway, the founder’s a friend of mine. So what’s it like on the ground?”

Pella tried to demur: She’d been here on the island all week, immersed

in wedding preparations. She'd barely spoken to anyone back home; she'd barely even been online. But these deflections were so plainly disappointing to her audience, if not downright unbelievable, that at last she reversed course. After all, if there was one topic about which she could be said to be expert, it was the inner life of Westish College.

"But surely you know them?" Nicholas asked. "The Witches of Westish?"

"Of course," Pella heard herself say, though the group's very name suggested an edgy clique from which she'd been excluded. She'd read the piece defending the prank several times and had no doubt that Irma composed it. "The girl who wrote the manifesto—that's my best friend."

"The lead witch!" Katrina said.

"Friends in high places," Nicholas said with a nod. "I find these young women very interesting. We're moving into an era of reckoning, and they're the shock troops. They're going to create the world they want. Or at least topple the one they don't."

"I don't know why this didn't occur to me earlier," Katrina said. "You should write something."

"Me?" said Pella. "What would *I* write?"

"A dispatch. For *The New Yorker* website. About the whole affair."

Pella felt both flattered and terrified at the thought. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm not there, for one. I mean, I was there the night it happened, but I didn't...that is, I'm not even..."

She was thinking about the invisible barrier she'd always felt between herself and the young women of Westish College—a barrier she liked to believe she had erected. She thought about how she'd spent a long afternoon with Irma just hours after the prank, and Irma had not even hinted at what happened. How indifferent did you have to be toward someone to decline to drop a hint? Pella thought about Mike's question from last night, which haunted her somehow: *Do you know a girl named Dahlia? Dahlia Breughel?*

"I mean, it's different to be a nontraditional student. To be older."

"That's what's so perfect!" Katrina said. "You're in the ideal position, aren't you? In that world but not entirely of it—at the college, but with the advantage of a broader and more mature perspective. You're embedded."

“You see how persistent Kat is,” Nicholas remarked as he helped himself to a second beer. “There’s no escaping her.”

“Well, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Irrefutably,” he said. “Pella should do it.”

Pella’s mind whirred. To become, even in some transient sense, a Writer—her father tapped a silicone spatula against the countertop, punctuating the word—would be to fulfill a lifelong desire. And here, out of nowhere, was an editor at a major magazine soliciting her services. She’d be a fool to refuse—but there was no way she could accept. This was Irma’s life, not hers. She couldn’t pretend to be a Witch of Westish; even with her *broader and more mature perspective*, she couldn’t pretend not to wish to be one. To write about it would be to invade Irma’s world—to package what had happened; to trade on the Witches’ name. Or was that, too, her fear speaking?

“It’s just that I have a conflict,” she said, alighting with relief on the perfect excuse. “Mike being a member of the administration.”

“Ah, that’s true,” Katrina said. “Too bad.”

This inner tumult having passed, Pella was restored to the thrumming beauty of the day, the prickle of sun on skin, the vista of water and sky that, as she let her eyelids close, did not need to be seen to be sensed. The slow way the ocean lapped against the shore, restrained and peaceful despite its size, reminded her of Contango, and though she missed her husky, this evocation of a distant beloved added a layer of depth to the present. Meanwhile a possible life was being evoked in ever more vivid tones, of moving to New York, of Katrina helping her to get a job, of being friends with impressive, erudite people like those who flanked her now...

“Where did your fiancé wander off to?” Katrina asked.

“Good question.” Pella peered down the beach. “I’m surprised he hasn’t come back for a beer.”

She imagined Mike pacing behind a dune, his BlackBerry clamped to one ear, his other hand rubbing his temples. She wondered if he’d finished his call, noticed that both his chair and his blanket had been usurped, and trudged back to the house.

“Owen!” Katrina cried. “The man of the hour!”

“Katrina, darling.” Owen, grinning broadly, approached from the other direction, his arms outstretched. “Thank you for coming.”

Katrina hopped up from her chair to wrap him in a hug, after which Nicholas and Owen shook hands. “Did you find the house all right?” Owen asked.

Nicholas said that he’d found it just fine. “Thank you for letting me crash.”

Letting him crash? thought Pella. Owen had mentioned that a friend would be staying at the house tonight but he’d failed to mention that the friend had a dubious post-party habit of hooking up with Katrina. Pella could already hear the sounds of their good fuck coming through the wall while she and Mike tried to sleep.

“Anything for Martin’s old roommate,” Owen replied. “Now, I’m afraid I need to break up this beautiful party and steal my maid of honor. I’m helpless without her.”

“That’s how *I* used to be when we worked together on the newspaper,” Katrina said approvingly.

Pella clambered to her feet and dusted the sand from her thighs. Katrina and Nicholas settled back onto the beach, Katrina in Mike’s chair, Nicholas in Pella’s.

To be allied with Owen and essential to him, today of all days—this was a desire close to Pella’s heart. And yet she felt, despite her pride in being called away, a reluctance to bid goodbye to Katrina and Nicholas. Even the simple presence of a novel six weeks shy of publication lent the conversation an air of magically expanded possibility: The bland but unassailable laws of human existence—a book must be published before it can be read—dissolved in the beachy light.

“You two be good,” she said as Owen tugged her away. Though the remark elicited no discernible response from Katrina or Nicholas, she winced at how priggish she sounded.

“There’s plenty of beer in the cooler,” she added. “Help yourselves.”

“We will,” Katrina said. With a contented yawn, she lay back in Mike’s chair and stretched her legs, crossing them at the ankles—this time, Pella thought, for Nicholas’s delectation.

Pella took a few steps, trailing Owen, and stopped and turned. Her voice sounded, even to herself, slightly forlorn: “Oh, and when Mike gets back? Will you tell him where I went?”

“Of course, darling.” Without turning away from Nicholas, Katrina

lifted one hand above the sand in a wan, forgetful wave, as though dangling her fingers in a current. “We’ll see you soon.”

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3

Before the ceremony, Martin and his siblings gathered to dress on the upper floor of the Tilly house. Owen's side of the wedding party had been awarded the barn, a salt-weathered cube that perched at the edge of the bluff. Back when the property was a working farm, the barn was a barn. Now it had been converted into a spartan guesthouse with a kitchenette along the rear wall and a laddered sleeping loft above.

Mike had taken the station wagon to collect Henry from the ferry. Pella, in her underwear, nudged a curtain aside with a finger, like an actress peeking at the stage from the wings.

The sun shone sharply on the edges of the white wooden chairs. Bright, identical, spaced at perfect intervals, those chairs looked to Pella like toys or pure ideas. They looked like the freshly scrubbed souls of their soon-to-be inhabitants. The green aisle sliced between them.

The florists teetered on spare chairs to affix sprigs of baby's breath to the upper corners of the wedding arch Martin's brother had built to Owen's specifications. The arch was a flat-topped rectangle of salt-gray branches, its angles lashed into place and threaded with green vine. It had the austere look of a lean-to, a place where lovers who needed little could hide out from the rain, and conferred a sense of honor and simplicity. Pella found herself approving of Owen's taste in every particular.

Far up the lawn, bartenders were arranging champagne flutes on long white tablecloths. The guests would mingle and drink before flowing downhill to their seats. But there would be no guests for a while yet. Her freshly manicured fingers released the curtain.

Down the middle of the room stretched a long table surrounded by unmatched chairs. On the table sat an unopened bottle of scotch, a bucket of

ice, and four tumblers. A full-length mirror leaned against the far wall, propped behind a cinder block.

Before the mirror, Owen was buttoning the front of his long, tapered, blindingly white shirt. While Pella watched, he stepped into his dove-gray pants, tucked and smoothed his shirt front, gingerly fastened the pants. He flipped up his collar and proceeded to knot his slim black tie. His fingers were trembling, just as Katrina had noted, but they worked nimbly nonetheless, and soon he was donning his jacket. Pella's gaze lingered on his face in the mirror. He'd settled on the slightest possible trim of his grown-out hair, and it looked, like the wedding arch, natural and perfect. He was getting married.

"Oh, Owen!" she cried. "You look—"

Owen met her eyes in the mirror and waited, with a droll hint of smile, to see what word she would choose. When she faltered, he offered one himself: "Marriageable?"

She nodded. "*Very* marriageable."

"You like the suit?"

"I love the suit."

The slender dove-gray suit would have looked debonair on anyone, but with Owen, whose whole demeanor bespoke a bookish elegance, it found its ideal inhabitant. Pella had long thought his hair, at least in certain lights, contained a tint approaching gray, and now, as he straightened his knot and shot his cuffs, she saw that it was so—he was indeed beginning to gray, quite prematurely, and it lent him an air of grace and distinction. Time was passing: For once she allowed herself to be warmed and mellowed rather than hurled into anxious spasms by the thought.

"Will you help me with my cuff links?" he asked.

"Of course." She stepped toward him. "You know we still have two hours."

Owen nodded. "I want to be utterly prepared. And then to relax." He offered her a sleeve. She poked a sterling cuff link through and flipped its hinge. He offered the other.

"You're going to have to put that dress on eventually," Owen remarked as he set about opening the bottle of scotch.

"Are you sure? Maybe I'll just wear this." Pella swept a hand over the

elaborate, corset-like undergarment she'd bought for the occasion. "It cost enough."

Owen, though, seemed to reject the joke. He cocked his head and studied her carefully. "Whatever happened to the old Pella?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, for as long as I've known you, I've been hearing about the wild impulsive girl who makes out with her teachers and elopes with an older man and raises as much hell as those defiant eyes suggest. But somehow I never *see* her."

"Do you think I invented her?"

"No. I'm very aware of her existence." Owen, having coaxed the cork from the bottle, poured them each an inch of scotch. "It's this person I sometimes wonder about—the one who, if she doesn't like the dress she's supposed to wear, dithers and declines to put it on, as if some change in circumstance will come along to save her."

Something in Owen's tone made Pella feel much more exposed than walking around in her underwear did. "A bridesmaid's dress isn't the world's most comfortable piece of clothing," she said. "It's not some silky suit you slide on over your boxer shorts."

"That'll be the day," Owen said. "Me in boxer shorts."

"Over your leopard-print thong, then. Maybe I'm thrilled with the dress, and I'd simply prefer to wear it for a half hour less."

"You're right," Owen said. "I suppose I've just been thinking about this distinction you tend to make between the old impulsive Pella and the new sedate one."

"The old Pella didn't pan out," she said. "She grew up. She settled down."

"Just like that?"

"I'm two years older than you," Pella said.

"That's true," Owen said. "But I'm not sure it's relevant."

"How would I know what's relevant? I didn't start this conversation, and I barely know what it's about except that I'm somehow behaving in a way you disapprove of."

"I don't disapprove," Owen said. "And I'm probably in the throes of some powerful pre-wedding jitters, so you'll have to forgive me. It's just

that I'd like to see a bit of the old Pella shine through. The impetuous samurai who slashes through everyone's pretense."

"Why?" Pella said. "So you can write a book about her?"

Owen tipped his head in a way that said *Touché.* "No," he said. "So I can delight in her company."

Pella sighed. "Maybe you'll see her tonight."

"Is that a promise?"

"More like a threat," Pella said, though it felt like an empty one. In a toast to her old self, she lifted her amber glass to the dust-strewn light.

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4

There came, just at the outset of the ceremony, the precise moment when autumn descended over Block Island—

—Over the beaches and rocks and gulls, and the ocean rolling in all directions;

—Over the rambling white house and the long sloping lawn with its lengthening shadows;

—Over the shapely glasses of cava and rosé, half-naughtily smuggled from the pre-wedding hour into the seats;

—Over the whole gathered assembly in their late-summer finery;

—Over the men with their neckties and bow ties, vests and waistcoats, belts and suspenders, seersucker and serge; the lumberjack beards and larded mustaches, the scrubbed and beaming faces, the careful scruff; the casual glamour, the assertiveness and ease;

—Over the women, outnumbered but not outdone, in their shawls and bare shoulders, their patterns waving against bright fabrics; the waists and pleats and plentiful smiles; the straw hats and sunglasses, the jewelry chunky and fine, the heirloom pearls and casual amber; the thematic silver;

—Over the pair of babies who wailed in an escalating duel, one on each side of the aisle;

—Over the silks and plaids, the cottons and wools and tulles, the spreading sunbonnets, the shawls and wraps and throws, the bright-patterned socks below high tapered trouser legs;

—Over the updos and down-dos and side-dos;

—Over the navy-and-ecru programs rolled into spyglasses and peered through by children; rolled into tight batons by type A types who batted them against their palms, thinking of Monday’s markets; and distractedly waved as fans, despite the cool, by everyone else;

—Over the derbies, the belt buckles, the improbable plumage of dresses, the conspicuous profusion of a certain shade of yellow, a rich pastured egg-yolk hue destined to rule New York that season;

—Over the strappy heels, the cork-heeled sandals, the gleaming eyelets of high-laced men's boots, the checkered scarves and cravats, the elegant wristwatches of the financiers;

—Over Katrina's wide-legged golden jumpsuit and Nicholas's moss-green jacket beside it;

—Over the curated spectacles of the publishing crowd;

—Over the artists and writers; the designers and directors; the start-up gurus and social butterflies;

—Over male heads shaved bald or showing the merest of stubble;

—Over much more velvet than Pella might have expected;

—Over the simple handsome wedding arch Martin's brother had built, with its bundles of twigs and branches and its sparse white flowers that suggested an antique honor and simplicity;

—Over the trio of musicians, with their checkered shirts and suspenders and sweetly intent expressions;

Just as Owen, having unhooked his gray-jacketed arm from his mother's bare Pilates-sculpted one, stepped forward to face Martin and shone beatifically toward him, and Martin's eyes met his with a shy happy look of equivalent love;

Over all this fanfare and company, autumn arrived. Arrived as a goddess, not a scourge. Arrived not with wind and rain, not with some premature darkening and foreboding in the sky, not with a shuttering of possibility and a snide presentiment of winter. Arrived, rather, as a mellowing so lovely and deep, it could not have been predicted or longed for before its arrival, improving as it did upon what had already seemed ideal. This improvement, this mellowing, this moment, satisfied a longing so deep that the longing itself could scarcely be felt or understood—it could only be longed for, as in dreams.

"DEARLY BELOVED," BOOMED Garrett Lovell. He spread his arms wide, bracketing Owen and Martin as they stood beneath the wedding arch. His own body seemed composed of dark burnished spheres—his chubby,

jacket-clad torso; his large round head, which was shaved and oiled to a shimmering gloss; his full cherubic cheeks. “Welcome to the wedding of Martin Tilly and Owen Dunne. If you’re here for some other, less gay occasion, you’re in the wrong spot. Please finish your wine and move along.”

He paused for the laugh his audience was eager to provide. “Monday through Friday, I deliver the news for the National Broadcasting Corporation. Today, I stand before you in a new capacity—as an ordained minister of the Church of Universal Life.

“As a boy from Lynchburg, Virginia, living down the end of an old dirt road, I sang in church every Sunday. My poor mother dreamed of making a preacher of me. And so I’m sorry, Mama, that you didn’t live to see this day. The day my assistant filled out an online form and printed my certificate, and I was ordained.”

The crowd responded with another hearty laugh. Garrett Lovell was sixty-odd years old, but some combination of good genes, perpetual cheer, the wellness regimes of the wealthy and televised, and regular Botox injections made him seem much younger. Beneath his linen suit, he wore a bow tie and straining suspenders.

“I first met Owen just over a year ago when a coworker went on maternity leave and I sat in on the morning show for a spell.” This coworker, as Pella somehow knew, was a woman whose fame outstripped even Garrett Lovell’s. To leave her unnamed sent a shiver of proximity through the crowd.

“My producer,” Lovell went on, “wanted me to interview the young writer who was taking New York by storm. And she dropped this *book* on my desk.” He mimed the concussive impact of a large object.

“‘Tabby, are you nuts?’ I said. ‘That thing’s as long as the Bible. If you want me to talk to this kid, slap some questions on the teleprompter.’

“‘Garrett,’ she said. ‘Trust me.’”

Garrett Lovell went on to describe how much he’d enjoyed Owen’s novel. And how impressed he’d been by Owen during their interview and by the note Owen sent him afterward, and how they’d become friends. How, when Owen asked him to officiate at the wedding, he’d moved heaven and earth to make it happen.

“And now,” said Garrett Lovell, shifting into a confiding, preacherly

register, “I’d like to point out how special and magnificent and, when you get right down to it, how amazing this occasion is. How amazing that we’ve finally arrived at the moment in American history when a gay Black man”—he jabbed a finger toward his own face—“has the power to join a gay Black man”—he gestured to Owen—“and a gay not-so-Black man”—he gestured to Martin—“in the bonds of holy matrimony. That, ladies and gentlemen, is something my mother never imagined.”

He paused for a round of cheers.

“And the State of...” He looked to Owen. “What state are we in again?”

“Nervous collapse,” Owen said, just loud enough for the crowd to hear and applaud. Garrett Lovell, with a well-timed roll of his eyes, appealed to Martin.

“Rhode Island,” Martin said.

“Thank you, Martin. I can see who the straight man is here. And the State of Rhode Island, according to laws passed this very spring, will recognize the vows spoken by these two young men, as will the United States of America. Can y’all believe that?”

The crowd exploded. Garrett Lovell egged them on with an upward push of his hand, bringing the ovation to its pinnacle, then waited for it to subside.

“So before we get down to the serious business of joining these two young men’s tax returns together, I’d like us to pause for a moment in gratitude and thanks.”

He clasped one hand around the opposite wrist and bowed his large bald head. The crowd fell silent.

“This pause,” he said, “reminds us that nothing happens unless those with courage pave the way. These blessings that Owen and Martin reap today and will for the rest of their lives—that all of us reap, because this marriage blesses and raises up our whole community—those blessings were worked for. Those blessings were fought for. Those blessings were earned. We stand on the shoulders of so many today.” Garrett Lovell’s voice wavered and caught. Pella, standing a few feet away, could see the redness that rimmed his eyes. “There is progress, but not without struggle. And there are struggles that, though they seem hopeless, yet can be won. So.”

Martin’s brother handed forward the rings. Martin and Owen began to recite the vows they had written, and tears streamed from Pella’s eyes. They

were freshwater tears at first, which filled her eyes without impeding her vision. But before she knew it, she was not just weeping but bawling, her breathing shallow and fast. Snot bubbled out of her nose. Garrett Lovell, not unkindly, glanced her way. Pella shuddered, embarrassed, but she couldn't stop. Marriage, as a practice, struck her as all too often cruel and chauvinistic, a snarl of possession and property arrangements, a chance to grow apart from someone. Her own first stab at it had been a disaster. And yet weddings, even when she didn't know the participants, always made her weep with joy and hope. Watching Owen and Martin face each other in their matching suits, sweet-eyed and nervous, their four hands joined as they spoke their vows, reached into the tenderest part of her and yanked up something impossibly pure. They had no idea what they were in for, but they were ready to try, and that was a beautiful thing.

Owen and Martin slipped the rings onto each other's fingers and, with a certain primness, kissed. Mike's big hand reached over Pella's shoulder to offer his pocket square. She grabbed it and blew her nose.

The musicians rocked forward and struck up the jaunty exit march. The crowd rose to their feet in jubilation, clapping and hooting. Flurries of rice sailed through the air. Big Jabez reached up, cupped both sides of Owen's face, and drew him close in the affectionate, dominant way of dog owners and Mafia dons. A consequential smile spread across his ancient face as he tugged Owen's forehead down and, with ceremony, planted a kiss upon it. The cheering redoubled. Owen blushed.

Martin and Owen, their elbows firmly locked, their faces bright with joy and relief, zigzagged across the grass dispensing one-armed hugs and high fives as they greeted guests on both sides of the aisle. Pella slid her arm through that of Martin's brother, and they followed at a distance. The afternoon sunlight angled into Pella's eyes, which anyway were clotted with leftover tears, and she more sensed than saw two familiar faces turn toward her. Katrina and Nicholas, standing shoulder to shoulder, clapping, Katrina radiant in a sleeveless gold jumpsuit, her unseen heels lifting her glossy raven hair with its gold headband above the crowd; Nicholas in a moss-green jacket and a bronze tie that harmonized with without quite matching the spangled preciousness of Katrina's gold.

As Pella and LJ strode slowly down the aisle, pausing after each step so as not to tread on the newlyweds' heels, Pella tried to burn the scene into

her memory. Around the fringes of the company stalked the two photographers, the one Owen had hired and the one from the *Times*. The mandolin, banjo, and bass braided together. The sun slipped behind a sliding cloud.

And then she spotted them. At the back of the crowd, obscured by the heads and hats in between, and yet so irrevocably themselves that Pella could not miss them. Her heart skipped, bewildered.

She felt something of the disorientation she'd felt when Mike came down the plank of the ferry—the sense of how entirely the most familiar person could be transformed by a short separation and an island light—but at least she'd been expecting Mike. Irma raised a hand in a shy wave. Judy's wide mouth beamed. Pella lifted her hand.

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5

An informal receiving line formed at the rear of the long aisle, in front of the fluttering panels of fabric that snapped and billowed like sails. Pella stationed herself beside Owen, chatting with the guests who were waiting to chat with him, and Mike wandered away, typing on his phone, drawing with his dress shoes a heavy, sluggish calligraphy across the lawn. He paused and slapped the phone against his palm. The football team, plainly, had lost.

“Pella!” Judy, as she approached, pressed the fingertips of one hand to her sternum, as though the sight of Pella had evacuated all the oxygen from her torso. “You look...*exquisite*.”

“Oh, thanks,” said Pella, who didn’t feel very exquisite in her ruffled bridesmaid’s dress, her makeup no doubt ruined by tears and her efforts to swipe them away. “But you! I love what you’re wearing.”

“This old thing?” said Judy. “By which I mean my husk of a self, of course. The dress is fresh from Saks.” The dress in question was of dark purple satin, cut with flat severity across her collarbones. Over it she wore a matching cape with a dramatic, flaring collar.

“Sexy vampire,” Pella joked as she reached out to finger the shimmering folds of the cape. “I love the color.”

“It’s funny about the color,” Judy said. “When I was a girl, my classmates teased me by calling me *Eggplant-ine*. Fairly innocuous, as such teasing goes—the simplest kind of wordplay. But it filled me with shame for...well, many reasons. Most notably, I was wildly susceptible to shame. But also, I was shaped rather differently then. Not utterly unlike an eggplant.”

While Judy rambled, Irma stood quietly at her elbow, shifting her clutch from hand to hand. She wore a lacy ivory dress that looked antique, and her hair was pinned atop her head in a precarious heap. She’d traded her Doc

Martens for silver flats that looked to be made of cardboard and sequins. Her lipstick was cherry red.

“And so in my so-called adult life,” Judy concluded triumphantly, “I make sure to wear eggplant to every monumental event. Of which this is certainly one.”

“It’s perfect on you,” Pella assured her. She turned to Irma, who looked nervous and exhilarated and far more dressed-up and feminine than Pella had ever seen her. Everything about her was slightly off-kilter—she hadn’t even known not to wear white to a wedding—but slightly off-kilter, in Pella’s view, was what Irma did best.

“Hi, Irma,” she said. “You look beautiful.”

Irma blushed and mumbled, “Thank you.”

“I didn’t know you were coming.”

Irma nodded. “We only decided late last night,” she said. “I was feeling down. I couldn’t sleep. Dahlia got kicked out of school.”

That name, *Dahlia,* was everywhere, even on television—but Pella had never heard it from Irma’s lips before. It emerged with a trembling intensity that suggested intimacy and loss, which piqued Pella’s curiosity all the more. How long had they been friends? And why had Pella never known? The girl Mike described seeing Irma with, with the updo and bright red lipstick, had clearly been Dahlia Breughel. And here was Irma with an updo and bright red lipstick, looking radiant and off-kilter, sad and enlivened, both like and unlike herself.

“She got kicked out,” Irma said, “and it’s basically my fault. Anyway, I couldn’t sleep.”

You could have called, Pella thought. She’d been immersed in what was happening here, in her art dress and drunken performance. With her phone tucked in the nightstand drawer, she most likely wouldn’t have answered or been much help if she had—but she still wanted Irma to have called.

“And finally I phoned Judy and woke her up and told her everything that was happening, and she said”—Irma, brightening slightly, pressed a hand to her chest to signal a shift into her Judy impression—“‘I have a *wild* idea, Irma. Why don’t we just...*hop*...on a plane and go to Owen’s wedding? And escape our troubles for the weekend, and won’t Pella just be *bowled flat*?’”

“Consider me flattened,” Pella said.

“She hadn’t canceled her room at the bed-and-breakfast,” Irma said.

“You know she and Doug were planning to come.”

“We were,” Judy agreed with a game resolve that indicated she was ready to acknowledge, at least in passing, the existence of Doug. “So I rustled up two plane tickets, and we rushed to the airport in the dark of night. And here we are.”

“Here we are,” Irma echoed, and looked around with diffident wonder as though trying to figure out where exactly they were. She’d never seen the ocean before; she’d never even been on a plane. And she’d certainly never attended a wedding like this, where the waiters carried platters of beige-gold champagne and the guests with their warm smiles and prismatic outfits fanned down the long green lawn. “It’s like *Gatsby*,” she said.

Pella, before she could respond to this, felt a hand on her arm. “Don’t let me interrupt,” Katrina said. “I just wanted to say hello.”

“Hello!” Pella exclaimed. In a gesture that felt wholly unlike herself, she grabbed Katrina’s hand and tugged her close to her side, as though they were drafting partners for tennis, and Katrina was a known champion. “This is Katrina Barker,” she said. “She’s Owen’s editor at *The New Yorker.* She and I were best friends in high school.”

“Inseparable,” Katrina confirmed.

Pella introduced Judy and Irma to Katrina, whereupon much was made of outfits again, a type of pleasantry that Irma, to Pella’s surprise, seemed suddenly eager to try. “It’s my grandmother’s dress,” she explained as she smoothed the hips of the lacy white shift. “I altered it myself.”

“You altered it?” Katrina shook her head in wonder. “But how? It fits you like a glove.”

“Sewing machine,” Irma said.

“I can’t even imagine. And this?” Katrina reached out to touch the crocheted shawl that hung for the moment meekly from Irma’s hand.

“That’s even older,” Irma said. “I think my grandmother’s grandmother made it.”

Owen’s face, imbued with all the glamour of the occasion, peeked into the circle they’d formed. “All my favorite ladies together,” he said. “How convenient!”

He squeezed Judy’s hands and, grinning, bowed his head with the playful deference owed his old professor. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Judy replied. “This is Irma

Friske.”

“I know who it is.” Owen turned to Irma and lavished the fullness of his attention on her. “I love your dress.”

“I love your wedding,” Irma said with disarming simplicity. “It’s wondrous.” She cast a glance around the grounds of the Tilly house, which did indeed look wondrous in the soft light of late afternoon, the onset of autumn having introduced a cool sparkle into the atmosphere.

Irma, though standing stock-still, vibrated with a shy, wild energy. Her eyes were wide. She chewed her lower lip. She seemed to be the lightning rod and conductor for the electric charge in the air; it coursed through the ramrod line of her body, from her coiled hair to her slippers. “Just wondrous.”

Owen beamed at her. “Yes,” he said with a sigh. “Isn’t it?”

Pella saw in a flash how captivating Irma might be to this crowd, as captivating as Pella had always found her. All her starch and eccentricity—the antique shawl around her shoulders and lacy bone-white dress; her literariness; her complicated mix of shrewdness and innocence—all the qualities, in short, that Pella loved and was sometimes exasperated by and that struck Irma’s peers back home as incomprehensible were here refigured, reinterpreted, remade like the dress. These people would see Irma pretty much as Pella did, in all her unswerving particularity and genius.

“Come on,” Katrina urged as she seized Pella’s hand and tugged her toward the tables of champagne. “There are so many people you need to meet.”

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6

Katrina led Pella toward the heart of the commotion, her wide golden pant legs streaming over the lawn.

Champagne flutes were snapped up from platters. Long lines wound back from the bars. Katrina maneuvered Pella through the crowd, dishing out hellos and handclasps and introductions. Pella, as she tried with limited success to remember the names and faces, felt astounded by everyone's warmth and charm and by how highly they spoke of Owen. It had been only three years since Owen moved to New York and two since he'd published his novel and met Martin, but he'd made so many friends.

"OMG," Katrina said. "Elinor Larks."

Katrina headed straight toward her, leaving Pella no choice but to be tugged along. Even Pella knew of Elinor Larks, whose lethal wit and litany of famous husbands gave her a tabloid currency, and who'd dominated British publishing for decades before bringing her blistering discernment to the larger audiences of America.

In person, Ms. Larks possessed, between her floral scarf and world-class auburn highlights, a face that matched her terrifying reputation, her skin surgically sucked back against her linear features in a way that suggested, even when she was standing still, that she was plunging ahead at incredible speed. Katrina, though, seemed wholly at ease in squeezing the renowned publisher's elbow and introducing Pella.

"I feel as though we met long ago," Larks said as she gave Pella's hand a firm single pump.

"Thank you for everything you've done for Owen," Pella said.

"Not at all," replied Elinor Larks. "My only job is to hope. Every so often, a book comes along to make me less a fool for hoping." The sentiment was generous, and Pella couldn't tell whether it was Larks's posh

London accent, her reputation, or some actual inner harshness that made everything she said sound like a withering reprimand. Pella felt she should curtsy as she and Katrina politely turned away. Elinor Larks called after them: “Oh, Pella?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let Owen dither with the second book. Don’t let it become a *thing*.”

Pella promised she wouldn’t. As she and Katrina strolled away, Pella noticed a tall, distinguished-looking man with a broad nose and curly gray hair talking to a pair of young women beside the bar. She whirled and grabbed Katrina’s forearm. “Is that James Burfict?” she said, her voice an unnecessary whisper.

Katrina nodded, but the question was rhetorical; Pella would have recognized Burfict anywhere. She’d been looking at his face on dust jackets all her life. He was a few years older than her father and had been her father’s favorite contemporary writer. Burfict had loomed large in Pella’s dad’s imagination—a kind of elder-brother figure, perhaps, who represented the artist he’d always dreamed of becoming, even long after he’d made his career in academia. Pella and her dad had attended a lecture Burfict gave at Harvard when Pella was eleven, and she still recalled the piece Burfict read, about saying goodbye to a much older lover on her deathbed. More than that, she recalled her dad’s utter reverence throughout the evening—a mode otherwise reserved for certain passages of Melville and Thoreau. Sometimes she reread Burfict’s early work as a way of being close to her dad.

“He’s not on the guest list,” she said.

Katrina shrugged. “Someone must have brought him. He likes to be where the fun is. Should we go say hello?”

“No, no,” Pella said, suddenly terrified by the prospect. She felt self-conscious about showing Katrina her childlike shyness, but she couldn’t help it. “Maybe later.”

Katrina introduced her to people from Owen’s publishing house, all of whom treated Pella as something between a minor celebrity and an old acquaintance. She met Owen’s agent, his torso too long for any tie, who greeted her more intimately and introduced Pella to his wife.

And on and on: Radio hosts and podcasters who had interviewed Owen

and been so beguiled by him, they'd stayed in touch. Bookstore owners and event managers who had hosted him. Magazine writers who'd published features about him; photographers who'd shot pictures for those features. Reviewers who'd written mixed reviews of his novel, then received from Owen a note acknowledging he felt the same way and was honored to have his work treated with such sensitivity and intelligence; he and the reviewers wound up having coffee and becoming friends. The famous producer who had optioned the novel for adaptation; the Netflix executives who were in negotiation with the producer; the up-and-coming director who was about to sign on to the project. Young writers Owen had partied with at book festivals; established writers who'd praised and anointed his book. Katrina's colleagues from *The New Yorker*. Owen's marijuana dealer, who was also a well-known food blogger. The owner of Owen's neighborhood coffee shop, where he wrote most mornings. The proprietors of the Brooklyn restaurant that was catering the wedding. The rising-star jewelry designer who had a summer boutique on Block Island and who'd created Owen's and Martin's enviably simple rings.

It seemed a whole rich world he'd gathered around himself, with his book at the center, and transported to this magical place for the evening, alongside the Tillys and Martin's hedge-fund colleagues. That was the genius of throwing an island wedding and forcing everyone to come so far: Once they arrived, there was nowhere to be but here.

Through it all, Pella felt like a freshman in high school again, circulating at the armpit of Katrina's jumpsuit, submitting with relief to Katrina's watchful protection.

"Such a good party," she said.

"Isn't it?" Katrina said. "I couldn't have invented a better guest list in my dreams, much less persuaded them all to come. Every detail is just what I would have chosen. Right down to the fact that Oonie isn't here."

"Who's Oonie?"

"Oonie Jiri," Katrina said. "Nick's ex. The woman who founded the Brightness."

"Wow," Pella said. "She founded it?"

Katrina nodded soberly. "She built it from the ground up—not that it didn't have its predecessors. And while she was still modeling too. You have to give her credit."

Pella, unsure what attitude toward this information Katrina would prefer, made a small indeterminate noise.

“You totally know who she is,” Katrina said. “She’s been featured in every magazine. She’s guest-starred on *Girls* so many times, she’s like the fifth Girl.”

“I’ve never seen that show,” Pella said.

“You’re a riot.” Katrina withdrew her outsize phone from her handbag and tapped at it swiftly. “Here she is.”

She turned the phone toward Pella, who, squinting against the glare, peered at a glossy, retouched portrait of a tall, voluptuous woman who looked to be South Asian. She leaned against a cobblestone arch on a quaint European street, her arms folded across her chest in a playful show of power. Her smile was reserved, winning, and several degrees beyond confident. She had Katrina’s lustrous black hair, set against features fuller and more expressive than Katrina’s.

“So pretty,” Pella said as she handed back the phone.

“So pretty,” Katrina agreed. She tucked the device away and snapped her purse. “You know, I’d love to chat with your friend Irma some more. She seems like a fascinating person.”

Even as she and Katrina mingled, Pella had remained constantly aware of Irma and Mike’s whereabouts. At present, Irma was standing beneath a billowing horse chestnut talking to three young women whom Pella recognized as part of the publishing contingent, all of them pleasantly dressed in monochrome frocks. The young women were turned eagerly toward Irma and seemed to be peppering her with questions. Irma rocked from heel to toe on her spangled slippers, her tongue poking shyly from her mouth as she mustered her replies.

Pella pointed out Irma to Katrina. “Go ahead, I’ll catch up with you,” she said. “I should check whether Owen needs anything.”

Katrina betrayed a slight surprise that Pella didn’t want to join her on this venture but missed only half a beat. “Perfect,” she said. “See you in a bit.”

As Katrina walked away, Pella glanced again at the trio of women talking to Irma. They looked like people with whom Pella might be friends: Considerate, diffident women whose selves, which they held at a slight distance, had always been half a hindrance and half a source of pride.

Women who had developed, over a lifetime of self-observation, ways of dealing with their defects and making peace with their advantages. This one's shoulders, that one's lips, the other's eyes; this one's emotional instinct, that one's dry humor, the other's knowledge of Proust. They—in Pella's sudden imagining—rarely stopped fretting about how their bodies looked, how their words sounded, how they appeared to men and to each other. She felt an urge to hug them all, and Irma too, and tell them they were beautiful.

A hand pressed into her empty palm a flute of champagne. The hand belonged to Nicholas.

His handsomeness, apparent on the beach, struck her more forcefully now—it startled her, in fact. His hair, damp from swimming before, had dried to the color of sand. The knot of his tie was already slightly loosened and askew, as though the party had been going on all night, or all his life. The mossy green jacket, the cognac boots. The golden spokes in his eyes. This was not the fallible, vulnerable beauty of the women clustered around Irma. This was beauty of a higher order—almost, it seemed, of another species.

"Hey," Pella said. "You clean up okay."

"Likewise," he replied. "And cheers."

They clinked their glasses together. Pella took a tiny sip and waited, intending to let Nicholas speak first. But he was waiting too.

"So," she said. "Tell me about your mother."

He laughed. "What would you like to know?"

"I'm not sure." Pella said. "Katrina mentioned she was famous. But now I'm already prying."

"She was never famous," Nicholas said. "She had a brief heyday as an artist, but that was long ago."

"What kind of art?"

"Sculpture, I guess you'd say. But it's a roundabout story. Before she became an artist, she was a radical feminist—not that the two are mutually exclusive. She started a movement newspaper at her high school, and she was leading CR groups all around Boston when she was sixteen. Encouraging housewives to share their stories."

"Precocious," Pella remarked. Precocity, feminism, growing up in Boston—all of it intrigued her.

“Then she went to NYU, because she wanted to be near the center of the movement. She wanted to *be* the center of the movement.”

Suddenly Pella realized why she’d asked about Nicholas’s mom in the first place: Katrina had said she appeared in Elise Jeegley’s novel. “Who was she in *Never Ever*?” she asked.

Nicholas looked at her with a hint of discomfort.

“Don’t worry,” Pella said. “You’re talking to Pella Affen-licht-light, remember? I know what it’s like to be fictionalized.”

“She was Sadie,” he said.

“Ah,” Pella said. “The beautiful one.”

“It’s hard to forget the beautiful one,” Nicholas said with benevolent sarcasm that sounded like a lament.

“The youthful firebrand,” Pella said, trying again.

“Was anyone not a firebrand in that crowd? But yes, Sadie was the firebrand’s firebrand.”

The one who slept with everybody was the thing Pella refrained from saying. Sadie—the beautiful youthful firebrand who slept with everybody—had been by far the most memorable character in *Never Ever*. Though less for the sex than the purity of her convictions and the way her beauty followed her like a shadow. Sadie was a woman who seemed destined or doomed—or maybe determined—to bring out the worst in other women even as she battled for their collective rights.

Pella tried, cautiously, to say something like this to Nicholas.

He nodded. “If you know much about the movement, you can imagine how double-edged her beauty was. Beauty brings attention, which helps when your ideas need attention. Beauty is endlessly palatable, which helps when you have unpalatable ideas. But it’s not exactly a basis for solidarity. And who decides who’s beautiful? You might say nature, or you might say men.”

“Mm,” Pella said.

She could still conjure the image of Sadie that had hovered in her mind as she read: gamine and nimble, younger than those around her, with long blond seventies hair. Now, as Pella stood beside Nicholas, that image took on specific lineaments: the prominent sexy nose, the catlike eyes.

“I guess in real life she didn’t flee to Bolivia to become a nun,” Pella said. “Or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Nicholas acknowledged the joke. “I have to hand it to Elise, though—that ending does capture something about my mom. She did quit the movement and tell everyone off. She did throw Germaine Greer’s watch out a window of the Flatiron Building. But what happened next was more prosaic. She got married and had me.”

“How unoriginal,” Pella said.

“She would have been happy as a Carmelite. Happier, anyway, than she was with my dad. They moved up near Woodstock before I was born. My dad was older—a man of the old New Left. He wanted to start a farming commune. My mom was a city girl through and through.

“I imagine she was miserable upstate. Everything she’d been working for since she was a teenager, sworn off and left behind. And no one around to admire her.”

“But she had you,” Pella pointed out.

“We were close,” Nicholas said, and his tone suggested that closeness could be an ambivalent thing. “But if you read the articles that came out when her art began to be noticed, they all emphasize how she started making art out of sheer misery and loneliness.”

“Ah,” Pella joked, “we’re finally getting to her art.”

Nicholas looked more chastened than Pella had imagined a man so handsome could look. “You’re right,” he said. “I’ve been monopolizing the maid of honor *and* the conversation. I should let you go.”

To go was not what Pella wanted. “Tell me about your mom’s art first,” she insisted.

He tipped his head and studied her expression as though afraid she was putting him on.

Pella met his gaze. It was hard to maintain eye contact—to endure the full brunt of his beauty without looking away or laughing or making an awkward joke. It felt like a fun, unwinnable carnival game. But she managed to last long enough for Nicholas to decide she was serious.

“I don’t think my mom ever took an art class,” he went on. “But she was unstoppable when she decided to learn how to do something. She taught herself how to weld, and once she’d learned, she began to make these vast sculptures of metal and fabric, the point of which was that size, expansion, maximalism were qualities that were always and explicitly coded male, in

the art world and everywhere else. Women weren't supposed to be big or grandiose or violent. They were supposed to work in miniature."

"Needlepoint," Pella said. "Darning socks."

Nicholas nodded. "Crafts with a purpose. My mom wanted to do the opposite. She wanted to make things that were useless and humongous."

"What an amazing project," Pella said.

His expression suggested that he didn't quite agree. "They were ahead of their time, for sure. But I'm not sure they were art. They were almost entirely theoretical—the theory was that a woman could do anything a man could do, and my mother certainly could. But I don't think she enjoyed it. She was doing what people told her not to, not what she wanted to do."

"What happened with your dad?" Pella asked.

"They divorced when I was three. Once my mom scraped together a little money, she moved us back to the city. She was happier there, or at least less depressed. She started bringing her sense of outrage into smaller spaces. Upstate, where everything was wide open, she bumped up against the limits of her technical powers. In the city, she didn't have to worry about that.

"She began to make artwork that literally smashed through walls. She designed pieces for interior spaces—spaces that were way too small for the pieces she designed. For a few years when I was a kid, there were people who would pay my mom to do serious and often illegal harm to their apartments—ragged chunks out of the brickwork, ugly holes in the floor. Pieces that took over rooms and rendered them uninhabitable so you had to squeeze in sideways and contort yourself just to see what she'd done."

It was impossible to say without seeing one of these artworks, but Pella immediately felt she understood Nicholas's mom's project: to enact the claustrophobia of certain kinds of domesticity and the violence required to relieve the pressure, which left only messes in its wake. She said as much.

Nicholas nodded. "I'm biased, but I do think some of those pieces were terrific. So much contortion and ugliness and then, out of nowhere, these flickers of beauty. Then again, maybe I'm just nostalgic. It was fun to hang out while my mom destroyed people's houses."

"She took you to work with her?"

"She pretty much had to," Nicholas said. "She was always working, and when she wasn't working, she was partying, and I was home in bed. That's

what she was famous for—even if you've never heard her name, which most people haven't, you've heard the names of lots of people she slept with.

"Anyway." He lifted his empty glass. "Sorry to ramble on. Now you'll remember me as the guy who got drunk and babbled about his mother."

He didn't seem anywhere near drunk, but he did seem worried about trying her patience. Pella found such modesty hard to square with how attractive he was. In fact, it made her wonder whether he could really be as attractive as she assumed. Maybe it had been so long since she'd seen a man who wasn't Mike or a college student that she was having an extravagant overreaction, like a stranded person seeing a mirage.

Perhaps, Pella reflected, he was not as beautiful as she'd first imagined; perhaps there was something in him that spoke to *her*. Everyone found Nicholas handsome, but what if his handsomeness contained elements—flickers of beauty—that only she could see?

This was a dangerous thought-road to venture down—it suggested she was enjoying their conversation not merely because he was good-looking and articulate but because he was Nicholas.

"It's my fault," she said. "I was egging you on."

"You're kind for listening. To be honest, I rarely speak of my mother. Lately I've been thinking about her career."

"Why's that?" Pella asked.

Nicholas looked pained, and Pella realized she'd forced this line of questioning as far as it could go.

"Several reasons," he said with a shrug. "But your friends the Witches are making me wonder. Maybe some of the ideas and feelings that inspired my mom are ready to circle back into the limelight: The righteousness. The sense of violent urgency. The blurry line between activism and art. It's a stunt she'd probably approve of."

From the way he was speaking, Pella couldn't tell whether his mom was alive or dead. She wanted to ask—she didn't know which of them, son or mother, fascinated her more—but a vagueness entered Nicholas's eyes, and he seemed, all of a sudden, exhausted by the topic. She let the question lapse on her lips. She could always look it up when she was alone.

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7

Irma wasn't sure where Judy had gone. The two of them had been chatting in their usual fashion when a blond woman with a loud voice approached and swallowed Irma up. Before long, the woman had multiplied into several, all of them asking Irma questions about her hair ("My friend Pammy just trims the ends sometimes. Or in the summer my mom does it"), and her dress (she repeated the stuff about it having been her grandmother's and having altered it, which led to an overly technical conversation about sewing because one of the women kept asking questions that required long answers, and Irma couldn't tell if the woman was being obnoxiously competitive or nerdily sincere or was maybe even trying to flirt with her, while the others nodded along), and her shoes (which were barely even shoes but sparkly ballet flats she'd bought at Walgreens for $4.99 that were basically cardboard and would probably fall apart before dinner, all of which she was too embarrassed to tell the women, even as she began to suspect it was just what they wanted to hear). Her comment about her mom and summer led them to ask whether she was still in school, which led Irma to say that yes, she went to Westish College, which led to much excited talk about the prank and the manifesto. It seemed that everyone at the wedding knew all about it. Irma took a second glass of champagne from a passing tray. It looked very beautiful, more beautiful than her first—golden, almost, in the deepening light.

"I bet you're one of the Witches," one of the women said.

Irma didn't know how to respond. She was sworn to secrecy—but she was a thousand miles from home, and everyone seemed to know who she was. "We're all witches now," she said with a shrug, and everybody nodded as though she'd said something brilliant.

At some point Pella's friend Katrina joined the circle. She was its tallest

member, perhaps its oldest, and certainly its most arresting. She possessed a sense of firm, quiet authority; she might have been a tree. She didn't ask Irma any questions, but sometimes, with a delicate interjection, prevented her from having to answer one.

When the conversation slowed, she slid her arm through Irma's and drew her away.

"I'm glad to get you alone," she said. "I heard you're the author of that incredible manifesto that's been circulating everywhere."

"Mm," said Irma uncertainly. "Who told you that?"

"Oh, a little birdie."

"A Mama Bird, you mean."

Katrina tipped her head. "A what?"

"That's what I call Pella sometimes. Mama Bird. You know, because she's always hovering around, trying to feed you? Whether it's wine or cherry tart or some article you've already read?"

"Huh," said Katrina. "I don't know that side of her so well."

"I also call her the Pelican," said Irma, and barely recognized her own expansive chattiness. "In medieval times, the pelican was a common symbol for Christ. For some reason, people believed the mother pelican would stab herself in the breast and sacrificially feed her young with her own blood. There's an Edith Wharton story about it."

"Actually," said Katrina, "it was Owen who told me."

Katrina went on to praise the audacity of the manifesto, quoting from it at length, and concluded by saying: "I wonder if you've ever thought of writing for *The New Yorker*?"

"Writing?" Irma squinted hard and punched her glasses higher up the bridge of her nose. "For *The New Yorker*?" Her incredulous tone could easily have passed for condescension.

"You're right, you're right." Katrina lifted an apologetic hand. "We're supposed to be partying, not talking shop. I can't help myself—I'm a confirmed workaholic. When you love what you do, it's barely a job, you know?"

"That's okay," Irma said.

"We're always on the lookout for daring new thinkers—writers with a fresh perspective. And everything happening with campus feminism these days is so vitally important. These movements so often germinate in the

academy, don't they? And suddenly, boom, they're everywhere. Frankly, much of what's happening now feels slightly foreign even to me. You might not believe it, but I just turned thirty—it's a different world from when I was in college. It would be so valuable to have a correspondent from those shores with your ardor and intelligence."

Irma could feel her tongue protruding between her teeth. She was maybe already a little drunk. Was she really being asked by this woman who seemed half a superhero in her golden jumpsuit and headband, so poised and tall and put-together—Irma could certainly believe she was thirty—to write for the most famous magazine?

"I know, I know." Katrina's mea culpa palm lifted again. "You're thinking *The New Yorker* is far too stodgy for a firebrand like yourself. The fat man with the monocle. No curse words till the eighties. Supported the Iraq war. I get it, Irma. Believe me."

Irma was barely aware of who had supported the war and who had not. She'd been ten at the time, and though cable news played on their farmhouse's television throughout the invasion, she'd kept to her books and her DVD of *Clueless,* the one piece of pop-culture samizdat her mom had allowed in the house because it was based on Jane Austen. *I'm not a prude, I'm just highly selective.*

"But we've also done plenty of important work," Katrina went on. "And it would be a terrific platform for you."

Irma could feel her tongue protruding again; she used the lip of her champagne flute to jam it back into her mouth. "I've always liked *The New Yorker,*" she said.

"That's my girl," said Katrina. "Now, I'm talking about the website, of course. It takes a long time to break into the print magazine—established voices, et cetera. It wouldn't be expected of someone your age."

"No," Irma agreed.

"But the website—well, I don't need to tell *you* that all the exciting writing happens online these days. And of course the potential audience is limitless. I'm sure everyone's after you—I imagine the Brightness would hire you in a second. But could I put you in touch with a colleague of mine?"

"Um," said Irma. "Sure."

"Not that you'll only write about feminism," Katrina said. "I'm sure you

have lots of ideas."

Ideas? Irma thought. *Me?* Irma knew how to argue and formulate. She knew the rules. She knew how to snap one Lego block of logic into the next. But it was Dahlia who had ideas. Maybe we could collaborate, Irma thought. Maybe we could cowrite something, share a byline on *The New Yorker* website, as a way of staying in touch. Breughel and Friske. Friske and Breughel. Do something good for the cause.

But it was hard to collaborate with Dahlia unless you were in the room with her; it was hard to get her to concentrate and to obtain the full measure of her presence. You had to compel Dahlia or woo Dahlia or soothe Dahlia; you had to sit with her. Irma had texted Dahlia multiple times today. She hadn't heard back. Despite all the time Dahlia spent online, gazing into the distant, immaterial ambience of a screen, friendship with her seemed wholly dependent on bodily presence.

A cavernous loneliness opened in Irma's chest. Was it strange to miss Dahlia this much when she'd only been gone a day? Was it strange that one small rib cage could hold this much emptiness? She should be spending this whole year in the library with Dahlia, just sitting beside her, encouraging her by example to do her classwork.

"Your glass is empty," Katrina pointed out. "Should we go to the bar?"

THROUGHOUT PELLA'S CONVERSATION with Nicholas, she'd been scanning the lawn, monitoring the whereabouts of Mike and Irma. She feared an ugly altercation if they crossed paths. But Irma was still huddled with Katrina, and Mike was waiting in line at the bar. As long as they weren't paying Pella or each other any mind, she could continue talking to Nicholas.

She felt, therefore, a flash of disappointment when Mike, a refreshed rocks glass in his hand, turned to look for her—and a flash of relief when Katrina, having taken leave of Irma, placed a hand on his sleeve to intercept him.

"There they are," Pella said. "My date and yours."

"For the record, I didn't bring a date," Nicholas replied. "But yes, there they are."

"It's wild to run into Katrina after all these years," Pella said. "And she's

been so kind. But I can’t help feeling inadequate compared to what she’s accomplished.”

“Kat’s relentless,” Nicholas said. “She’s going to squeeze every last drop out of her talent—she’s going to have the best career Katrina Barker can possibly have.”

Pella noted the truth in this and also a lack of charity in his tone, as though Katrina’s striving was unforgivably gauche. She detected, beneath Nicholas’s charms, a worrying hint of callousness in his attitude toward Katrina. He’d slept with her several times while seeming not to notice how enamored of him she was, but Pella was beginning to suspect that he noticed pretty much everything.

“And so beautiful,” she said.

Nicholas nodded. “Could she look one scintilla better? The clothes are perfect, the hair is perfect—everything’s perfect.”

Pella couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy. “I do love her in gold.”

They cast their gazes across the lawn to take in how indelible Katrina looked in her gold jumpsuit, which shimmered in the fading light. It was sleeveless, with long swooping armholes that exposed her torso and hinted at her ribs. The waist rose so high, she seemed almost to be on stilts, and the wide-legged pants cascaded down. Ah, Pella thought, to be able to wear an outfit like that!

“I did something bad to her once,” she heard herself say. “A long time ago.”

“Only once? Sounds like a model friendship.”

“Yes,” Pella said. “But it was a biggish thing. I tried to steal the attention of a guy she liked.”

Nicholas smiled. “If you tried, then I imagine you succeeded.”

Pella felt flustered by this bit of flirtation, even though—or because—it was what she’d aimed to provoke. She shrugged. “Katrina doesn’t always know what she’s doing with men.”

Pella blushed. She could see the silhouette of her intentions, the contrast she wished to draw between Katrina, who didn’t know what she was doing with men, and herself, who did. She wished to suggest to Nicholas a different, more dangerous version of herself, one not wrapped in a ruffly bridesmaid’s dress and a department-store engagement ring. But if those

were her intentions, her method felt both too transparent and woefully insufficient.

Across the party, Katrina was speaking to Mike with animation, her face bright, the sharp angles of her limbs amplified by those of the martini glass that bobbed in her hand. Mike said something in reply. Katrina laughed.

For some time, the waitstaff had been urging the partygoers to leave the cocktail area and find their seats for dinner. Now all at once, as though responding to a secret signal, everyone began to obey. Katrina, spying Pella and Nicholas, waved in their direction.

Pella waved back. “Here they come.”

“I’m sorry to have dominated our chat,” Nicholas said. “I hardly got to ask any of the questions I wanted to ask.”

“Oh?” Pella said. “What sorts of questions?”

“For starters, I’m curious about your relation to Owen’s novel. Its creation. Its publication. Its success. I suspect it must have been hard for you.”

He could hardly have dangled a better cliffhanger. Pella tried to hide her fascination by imparting a note of skepticism to her reply: “What makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “I know what it’s like to be close to an artist—to serve as a helper and also a subject. When I read Owen’s novel, I felt you in that role. I know how tough it can be.”

“Because of your mom,” Pella guessed.

He nodded. “Because of my mom.”

“How were you a subject of her art?” Pella asked. “I thought she was an abstract sculptor.”

Nicholas gave a rueful smile. “You haven’t seen her films.”

Mike and Katrina, made equally tall by Katrina’s heels, their heads above the crowd, were approaching more quickly than Pella might have wished. The pair of twosomes converged.

“Good news, Nicky!” cried Katrina as she entwined her fingers with his. “I found our place cards—we’re both at table nineteen. Isn’t that *perfect*?”

What? thought Pella. No you’re not! She’d spent two entire mornings in Owen’s kitchen, listening to him hash out and rehash the seating chart, trying to be helpful, though she scarcely knew a soul on the guest list. Precisely because Katrina was one of the few souls she did know, she was

certain that Katrina was not at table 19. Katrina was at table 30. Katrina must have switched the cards.

“You two,” Katrina said to Mike and Pella as she nuzzled into Nicholas’s side, “are at the high table, I suppose.”

“We are,” Pella confirmed.

“How glamorous.” Katrina smiled complacently. “Don’t forget to wave at us, way out in the boonies.” She tugged Nicholas away, in the direction of table 19.

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8

Pella, as though in imitation of Katrina's behavior with Nicholas, looped her arm through Mike's. Slowly, trailing the crowd, they made their way toward table 1. Mike, grumpy and silent, rattled his half-melted ice cubes and tossed back whatever diluted drops of whiskey remained. Pella tried to keep her own mood from sagging. While she was talking to Nicholas, her mind had felt agile, her voice clear, her movements graceful and winning. Now, all of a sudden, she was consumed by dullness.

"Hey babe," she said as she leaned her shoulder into Mike's.

"What's Irma doing here?" He looked straight ahead as they ambled along, his tone ominously neutral.

"She's Judy's plus-one."

"Why is she Judy's plus-one?"

"I don't know," Pella said. "Because Judy asked her?"

Mike's face collapsed into an ugly grimace. The expression was Pella's first clue that he might be getting not just cheerful-wedding drunk but drunk for real. "Gross," he said.

"Gross?" Pella repeated. "What's that supposed to mean?" She was on the verge of declaring that it wasn't gross at all, that Judy and Irma, despite the difference in their ages, were both stunning women and full-fledged adults, but that would be to accept the implied accusation that they were sleeping together, which Pella assumed was untrue, even if their presence here was causing her, deep down, to wonder.

"Pathetic," Mike said. "Inappropriate."

"They're friends," Pella said. "Judy wanted her to meet Owen, her fellow Westish Award winner. And the rest of these people." She swept an arm over the gathering as guests found their seats in the reddening light. "She thought it would broaden Irma's horizons."

Mike turned his big head to face her squarely. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That Irma was coming. How could you keep that from me? Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

There was only one possible response to this charge, and it had the advantage of being true, though Pella felt embarrassed to say it aloud because it showed how little knowledge of Irma’s life she currently had. “I didn’t know.”

Mike shook his head and stared in dismay at his empty rocks glass, refusing to engage with what he believed was a bald-faced lie. Pella continued to cling to his elbow as they walked in stilted silence, weaving their way through the outer tables while the party hummed around them.

Finally they arrived at the head table, which presided at one end of the grassy dinner area, backed by pines and chokecherries. Owen extended a hand to help her onto the tall wooden dais. Pella hiked up her skirt and, teetering on one heel, lifted a knee high enough to make the ascent. “Enjoying yourself?” Owen asked as he pulled out her chair.

“Of course.” She smoothed her butt-ruffles to shimmy into her seat. “But you won’t believe what happened. Katrina switched the place cards to sit with Nicholas.”

Owen chuckled. “Of course she did.”

“What do you mean, of course? You worked forever on the seating arrangements.”

“Don’t be offended on my behalf,” Owen said. “It’s a dinner, not a detention facility.”

“So why spend so much time on the cards?”

“So people can have the pleasure of switching them. And you can have the pleasure of seething about it. After all, my dear, there must be obstacles to love. Ah!” Owen clapped his hands together. “How delightfully this is all working out.”

I’m not seething, Pella thought, and peeked at Owen, wondering what he’d meant by this, but he was looking down at his tie. Something about the way he’d included Pella in his explanation struck her—it was almost as though it was she, not Katrina, who needed obstacles to love.

The sun, as it readied itself to slide beneath the sea on the island’s far side, bathed the lawn in its tenderest light. The wine was poured, the bread

and butter were passed in their wicker baskets. The rosy sunset cascaded over the grass. Pella settled in, pleased to be seated at Owen's left hand and ready to enjoy his attention during the meal.

But as soon as the large wooden bowls of salad were delivered, Owen hopped down from the dais and headed out to circulate among his guests. Martin, after polishing off a basket of bread and both his own and Owen's wine, swiped a napkin across his mouth and followed.

Now two empty chairs yawned to Pella's right. On her left, Mike kept his shoulders pointedly turned toward Henry, presenting her with only the gray expanse of his suit jacket's back.

Pella picked at her salad and gazed out at the crowd. When Owen described the layout for the dinner—forty round tables of eight, with the long high table looking down—it had sounded glamorous to be raised on a platform beside the groom, visible to the crowd as though onstage. Now it felt like an absurd form of banishment. Anyone who glanced up from the happy camaraderie of the party—Nicholas, Katrina, anyone—could see her sitting in befuddled solitude, glumly crunching her croutons.

Finally, as the first set of dishes gave way to the heartier second, Owen and Martin returned to their seats. Pella leaned toward Owen, eager for both conversation and the appearance of conversation. But as she did, a fork clinked a glass, and the clinking spread through the crowd, causing Owen to turn toward Martin and, as the clinking reached its crescendo, to lean in and kiss him. A cheer erupted. The kiss dwindled into a private exchange between groom and groom, their heads bent together, and after a few bites of food, Owen was up again, moving among the tables.

Pella gazed after him longingly. She too itched to return to the flow of the party, but for however long dinner lasted, there was no flow, only people talking to one another at those cozy round tables bobbing along in the dusk like rafts on a lazy river. Beside her, Mike and Henry were downing staggering amounts of food. The waitstaff, tasked with taking good care of the head table, kept bringing bowl after pretty earthenware bowl of Fall Squash with Pine Nuts, Shrimp and Clam Risotto, Seared Scallops over Fresh Polenta, platters of oysters, and baskets of bread, and filling and refilling Mike's and Henry's wineglasses, and Pella's too while they were at it.

She leaned in to catch the drift of their conversation, but she couldn't

hear a word. Beware your destination, Pella thought as she surveyed the gathering that for so many months had served as hers. This party was a horizon toward which she'd been hurling herself, as though arriving here would reveal to her what came next and open a portal through which she could advance. But now the sun was disappearing with autumnal speed, without the fanfare of a colorful sunset. The grayness deepened around her as she sat alone, gazing out at the thrumming crowd. Inside she was starting to panic. Nothing lay beyond this weekend of which she had conceived; nothing lay beyond it but how afraid she was.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her purse. Most likely she'd left it in the barn. Without her phone, she couldn't look up Nicholas, nor could she look up his mom. She wasn't sure which prospect intrigued her more.

His shoulders still twisted toward Henry, Mike slid his BlackBerry from his jacket pocket and checked his messages as he nodded in time with Henry's words. Finished, he set the phone face down on the table. When it seemed he'd forgotten it, Pella crept a hand over and pulled the phone into her lap.

Working beneath the table, she opened a browser window and was annoyed to realize she didn't know Nicholas's mom's name. She typed:

Sadie never ever jeegley real person?

A name and a face popped up: Sylvie Byrnes, 1953–

"Hey!" Mike said. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Pella clicked the screen dark.

"Are you reading my messages?"

"Of course not." Pella dropped the phone into his waiting palm. "Why would I read your messages?"

"Got me," Mike said. "Why would you steal my phone?"

"I didn't *steal* it," Pella said. "I was just borrowing it for a second."

"Don't." Mike jammed the phone into his breast pocket and turned his back. He was truly in a foul mood—foul toward Pella, anyway. Still, that open en dash had told her, if not everything she wanted to know about Sylvie Byrnes, at least the first thing: She was, as far as the internet knew, alive.

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9

The dinner guests began to file toward the dance floor for Owen and Martin's first dance. Pella, thrilled to be released, leaped up from her chair. Beside her, Mike and Henry yawned and stretched as they shoved back from the table.

When Henry arrived that afternoon, she'd been stunned by the change in him. His whole body bulged with muscle now. His shoulders and biceps strained at the fabric of his jacket. His face and neck were fleshier. It was all so different from the lithe boy she'd met a few years ago. Even compared to last winter, he looked swollen and gladiatorial. His body had become a spectacle—your eyes couldn't help but linger on it.

"Good dinner?" she asked.

Henry nodded. "Almost as good as Thanksgiving at your house."

They brushed elbows as they walked. Pella sought out his pale blue eyes. "How's it going, Henry?"

Maybe it was all the wine he'd drunk or the fondness in Pella's voice, but this simple question seemed to slice through Henry's insistence on having a stalwart good time. His step slowed, just for a moment. His face seemed ready to break.

"It's going," he said.

The faux-hawked DJ, immaculately appointed down to his lashes' tiny rhinestone fringes, rallied the crowd to a fast, accelerating clap. Henry slipped away. The first notes of the first dance began—a swingy jazz standard full of horns. Pella had not expected to see the sly, confident self-display of Martin as he moved, his jacket unbuttoned, his white-shirted belly pooching over his belt in a way that might be deemed adorable, his wan hair licking up from his sweat-prickled forehead as he pursed his lips in concentration. He possessed neither rhythm nor agility, nor did these

deficiencies matter, so total was his poise as he canted his hips and strutted away from Owen. They stalked each other like stiff-legged matadors up and down the floor. Martin did the swim, the robot, the moonwalk, all with awkward aplomb. Only when the song ended and Owen tugged him into a tender embrace did he seem embarrassed, those salmon blotches deepening in his cheeks.

Pella looked around. In darkness, the true perfection of the party's spatial arrangement revealed itself, as hedgerows and bushes and trees, tents and bars and low stone walls, divided the area into a labyrinth of cozy outdoor spaces, like the rooms that open behind rooms in certain significant dreams. Blue-white paper lanterns hung from tree limbs in scalloped rows, like pearls.

The grooms' mothers took the floor to dance with their sons. Owen's mother, Genevieve, was a news anchor in Sacramento, a lean, striking woman who wore her hair short and her skirts even shorter. Her dress tonight was a sleeveless midnight-blue sheath that afforded frank vistas of her sculpted legs and arms. It was a rather pointed entry in the I May Be the Mother of the Groom but I'm Still Bringing It genre, perhaps too pointed; Owen, upon seeing his mom in the gathering area before the ceremony, had squeezed Pella's hand so hard he almost bruised her fingers. But when he hugged his mom a few moments later, he was impeccably composed and found, as he often did, the perfect word:

"It's a showstopper, Genevieve."

Now mother and son boogied easily to a Stevie Wonder tune, their happy rapport apparent, and Pella had to admit that Genevieve looked terrific. If she was going to give Big Jabez credit for shamelessly hitting on her—if she was going to allow everyone an unabashed erotic life—then she should probably give Genevieve credit for wearing an extremely flattering dress.

"Pella," cried Irma, appearing out of nowhere and clasping her hand. "Isn't everything *beautiful*?" A high credulous pink had risen like bubbles in her cheeks. Her whole person looked giddy and light.

"It's beautiful," Pella agreed.

"I like your friends so much," Irma said, as though everyone here were Pella's friend. "They're wonderful!"

Pella recognized the exhilaration in Irma's voice. It was made possible

by tipsiness but was not tipsiness itself—it was the exhilaration of youth and newness and the magic of fresh eyes. “Come on!” Irma said. “Let’s dance.”

She tugged Pella’s arm. Pella let her tug but kept, for the moment, her feet planted on the earth. “Mmm,” she said. “I don’t know.” She’d hoped that she and Mike might dance, since they didn’t seem to be able to talk; another ballad had begun, and the established couples were filing onto the floor. But Mike was nowhere to be found—he and Henry had probably decamped for the bar.

“Come on, come on,” Irma said. “Let your boyfriend sulk.”

“Let’s leave Mike out of it,” said Pella softly.

“I love Mike. Mike’s the best. He needs time to sulk. Come on!”

Pella had never, to the best of her memory, seen an outdoor dance floor before. It was square and huge and made of glossy cabernet-colored wood that caught, at this distance from the lanterns, the light of the waning moon. She knew that the dance floor had been assembled by a work crew this afternoon, but it looked like a pagan monument that had stood at this cliff’s edge for thousands of years, the defining artifact of a long-departed people who really knew how to party.

Between songs, a group of chasing kids converged and swung clockwise in a fleeting bout of ring-around-the-rosy. “You know what this game’s about?” Irma yelled happily to Pella as the children plopped down on their bottoms. “The bubonic plague!”

They stepped onto the platform. Pella, eager to shake off the dullness of her dinner seat, slipped with easy relish into the rhythm of the song. Irma watched her for several beats, her tongue protruding, her face wizened with concentration. Then she started to move. She possessed—of course—a robotic, ironical way of moving around the dance floor that turned out to be mesmerizing, as though she’d converted self-consciousness into a bodily art. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she said, leaning close to whisper-shout this confession above the music.

“You’re doing great!” Pella said. And indeed she had to look away from Irma in order to prevent herself from stealing her friend’s stiff little moves.

A Beatles song came on. Martin’s dad came strolling out onto the floor, snapping his fingers and shutting his eyes in a private reverie of melodious

understanding. Pella and Irma danced and twirled around him. Grinning sheepishly, he blushed.

And when Irma loosened up and started jumping around, when her stupendous, ridiculous beehive began to unravel too fully to regather and re-pin, and she finally had to undo it altogether and unleash her frizzy, dangerously heavy mass of hair, whipping it this way and that, Pella felt even more amazed.

They ran to the bar for a glass of water and returned to the floor. Katrina arrived, a huge smile on her face, to join them. She shouted something Pella couldn't quite hear about dancing outside, what a dream it was, and Pella nodded. Katrina grasped one of Pella's hands and one of Irma's, and they were all three dancing together. Pella felt light, suspended, held and buoyed in the space between her friends. All of life was synthesized. The dance floor felt intermittently empty and full; for a while they had a swath of it to themselves. They gravitated toward the speakers as though pulled into the physical pulse of the music.

None of the three were very good dancers; that, Pella thought, was what made them such great dancers. Katrina shimmied her gold-strapped shoulders in a ceaseless figure eight; Irma continued her stiff robotic shifting; Pella did whatever her body could find to do. They held hands and jumped. The DJ spun a random reggaeish song, the ubiquitous hit of some indeterminate year, something about *stick to your girls like glue*, and it seemed to Pella the most magical piece of music ever composed, the single piece of artistic perfection toward which all human striving had been aimed. Owen strutted into view, twirled each of them, and danced away again. Pella's sense of everything, of time and selfhood and solidity, vanished for a spell; she was entranced by the beauty of her friends. My girls, she thought, I will stick to them. They were dancing in the open air, they were alive and free; every movement, every moment, felt freer than the one before. The night grew huge around them.

Clarice, Martin's niece, with her dense braces and deadly seriousness, stood in the grass at the edge of the dance floor, arms crossed over her sailboat-patterned dress. Irma darted away from Katrina and Pella. The soles of her silver slippers kicked up behind her, and she skidded to a stop beside Clarice, who at thirteen was half a foot taller than she. She seized the girl's hand.

Clarice's eyes widened, and she gripped the ground with her feet, resisting Irma's tug. She seemed frozen between terror and joy. Irma leaned close and spoke to her. With a giggle, Clarice allowed Irma to tug her onto the floor, where Pella and Katrina closed ranks around her. In the center of their little circle, Clarice smiled and bobbed her head to the music. Irma, with expressive looks and *You can do it* nods, continued to encourage her. The two of them had forged some instant bond. Clarice's feet began to move, and she lifted her arms and swayed with native grace. Her eyes fell closed, and a dreamy expression crossed her face, as though she were imagining the not-so-distant day when she'd be the unabashed star of such parties. When the song faded out, Pella and Katrina clapped and cheered. With a shy happy smile, Clarice snuck away.

Pella spotted Judy sitting alone at a nearby table. Inspired by Irma's success with Clarice, she broke from the circle and trotted over the grass, her scales and ruffles rustling.

Judy leaned back in her chair, half recumbent, the dramatic folds of her dress catching glimmers of light from the paper lanterns, her cape drawn tight around her shoulders. She wore a satisfied expression, both sleepy and alert, as she watched the dancers shimmy and twirl. A crimson stain arced across the tablecloth. Pella held out a hand. "Judy," she said. "Come join us."

Judy smiled up at her. "No thank you, my dear."

"Please," Pella urged. "We're having so much fun."

"So am I," Judy said.

Pella, stymied, felt a twinge of embarrassment. If she knew what to say, the way Irma had known with Clarice, Judy would come dance with them, partake of their joy, and what a joy that would be! Judy, sad after her breakup. Judy, alone at her table. Judy, secretly wishing to dance but feeling herself too old for the moment and the songs, too old for the young—this was what Pella imagined. And if it had been Irma holding out her hand, Judy would be rising to her feet, ready to have her melancholy transformed—this was what Pella feared.

"Are you sure?" Pella asked.

Judy, still half recumbent, reached out a hand and grasped Pella's. "My dear, I'm having a *marvelous* time. I could not be happier that I came."

Pella knew Judy's way of effusing in order to deflect and neutralize

attention she found invasive. But her tone was so muted and sincere, her expression so contented, that it baffled this interpretation. Pella's resolve—to drag Judy onto the dance floor, away from her lonely table, away from the dolefulness of her breakup, and force her to have a good time—wavered and was gone.

"Okay," she said, and squeezed Judy's hand.

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10

The colorful wreckage of New England's finest edible vegetation was heaped and scattered across the tables: parsnips and turnips and pattypan squash, a dozen different greens, gorgeously plump wedged and salted tomatoes, half-eaten ears of Indian corn, fried zucchini cakes. Platters of pinwheeled anchovies. So many upturned shells, the clams' dainty and ridged and regular, the oysters' unruly and bumpy and rude. A wine bottle rested near a table's edge. Pella reached out and grabbed it, expecting it to be empty; she wanted only the distraction of lifting it to her lips and goading the last two grainy drops onto her tongue, but it was half full. She captured a mouthful and held it, sloshed it between her cheeks, and wondered what a sommelier would say about it other than that it was very, very good.

She wandered the grounds for a while as Irma and Katrina danced. She told herself she should take advantage of the reception's remaining hours to meet some new people. There was no need to think about Mike, whom she could talk to anytime, or Judy and Irma, who, for all the uneasy distance Pella felt from them, would be at Westish when she returned. If you were going to talk only to the people you already knew, why go to the party at all? Even Katrina, now that their new-old friendship had been secured, was a person best saved for later. Katrina had invited her to visit for a long weekend in October, use *The New Yorker*'s theater tickets, sleep on the comfortable foldout couch.

"Pella? Hi."

"Hi." Pella smiled at the woman with jagged, dyed-black hair who held out her hand.

"It's so cool to meet you. I'm Martin's Aunt Jean. Who do you think should play you in the Netflix series?"

“I don’t know,” Pella said. “Meryl Streep?”

“Oh, I knew you’d be hilarious,” said Aunt Jean.

Pella passed into another chat, and another. Across the lawn, molecules of conversation formed, large or small, stable or transient, and broke and reformed. Pella wished she had a real-time party program that would tell her who was discussing what beneath what tree so she could seek out the people and topics she found most interesting. Instead she wandered in the dimness, and various people in various states of drunkenness appeared at random before her. A soft-spoken documentarian told her about the Occupy film she was working on. One of the women who’d been gathered around Irma turned out to be a physician on Rikers Island. A posh Ecuadorean man confided that he’d spent a year remodeling his Chelsea apartment in an effort to cheer himself up, but now that it was finished he was depressed again and would need to start over. His face glowed with such exuberant health that his depression seemed an implausible figment.

Tired of talking, she loitered by the dessert table and watched the waitstaff lay out the sweets: wedges of carrot cake for the vegans, slabs of flourless chocolate torte for the gluten-free, mini-eclairs from Martin’s favorite Brooklyn bakery for Martin. Ramekins of yogurt topped with Block Island cinnamon honey. Red and gold apples strewn over the table for decoration and drunken crunching. Gleaming huge-handled coffee urns like the trophies in Mike’s office stood sentinel on either end. Pella was aware she’d spent the past hour waiting for something that had not happened. She refused to allow herself to acknowledge what it was.

Far away on the dance floor, one song wound down without crossfading into another. The DJ’s voice came over the loudspeaker, too garbled by static and distance for her to make out, but Pella, well versed in the evening’s itinerary, knew he was introducing the band—a bluegrass quartet called Wind in the Pines whose backing members had played during the ceremony and who would now be joined by their fiddler and lead singer, Martin’s sister Shuba. After their set, the wedding cake would be cut.

Those seated at tables hoisted themselves to their feet; those standing made a quick trip to the bar; and everyone began to flow toward the dance floor, beside which the band was setting up on stools and tuning their instruments.

Nicholas came walking toward her with his easy gait and hangdog

smile. *What took you so long?* she thought but managed to resist saying.

"Hey," he said. "Should we stroll for a minute?"

They became part of the loose cascade of bodies proceeding toward the dance floor. Shuba's boyfriend, Tony, in suspenders and brightly checkered shirt, perched on a stool with banjo in lap and toyed with his orthodontic harmonica holder. The cadaverously thin guy in the straw hat tuned his mandolin; the stocky guy with a billowing beard tapped at the neck of his bass. Shuba stood before them in her bridesmaid's dress, a backward Red Sox cap perched on her lacquered curls. Gripping her fiddle by the throat, she leaned toward the microphone stand.

"Wind in the Pines was the camp my parents shipped me off to every summer—that's where I got Lyme disease and the name for this band." She raised the fiddle and, like a preening duck, lifted and twisted her neck to rest her chin atop it. "So thanks, Mom and Dad!"

The quartet struck up their instruments with such jubilant clarity and Shuba's voice joined in with such easy force that Pella kept one ear trained on the song even as she and Nicholas skirted the gathering and slipped into darkness.

Wordlessly, they passed beyond the Tillys' tree line onto the adjoining property, following northward the line of the cliff. The houses whose yards they traversed were dark. As the music diminished, she could hear the lull of the ocean.

Nicholas reached into his lapel pocket and produced one of the pre-rolled joints that were included in certain of the gift bags Pella had spent Thursday assembling. "Almost too festive to smoke," he remarked of the slender cylinder with its silver and lavender stripes.

"Owen spent all summer testing different papers," Pella said. "He decided these burned the best."

"Poor guy. Always suffering for his various arts." Nicholas lit the joint and took a drag. He held it toward Pella.

"No thanks," she said. "I'd better keep my wits about me."

"Why's that?"

"There's just...a lot going on."

"There's always a lot going on," Nicholas said, "unless you're dead."

Pella wanted to return to the topics Nicholas raised before dinner, about

art and artists and being close to them; she was trying to figure out how to begin when she felt his eyes on her face.

"You know," he remarked, "you're more beautiful than I imagined you."

"How long have you been imagining me?" she asked.

"Ever since I read Owen's novel."

"Is that what this is about?" she teased. "Some sort of literary crush? I'm not a character in a book, you know."

"I wouldn't call it a crush," he said, which struck Pella as a skillful bit of equivocation—would he call it less, or more? Not that it mattered to her. They weren't really flirting—just goofing around. Still, she felt a little flustered and reached randomly for something to say.

"Did you read it recently? Or right when it came out?"

"Even before it came out," Nicholas said. "I wrote about it for the *SoHo Review*."

"That was you?" Pella blurted. She really was not expecting this.

"That was me."

Pella had absorbed every word of response to Owen's book, and the *SoHo Review* piece had been one of her favorites, though its details were fuzzy now. That it had been written by Nicholas was mind-boggling.

"I didn't realize you were a book critic," she said.

"I'm not," he replied. "I'm an accountant."

At first Pella assumed he must be joking—but a beat went by without him breaking into a smile, and she realized he was indeed an accountant as well as the author of at least one well-crafted book review, not to mention the ex-boyfriend of a famous model, actress, and website founder. Somehow this last accomplishment was also the least surprising.

"But enough about me," he said. "Tell me about your mother."

"You're stealing my jokes," Pella said.

Nicholas said nothing, only took another small hit of the joint and looked out at the rolling waves, their near sides lit by the party's electric lights. Pella realized that, given their earlier conversation, she was going to have to talk about her mom. *Here goes nothing*, she thought. *You brought this on yourself.*

"She died before I turned four," she said. "I feel like I barely knew her."

They took a few steps in silence, or what passed for silence here: the murmur and slosh of the ocean, the singing of katydids, the roar of the party

diminishing behind them. Pella could already feel the sobs trying to climb up out of her chest. *You brought this on yourself,* she thought again. She held out two scissored fingers, and Nicholas placed the joint between them.

"Almost four years is a long time," he suggested as Pella held in the smoke.

She nodded and exhaled. "I know."

"What do you remember?"

"Not much," Pella said as she handed back the joint. "I have a few photographs my dad took when we all hung out. Birthdays, holidays, excursions to the zoo. My parents never lived together."

"Probably better that way," Nicholas said. "To judge by my own experience."

"My mom was an infectious-disease doctor. My dad had just become a professor. They'd been dating for a few months, very casually, when my mom announced she was pregnant. My dad asked what she wanted to do. She said she wanted to have the baby.

"At one point, my dad gallantly offered to marry her—this is in his telling, which is the only way I know anything. Apparently my mom just laughed at him. *It's 1987, you moron*—that sort of thing. And then I was born. She and I lived in an apartment in the Back Bay that I can't remember, no matter how hard I try."

"What was her name?" Nicholas asked, and the question felt almost too intimate for Pella to bear.

"Sarah," she said.

A lump rose in her throat. She puffed out her cheeks and looked at the ocean, which was surpassingly lovely in all the usual ways—immenseness above and below, the dark sky littered with stars. The breeze seemed to blow right through her. "You know what's funny?" she said when the lump subsided. "I have exactly one photograph of her from before I was born. And I brought it with me this week for absolutely no reason."

"There must have been a reason," he said.

"I just tossed it in my suitcase when I was packing," Pella said. "I mean, I didn't toss it—I placed it in very carefully. But I've never done anything like that before. It's too precious to carry around. It just sits in my underwear drawer."

"There must have been a reason," Nicholas said again as he passed her

the dwindling joint. “What do you think it was?”

His manner of asking, peaceful and curious, put her at ease—but when she filled her lungs with smoke and tried to consider the question, her mind went blank.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Everything else I brought on this trip, I considered and reconsidered and wrote down on three different lists. And then my most valuable possession, the thing I could least bear to lose, I added on a whim.

“The weirdest part is that I haven’t thought about it since. It’s just lying at the bottom of my suitcase. At least, I assume it’s there. I haven’t even checked. Now I’m freaking out a little and wondering whether I should go to the house and make sure it’s not missing.”

“If that would make you feel better,” Nicholas said, “we’re headed in the right direction.”

We could, Pella thought. Walk to the house, climb the stairs to the guest room, unzip the suitcase, make sure the photograph is still inside. And then I’d be in a bedroom with this beautiful man.

“That’s okay,” she said. “No need to subject you to my paranoia.”

With a look that accepted this decision while rejecting the notion that she was paranoid, Nicholas leaned over and stubbed out the smoldering silver nub against a boulder in someone’s yard. “What do you remember about her?” he asked in that calm, curious tone. “Beyond the photographs.”

Suddenly Pella was seized by an image of herself and Nicholas standing together in the guest room. She was gripping his tie in the fingers of one hand. She was using it to pull him toward her. Shit, she thought. I hit that joint too hard. Owen had said the stuff served at the reception would be strong and aphrodisiacal.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I think I need a break.”

Nicholas held up a hand. “I didn’t mean to pry. During dinner I was just thinking about how much we have in common. Your relationship with your dad, mine with my mom. That intense only-child opposite-sex-parent dynamic.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes.”

“I was almost four when my dad moved to Oregon—the same age you were when your mom died. But that was a far cry from him dying, because I still had to visit him twice a year.”

“You didn’t enjoy that?”

He shrugged. “It caused a lot of strife between me and my mom. The separations, the comings and goings. I can’t say it was worth the trouble.”

“I always felt my dad and I were married,” Pella said. “Not in, like, an overtly sexual way. But like we were bound together forever. I’d never leave him and I’d never be replaced.”

Nicholas nodded. “I know what you mean.”

Pella was cognizant that they shouldn’t be away too long; she didn’t want their absence noted. But it was a pleasure to talk to Nicholas, and if it pained her to be forced to delve, even briefly, into her memory of her mom, it was a kind of pain that felt dizzyingly, even exhilaratingly accurate, a finger plunged straight to the wound, and it seemed astute of him to have caused it.

“You know,” he mused, “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

It wasn’t clear he was flirting or knew how flirtatious this sounded—to judge by his tone, he was merely thinking aloud.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” she said. “What am I like?”

“Like a dream come true. You even look great in that dress.”

Fine, he was definitely flirting. In the crisp air, the stars seemed vivid and near and lit the sandy grass at their feet as they picked their way along the cliff’s edge.

“You know,” Nicholas said, as though it flowed naturally from his last statement, “we could just get out of here.”

“You’re here with Katrina,” Pella said, and sensed the instability in her tone. She was chastising him for toying with Katrina’s affections even as she dared him to disagree.

“I’m not here with Katrina,” he said. “At the moment, I’m here with you.”

Some awful part of Pella shivered with pleasure. Nicholas seemed less a person than a holographic projection of her desires. And yet she could feel the reality of his presence as they walked step for step, their exhalations synced, along the path. She adjusted her footsteps ever so slightly so that her bare arm brushed his jacket.

“Do you always do exactly as you please?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Or I would have kissed you already.”

“Don’t,” Pella said sharply. She wanted to be turned off by his obvious

caddishness, but instead it was turning her on. And anyway if he weren't a cad, they wouldn't have taken this walk in the first place.

"Don't worry. I'm a paragon of restraint."

"It was a mistake to leave the party," she said. "We'd better get back."

At this, they turned around—Nicholas, now, was the one walking nearer the cliff.

"I didn't mean to offend you," he said. "I've enjoyed our conversation."

"Me too."

"I'd like for it to continue," he said. "As friends or otherwise."

"As friends," Pella said firmly.

"Friends, then."

He held out his hand to shake. Glumness overtook Pella at the sight of it. It wasn't what she wanted, to shake his hand as though at the end of an office meeting, but that was what they did, and if she tried to soften her fingers and mix a touch of affection into the exchange, Nicholas did the opposite, his hand rigid as he lifted and lowered hers in a single, declarative pump.

Their arms fell to their sides. Pella's glumness turned to a yawning solitude.

"I don't think we should walk back into the party together," she said. "Do you mind waiting a bit while I go ahead?"

"For you?" he said with a smile. "I'd wait forever."

Pella rolled her eyes. "I think you like to flirt with unattainable women," she said.

"Yes," he agreed. "But I also like to attain them."

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11

Pella could barely see the bronze glow of the party in the distance. And yet she and Nicholas had been walking so slowly—they must have been gone a long time. She had little desire to rejoin the party she was hurrying toward, but she was anxious for her presence, rather than her absence, to be noted. Frustration and guilt washed over her and clashed with her exhilaration.

The nearer she drew to the glow, the less ready she felt to reenter it and the more overwhelmed. How could you fall for someone you didn't know? How could you know someone you just met? But these were the same stupid questions people had been asking themselves since love was invented.

Not that she was falling in love with Nicholas, or anything remotely similar. She decided, as she hustled back toward the party, trying to put as much space and time as possible between her reappearance and his, her furbelowed dress constricting her knees and forcing her into quick choppy steps on wobbly heels, that she was smitten with him. *Smitten*, that was an apt word, much safer than thinking of love, and her mind snapped shut around it. She could bear being smitten. The stakes felt tolerably low. Being smitten didn't upend your life.

As she charged along, one of her heels sank into what felt like quicksand. She tried to plant her other foot to steady herself, but it bounced off something hard and convex. She pitched forward, twisting her ankle, and lost her footing. Both hands plunged through broad scratchy leaves into squishy mud. Her hands buried to the wrists, she held herself in a hips-lifted plank, swearing under her breath, trying to keep her dress clean. She'd traipsed into a backyard garden, one that had been badly overwatered. The hard convex thing she'd tripped over lay inches from her nose: an acorn squash, fluted and deep green. Even as her triceps burned and her ankle

throbbed and her palms twisted awkwardly in the squishy mud, she couldn't help but admire its beauty.

She yanked her hands free and, with a half-falling lurch, tumbled out of the squash patch and onto dry lawn. She'd turned her ankle, and one of her shoes was gone. She managed to reach in among the vines and fish it out of the muck. Her dress, as far as she could tell in the weak ambient light, had not been ruined. Her ankle felt stiff and swollen.

The ocean drowsed softly beside her, the slow waves lapping at the foot of the cliff, while Beyoncé's voice in the distance told her she still had a ways to go. Pella, limping and wincing, hurried on. She could feel Mike ahead of her, wondering where she'd gone; she could feel Nicholas behind her, steadily catching up. She couldn't let either of them see her in this state.

She cut through a gap between arrowwood shrubs and found herself on the Tilly property beside the barn where she and Owen had dressed for the ceremony.

Relief washed over her. The barn was the godsend she needed, a quiet, out-of-the-way place with a bathroom and a full-length mirror. She could rinse off her muck-covered shoes, scrub her hands and feet, try to redeem her hair. Plus her purse was in there somewhere. There might even be some Advil in the cabinet.

The heavy door creaked on its arrowhead hinges, and Pella found herself in the midst of a raucous, Boschian poker game that stretched the length of the driftwood table, at the head of which sat Big Jabez, his chips piled high before him.

"Paula!" he growled, and lifted an arm of his persimmon jacket. A fragrant cloud of pot smoke and pipe tobacco hovered over the cards and glasses and bottles of gin. "Saved you a chair."

"Maybe later," Pella called as she slammed the heavy door shut.

The rented toilet-cabins were all the way across the premises. Pella set off, plotting in her mind a roundabout route that would take her past as few people as possible. Her ankle was stiffening thickly, and she wondered whether she shouldn't just lie down on the grass and cry, but Mike always said it was best to keep blood moving through a sprain.

Before she'd taken a dozen steps, she heard her name called—Pella this time, not Paula. It was Owen, flanked by a man and a woman, beside the plundered sprawl of the dessert table.

“Pella!” he shouted again. “Come, meet my friends!” He sounded desperate, like *friends* was a code word for *captors*.

“I’d love to!” Pella called. She glanced with dismay at her shoes—they were bricks of damp mud in her hand. She flung them into the blue-black drupes of the arrowwoods. For the rest of the night she’d be one of those careless sylphs who bounce barefoot around the party, albeit one with a plodding limp.

On her way to Owen, she passed a table on which lay a sodden heap of bar rags. She grabbed one, scrubbed at her mud-caked hands and forearms, and tossed the rag into the bushes. Now her hands looked clean and reeked of bar slop.

“Pella,” said Owen. “This is Marion. She writes party reports for the *Conserver*.”

Marion, who was roughly Pella’s age, wore platinum bangs cut straight across her forehead. Her plump limbs and breasts squeezed forth from a minuscule dress. A notebook protruded from her snakeskin purse.

“So nice to meet you,” Pella said.

“Delighted,” replied Marion in a stinging tone. Pella clasped her smelly hands behind her back. She wasn’t usually bothered by caustic women—it was the sylphs who made her self-conscious—but Marion seemed an especially terrifying case.

“And this is Charles.” Owen indicated a slender, clean-shaven man, his drawn face dominated by the black rectangles of his eyeglasses. “One of the finest theater directors in New York City.”

Pella, guessing what was required of her, shook Charles’s thin-fingered hand and began, with feigned animation, to talk. Owen slipped away into the darkness.

“Well, that was fast,” Charles said, and gave his gin a disconsolate swirl.

“He’ll be back,” said Marion. “But you know, darling—and I hate to be the one to break this to you—tonight’s not the night you’ll bed him.”

“I don’t see why not,” Charles said. “I’ve come all this way.”

Marion turned to Pella. “Charles is in love with your friend Owen, in case that’s not obvious.”

“I’m not in *love* with him,” Charles said. “I have a purely sordid and carnal yearning. It just happens to have outstayed its welcome.”

Marion, ignoring this, leaned confidentially close to Pella. “Let’s have a

little girl talk, shall we? I saw you chatting with Nick Byrnes."

Pella, terror-struck, flicked her eyes toward Marion's notebook. She didn't read the *New York Conserver,* but she knew it to be a long-running institution of cultural gossip.

"Why are you blushing?" Marion asked. "You seem to have caught Nick's eye. He's very charming. Believe me, I know."

"Oh, please," moaned Charles. "*You've* never caught Nick's eye."

"Of course not," said Marion. "I've never even caught his D."

Her companion snorted the last of his gin from his nose.

"You're absolutely the evening's front-runner," Marion told Pella. "A few more hair flips and you two will be dashing off into the bushes."

"Oh," Pella stammered. "There's no...I mean...I'm engaged."

"What a font of revelations you are," Marion said, with a glance at Pella's diamond. "So tell us about her." She pointed across the lawn toward Irma, who was standing beneath a breve-shaped string of lanterns surrounded by laughing women.

"That's Irma," Pella said.

"Is it true she roofied that sad college boy? The one who was whining on *Fox News*?"

"You'd have to ask her," Pella said.

"She's the star of the evening," said Charles. "That white dress is a ten."

"No one cares about the dress," Marion said. "But it's not wrong to envy the little minx. Twelve years old, fifty-three pounds, and ready to party. She's the star of the evening."

"That's what I just said." Charles pouted.

"I'm agreeing with you, you idiot." Marion, as she walked away, her companion hustling to keep pace, twisted toward Pella and raised her glass. "Have fun, I guess? Is that a thing people say?"

PELLA STOOD HALFWAY up the sloping lawn, her bare feet in the lush grass, scanning the reception for Mike. The hours of lighthearted capering had ended, and the scene had changed. Everyone older than Clarice and younger than Judy was on the dance floor, which resembled a pulsing nightclub.

In the center of the throng she spotted Henry, sandwiched between two boys—or, rather, two men his age, though all three looked like boys, their

clean-shaven faces flushed with booze and exertion. Henry looked vehemently drunk, his eyes closed as though dancing alone at home. The young man behind him, his chest pressed with tender purpose into Henry's shoulders, was tall and South Asian and wore a pencil-thin burgundy suit beneath his remarkable pompadour. His own eyes were closed as his arms waved above his head in a loose slinky way, like lines of heat shimmering up from pavement.

The boy facing Henry, by contrast, seemed far more watchful and cognizant of his surroundings as, with a mischievous air that tipped toward the sinister and the focus of a jewel thief, he went about unbuttoning Henry's exquisitely tailored white shirt. Petite and freckled with a pretty snub nose, he wiggled his hips and fingered Henry's placket, trying to fit to the beat the difficult work of sliding the button of a starched, tight-fitting dress shirt through the stiff slit of a buttonhole. Henry kept dancing, his head tipped back, his face to the star-dense sky.

The dance floor was full. Faces flashed in and out of the light. The white halves of Henry's shirt parted, revealing a triangle of pink chest. The snub-nosed boy reached Henry's bottommost button and, with a swift triumphant flourish, yanked the shirttail out of his dark pants. Immediately he set to work on a silver cuff link. His total attention to these finicky tasks in the midst of the general pandemonium struck Pella as somehow poignant.

The cuff-link issue solved, the boy tugged Henry's white shirt from his body, each sleeve catching on the bulge of his forearm. The shirt streamed from the boy's hand like a banderole as he waved it aloft in triumph. Pella feared he was about to unbuckle Henry's belt, but the boy danced away, leaving the whole reception to enjoy the fruits of his labor: Henry's beautiful, beefy slab of torso, glistening with sweat, the muscles sliding as he moved.

The young gay men of the party assembled around him, marching in a comic orbit, trailing their fingertips along his naked shoulders and abs, expressing their admiration far more openly than women were inclined or allowed to do. Henry threw his head back, reveling in this attention while pretending it didn't exist.

Pella recalled what she'd said at lunch yesterday, that being an athlete was like being a woman, Henry like a Lily Bart. His body and youth were his capital, and the capital was being spent down. She could see he'd built

this eye-grabbing body not as a tool for playing baseball but as compensation for his failures in baseball. His swollen physique had become an end in itself—a repository for his frustration, which he burned off day after day in the weight room, and for his sense of progress and craft. His career had stalled—his muscles grew.

The music shifted to a slower tempo. The crowd dissolved. Henry stood alone, his shoulders heaving. He stooped to pick up his shirt.

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12

Pella found Mike alone at the elevated head table, sitting in the same chair he'd occupied during dinner, carving the tip from a thick cigar.

"Hey," she said as she too resumed her dinner seat. "Where's Henry?" She winced at her disingenuousness. Somehow the conversation could only begin with a lie.

"Damned if I know," Mike said. "Went to the bar and never came back."

He dug a lighter from his pocket, fired the cigar, and turned it toward himself to inspect the glowing ring. Satisfied, he jammed the unlit end between his lips and leaned back in his chair. He was too large to recline in a manly cigar-smoking way, but he tried. The chair, teetering on its spindly hind legs, looked ready to pitch him backward off the dais. "Guess I'll have to smoke these myself," he said. "Want one?"

"No thanks," Pella said.

He had taken off his jacket, but the knot of his tie still clung tightly to his throat. Pella grabbed his free hand.

"Hey," she said. "Can we go dance?"

His shoulders lifted and dropped. "Maybe later."

She recalled the many weddings of his Westish friends and former teammates they'd attended—always Mike was the genial center of the party, a crowd around him in the cocktail hour, a hit on the dance floor as he moved his big body with imperturbable grace.

She wondered whether he'd noticed her absence—she had little sense, amid the strange distensions of party-time, how long she and Nicholas had been gone—but to ask whether he'd noticed her absence would only alert him to it.

"Talk to anyone interesting?" she said.

"Not really. Your friend Katrina seems nice."

“Thanks for saying so.”

“No need to thank me.” He puffed out a ring of blue smoke. “She seemed nice, is all.”

“What did you two talk about?”

Mike shrugged. “What’s happening back home, mostly. The prank, and the bullshit afterward, and the stuff people are writing about it.”

“Wow.” Though Mike and Katrina had chatted easily on the beach, it was hard for Pella to imagine them having so substantial a conversation. “What did Katrina say?”

“Let’s see, what did she say?” He tapped cigar ash into the grass. “She said, ‘I feel for men—the good ones, that is. They’re in an increasingly untenable position these days. They’re on the wrong side of history just by being alive.’”

“Sounds like something I might say.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never heard you say any such thing.” Mike reached for his scotch and polished it off.

“A year from now,” Pella said, “we can hang out with Katrina all the time.”

“Perfect.” Mike plunked down his empty tumbler. “Let’s move to New York so you can leave me for that guy.”

Pella flinched. “What guy?”

“You know what guy. The one whose dick you’ve been riding all night.”

“I’m not riding anything,” Pella said. “What a stupid way of talking.”

With a meaty hand, Mike dismissively waved his cigar. “You have my blessing,” he said. “Just go fuck him already.”

Pella tried to ignore this. “I’ve been looking forward to tonight for months,” she said. “I want us to have a good time.”

“Ha.” Mike’s voice contained an alien note, detached and automatic, as though he weren’t quite speaking *to* her but only within earshot. His eyes gazed out over the sea of tables, never alighting on her.

Finally he turned to her and said, “If you don’t want to fuck him, why are you googling his mom?”

Shit, Pella thought. She’d clicked the phone dark when Mike caught her looking up Sylvie. She should have closed the browser window. “I was bored.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Bored because you had to sit next to me.”

“You didn’t say a word to me all through dinner! You’re being a terrible date.”

“I was talking to Henry. He’s had a tough year.”

“It’s possible to talk to me and Henry at the same time,” Pella said. “You’ve done it before. But now you’re holding a grudge against me because of what Irma did, and you seem to have failed to noticed that *I* didn’t do anything, so you’ve got no reason to be mad at me.”

“I do now,” Mike said.

“His mother’s a well-known feminist artist. I was curious about her work.”

Mike scoffed. “What’s her well-known feminist art? Does she drug football players and tattoo humiliating shit on their foreheads?”

“Sometimes,” Pella said.

All of a sudden, Mike’s expression shifted from anger to boyish sadness. When he spoke again, his voice sounded plaintive and chastened—helpless, almost. “I got an email from Molina,” he said. “She’s kicking me out of my office.”

It was his tone more than the words themselves that worried Pella. “What do you mean?”

He grabbed his phone from his pocket and tapped in his code. He stared at the screen for several moments, his eyes grim, and Pella could tell he was rereading the message in question, pulling every last bit of bitterness from it, the same way he was pulling deeply on that disgusting cigar. He didn’t hand her the phone, which would have suggested too much affection. He plunked it on the table in front of her, the email open. Pella read. Some bureaucratic language about intraoffice communication. Relocated by EOD Tuesday.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “You’ve been in that office forever.”

Mike nodded glumly. “Seven years.”

“So why would she do this now?”

“Because she’s a cunt,” Mike said.

Fury blazed in his eyes—the fury was directed at Molina and possibly Irma, but Pella was the person he was looking it, and she felt herself bearing the brunt of it. From the verge of softening, she hardened again.

“If you mishandled it, you mishandled it,” she said. “Don’t blame Irma. And don’t blame me.”

Mike scowled. “I knew you wouldn’t support me.”

“Support you?” Pella said. “All I do is support you. Who helps you study for the LSAT? Who cleans your house and cooks your meals? Who spends an entire week making Thanksgiving dinner for all your orphaned jocks?”

“Nobody forces you to do those things.”

“Nobody forces me,” Pella said. “But you expect them.”

“I expect them because you do them. You want to stop, stop.”

“Fine,” Pella said. “I’m done.”

“Me too.” With an air of emphatic decision, Mike dropped his cigar into a glass of water. The glowing orange tip hissed and died. He shoved back his chair and stood. “I am going to dance,” he said, enunciating each syllable with drawn-out drunken precision.

With an ease that surprised her, he hopped down from the dais and began to stride away. He turned and looked over his shoulder. “One more thing,” he announced as though speaking to an assembly. “I will not be applying to law school. Not this year. Not next year. Not ever.”

A grim sadness spread through Pella’s body. “I know,” she said as she laid her head down on the table. “I know.”

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13

Pella spotted Irma's silver slippers darting across the lawn, heading from the dance floor toward the bar. Pella caught up with her there. Irma, flushed and sweaty, her hair spilling everywhere, was chugging a pint of water.

"Mama Bird!" Irma cried as she plunked down the empty glass. "I'm ordering champagne. Would you like some champagne?"

"Just do me a favor," Pella said. "Stay away from Mike, okay?"

"Stay away from him?" Irma repeated with airy incredulity.

"Yeah," said Pella. "He's really upset."

"Why would Mike come near *me*?" Irma asked. "Dude has said like fifty words to me in my life."

"He's not a dude. He's my fiancé."

"Those categories aren't mutually exclusive," Irma said cheerily. "Watch, I'm going to get carded again." She leaned across the bar and flapped a hand madly until the bartender acknowledged her.

"Are you going to card me?" she asked.

"No," said the bartender. "I already carded you."

"And I'm not getting any younger!" Irma said. "This is my friend Pella. We'd like two glasses of your finest champagne. Not the cheap stuff, please."

The bartender looked at her flatly. "I have one kind of champagne." He plunked two slim glasses on the bar, drizzled a bottle over them as foam ballooned everywhere, and made an ironic bow.

"Thanks, pal." Irma lifted the damp glasses and handed one to Pella. "Cheers! To everyone!"

"Cheers," Pella said.

As the note of sour judgment fell from Irma's features, she seemed to grow more lovely; her girlish effervescence, paradoxically, made her seem

more mature. It was the exact transformation Pella had always sought to encourage in her.

“Just steer clear of Mike, okay?”

Irma peered at her in puzzlement. “Pella, why are you being like this? I came all this way to hang out with you. And you’re just grumping around, warning me away from people.”

“I’m warning you away from one person,” Pella said. “A person whose life you’ve really messed with lately.”

“Me? How did I mess with Mike’s life?”

“With your stupid prank. The football team lost today—”

“Oh my goodness!” Irma clapped a hand to her heart. “Why didn’t you say so? Tragedy strikes our quiet community!”

“Let me finish. Mike is catching a ton of flak. President Molina booted him out of his office, and he’s worried about his job.”

“He’s not going to lose his *job*,” Irma said.

Her tone was dismissive and certain, but a worried look flashed over her face, which Pella took as an opening.

“Irma, why didn’t you tell me what you were planning?”

“Why, so you could try to talk me out of it?” Irma lifted a hand to scratch at the hollow of her neck.

“You could have told me,” Pella said. She sounded like she was pleading —for what, she wasn’t sure.

I came all this way to hang out with you—those were the words of Irma’s that Pella wanted badly to believe, but the two of them had barely spoken all evening, and Pella couldn’t tell whose fault that was.

“It needed to be a secret,” Irma said. “And anyway, I didn’t want you caught in the middle of it.”

“I’m caught in the middle regardless,” Pella said. “Westish isn’t just Mike’s job—it’s his whole life. Which means it’s my life too.”

Irma grimaced, her face wrinkling. “Fine,” she said. “If that’s the life you want.”

“What’s wrong with my life?”

“Nothing—if it’s the life you want. But sometimes I think you don’t care what you want. You don’t want to want anything, because if you want what you want, then you might have to try to get it. You don’t want the responsibility of wanting what you really want.”

“You’re talking gibberish,” Pella said.

“Am I? Then ignore me. Marry a random dude and live in a random place. Spend your life mothering teenage jocks. Why not? It’s all the same in the end, right? We’ll all be pushing up daisies.”

“What are you saying?”

Irma tossed back her champagne and gave a full-body shudder. “I can’t stand it,” she said. “I can’t stand to watch you do this to yourself. ‘Who, me, Pella Affenlicht? No, I have no aspirations. I just putter around my garden like I’m eighty. Sometimes I walk the dog.’

“It’s bullshit, P. I can’t take it anymore. It’s not about Mike. Maybe you love him, or you loved him once and hope to do so again, or whatever. Maybe you’re dead set on marrying him. That’s fine. Leave Mike out of it. But what about *you*, Pella? What are you so afraid of? What’s got you so bottled up? It’s not your meathead fiancé. And it’s not fucking *me*.”

“I’m afraid of lots of things,” Pella said. “What if your whole family was dead and gone? What would you be afraid of?”

“Get over it,” Irma said. “You’re afraid of yourself. You’re afraid of your desires and your ambitions. You’re afraid of how huge they are. You’re afraid that if you let them out of the house, they’ll eat the whole world. And, hey, maybe they will! But go ahead. Marry Mike Schwartz. Housewife for life.”

“I’ll never be a ‘housewife,’” Pella said. “Don’t be absurd.”

“You’re literally a housewife right now! You’re pissed at me for not letting you treat my senior thesis like it’s your goddamn ladies’ book club. It’s pathetic, Pella. It’s sad.”

“Screw you,” Pella said.

“Screw yourself. You’re not my mother—I already have a mother. And you’re not Judy’s mother either. You blame us for your problems. You think we’re keeping you down. You insist on mothering people and then you resent them for letting you do it. Even Owen—you think you’re some kind of holy martyr because you helped Owen with his book. And he didn’t give you enough credit. Poor dear.” Mockingly, Irma drew lines of tears down her cheeks with her silver fingertips. “You know how you get credit, P.? Do you? You go out and fucking *get* it.”

“You’re a child.”

“He wrote that book. Do you hear what I’m saying? He *wrote* it. It’s

his.”

Pella’s anguish and distress had rendered her utterly insubstantial, so that Irma’s words were within her and all around her and moving right through her.

“I worked my ass off on that book,” she said.

“Whose fault is that? You did it because you wanted to.”

“Maybe *you* should think about helping people.”

Irma laughed. “I’m helping you right now.”

Pella waved a hand at her. At her lacy white slip, her stubborn face, her updo and dainty gold cross and oval of bright red lipstick—she encompassed it all, dismissed it all, with a wave of her hand. “You look like a whore,” she said.

Irma’s eyes flashed with pain, followed by an awful satisfaction. Pella’s heart flared with regret. She’d revealed herself to be the worst, most benighted kind of person, just as she sometimes feared Irma thought her to be. The kind of woman who called another woman a whore. Whatever moral authority she’d ever possessed—gone in an instant.

“Good,” Irma declared. “That’s what I was going for.”

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14

Irma spun on a heel and headed for the dance floor. It crushed Pella to see how lightly she moved, buoyant in her silver slippers, as though fueled by Pella's insult. Pella trailed at a distance, her own body heavy and sodden. She wasn't following Irma, exactly, but she feared that when she lost sight of that white dress, the final threads of their friendship would be snapped and gone forever.

Irma dipped her knees and executed a cheerful two-footed jump onto the elevated surface. The lights strobed in a staccato rhythm that made the dancers seem to move in stop-motion. Everyone was returning to the floor for one last convivial surge. Genevieve and Garrett Lovell. Martin's parents. Shuba and her boyfriend and bandmates. The snub-nosed boy and the burgundy-suited boy. Aunt Jean. Henry, his shirt back on but misbuttoned. There was Mike. And there, dancing more closely than Pella might have wished, were Nicholas and Katrina.

Pella decided to go hide out in one of the fancy porta-potties that had been carted onto the north edge of the property. Her ankle aching, she rounded a clump of blooming sunchokes and trudged slowly over the lawn. When she arrived at the wood-paneled toilets, they looked like tiny Thoreauvian cabins. She reached for a handle marked VACANT. The door crashed open, knocking her backward, and Martin's sister Lydia emerged.

"Pella!" she exclaimed with more enthusiasm than Pella expected. She had pegged Lydia as a schoolmarmish stick-in-the-mud and avoided her all weekend.

"Just think!" Lydia said, her eyes alight. Her long cheeks were the same sallow shade as the glass of chardonnay that wobbled in her hand. "Soon we'll never need to see these dresses again!"

Pella paused. She'd understood, based on what Owen told her, that

Lydia had been instrumental in choosing the dresses. “You don’t like them?” she cautiously replied.

“*Like* them!” Lydia half shouted with delirious indignation. “Why would I *like* them?”

If Lydia was repenting of her poor decision, Pella was eager to forgive her. Even more, she was eager to commiserate about the dresses. “No offense,” she said, and gripped Lydia’s rawboned wrist, “but I despise them.”

Lydia’s face bobbed up and down in sympathy. Wisps of blond-gray hair had escaped their lacquered bonds and stuck to her slightly damp cheeks. “They’re atrociously prommy, aren’t they?”

“Prommy,” Pella agreed.

“The theme is Under the Sea,” Lydia said. “Like, hey, you drowned, you were under the sea! We just dredged up your body. Here’s what you were wearing.”

Pella laughed more heartily than she had thought possible.

“I would have picked something sleeker,” Lydia went on, “had it been up to me. More like Owen’s mom’s dress, you know? Though not quite as”—her eyes sailed wide in an expression of shock at how outrageous Genevieve’s dress was, but the look quickly modulated into sardonic amusement at how easily she could be shocked; altogether, Pella thought, it was an extremely winning series of looks—“*extreme*.”

“Wasn’t it you, though?” Pella, while amused by Lydia’s riffing, felt confused.

“Wasn’t what me?” Lydia asked.

“The dresses. You picked them out, right?”

“Ha!” shouted Lydia. “Here, let me find my knee!” Unsteadily, with her non-drink-holding hand, she gathered up the poofs of her skirt, lifted one leg, and, while teetering on the other, slapped her knee. “Owen schlepped me around to the stores with him, if that’s what you mean. But I can’t say I had much input.”

“You mean...”

“I feel like I’m trapped in a tube of toothpaste,” Lydia said. “I feel like a taffeta frog.”

A towheaded child in pajamas came flying across the dark lawn and threw himself, forehead first, into Lydia’s ruffled thigh.

“Not now, buttercup,” she said as the boy wrapped his arms around her bottom and began to wail. She cupped and patted the back of his head. “Mommy’s drunk.”

At this, the boy’s wailing increased. Pella laughed. Lydia, obviously, was not who she had imagined. And neither was anyone else.

“Oh, hush. I’m only kidding.” Lydia scooped up the child and shot Pella an apologetic eye-roll as she headed toward the house.

“Owen said you’d love them,” she called over her shoulder. “But just think! Soon we’ll never have to see them again.”

PELLA SAT ON the toilet for a long time.

She ran back over the party in her mind. It all seemed to be a composition of Owen’s, this sizable collection of talented, good-looking people, and among them, demanding your gaze like peacocks, a few truly beautiful ones, like Nicholas, and famous ones, like James Burfict and Garrett Lovell. Every wisp of the evening seemed to be of Owen’s making, all this Brooklyn and Manhattan brought to Block Island on the cusp of summer and fall so that the temperate weather seemed an especially welcome touch—one more gift, like the outdoor dance floor and festive silver joints, bestowed by the thoughtful host. All these people were characters of Owen’s, and Pella had once again played the supportive editorial role. This wedding was a novel that, though long in the making, would take one night to read.

She rearranged her undergarments and dress, lowered the toilet lid, and sat down atop it. She was thinking of the old debate about whether fictional characters had free will. This crowd of three hundred and fifty, each of them dressed to perfection—weren’t they all in a way Owen’s characters? Yes, they’d selected their own outfits, told their own stories, and thus exerted their free will. But they’d been selected by Owen because of the outfits and stories they would select—and so weren’t they all, in the last analysis, rounded in by the authorial vision?

Maybe it was absurd to survey this crowd of people and see them as Owen’s creation—they were, after all, human beings who overflowed with unruly desires, most of them unknown even to themselves.

And not everyone had selected their own outfits—she, for instance, had

not. Nor had Martin, nor Mike and Henry, nor any of the members of the wedding party. She should feel flattered, Pella supposed, that the men had been made as princelike as possible by the author's unerring taste and relentless attention to detail (no syllable, no tie clip too small), while the women had been turned into taffeta frogs: The men needed sprucing up, the women tamping down.

Irma was right, Pella thought. Or partly right. Pella had thrown herself into Owen's novel, not for cynical reasons but out of naive enthusiasm for both the work itself and the exhilarating closeness with Owen. She'd loved the intimacy of their shared project, from the late-night Tokyo talks to the manuscript pages slipped under her bedroom door. But when the finished project launched Owen's life in a glorious new direction while failing to do the same for hers, she'd been crestfallen. Now she was making the same mistake with his wedding—allowing it to consume her, pretending it would propel her into some vague but glorious future, when all she was really doing was neglecting the facts of her life.

She'd done something similar with Irma. She was always hurling herself into other people's projects and pretending they were shared. Why did she care so much where Irma went to grad school or whether she won a Rhodes? Irma's ambitions were Irma's, and Irma's brilliant success would be Irma's, no matter how much Pella helped or cared. Irma, like Owen before her, would take what she could from Westish and move on, ready to flourish in the next phase of life. And where would Pella be?

Meanwhile, the one project that should have been truly shared, her relationship with Mike, had somehow splintered like an atom in a cyclotron. Mike out on the practice fields coaching, Pella at home puttering, the resentments between them growing. If the Witches' batshit prank surfaced some of those resentments, they'd been brewing for a long time. *I will not be applying to law school*, Mike said, and Pella knew this was true. She'd known for a while now, but she'd refused to acknowledge the gulf between them, even to herself.

No more, she thought. No more pretending. No more puttering. No more projects that weren't her own. Irma was right. Mike was right too. If you wanted to flourish, you had to fucking *do* it. From now on, she would stand on her own bare feet.

SHE STOOD UP from the toilet and stared at her hands as she washed them. She didn't have her purse, and there was no point in checking the mirror to see how bad she looked. She unlocked the door and stepped out.

Owen was coming toward her, striding across the lawn with easy steps, smoothing his slender tie. The jacket of his dove-gray suit was still suavely buttoned, and he looked impeccably calm and composed, more so than at the start of the evening. While everyone else flailed and unraveled and yielded to madness, he had gathered up their cast-off composures like so many discarded garments and put them on. Or else he'd just sneaked off to smoke the perfect amount of pot.

They walked back toward the party together. "You're so serene," Pella remarked. "Let me guess—it's a shotgun wedding."

Owen smiled. "You're a riot, my dear."

"I know."

"I just want to take it all in," he said with a sweep of his arm. "Trap every moment in my semipermanent memory machine. Besides, my husband seems headed for the opposite fate." He pointed through the crowd to the faraway bar, where Martin and a trio of dark-suited colleagues clinked and downed their shots.

As Martin tried to set down his shot glass, his arm flopped unsteadily onto the bar. The shot glass tumbled away. "I didn't think he drank," Pella said.

"He doesn't," said Owen. "Except when he does."

As they watched, Martin sprang back from his companions and dropped into a karate stance, his face the color of port. "Wow," Pella said. "He's really sweating."

"He's a mess," Owen confirmed.

"Will he vomit?"

"Eventually. First they'll sing 'Ten Thousand Men of Harvard.' And I'll vomit."

"He does look crimson," Pella said, and basked in Owen's smile.

"Maybe those old misogynistic songs sound different," she mused, "if you do them in a gay way."

"'It's Raining Ten Thousand Men,'" Owen said.

"Exactly."

“That’s a nice idea.” Owen brushed a speck of island debris from his lapel. “But I’m afraid my beloved plays them rather straight.”

He looked at her, squinting through his contact lenses. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes,” she said. “Mike and I had a fight.”

He tipped his head. “What kind of fight?”

“A bad one,” she admitted. “We said some things.”

Owen waited for her to continue.

“We said...most of what we could think of to say.”

“Most but not all,” Owen suggested. “You held back. Because you love each other.”

“Maybe,” Pella said. “But it was rough.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not sure what to do.” Despite Pella’s new commitment to strength and independence, tears filled her eyes. “I don’t think Mike and I should talk any more tonight. He’s getting blitzed, and I’m not sober, though I feel like I am. I could stay with Judy and Irma, that was my first thought, but I had a fight with Irma too.” Pella kept talking, trying to confide in Owen about her swollen ankle, her lost shoes, and so on without sliding into self-pity, as the tears rolled down her cheeks for the second time today.

Owen took her hand. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. You can stay with Martin and me.”

“What?” Pella shook her head. “Owen, that’s a terrible idea. It’s your wedding night.”

“It is,” agreed Owen. “But what’s a wedding night? It’s not your first night together, and it’s not your last night together—in fact, it’s hardly a night together at all! It’s a night for friends and family. Of which you, my dear, are both.”

Through her tears, Pella couldn’t help emitting a small happy noise.

“We’re well equipped to host you,” Owen went on. “We have the honeymoon suite of the old hotel downtown. There’s a sitting room outside the bedroom. I can’t be held responsible for the decor, but it has a large sofa. And if you hear any untoward sounds coming from the inner sanctum, don’t worry—it’s just my husband throwing up.”

“Thanks, Owen.”

“Don’t mention it. Tomorrow morning you and Michael will patch

things up, and everything will be fine.”

“Tomorrow morning,” she said mournfully. “Ugh. Tomorrow morning I have to make three hundred muffins.”

“Forget the muffins. I mean it—there’s really no need.” Owen fished in the lining of his jacket and brought up a wrought-iron key. “And you needn’t wait for us either. Martin will keep me here until the bitter end.”

He pressed the key into Pella’s hand and told her the address.

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15

Judy, do you know what time it is?”

Irma feared it was late—and how could it not be? The darkness surrounding the sparkling party felt so large and deep. So many people had approached her to introduce themselves, and she’d chatted easily with all of them, the words falling freely from her lips, just as she’d danced for what felt like hours, her body moving freely through the fresh autumn air. She’d downed two flutes of champagne since yelling at Pella and had just obtained a third.

Judy, from her seat at the round table where she’d taken up residence, smiled. With a shake of her arm beneath her cape, she checked her watch. “Half past eleven, dear.”

“Good,” said Irma. “I was worried it was late.”

A gust of breeze shuddered the trees. Judy tightened her cape around her shoulders. “It’s getting late for me,” she said. “I may head back to our lodgings soon.”

Irma’s heart sank. She didn’t want the night to end—not soon, not ever. But if Judy was leaving, she should probably go with her. “Don’t you think this is good champagne?” she asked, and held out her glass, if only to distract them both.

Judy took the flute and availed herself of a minuscule sip. “It is,” she declared gravely, handing the flute back, “excellent champagne.”

“Are you having a good time?” Irma asked.

“I’ve been having a *marvelous* time,” Judy replied, and pressed a hand to her heart. She was speaking in that overcooked Judy way, so that you could scarcely tell where on the continuum of sincerity and irony you were.

Irma felt that Judy was indeed having a marvelous time but was also melancholy because of her breakup with Doug, sort of the way Irma was

having a marvelous time but was also melancholy about Dahlia's departure. "You didn't dance with us," she said.

"That's true," Judy said. "I wasn't in the mood."

"There's still time," said Irma with a hopeful glance toward the dance floor, where well-dressed bodies moved in the white of a stop-time strobe.

"Oh no," Judy said firmly. "I've done plenty of dancing in my day. And I daresay I'll do a bit more before I expire. But not tonight."

"Are you thinking about Doug?" Irma asked.

Judy, after a long pause, nodded. "I suppose I'll never stop doing that, in one form or another."

"Have you seen Pella?"

"No," said Judy. "Not for a while now."

"I should find her and apologize. I was mean to her before."

Judy gave Irma a look both tolerant and admonishing.

"I know, I know," Irma said. As she drained her champagne, Owen's beautiful dove-gray suit floated by. She grabbed its sleeve.

"Owen!" she said. "Have you seen Pella?"

"I'm afraid the maid of honor is a touch indisposed," Owen reported. "She asked me to say farewell to you both. She hopes to see you at brunch in the morning."

"I doubt she said farewell to me," Irma said.

Judy rose from her chair and clasped Owen's hand—the one adorned by a simple gold ring. "I could *not* be happier for you," she said. "This day has been resplendent."

"It was all the more special for having shared it with you," Owen gallantly replied. "Thank you for making the trip. And"—he glanced at Irma and smiled—"for bringing the star of the party."

"I'm thrilled you two have finally met," Judy said. "In all these millennia of teaching, my two brightest students."

Irma, embarrassed by this compliment even as she absorbed and ignored it, peeked at Owen, who seemed to feel the same. Judy collected her purse from a nearby chair. "And now I've turned from an eggplant into a pumpkin," she concluded.

"There are taxis at the ready," Owen said as he offered Judy his arm. "I'll escort you. And don't worry—we'll take immaculate care of Irma. She has plenty of dancing to do."

“I’m sure she does,” Judy said.

They turned to walk up the hill. Somehow Irma knew Owen would glance back at her. She waited until he did so, returned his smile, and sprinted toward the dance floor.

PELLA TUGGED THE heavy barn door open and listened through the crack. Silence, thank God; the poker game had disbanded. She slipped inside and, amid a hanging cloud of pipe smoke, collected her purse and phone. Head down, she began the long trudge up the lawn toward the Tilly house, where cabs would be waiting in the driveway. Clusters of partygoers laughed and murmured in the lantern-dappled darkness. She’d text Mike from the cab to tell him where she’d gone.

She skirted the edge of the party and neared the house. Strolling toward her over the grass, lit by the glow of the porch lights, was a tall angular man with curly, close-cropped gray hair. It could only be James Burfict. He’d seen an acquaintance to a cab, perhaps, and was returning to the party. Pella didn’t alter her steps, and neither did he.

The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled high past his knobby elbows. His square, large-featured face, still limber in its expressions, smiled. He lifted his glass. “Had enough?”

“I saw you speak at Harvard,” Pella said.

He glanced up into the treetops. “You must be thinking of Toni Morrison,” he said. “I haven’t done those rounds in ages.”

“It was ages ago,” Pella said. “I was eleven.”

“In that case, it could have been me. Nice to see you again.”

“I was there with my dad,” Pella explained. “You were his favorite writer. His favorite living writer, I mean. When I saw the way he looked at you, I...I wanted to be a writer too.”

Burfict nodded, and in the space of this nod, his whole manner changed. He absorbed what she said with the utmost seriousness; so much seriousness that Pella felt embarrassed. He had brought, in an instant, more consideration to her thwarted desire than she ever had.

His expression seemed to call her entire way of being into question, not because the look was a chastising one, but simply by contrast to its own glowing concentration. If James Burfict—if anyone—could respond to her

with such urgent fullness, then all her meandering self-deprecation was so much self-protective trash.

The gift he was giving her with his look, his full attention, was the same gift he had given himself, and that was why he had triumphed. That look was his books in human form.

“And?” he said.

Her reply died in her throat. She’d cried too many times today—what was wrong with her? She widened her eyes to keep them from tearing. She pressed her lips together to keep from making some weak strangled sound.

“It takes a long time,” he said.

She swallowed miserably around the lump in her throat.

“It’s trite to say that your doubt is your faith. But it’s true too.”

She swallowed again, fighting back tears, thinking of her dad.

“It’s equally trite to say I can read your talent on your face. Trite and possibly specious—the kind of thing a shameless old flirt might say to get into your dress. Don’t get me wrong, I’d be happy to get into your dress.”

“There’s not even room in here for me,” Pella said.

“There!” Burfict clapped his hands and smiled. “She’s back from the dead. Thank God. Look, I don’t know whether you’re talented or not, and I’ll probably never find out. Everybody’s got something, but nobody wants to sit down and do the goddamn work. Tell me, do you ever think?”

“Do I think?” Pella said. “Incessantly.”

“That’s all writing is,” Burfict said. “No more and no less. Do you think you have writer thoughts and nonwriter thoughts? Wrong. You have one kind of thought—you can write them down or not. Frankly, it’s the same to me either way. My little hourglass is running out. I’m happy to spend my last grains of sand reading Shakespeare—I don’t need you chiming in.

“Nobody else cares. That’s why *you* have to care. I hate it when people say, ‘Why should I write? Nobody cares whether I write.’ Do you also say, ‘Nobody cares whether I fuck’? ‘Nobody cares whether I screw my boyfriend tonight, it’s of no world-historical importance, I’d better watch Netflix instead’? No. Hell no. You screw him because you want to. Or because he wants you to—although if you’re only doing it because he wants you to, you’re already falling apart. You can have sex like it’s a marital duty, and you can write like it’s an artistic duty. In both cases, you’re fucked, and not in the fun way.

“Clarity comes from desire. Here’s the rule, don’t forget it: Life is easy when your cock is hard.”

“That seems like a rather...phallocentric dictum,” Pella said. It was interesting how closely some people stuck to their own scripts, how much like Burfict Burfict turned out to be. Perhaps it was also instructive. Why not be who you were?

“I happen to have a cock,” he said. “Revise as necessary based on your own equipment. Life is easy if your nipples are hard. Life is easy if your clit is hard. You may recoil from what I’m saying, but it’s true.”

“I tend not to recoil from anything men say to me,” Pella said. “I’m easy on men. It’s a weakness of mine.”

“Why is that a weakness?” he said. “Be easy on men. Be easy on women. Be easy on yourself.” He jabbed his glass at the twinkling party. “At the risk of stating the obvious, we’re all just riding through the sky on a giant ball. We’ll be gone in the blink of a dinosaur’s eye. So why should anybody be hard on anybody? Hard is for nipples; hard is for cocks. Easy is for everyone. Forgive everyone everything. Especially yourself. You got me?”

“Yes,” said Pella, though she wasn’t sure whether she agreed or not.

“Good,” he said. “Now, I apologize, but I need to cut this short. There’s a dress up there that might have room for me.”

James Burfict kissed her cheeks and was gone. So light and practiced was the hand that cupped her ass that Pella didn’t notice while it was happening, her attention collected by his warm breath and the effort required to execute their kisses, but only felt a phantom resonance against the scales of her dress as he strolled away.

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16

The little inn overlooked the ferry docks amid the salt-washed shops and churches that constituted downtown New Shoreham. Weary and barefoot, her ankle still throbbing, Pella hobbled up the stairs to the topmost landing. There was only one room. She twiddled the wrought-iron key in the lock until, finally, it caught and turned.

She entered a large, chilly room so overstuffed with nautical knickknacks it resembled the gift shop of a whaling museum. Sextants, compasses, porthole-style clocks. Framed lengths of rope displaying popular knots. An imposing set of double oak doors led to the inner sanctum. At a strange angle down the middle of the room, like a misparked luxury car, ran a long white-aproned couch.

Pella reached behind her back and, with even more difficulty than she'd had with the key and lock, tugged down the zipper of her dress. She wriggled it past her hips and let it fall to the carpet, unhooked her bra and dropped it atop the ruffled heap. Through thin-paned windows, the midnight cold bled into whispery curtains. She searched along the walls for a thermostat but couldn't find one. There didn't seem to be any blankets either.

She moved around the room gathering up the crocheted throws that were draped over chairs and footstools like giant doilies. She carried her armful of lace and yarn to the couch and tossed it down.

The night's last decision, which she pondered while rocking from foot to foot, scrubbing at the gooseflesh on her arms, was whether to take off her underwear, which wasn't mere underwear but rather the Haute Couture High-Waisted Thong in Soft Sand, purchased, like her outlandish art dress, in one of her online fits of pre-wedding extravagance, this time from the Wedding section of the Spanx website. Though called a thong, it was

essentially a nylon-and-elastane corset that shrink-wrapped her entire torso up to her breastbone. According to the website, it provided Level 2 Support: A Firm Hug. Pella did not want to know what Level 3 Support entailed. The Spanx Wedding section was for brides, not bridesmaids, and it had been ridiculous to spend a hundred and thirty dollars just to feel obscurely organized beneath her ruffles, as though she thought that by blowing through money, she could signal to herself and the world that she was going to kill it at this wedding.

Then again, she *had* killed it, in a way—she'd captured, for a while, the attention of Nicholas Byrnes. It was a good thing they hadn't, as part of their weird flirtation, exchanged numbers or she'd be tempted to text him right now. She wouldn't actually do it, but she'd be tempted.

The Spanx, she decided, were staying on. She needed a Firm Hug right now. She'd be more comfortable without them, but she'd also be colder, and she didn't relish the idea of settling her naked bottom against the scratchy fabric of these sofa cushions, with their unknowable honeymoon-suite history.

She stretched across the cushions, which felt bizarrely frigid against her bare skin, and arranged her crocheted throws atop herself. She closed her eyes but felt too wired to sleep, the room too full, her mind and body too full, as though thoughts and feelings were knickknacks. From the floor below, she could hear muffled footsteps.

What had happened between her and Mike? He'd been looking for assurance. She'd given him none. The problem was in her. She didn't know what the problem was. The problem was that it was freezing in this room; the problem was that these weren't blankets, they were giant doilies made of yarn. Maybe the thermostat was in the bedroom; maybe when Owen and Martin returned, they would turn up the heat. The problem was her own bad attitude. The problem was that she loved Mike but only in certain ways. She'd texted him from the taxi to tell him she'd left the party and would be spending the night at Owen's hotel. K, he'd written back.

She flopped from her butt to her hip and tried, with exasperated yanks, to shift the doilies around to cover her body. Her engagement ring snagged into the loosely crocheted folds, and she had to free herself with her other hand. She opened her eyes. Everything in this room was a fucking metaphor.

She'd set an alarm on her phone for six a.m. so she could go prepare the brunch. I should text Katrina, she thought, a casual note about how great it was to reconnect—she felt hungry for human contact. She grabbed her phone and composed a warm message but stopped herself from sending it. Either Katrina was nakedly entwined with Nicholas, in which case she wouldn't respond and Pella would lie here and stew, or Katrina was fast asleep and wouldn't respond, in which case Pella, imagining her to be nakedly entwined with Nicholas, would also lie here and stew.

Or maybe, Pella thought, the muffled footsteps from the floor below belonged to Katrina—who, after all, was staying at an inn somewhere on this not-huge island—and if Pella texted, she would say, Amazing timing, just got back to my room!, and Pella would say, Oh wow, where are you staying?, and Katrina would name this hotel. Pella would say, What a crazy coincidence!, and Katrina would invite her over for tea, and Pella would zip herself back into her dress, limp downstairs to the third floor, and burst into yet more miserable tears, and Katrina would wrap her in a Level 2: Firm Hug and dig into her overnight bag for a T-shirt that was too slim for Pella and sweatpants that were too long, and Pella would gratefully put them on, and they would snuggle beneath the warm blankets of Katrina's four-poster bed and Pella would share with Katrina every detail of her fights with Mike and Irma and all the backstory that went into each while Katrina, her long fingers wrapped around a mug of peppermint tea, would listen and offer clarifying advice. Which entire beguiling fantasy, Pella could see, depended on the equally beguiling premise that Nicholas had sent Katrina back to her four-poster bed without a good fuck, even though Katrina could use one.

She opened a browser window and searched for Nicholas Byrnes.

It was a common name, but Nicholas was one of its most prominent possessors, and when she clicked Images, she was flooded with pictures of him, some of them a decade old but all looking exactly like Nicholas, only the volume of his sandy hair waxing here and contracting there. Many had been taken on the red carpets of galas and charity balls alongside the woman Katrina had described as his ex—Oonie—who was so gorgeous and radiant and larger than life, she made Nicholas, standing beside her with his hangdog smile, seem almost plain.

Pella returned to the main results page. He was indeed an accountant—a partner at the firm of Tucker and Byrnes LLP—and a writer. She skimmed

through articles he had written, mostly reviews of off-Broadway plays for the *Times* and appraisals of high-end anoraks, high-end yurts, and six-star ecolodges for a magazine called *UHNWI*. Apparently he took a lot of free vacations. She scrolled until she found a link to the piece he'd written about Owen's book for the *SoHo Review*.

The Art of Yielding
By Nicholas Byrnes

In *The Art of Fielding,* Owen Dunne casts a roseate light over all he surveys. Much has been made of the author's youth, and it's true that the novel, out of all literary forms, is the hardest to master at a tender age. And so one is tempted to call Dunne an artist on the verge of a stellar career. But what sort of stellar career is possible in these increasingly troubled times?

She skipped ahead, past the plot summary, and found the part she remembered, which happened to be the end:

Dunne seems insistent on the comforts of the middlebrow, a kind of mashed-potato realism, and I fear his success, however deserved, will only confirm him in that choice. Not that I wish to pigeonhole a writer so young; that would be, perhaps, the most violent thing I could do. But this is mature work from both a technical and an emotional standpoint, and I must speak to Mr. Dunne as to a mature artist rather than allowing the discourse to founder, as the discourse is wont to do, on dreamy paeans to "potential."

In America, we tend to speak of forty-year-old artists as "young," as though they are likely to get better as their life force wanes, as though the books they've labored over through their most vigorous years are, simply by virtue of being first or second efforts, apprentice work or juvenilia. It may be time to move in the other direction: to declare our twenty- and thirty-something writers mature and hold them to the ultimate standard—the standard of literature, with its double task of free-diving to the depths of consciousness and doing

> battle with the times. And by that standard we must deem Mr. Dunne not angry enough, not messy enough, not violent enough for the ugly work at hand. He has chosen, in this book, to serve as a palliative-care novelist. This is literature as hospice—another drop of morphine for a dying world—and so not quite apposite for those of us who, however hopelessly, wish to live.

Damn, Pella thought. A “drop of morphine for a dying world.” It was a harsh and demanding, if not totally incorrect, way to describe Owen’s novel, and it was magnanimous of Owen to have received it so well. He’d invited this exacting critic not only to his wedding but to his house to boot.

She dimly recalled reading the essay for the first time. It had been published several months after Owen’s novel came out—after the praise and the backlash had died down and just as Pella was realizing how unhappy her obsessive tracking of Owen’s career was making her. How often she searched for his name on social media sites; how often she checked his Amazon sales ranking like a lab rat yanking a lever; how eagerly she refreshed the bestseller list each Friday night to see whether his book had risen or fallen. She was annoyed when he was named a finalist for the Pulitzer; she was annoyed when he didn’t win. She read blogs, tweets, listicles, comments, purchaser reviews. She’d never spent so much time online. Finally, she banned herself from all of it.

She violated the ban only when her mood was especially dark, and she always violated it through the same loophole: She searched for her own name, not Owen’s. As though her name were anything other than a conduit to his. The result was always the same. She typed:

Pella Affenlicht

The search engine replied:

Did you mean *Pella Affenlight*?

Showing results for *Pella Affenlight*

Alongside the reviews of Owen’s novel would appear a grid of photographs, not of Pella but of every more or less famous, more or less redheaded actress some blogger or tweeter had suggested should play her in the inevitable filmic version, all of them vastly more glamorous and accomplished than she—a small battalion of shadow Pellas, if shadows

were brighter and more glorious than the objects by which they were cast. It had been one of those self-searchings that turned up the *SoHo Review* essay. Somehow she'd declined to seek out a picture of its author. Given the formality and moralism of the writing, she'd probably imagined he was ninety years old.

She lay on the deep, stiff couch, wearing only her baroque underpants, wrapped in the loosely crocheted throws that reminded her, in her half-dreaming state, of Irma's dress. What would happen tomorrow? Tomorrow you will wake up early, she told herself. You will return to the Tilly house, you will make the muffins and the crustless quiche. You will leave this place, you will make up with your fiancé, you will ride on a ferry and a cab and a plane and a car, you will wind up in a place without these conflicts and complications and unmanageable hopes. Normal life will reassert itself.

She returned to the Images page and found a high-res headshot in which Nicholas was looking straight at the camera. She clicked it and zoomed in tightly on his gold-spoked eyes. She held the phone in her left hand while her right fell to the organic cotton double gusset of her Spanx. She began to slide her fingertips outside the fabric, her nipples already unbearably stiff. *Life is easy if your nipples are hard.* She brought the phone nearer her face. She nudged the gusset aside.

A voice sounded on the landing. A key rattled in the lock. Startled, she darkened her phone and jammed it between the cushions. Her damp fingers withdrew to her belly. Whether attempting to preserve the newlyweds' privacy or her own, she lay perfectly still, pretending to be asleep.

The door swung inward, and in stumbled a strange, shadowy figure that took Pella a moment to parse—Owen was half dragging, half carrying Martin across the threshold. He loosened an arm from Martin's deadweight grip to reach back and shut the door.

Their conjoined silhouette reminded Pella of the close of the ceremony—Owen and Martin striding down the aisle in joyous triumph, their elbows hooked together, dressed in their identical dove-gray suits, zagging from one side of the aisle to the other, squeezing a hand here, leaning in to receive a kiss there, as though newly embarked on a lifelong three-legged race. Now as they shuffled over the rug, they were similarly fused, able to move only as one, but in a hindered, lopsided way, the Martin half of the silhouette slumped and hanging limply.

Suddenly, Martin snapped to alertness and launched a surprise attack. With a loud, bearish growl, he wrapped his arms around Owen's waist. He lowered his head like a battering ram and, feet churning, drove Owen backward toward the couch where Pella was lying. She smelled whiskey and sweat, the musk of bodies enclosed all day in tight-fitting suits, mixed with the floral lilt of Owen's cologne. Owen stumbled but managed to divert their course, and they spilled into an overstuffed armchair on the far side of the room.

"You goose," Owen whispered. "Pella's here."

Martin's voice was a harsh, indignant bark: "Pella? Here? Where?"

"On the couch," Owen said.

"What's she doing on the couch?"

"She and Michael had an argument. Come, let's go to the bedroom."

"Just because they had an argument doesn't mean she's here."

"That's true. But she is here."

"She follows you around," Martin said. "Why does she follow you around."

"We're friends."

"Friends," Martin hissed. "Why don't you just fuck her already?"

"That's more your thing, dear," Owen said quietly. "Anyway, let's not be vulgar."

The armchair into which they'd tumbled was out of Pella's view. The back of the couch rose between her and the happy couple, and they were far enough away that Pella, had she indeed been asleep, might plausibly have been unable to hear their exchange.

"I love you, Martin," Owen said—and, following upon what had just been said, it sounded to Pella like a kind of plea.

"I love you too, Oliver," grumbled Martin.

"No," said Owen softly. "Not Oliver."

"Whatever."

"Not Oliver. Not Ozzie. Not Ogden. Not tonight."

"Whatever," barked Martin. "Do we have any food?"

"I'm serious," Owen said.

"Me too. Do we have any food?"

"There's beef jerky," Owen said.

"There is? Where?"

“In your overnight bag. I brought it for you. We’ll go get it.”

“Yum,” said Martin. “Beef jerky.”

“Martin?” asked Owen, with a certain plaintive urgency. “Whom do you love?”

“You already know,” groused Martin.

“Please?”

“Please *what*?” His drunken voice was fading a little, back toward sleepy incoherence, but still it had an overmastering, indomitable quality.

“Please tell me whom you love.”

“Owen,” Martin said.

“Owen who?”

“Owen Elias Dunne.”

“And who is that?”

“A very famous author. Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.”

“No.” Owen sounded pained. “Please.”

“You want to know who Owen Elias Dunne is?” Martin demanded in that same overmastering voice.

“Yes please.”

“I’ll tell you who he is.” Martin’s voice grew soft. “He’s a boy from North Carolina. A poor lonely boy from North Carolina. But he’s not lonely anymore. Because I love him. I love him so much.”

“Yes,” sighed Owen. “Yes.”

“And my tummy hurts,” Martin said. “Like, a lot.”

“Let’s get you to bed, darling.”

While Pella shivered beneath her doilies, they hoisted themselves from the armchair and headed for the inner sanctum. The oak doors whispered shut behind them.

The latch clicked softly, and Owen and Martin vanished into the wee-hour silence and the mysteries of marriage, the unknowable mystery of the interior of any marriage, the unknowable mystery of any person combined with any other person, and the three-legged person that together they become. The double doors were heavy, and she could not hear voices, but she did hear, as she drifted to sleep, the flush of the toilet again and again, which probably meant that Martin was throwing up.

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17

Irma danced, she danced and danced; she danced with Owen, she danced with Katrina, she danced alone. She danced with the pretty girls she'd met, the Laurens and Caitlins and Emilys, all a few years older than she, like Pella but less pretty, with their different perfect dresses and brown hair, all of them blurring together but also beloved in her mind because of their sweetness and the wonderful fact that they were dancing. They all, including her, took turns dancing with Nicholas, who was a very simple and easygoing dancer and had equal time for everyone and wasn't annoyed when Irma, in a spasm of excess energy, grabbed his tie and yanked it too hard. She danced with Martin's sister Shuba and the guys in Shuba's band. She danced herself into shapes: a *Y,* an *M*, a *C*, an *A*. She spun around with her arms outstretched and tipped her head back to look up at the stars. She danced with a boy she didn't know. She danced with a different boy she didn't know who'd been dancing with the first boy. She danced between the two boys. The two boys started kissing. She felt a flash of envy. She too wanted to kiss somebody. With all of her being, with all of her body, she wanted to kiss. That would be better than dancing, but at least she could keep dancing.

As the crowd thinned and dwindled, the camaraderie among those who would dance to the end grew. The remaining bodies gravitated toward the center of the floor, drawing closer and closer together as though for warmth. It felt to Irma that their dancing was powering the music and the starlight like a generator, and as long as they didn't slow down, as long as they kept dancing with total devotion, the music would keep on playing, and they could keep on dancing, powering the music, powering the stars.

The dancers formed a clapping ring, and everyone chanted Owen's name. He waved a hand to demur—his soft smile suggested he was too

relaxed and exhausted and possibly stoned for dancing and was content to bask in the night's success. He'd joined this group because they were the heart of the winding-down party, and he wanted to be near that heart.

But the chant continued, and finally Owen allowed himself to be pushed into the center of the ring. He disco-pointed into his hip pocket and up toward the sky, swiveled his hips a few times while everyone cheered, and retreated to the clapping perimeter.

Who would be next?

Mike strolled into the center. He shot the cuffs of his jacket and, with his head thrown serenely back, fiddled the knot of his groomsman's tie into perfect fettle. Then he began to dance. His whole face glistened with sweat, his bulk suddenly buoyant as his sleek black shoes slid this way, that way, this way across the burnished floor.

The crowd clapped along with the music and cheered at Mike's nimbleness as he puffed out his scotch-reddened cheeks and danced with triumphant ease. Irma, watching him, felt giddy. This was a different Mike than the one she knew. She strode into the circle, slight and nerdy in her lacy slip of a dress, her hair sprawling everywhere, her silver slippers planted firmly on the dance floor. She crossed her arms and, as though in an old Western, confronted him at a distance of several paces.

Mike, thus challenged, broke into an old-school running man, his huge arms rowing and his knees driving high, their lack of cartilage ignored for the moment.

Irma, her red lipstick glowing, burst into a perfect imitation of this creature twice her size, puffing out her cheeks and pumping her wiry arms and legs in deadpan pastiche. The crowd, no more than two dozen strong at this point, exploded with delight. Mike planted his glossy shoes on the floor and indicated, with a smile and a flourish of one hand: *Fine, your turn*.

Irma hesitated, at a loss without Mike to imitate. A burst of self-consciousness sliced through her champagne high. She'd jumped out here on a whim; now she needed to follow through.

She turned off her mind and waited. The ring of onlookers clapped in eager rhythm. Irma kept waiting, her body stock-still, until one of her hands slowly rose up in front of her face. She glared at it as it twisted side to side. Mike mimicked her, convincing and hilarious in imitation of her stiffness. When Irma saw her movements reflected in his giant form, she broke into a

grin. How was he so good at this? Every part of her body began to move—her hips beneath her white shift, her fingers and elbows and knees. They traded moves until the song segued into another. Mike, chest heaving beneath his tie, held out his fist. Irma bumped it with her own.

After that the circle disbanded, the lights that ringed the dance floor turned off, but the dancing continued. When finally the music diminished and stopped, and silence poured like moonlight down over the island, Irma was twirling, her arms outstretched, twirling and twirling, her head thrown back, her nose pointed up at the sky.

She too wound down, like a slowing top, her arms and flattened hands lowering like wings as she came to rest, her eyes closed, and hoped there would be another song. One moment passed, then another, and all she heard was the thrum of blood throughout her body. She opened her eyes. The DJ folded his laptop shut. He detached it from the cords that connected it to the speakers. Far away there were bodies departing, widely spaced in twos and threes, trudging slowly up the lawn.

On the dance floor, Irma saw, they were five: herself and Katrina and Owen and Nicholas and Mike, standing in a little hub.

“Is this the end?” she asked, directing the question to Owen.

“It is for me,” Owen said. “I need to tend to my husband.” He glanced up the lawn toward Martin, who, as he said goodbye to his pals, was pacing in listing zigzags, his head tipped to one side.

“However!” he continued just as Irma was about to protest. “It’s not the end for you. This is still my wedding, and I command you to party till dawn.” He made his way around the circle, fondly hugging everyone, and when the hugs were done, he pressed a thumb to Irma’s forehead. Grinning, she closed her eyes. “I bequeath this enchanted evening and all its powers to you,” he said. “Don’t rest until you’ve wrung every drop of pleasure from it.”

“I won’t,” Irma promised.

“Good.” Owen turned to Mike. “Michael, before you join the party, will you help me bundle my better half into a taxicab? He can be a handful when he’s drunk.”

Mike draped an arm around Owen’s shoulders, and the two of them strolled up the slope toward Martin, their suit vents swaying behind them.

Irma, charmed by Owen’s benediction, still feeling the gentle press of

his thumb between her eyes, beamed at Nicholas and Katrina. They beamed back at her, gorgeous in their green and gold party clothes. She wished she could kiss them both.

“Okay, enchantress,” said Nicholas with a smile. “You heard the man. You’re in charge.”

“Yes,” agreed Katrina. “Where to?”

“We need champagne,” Irma decided. “And we need to go to the beach.”

“You’re a natural,” Nicholas said.

Irma, on a whim, sprinted over to where the bar had been, and when she found, sitting at the foot of a tamarack, overhung by needles, an unopened bottle of warm champagne, she did indeed feel like an enchantress, capable of making miracles. Triumphant, she trotted back to Nicholas and Katrina, and they passed the bottle as they made a plan. They would find a ladder that led down from the grassy plateau to the beach, then walk south along the water’s edge toward Martin and Owen’s house, where both Nicholas and Mike were staying, and have a nightcap under the stars.

“The only hard part,” Nicholas said when Mike returned, “may be knowing when we’ve arrived. I’m not sure I’ll know the house from the beach side.”

“I’ll recognize it,” Mike said.

“Excellent. You can lead the expedition. Let’s collect a few of these gentle treasures”—Nicholas plucked a stray silver joint from a nearby table—“and be on our way.”

They walked down the lawn toward the place where the ladder poked its rails above the cliff. “Wish me luck,” Mike said as he turned around, ready to brave the long climb down to the sand.

“Wait!” said Irma. “I’ll go first.”

Mike looked at her. “Why?”

“I’m the smallest. I’ll test the ladder. Make sure it’s safe.”

Mike shook his head. “If it’s safe for you, that doesn’t mean it’s safe for me. But if I survive, this ladder can handle anything. I’m the tester.”

He lowered one foot below the other and disappeared from sight. Irma hurled one silver slipper and then the other over the edge, into darkness, and followed. Atop the cliff, Katrina and Nicholas heard a heavy thump as Mike’s feet dropped to the beach, then a much lighter sound and a yelp of joy as Irma’s did the same.

Katrina tucked her heels inside her gold-chained bag. She slung the bag crosswise across her body and began her descent.

“Katrina,” Irma called. “We’re looking up your dress.”

Katrina laughed happily. “I knew there was a reason I wore pants.”

“We’re looking up your leg holes. Aren’t we, Mike?”

“Irma is,” Mike said. “I’m too much of a gentleman.”

“Mike’s too much a gentleman,” Katrina echoed. “He wouldn’t look up my leg holes if I begged him.”

“Beg him and we’ll see,” called Nicholas from above. “Watch out, Kat—here I come.”

Nicholas and Katrina joined Irma and Mike, and the four of them—*The unlikely foursome,* Irma thought—wandered down the beach, their forward view restricted by the curve of the cliff. Irma, thrilled by the surf rolling in, its peaks rippling white in the starlight, stepped closer to the water. Scallop lines of foam chased around her ankles.

“Don’t get your dress wet,” Katrina warned. “You’ll freeze to death.”

Irma could not believe how much everyone at the party had seemed to enjoy her company, especially the women; she was as elated by their enjoyment as she was by the champagne. She wanted desperately to kiss someone. She thought of Dahlia and Ben on the dance floor, Dahlia slashing her hair through the strobe, Ben’s hand on the curve of her butt.

“So what’s your deal?” she said to Nicholas as she splashed along in the foam.

He seemed amused. “My deal?”

“Yeah. Were you fun when you were young?”

“Who can remember back that far?” he rejoined. “But I did invite you along on this adventure, which suggests I’m not all bad.”

“I’m pretty sure Katrina invited me.”

“Not at all,” said Katrina. “I didn’t want you to come. I’m too intimidated by your youth and beauty. Nicky insisted.”

“What about you?” Irma called to Mike. “Did you want me to come?”

“I have mixed feelings,” Mike replied.

“Fair enough. Katrina, may I wear your headband?”

“Of course you can, love.” Katrina lifted her golden headband and, with two hands, deposited it atop Irma’s sprawling hair. “There,” she said. “The enchantress presides.”

Mike stopped and peered at the steep gray bluff as though trying to extract some information from it. The beach was too narrow, the cliff too high, to see what lay above. “We’re here,” he said. “This is the house.”

“How do you know?” Katrina asked.

Mike shrugged. “I just know.”

Nicholas toed at a squarish configuration of rocks nearby. “A firepit,” he said. “If we had some wood, we could build a bonfire.”

Mike snapped his fingers. “There’s a tarp on the back porch. Covering a pile of something. I noticed it when Martin and I were grilling.”

“Good man,” Nicholas said. “Let’s check it out.”

They all clambered up the long iron ladder, the rungs of which left gritty bars of rust across Irma’s palms. Mike and Nicholas lugged the small logs beneath the tarp to the cliff’s edge and tossed them to the sand, where they landed with satisfying *whump*s. They tracked down kindling and newspaper, which Nicholas arranged within the rock bed and lit with a flick of his lighter.

Irma and Katrina entered the salt-gray house and rummaged through the kitchen. They collected a bottle of tequila, a carton of orange juice, a jar of maraschino cherries. It was just like Owen, Katrina opined, not to keep any plastic cups in a beach house; he was so environmentally conscious. They grabbed coffee mugs, spoons for stirring, ice-cube trays full of ice. They found marshmallows and graham crackers, but no chocolate—until Irma, digging through every drawer she could find, spotted a bag of Hershey chips. “We’ll melt them in a bowl!” she said.

“Will that really work?” Katrina asked.

“Watch,” said Irma as she slid a metal mixing bowl from a shelf.

They ferried their bounty into the backyard and down the ladder to the beach, where Nicholas and Mike were gathering hunks of driftwood large enough to sit on. All this preparatory labor, the foraging and lugging and fire-building, the trips up and down the ladder, sobered them up in a gentle, salubrious way, so when they reconvened around the orange and crackling fire, they looked cheerful and revivified, suffused with a vacation-house sense of shared and successful industry. Katrina and Mike stirred their makeshift tequila sunrises, tipping a red swirl of maraschino syrup into each. Irma set about melting the chocolate chips. Nicholas tended the fire. The night had been renewed.

The four of them sipped their drinks and squeezed closer together, shoulder to shoulder on one side of the fire so they all could face the ocean. They roasted marshmallows on the tips of branches and passed the silver-wrapped joints. Irma observed the others carefully and, when her turn came, drew in her first-ever lungful of pot.

“Irma, I have to hand it to you,” Katrina said as she ladled a spoonful of warm chocolate over a graham cracker. “I did *not* think this would work.”

“It’s that Westish education,” said Mike. “Worth its weight in gold.”

“Speaking of which,” Nicholas said.

“Speaking of *witches*,” Katrina corrected.

“Spot-on as always, Kat. Speaking of witches, Pella was telling me you and Irma have been at odds lately, after all the excitement.”

Irma glanced across the fire at Mike, her dance-off competitor, unsure how he would react to this. Sure, they’d forged an alliance for the evening—based, perhaps, on a strong mutual desire for the evening not to end. But that didn’t mean they should wade into the quote-unquote *excitement*.

“I was wondering,” Nicholas went on, “whether we could broker some kind of rapprochement.”

From the other side of the flames, Mike was looking at her, his expression by no means unkind. Irma felt flooded with affection for him. She didn’t want to kiss him the way she wanted to kiss everyone else, but she cared about him, and she regretted the trouble the project had caused him.

“Mike, I’m sorry,” she said.

Mike swatted the air with his s’more. “Don’t sweat it,” he said. “I understand where you were coming from.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. You’ve caused me a shitload of trouble. And your friend really messed with Ben.”

Irma was nodding along. “I know.”

“That said, my players do dumb stuff all the time. I don’t tolerate it—I yell, I scream, I run them up and down the stadium till they puke. But I still love them, and I know they can do better. That’s what college is for, in my eyes.”

Irma began to reply. Mike held up a hand. “Not that I’m so wise,” he

said. “I learned something from you. The end of your editorial—you wrote that, right?”

“Yeah,” Irma admitted. “It was me.”

“The part about We Are One—I was discussing it with Katrina earlier. She helped me see what you were saying.”

“It’s so good!” Katrina said. “Should we do a recitation?”

“Oh God, no,” Irma said, but Nicholas was already reaching for his phone.

“Wonderful idea,” he said. “Kat, will you do the honors?”

“Gladly,” Katrina said. “If I have the author’s permission.”

“You guys are embarrassing me,” Irma said. Though she was blushing, she didn’t say no—a distinction Nicholas noted with a smile.

“On the contrary, we’re celebrating you.” He handed Katrina his phone “Go for it, Kat. The author approves.”

“I’ll skip the whole part about patriarchy,” Katrina said, “though I love it.”

“‘Patriarchy is the death of nature,’” Nicholas said, quoting the piece.

“‘It’s the zero-sum rule of the few,’” Katrina added. “Okay, here we go.” Katrina cleared her throat. Irma shivered with nervous pride. Were they making fun of her? They didn’t seem to be. Katrina began to read.

> Our school motto is We Are One.
>
> A beautiful sentiment, steeped in the idea of the essential sisterhood of all beings. But such a motto can never originate out of any bureaucracy, nor come from the central power of any institution—such a motto cannot be imposed on all those who feel division most acutely. We Are One cannot be decreed. It cannot come from a president, or a board of trustees, or a football coach, or anyone with any power at all.
>
> Originating in the center of powers, such a motto can only seem like an order, or an obfuscation, or a brutal remaking of the truth. When you insist that we are one, you protest too much. Utopia, even the transient and partial utopia of our little college, cannot merely be declared. It must be earned.

> Perhaps it is a motto that should never be spoken at all; it should only be lived. We, the Witches of Westish, affirm that we are many, we are everywhere, and we will not sleep.

"Hear, hear," said Nicholas.

"Crushed it!" Katrina agreed.

"I'm going to read the historian you mention in your piece," Mike said to Irma. "That Greta Lerner."

"Gerda," Irma said.

"Gerda," Mike said. "My fellow student of history. My fellow Wisconsin Jew."

"You're a cool dude," Irma said. "Cooler than Pella lets on sometimes."

Mike chuckled. "Likewise."

"This bonfire has already surpassed my wildest dreams," said Nicholas. "Now, who wants to go for a swim?"

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18

Pella's eyes half opened. Something was happening. Something had happened. She felt exhausted and enervated, and whatever had happened was wrong. Was the alarm going off? No. But why not? She'd fallen into jagged sleep so late and set the alarm for so early that she couldn't possibly have woken before it, but it wasn't going off, it hadn't gone off, which meant she must be late to make the muf—

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

She felt it now; she realized what was happening. For a moment she froze, as though willing her body to become inorganic. With a frantic heave, she flung the tangled too-small throws she'd tried to use as blankets to the floor. She could feel the slightly sticky slickness not only in the crotch of her corset but connecting the bare skin of her buttocks to the couch. She squeezed her thighs together, eyes closed, and imagined herself already in the bathroom. She needed to cross ten feet of carpet without letting one more drop of blood leave her body. Her arms and legs were trembling in the cold.

Fast or slow was the question. Fast, she decided. She opened her eyes onto darkness. With a sickly clench in her gut she rocked her hips, gently unsticking her bloody corset from the couch. When it came free, she hurled herself off the sofa, hurried over the carpet with squeezed-together thighs, and slung the bathroom door shut behind her.

She grabbed the top edge of her Spanx, peeled them down over her ribs and belly button and hips, and, with a full-body shudder, detached the blood-soaked gusset from her crotch. She shoved the entire contraption down her legs and let it fall to the tile, the fabric lumped around her feet. She sank down onto the toilet and felt more blood fall from her in goopy clumps as she peed. She'd always had heavy periods, and every so often she

had one that came on unstoppably fast in the very first hours. What a nightmare.

With an angry slap, she sent the roll of toilet paper whirring on its spindle. It rippled toward the floor. She tore off a long white stream, wadded it, and wiped the blood from her thighs. She dropped the wad between her legs into the toilet bowl and unspooled another. The powder room was so tiny that—count your blessings—from her seat she could reach the sink and turn on a trickle of water to dampen the toilet-paper wad. She reached back carefully to clean the blood from the crack of her butt. Her headache was diabolical. A horrible noise was coming from inside her skull. She slumped forward on the toilet and let her eyes fall closed.

But actually, there *was* a noise, a loud unremitting buzz, coming through the powder-room door. Shit. Her alarm. Why was it so loud? If she could hear it through this door, Owen and Martin could probably hear it through theirs. Shit.

She spun more toilet paper off the roll and squished it into a vaguely cylindrical shape and jammed the shape inside her body as far as it would readily go. She stood from the toilet and scanned her groin and thighs for blood and stepped her feet out of the leg holes of her bloody Spanx and opened the powder-room door and darted, in a clenched sort of way, into the dark freezing antechamber and squeezed the side-buttons of her phone as it shuddered on the table. The beaded minaudière she'd carried last night lay there too, and hope swelled in Pella that it might contain a tampon, but even as she twisted the clasp, she knew it did not. The minaudière was another extravagance bought for the wedding—it contained nothing but what she'd put in it yesterday morning. While she'd been aware as the trip approached that her period could arrive as early as the weekend, somehow once she'd reached Block Island, the entire concept of a menstrual cycle vanished from her brain, whether because she was distracted or because she'd wished it away.

At her back she could feel the long white couch, with its formal aprons and stiff uncomfortable piping, admonishing her. She forced herself to turn and look at the middle cushion. It was worse than she'd feared. In her restless tossing she'd brush-stroked blood all over the big white square.

She ran to the bathroom, doused a hand towel with cold water, grabbed a seashell of soap. She dropped to her knees beside the sofa and scrubbed at

the stain. She scrubbed so hard that pilling fibers from the damp towel merged into the sofa fabric. The towel turned steadily pink, but the stain kept growing and spreading as she scrubbed. Exasperated, she stood and chucked the towel toward the bathroom door. With both hands, she yanked the offending cushion out of its slot and flipped it over. She jammed it back between its fellows. Ta-da.

She returned to the bathroom to consider her Spanx, which lay in a sad heap of Soft Sand by the toilet base. She stoppered the sink, filled it with cold water, and plunged the garment in. The blatant stupidity of her plight blazed in her mind. How were you supposed to think about your life, come to any conclusions, have any decent epiphanies—how were you supposed to *do anything* if shit like this was always going to happen? When she tried to figure out who was at fault in her fights with Mike and Irma—not in a bitter nitpicking way but in order to understand what had happened and how it could be repaired—when she tried to parse the whole batshit night and decide how to proceed, she'd have to know, even if she never told anybody, that it all happened when she was on the absolute verge of getting her period.

Fuck, she thought as she rubbed the seashell of soap into the bloody crotch of her Spanx. Even if she could go back in time and be aware of her state so that she'd bring tampons to the reception and decline to spend the night in an overdone drawing room on a fancy white couch she could ruin, even if none of *this* part of the nightmare had happened, there would still be the other part, the part that made her feel like a hostage to her own hormonal state. No wonder the night had been a disaster. No wonder everyone and everything had made her cry. She hated to say *No wonder*—it ceded too much power to a force she couldn't control, even if the force was her. She wanted to remove her menstrual blood from the story, soak it back up from the cushion into her body, but blood only flowed one way.

She wrung out the Spanx, making a thin sopping pink-sand rope. She wanted to rescue the undergarment—it cost so much, it felt irresponsible to do otherwise—but she needed to get to the Tilly house and start making brunch. She hurled the sopping rope into the powder-room trash can and tied the liner bag shut.

Sans underwear, she headed into the antechamber. She climbed inside her bridesmaid's dress and, with much squirming, managed to get it zipped.

She dialed the number on the card the cabdriver had given her last night. Phone to her ear, she looked at the couch. The cushion she'd flipped was several shades brighter, less faded by sunshine and wear, than the two that flanked it. A navy pen squiggle in the shape of a tilde adorned one corner and was no doubt the reason the cushion had been flipped before, years or decades ago.

Pella realized she couldn't do it—she couldn't leave it like this. Not only because it was cowardly to conceal the stain so the window to try to clean it would pass, and the next person who spilled something would flip it over and find her blood; it was somehow more than that.

She went over to the couch and, just as she'd done before, yanked out the cushion, flipped it, and jammed it back in, blood-side up. She stepped back to observe what she'd done.

That felt better, that felt more honest, but she balked at leaving it that way for a different reason. She didn't want to subject Owen and Martin to quite so much of her private reality on their first full day of marriage. They had their own reality to contend with.

She grabbed the cushion and tucked its square overstuffed form under her armpit. She pressed it awkwardly to her side with her elbow and forearm, her minaudière clutched in that hand. With one last glance at the oak double doors of the inner sanctum, she let herself out of the room. She marched down the hall and descended the staircase to the foyer.

The tall wooden desk with the brass call bell was unattended, just as it had been when she'd come in. The cuckoo clock behind it had only recently struck six. Pella glanced around for a pen with which to write a note. As she did, she heard footsteps. She walked through a doorway and found herself in the breakfast room. A woman with barrettes in her short gray hair leaned over a table, setting out napkins and silverware. Her air of industry and vigor despite the hour made plain she ran the inn. She was younger than the person Pella had inferred from the decor. She glanced up at Pella, a barefoot nonregistered guest in seafoam ruffles carrying a smuggled cushion, and frowned.

Pella approached her.

"I bled on this cushion," she said bravely.

"What do you want?" the woman said. "A medal?"

"It's from the couch in the honeymoon suite," Pella said. "I'm sorry—I

don’t mean to be shoving it at you. I didn’t want the newlyweds to have to deal with it.”

The woman looked at her stonily.

“I’ll leave you my credit card number,” Pella continued. It seemed rude to set the cushion down, and the woman showed no sign of wanting it. After some fumbling, Pella managed with one hand to open the clasp on her clutch and extract the card. “Just write down the number and give the card to Owen when he leaves. You can charge me for the cleaning or a new cushion or whatever you need to charge me for.”

The sight of the credit card seemed to appease the innkeeper. She plunked her fistful of cutlery down on a table and reached out for the cushion. Without much squeamishness, Pella noticed, or even much attempt to avoid the splotch of blood.

“Anything else?” the woman said.

“No, ma’am,” said Pella, and hurried out of the breakfast room.

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19

The sun peeked over the water as the cab eased up Corn Neck Road. “Do you mind two stops?” she asked. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

She hopped out of the cab in Owen and Martin’s driveway, shoes and clutch in her hand, and tiptoed over the gravel. Mike would no doubt be passed out cold; she would slip into the bedroom, remedy her menstrual situation, and change clothes without disturbing him. She’d kiss him on the forehead and return to the cab, ready to head to the big house to make the muffins.

As she approached the front door, she was surprised to smell freshly brewed coffee. Someone was already up. That someone, she thought, could only be Mike, risen despite his hangover to brood over the football team’s loss, his banishment to a cubicle by President Molina, and his fiancée’s lack of empathy for these woes. Pella realized how little she wanted to face him right now. She’d felt a rush of love at the thought of his sleeping self, but his waking self inspired no such emotion. She grabbed the handle of the screen door.

There, tucked into the bench seat behind the kitchen table, sat Irma and Nicholas, their mugs of coffee issuing wisps of steam. They glanced up as Pella entered, surprise in their eyes. Bedhead, predictably, was something Nicholas did well, his sandy hair all the more lovely for being a mess. He had changed into gym shorts and a T-shirt, while Irma was still wearing her delicate white dress, which looked even more like a nightgown at this hour. Pella was astonished to glimpse, beneath the edge of the table, Irma’s bare legs lifted and outstretched, her crossed ankles resting on Nicholas’s thigh.

Pella felt a stab of jealous rage. It doesn’t mean they slept together, she thought. Maybe they both just like coffee. But there were Irma’s insolent legs, propped in Nicholas’s lap.

“Hey, Mama Bird,” Irma said.

“Good morning,” said Nicholas. His voice was smooth, but he flinched and straightened on the bench. “Come, have a seat.”

“No time,” Pella said. “Mind if I grab some of this?”

With a wavering hand she plucked a mug off the drying rack—IF MAMA AIN’T HAPPY, AIN’T NOBODY HAPPY—and sloshed it full of coffee. The glass beak of the pot banged wildly against ceramic.

“Of course not,” Nicholas said. Hastily, he nudged Irma’s ankles from his thigh and tried to slide out from behind the long table. “But why don’t you join us? In fact, take my seat. I’ll just run upstairs and—”

“No thanks.” Pella slugged back a gulp of scalding coffee as she headed for the open archway. “Time to make the muffins.”

Nicholas, as he tried to stand to intercept her, banged his thigh against the table and muttered a curse. His bewilderment surprised Pella; she assumed many of his Sunday mornings began with some woman he’d merely flirted with walking in on the woman he’d fucked. She might have felt flattered by his discomposure if she weren’t livid and annoyed with herself for feeling livid; she, a person who was engaged to be married and who lived in another time zone and who had met Nicholas yesterday, et cetera, could not be anything but pathetic for caring whom he slept with. Now she would have to secretly envy both Katrina and Irma. Envying Katrina was like riding a bicycle, an age-old habit easily reclaimed, but to be forced to envy Irma in a sexual realm felt like a brand-new form of penance. So much so that she couldn’t even look at Irma and kept her attention trained on Nicholas. A strange expression entered his gold-spoked eyes; he seemed almost to be beseeching her, but to what end, she couldn’t tell.

Her own eyes flashed with a warning: *Leave me alone*. Nicholas, relenting, sat down. Pella slipped through the archway into the wood-paneled living room and climbed the stairs.

The door to the primary bedroom stood ajar. As she passed—it was her own fault for peeking in—she could see Nicholas’s tie draped over the headboard, his mossy green jacket puddled on the floor. The blankets and top sheet were twisted into loose ropes, the fitted sheet clawed from one corner to reveal the blue-and-white stripes of the mattress. Three—three!—silver condom wrappers flashed on the rug.

Alongside Pella's jealous fascination and mixing with it strangely came a surge of tenderness toward Irma, who she knew—insofar as she still knew anything about her friend—had never had sex before last night.

Without realizing what she was doing, she walked closer to the bed and scanned the rumpled sheet. There in the center, among pale overlapping stains of the usual kind, was a single drop of blood. It felt like a terrible intrusion to be looking at it, and Pella already felt guilty, but it also brought her, somehow, a sense of harmony with Irma of a kind she'd feared was fading from their lives. She pulled the door shut behind her and continued down the hall.

SHE DIDN'T FEEL like talking to Mike right now, and anyway she was in a hurry—she just needed to change her clothes and go perform her maid-of-honorly duties as the maker of muffins and quiche. Quietly, hoping not to wake him, she nudged the door open. Dawn light spilled through the east-facing window. These bedclothes hadn't been undone at all. The patchwork duvet was tucked in at the edges, just the way Pella had tucked it yesterday, the orange crocheted blanket folded in neat thirds at the foot. Mike lay face down, his buttocks slack and vulnerable, his shoulder blades rising and falling with sleep. Beside him, face up, her cheeks slightly pinkened by yesterday's sun, lay Katrina. Her face was simple with sleep, her nipples tiny and dark, her French wax impeccable. Mike's hand, big fingers spread, lay across her stomach.

As Pella stood there, staring at that hand, Katrina's eyes opened.

"Don't mind me," Pella said. Calmly—calmly?—she set her mug on the dresser. "I just need to grab a few things."

Mike, still asleep, groaned into his pillow. Pella turned around and yanked open the top drawer of the dresser. She fished out the clothes she'd brought for today. The dresser was so small, the drawers so sticky and ill-fitted, that it was probably some Puritan antique, and she felt worried, very worried, that her coffee mug would leave a ring. She slid a folded T-shirt under the mug. In the mirror atop the dresser, she saw Mike roll over. Through the haze of a hundred scotches, his brain began to comprehend what was happening.

"Pella," he said.

She crooked an arm behind her back and found the zipper between the stiff-rolled edges of the dress. In the mirror she could see that Mike and Katrina had scooted as far apart as the little bed allowed. They were no longer lying down but sitting up attentively, erect and skittish, like kids when the meanest teacher walks in, their nakedness awkwardly covered by the blanket one of them had grabbed from the foot of the bed. Pella did not care. She did. Not. Care. In her mind, Irma's bare legs flashed on Nicholas's thigh.

As she finished unzipping, she turned to face the bed. The bodice of the dress fell from her torso, and with some graceless writhing and tugging and popping of seams—this dress would never be worn again—she managed to drag the whole contraption down over her hips so that it huddled, stiff and awkward, on the floor at her ankles.

She unhooked her bra and tossed it down by the dress as though there were some kind of bonfire down there in which the experience of the weekend could be triumphantly burned. Her underwear was in the trash at the inn.

"Fun night?" she said.

"Pella," Mike said again.

She stood at the foot of the bed, forcing them to look at her. She couldn't say why. But if everyone was getting naked, she'd get naked too. She had a lot more pubic hair than Katrina, flamelike and scratchy and wild. A rich disdain surged through her. She could only, from the high moral perch of her own sexless night, feel sorry for them both, for how far each had fallen in her estimation. She remembered the one-letter text Mike had sent last night after Pella told him she wouldn't be returning to the house: *K.*

"Pella," Mike said for a third time, his voice hushed and low, as though he were hoping to exclude Katrina, who was sitting right there. "Can we talk?"

He glanced toward the open door. He wanted the two of them to leave Katrina—to go, perhaps, into the other bedroom to talk.

"Sure," Pella said in a voice that made clear they would stay right there. She tugged on her underwear. "What would you like to talk about?"

"This...this isn't what it looks like."

"Good," said Pella. "Because it looks like you fucked Katrina."

"I know you're angry."

“I’m not angry, Mike. I’m proud of you.”

“Babe—”

“Look,” Pella said as she sucked in her crampy gut to button her jeans. “If you’re going to talk in these vapid clichés—*It’s not what it looks like, I know you’re angry, babe*—I’m going to have to respond in clichés, and I don’t want to do that. I guess I’m *not* proud of you, because I’m not sure you really wanted to fuck her. I think she just seduced you when you were too shit-faced to say no. No offense, Katrina.”

“None taken,” Katrina said.

Her expression looked very different than Mike’s, which was stunned and fearful to the point of incomprehension. Katrina looked cool and comfortable even as Pella met her eye. She looked like she was enjoying this.

Pella finished dressing and slid on her flip-flops. She walked into the hallway, shut the door behind her, and descended the stairs.

Sensing that Nicholas and Irma were still in the kitchen, she turned the other way and headed out through the screened-in porch into the dew-spangled yard, every blade of grass, every thistle and dandelion, cast into deliriously sharp relief by the force of the morning sun.

She rounded the house and climbed into the cab. The driver was playing a game on his phone, the tootling music turned up loud. “Next stop is the Tilly house,” she said. “Do you need the address?”

“Oh, please,” scoffed the cabbie as the music tootled and a rain of gold coins flowed down his tiny screen. “I was born here.”

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20

In Shakespeare, of course—in Shakespeare as Shakespeare wrote it and in all the drama of Shakespeare's time—the women were played by men. Men in dresses, men in drag. Men in hilarious wigs and powders mimicking timorous voices. This provided, as we know, as is everywhere evident in the texts of the plays, a vast field of opportunity for openness, jokes, and reversals, blatancies and intricacies. For gender fluidity, as we would say. For men to be women being men, for the kinds of transgressions, switches, and slippages that hint at freedom, freedom, freedom.

And all these opportunities, all this playfulness and the surge of hope such playfulness inspires, were predicated on the fact that women weren't allowed to act. All the beauty and freedom and subversion, the switching of codes, the sense of endless possibility those comedies contain, was just that—*contained* by the box of the stage. As long as there were no women, anything was possible.

And yet when the lid was lifted off that box, how powerful, how intoxicating, how vivid, how potent, how *real* the vapors that floated out. Art was real, as real as anything—sometimes art could seem the realest thing in the world.

The other thing that happened in Shakespeare, alongside the all-male cross-dressing and gender confusion, was the bed-hopping, the love-swapping. Obviously the two were related; they were adjacent types of mistaken identity. This person wrapped in strange clothing, that person wrapped in a strange embrace. Your betrothed slides into bed beside you, you take her into your arms—is it your fault it's not your betrothed?

Could this be what happened to Mike and Katrina? When the reception had ended (Pella imagined, as her cab rolled up Corn Neck Road), Mike stumbled back to Owen's house, stone-drunk and alone. He grabbed one

last beer from the fridge, stormed up the stairs, and fell into bed to snore off his bender. While he snored, someone slipped into bed beside him.

One fact to keep in mind about Shakespeare's England—and the rest of the world throughout human history until a few generations ago—was how dark it was much of the time. The nights were long, long as the days, longer than our light-addicted selves can conceive of nights being. Sixteen hours of uninterrupted dark in the winter. After sundown, there was only the reddish light of the fire and its proxies, the sunlight bouncing softly off the moon, and the far-off stars. This was beautiful, nourishing light—and fickle, and often absent. People loved and craved light. The fullness of the moon.

So in Shakespeare, the comic prospect of crawling into the wrong bed was rendered plausible by the fact that a person in bed, once the candle was blown out, could rarely see his companion. This was what Pella imagined: Mike is shit-faced, on the verge of puking—or, to put it in lyrical terms, enchanted by the potions of the feast. The house is pitch-black. The door creaks open.

He thinks it's her, Pella. Returned from her fleeing.

The person opening the door, who is equally shit-faced and enchanted and even more disoriented than Mike, being as she's in a pitch-black vacation house she's never been in before—what does she believe? She believes the person in the bed is Nicholas. She has followed him here. She is bravely taking a chance—hoping he is alone, hoping he will welcome her. So much intoxication, so much vulnerable desire, so much sadness and longing and need.

"Hey," whispers the she, who is finally being played, at this point in history, by a woman.

"Hey," whispers the he, just awake.

They understand each other. They are in love. They just happen not to know who the other one is. The she thinks he is Nicholas. The he thinks she is Pella.

After a bit of drunken fumbling, with a susurrus of fabric, her outfit falls to the floor. She unhooks her bra, peels off her underwear. There is no posing and posturing involved in her undressing, no coy shyness or self-conscious boldness, no attempt to show herself to advantage, to give this angle rather than that—or, rather, there are always these concerns, because

she is a woman being played by a woman, a Pella played by a Katrina, but fewer concerns than usual, because she cannot be seen.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he whispers.

“Me too,” she assures him. She feels her way toward the bed, into the bed.

She thinks he is Nicholas. He thinks she is Pella. Nicholas and Pella, in a bed.

“*Babe*,” he whispers, the word a kind of lament. He wants to apologize—for their fighting, for their friction and misunderstanding, for the separateness and discord brief lives should not have time for.

“Shh,” she whispers. She wants to be apologized to—for the way he flirted with another woman, for failing to invite her here—but she has found him, he is alone, and that is enough. “I know,” she says in a tone that caresses him with forgiveness. “I know.”

And what about the kiss? Could they kiss, even for an instant, and still not know? That he is Mike, that she is Katrina—that they are not Pella and Nicholas?

The mind says, No, it’s impossible—the lips must know.

The lips say, Shut up, we’re drunk. They touch. They do not know.

The kiss connects them. An older, more constant form of electricity—the brilliant, bodily kind—flows freely between them.

Part of what they sense in their kiss, part of its electricity and wonder, is the sudden absence of the barrier that has separated them. The channel between them is inexplicably open in the way each has longed for. Reluctance, resentment, self-protection: These are somehow not present. Relief floods in. I am with Nicholas, she thinks as their pursed lips open to hungry tongues—but what kind of Nicholas is this? A Nicholas who wants her truly, in the way she wants to be wanted, who is not always hedging and resituating, always explaining, with his actions as well as his words, that sex is not love and his love is not for her, in a way that makes her long for that love and crave it all the more but also makes her feel—despite his unerring honesty, despite his refusal to mislead her—frustrated and unloved. That Nicholas—the Nicholas she knows she can never possess—this kiss is not his kiss. This is the kiss of someone who desires her, deeply and forever.

And on the other side too—how different it feels to him, to be kissed in

this way by his fiancée. To be kissed in this sincere and loving way, this grateful appetitive way. His fiancée, as Pella knows, does not kiss him like this.

The he and the she are kissing. The layers are three. The kiss itself is a form of perfect understanding, of ideal unobstructed togetherness: We are one.

Beneath the physical act of the kiss, these two people, these actors-in-the-world, the woman who is playing the woman, the man who is playing the man, have no idea who the other one is. Their misunderstanding is total.

But in the third and deepest layer, they understand each other perfectly again. Or, rather, they misunderstand perfectly. Each of them longs for love. They have the same earnest hope—not simple, but earnest. They have been thwarted in similar ways. Pella can see that now. In her mind's eye, in the darkness behind her lids as she leans against the headrest of the cab, she can see it all. How Katrina and Mike might want each other enough to seek each other through darkness.

When the world goes dark, so much of what we believe we knew is disproven: We cannot tell red wine from white. Far more than Shakespeare, we rely on our eyes. Far more than Shakespeare's most gifted female counterpart, whoever she might have been, we rely on our eyes. They didn't have to front this brightness all the time. One moment the brightness is blinding; all we see is the brilliance of the light. The next moment sight itself becomes too vivid, too much, too consuming. It blots out the other senses. We are idiots; the seeable is all we see.

The misapprehension lasts only a moment. Soon they have figured it out. These bodies shrouded in darkness differ too far from expectations—from what's in the stage directions. This huge hairy Nicholas, this long languid Pella. But even the knowledge, as it dawns, confuses—true knowledge always does.

They are hammered drunk, they are sweetly enchanted, they submit to the deeper logic of what must happen now. They go ahead and submit to it, sublimely, in the dark. And as the darkness slips away, having performed its mischievous offices to the gods' satisfaction, and Aurora blesses the scene, she—*me*, the other Pella, the real one—bursts through a flimsy door in a bad dress, stuffed full of toilet paper, and appears onstage.

Of course, that's not how it happened at all.

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21

Pella debarked at the Tilly house and made her way up the driveway past the cars brought from the mainland by Martin's siblings and found the front door open and slipped inside the quiet house. She headed for the kitchen—and felt chastened to find Lydia, already awake, unloading a grocery bag full of egg cartons onto the kitchen island.

Lydia smiled as Pella came in. "Hey," she said in a croaky whisper.

"Hey," said Pella in the same voice.

"We don't have to whisper," Lydia whispered. "I just lost my voice from all the fun." Her lank hair was screwed into a knot beside one ear. She wore a tattered Vassar sweatshirt and long striped pajama pants that pooled around her fuzzy slippers. "Whew," she said. "I haven't felt this shitty in years."

"Me either," Pella said.

Lydia nodded at a bottle of Advil sitting on the kitchen island, the cap resting beside it. "Drug yourself," she said. "There's coffee too."

"Thanks." Pella popped two into her mouth. She was impressed by Lydia, who with the bleary swagger of a sailor had already lugged in from the garage all of the groceries and muffin tins Pella had bought for the morning's baking and stacked them on the counters alongside the family's store of bowls, whisks, and measuring spoons.

Pella poured herself a cup of coffee and tried to keep from hurling herself into Lydia's angular, competent body and bawling uncontrollably the way the towheaded boy had done last night. "Do you have a tampon?" she asked.

Lydia glanced up. "Of course!" she said. "They're...hang on. I'm not sure where they are." Lydia cross-country-skied out of the room, shushing

along on her slipper bottoms, and climbed the stairs. She returned bearing two handfuls of tampons that she plunked down on the island.

“You’re a godsend,” Pella said.

Lydia opened the pantry and pulled out a cloth shopping bag. She brushed the tampons into it, capped and tossed in the Advil bottle, and gave it to Pella, who headed for the bathroom.

When she returned, she and Lydia set about chopping apples and grating zucchini. Pella’s headache was blinding. Irma’s bare shins flashed in Nicholas’s lap, Katrina’s bare limbs stretched over the bedclothes. Her phone shuddered on the countertop. Mike was calling. She ignored it. He called again. And again. And again.

Pella sent him a text: Stop it.

Then she sent another: See you at brunch.

Which sounded more conciliatory than she’d intended, but that was fine. What she wanted was to buy some time and be assured Mike wouldn’t show up here sooner. It was seven o’clock—the brunch didn’t start for four hours.

Okay, he replied. I love you.

Pella and Lydia mixed batters and poured them into muffin tins and swapped the tins in the oven. Apple crumble. Blueberry almond. Zucchini, Gruyère, and black pepper. Various Tillys tiptoed into the kitchen to pour themselves coffee and remark on how good everything smelled. Pella, grateful for the need to stay focused, smiled abstractedly at Lydia’s jokes.

Around nine thirty, just as Lydia was popping the last round of cooling muffins into napkin-lined baskets, and Pella was mixing a huge bowl of batter for the crustless quiches, her phone buzzed again.

Pella, this is Katrina. Don’t worry about bumping into me at brunch. I’m on the ferry. I’m sorry about what happened last night. What happened was that I slept with your fiancé. I’m sorry.

Pella grabbed her phone as though preparing to shatter it against the sink. The dot-dot-dot of a text in progress popped up. She glared at the phone and waited. The pause lasted for what seemed like forever, that ellipsis poised tauntingly on the screen. When the texts came, they rolled in in a steady succession, as quickly as Pella could read them.

That said, I'd like to set the record straight about a few things, as long as I'm sitting here on this ferry all by myself and I seem to have reception. You'll probably block me but hey, c'est la vie.

Pretty much everything you said this morning when you walked in was dead wrong. Mike absolutely seduced me. I say that not to defend myself but to defend him. He wasn't some passive participant.

And neither were you, Pella. Are you going to sit here and tell me you weren't trying to seduce Nicky? The second he showed up on the beach, it was obvious you were going to do whatever it took to sabotage me. Did you think you were being subtle? Sneaking off with him, talking shit about me, whatever else you did? Just because you're a good flirt doesn't mean you're a good person. Fucking with people in sneaky ways isn't exactly a virtue.

Look, I'm not some completely deluded old crone, even if I feel like one sometimes. I'm aware that Nicky doesn't love me. Sort of painfully aware at times, because I do have a thing for him. Or I did. Nobody talks like Nicky, as you know. And not many people fuck like him either. You can ask your friend Irma about that part.

I know you, even though we were only friends for like a year and a half when we were kids. You probably think you're a different person now, but actually you're not different at all. I could tell the second I saw you that I still knew you, and I was genuinely hoping we might have a better relationship this time around because I've always enjoyed you, but boy, are you a bitch. I know that's ironic of me to say at a moment like this, when I've done the supposedly bad thing. What I did was actually bad, not just supposedly.

Mike is a good guy. Better than a good guy. He's smart and funny and he can dance and he loves the living shit out of you. He was lovely to talk to at the party and he was even lovelier to talk to at the bonfire after. If I were you, I'd stop all this silliness and realize what you have in him. But I don't

know if you’re capable of that. Or even if you have any interest. You treat him poorly, that much is for sure. If you don’t want to treat him better, I hope you’ll break up with him.

A bonfire, Pella thought with a flash of pure envy. They had a bonfire on the beach.

In retrospect there had been something strange about Katrina’s manner in the bed this morning. She made gestures of embarrassment, sitting up straight, covering her bare chest with the blanket—but within all this was something watchful and cold. Katrina was monitoring the effects of her deed, as though if Pella hadn’t walked in, the act would have been for naught. In retrospect, it was less the sex than the cuddling that made Pella’s heart pound with this sickening speed—the cozy way Mike and Katrina had been sleeping and the embarrassed way they peeled apart, as though aware of how damning that coziness was.

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22

Owen strolled into the kitchen, his sandals slapping lightly against the floorboards. Fresh and unfrazzled, happy and relaxed, his two-day-old haircut tinged with that handsome hint of gray, he looked like an advertisement for marriage. He hugged Lydia, who was about to go upstairs to check on her kids, and they shared a quiet joke before she departed. But when he laid his hands on the kitchen island and waited for Pella to meet his gaze, she could see he was unsure what to say.

"You know," she said.

"I don't know anything," he replied.

"Yes you do," she said. "You know everything. But how? Does everybody know?"

"No, no." He gave his head a tiny shake. "Certainly not."

"But how do *you* know?"

Owen advanced around the kitchen island, lifted a corner of the dishtowel slung over Pella's shoulder, and used it to dab a stray bit of muffin batter from her cheek. He grasped her hands in his own.

"Listen to me. I know what you're going through right now. Believe me, I do. But there's something here that can be beneficial. There are some things that might be better off in the open between you and Michael. Better expressed than repressed. Regardless of the pain."

Pella nodded.

"I have a suggestion," Owen said. "Martin and I are leaving on our honeymoon tomorrow. Our apartment will be vacant for a month."

"Oh," said Pella.

"We're in need of a reliable plant sitter. Perhaps it would be good for you," Owen said, "to have some time to yourself."

"With the plants," Pella said.

They were speaking in quiet, furtive voices, their four hands resting on the kitchen island. Mr. and Mrs. Tilly bustled in and out of the kitchen, as did LJ's girlfriend, Kate, and Lydia's husband, Sam, everyone pitching in as the moment neared for the guests to arrive. "I should get back to work," Pella said.

"Consider it," Owen said. "A break might be good for you both."

"A month," Pella said.

"Or any portion thereof. Yes."

"Okay," she said. "I'll think about it."

MIKE AND HENRY arrived to the brunch together. They spoke in low voices as they sat penitently with their plates in their laps, dainty coffee cups balanced on their knees. Pella watched them from the kitchen. They might have been at a funeral. Henry leaned toward Mike to say something; Mike absorbed the statement with a measured grimace. Someone—Owen's brother—greeted them from across the room. Their faces shifted, with sudden effort, into public smiles.

Out in the yard, beyond the kitchen windows, Owen and Martin circulated among the guests, their fingers interwoven. Who could know the mysteries of love? Who could see the weird interiors of coupledom, those hidden rooms decorated by blind amateurs? Owen, Pella thought, was *more* than she'd given him credit for, even at the peak of her infatuation with him. More of a jerk, yes. But also more complicated, more mature, more realistic. *That's more your thing*, he'd murmured to Martin last night about sleeping with women, and the way he said it suggested to Pella a delicate world that would always require navigation.

Mike's forehead was drawn into deep furrows, his head hung low. He really did look like he was at a funeral. Part of this had to be playacting, Pella thought. Not that Mike wasn't wrecked; he was no doubt more wrecked than she. But when you were the primary mourner at a funeral, as she'd been for her dad, you had no need to look that sad. What you wanted to do was burst into giddy laughter.

At her dad's funeral, the person she'd laughed with was Mike. She remembered the way they'd made shadow puppets via some fractured beam of dusty light that angled fortuitously down through a high window of the

Westish chapel and landed on the wall beside their pew. They fashioned bunny ears and flapping birds, and Mike made hopeless efforts at other animals, and the bunny was hilarious and the bird was hilarious and the hopeless efforts were even more hilarious, and Pella was laughing hard enough to very nearly pee.

After the funeral they went to the reception, which was a lot like this, with plates of food and teacups on knees. Pella stayed as long as she could bear, then gave Mike a look, and he took her hand and walked her back to her dad's apartment. After that she did not laugh or leave the house for two months but only ate the pints of frozen custard Mike brought her and depended on him for everything.

SHE WALKED OVER to the silver coffee urn and plucked a clean overturned cup from the tablecloth. There was coffee in the kitchen; she was making herself available.

Mike hoisted himself off the couch and walked toward her. "Can we talk?" he asked. He looked ashen-faced and wary. He looked hungover and contrite and afraid of her. She kind of liked it.

"Talk to Katrina," she said.

"Katrina's gone."

"You must be heartbroken."

"Please?" he said as he refilled his own cup from the urn. "Just for a minute."

Without answering, she turned and headed through the living room. As she wove through the gathering, she kept her gaze dead ahead, a smile plastered to her face, trying to seem totally upbeat and normal while discouraging anyone from speaking to her.

She made it through the house unaccosted, but as she tugged open the sliding glass door and stepped onto the deck, she locked eyes with Martin's dad. He perched on the edge of a white-cushioned wicker chair, looking fresh and dapper in his faded denim shirt, tuning an acoustic guitar. "There she is!" he said as though he'd been waiting for her. "The star of the weekend."

"Hi," Pella said.

"Have you met the Florsheims?" John Tilly tipped an ear toward the

elderly couple who shared the matching wicker settee, plates of quiche and salad in their laps. She smiled and said she had not.

“Pella helped plan the whole wedding,” John Tilly explained. “She kept our dear Owen on an even keel all summer—you know how artists can be.” He pronounced the word *artists* with such generous affection and such naive confidence that these special creatures existed that Pella couldn’t help but like him. “She even baked this quiche!”

The Florsheims, blinking up at her with beatific indifference, declared their love of the quiche. John Tilly was not finished waxing.

“Pella is Owen’s closest friend from college. The kind of friend you dream of having.” He beamed up at her, his shaggy gray hair falling toward his eyes. “I hope you’ll be a regular here from now on.”

Pella sensed, as though from a distance, the satisfaction this paean would have inspired in her under other circumstances. She tried to smile in a way that wasn’t weird and miserable.

“We’re going to have a jam session later,” Mr. Tilly added. “Sing a few songs. I hope you two can join us.”

“Great,” Pella said.

She and Mike walked down the meadow toward the cliff. The downward grade of the weed-studded earth was such that each footstep felt a tiny bit like falling. It gave Pella the sense of being inside a nightmare, moving with maddening slowness toward the inevitable end.

They did not, however, dive off the cliff when they reached it. They stopped at the ramshackle rancher’s fence near the spot where the ceremony had been performed. The walk had been silent, as though nothing could be said until they arrived. The day was chilly and brilliant, the sky a shade of pale and perfect blue. As they walked, Pella felt him beside her, the snuffle of his breath, the shamble of his step, the large warm aura that for so long had encompassed her. Step, step, step. Slowly, slowly, slowly. Falling, falling, falling. She wanted badly to seize his hand; she regretted every past moment in which she might have but did not seize his hand. And yet she kept the hand that was not carrying her coffee hugged up into the sleeve of her sweatshirt. He could keep her from falling, but only if she wanted him to.

“Pella, look,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

His amber eyes were repentant and miserable, full of the gritty intensity

of his most important missions.

“Fun wedding,” she said. “Crazy week.”

He squinted at her uncertainly, trying to discern her tone. It sounded—she meant it to be—sincere.

She sipped from her dainty blue-and-white rented porcelain cup with the half-heart handle. “Silly to come all this way with so little coffee.”

Mike looked both disarmed and wary. Why was she speaking in this lighthearted, friendly way? What was she up to? She wasn’t sure what she was up to. She didn’t want to rage, she didn’t want to fight, she didn’t want to be apologized to.

“Pella, look,” he repeated, ready to relaunch into whatever impassioned apologies he’d been composing in his mind. “I’m sorry. I know what you must—”

“Don’t,” she said with a soft shake of her head.

“I know you’re angry,” he said. “You have every right.”

“I’m not angry,” she said. “Or, okay. I’m livid. But I don’t blame you and I don’t want you to apologize. I understand why you did it.”

At this Mike’s eyes narrowed; his whole face clouded with distress. “No you don’t,” he muttered.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I do.”

The breeze felt raw against her cheeks. She would have liked to be even softer of voice, calmer and quieter and more understanding, but she had to speak above the breeze. “I know that I’ve been difficult for a long time,” she said. “Fighting you every step of the way. Not understanding what was important to you.”

Mike was frowning. “You’re what’s important to me.”

“I know,” Pella said. “And I know why you slept with Katrina.”

“No you don’t.” The movements of his hands were flailing, helpless, small—seeming attempts to grasp something or ward it off. His voice, though quiet and hoarse and hungover, took on a fearful, almost panicked tone: “You can’t just decide what it means. That it means anything at all. I got royally blitzed and I did something I regret and I’m sorry. You can punish me for as long as you want, but it doesn’t have to *mean* anything.”

“I’m going to go to New York for a few weeks,” she said. “Owen offered me their place while they’re on their honeymoon. We can each regroup. Do some thinking.”

“I don’t want to do any thinking.”

“Me either. We can each stop thinking for a while.”

He looked at her; she watched him do so. She had, at some point, begun to find him simple and predictable. Now she saw how little she really knew of him.

He was a man of large gestures, but what gesture could he make? Drop to one knee and ask her to marry him? He’d already done that.

“A few weeks in New York.” Mike gazed into the long grass at the cliff’s edge. He frowned and tried to wrap his mind around what this might mean.

“Yes,” Pella said.

“And then you’ll come home.”

“It’ll be good for us,” she said. “I’ll take the four o’clock ferry.”

“What about the singalong?” said Mike with a gallows smile. He glanced down into the drained, dainty cup that was hidden in the center of his palm.

“You should go,” Pella said. “These people can really sing.”

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III

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1

Irma's charmed sense of the wedding weekend—of success and exultation, entrancement and romance, life swelled to its edges—lasted, despite her hangover, all through the journey home. It was incomprehensible, given everything that had happened, that they'd left Westish only the day before. On Friday evening—and now it was Sunday night—she'd been curled miserably in bed, lamenting Dahlia's departure, when Judy phoned and said, in her inimitable Judy way: "*Irma*. I've been feeling terribly guilty about deciding not to attend Owen's wedding. And so it occurred to me, as I was sitting here sipping my tea: Why not call Irma and beg her to escort me? She's a tolerant soul who wouldn't mind the way I dodder through airports."

The ruse was transparent: Judy didn't want to go to Block Island any more than Irma was a tolerant soul.

"I'd love to," Irma said.

"Oh, how marvelous! But I haven't told you the worst part yet. We'll have to leave before dawn to make our flight."

Suddenly energized, Irma hopped off her bed to pack a bag. She asked Pammy to check on Anderson over the weekend and left the door unlocked when she departed, feeling enormous gratitude toward her professor.

And now that she and Judy were headed home, she felt even more grateful for the circumspect way Judy treated her today. After the reception, Irma had, quite obviously, not returned to the bed-and-breakfast where they'd readied themselves for the wedding, leaving one of the suite's two queen beds untouched, and, just as obviously, had hovered by Nicholas's side throughout the brunch at Martin's family's house, nestling beside him on the sofa, picking grapes off his plate, and touching his hand or his leg whenever possible. None of which Nicholas had seemed to mind or be

embarrassed by—in fact, he seemed almost to enjoy Irma's clingy, girlfriend-like maneuvers, perhaps due to the same principle that emboldened Irma to perform these maneuvers in the first place: the principle that, within a few hours, they would be saying goodbye.

And Judy, observing all this, had not so much as lifted an eyebrow in Irma's direction. No prurience, no judgment, no reaction at all. Judy, as the three of them sat and chatted over muffins and fruit, merely accepted as unremarkable fact that the person who was Nicholas might be interested in the person who was Irma, and vice versa, and that the two of them might have stayed out all night together, and that Irma might still be wearing, like a badge of honor and courage both, the same white slip dress she'd worn to the wedding and furthermore might, while they chatted, let her hand rest on Nicholas's knee.

For this circumspection Irma felt exceedingly grateful. It continued all through their pair of flights as they both buried their noses in books and sometimes lifted them out to lightly chat, not about Nicholas or Dahlia or Doug or even Pella, but simply about how marvelous—*marvelous!*—the entire weekend had been and how glad they were to have gone.

Judy's company felt like a bubble, and the hushed, puckered-leather interior of the town car Judy had hired to convey them home from O'Hare felt equally like a bubble, and Irma's exhilarated exhaustion and champagne headache felt like a bubble too. As they cruised up I-94 in darkness, she closed her eyes and felt she was not yet remembering Owen's wedding and all that happened there but somehow still experiencing it in the present tense, as though time had collapsed and staying up all night meant it was still yesterday.

It wasn't until the town car deposited her on the edge of west campus, and she shouldered her bag, waved goodbye to Judy, and set out across the dark quad, the chapel bells tolling two in the distance, that Irma took her phone out of airplane mode and returned, in a sense, to real life.

All evening, Pammy had been flooding the Witches' group chat with news from the internet. Copycat pranks had been committed over the weekend at three different colleges, including Princeton, where a men's lacrosse player had been found passed out on a practice field inside a lacrosse goal, RAPE VICTIM tattooed across his forehead. Someone released security-camera footage of several figures in black robes and witch hats

bumping along in a maintenance cart onto the practice field, then rolling the passed-out athlete out of the cart's bed and into the goal. Since then, the lacrosse player's identity had been published by the Brightness. Several current and former Princeton students had accused him of inappropriate behavior, and one had accused him of rape.

Beyond the three colleges where students had been tattooed, there were many anecdotal reports and accusations floating around on social media, posted by or on behalf of male athletes who, on Saturday or Sunday morning, woke feeling groggy and ill and believed their drinks had been spiked.

While Irma and Judy were flying from Providence, a conservative magazine called *Washington Commons* had published an essay about the prank, the author of whom nitpicked Irma's essay clause by clause while kvetching at extravagant crotchety length about the fatal missteps feminism had made in the seventies, the moral degeneration of the young today, and the Sodom-like iniquity of left-wing campuses like Westish. Irma read the piece on her phone as she dragged her wobbly-wheeled suitcase over the Small Quad's walkways. Exasperated, she looked up the piece's author, whom she assumed would be past eighty; in fact he appeared to have graduated from Dartmouth the year before. All across social media, people—primarily, but far from exclusively, men—were writing mean things about Dahlia and asking how she'd like it if somebody tattooed her.

Irma typed out a few messages to the group chat, responding to the links Pammy had sent with the appropriate emojis for each and asking Dahlia whether she was doing okay. Receiving no replies, she crawled into bed, just barely remembering to set an alarm for her nine a.m. French class.

By the time Irma's alarm sounded, Dahlia had posted, for the first time ever, a photograph of herself on social media. In the photo, which had a slightly eerie mugshot feel, Dahlia stared with dull defiance into her bathroom mirror, the white glare of the setting making her look extremely pale, her hair swept back, her pink dots of cheekbone acne prominent. Written across her forehead in black capital letters—she'd clearly used a leftover set of tattoos—were the words RAPE VICTIM.

I like it just fine, she'd written. Thanks for asking.

Hey, Irma texted uneasily as she threw on her clothes and ran out the door. I'm here if you want to talk.

Dahlia didn’t respond, nor did Irma hear from her all day as she floated wearily from class to class. By the following morning, things had taken another turn.

IT STARTED WITH a girl at NYU. She was giving a presentation on squid to a large class. Another student filmed from a far corner of the amphitheater. As the girl walked down the aisle toward the front of the room, you could see the words RAPE VICTIM tattooed across her forehead.

The professor—white, male, white-haired—objected. The student objected to his objection. What, she asked, was he objecting to—the fact that she had been raped? She objected to that as well. The fact that she was speaking out about it? Those were the methods of oppressors: to silence, to shut victims down, to refuse to hear. Some other students were cheering. The professor, befuddled and flustered, fell silent. He was, perhaps without knowing it, backing away from the student, whose voice was loudly raised. As he backed away, he stumbled over a power cord and almost fell down, just barely managing to brace himself against the giant whiteboard.

After recovering his balance, he tugged up his baggy jacket sleeve and, with a kind of defeated eagerness, gazed at his watch as though it might announce that it was time for him to retire. The student began her presentation. Many memes were made of the professor stumbling backward in super–slow motion.

Within a day, the practice spread across the country. College students, some acting solo and others in groups, almost entirely women but more than a few men and nonbinary persons, walked their campuses and attended class with RAPE VICTIM tattooed across their foreheads. Confrontations with professors and administrations were recorded and posted online. The right to free speech was invoked. Also recorded were many incidents where the professors did not protest or even clapped and cheered. These videos, while more numerous, were far less popular than the confrontational ones.

Some of the participants argued that, in this second wave of tattooing, only the victims of rape should wear the badge of the RAPE VICTIM tattoo, that it was an act of appropriation, a pilfering of empathy and attention, even a form of violent assault, for anyone else to do so.

Others argued that it was an act of solidarity and also in a sense an act of

useful dilution—the victims of rape and sexual assault should not be made to feel alone.

All the videos discomfited Irma, regardless of the demeanor of the student or the reaction of the professor, and she quickly stopped watching them. Probably everyone did. But the videos kept coming, and so did the articles in school newspapers, and on the Brightness, and then in the *New York Times*.

Dahlia's Instagram account, which had previously consisted of a handful of posts of bare feet and trees, had surpassed a hundred thousand followers and was increasing by the hour. But why did Irma keep checking Dahlia's follower count? Was she envious? Did she care? Dahlia's intense micro-celebrity seemed to be, with the help of her self-tattoo, transcending the micro- and becoming, if not full-blown celebrity, then something in between. Maybe Irma was less envious of Dahlia for having followers than she was of the followers for having Dahlia's attention. Maybe she was envious in both directions—of Dahlia for having a following and of the followers for having Dahlia. Meanwhile Dahlia refused to pick up her phone.

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2

Irma had been holed up in her library carrel, planning to skip dinner, when Pammy texted her. Not via Cloister but in the everyday nonencrypted way, and not on a thread with Dahlia but one to one.

Hey stranger. Did u eat?

Not yet, Irma wrote back.

Meet at the d hall in twenty? Turkey leg, cupcake, alarm clock.

Sure, Irma replied. Happy face.

Now Pammy and Monty appeared hand in hand in the archway of the dining-hall entrance and joined the queue of students waiting to swipe their ID cards. Monty was wearing his putty-colored mask over his nose and cheeks. Pammy gave a hearty wave. Irma, who couldn't help feeling disappointed at the sight of Monty, waved back. She and Pammy weren't close friends—they typically hung out only with Dahlia present—but Irma was craving a confidante tonight.

Pammy and Monty filled their trays in the hot-food line and sat down side by side across from Irma. Pammy was wearing a persimmon polo shirt with a penguin over the heart and the collar jokily popped. It had obviously come from Monty's closet, if not straight from his body. Her eyes glistened, and her cheeks were flushed in a way that might have been explained by hot or cold weather, but the temperate September night was neither.

"Hey," said Pammy. "Lots going on, huh?"

Last night, Hunter Stroman had done another segment about the pranks, initially focusing on the incident at Princeton, from which he himself had apparently graduated, then circling back to Westish after the commercial break. Again he'd mentioned Dahlia by name.

Around midnight, just as Irma was readying for bed, Pammy sent a link to a video accompanied by a long string of emojis and exclamation points.

The video contained grainy cell phone footage of a concert at an outdoor amphitheater. The singer fussed with her microphone stand as the crowd's roar subsided to a hum. *We love you, Lana!* yelped someone, piercingly, from the audience. The singer, tiny on Irma's screen, looked up and shyly smiled. Her hair was done in nostalgic sine-wave curls, topped by a silver headband not unlike the gold one Katrina wore to the wedding. She wore a long, fitted dress that left her arms bare. "Brrr," she said as she hugged herself. "It gets chilly here in Lawrence."

The singer took a step toward the edge of the stage, and someone sprinted from the wings to hand her a flopping pink garment. The singer tugged the garment's neck wide to pull it on without disturbing the dark shellacked ringlets of her hair. She reclaimed the microphone from the stand and stretched out her arms. FREE DAHLIA read the sweatshirt in white letters against pink. In the video's dark foreground bobbed the white points of scores of held-aloft cell phones, all recording the scene.

Wow, replied Irma. Who is that?

Pammy sent back a block of crying-laughing faces. Irma you're hilarious. It's LDR.

Oh right, Irma said, as she typed those letters into her search engine.

"Have you talked to her?" Irma asked Pammy now, meaning Dahlia. She'd left another voicemail that had also gone unreturned.

"A little," Pammy said.

"How's she doing?"

Pammy shrugged, and her shrug seemed to contain a full acknowledgment of how objectively nuts it had been for Dahlia to tattoo herself and a further acknowledgment that, when it came to Dahlia, the objective assessment captured only so much.

"She seemed pretty cheerful," Pammy said.

Crowded onto Monty's tray around his hamburgers and potatoes were several glasses of milk. One by one he picked them up and, with careful clockwise motions, as though screwing them into the fake-wood grain of the table, arranged them between his and Irma's trays, as evenly spaced as fence posts. "You guys should be the ones selling the sweatshirts," he said.

"Maybe," said Pammy as she leaned over to kiss his ear. "But we're not."

Monty made a tiny adjustment to the space between two milks. "You're

such a great designer, though. Yours would be way cooler."

Pammy's eyes, wide with dramatized wonder, found Irma's across the table: *Isn't he sweet?* "Even if mine were cooler," she said, "it wouldn't be the original."

Below his mask, puzzlement pursed Monty's lips. "You guys are the Witches of Westish. The whole thing started with you."

"But the sweatshirt started with them," Pammy explained. "Whatever we did would be a knockoff. People want the real one—the one that Lana wore."

Monty, as he pondered this definition of realness, slowly chewed a bite of hamburger. He paid such devout attention to everything Pammy said, as though she were a class outside his major he was determined to ace, that Irma couldn't help but like him. "Do you know who they are?" he asked. "The sweatshirt girls?"

Pammy shrugged. "I think they go to Wellesley. Or Wesleyan. Which one is a girls' school?"

"Wellesley," Irma said.

Pammy paused, a forkful of whipped potatoes hovering before her lips. "Not sure why I asked that," she concluded. "I don't know if they go to a girls' school or not."

"Sixty bucks each," Monty said. "Plus shipping. They must be getting rich."

Pammy, as she swallowed her potatoes, made a face of cheerful dissent. She'd done enough DIY projects to know they never made you rich. "They're going to spend all semester stuffing bubble mailers. And they'll still be way behind."

She turned her eyes to Irma. "How was your weekend? Where did you go again?"

"Block Island. For Owen Dunne's wedding." Irma still felt amazed that she'd attended the wedding of a prize-winning author, and it would have been nice for Pammy and Monty to share even a smidgen of her astonishment. But neither's face wavered from an expression of polite, distracted indifference.

"He's the writer guy?" Pammy said.

Irma nodded.

"Uh-huh," said Pammy. "How was that?"

“It was fun.” From the tilts of Pammy’s and Monty’s torsos, she could tell they were absorbed by whatever their legs were doing under the table. “There was an outdoor dance floor.”

“Ah!” Pammy straightened, her attention caught. “And?”

“And what?”

“Did sparks fly? Romance under the stars?”

Irma hesitated. Was she blushing? She turned to seek her face in the windowpanes, but the betweenness of dusk had given way to night, and she could no longer find her reflection, only the upward-pointing footlights on the lawn.

“Well...” she said. “I maybe kind of met somebody.”

“Ooooh!” Pammy’s mezzo squeal of delight seemed to ping between Monty’s milk glasses and the high out-of-service chandeliers. “And who did you maybe kind of meet?”

“Nobody,” said Irma. “I mean...just a person.”

Pammy nodded eagerly. She was thrilling to this news in a way that both pleased Irma and made her squirm. “And what was this person’s name?”

“Nicholas.”

“Nich-o-las,” Pammy repeated, imbuing the name with a lilting multisyllabic prestige that, though farcical, was in fact not far from Irma’s idea of Nicholas. “Did anything happen?”

Irma’s eyes flicked from Pammy to Monty. She wasn’t sure how much of her experience she’d be willing to divulge to Pammy alone, but it was more than she was willing to divulge to both. “Um,” she said.

“Something happened!” Pammy shimmied happily on her plastic stool. “How was it?”

Irma found it within herself to say: “It was nice.”

“It was nice!” Pammy repeated giddily, as she elbowed Monty in the ribs. “Have you talked to him since you got back?”

“No,” Irma admitted. Here was the crux of it. She looked at Pammy shyly. “I was thinking of maybe contacting him. Maybe.”

“Absolutely,” Pammy said. “Do you have his number?”

“I have his email.”

“Great! So email him.”

“And say what?”

Pammy gave a nonchalant shrug. “You’re the writer. Just be yourself.”

“Okay,” said Irma. “But what am I like?”

Pammy squinted at her as though trying to discern in real time what Irma was like. “Smart,” she said. “Funny. Cool.”

Irma grimaced. “Those adjectives got less convincing as you went along.”

“See?” Pammy said. “Funny.”

“Is he on Flap?” Monty asked, referring to the app Westish students used to flirt.

“I doubt it,” said Irma. “He’s thirty-four.”

“Thirty-four?” Monty looked aghast.

“Yeah.” Irma could feel the heat in her cheeks. Before the weekend, she would have agreed with what Monty’s expression conveyed: Thirty-four was terribly old.

“Wow,” murmured Monty. “You’re twenty-one?”

Irma nodded.

“So when he was twenty-one, you were eight.” Monty, pleased to have found this clean, mathematical way to register his qualm, downed a glass of milk.

“And when he’s a hundred and twelve, Irma will be ninety-nine,” Pammy said dismissively as she pulled out her phone. “What’s his last name?”

Irma hesitated. Pammy was about to search for images of Nicholas, something that she, through an extreme exertion of willpower, had thus far prevented herself from doing. Because once she started, how would she ever stop? But to decline to answer would be to raise the possibility that she was lying. “Byrnes,” she said. “With a *y*.”

Pammy, having typed and searched, let loose a low, musical whistle. “Whew,” she declared as she fanned herself theatrically with a sheaf of paper napkins. “He’s *hot*.”

“Let me see,” Monty said.

“Let *me* see,” Irma said.

Pammy turned the phone. Irma leaned across the table to get a vantage she could share with Monty. The photo was indeed of Nicholas, wearing the same mossy green jacket he’d worn to the reception. Irma shivered as her shoulders and arms mistook the cool recirculated air of the dining hall for the post-midnight breeze of the Block Island beach. It seemed incredible

but was incontrovertibly true that she'd been wrapped in that very jacket a few nights ago. The precise texture of its soft-slash-scratchy wool was right now being retrieved by her skin, its smell of bourbon and dry-cleaning and bonfire smoke by her nostrils, as though some wily engineer had found a way to recruit all her senses to the internet.

Irma had relived their first kiss a hundred times since. Nicholas, suave and proper as always, had made excuses to the effect that he and Irma needed to stretch their legs, and they'd left Mike and Katrina chatting by the bonfire and walked down the beach holding hands. It was Irma who stopped and turned toward him—she could not judge distance, in her drunkenness, but she sensed they'd gone far enough from the bonfire to be unobserved. Nicholas laid a palm against her cheek.

"Wait," she said in a flash of panic.

"Yes?" he said, unperturbed. She couldn't see his face, the beach too dark, but she could hear a smile in his voice.

She realized that, though what had stopped her was pure trepidation, there was something she wanted. "I want to give you your jacket back first." The word *first* felt like a remarkable way to end that sentence.

"You won't be cold?"

"I don't mind that." She took a step away from him, wriggled out of his moss-green jacket.

"Just lay it there," he said. They were standing beside a bicycle rack. "I'm fine."

"No," she said. "I want you to be wearing it."

There followed an inscrutable pause as she held the jacket out but he did not take it.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm very particular."

"That's good," he said. "So am I." She could hear the smile in his voice again.

She wanted to lay her hands on the front of his jacket as they kissed. She wanted, even, to hold on to his lapels. She wanted to feel his hand press against the fabric of her dress in the small of her back, which could not happen if she was wearing his jacket.

After they'd kissed for a while, she said, "We can go up to the house if you'd like."

"I would like that very much," he said.

“Good,” Irma said. “It’s cold out here.”

He removed the jacket again and slipped it over her shoulders. They walked up the beach trail to the road, taking the long way around rather than passing the bonfire where Mike and Katrina still were.

Her mom had always said to her the weirdest stuff about sex, from the time that Irma was young: The only way for a woman to keep her independence was to keep her legs together. Her wits about her. Her chastity intact. Ada was always cautioning Irma in this way. Young Irma thought her mother was so much prettier than she was, so much more likely a target of the kind of male attention she professed to revile, that it was almost a compliment for her to talk to Irma in this bizarre fashion, which seemed to take for granted that Irma was a sexual person who could be ruined or damaged by sex, whereas Irma felt fairly certain that she was not. She’d assumed that sex would never come near her.

Irma had always felt crushed by contradictions. You couldn’t be a sexual being and also be Irma; you couldn’t be a woman and also be Irma; you couldn’t slash your hair in the darkness and also be Irma. You couldn’t be an intellectual and also a sexual being, or a woman, or a slasher of hair in the darkness. You could be an intellectual and yourself, but not without an irksome sense of narrowness, penury, and incompletion. You couldn’t enjoy, relax, have fun, take pleasure, cut loose, party, whatever you wanted to call it, embrace certain deep and Dionysian aspects of your being, without suspending your moral sense, and all too often it seemed your moral sense was all you had. You couldn’t embrace the fun of flirting with Nicholas, the full spectrum of the pleasures of seducing and being seduced, the prospect or possibility of sex, without powering down your executive function. That was life, or life so far. To be turned on meant to shut down.

What she’d been thinking about as she and Nicholas kissed was Dahlia at the Parties. Dahlia on a strobe-lit dance floor, appearing and vanishing, there and gone. Dahlia flickering in staccato freeze-frame, Ben’s hand on the curve of her ass. Dahlia slashing her hair.

At the Parties, Irma had wanted to emulate Dahlia’s exuberance, but she’d utterly failed. She would have loved to be Dahlia dancing with Ben-Josh; she would have loved to be Ben-Josh dancing with Dahlia. But she was neither. She’d snuck out and walked home in shame. She didn’t know how to be herself and also have fun; she didn’t know how to be herself and

put others at ease. She felt she didn't know how to be herself at all or else knew it far too well and didn't dare venture beyond, into what she might become.

Owen's wedding had felt like a second chance. All through the reception she'd channeled Dahlia: In the note of semi-ironic wildness she'd tried to strike with her white dress and red lipstick, her drugstore slippers and piled-high hair. In the note of knowing indifference, of life as half wild game and half dreadful bore, she'd tried to strike in her conversations with Nicholas to get him to like her. The way Dahlia had played Miranda, she'd tried to play Dahlia. Strobe and flicker, light and dark. There, not-there.

She continued, as she and Nicholas arrived in the wood-paneled room and lay down on the four-poster bed, to feel she was not quite there. She was drunk and nervous and still channeling Dahlia. Had Dahlia been at the reception, she imagined, Nicholas would have been smitten with her to the point of madness, and Irma would now be at the bed-and-breakfast, asleep in the bed beside Judy's. Maybe that *was* what was happening—it seemed more likely than the apparent reality, which was that she, Irma, was entwined with, nearly naked with, this Nicholas Byrnes.

When she peeled off her underwear, the pressure felt like too much to bear. What could she hide while so unhidden?

"I've never done this before," she admitted, relinquishing her Dahlia-energy at last.

Nicholas looked at her with, Irma sensed, a genuine curiosity about what she was feeling. She'd been afraid he would look surprised, or disappointed, or worried; she'd been afraid he would exhibit some kind of devilish glee at getting to deflower her. What a weird fucking word, *deflower*.

"Would you like to now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Very much so."

Afterward she felt no desire to sleep but lay beside dozing Nicholas with her eyes half closed, listening to the soothing pulse of his breath. She was a different person now. The gray predawn light tapped early at the window, there being nothing on the horizon to obstruct it, no houses or hilltops, only the sea. *Aurora*, she thought. Nicholas yawned and climbed from the bed and headed for the bathroom. When he emerged, he lingered in the doorway and smiled when he saw her watching him. She felt shy and fascinated and

—*Out with it, I*—utterly in love with him. She'd missed him when the bathroom door was closed.

"The sun's coming up," he said. "Should we walk down to the beach?"

This sounded lovely, and she liked him for suggesting it. But there was something more she wanted before she could leave this wood-paneled room. Not him, exactly, though she was flush with feelings toward him. What she wanted was herself.

"Could you come back to bed?" she shyly asked.

"I could," he said.

If she'd been channeling Dahlia during the reception and the dancing and all the way through the bonfire; if Nicholas, once they were alone together, had by skillful patience, by dint of his good-humored confidence, helped her to emerge from that pretending, still she had only half succeeded, still she had been drunk and stoned, still her mind and her heart had been racing with worried agitation and running commentary—Am I doing this right, is he liking this, am I wearing the right expression? Now, as he climbed into the bed, she felt calmer. Or, no, she felt less calm—more aware of how uncalm she felt. Less calm, more aware. She pulled him toward her to kiss and dug her fingers into his hair.

Eventually Nicholas turned to the nightstand and reached for the condom that lay there in its square of silver foil.

"Here," Irma said as she stretched out her hand. If she couldn't be utterly herself, because no such utterness existed, at least she could try to listen to her urges and obey them when she could. Her urge to put the condom on him was strong. To exert some control over the situation, perhaps. Or, in a tiny way, to take care of him.

"Last one," he said. "Be careful."

"I will."

She found the little cut-in at the lip of the foil and cautiously ripped it open. She drew out the translucent disk of the condom, pale blue in color, with its thicker rim around. How many times had she rehearsed this moment? How many times had she practiced in her head the proper method for putting on a condom, or reminded herself while walking through the quad, with an anxious burst as though prepping for a test: *Now remember, afterward, to get up and pee. Don't forget to pee*? And yet she'd forgotten the very first time, only lay there beside him, listening to him breathe.

She poked a finger into the tip of the condom and tested to see which way the latex would unroll. Nicholas was lying atop the sheets, naked in the dawn light; it was overwhelming, embarrassing, to look at him with anything but the most fleeting glance. She could feel her cheeks burning. She was seated beside him, hips twisted away, calves and feet dangling off the bed. She'd never been so naked in her life.

She pressed the condom down over his penis and slowly unrolled it. It did not quite reach the base, and she worried she'd made a mistake, but she surveyed her work, touching him as she did, and saw that he was covered, the condom intact, the odd little tip poking up like an air-filled nipple. He hadn't lost his erection—the opposite, in fact. Success, total success. In her mind, she pumped her fist: *Go, Irma.*

She thought about climbing atop him, straddling him, because he looked so comfortable there, his hands clasped behind his head, but by consulting her urges, she found that this was not what she wanted. She lay on the bed beside him, rolled onto her back, and waited.

She was sore from the first time, she was wet but not really, and when he entered her, she winced. But she wanted the full measure of the experience, including her soreness. "Okay?" he asked. She gripped her arms and legs around him, tight as a binder clip. "Okay," she said.

The pain could take you out of the experience, but it could also take you in. Not in a masochistic way—or at least not a purely masochistic way. The pain could give you a point of focus that wasn't the pleasure. The pleasure made Irma nervous; the pleasure shook her resolve. It was easier to organize herself around the pain. She was outside her urges now. She was sober, hungover, grimacing, gripping. Her head hurt. Her everything hurt. Her heart hurt for reasons yet unclear. She did no pretending this time—she just held on and ground her teeth and grunted in Nicholas's ear. The pain of the experience, her headache, the pain of having him inside her then—all this pain made sense to her. To go where pleasure went, to follow that unknown road—that was the most difficult, the most frightening prospect of all.

Afterward she leaped up to pee as though peeing were the ultimate purpose, the sine qua non of sex. She lingered in the bathroom, looking down at her changed/unchanged body as she perched on the toilet, inspecting her changed/unchanged face in the mirror. When she emerged,

Nicholas was wearing fresh clothes from his suitcase. Irma slipped into her shift of a dress, and they went downstairs.

As they sipped their coffee at the kitchen table, she bravely crossed her ankles over his thigh, and Nicholas did not complain. That was how they were sitting when Pella hurried in, wearing her ruffly bridesmaid's dress.

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3

On her first night at Owen and Martin's apartment in Brooklyn, Pella dreamed about the last time she'd seen her mom. This had happened dozens of times in her life but not for several years.

The station wagon slowed to the curb, and Pella, her small body lifted by her primitive '80s car seat, peered out the back-seat window. Her dad—impossibly tall and handsome, his auburn hair mussed, wearing not his usual suit but a white undershirt over striped pajama bottoms—strolled down the steps of the townhouse, yawning and smiling, the blue door open behind him.

Pella's mom's hands released Pella from her car seat, and she scrambled down to the sidewalk, her stuffed corduroy whale clutched to her chest. She was three and a half years old. It was early, very early, the darkness of night just beginning to thin. The dew lay on the grass in heavy globules, each a quivering gray replica of the world.

She'd been dropped at her dad's countless times, but today felt different. She was clutching her whale because her mom plucked her out of perfect slumber to put her in the car. Now her parents spoke to each other in soft voices shaped to the hour. Her dad lowered the wagon's tailgate and slid out a burgundy suitcase with hard beveled edges. Over his shoulder he slung the backpack Pella brought to their Saturday sleepovers. With long easy strides, his pajama legs flowing like streamers, he ferried her belongings up the stairs and placed them inside the entry.

Pella was lifted into the air. She buried her face in her mom's blond hair. *I love you, I love you,* her mom murmured. *I'll be back soon. I love you.*

Her mom was going to Kenya, home of lions and hippos. Pella would be staying with her dad for the summer. How a summer compared with a Saturday was a question for adults. Her stomach rumbled. She was getting

hungry. Her mom's hug was lasting too long. Pella wriggled free, dropped to the sidewalk, and ran toward the open blue door. "It's okay," she heard her dad say. "We'll be fine."

That was—always—the end of the dream. *We'll be fine.*

IN THE MORNING, Pella set about making herself at home among Owen's and Martin's belongings. Their apartment was in a solemn prewar building that overlooked the trees of Eastern Parkway. With the windows open, she could hear and feel the tremor of red-line trains beneath the asphalt. It reminded her of the distant rumble of Wisconsin thunderstorms rolling in from the west.

Though large, the apartment was older and less grand than Pella had imagined, given her impression of Martin's wealth. It was also messier than she might have supposed. The fridge held, along with cans of cherry sparkling water and a drawerful of fancy cheese, takeout boxes, congealed pizza, and a half-eaten sandwich on a plate. There were dishes in the sink and blobs of jelly on the counter. Sections of the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were strewn about. Empty wine bottles and glasses bottomed with burgundy grit covered the coffee table, and the corn-colored wax of a carelessly tended candle had pooled in steppes on the glass. A smell of old-school shaving cream hung in the air, tinged by something floral. The mess must have been Martin's doing when he came to the city for work. Owen hadn't been to Brooklyn since midsummer, and his imprint on the apartment was confined to a small and impeccably tidy office that contained the bare taupe surface of his writing desk, a torture-adjacent Pilates machine, and a long line of kettlebells.

The guest room in which Pella had slept was a small narrow space, just large enough for the twin bed and bureau it contained, with its own half-bath and a tiny window overlooking a desolate courtyard. The maid's quarters, she supposed. She'd slept for thirteen hours. Now she hoisted her suitcase onto the bed and examined its hastily packed contents: Technicolor art dress, lime-green stilettos, two swimsuits, one of them Katrina-approved, and all the shorts and underwear, T-shirts and sweatshirts she'd worn on Block Island. None of it terribly relevant to the island she was on now, all of it crumpled and covered in sand.

Tucked beneath her sandy beach clothes was the manila envelope that contained the picture she'd told Nicholas about, the oldest and, she felt, most radiantly potent photograph of her mom. Why had she brought it on what was supposed to be a weeklong trip? She'd traveled with it only three times in her life: First when she decamped to boarding school, second when she eloped with David, and third when she fled back to Westish. All three had been permanent moves, or had seemed so at the time. And now this was the fourth. She picked up the taped-shut envelope, not wanting it to get bent or wrinkled or any sandier than it already was, and tucked it into the topmost drawer of the little bureau.

She thought back to her car-seat dream, which doubled as her earliest memory, though the memory no longer existed except in palimpsest, rewritten over and over by her endless attempts, both waking and dreaming, to reclaim it. The look and feel of a June dawn in Cambridge and the details of her father's early-morning gestures and expressions had been filled in later by the casual constancy of sharing their Shepard Street townhouse for the next dozen years. Only her mother was appropriately, painfully vague—a kind of cloud of light. Something too near and engulfing to see and at the same time not there at all.

That wasn't the day Pella's mom died, but it was the last time Pella saw her. The dropping-off, with its fraught sense of occasion—the early rising, the formal, never-seen-before suitcase, and the elevated ambivalence of Pella's mom as she both hurried Pella along and seemed unwilling to leave—would forever stand in for what happened two months later. A Jeep in which her mom was a passenger slid off a mountain road and rolled down a steep embankment, killing everyone inside.

In the hall closet, Pella found Owen's iron and ironing board. She carefully pressed her art dress on the lowest setting and inspected it for stains. She folded it neatly, put it in her bag, and set off for the upscale consignment shop she'd found online, several neighborhoods away.

She walked three long blocks before she realized she was going in the wrong direction. She'd been to New York many times—first with her dad, with whom she'd visited the city often from childhood on. Her dad wrote reviews for *The New Yorker,* and they would take an early enough Friday train, Pella having skipped school, to drop by the Midtown offices, breathe in the hallowed air, and be treated to dinner by her dad's garrulous editor.

Then they would check into one of the old hotels nearby, and Pella would flop on the cushy bed and feel herself in heaven. They would go to the Met or the Cloisters, wander in Central Park, see one of her dad's beloved operas.

Later, after Pella went to boarding school, she experienced a different version of New York weekends, speeding down from New Hampshire in classmates' cars to ingest quantities of alcohol and drugs and make out with a number of people that, in retrospect, seemed better suited to a lifetime than a weekend.

What those eras shared, she realized as she doubled back past the green awning of Owen's building, was that neither involved contending with New York City. She'd held her father's hand or ridden atop his shoulders; she'd trailed, stoned and trusting, anyone who'd claimed to know where the party was, and ever since she'd fancied herself half a New Yorker. Now she could see how wrong she'd been.

She walked into a bodega to buy a coffee. The guy before her in line ordered a ham-egg-and-cheese sandwich. Over the weekend Pella had eaten nothing but a few bites of muffin batter and half her wedding entrée, but now her cramps had diminished, and she found herself famished. A ham-egg-and-cheese sounded—and smelled, as the counterman put it together—extravagantly delicious, but she could also smell bacon, which smelled even better.

A glance at the menu board revealed that a ham-egg-and-cheese and a bacon-egg-and-cheese each cost four dollars, tax included. Who said New York was expensive? She ordered both, plus a large coffee, and carried her paper-wrapped bounty through the massive arch of Grand Army Plaza. She sat down on the stone edge of a strange Art Deco fountain, a naked and muscular green-bronze couple looming above her, sunlight twinkling down, a dense ring of traffic honking and curving around the broad gray plaza, and felt herself, in a suddenly joyous way, at the concrete ouroboros of the world.

She was finishing her first sandwich—bacon; incredible—when her phone rang.

"Hey!" she said with far more cheer than Mike could have expected.

"I know you're angry," he began in a penitent voice that sounded prerecorded. As he launched into the apologies he'd clearly been rehearsing

on the plane, Pella washed down her sandwich with a long hot drag of sugary coffee. Somehow she didn't want Mike's apologies. She didn't want him to grovel or take this remorseful tone. She didn't want to hear how drunk he'd been and how much he regretted it.

"I'm furious," she said. "It was beyond humiliating to walk in on you guys. But I don't feel like fighting, and I don't feel like punishing you."

"Okay," Mike said warily.

"If nothing else, it was bold," she said. "You really went for it."

"I didn't go for anything," Mike said defensively. "I was trashed beyond belief."

"How was it?" Pella asked.

"How was what?"

"You know," she said. "The sex."

"Pella," Mike said with a sigh. "I'm really, really sorry."

Mike's lugubriousness seemed impossible to lift, and Pella found that, at least for the moment, she had nothing more to say.

Maybe she shouldn't have come to New York. Maybe if she and Mike had flown back to Westish together, they'd be having a series of blowout fights followed by feisty makeup sex, and something would be restored. But she was not at Westish, and for the moment she didn't want to be. She'd said she was furious, and she knew that had to be true, but the sensation in her chest resembled less fury than an almost euphoric sense of propulsion. It was terrifying to admit it, even to herself, but she wanted to be propelled. To hang up the phone and keep exploring Brooklyn. To find the consignment shop and be rid of her art dress forever. But first, to unwrap her other sandwich, which smelled almost as good as the first.

"How's Contango?" she asked as she peeled back the waxy paper.

"He's good," Mike assured her.

"Give him a little dry food in the morning," Pella said. "Just a handful, to tide him over."

"I know."

"And then his freeze-dried food for dinner. Make sure you put enough hot water in. He doesn't like it too thick."

"I know how to make dog food," Mike said.

THE WOMAN BEHIND the counter at the consignment shop was Judy's age and extremely beautiful, her fingers and wrists and neck covered in gold and silver, her short hair dyed the color of frost. As she held the dress in the air and twisted it back and forth, Pella fidgeted her hands in the pocket of her Westish sweatshirt. She felt as though her soul were being held up for inspection.

"I could do a hundred dollars," the woman said.

"A hundred?" Pella said, incredulous. "It's in perfect condition. I paid eight fifty."

The woman's nanoscopic eyebrow lift suggested this had been Pella's decision and perhaps not one she should advertise. "One sixty in store credit."

Pella looked around. A pair of tall brown boots of a type she associated with horseback riding sat on a distant shelf. On her walk through Brooklyn, she'd noticed several women her age wearing versions of such boots. In addition to being beautiful, they were clearly au courant.

"What size are those?" she asked.

The woman lifted her eyebrows again, this time at the dubious suggestion that she might keep such banal information in her brain. "Maybe go check."

Pella walked over to the shelf and picked up one of the boots. She couldn't find the label, but they looked to be more or less her size. She slid off one of her flip-flops, and the beautiful store owner tossed her a balled pair of nylon footies.

Pella tugged on the footies and tried the boots. The leather, though in excellent condition, had already softened with wear. She tucked her flip-flops into her bag, gave the woman thirty-one dollars, and walked out into slanting rays of afternoon sunlight.

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4

Irma sat on a bench outside Scull Hall, thinking about Pella. Specifically, she was thinking about the time she and Pella went to a fish boil. It was the beginning of Irma's sophomore year, and she'd just returned to campus after a long summer of waiting tables and hanging out with her mom. She and Pella had developed a rapport the previous spring after Irma helped Pella plant her garden, but Pella, being seven years older, seemed an unlikely long-term friend, and Irma feared neither the rapport nor the plants would survive the summer. As she drove back toward Westish from her parents' house in the Driftless Area, she found herself looking forward to their first independent study of the semester with an odd nervousness in her gut.

That very afternoon, not long after she arrived on campus—it was the Saturday before school began—her phone dinged:

Irma! Mike's away with the football team, and I was thinking of going up to Door County to try a fish boil. The Two Loons has a room—we could stay the night, come back tomorrow. Yes?

Irma wrote back immediately: I'll drive.

It was the kind of uncanny intuition she later came to expect from Pella: She hadn't even told Pella what day she was arriving, yet the moment she finished sliding her books from storage boxes onto her shelves and began to feel lonely and homesick—not to mention annoyed at herself for still feeling lonely and homesick, now that she was a sophomore—Pella reached out in this surprisingly generous way. Irma tossed a few of her just-unpacked clothes into her backpack and headed out the door.

She collected Pella in the Ram, and they inched through weekend traffic up the long finger of the peninsula. The Two Loons Inn sat atop a hill overlooking the bay. They deposited their bags in their room, which smelled

sweetly of cedar, and hurried outside to the fish-boil ceremony that was already underway.

Afterward, Irma, her belly full of whitefish and cherry pie, assumed they would sit in rocking chairs on the veranda and gaze out at the water. Pella, who'd been drinking a lot of wine, had other ideas. "Come on," she said. "We're going to a bar."

"A bar?" Irma said. "I'm nineteen."

"I know how old you are," Pella said. "There's a place in Sturgeon Bay that's supposed to be good."

Off they went, halfway down the peninsula again. Pella sweet-talked Irma's way past the bouncer, and they entered a packed, dark-paneled cocktail lounge. Pella somehow secured them a booth, then went to the bar to order herself a martini and Irma a Shirley Temple. "Mostly douchebags from Chicago," she reported as she slid into the booth. "But a couple of them are cute."

As Pella was finishing her martini, a guy walked up and started talking to her. Pella replied, and next thing Irma knew, two guys in baseball caps squeezed into the booth with them, and Pella, a fresh martini in front of her, was flirting with them outrageously. Irma, equally amused and embarrassed, chewed the straw of her kiddie cocktail and refused Pella's attempts to draw her into the conversation. The guys seemed content to ignore her.

"You shouldn't have been talking to them like that," Irma complained when the guys were finally gone. "You have a boyfriend."

"I wasn't going to *do* anything," Pella said with a shoo-fly wave of her hand. "Besides, by that logic you *should* have been talking to them like that, because you *don't* have a boyfriend."

Irma smiled. "Sounds like we both screwed up,"

Pella leaned across the table, her expression frank and intense. "So tell me," she said. "Who do you like?"

"Who do I *like*?" Irma said. "Simone Weil. Simone de Beauvoir. Anybody named Simone."

"Come on," Pella said. "You know what I mean. There must be someone at Westish you have a crush on."

Irma squinched up her face. "At Westish?"

"Why not?" Pella said. "I see some hotties around. Some cradles I

wouldn’t mind robbing.”

“Does drinking make you super-horny?” Irma asked. “Or it just makes you want to talk about it?”

“A little of each.” Pella leaned back in the booth and appraised Irma, a devious glint in her eye. “You know what we should do next Saturday?”

“What?” said Irma.

Pella reached out and fingered a frizzy offshoot of Irma’s hair.

“No,” Irma said.

“My treat,” Pella said.

“No.”

“Why not?” Pella said. “You’d look so great if we lightened your load a little. We could even lighten the color. You’re already two-thirds blond—we could just tip you over the edge.”

“Two words,” Irma said. *“Hell no.”*

“But why?”

“I’ve been growing it all my life. I’m not about to stop now.”

Pella made a pouty face. “You should trust me more.”

“Why?” Irma said. “Because you’re a drunk horn-ball?”

“That’s exactly why.” Pella looked at her, her green eyes glistening with import. “You know, you can’t grow your hair your entire life. You’ll wind up in a cult.”

Irma, until that moment, despite her discomfort with the dark bar and the guys and the prying questions, had been thoroughly enthralled and fascinated by the experience of drunken Pella. It felt like a glimpse of Pella’s unseen powers—a glimpse, perhaps, of what she would be like without Mike.

But at the word *cult*, Irma felt a flare of rage. She didn’t want to cut her long frizzy hair or to feel self-conscious about that decision. She would never be Pella, and she didn’t want to try. “You’re the one who’s going to wind up in a cult,” she said. “You don’t have a mind of your own.”

“Hey,” said Pella.

“You’re already in a cult. The cult of Westish sports.”

Pella, bewildered, held up her palms. “Okay, okay. I was just goofing around.”

“Sorry,” Irma said.

Irma had a way of doing this, of escalating a joke into the territory of

hurtful critique. Pella, in her tipsy buoyancy, forgave Irma instantly, and they headed back to the Two Loons, where they fell into bed and slept past checkout.

"LISTEN," IRMA SAID. She'd called Pella from the bench outside Scull Hall. "I just want to tell you how sorry I am."

"For what?" Pella said. The connection was a little scratchy, and Irma found it hard to construe Pella's tone—whether she thought Irma had nothing to apologize for or too many things to apologize for to know which ones she meant.

"For everything I said at the reception," Irma said. "And the way I said it. All that stuff about you being passive and wasting your life. I was blitzed on champagne, but that's no excuse. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay," Pella said.

"And what I said about Mike too"—Irma's voice caught, for reasons she didn't quite understand. "I've always been too hard on him. Too slow to see the ways he might actually be good for you. Mike's a good guy, a really good guy..." She trailed off, unable to continue.

"Irma?" Pella said. "Are you *crying*?"

"I'm not a robot," Irma said. "I'm capable of human emotions."

"I know you are," Pella said gently. "But, I, what's wrong? Tell me."

"I already told you!" Irma's voice rose in pitch toward a desperate wail. "I'm really sorry about what happened with Mike and Katrina. I should have stopped them. I know it sounds stupid, but I didn't think they would actually, you know—"

"Irma," Pella interrupted in a brisk, smelling-salts tone. "Listen. Whatever happens between me and Mike, it has nothing to do with you. It doesn't even have to do with Katrina. It's just between us, okay?"

Irma, suddenly exhausted, lay down with her head on the bench. She'd barely slept in days. "Okay," she said.

"Ever since I got on the ferry," Pella said, "I've been thinking and thinking. And mostly what I've been thinking is how right you were. About how passive I've become, and how predictable—hanging around, blaming other people for my problems. You didn't sugarcoat it, but you were right. It was the kick in the ass I needed."

Normally Irma loved nothing more than being told she was right. And it was a relief to hear that Pella wasn't angry.

But still Irma felt uneasy. She sensed she had more to apologize for, offenses not easily framed in words. Everything that had happened after they left the reception felt like a crime—especially the way Nicholas draped his jacket around Irma's shoulders, and Mike did the same for Katrina.

"Besides," Pella was saying, "I should be the one apologizing to you."

"For what?"

"For saying you looked like a whore."

"Yeah," Irma said. "Not your most enlightened take."

"It's so humiliating. Please wipe it from your memory."

"It's gone," Irma promised.

"Thank you. And by the way, you looked amazing. How did you figure out how to do your hair like that? And your makeup? Did Judy help?"

"No." *Dahlia taught me,* Irma thought but declined to say. Somehow she felt compelled to keep Pella and Dahlia as far apart as possible, not only in person but in her own mind. It was almost as though they were magnets with matching poles, repelling each other's energies, and so could not touch. Perhaps that was why she'd nudged Pella out of independent study: Because Dahlia was back. She regretted it now, and not just because Dahlia was gone.

"Do you remember when we went to the fish boil?" Irma said. "With the huge black cauldron, like something out of *Macbeth*?"

Pella sighed, steeping in the memory. "That was fun."

Irma sat quietly for a long time, looking out at the lawn. She felt grateful to Pella for neither filling the silence with words nor trying to get off the phone. She could hear city noise in the background.

"Okay," she finally said. "So when are you coming home?"

"I might stay until Owen and Martin get back," Pella said. "It's good to have this time to myself. I feel clearer already."

Irma thought she sounded clearer too. An unfamiliar quality was present in Pella's voice—a kind of purposeful calm that Irma didn't remember hearing in even their mellowest gardening sessions.

"They're gone for a month," Pella said.

"A month feels like a long time," Irma said. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," Pella said. "And I want you to know I'm taking your

champagne wisdom to heart. I can hear your voice in my head: *If you want something, go out and get it*. That's me now."

"Good," Irma said.

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5

Shit, Pella thought as she hung up the phone. I'm late.

She felt glad to have talked to Irma—glad to hear Irma's voice; glad for their mutual apologies. And she felt equally glad that Irma hadn't mentioned Nicholas.

She spotted him from down the block as she hurried toward the bar. Nicholas leaned against the side of the building, reading a paperback in the fading light. His slump-shouldered, hangdog manner reminded her, movingly, of a melancholy boy waiting to be collected after school. Transecting the book's spine, like a Band-Aid across a nose, was the yellow USED sticker of a college bookstore. The sleeves of his sky-blue sweater were pushed up past his elbows.

Pella slowed her steps and adjusted the hang of her blouse. The heels of her boots made a cloggy echo on the pavement. Nicholas glanced up and gave a little wave.

"Hi," she said. In imitation of Katrina and others she'd observed at the wedding, she offered each cheek to be kissed. "Sorry I'm late."

Briefly, as they brushed cheeks, she allowed one hand to rest against his side. Her palm touched only his jacket's quilted fabric, impersonal as a tent flap, but a shudder of pleasure ran through her. It was where her hand would go if he kissed her for real.

It was Pella who'd gotten in touch. Early that morning, Owen had called from his honeymoon to see how Pella was getting on in the apartment. After they chatted about the fauna of New Zealand, the quality of light in rural Australia, she'd coughed and said:

"I was wondering if you had Nicholas's number."

"Aha," said Owen.

"There's no *aha*," Pella said. "I have a question for him."

“A true-false question? Or multiple choice?”

“Short essay,” Pella said. “Just send the number.”

Owen did. Instantly, without giving herself a chance to dither and second-guess, she’d texted Nicholas and asked if he’d like to meet up. Several gut-wrenching hours went by before he wrote back, saying how lovely it was to hear from her and how sorry he was for the slow response—crazy week at the office. It was short notice, now, but could she possibly meet for a drink after work? Pella, whose day’s work had entailed waiting for Nicholas to text her, tucked her phone between the couch cushions and forced herself to wait ten minutes before replying. Now she followed him down stone steps to a dark and drafty lounge.

“I’ll buy the first round,” Pella said. Before Nicholas could protest, she walked to the bar and scanned the long row of tap handles. She was surprised to see the logo from the brewery at the rehearsal dinner, with its earth-tone setting sun. Dark Farm Night Porter. It felt somehow like a sign.

The bartender drew two inky pints topped with thin beige foam. Pella carried them to the table and handed one to Nicholas. Their eyes met as they clinked glasses, and Pella recalled how he’d brought her a glass of champagne at the wedding. Then, as now, she was astounded by his beauty. He asked what she’d been up to since arriving in New York.

“Expanding my horizons,” Pella said. “By which I mostly mean eating egg sandwiches. I’ve been to every bodega in Prospect Heights.”

Nicholas nodded. “I like mine with ketchup.”

“See, I hadn’t even thought of that,” Pella said. “Now I can expand my horizons further. What else? I got screwed over at a consignment shop, but at least I got these.”

She swung one leg from under the table and, with half-ironic pride, tugged up her jeans to show Nicholas one of her boots. “And I went to TJ Maxx and bought these socks. Plus I cleaned Owen and Martin’s apartment.”

“You should start your own tour company,” Nicholas said.

“I washed my beach clothes at a very spacious laundromat. I talked to Mike a few times. And—oh, I forgot the best part! I went to a dance class.”

After Pella surrendered her art dress, she’d wandered farther down Court Street, past coffee shops and pet boutiques, and paused before a storefront

of plate glass. Inside, amid a simple interior of wood floor and mirrors, a dozen women were dancing.

Instantly, she was captivated. The women moved in near unison, facing the instructor as they glided through their steps. They ranged forward in a zigzag pattern, staggering as though drunk; they arched their backs and windmilled an arm to touch the ground; they leaped up and lifted one knee as they threw their heads back and spun. It looked a little like ballet and a little like hip-hop, and Pella could hear, just barely, a sultry midtempo pop song leaking through the plate-glass window.

The dancers stopped, reorganized themselves, and repeated that snippet as the instructor nodded brightly, her dark corkscrew curls bouncing as she chattered into her headset microphone. Only a couple of the women were younger than Pella; the most fluid was at least Judy's age. The happy amateur verve with which they all moved reminded Pella, in some vague way, of her own joyous and inept dancing at the wedding as she and Irma and Katrina bounced around, spinning and holding hands. These dancers were good but not *that* good—not untouchable in their grace. They looked like normal people who, through effort and repetition, had learned how to do a thing.

The instructor stepped forward to demonstrate a snaky, twisting maneuver. She ended with one arm outstretched, her gaze lifted proudly over her upturned fingertips. She wore a calm, inward smile, her eyelids fluttering closed, as though the very act of moving through space was an access of gentle ecstasy.

Afterward, Pella phoned the studio and learned that the class she'd observed was called Open-Level Contemporary Jazz. There were also classes in Introductory Contemporary Jazz, including ones taught by the instructor with the inward smile whose name turned out to be Camila. Anyone with twenty-five dollars was welcome.

"So I went," Pella said, and suppressed a smile at her own bravado.

"How was it?"

"Amazing," Pella said. "I mean, I was terrible—I elbowed the woman next to me so many times, she should have been wearing football pads. But it felt amazing to be terrible. And Camila was as calm as I imagined her. She has this soft yodel-y voice, even over the microphone—I think she's Dutch Moroccan? She demonstrated various ways to do each stretch,

depending on your flexibility, and she kept cooing, ‘You do you, boo. You do you, boo.’

“At first I couldn’t tell what she was saying. It sounded like a birdcall or a mantra from some mystical language. *Yudu yubu*.”

“I suppose it is a kind of mantra,” Nicholas said.

Pella nodded. “I was the least flexible person there, but every time I was about to get frustrated, Camila would say, ‘Yudu yubu.’” She paused for a sip of her beer. “Sorry to ramble on like this. I’ve barely spoken to anyone all week.”

“Except Mike a few times,” Nicholas said.

“Right,” Pella said. “And Irma once.”

Having said this, she glanced up to see whether it produced any particular effect, but Nicholas let Irma’s name glide past—as, she supposed, she preferred to let Mike’s.

“It sounds like you’ve been enjoying yourself,” he said.

“I’ve had worse weeks,” Pella said.

Not long thereafter, Nicholas finished his beer. “I should get going,” he said.

If his voice contained a note of regret, it was too subtle for Pella’s taste. She’d resolved not to sleep with him tonight and had cautioned herself all afternoon to resist his advances, no matter how smooth and beguiling—but where were the advances?

“You mentioned your job at the wedding,” she said, remembering his remark about a crazy week at the office and assuming that was why he had to go. “But we never talked about it.”

“Come on.” He slid from the booth. “We’ll walk and talk. What train do you need?”

“The two-three,” Pella said with a pang of disappointment.

As they walked down Seventh Avenue, an all-too-chaste gap of city air between them, Nicholas told the story of how he’d become an accountant. “I started doing my mom’s taxes in high school,” he began. “She’d been audited multiple times, presumably for political reasons, and so they needed to be done, but everything about it was anathema to her: deadlines and math and writing checks to the government. She wasn’t earning much money, but there were some complications with the place upstate, and trickles of income here and there from her art and her work as a seamstress...”

In theory, Pella wanted to hear this story, both for the glimpse it provided of Nicholas's life and the glimpse it provided of Sylvie's, by whom Pella was equally intrigued. But in practice, she could barely understand what he was saying, so focused was she on that gap of air between them and the fact that they were not touching.

"Growing up I'd always known lots of artists, both my mom's friends and my own. Some of them found out about my secret talent. Next thing I knew, I had a cottage industry that paid for my drugs and dinners all through college.

"When I graduated, I moved back to the city and decided to get certified. It wasn't exactly a lifelong dream—one day I was writing my senior thesis about Hogarth and Ruskin, the next I was studying for the CPA exam. But I needed a way to make money, and I didn't want to work for anyone else. So I passed the exam and hung out a shingle and kept paying for my drugs and vacations. Every time I went to a reading or an opening, I expanded my clientele."

"Pretty ingenious," Pella managed to say.

"It was nice for a while," Nicholas said. "But when my mom got sick, different motives kicked in. Her drugs cost a lot more than mine. I struck a deal with an accountant I knew who'd been trying to get me into his firm for a while. Basically I agreed to combine my thriving little business with his bigger, less thriving one in exchange for his excellent health insurance, which, via many complicated operations, we managed to get Sylvie on as well."

Nicholas paused by the dark green lantern of the Christopher Street station. "Sorry," he said. "That was the long version of the story. And here we are. Your train should be running local."

"I didn't know your mom was sick," Pella said. "I'm sorry."

Nicholas shrugged. "She had several strokes. She's doing better now." He glanced toward the upper stories of the tall, wedge-shaped building across the way. "It's funny," he said. "I always thought I'd be an artist of some kind."

He reached out to hug her, and Pella took the liberty, just for a moment, of nestling against him. She felt again that thing beyond his beauty—the startling electricity that leaped out from her person in his presence, as

though the orbit of her self had been enlarged. He stepped away from her and turned to leave.

"Can I come home with you?" she said.

Their eyes met. Whatever time passed would have to be measured in milliseconds, but Pella couldn't read Nicholas's expression or stand the suspense. "Too abject?" she said. "Or just abject enough?"

"I'd love that," Nicholas said.

"*But,*" she said. "I hear a *but*."

"But I'm supposed to meet a friend."

Pella nodded. How dumb could she be? She remembered how she and Nicholas had parted at the wedding: She'd insisted they proceed as friends, he'd agreed, and they'd shared a handshake as anticlimactic and unsatisfying as the space between them now. That, clearly, was a different definition of friendship than the one currently in play.

He was standing a long step away from her, his hands in his pants pockets, looking at her with a soft, neutral expression she found inscrutable. *Fuck it,* she thought, and covered the space between them with something like a lunge. The kiss landed awkwardly near the corner of his mouth, and Nicholas seemed almost to flinch in surprise, but Pella persevered through that terrifying moment. Their lips met properly, then hungrily, and Nicholas's tongue found hers as his palm slid down from her cheek to grasp the back of her neck. They kissed for a while beside the subway stop, the traffic of Seventh Avenue flowing past.

"You could cancel," she murmured, her eyes still closed, her lips near his ear.

"I might," he murmured back.

THEY WERE MAKING out on Nicholas's bed. Pella's shirt and bra were somewhere on the floor. "Hang on," she said. "I'll be right back."

She went into the bathroom to take out her tampon. When she returned, Nicholas was sitting on edge of the bed, waiting. There was something simple and gratifying in his manner as he looked at her, his hands flat against the duvet. He might have been a monk, meditating before a holy piece of statuary. He might have been a boy too young to know what came next. There was nothing of sex in his peaceful expression, nothing outside

this moment of looking, but she could see the thick curve of his erection beneath the denim of his jeans.

"I'm sort of still on my period," she said.

He nodded. "Thanks for letting me know."

"You might want to put down a towel. I don't want to bleed on your sheets."

"Okay," he said.

With a gesture that nudged his erection to a manageable angle, he stood and walked out of the room. When he returned, he peeled back the bedcovers and spread a beach towel over the sheets. All this stage business of towels and tampons and hard-ons soothed Pella somehow. Having sex with a new person was as awkward as she remembered, even when the person was as beautiful as Nicholas. They lay down on the bed.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked. "I know your situation is complicated."

He fixed her again with that peaceful look, and Pella felt she'd never been so sure of anything.

"Maybe it's not that complicated," she said. "Maybe I'm just in New York for a few weeks before I go home and resume my normal life, and my fiancé just hooked up with my former best friend one room over from where you were hooking up with my current best friend, but actually you and I were the people who should have been hooking up. And if we did hook up, it might somehow balance out all that madness and maybe even make things better between my fiancé and me."

Nicholas smiled. "You're right. That doesn't sound complicated at all."

Pella's left hand unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. She dragged her fingers gently over his boxers, tracing the line of his cock. "What I mean is, nothing needs to be complicated between us."

Nicholas's eyes fluttered shut. "We'll see about that," he said.

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6

Irma sat at her desk, her knees drawn tight to her chest, her socked feet on the pilled navy fabric of her chair. A cold cup of dining-hall coffee languished beside her laptop. Since returning to her room she'd been toggling between two typing windows, one an email to Nicholas, the other her thesis notes, without making progress on either. Midnight neared.

Deep in her backpack, her phone began to buzz. Hurriedly she dug it out. It was too late for a telemarketer, too late for her mom. It had to be Dahlia or Pella or even Nicholas—it had to be one of the three absent people around whom her thoughts constantly wound.

When she saw a blocked number, she hesitated. Remember, Dahlia had texted her and Pammy, don't talk to any reporters. This warning struck Irma as a touch melodramatic, but a call from a reporter seemed far from implausible.

"Hello?" Irma said.

"Irma," said a mellow female voice. "This is Oonie Jiri calling from the Brightness. Do you have a minute to chat?"

"Um." Did Dahlia's admonition include a sympathetic reporter from the Brightness? Probably, Irma thought. "I don't really have anything to say."

"That's okay." The woman's laugh was deep and reassuring—the laugh of a person sure of Irma's goodwill. "I'm happy to do most of the talking."

"What did you say your name was?" Irma asked.

The woman seemed amused by this. "Oonie. O-o-n-i-e. I'm the founder of the Brightness."

"Oh," said Irma. "I thought you were a reporter."

"I hope not," Oonie said. "I can never keep my facts straight. Forgive me for calling out of the blue, Irma. Normally I let staff handle contract stuff, but I'm a huge fan of your work, and I wanted to reach out. I know

your amazing essay has been living on our site since your school paper censored it, and I wanted to thank you for letting us do that."

"Sure," said Irma. In fact she hadn't given anyone permission to do anything and wasn't sure what had happened. The Westish *Bugler,* presumably under orders from President Molina, took down Irma's editorial soon after it was posted, and the essay had somehow migrated to the Brightness, from which it had been linked to far and wide.

"And I wanted to apologize," Oonie continued, "because I just found out we never offered to pay you. Which, what can I say? The Brightness is about empowering women, not exploiting their labor! Would fifteen hundred be okay?"

"Dollars?" Irma said in disbelief.

Oonie laughed again. "We could figure out how to pay you in Bitcoin," she said, "if that's your kink. I'll have Danielle send you a contract. And congratulations, Irma—a million uniques on your very first go!"

Irma, meekly, asked what a unique was.

"Unique visitors. Readers of your essay, basically."

Irma absorbed this in dumbfounded silence. A million people had read her essay, or at any rate clicked on it. Most would have merely skimmed the opening lines, eager for a quick blast of righteous anger either toward the Witches or alongside them. But if even one out of ten kept reading, that was a hundred thousand people who'd encountered Irma's writing. It would be the culmination of a career, a goal to strive after for a lifetime, to reach that many readers...but it seemed already to have happened.

While they talked, Irma opened a browser window and typed Oonie Brightness into the search engine. The top results were all images, and the images were hard to believe. Irma moused down the mosaic of thumbnails, her mind numbed by the presentation of so much beauty in such diverse guises. It seemed she could scroll forever without seeing Oonie wearing the same outfit or even the same expression, so many and varied were the photo shoots she'd done. She was voluptuous, tall and broad, with agile lips and a long straight nose, her dark wavy hair by turns loose and wild, sculpted into panini ripples, or coiled in an airtight bun.

Before long in her scrolling, Irma found pictures of this shockingly gorgeous woman with a man who looked like Nicholas, and when she clicked to enlarged the photo, she found that was exactly who it was. They

were standing on the red carpet of some charity function, grinning out at cameras. Nicholas's hair was shorter than its current version. He had his arm around Oonie's waist. They looked like celebrities—Oonie, plainly, *was* a celebrity—and were obviously a couple. Their manner together seemed perfect and awkward, the awkwardness stemming from the way Oonie, looming above him in her heels, seemed so much more capacious than he, a being on another scale, so that Nicholas's not-long arm could barely wind its way around to rest his hand on her distant hip.

Irma was so overwhelmed by the thought that she had been in a romantic situation with a man who had been in a romantic situation with a woman this gorgeous and glamorous that she almost forgot she was, right now, on the phone with this very woman, who was saying, "Irma? Are you there?"

"Sorry," Irma said. "My phone cut out for a sec."

"No worries," Oonie replied. "I've just been singing your praises in every way my feeble mind can manage. But seriously, Irma, you've got the full package of what we're looking for. You're young, you're brilliant, and most of all, you mean it.

"And Nick tells me you've got the style to match."

Irma, though not as unprepared for this remark as she would have been before her surreptitious image search, still managed to knock over her cold coffee. "Nick?" she said as the coffee spilled down the side of her desk and Anderson Cooper sprinted into the bathroom.

"Nick Byrnes. He's the one who gave me your number. He texted to say he'd met the author of the famous Witches statement—"

"Well, officially, it's anonymous," Irma said. "Anonymous and collectively auth—"

"And that you were as dynamic in person as you were on the page, and __"

"He said I'm dynamic in person?"

"That's a quote," Oonie said, "and my ears perked up, because Nick has great taste. I'd love to set up a meeting with you guys—the Witches of Westish. Maybe fly you out to New York."

"New York?" Irma repeated. "New York City?"

Oonie, who seemed to find most of what Irma said amusing, laughed again. "Not Schenectady," she said.

“I’ve spent the last year putting together a massive round of funding for the Brightness,” Oonie went on. “Now we’re locked and loaded and ready to grow. I’m talking feminist media on a whole new scale. Podcast. Video. Documentary. Scripted. All of it. Remember when Vice was just a magazine? What Vice did for assholes, we’re going to do for women.”

Several beats of silence passed. Irma sensed she should say something, but she wasn’t sure what.

“That’s a line from my investor pitch,” Oonie said. “You’re supposed to chuckle.”

“It’s funny,” Irma assured her.

“It’s okay, the VCs loved it. Anyway, we’re dying to bring in new talent. Young women with brash perspectives. Daring. Unapologetic. The voices of tomorrow. Like you and your friends. Speaking of which, I’ve been trying to get in touch with Dahlia Breughel. Could you have her give me a call?”

The question presupposed more influence over Dahlia than Irma had ever possessed, but it didn’t seem necessary to let Oonie know that. “Sure.”

“Terrific. Here’s my private number.” Oonie recited the digits, which Irma carefully inscribed in her yellow notebook. “Tell her to call tonight, no matter what time. You guys are smoking hot right now, but we need to keep the momentum. I knew Lana was going to love that sweatshirt.”

“That was you?” Irma said.

“That was me,” Oonie confirmed.

HEY D! YOU up? Call anytime! Xoxoxo

Having sent Dahlia this text, Irma flopped down on her bed to think. Her head was a jumble. So much had happened, so much was happening, and yet here she lay, utterly alone, and not just alone but lonely, as lonely as she’d ever been. Lonelier than during her first Westish semester, before she met Pella or Dahlia, when she attended every office hour of each of her professors, not because she was a suck-up, though she must have seemed like one, but just to have a conversation.

Sleeping with Nicholas had done something to her. It was as though the act, painful and disorienting but not at all something she wished to undo, had extended through time, so time itself became painful and new.

It had been five days since Dahlia's departure, and apart from a few stray texts to the Cloister thread—Remember guyz: don't talk to reporters!—Irma had not heard from her at all. When she'd thought of this coming year, she'd thought only of the time she would spend with Dahlia, as much time as Dahlia would allow. That had been the premise, the promise, of the project—and now the project had backfired, and Dahlia was gone, and Irma was left with a sadness she wasn't sure how to tolerate. Which was strange, because she prided herself on her toughness and had not expected this feeling at all. She'd known she was pouring her energy into being as close to Dahlia as possible, but she hadn't known what it would feel like if she failed.

And now Dahlia's absence seemed inextricably mixed up with what had happened with Nicholas, so that Irma barely knew what her deep-down ache was about. It was a strange phrase, *lose your virginity*. Irma knew its original point was that your virginity was a priceless entity you were supposed to safeguard with your life and exchange only for the even more priceless entity of a proposal from an upstanding man who'd previously slept only with prostitutes and the occasional world-weary married woman. But the phrase itself wasn't about keeping or safeguarding, it was about *loss*, and what she felt, deep down, was a profound sense of loss.

What was she so sad to have lost? Not her virginity; that was a burden she'd been lugging around too long and felt relieved to be rid of. No, the thing she'd lost was the very thing she'd gained the moment her virginity, that all-important nonexistent entity, disappeared. What she'd gained was sex, and all the latent inchoate feelings sex stirred into her awareness, above all a kind of grief-in-love, a losing-in-the-having, and those feelings felt as connected to Dahlia as they did to Nicholas, maybe more. A new kind of unloneliness, which now she could never unknow.

IT WAS THREE in the morning when Dahlia called back. Irma was dozing on top of her blankets, her room's lights blazing, her Doc Martens still laced to her feet. She jerked awake at the buzz of the phone.

"Hey!" said Dahlia as though it were midday.

"Hey!" Irma replied. "You'll never guess who I talked to."

"Who?"

“Oonie Jiri. The founder of the Brightness.”

“Oh God,” Dahlia said.

“Why ‘Oh God’?”

“No reason. She’s just been DMing me nonstop. What’d she say?”

“Lots,” Irma said. “She wants to pay us for the Witches statement—five hundred dollars each.” After hanging up the phone with Oonie, Irma realized she’d erred by letting Oonie call her the author of the manifesto and accepting, without consulting Pammy and Dahlia, her offer of payment. Even if Irma had composed the sentences, any proceeds belonged to all three of them.

“I don’t want any money,” Dahlia said. “You and Pammy split it.”

Irma hesitated. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money. And seven-fifty was even more. She could do a lot with seven hundred fifty dollars. In that sense, she wanted the money. But if Dahlia didn’t want the money, maybe she shouldn’t want it either.

“If Pammy knows you’re not taking your share, she won’t take her share,” Irma pointed out. “She’ll say I wrote it and should keep it all.”

“Then that’s what you should do,” Dahlia said.

“But you and Pammy tattooed the guys,” Irma protested. “And Pammy shot the video of Bobinson. Why should I be the only one compensated for my labor?”

“None of us did any *labor*.” Dahlia spat this final word with queenly disgust. “If you’d told me the project was labor, I would have sprinted the other way. You wrote something. The Brightness wants to pay you for it. Fine.”

Irma found Dahlia’s response to the offer of payment both inscrutable and unsurprising. It annoyed her that Dahlia was making decisions for all three of them, but then Irma could sense she wanted Dahlia to make the decision. She trusted Dahlia’s instincts more than her own.

“Forget about the money,” she said. “I haven’t told you the important part. The Brightness wants to meet with us.”

Dahlia laughed merrily, and Irma could tell the conversation wasn’t about to get any simpler. “What for?”

“I think they want to hire us.”

“To do what? Performance art on football players’ faces? Or are we branching out?”

“I’m not sure,” Irma admitted. “Oonie mentioned a podcast?”

The harder Dahlia laughed, the lower Irma’s spirits sank. “A podcast,” Dahlia said. “Be still, my heart.”

“Look,” Irma said firmly. “Let’s just meet with them. Hear their ideas. What do we have to lose?”

“Nothing but our dignity,” Dahlia said.

“Please,” Irma pleaded.

“Irma, what’s gotten into you? Is this about the guy you smashed?”

“How—” *Do you know that?* Irma started to say, but the answer was obvious: Pammy had told her, and the idea that Pammy and Dahlia were gossiping about her while she lay here feeling lost and desolate made her angry indeed. “I didn’t smash anyone,” she said. “We had sex.”

“Got it,” Dahlia said. “Sounds tender.”

“I don’t need you to come,” Irma said. “I can meet with them myself.”

This was a bluff; Irma had little desire to meet with the Brightness alone. What she desired was a project, a meeting—an *anything*—to share with Dahlia. And if she could travel to New York and lay eyes on Nicholas again, possibly even lay her hands on his lapels, that was desirable too.

Nor was Irma so deluded as to think she was the person the Brightness wanted. Yes, her essay had gone viral. And, hard as it was for Irma to believe, Nicholas had apparently paid her a compliment that piqued Oonie Jiri’s interest. But it wasn’t Irma’s name on the sweatshirt, and it wasn’t Irma who was trending online. It was dawning on her, only a few beats slow, that if Dahlia had answered Oonie’s DMs, Oonie would never have phoned Irma.

Dahlia made a plosive sound of annoyance. “Fine, we’ll meet with them.”

“Great!” Irma hopped off her bed and grabbed her notebook from the desk. “Here’s Oonie’s private number. She said you—”

“I’m not going to *call* her,” Dahlia said. “Just set it up. Whenever works for you.” And she hung up the phone.

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7

Pella awoke alone. The bedroom door was shut, but she sensed the apartment was empty. She slipped from bed and peeked at the beach towel she'd been sleeping atop. She hadn't really bled on it at all. Hormonal springtime had arrived.

"I always thought I'd become an artist," Nicholas had said last night in a lamenting tone, but it was fairly evident where his artistry lay. They'd fucked three times, the first two straight through without stopping, and she felt now, as she tossed the towel into Nicholas's hamper, a bliss of contentment that pervaded every cell of her body and obliterated any trace of the morning-after guilt she imagined she should feel. Instead of guilt she felt triumph. If this had been revenge sex, laden with tawdry motives—if she'd been punishing Mike for sleeping with Katrina, and Katrina for sleeping with Mike, while also proving she needn't take a back seat to Irma—then it had been the most fulfilling revenge sex in history, and she hoped and prayed she'd get a chance to do it again, preferably before nightfall.

She headed down the hall to use the bathroom and emerged feeling giddy and light. Total access to Nicholas's living space seemed as intimate, and almost as exciting, as total access to his body. She walked into the kitchen, whose narrow appliances, tin-lipped counters, and burnt-orange linoleum looked untouched since the '70s, and found a note on the small round table.

Dear Pella,

There's coffee in the pot and eggs in the refrigerator. The door will lock behind you. Thanks for a beautiful night.

N.

She felt an absurd pang of sadness at the sentence *The door will lock behind you,* which suggested she would eventually have to leave, but there was no denying it was a kind and generous note. It had indeed been a beautiful night, and she felt proud of herself for forcing it to happen.

When she'd finished her omelet, she refilled her coffee and went to explore the apartment's other rooms. The entire place seemed slightly shrunken in an *Alice in Wonderland* way—the ceilings low, the rooms cramped and mazelike. The walls and window seats were painted in oranges and greens, the built-in shelves stuffed with books and topped with bits of sculpture. Pella counted three umbrella stands, one of them full of peacock feathers.

The living room, like the kitchen, possessed a preserved and antiquated '70s-going-on-'80s vibe, as though some film director was getting ready to shoot a period piece—an adaptation, perhaps, of Elise Jeegley's *Never Ever*. The few contemporary items—an Apple laptop on the coffee table, a newish wireless stereo atop one shelf—looked out of place.

Behind the living room was tucked a smaller space that contained a foldout sofa, a sewing table stacked with yarn and folded yards of fabric, and a large, pale green sewing machine that looked both old and professional grade. The walls were lined with glass-fronted cabinets, their shelves stuffed. Strewn around the room's surfaces were small stout statues of lacquered wood and stone, homages to fertility from various cultures, most of the figures abstract and featureless, a sphere cascading over another sphere, evocations of a quality; others more ornate, with tresses and facial expressions; one with a grid of breasts. Pella sensed some irony in the collection of all these icons of fecundity, but she had no idea wherein the irony lay. She assumed everything in this room belonged to Sylvie.

She tugged open the doors of one of the cabinets. Inside was a riot of paper: Pamphlets, folders, magazines, binder-clipped stacks of yellowing sheets. Several editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* lined up in a row. There were hardbound books next to what looked like manuscript copies of the very same books. Pella scanned the names: Kate Millett, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone.

She set down her coffee and slid a few staple-bound documents from the shelf: “Notes from the First Year.” “Notes from the Second Year.” Posters from gatherings and events around New York—for some, a single curled poster with torn corners where the tape had been, for others, several of the same posters faded and stuck together and plainly never hung. Programs from meetings with notes scrawled all around the edges. Manila folders full of typewritten letters.

As Pella leafed through, she felt both fascinated and dumb. She had only a vague idea of what she was looking at, a trove of second-wave feminism as practiced in New York. Irma had read all these books, but Pella had not. Most of her knowledge of the movement came from what Nicholas had said at the wedding.

On another shelf, she found reviews and notices of Sylvie’s early artworks—those sewn and soaring opuses Nicholas had described. The clippings were compiled in chronological order, the magazines and papers encased in plastic sheaths. She spread them on the table and began to read. A few reviewers praised Sylvie’s talent. Others—not all of them men—seemed baffled and annoyed. All of them mentioned, in tones of titillated condescension, her prior life as a radical activist, her marriage and the reputation for wildness that preceded it, and the number of times she’d been arrested. Pella recalled that Sadie Flaim, Sylvie’s alter ego in *Never Ever,* had refused to sleep with the same person twice. It seemed, suddenly, an extremely poignant detail.

There were few reproductions of the artworks themselves. The newspapers preferred portraits of the artist as misguided rebel, Sylvie’s blond hair center-parted and flowing over her person. Her eyes looked down and away from the camera—not shy, Pella thought, but vacant, as though being photographed was a violation to be withstood.

Sylvie looked a little like Irma, who lacked the mixed blessing of her awesome beauty but possessed the same gamine frame and veiling surplus of hair—and, Pella thought, the same brave diffidence.

Irma would have been thrilled to discover this private archive and to explain its contents to Pella—who would have been equal parts pleased and annoyed to have them explained to her. She reached for her phone, ready to take a picture of the picture of Sylvie and text it to Irma, but that, she realized, would be impossibly cruel. Irma, who’d slept with Nicholas four

days before; Irma, who'd looked at Pella with such timid, blooming pride when Pella walked into the kitchen: *Pella, I did it!*

If someone had told her on the night of the Parties that she'd soon be sitting in a West Village apartment after having stayed up all night having sex with its gorgeous inhabitant and that the person she would feel alienated from after this diabolically glamorous transgression was not Mike but Irma, the gorgeous inhabitant's former lover...well, that would have been hard to believe. But here she was.

AFTER SHE LEFT Nicholas's, Pella walked across the Brooklyn Bridge and all the way up Flatbush to Owen and Martin's. She changed her clothes, headed to dance class, did squats and steps for an hour and a half, and walked back. She was trying to wear herself out, but neither her mind nor her body showed any sign of wanting to slow.

She set about tidying the apartment. On the dining-room table lay the swipe card she'd bought at the laundromat. As she slid it into her wallet, the edge of an unfamiliar card caught her eye. She drew it out. DARK FARM BREWERY, it read, with a phone number.

Pella instantly dialed the number. *What am I doing?* she wondered as it rang. Vivian answered, and Pella, fumbling, tried to explain who she was.

"Ah," Vivian finally said. "The one with the dress."

"That's me," Pella said, wincing at the memory of her misbegotten art dress.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well," Pella said, "you told me to stop by the brewery if I was ever in New York."

Vivian chuckled. "That was fast."

"I'm trying to keep things moving," Pella said.

"Me too," Vivian said. "What are you up to right now?"

Pella showered and ate a sandwich and set off again. She traversed a low flat part of Brooklyn near the river, beyond which rose the Statue of Liberty in all her green-penny grandeur, police helicopters buzzing around her shoulders. Both of them—Pella and Lady Liberty—gazed up at the Manhattan skyline and the glowing blue spire of One World Trade. It made Pella think of Katrina and her magazine's new home.

At the water’s edge, atop a rectangle of weeds and crumbling concrete, she found a half dozen picnic tables painted green. Beside this patio stood a low hangar of corrugated metal with a peaked roof. The metal eaves were festooned with white Christmas lights.

She passed through the doors into a dim sparse space with a bar on one side and booths on the other. High slatted windows admitted the only light. The bar and booths were made of pale untreated wood. Beneath the syrupy smell of dark beer lay the springlike, slightly charred odor of freshly kerfed boards.

Pella stood in the empty space wondering what to do. A rear door opened, and a woman appeared, carrying a ten-gallon bucket.

The attributes Pella chiefly remembered—Vivian’s muscled arms and the winding tattoos that adorned them—were eclipsed by heavy clothing: brown waxed pants, checked flannel shirt, her silver-threaded hair tucked beneath a Dark Farm baseball cap. She cut a steelier figure than she had on Block Island, when she’d been wearing makeup and a light calico dress.

“Welcome to the Dark Farm,” Vivian said.

She set down her bucket and, as she walked behind the bar, motioned for Pella to grab a stool. “Where’s your fiancé? What was his name again?”

“Mike,” Pella said as she sat down. “He’s back in Wisconsin. Things are a little messy at the moment.”

From the taps Vivian filled several small glasses and arranged them on the bar by color, from flaxen to inky black. As they drank, she explained that the taproom and adjoining brewery had opened just weeks before. This chunk of waterfront had been swamped by Hurricane Sandy and would someday be swamped again, which made setting up shop here cheaper than it would otherwise have been.

“I was in a little hovel in Gowanus before. Just brewing beer and delivering kegs to restaurants. I loved it, but I ran out of room—I couldn’t take any accounts above Fourteenth Street. And I wanted a spot where people could hang out and drink. We’re far from the trains, but maybe it’ll become a destination.

“Come on, I’ll show you where the magic happens.”

A door at the back opened into the brewery, a bigger space filled with stainless-steel tanks, beat-up vats of copper and wood, and stacks of battered kegs. Thick bready odors filled the air. The vats gurgled like living

things. “I bought these used,” Vivian said as she patted the flank of a vat. “They’re all a little different.”

She introduced Pella to her assistant brewer. Then she grabbed a wooden canoe oar, climbed a stepladder, and peered over the side of a copper vat. She stirred the sludgy contents, awakening a sweet, piercingly vivid smell that reminded Pella of pine needles. Vivian descended the ladder, pulled a glass off a shelf, and turned a spigot on the vat’s underside.

Pella took a sip. “Yum,” she said. “Tastes like Christmas.”

Vivian nodded. “A winter warmer.”

Pella handed Vivian the glass, and they walked toward the rear of the brewery. Vivian placed her hand on a doorknob.

“We’ll just peek into the office,” she said. “The little prince is napping.”

The office was as raw as the other spaces. Two young women sat at desks made from salvaged doors and sawhorses topped by computer monitors. One of them spoke quietly into a cell phone; the other glanced up and silently waved. On the wall hung maps of Brooklyn and Manhattan, jabbed with colorful pins. Dark Farm T-shirts and caps spilled out of cardboard boxes. A framed cover of a magazine called *Ferment* pictured Vivian, Jack on her hip, above the caption THE NEW WAVE OF WOMEN BREWERS.

A pegboard partition hung with an array of tools divided the space. “Mama?” came a moan from the far side. “*Ma*-ma!”

“Like a sixth sense,” Vivian said. She motioned for Pella to follow her. Behind the partition, the space had been arranged to resemble a bedroom, with a dresser and bookshelves and a rug covered with pastel blocks and plastic dinosaurs. In the middle stood a pair of army-green cots, one covered in Sesame Street bedding beneath which lay a three-year-old boy, his eyes half closed. “Is it morning?” he asked.

“Actually, it’s afternoon,” Vivian said. “Are you ready to wake up from your nap?”

“Yes,” he sighed as he sat up and blinked.

Vivian stooped to scoop a blanket off the floor. “This is Pella. We met her on Block Island. Remember when we went to Block Island?”

Jack, his eyes trained on Pella, shook his head no.

“I think you do,” Vivian said. “Do you want to say hi?”

“Hi.”

“Why, hello,” Pella said. His eyes were dark and doe-ish, and his hair

stuck out in tufts. Pella felt a strong urge to wrap his sly little body in her arms. Instead she held out her hand. He seized her thumb and bent it back with surprising strength.

“Careful,” Vivian said. “He’s a judo master.”

“So am I.” Pella, her thumb still captive, ducked under her own elbow, twirled in a circle, thinking as she did of Introductory Contemporary Jazz, and landed on the cot with Jack in her lap. His laugh was a giddy staccato. He twisted his face toward hers, his tiny nose an inch from her own, and said, his voice clear and polite, “Could you please do that again?”

One of the women from the office poked her head in, bugging her eyes and holding up her phone, from whose speaker faint shouting could be heard. Vivian rounded the partition.

“I have to go potty,” Jack said.

Pella nodded. “Okay.”

“I don’t wear diapers,” he explained. “I wear underwear like a big guy. I wear a pull-up at night, but naptime’s not at night. It’s during the day.”

“Right,” Pella said.

“That means I go potty right after my nap. But sometimes Mama forgets.”

He slid out of Pella’s lap and walked toward a partly open door at the end of the room. “Come on,” he said as he pushed the door with both hands. “I don’t need privacy.”

A blue and white plastic potty occupied a corner of an industrial two-stall bathroom. Jack yanked down his pants and underwear and sat. “I might have a poo as well,” he announced.

“I’ll wait out here,” Pella said.

“It’s okay,” Jack said. “I don’t need privacy.”

Pella loitered outside the bathroom door while, for what felt like several minutes, Jack grunted with incredible effort, like an elderly relative in a Philip Roth novel. Suddenly, the grunting stopped.

“I’m finished with my poo!” he called, his voice returned to a lilt. “Would you like to come see?”

“No thank you,” Pella said. But her demurral only meant that Jack, the detachable bowl of the potty swaying dangerously in one hand, tried to pull the too-heavy door fully open with the other.

“I’m coming,” Pella said. “I’m coming.”

She hurried into the bathroom, and Jack offered up the plastic bowl for her inspection. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“I do,” Pella said. “It’s beautiful.”

Satisfied, Jack walked into one of the stalls, dumped the bowl into the toilet, and flushed. He handed the bowl to Pella, who rinsed it. He slid a wooden step stool out from under the sink, climbed up it, and turned on the right-hand faucet. “This one is cold water,” he said, and lovingly patted the knob. “I like cold water.”

“Me too.” Pella felt soothed and hypnotized by Jack’s slow, unhurried absorption in every movement. He squirted a worm of pink soap into his tender palm. He rubbed his hands together to work up a lather, then rinsed the lather and shut off the faucet. He tugged a single square of brown paper towel from the dispenser, dried his hands, and climbed down to set the paper towel gently in the trash. He pushed his step stool under the sink. She might have been watching a Zen monk performing a thousand-year-old ceremony.

They found Vivian pacing among the dark green picnic tables, her phone pressed to her ear. Her pacing and her careworn expression reminded Pella of Mike. “I’ll call you right back,” she said into the phone as they approached.

She scooped Jack into her arms and shot Pella a look of apology. “Sorry,” she said. “We effed up the Hotel Finch account, and those people are bastards. Lot of fires to put out. And now my bartender for tonight called in sick. But I’m so glad you stopped by.”

“I could watch Jack for a while,” Pella said. “If that would help.”

“No, no,” said Vivian, even as her eyes lit up with interest. “You should go paint the town. Enjoy yourself.”

“I really don’t have anywhere to be,” Pella said.

Pella and Jack strolled across the floodplain, and Jack showed her where the nearest playground was. Afterward they bought empanadas and aguas frescas from a cart and ate on a park bench as the sunset faded behind the skyline. By the time they returned to the Dark Farm, the dark green picnic tables were littered with full and empty pint glasses, the benches crowded with giant men. They called from table to table in Australian accents that made Pella think of Owen and Martin’s honeymoon.

Inside, the booths were full and most of the bar stools occupied. The girl

from the office was pulling pints. Pella didn't see Vivian, but Jack, sensing her presence, ran around the bar and found her crouched there, changing a keg.

"Did you have a good time?" Vivian asked him.

"Mostly," he said.

"Good." Vivian, wide-eyed, looked at Pella. "Do you see this? There's a freaking rugby team out there. I'm not sure what happened—the place is usually empty."

"I really need to go," said the girl from the office. "I have class."

A guy with a handlebar mustache marched up to Pella, who was standing behind the taps. "Two Berliners," he said.

Pella grabbed two pint glasses, filled them with Berliner, and set them on the bar. The guy handed her a twenty. She glanced up at the chalkboard list above the bar, took a five from the open register, and slid it toward the guy. He patted it once, grabbed his beers, and was gone. Another guy walked up to Pella.

She didn't leave until midnight. All evening, she poured pints and chatted with customers, wiping down the bar and dashing around to collect empties when she had a free moment, the armpits of her T-shirt soaked with sweat. When people asked her questions about the beer, she either referred them to Vivian or spat out random strings of adjectives with total authority. As during dance class, she had no idea what she was doing. As during dance class, having no idea seemed totally fine, even pleasurable, because she didn't expect herself to know anything. Introductory Contemporary Bartending.

Not until the last customer left did she check her phone: two missed calls from Mike, none from Nicholas. "Get the heck out of here," Vivian said. "I'll finish cleaning up."

Pella zipped up her sweatshirt. "The tips are right there." She nodded toward a tin bucket under the bar.

Vivian chuckled. "Don't show me where the tips are. Put them in your wallet."

"You don't have to pay me," Pella said. "I was having fun."

"You know what's fun?" Vivian said. "Getting paid." She pulled a wad of cash from her flannel's pocket and started stacking twenties on the bar. "Here's your bartending wages," she said. "And here's for the babysitting."

“Are you sure?” Pella said. “That looks like too much.”

“Do you know what childcare costs in this town? Believe me, I’m ripping you off.”

Pella swept together the tips and Vivian’s stacks and tucked it all in her wallet. “Thanks,” she said.

“The pleasure’s mine,” Vivian said. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

PELLA WAS WALKING down a deserted street, trying to figure out what train might get her home, when a yellow taxi happened by. She flagged it down and gave the driver Owen’s address. She counted the money in her pocket and called Mike back.

“Hey babe,” she said.

“Hey,” he said. “You sound happy.”

“Happy and tired,” she said. “Do you remember that woman Vivian from the rehearsal? The one with the delicious beer?”

“Sure,” Mike said. “What about her?”

“I dropped by her brewery today to check it out. I wound up helping out behind the bar. It was kind of a blast. I might go back tomorrow.”

“You got a *job*?”

“No, no,” Pella said quickly. “Nothing like that. I just want to see how her business works. I mean, it seems like a hot mess, but still. It might help me think about my career.”

“Since when do you care about beer?” Mike said.

“It’s not about beer,” Pella said. She felt frustrated, though not with Mike. She craved his approval, and she knew that, under different circumstances, he would heartily approve of her long shift of babysitting and bartending, the cold hard cash in her pocket, and even the Dark Farm itself. But he was right to be suspicious. She’d spent last night in Nicholas’s bed, and part of her felt like she was still there.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Long,” Mike said. “I moved out of my office. Into a tiny cube.”

“Sorry,” Pella said. “I wish I’d been there to help.”

They chatted, affably but without much substance, while the cab rolled through Brooklyn. Pella handed the driver a twenty and walked under the green canopy of 95 Eastern Parkway with a sense of freedom and

belonging. They were still chatting when Pella reached her little maid's quarters, flopped down on the bed, and fell asleep with her phone in her hand.

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8

Pella returned to the Dark Farm the following day. Again she spent the afternoon in the park with Jack, then worked a full shift behind the bar. The place was nearly empty. Vivian showed her how to change the kegs and work the computer system and where to put the cash at the end of the night.

She saw Nicholas on Friday, and again on Monday. In the small hours of Tuesday morning, on her way back from the bathroom, she plucked a T-shirt from his dresser without asking, a tiny act of possession that gave her no end of pleasure, and slipped it over her head. She nuzzled into his body and said:

"I've never had sex like this."

"That's a generous compliment," he said.

"I don't know if it's generous," she said. "It's just the truth."

His body, lithe and smooth, feline somehow. The pink curve of his cock, the blondish tufts of hair from which it protruded. The curve itself was elegant, but how? It had a saber-like quality—not that she wanted to put a saber between her legs. But it had a curve that was beautiful, an apparent craftsmanship, an obeisance to some golden ratio, a natural law of the arc of a cock, pointing eloquently toward the ceiling. The whole scene defied description; it sounded so porny and corny to describe how his cock looked, and yet it was true that how it looked was very, very important to her.

After those first primly spaced-out nights, they embarked on a stupor of sex. Again and again she asked for more, and Nicholas obliged. When she headed to the Dark Farm, she stumbled through a medium denser than air, her body stunned and sore, his smell filling her nostrils, his hands and fingers everywhere, the voices of customers echoing at the edge of her comprehension.

While she worked, she thought about his cock. That way he had of

standing there behind it, his palms turned slightly toward her, his body relaxed into stillness, looking at her looking at him. His entire lithe person seemed only its background. It was as though he brought nothing to the practice of sex but sex itself. His expression empty, his feet flat on the floor. His body's only gesture that of his ideal pink cock pointing up at the ceiling fan and the third-floor apartment above, and beyond that the light-riddled air that filled the trough between uptown and downtown skyscrapers, and beyond that the clouds' undersides hazy with light and the upper layers of atmosphere clotted with excess carbon and methane, and beyond that the invisible stars and imaginary heavens, and it was (this was all ridiculous, she knew) as if his cock in all its ideal simplicity were pointing up *there*, past it all, toward the stars they could not see, and saying, *Hey, you, that's where we're going*...and the strength of her anticipation, her internal *Yes, please,* when they were not yet touching, felt like astounding joy.

"Hi" was what she would say in these moments, made timid by his simplicity.

"Hi," he would reply.

The way she felt during sex with him was uncapturable. It was impossible to remember afterward, much less describe. There was a lot of talking. That she was sure of. While they made love, she walked into new rooms inside herself, and she and Nicholas would take turns describing what those rooms contained, and words were one of the tools they used to describe. There was an ongoing, cumulative power to the love they made. A Scheherazadeness. A perpetual and even dogged effort toward more and more precision, but the effort felt effortless. None of this made sense, she knew. Maybe it was enough to say that he smelled like nothing she'd ever smelled and his cock fit her so perfectly, it seemed scarcely even to be there, but was it ever, and her orgasms came tripping out of her, tripping and tripling, doubling and redoubling.

Sometimes while they were having sex she would begin, by dint of a lifetime of habit, to don her ancient costume, her age-old carapace, and, without realizing it, embark, however subtly, on one of her arch and arching performances. *Oh God baby, yeah baby, come on, give it to me...*

Whereupon the tip of a finger would press against her lips, soft but insistent, firm, unerring, hushing her, and whatever surge of energy or emotion she was trying to expel or expiate by her rote pornographic talk,

having traveled up her spine and arrived at the tip of her tongue and been arrested by the press of that finger, would now, of necessity, be swallowed, contained; would dive back down the front of her body and become pure energy again, remixed, remystified, and this energy, when she did not dispel or deny it, would build and burn and come tripping, trilling, wordless, again and again.

Nicholas possessed within him a vigilance, an almost obsessive requirement for honesty, a talent for steering against falseness. He combined this with a talent for praising her, and the combination felt maniacally satisfying, because it meant that the praise was true. Was it silly to say that something of the heightened glory of her favorite books, the religiosity of literature, was what she felt when they were naked together? There were passages in Jane Austen, in Tolstoy, in Wharton, in James—and so on, they weren't all dead, the writers who could do this to her—that described Pella's internal states of being with such clarity and accuracy that the corresponding instantaneous rearrangement and refinement of her own perception amounted to a brand-new internal state, so that having certain fleeting, hard-to-capture states of consciousness described by a person outside herself amounted, inside herself, to a brand-new state of consciousness; so that the pleasure—no, the religious nature of reading derived equally from the accurate description of her consciousness as it existed and the emergence therefrom of a consciousness that was new; and this was what it felt like when they had sex.

Was Nicholas the author of her sexual experience? And was Pella purely the reader of it? And how active *was* a reader, anyway? How active, how authorial, was the person getting fucked? Not that the person getting fucked had to be the woman, necessarily, but in this case Pella certainly felt that it was she. Sometimes her mind went down a path it had never been down before, and she imagined, with a surge of delight, becoming pregnant with his child, which was the most fucked thought of all.

Their talking and their touching brought Pella to a precipice, a jumping-off place, and then sometimes, on nights when it could be achieved, she jumped—not into orgasm, though she always did come, and the orgasms she had were the best of her life, wonderful and ecstatic. But they were also capturable, limitable, categorizable under the name *orgasm*, and therefore

confined by being defined. No, she jumped, on certain nights, into something else, something that had no name. A place of perfect darkness.

He showed her his bruises, purple thumbprints with rosy edges that surrounded his pale shoulders, and she gazed at them dumbly, not remembering how she had made them.

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING at the end of her second week in New York, Pella jerked awake to the ringing of her phone. Eyes closed, she stretched out a hand to silence it, but she stretched in the wrong direction, and her hand found Nicholas's shoulder tucked beneath the quilt. They'd been up most of the night. Mercifully, the phone fell silent.

Moments later, it started ringing again. Nicholas groaned in his sleep. Pella found the phone on the nightstand and glanced at the caller ID. Somehow she'd known it would be Owen.

"My dear!" he said loudly. "Greetings from Kakadu."

"Owen," she whispered. "It's six a.m."

"Not in the outback it isn't—it's ten at night, and I've been waiting all day. Has the paper arrived?"

"What paper?"

"Why, the *Times*," Owen said, as though offended by the question. "Why are you whispering?"

"You want to know if the newspaper came?"

"I only have a minute," Owen warned. "I sweet-talked the folks at the ranger station into letting me use their emergency landline. Martin's asleep in the tent."

Slowly, groggily, Pella began to understand why Owen had called. He was in a remote part of Australia without cell phone reception or access to a newsstand. His wedding announcement was scheduled for today's Style section, and he wanted Pella to read it to him.

"I'm sure it's online," Pella said. "I can bring it up on my phone."

"No, no," said Owen. "I need to know how it's all laid out. The paper's on the doormat. Just scootch out of bed and grab it."

Nicholas, who'd seemed ready to doze through Pella's stage-whispering, suddenly shot upright. "Who's that?" he said in the loud startled voice of a person still asleep.

“Who’s *that*?” Owen said.

Owen, Pella mouthed toward Nicholas, who flopped back down and shut his eyes. “Nobody,” she said into the phone.

“Does Nobody get the *Times*?” Owen asked.

“Everybody gets the *Times,*” Pella said. “Hang on.” She tiptoed into the living room and, stark naked, opened the apartment door enough to slither an arm through and pick the chunky paper off the tile. She plunked down on the sofa and spread the Style section across the cushions.

“Here it is,” she reported. “An entire page. ‘From Book Signing to Block Island.’”

The central photograph was of Owen and Martin standing on either side of Garrett Lovell, framed by the wedding arch, the Atlantic twinkling beyond. Pella’s eyes shifted instantly to the smaller photo—she hadn’t entirely relinquished the fantasy, however silly and prideful, that she might have her picture in the *Times*.

“It’s of Mike and Irma,” she said. “Dancing.”

Her fiancé and best friend confronted each other on the dance floor, their eyes locked, each with one knee high in the air and both feet off the ground.

The intent and radiant expressions on their faces, the pink in their flushed cheeks, the euphoric sense of motion as Mike’s tie swung to one side and the lacy skirt of Irma’s dress whirled around her hips—the picture contained so much kinetic energy and unbridled joy that it demanded to be published despite the more noteworthy guests who might have been shown. The caption read:

GROOMSMAN MICHAEL SCHWARTZ AND GUEST IRMA FRISKE SWAP MOVES BY STARLIGHT.

As she described this to Owen, her mind whirled like Irma’s skirt. In all her obsessive imaginings of what happened that night, at the bonfire and in the bedrooms after, she’d never imagined this: a perfect camaraderie between Mike and Irma. They’d always been at odds and never more so than earlier that evening, when Mike seemed enraged by Irma’s mere presence. But in this dance-floor photo, Pella glimpsed something different. Mike sleeping with Katrina, Irma sleeping with Nicholas; it suddenly seemed obvious how tightly these events were linked and all the ways Mike and Irma had likely conspired in her humiliation—or, as Pella was beginning to think of it, her liberation.

“Read the article,” Owen said.

> When Owen Dunne’s debut novel was published two Septembers ago, his publisher informed him his first public reading would take place at BookCourt, a spacious independent bookstore in Brooklyn’s Cobble Hill. Little did Mr. Dunne know how accurate that name would prove.
>
> Seated in the back row of the audience was Martin Tilly, an analyst at Bluestone, who had read Mr. Dunne’s book in galleys and was determined to meet the author.
>
> “I was so nervous that night,” recalled Mr. Dunne, now 25. “I was stunned and pleased that anyone showed up at all. At the end of the book-signing line, there was this man who’d come by himself. He was wearing a gray rumpled suit and an unsightly tie, like a financier—and then he asked how I felt about Alan Hollinghurst. He’s never admitted it, but I think he went to the end of the line on purpose, so he could have my full attention.”
>
> “Of course I did it on purpose,” said Mr. Tilly, 33. “Halfway through the reading I was in love.”

Owen purred a sigh of pure contentment. “I have to go,” he said with import in his tone. “But before I do.”

“Mm,” Pella said, and knew what was coming.

“Tell me your plans with Mr. Nobody.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m having an awfully good time.”

A brief silence followed, in which she could hear Owen, ten thousand miles away at the ranger station in Kakadu, compressing his thoughts.

“Do you remember the book *White Noise*?” he asked. “How they visit the Most Photographed Barn in America?”

“Yes,” Pella said, and wondered worriedly where this was headed.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Owen said. “But Nick’s a little like that barn.”

“He’s the Most Fucked Man in America,” Pella guessed.

“Precisely,” Owen said. “Every encounter reinforces the aura. Women

want to sleep with him because all the other women have already slept with him. The aura grows and grows."

"It's not just aura," Pella said, recalling what she'd been up to all night and allowing a note of sly exultation to enter her voice. "The guy knows what he's doing."

"I don't doubt it," said Owen. "But do you?"

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9

After class, Irma hurried back to her room to shower and dry her hair. She put on the blouse and blazer Pella had sent her over the summer, an extravagant birthday present meant to be worn to her grad-school interviews. She settled in behind her desk and double-checked the video-conferencing app Oonie asked her to install. It had taken forever to set up this meeting—Dahlia kept postponing, and Pammy wasn't coming at all. Irma didn't want to be responsible for any glitches. The app worked—her face popped up on her laptop screen. She watched herself fiddle with her small gold cross.

As the chapel bells tolled four o'clock, the screen divided in half, and Oonie appeared, looking almost as glamorous as she did in her photos online. She was sitting at a conference table beside a woman with sleek blond hair, the camera set back to take them both in.

More and more faces popped up—pretty women in their twenties like the ones Irma had met at Owen's wedding, wearing fuzzy sweaters and sitting in cubicles lined with books, looking sweetly beleaguered. They waved politely at Irma and told her how much they'd liked her essay. Irma basked in their praise for a few moments, then they returned to their phones or to other windows on their computers. Oonie and the sleek blond woman talked intently to each other, their microphone muted. Everyone was waiting for Dahlia.

Fifteen minutes ticked by. Finally Dahlia flickered into view, drinking out of a giant-handled cup through a straw. The jagua ink on her forehead had faded to a medium gray. "Sorry," she said without a hint of apology. "I was up late last night."

"No worries whatsoever," Oonie said, and seemed entirely to mean it. "It's such an honor to meet you. Let me introduce everyone."

The young women in the cubicles had all put down their phones and were gazing intently at their screens. They seemed as entranced by Dahlia as Irma was, despite never having met her.

"I started modeling at seventeen," Oonie said. "Which means I've spent half my life in this male-dominated legacy-media environment. On a personal level, I could tell you stories—boy, could I tell you stories! But apart from my personal history, there's the systemic level, and I can tell you that the system is dominated by men—you might say *patriarchal*," Oonie added, with a nod toward the camera that seemed intended for Irma, as though Irma had invented the word.

"I love that there are so many more women-owned businesses than there used to be. So many female entrepreneurs. But it's one thing to be selling makeup or diapers, and it's another to be making woman-owned *stories*. That's what will change the world. Women in charge of the stories we tell. Which brings me to Mimi." Oonie turned to her right and smiled. "I'd like to introduce Mimi Buford, our brand-new vice president of multimedia. Go easy on her. It's her first day on the job."

It didn't look like Mimi Buford's first day of anything. She shared her screen and began to talk about the podcast boom and the video boom and how they would soon be combined. Irma had a hard time following, her attention consumed by watching Dahlia's small sighs and eye-rolls as she sat on her bed in Evanston, slurping her drink through her straw. It made Irma nervous, as though Dahlia was screwing around in class and they might both get into trouble.

When Mimi was finished, Oonie looked into the camera frankly. "We have a lot of money," she said. "I'd like to spend some on you."

IRMA HAD, SINCE the wedding, been exchanging emails with Nicholas. She found the process intoxicating, not because the emails were romantic or alluded to their night together in any way—they were mostly about books—but because she was exchanging them with Nicholas. His messages were shorter than hers and arrived a little more slowly, but they were funny and thoughtfully crafted, which Irma took as a form of care.

Tonight, when she finished composing her message to him, she added a

postscript below her name that contained her phone number and asked him to call.

Her phone rang a few minutes later. She was sitting at her desk, reading for Judy's class and intermittently scratching the belly of Anderson Cooper, who lay sprawled across her laptop keys.

"Hello," Nicholas said. "You wanted me to call?"

"Hi." Irma suddenly felt terribly nervous. "I wanted to ask about something...I had a meeting with Oonie Jiri."

"Ah," said Nicholas. "Good for Oonie."

"She invited me to New York—she offered to pay for my plane ticket and my hotel. Maybe as soon as next week. I'd have to miss a bunch of classes, but..."

"That's great," Nicholas said. "I hope you'll take her up on it."

"I think I might." Irma strove to keep her voice cool. "And I was wondering...would you like to get together when I'm there?"

"Sure," Nicholas said. "It would be lovely to see you."

Irma held out her fist for Anderson to bump, but the cat just peered at her and yawned. She was so excited that she scarcely heard what Nicholas said next, except for one word: *Pella*.

"What was that?" she said.

"I just asked whether you knew that Pella and I have been seeing each other," Nicholas said as though this were a perfectly normal, non-earth-shattering sentence.

"Oh," Irma said. "Well, sure. She mentioned it."

"Good," Nicholas said. "Have you told her that you're coming?"

"Um," Irma said. "Not yet."

"She'll be thrilled," Nicholas said. "I'll try not to let the cat out of the bag—but you should tell her soon. Keeping secrets isn't my strong suit."

"I guess not," Irma said.

"Maybe the three of us could grab lunch," Nicholas suggested. "I'm really glad for you, Irma. Oonie's a brilliant leader. The Brightness could do big things for you."

IRMA WALKED INTO town to buy toothpaste, just to have a goal and a destination, then wandered down to the lighthouse and sat on the rocks,

watching the clouds scudding over the lake catch orange reflections of the sunset. Later, as she passed through the VAC parking lot, headed back toward campus, she heard a shout behind her.

“Irma!”

She turned and saw Mike waving from the doors of the VAC. He hurried down the wide stone steps, his bowlegged gait favoring one leg, as though afraid she might run away.

“Hey!” he said. “Glad I ran into you. Where are you headed?”

“Dining hall,” Irma said.

He checked his watch. “You’re not gonna make it. Come on, I’ll buy you a burger. Or a tofu burger.”

“Burger’s fine,” she said.

They walked to Bartleby’s and settled onto stools. Bartleby’s was the main campus bar, and the one where underage drinking was tacitly allowed. A long line of tipsy students wound down the block on weekend nights, most of them fidgeting with fake IDs. Irma had never been inside. She’d heard so many tales of fistfights, hookups, and other Bartleby’s dramas that she felt a little nervous as they entered, but it was seven o’clock on a Monday, and the place had the wholesome sheen of a chain family restaurant, the floor freshly mopped, the wooden tables lemon-waxed. Families munched on fried foods in baskets, toddlers in high chairs bellied up to the ends of their booths. Mike slapped hands with the bartender.

As they sipped their beers, Mike turned to Irma with a very serious expression.

“Irma,” he said. “You’re Pella’s best friend.”

“Mm,” she said.

“I need some insight. I can’t tell what’s going on with her.”

“I think you know her better than anyone,” Irma offered.

“I know I screwed up,” Mike said, his forehead furrowed deep. “I was drunk, I was stoned. I’d take it back if I could.

“She went to Owen’s to have time to think—I understand that. But every day that goes by—” He ran a miserable hand up over his widow’s peak and sighed, searching for a way to express himself. “I worry that poor Contango is starting to lose it. He wanders from room to room, looking for her.”

He looked at Irma expectantly. “You’re in touch with her?”

“Mm,” Irma said.

“It’s not like we don’t talk,” Mike said. “We’ve talked a bunch. But she still hasn’t bought a ticket back. She won’t admit it, but she must be really mad.”

“I don’t know if she’s *mad*,” Irma said vaguely. It was hard to see Mike punishing himself like this. She didn’t want him to suffer, and she didn’t want to tell him what she was pretty sure she knew.

They chewed their burgers. Behind them, a small girl and boy raced back and forth between the jukebox and the dartboards, slapping the jukebox as they arrived. The girl won every time. Irma looked behind the bar, above the rows of glittering bottles, and saw a framed photo of Mike, wearing a polo shirt and smiling, his arms around two smaller men.

Mike ordered them another beer and turned to her. “Do you think I should fly out there?”

Irma looked down. “Probably not,” she said.

“That would be too much?”

She nodded, glad not to need to explain. “Too much.”

“So what should I do?”

Mike’s face, as he looked at her, was shining with forlorn hope. Irma shifted on her stool. *She’s not coming back*, Irma thought. She didn’t know this to be true, but when the thought popped into her head, she realized she believed it. Or feared it so much that it was easy to believe.

Mike needed to know the truth, but Irma did not trust herself to be the one to tell it. She no longer trusted her urge toward truth-telling, which now felt far from objective or disinterested, as she might formerly have characterized it, and carried a strong whiff of ego. Somebody else would have to tell Mike; she hoped it would be Pella.

“Cheers,” she said, and lifted her beer.

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10

Pella sat alone in Nicholas's kitchen, a diagonal rain lashing the windowpane. She'd eaten a bowl of oatmeal, and the empty bowl rested beside her elbow. She sipped her second cup of coffee, eyes glued to her laptop. In the sewing room she'd found a DVD. *Kitchen Film*, read the title card. *By Sylvie Byrnes*.

It had been shot in the room in which Pella was sitting. The camera was fixed in an upper corner, filming at an angle that reminded her of surveillance-camera footage. The appliances were tucked in the same tight configuration—stove, then sink, then fridge—connected by brick-red countertops with a ridged-tin lip. Even the diner-style clock opposite the door looked the same. On the screen, however, the small round table at which Pella sat was absent, the space it occupied consumed by a giant boulder.

As the film begins, a slender woman is seen from behind, her long hair falling almost to the drooping loops of her apron strings. She is cooking, in that compact space, what Pella quickly determined to be a rather complicated and classically French dinner. Mixer, mixing bowls, utensils, and ingredients cover every inch of the counter. Pots occupy all four cramped burners of the stove. A bloody hunk of raw meat slumps on a cutting board. The refrigerator door, blocked by the boulder, can open only partway; the woman snakes her arm into the gap and extracts, just barely, a quart of milk. The successful execution of this movement made Pella want to cheer. These dishes are difficult to cook; a high likelihood of failure looms. Pella felt this as suspense.

While the woman cooks, her every movement balletically measured to deal with the spatial constraints, a young boy sits in a tall chair on the boulder's far side. His hair is sandy and floppy. His shirt is earth-tone

velour. He looks to be Jack's age, three going on four. Crayons and paper rest on his high chair's tray. While he draws, he jabbers and sings at his mother. She jabbers and sings back; you can tell by the way her head dips down and to the right, toward him, during every split-second pause in her cooking. This running exchange was understood by Pella purely from the movement of the boy's mouth and the small bobs and twists of the back of the woman's head. The film has no sound.

The boulder rises high enough into the room that the boy cannot see over it. He presses his hands down on the tray, small arms locked in extension, craning to see her. At one point he begins to cry, and the woman leaves her burbling pots to comfort him. Lithe and intrepid, she scrambles over the boulder on all fours. With a choreographed twist, she slides into the narrow space between boulder and wall. She cups the boy's cheeks and smiles. He ramps up his crying, his face strangled and red, as though the beauty of her smile intensifies unbearable contradictions or as though he cannot complete the fit without reaching a climax. Finished, he beams. She kisses his forehead and scrambles over the boulder again.

As the woman completes each dish, she plates a serving and delivers it to the boy, now scrambling over the boulder to him with the added encumbrance of a full plate, held carefully atop a hand that cannot touch down for balance. The boy begins to eat, by turns puzzled and eager. He's never seen these foods before. He tries to figure out each, grabbing, squeezing, smelling, tasting, engaged in a process of vigorous self-inquiry —*Do I like this?*—that is evident in every deeply concentrated expression of his full-cheeked face. Pella laughed. The boy does not like the haricots verts and tosses a few to the floor. The boy likes the boeuf bourguignon. The flan vanishes in a flash.

The woman begins to wash the dishes and scrub down the stove and counter. When she is finished, she washes the boy's face and hands, squishing them under a damp cloth, while he wriggles and smirks and shrinks. She releases him from the chair, and together they scramble over the boulder, comparably agile in their movements. On the far side, she scoops up the boy and they exit the room. His little hand reaches back to turn out the light.

The film—Pella hadn't realized this before beginning—was two hours long, silent, and she'd watched it from start to finish, spellbound, without so

much as pausing to refresh her coffee. When that little hand reached back to snap off the kitchen light, she awoke as though from a dream—only to find that her surroundings were the same as those in the dream.

She felt an intense sympathy with the cooking woman; she felt an intense sympathy with the boy in the chair, in the corner behind a boulder, jabbering for contact, craning to see. She felt a surprising level of suspense and anticipation as she watched. She winced when the woman opened the oven door only to have it bump against the rock. She delighted in the skillful way the woman managed to insert the flan without unsettling it or burning herself. The woman's back was to the camera most of the time. The rare glimpses of her clever, familiar face were gripping too. Pella knew enough about French cooking to understand what a difficult meal she'd attempted and how beautifully she'd executed it under such confining circumstances. Then there was the fact of the boulder itself.

"Was that a real rock?" she asked Nicholas when she'd gathered the courage (it seemed to require courage) to tell him she'd found and watched the film.

"It's a real rock," he confirmed.

"But...how? How did she get it into the building? How did it not collapse the floor?" Pragmatic questions seemed the easiest to ask.

"The rock is called stose," Nicholas explained. "It's only slightly heavier than pumice. This was the first piece she did in the city after she left my dad. The rock came from our place upstate. She hacked it into pieces, trucked it down, and reassembled it in the room. It was imperative to her that it be one rock. One impediment."

"The patriarchy," Pella said.

Nicholas smiled. "That's one way to put it."

"It reminds me too," Pella said, "of the fertility statues in the sewing room—it has the same squat, mounded shape."

This remark altered Nicholas's expression, which a moment ago had been tolerant and slightly bored—one more rote comment about the patriarchy from one more sexual partner. "Ah," he said. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Your mom's an excellent chef," Pella said. "That was quite a meal she made."

"She never really cooked except while planning that film," Nicholas

said. “She chose those dishes and practiced them again and again. Then it was time to perform, and then it was over.”

“You didn’t eat boeuf bourguignon every Tuesday?”

“I haven’t had it since,” Nicholas said.

Pella could recognize some of the themes: The situation of the woman as artist, executing her craft to perfection, only to have her masterwork sniffed at suspiciously, swallowed or spit out, gobbled up or tossed to the floor by the immature male critic. The darkness of the mother who sees her son that way. Unlike an actual chef, Sylvie—or the woman she played in the film—never sampled the dishes as she prepared them; she didn’t allow her own pleasure and taste to serve as a gauge of success. This was the pain of being an artist, a woman, a mother, a person, in a hateful world. The diligence of the artist and the mother; the futility of the artist and the mother; the way the child was pitted against the artist, the artist against the mother, the mother against the child. And yet the obvious, riveting intimacy of their bond.

What about the boy? Pella wondered. Could the film be said to be about *his* difficulties? Was the film, in some essential sense, about what it was like to be the son of an artist and a second-wave force of nature? Or was Pella, watching the film, more aware than its creator of the boy’s position and the potential for cruelty involved? Such an arrangement—in which the beholder of art believes she can discern the blind spots of the artist—can be a terribly uncomfortable one. But Pella suspected this too was part of the project, that the discomfort of believing she could see Sylvie Byrnes’s blind spots was, to some degree, an effect created by Sylvie with open eyes.

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11

Irma's laptop began bleeping in an unfamiliar way. It was the app she'd downloaded for the meeting with Oonie. She clicked Accept.

Dahlia appeared, wearing fuzzy white pajamas, those beautiful peaks of acne on her cheeks. She had a scrunchie in her mouth. Her hands swirled over her head. "Hmmff," she said.

"Hey!" Irma had been trying to reach Dahlia for days. And when she saw Dahlia's face on the screen, she realized that learning that Nicholas was sleeping with Pella didn't make her want to work for the Brightness any less. In fact she wanted it more, because she wanted to be near Dahlia.

"What did you think?" Irma said.

Dahlia figure-eighted the scrunchie into her hair. "About what?"

"About the meeting."

Dahlia shrugged. "I didn't think much."

"We could reach a lot of people," Irma said. "We could do a lot of good."

"I never even did my homework," Dahlia said. "I can't get a *job*."

"But you'd have me as a partner," Irma said. "I'll do the homework." Vis-à-vis Dahlia, Irma was happy to be the sedulous, workaday one and let Dahlia be the rare and special one. Not because Dahlia was so smart, exactly, but because of that special force or quality Irma sensed in her, the force that pushed events to their conclusions. She felt content to be Dahlia's amanuensis, the transcriber of her actions, like in a biography where the woman, X, gives up her promising artistic career to mix paints for the man, Y. Everywhere else in her life, Irma had ambitions. She wanted to be the principal, the center, the ball of potential—except where Dahlia was concerned. For Dahlia, she just wanted to mix the paints. Mix the paints and be close to her. The only problem was that Dahlia rarely wanted to paint.

“We could record a podcast right here,” Irma said. “My room’s plenty big—you could move in with me and Anderson. We could grab a bed out of basement storage.”

“Ha-ha,” Dahlia said. “What would I eat?”

“I’ll smuggle you food from the dining hall, same way I smuggle milk for Anderson.”

At this Dahlia laughed for real. She seemed delighted by this vision of herself and the cat on equal footing, a pair of illicit pets. Irma had known this would appeal to Dahlia, though the precise nature of the appeal eluded her; something about the freedom and anonymity of being a cat, unregistered and unenrolled, liberated from expectations. “I don’t need a bed,” Dahlia said. “I can sleep on the rug.”

“We’ll get the bed anyway. You can keep your stuff underneath it.”

Dahlia laughed again, and for a brief moment Irma dared to believe she might consider the idea. But Dahlia said—

“Irma, I’m sorry, but you can’t get involved in any of this. A podcast called *The Witches of Westish*? Recorded in your room? Valerie would shut it down so fast.”

“Since when do you care what she thinks?”

“It’s not about her. It’s about you.”

“I can take care of myself,” Irma said.

Dahlia made a pouty little sigh by which Irma felt admonished. “Fine,” Irma said. “I’ve got my truck. I can come down to Evanston on the weekends. We can record at your mom’s house.”

“Irma, you’re not listening. You can’t get mixed up in this.”

“In what?” said Irma, exasperated.

“Do I really need to spell this out? You’re the Westish Scholar. You’re the shining light of the whole institution.”

“I can do what I want.”

“No you can’t. Why do you think Valerie hasn’t called you into her office even once? Because she doesn’t want any whiff of you having been involved. And neither do I.

“You think that deep down everybody’s reasonable and kind and has your best interests at heart. And they do—right up until the moment they don’t.”

“But—”

“Irma, this isn’t smuggling your cat into the dorm. This isn’t *I get straight As, so I can do what I like.* We’re at the point where people care what happens. And when people care what happens, other people get fucked.”

Irma felt both irritated and, though the feeling displeased her, envious of Dahlia. Why did she, Irma, need to be clucked over and kept out of trouble? Why did she need to be the Goody Two-Shoes? Wasn’t it better to do what she’d done on Block Island, better to dare, better to dance, better to get blitzed on champagne and not know quite *what* you were doing, to turn off your squinchy, naysaying Irma-voice and abandon yourself to a braver, baser impulse?

“I could leave school,” she said. “We could make this work.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Dahlia said.

“We could take the deal,” Irma said. Her chest felt fluttery and strange, like she was going to hyperventilate. “Move to New York, do things for the Brightness. Think how much fun it would be. Think of the difference we could make.”

“What difference?”

“You know,” Irma said. “Spreading the message. Smashing the patriarchy.”

“You’re going to host a *podcast* that smashes the patriarchy? You’re going to get a *job* smashing the patriarchy? Come on, Irma. You’re smarter than that.”

Irma fell silent. She was never going to win an argument by claiming that the system could cure its own ills; that was a fallacy any fifth-grader could refute. But she couldn’t help feeling that Dahlia’s attitude was too bleak, more like the Dahlia of two years ago, for whom the fucked-up-ness of everything was an unliftable burden, than the Dahlia of two weeks ago, for whom the fucked-up-ness of everything was a cosmic joke you could stand astride.

“Let me ask you a question,” Dahlia said. “Why do you think Pammy wasn’t at the meeting?”

“Because she’s so in love with Monty that she can’t leave him for an hour.”

“Wrong,” Dahlia said. “Because Molina made Pammy swear to the lawyers she would never speak a word about any of this ever again or else

she'll get kicked out of school. Molina wants to protect her. Ben-Josh's dad and the media and everybody else was, is, up in arms about me, and as long as Molina kicked me out, she could go easy on you guys. You're on the Pammy plan, Irma—you're not on the me plan."

"I didn't sign anything," Irma said.

"You didn't have to. You signed it by being you."

"What's that mean?"

"It means the project was my idea," Dahlia said. "And I never intended to get you in trouble."

"I'm tired of being the good one," Irma said.

She looked out the window, down on the quad. A dim figure passed on a bike. The tech-blue lights of security phones hovered in the darkness.

"Look, I'm sorry I got you mixed up in this," Dahlia said. "I'm a shitty person sometimes. Lots of the time."

You're not a shitty person, Irma thought. *You're the best person.* A knot rose in her throat like she might cry. "What about you?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Who knows?" Dahlia said. "Probably not much."

"But what will you say to Oonie?"

"I don't know." Dahlia sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should do something for them."

Whereupon Irma was back where she started, awash in exasperation and envy and feeling that Dahlia was having her cake and eating it too, being both the persecuted and the celebrated one, the sufferer and the success story, while Irma stared at her homework.

"Oh, crap, my mom's yelling at me about something. I gotta go."

"Bye," said Irma to the already blackening screen.

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12

Owen and Martin are coming home tomorrow," Pella said as she and Nicholas lay in bed together. To say so made her nervous, and when Nicholas did not reply—his eyes were half closed—she jumped in to fill the silence:

"Hard to believe it's been almost a month."

"Time flies," murmured Nicholas from behind heavy lids, "when you're having fun."

"It sure does," Pella agreed. She felt so thoroughly at his mercy that it delighted her to an absurd degree to hear him say he was having fun with her—even though what he'd said had been pure cliché, and in the second person to boot, so the person having fun, in the syntax of the sentence, was she. That was undeniable: She was having fun.

"But it's more than just fun," she said. "Don't you think?"

"Absolutely," said Nicholas as his voice slipped toward sleep. "It's divine to have you here."

Another silly bolt of pleasure shot through Pella. "Divine fun," she agreed. "That's what we're having." She paused, unsure how to make progress with the topic she'd already broached. "But Owen and Martin will be back tomorrow. I'm not sure what happens next."

His eyes fell fully closed. "What would you like to happen?" murmured the lips that were, on that beautiful, pillow-framed face, the only moving thing.

"I'm not sure," Pella said. But when she looked at him, her blood sang with sureness: *I want to sleep with you forever.*

"It sounds like you want to stay."

In the ten or so days since she'd first seen *Kitchen Film,* she'd continued watching it in a slow perpetual loop, holding her phone on the subway or

propping it against a pint glass on a slow night at the Dark Farm, making it the backdrop to her days. When she looked at Nicholas now, she saw echoes of his childhood self, and this sense of long acquaintance, of having known him as a small and vulnerable boy, felt tantamount to love.

"What do *you* want?" she asked.

"I want," he mumbled, "to be a force for good in your life."

He was very nearly asleep. Pella touched his shoulder. "Nicholas?"

"Yes?"

"I—I kind of need to know what's happening with us."

At this, Nicholas roused himself, and he sat up against the headboard. Something harsh and adamant glinted in his eye.

"If you're thinking of moving to New York," he said, "then as your friend, I support you. But if you want a fiancé, keep the one you have."

"Who said anything about fiancés?" Pella was taken aback by his tone. Her own aspired to lightness: "We could just be a couple."

Nicholas looked annoyed, perhaps due to the crudity with which Pella was forcing him to express himself. "We're not a couple," he said.

Pella's heart sank. "I've had an amazing month."

"So have I."

"So couldn't we have more amazing months?"

"Maybe," Nicholas said. "But not like this one. To be frank, I've been arranging my life a certain way on the assumption that our time was short."

"Oh," Pella said.

"I've been neglecting my work, and my friends, and even my mom."

This mention of Sylvie saddened Pella all the more. How badly she wanted to meet the creator of *Kitchen Film*, which was fast becoming her favorite piece of art; how tantalizingly plausible such a meeting seemed, and yet so far away from happening.

Nicholas wasn't neglecting *all* his quote-unquote friends; she'd found a scrunchie in his bed the other night. "I'm sorry to have been a disruption," she said.

"That's not what I meant," Nicholas replied. "I've been spending time with you of my own volition. But if you're planning to stay, we'll have to cut back."

Misery spread through Pella. If she stayed, she'd see less of Nicholas. If she left, she'd see none. These weren't the options she wanted.

“Romance isn’t a relay race,” Nicholas said. “I’m not here to pick up where Mike left off and carry your engagement over the finish line. We’re starting at the beginning, as near strangers who have a fair amount in common.”

Pella wasn’t about to argue, but she suspected that romance *was* a bit like a relay race—people were always escalating from one relationship to the next. You didn’t start over from scratch. You started from where you were.

“I don’t expect you to pick up where Mike left off,” she said. “It’s just hard to imagine blowing up my life without—”

“Without what? Assurances? There are no assurances, Pella.”

She leaned back on the pillow and sighed. “I know,” she said.

He turned to her and kissed her, very gently at first.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON when she got back from dance class, Pella made a pot of chickpea stew. She arranged the flowers she’d bought while shopping and lit candles in the dining room. She expected Owen and Martin, after their twenty-one-hour flight, to stumble in deliriously and fall into bed, but she wanted the place to look nice nonetheless.

They entered looking remarkably fresh, or at least Owen did, and Pella marveled once again at the radiance that seemed always to beam from his person. Martin owed his version of radiance to a vivid sunburn. Among their bags were several bottles of choice New Zealand wine.

“It looks lovely in here,” Martin said as they hugged hello. “I’m sorry to have left you such a mess.”

“It’s very hygge,” Owen agreed. “We should keep you on retainer.”

Martin went to shower while Owen uncorked the wine. Soon they were arranged around the dining-room table, the chandelier dimmed, the candles waving, spooning up their stew. Owen and Martin described the sublime immensity of the outback. Pella described her dance classes and the Dark Farm and how she’d grown friendly with Vivian and Jack, not mentioning the long hours she’d been working and the four thousand dollars stashed in her room’s little bureau.

“Have you made plans to head back to Westish?” Owen asked as he uncorked the second bottle.

Pella sheepishly said that she had not.

“There’s no rush at all,” Martin said. “Just keep us posted.”

Owen nodded. “We’ve been talking about renting your room to have some extra income. We’ve been talking”—he and Martin exchanged a glance—“about having a child.”

“A child!” Pella felt so overcome by sentimental gladness that she had to blink back a tear. “Owen, Martin, that’s wonderful. I’m so excited for you.”

“Not anytime soon,” Owen clarified as he blushed adorably. Pella reached across the table to hold his hand. “In the medium-longish term. But we have to start planning now.”

Martin, in his paterfamilias way, gave an authoritative nod. “Children are expensive. Especially when you’re incapable of generating them yourself. I know couples who spent over three hundred thousand when all was said and done.”

“Three hundred thousand!” Pella exclaimed. “For what?”

“Well, for starters, fifty thousand for the egg.”

“Fifty thousand!” Pella couldn’t stop repeating numbers. “I have eggs.”

“Fifty thousand’s top of the line,” Martin said. “Harvard- or Yale-type eggs.”

“And what, exactly, are you implying about Westish eggs?” Owen asked indignantly.

Martin swallowed a bite of stew and grinned at them both, enjoying his half-feigned Harvard snobbery. “I’m saying thirty-five, max.”

“I want social intelligence,” Owen said. “I want a scrappy, can-do spirit.” He turned to Pella. “*I* think you’re worth at least forty.”

“Thank you,” Pella said.

“Then there’s the womb,” Martin said. “That’s the really pricey part. There’s a range there too. Depending on whether you want a domestic carrier.”

“What’s a domestic carrier?” Pella asked. “JetBlue?”

“For a sense of humor like that,” Owen declared, “I’d be willing to go forty-five.”

“A child-bearer who lives in the US,” Martin explained. “It’s cheaper to find someone in India or Brazil.”

“How much for the wet nursing?” Pella asked.

“That you can name your price on,” Martin said solemnly, as though

Pella's question had been sincere. "Breastfeeding is highly sought after these days."

"I find it all pretty frightful," Owen said. "The fetal economy."

"Owen wants to adopt," Martin told Pella as he headed for the bathroom. "But I want a child who looks like Owen."

"Who doesn't?" Pella said.

The moment Martin left the dining room, Owen fixed his soft gray eyes on Pella. "I don't want to do some all-knowing gay-best-friend thing," he said. "But you look like you've been having a lot of sex."

"Mm," Pella said.

"With Nobody," Owen guessed.

Pella shrugged. Owen's eyes met hers again, this time with doting seriousness. "Tell me," he said. "What's going on between you two?"

"I don't know." Pella had been thinking about it all day. She agreed with the very reasonable opinions Nicholas expressed last night: They were far from being in a relationship, and if she decided to move to New York, it shouldn't be because of him. But the adamant harshness that flashed in his eyes—that had been something new. It seemed to suggest a firm internal limit, a barrier that would never be broken down. He hadn't lost his composure exactly, but he'd momentarily abandoned his charm. And then they'd slept together, more movingly than ever, and in the morning they'd done so again.

"I won't press you," Owen said. "But in case you were wondering, we were thinking a thousand a month for the room."

The bathroom door creaked, and Martin's footsteps padded down the hall. Owen pushed back his chair. "And now I'm crazed with jet lag," he announced. "Thank you for dinner, my dear."

PELLA LAY AWAKE in her little bed. Why had she started crying when Owen and Martin revealed that they might have a baby? Why had she wept so hard at their wedding? What was it about other people's marriages and other people's pregnancies that moved and elated her when she felt so ambivalent about these prospects for herself?

She missed Mike, in a dense atmospheric way, as the lodestone of her life at Westish, her house and dog and garden, the sunrises over the lake.

But could she fly back to Westish and marry him? Could she look at him the way Owen and Martin had looked at each other tonight? Could he look at her that way after this month she'd spent with Nicholas and now that she was becoming—as she sensed happening—a different person?

Maybe she didn't want to go home. Maybe she wanted to keep sleeping with Nicholas, even if they weren't a couple and destined never to be. Maybe she wanted to babysit a three-year-old, tend bar at a brewery, and watch *Kitchen Film* on repeat. Maybe she wanted to pay a thousand dollars a month for a room barely bigger than she. Maybe she wanted to go to Camila's class every morning even though she could barely touch her toes. *Yudu yubu.*

She picked up her phone and called Nicholas. She assumed he would be with a friend, but he answered right away.

"Look," she said. "If I stay in New York for a while, I won't be staying for you."

"Oh?" he said, a smile in his voice.

"Fine," Pella said. "I'll be staying for you. But I'll be staying for you for me. I'm old enough to know the difference. I don't expect you to upend your life for me."

"Okay," he said. "What are you doing Saturday night?"

In the morning she called Mike and told him she wouldn't be coming home.

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13

The middle days of October were blisteringly warm on the Westish campus, and every afternoon felt like ersatz summer. Irma, dazed and sweaty, saw herself from above, an ant tracing and retracing a trail for no reason, as she traipsed from lecture hall to library, dining hall to home. She tried to concentrate on her to-do list—class with Judy, grad-school applications, the first chapter of her thesis—but for the first time in her life, schoolwork felt trivial. She thought about what Pella and Nicholas might be doing in New York: She pictured them in velvety concert halls, cozy restaurants, a rowboat in Central Park. She heard from Dahlia sporadically, though news of Dahlia was everywhere.

In the weeks since Dahlia had tattooed herself, she'd become more and more of a national figure—the holy avatar of a new anti-rape movement if you were one kind of person, and a societal blight who needed to be silenced if you were a certain other kind.

The last time Dahlia returned one of Irma's calls, it was to report, without any emotion in her tone, that she'd accepted Oonie's offer and signed a contract to work for the Brightness. Her duties, as she yawningly described them, included hosting online forums and writing short articles for the website, both of which were impossible for Irma to imagine her doing. But the core of her job was to cohost the Brightness's new flagship podcast, which would be titled, simply, *Dahlia and Oonie Live*.

"They offered me two forty," she told Irma nonchalantly.

Irma's brain spun through various calculations of what *two forty* might mean. None of them made much sense. "An episode?"

"Thousand," Dahlia said. "Per year."

Irma was too dumbfounded to reply.

"It's just a New York salary," Dahlia said. "I'm supposed to use it to pay

rent in some fancy brownstone. But instead I live with my mom."

It was, as so often with Dahlia, hard to tell how to parse this remark—whether Dahlia considered herself to be savvily performing geographical arbitrage, socking away money instead of blowing it on brownstone rent, or whether she considered herself pathetic for failing to leave her childhood room.

"That's...that's so much money." This wasn't what Irma had intended to say, but she was shocked. Irma had, at Dahlia's urging, backed away from Oonie's advances. But what if she hadn't? Even if the Brightness paid her half as much to be Dahlia's sidekick and interlocutor, that would be a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Enough to fix up her parents' farmhouse and pry them out of debt.

"Only if I keep the job," Dahlia said. "I doubt I'll last two months."

In preparation for the podcast's launch, the Brightness had run an article about Dahlia that amounted to a celebrity profile. Titled "Styles of Radical Witch," it consisted almost entirely of photographs of Dahlia in up-to-the-minute outfits, her makeup professionally done, her hair tucked smartly behind one ear. The words RAPE VICTIM had faded from her forehead to the absolutely perfect degree, so they hovered there, just barely traced, in a ghostly and stylish gray.

Irma wasn't sure about the politics of running celebrity profiles of newly minted feminist icons, especially ones employed by the website running those profiles, but she couldn't tear herself away from the photos, in which Dahlia looked so conventionally gorgeous that to stare at them, as Irma did incessantly, caused her physical pain. She was, suddenly, far from the only person entranced by Dahlia's beauty. It was amazing how swiftly Dahlia had gone from being utterly anonymous even on the Westish campus to being considered one of the hotter women around. Her social media following included not just Lana Del Rey and Oonie Jiri but dozens of A-list singers, actors, and influencers, male and female alike, who flooded her posts with adoring remarks.

The posts tended to appear in the wee hours and consisted of rants against the patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and anyone who had attacked Dahlia online. Irma had several times tried to dissuade Dahlia from posting so often, or at all. "Shouldn't you just let this all die down?" she asked.

"Easy for you to say," replied Dahlia. "You're not the one getting

trashed nonstop.”

It was true that many mean and terrible things were being said about Dahlia, often to huge audiences. Hunter Stroman had devoted four—and counting—segments of his show to her villainy. A recently elected thirty-something member of Congress had tweeted, Somebody should pound some sense into that Dahlia girl. In the replies below, hundreds of men volunteered for the job.

IRMA WANTED NOTHING to do with the Dahlia-as-celebrity movement—or maybe she wanted everything to do with it in a way that felt impossible to tolerate. She had decided to avoid the live pilot episode of Dahlia and Oonie’s podcast and declined when Pammy offered to bring over beer for a listening party. She was trying to become the old Irma again—the one who studied all night and filtered out everything else. She was trying not to waste her time imagining an alternate world in which she was the cohost of *Dahlia and Irma Live.*

When the appointed Wednesday evening rolled around, she was sitting at her desk, the sun just set, the Small Quad bathed in a rose-tinged dusk beyond her open windows. She was drinking spearmint tea and attempting to draft some paragraphs of her thesis longhand, her laptop resolutely closed and pushed away. The chapel bells began to toll their lugubrious song.

When the bells concluded, Irma couldn’t believe her ears. Dahlia’s voice seemed to be wafting toward her from several directions. Irma couldn’t make out the words, but it was plainly Dahlia’s timbre and cadence—rolling, droll, melodic, caffeinated; mesmeric and jarring at once. The sound rose through the floorboards from the room below Irma’s, which belonged to sophomore girls Irma had only ever nodded at in passing, and drifted faintly through the window from rooms around the quad, Dahlia’s voice blurred by the varying speeds of streaming devices. The Dahlia-voice paused and another took its place, a voice deeper and slower in cadence, with which Irma was also familiar.

In a flash, Irma realized how big Dahlia’s podcast was going to be. Dahlia wasn’t Westish-famous, the way certain cool and popular students were; just the opposite. Her fame had now sailed so far out into the world

that it could boomerang and return. She'd become famous enough that Westish College, or at least a contingent of female students, would now reclaim her. Those sophomore girls weren't listening because Dahlia had been their schoolmate—they were listening because so many girls *out there* were listening, and the taut force of their joint attention sent Dahlia's fame bouncing back to Westish—the place that had always been most indifferent to her and most likely to consign her to the banality of the known.

Irma shut the windows and tried to keep writing.

> "Good wombs can produce bad sons," says Miranda—a line that might, if we were inclined, shed a modicum of suspicion on Prospero's dissings of Sycorax. After all, even if Caliban, the attempted rapist, is a monstrously unpleasant figure (and he himself not without pathos), this might not be his mother's fault. Both Miranda and Caliban have been deprived of the presence of the mother, who becomes either an absolute blank or a figure of absolute blame.

She set down her pen, unable to concentrate. Dahlia's voice, or an indistinct echo thereof, continued to seep through the floorboards. It didn't help that the opening chapter of Irma's thesis, tentatively titled "Pregnancy and Prophecy: Two Ways for Women to Stay Alive Under Capitalism," was about *The Tempest* and reminded her of Dahlia constantly. With a full-body shiver that was tantamount to a prayer, she opened her laptop and navigated to the Brightness. Feeling that it might be too much to see Dahlia's and Oonie's faces, she turned on the audio-only version and crawled into bed.

"What do you know about hysteria?" Dahlia cheerfully asked.

"Tell me," Oonie said.

Dahlia described to a rapt Oonie how the word *hysteria* came from the Greek word meaning "of the womb" and thus applied only to women. She chatted for a while about Freud's early treatments of women in a way that suggested she'd spent much of the day on Wikipedia, prepping.

All this was embarrassingly rudimentary, from Irma's point of view, and lacked Dahlia's usual verve, but if Dahlia wanted to use her quote-unquote platform to deliver remedial women's studies lectures, then perhaps this was some kind of mild social good, or at least not the worst use of Dahlia's

time. Maybe she was being fed this stuff by a maladroit Brightness producer, or maybe she was simply trying to start her new job on her best behavior. Irma slipped from bed and, with a strange combination of disappointment and relief, closed the podcast and sent Dahlia a text:

You sound amazing! So proud of you, Dahl!

She tried to return to her work, but before she'd written a single sentence, a Cloister from Pammy popped up.

D's on Hunter S again.

Irma watched first with the sound off, cringing. Hunter Stroman sat at his desk, hands folded somberly before him, jacket off and sleeves rolled high in what might have been a weird counter-homage to the president.

The first graphics shown over his shoulder were idyllic photos of Westish culled from the school website: The morning sun peeking over the lake, lending a lovely tinge of rose to the gray stone buildings. Students lounging on blankets on the quad, books open before them. Football players celebrating after a victory, their navy helmets held aloft. Then a photo of Dahlia from her Brightness shoot in a top that showed a surprising amount of cleavage. The host sat stock-still with folded hands, only his mouth alive.

Six minutes in, having retained his teacherly calm for so long that his authority had become unquestionable, Hunter Stroman began to move as he spoke, leaning forward and back, swaying in circles. His broad face added to its summer-camp tan new and strengthening shades of red. Suddenly he lunged diagonally forward, his left hand leaving the frame. When it returned, Irma was stunned to see it brandishing a copy of Owen's novel. Irma clicked the sound on, just for a second, her fingertip hovering.

"The quintessential American ivory-tower experience circa 2015, where for the low, low price of two hundred thousand dollars, your child can be groomed for gay sex by the sixty-year-old president of his college and then go on to write a bestselling novel about how brainwashed he is and how wonderful it all was. I can only imagine how Osama Bin Dahlia will cash in on her newfound fame as the face of radical gender terrorism. There's something in the water up there at Westish College, and it ain't just fluoride, my friends. It's extremism. The current president of Westish, Mexican immigrant Valerie Molina, might not be a pedophile like her predecessor—we're checking on that—but she's utterly failed to maintain—"

Irma clicked the sound back off. The photo of Dahlia in her low-cut

dress returned to the screen. Irma clapped her computer shut and tried to go to sleep.

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14

It was Friday night, and the Dark Farm was humming. No empty booths, hardly an open seat at the bar, and despite the harsh wind off the river, a birthday party outside at the picnic tables, the guests downing round after round. Pella felt light and graceful as she cycled through her tasks.

Jack was long asleep, and Vivian was sitting in a booth with three men, two of whom wore the trim sport coats and winter tans of substantial wealth. The third man, tubby and pink-faced, was draped in a long smock of purple corduroy, a Mets cap atop his head.

The Dark Farm didn't offer table service, but Pella, sensing these guests were important, behaved as if it did. She dropped off round after round of tasting glasses, plucking up empties as she left. The foursome politely ignored her until, several trips in, Vivian touched her arm:

"Pella, have a seat. I want to introduce you."

Pella glanced back at the other bartender, who was busy swapping out the lager keg.

"Don't worry about Juan," Vivian said. "If he gets slammed, I'll go help."

Pella squeezed into the booth and was offered first pick of the tasting glasses she'd just delivered. She chose Elektra Complex, the Dark Farm standby. Vivian smiled.

Vivian's hair was down tonight, her makeup in rosy shades, the V of her wrap top exposing extra tendrils of tattoo. Lightly she brushed silvery crinkles of hair out of her eyes as she laughed at much that was said.

Vivian did this on occasion, called in Pella when entertaining people, especially men, she wanted to impress. "Pella's my right-hand woman," she said now by way of introduction.

The men all smiled at Pella. "Hi," she said.

The man in purple corduroy turned out to be a famous restaurateur named Marcus Qualley; the tanned duo were his business partners. Recently returned from a tour of Iceland and rural Scandinavia, he described meals of fermented shark meat and aquavit and the local fervor for horse tartare with salty gusto. What seemed to be at stake this evening was the serving of Dark Farm beer in Qualley's string of successful restaurants, but the conversation ran to dreamier notions: What if the Dark Farm opened a bar in Manhattan? What if Qualley opened a spot here in Red Hook? What would it look like if they all joined forces? Pella suspected that no such partnerships were being considered—all this brainstorming and bonhomie was merely in the service of the evening's pleasure.

She finished her beer and glanced toward the bar. "I should get back to work," she said. "It was lovely to meet you."

"Before you go," Qualley said, "where are you from?"

Pella hesitated. All her life, she'd answered this question by saying she was from Boston or Cambridge. But she hadn't set foot in either in half a lifetime. Having come *to* New York had somehow altered where she'd come *from*.

"Wisconsin," she said.

"What do they eat there?" Qualley asked. "Don't say cheese."

Pella pondered. What was the best meal she'd eaten in Wisconsin? It might have been one she'd prepared herself, but she couldn't say that. Four faces gazed at her expectantly. She thought of the scallops she'd eaten at Qualley's restaurant in Chelsea on a rare night out with Nicholas and how sweet and delectable they'd been. Her mind fell quiet; in the silence a voice floated up. The voice belonged to Irma: *With the huge black cauldron, like something out of* Macbeth.

"Have you been to a fish boil?" she said.

"No." Qualley leaned back contentedly. "What's that like?"

"It's whitefish from Lake Michigan," she said. "Fresh-caught. With red potatoes. Cooked outdoors in a cauldron."

"It's good," said Qualley—a kind of prompt or question.

"Very," Pella confirmed. She began to attempt to describe the fish boil, the taste of the whitefish, the feel of the lakeside setting, but she was hurrying, worried about wasting Marcus Qualley's time, and her haste caused her to stumble. Sentences trailed off, derailed by *like*s and *um*s. She

was trapped in the wrong reminiscence, recalling not the fish boil itself but Irma's unexpected mention of it on the phone when they were making up after the wedding, before Irma stopped returning her calls. Pella felt her cheeks redden.

Qualley, with a smile both imperious and kind, held up a hand.

"Slow down," he said. "Take us there."

Pella nodded. She drew in a deep breath, exhaled, and tried to attend to what she was seeing. A bright weekend in early September, the start of her junior year. Driving up to Door County on a sun-drenched Saturday, Irma behind the wheel of her massive truck, the fresh green leaves aglitter. Checking into the inn, hurrying down to the lawn overlooking the bay, where the fish boil was beginning. She'd loved that meal so much—the pageantry, the setting, and especially the food. She began to tell the story. Qualley smiled and closed his eyes.

Two hundred people gathered around a cast-iron cauldron on a cool summer night. The fat-bellied cauldron hung from a tripod and chains. Beneath it, quartered logs were stacked in a pyramid. A tall, avuncular man with a creased face chatted to the crowd while lighting the fire. Like a crafty magician, he seemed to both explain and obscure the movements of his hands. The water came to a boil.

"And then the man—they don't give women jobs like this, do they?—pours into the cauldron a sparkling column of white salt." The flowing column twinkled in Pella's mind. The salt continued to fall. "A shocking amount of salt," she said. "Pounds and pounds of salt."

Qualley, who'd seemed asleep, fluttered his eyes and nodded. *Ah*, said his expression. *I know what that's about.*

Pella realized suddenly that she did too. When she and Irma attended the fish boil, she hadn't understood the purpose of the salt and feared it would ruin the fish. But now she saw the reason. She felt herself to be at the fish boil, witnessing it just as she'd done on that September evening—but she was a different person now, one who'd begun to understand, at least in its rudiments, the chemistry of food.

Vivian tapped Pella's shoulder. Pella assumed this was a cue to get back to work, but Vivian only wanted to slide out of the booth. Having done so, she motioned for Pella to sit back down. "Keep talking," she called as she headed toward the bar. "I'll be back."

Pella kept talking. Huge netted baskets of small red potatoes were lowered into the cauldron's water. Later, in their own netted baskets, the chunks of whitefish were added.

When the fish was nearly finished, the master of the boil poured a small quantity of kerosene into a coffee can. ("I knew it," murmured Qualley.) His assistant stood behind him holding a long pole planted in the ground like the pike of a knight at arms. The boil master asked the crowd to step back. He flung the kerosene onto the fire. With a *whoooosh*, the fire soared, engulfing not only the cauldron but the structure from which it hung in a tower of orange flame. As the flames diminished, the cauldron boiled over in a white rush of foam.

The assistant stepped forward with his pole. He slid it into the water and through the netting. He and the boil master, from opposite sides of the cauldron, hoisted out the sacks of whitefish and potatoes.

Qualley slapped the table with delight. "Simple food," he said. "That's what I'm talking about."

"Why the whole show with the kerosene?" one of the partners asked. "Just for kicks?"

Qualley looked at Pella. *I know,* his cheerful, rheumy eyes said. *Do you?*

Pella returned his glance. *I think so*.

Then answer the man.

"Not just for kicks," Pella said. "Remember all that salt we poured in before? You might think it's for flavor, but no. The salt raises the specific gravity of the water. The water gets heavy, like the ocean. When the water gets heavy, the fish oils float. Then all the oils are on the surface, so when the kerosene-bomb boils the kettle over, the fish oils pour over the sides. Boil and bubble, toil and trouble."

"If you *didn't* boil it over," Qualley added, "you'd need to rinse the fish —and when you're talking fish for two hundred people, that would be a royal pain in the ass. It's ingenious. It's magnificent."

"Yes," Pella said. She was impressed by how quickly Qualley had figured it out.

"What do they serve with the fish?" Qualley asked.

Pella described the lemon and melted butter, the coleslaw and the bread. Qualley leaned back against the pew-like wooden booth and folded his hands over his corduroy-clad potbelly. "And for dessert?"

Pella smiled. “The best cherry pie you’ve ever had.”

Qualley sighed as contentedly as if he’d just eaten the last slice. “Door County cherries—I’ve heard about this. Tell me.”

Pella described the cherry pie. Vivian returned, carrying a fresh tray of beers and smiling fondly at Pella. Qualley shot a puzzled glance at the newly arrived tray. More drinking, it seemed, was not on his agenda.

“Can we peek at your setup?” he asked. “I’m curious.”

“Sure,” Vivian replied. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Qualley was ready. He slid his belly out from the table and stood. “Thank you,” he said to Pella as he shook her hand. “You planted a seed in my brain tonight. You really took me there.”

“You’re welcome,” Pella said.

The next day, Qualley’s restaurants signed on to serve Dark Farm beer and were designated by Vivian as the number-one account.

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15

On the night before Thanksgiving, Pella and Nicholas went to a party.

They'd been seeing each other twice a week—maybe three times if Pella texted him while closing the Dark Farm and he was home and invited her over. This, Pella knew, was the proper dose of Nicholas. Enough to leave some spaciousness, which she used to go to dance class and push Jack on the swings and read the books and pamphlets she borrowed from the sewing-room shelves. But it was Nicholas, not she, who enforced the dose.

When they disembarked the L at Morgan Avenue, the night felt unseasonably warm, much warmer than when they'd boarded the train. A stifling wind billowed down the avenue, as though the world were a subway grate. She slid her fingers between Nicholas's as they headed up the street. He turned toward her and smiled.

Pinned to his denim jacket was a large blue button that read ACCOUNTANTS FOR BERNIE. His eyes twinkled, and Pella could tell he was determined to have a good time. She found this puckish mode of his magnetic, not to mention sexy—but she also sensed the gap between their hopes. Nicholas was driving north tomorrow to spend the holiday weekend with his mother, and he wasn't looking forward to it. This lent tonight a slightly desperate urgency: He wanted to squeeze in several nights of fun, whereas Pella wanted to squeeze in several nights of Nicholas. What she really wanted was to be invited upstate to meet Sylvie and not to spend Thanksgiving alone, but she'd made no progress in that regard.

A couple was standing outside the metal door of an old factory building, waiting to be admitted. The man was fiftyish, tall and potbellied, in a black suit and Leonard Cohen hat. The woman was Nicholas's age, frail and comely, with dark feathered bangs and a Spanish accent. She and Nicholas

greeted each other with familiar kisses. Introductions were made among the foursome, the names washed out by passing cars.

A buzzer sounded, and they rode a service elevator to the top floor. The elevator and halls were littered with trash and scrawled with inept graffiti, but the loft they entered, the home of some well-known sculptor, smelled of money and cantaloupe. Many, many people milled in the dimness. The DJ, someone said, was from São Paolo.

Before long, Pella lost sight of Nicholas. She poured herself wine from a host of bottles standing on a sideboard. A tall lanky guy with gray curly hair approached and asked her name. His T-shirt said FORTY-THREE YEARS, NO COMPLAINTS. Pella wondered whether this was intended to mean he had no complaints to lodge or that none had been lodged against him, but she didn't want to seem interested enough to ask. "Sarah," she said.

He grinned at her shrewdly, radiating the unearned cockiness of guys who have drugs. Pella/Sarah shrugged and followed him. She did one line, hoping that it would shift her into the spirit of the party and to prove to herself she still knew how. Most of the coke she'd snorted in her life had been snorted in this very neighborhood at vastly scuzzier versions of this party on visits from Tellman Rose.

She slipped away from FORTY-THREE YEARS. The loft, she realized, contained many of the artist's sculptures, human-size figures that blended confusingly into the crowd and turned out on closer inspection to possess the ball-shaped noses and bald-topped, bushy-fringed hairdos of old-timey clowns. She was already regretting the coke. An outside energy had invaded her and was working at cross-purposes with her own. The only way to dispel it would be to find Nicholas and do something sexual—the atmosphere seemed to encourage it—but Nicholas was nowhere to be found.

She sank down on a sleek buttoned couch and pulled out her phone. As she scrolled and bounced, a text popped up from Irma. They hadn't spoken in two months.

Hey, Irma wrote. You there?

I am! Pella replied. What's up?

Not a lot. Just wanted to say hi. How's NYC?

It's good. Pella tried to think of details that would corroborate this claim

without mentioning Nicholas. I've been working at a brewery. Did you meet that woman Vivian at the wedding?

Don't think so.

Right, she was only there for the rehearsal. Anyway, it's a craft-beer place. I'm a bartender, basically.

Cool. Listen, have you talked to Mike lately?

No.

Oh. Did you hear?

Hear what?

That he's going out with Caroline Carapelli.

"Going out" with her?

They're pretty much joined at the hip. Check her Insta.

Pella felt a surge of rage. Her fingers flew:

THAT's why you wrote me, I? You wrote to tell me THAT?

I just figured you'd want to know.

Thanks, Pella typed.

Here was Irma in her most exasperating mode, reaching out and avenging herself at the same time. Pella flipped her phone into airplane mode and jammed it in her bag.

Feeling half deranged, she wandered the party looking for Nicholas. He wasn't in the crowd by the bar, nor was he dancing—he was nowhere at all, it seemed. Finally she found a hallway and followed it.

On a couch in the far corner, two people were entwined. One of them, as Pella knew instantly though she could only see his back, was Nicholas. The other looked up and saw her. It was the woman from the couple they'd walked in with, the one with the feathered hair. Nicholas was kissing her neck.

The woman made eye contact with Pella, her expression dreamily abstract, full of the pleasures of drugs and of Nicholas's tongue on her skin. She seemed to be asking Pella what Pella wanted her to do. Pella, somehow heartened by this deference, found it in herself to smile. She turned around and walked out of the room.

PELLA SPRAWLED ACROSS her twin bed, scrolling through Caroline's feed. Mike and Caroline couldn't have been dating for more than a month, but

they each looked healthier and happier than Pella remembered. They'd been working out together.

In one clip, Caroline faced away from the camera, framed by an iron rack. Her coarse dark brown Carapelli hair was knotted high and tight on her head, the long bar laid across her thrown-back shoulders, heavy weights at the ends. White talc dusted the backs of her hands as she wriggled her shoulders and screwed her palms into the gritted texture of the bar. She hoisted the bar off the rack, took one wobbling backward step, and gathered herself to stand tall. She inhaled and sank into a deep squat that brought her butt to her heels. She shot upward as though leaping, then dropped her butt to her heels again. And again. And again. She staggered forward, let the bar crash onto the rack, and turned to the camera with a smile.

"Great work," Mike said from behind the phone.

Pella clicked to another video. Caroline and Mike stood with their backs to each other. Mike swung his big arms, dipped his knees, and leaped onto a box taller than his waist. Caroline did the same. They each stepped one foot backward, dangling that leg and dropping down to the concrete floor. They swung and dipped and jumped again and again, bobbing their heads in time to the background music. After thirty jumps they turned to face each other. Mike extended a fist. Caroline bumped it with her smaller one. Caroline jogged toward the camera, her body filling the frame, and reached down to press the red button.

The way they moved in concert. The way they bumped fists! The intimacy implied left Pella lost and reeling. She would rather have watched them having sex.

Owen and Martin had gone to Martin's parents for Thanksgiving. They'd invited Pella, but she was working tomorrow, and it had seemed pointless to go for a night. Now she regretted it. She'd spent some awkward Thanksgivings in her life, especially during her marriage to David, but she'd never spent one alone.

Around noon, Nicholas called. Pella let it ring through, but what was she going to do, ignore him forever? Might as well get it over with—whatever *it* turned out to be.

"Hey," she said. "How was the party?"

"The party was fine," he replied. "But where were you?"

She told him about how she'd walked in on him.

“You could have interrupted,” he said.

“I know,” Pella said. “But I didn’t want to.”

Nicholas sighed. “I suppose that’s your prerogative,” he said. “But as you know, I tried to phone you multiple times. I was worried something happened.”

“I texted you,” Pella said. “I told you I went home.”

“I know. But you didn’t tell me why. And so I worried.”

I love you, Pella thought. *I love you and I’m a mess.* She was standing on Owen’s fire escape. Below her, a boy of ten or eleven had climbed onto the roof of a parked SUV and was striking superhero poses for his friends.

I’m sorry to have made you feel awkward,” Nicholas said. “It wasn’t what I intended. We did some drugs and one thing led to another. If you’d stayed at the party, I wouldn’t have taken her home.”

They were together but not together, close but often apart. She was in love and pretending not to be. He was seeing other people, sometimes when she was in the next room. What could be confusing about that?

For all Pella’s craving of Nicholas, she could see there was something in his independence, his selfishness, the wide margin he claimed for himself, that was part of her craving. It wasn’t only that he made himself scarce, and what was scarce was sexy—though of course that was true. It was also a kind of envy. She wanted to be like him. She wanted to be that independent, that selfish, that free. What she didn’t want, unfortunately, was to sleep with anyone but him.

“What was her name?” Pella asked.

“Her name is Nicky. She’s a friend from Barcelona. She was passing through town.”

“Nicky,” Pella repeated.

“Nicolasa,” he said. “Yes.”

The adroitness of his pronunciation annoyed her. “That must be awkward when you’re having sex. Not knowing whose name you’re yelling.”

“Actually, it’s perfect,” Nicholas said. “I can yell my own name with impunity.”

Goddamn it, Pella thought. *He even does the jokes better than I do.*

“She’s an old friend,” said Nicholas gently. “We’ve known each other fifteen years.”

“She’s aging well,” Pella said. “To hold your attention.”

“There are several ways to hold my attention,” Nicholas said.

They both fell silent for a while. It was apparent from the background noise that he was driving. Much as Pella wished to banish Nicky Barcelona from her mind, the person she felt most jealous of was Nicholas, for getting to spend Thanksgiving with his mom. Her desire to meet Sylvie Byrnes felt dangerously intense. How far this desire reflected her fascination with Sylvie’s work, in all its eloquent uncompromising silence, and how far her fascination with Sylvie’s son was not a question that admitted an answer.

“When will you be back?” she asked.

“Early Sunday,” he said. “I like to beat the traffic.”

The boy leaped from the SUV into the service road. A bicycle swerved to avoid him and nearly clipped the cars on the opposite side. The rider turned her head to yell at the boy.

“Maybe next time,” Nicholas said, “you’d like to come along.”

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16

Irma had awakened as on a normal Tuesday and gone to her early French class and then to the dining hall to read and eat cereal and then to the lecture for Judy's course Real and Surreal, which she'd taken freshman year and was auditing now, partly because many subtleties of Judy's depiction of Modernism had sailed past her the first time around, partly just to be in Judy's presence, which made Irma feel safe and good.

During the lecture she began to feel something strange was afoot. An electricity crackled through the room as though from an approaching storm, and she sensed in the rows behind her a subtle rustle of whispering and texting and the showing of phones to one another. Irma was sitting dead center in the front row of the not-large room. Her first impulse was to be annoyed on Judy's behalf, and she readied herself, as an authoritative senior and self-appointed Judy-deputy, to twist around and deliver a withering room-stilling glare, possibly accompanied by an actual *shush*. But as she braced to turn, an uncanny understanding washed over her—she herself was included in, part of the target of, the room's shift of attention and to twist and fix the whisperers with a withering glare would be met not by chastened glances and restored silence but by some more prurient, less predictable reaction. Her phone was in her backpack.

The disturbance eddied through the remaining minutes of class, though Judy seemed so wholly unperturbed, bathing the room in her warm theatrical manner, her long fingers dancing above the lectern, expertly manipulating the transparencies on the old-fashioned light board she still liked to use, that Irma began to think she was imagining not just the part about the disturbance being directed her way but the disturbance itself.

Finally the bell rang, and Judy smiled and said, "Till Thursday, then." Instead of staying to chat as she usually did, Irma hoisted her backpack and

headed toward the door. Her phone showed a single alert: a Cloister from Pammy.

Did u see what D wrote?

No, Irma replied. Where?

Pammy responded instantly: Brightness blog. Tho it's everywhere now.

Pammy sent a link. Irma couldn't get it to load while speed-walking through the quad. She reached the navy door of Phumber Hall, swiped her key card, and double-timed up the stairs.

Reader, I Roofied Him

> Everybody keeps asking me whether Ben-Josh got drugged, as though this was the pivotal question in world history. I'm not sure why it matters so much...Just kidding, I know why it matters. Because he's a man! You know the old saying: When a man stubs his toe, it's a tragedy. When a woman gets raped, it's a romantic comedy. I'm not super-interested in my own biography, so please don't ask what happened to *me* freshman year at the sacred Parties (always with a capital P to show how sacred they are) when I blacked out despite not drinking much and have no memory of how I got home and woke up feeling so shaky and scared and awful, I vomited a dozen times and was afraid to leave my room for two days and missed my first college classes. Only after that did I begin to recall flashes of having sex with a guy while I was in this period of having totally blacked out. The guys in these flashes I "recognized" because I'd already hooked up with him during freshman orientation week, though he was a senior, and we were doing an extracurricular together. I hooked up with him afterward too, I might as well say, before I figured out what happened. I didn't want to but he kept texting and I had a terribly sickening feeling about the idea but I also couldn't see why I shouldn't sleep with him again since I'd slept with him before, and like I said, he kept asking and asking. So yes, unfortunately I let him come over again and I couldn't go through with sex but I felt it was my duty to jerk him off, and I suppose that

triggered something because not long after, I started to realize what had happened.

Did I tell anyone? Did I report him? Eventually I sort of did, but not for almost two months. I talked to a professor I quasi-trusted, not because I really knew her but because she'd been very understanding about me skipping class and not doing my work and seemed maybe to be picking up on the subtext of my sad excuses, and she put me in touch with a member of the administration, who was also nice and who informally advised me that I didn't have much of a case. I'd had sex with this guy before the "incident" and hooked up with him after, so how could I ever "prove" he'd raped me in between? Plus we had a whole text correspondence where he was like, I want you so bad, and I was like, OMG I want *you* so bad. I'm paraphrasing but you get the idea. Apparently if I brought a proceeding against him, all those messages would be fair game and presented as "evidence," of what I don't know. And also, as I said, my memory of what happened, even after it came back, was pretty fuzzy and incomplete and I just remembered flashes here and there, I'll spare you the details. And the fact that this guy was a senior in good standing with an unblemished record, which I guess means an unblemished record of getting away with rape without being reported, since what are the odds I was the first? Plus, finally, the fact that I'd continued interacting with him every fucking day in an extracurricular context while managing to pretend that nothing was wrong.

Because of all these reasons I was advised it would be hellish to bring a proceeding against him. It would take all year, everything I said would be disputed and ridiculed, there was no way it would be decided in my favor in the end, and meanwhile my life would be consumed by the proceeding and I'd have no energy to concentrate on anything else. So maybe just let it go and here are the numbers of some people you could talk to. All of which was more or less sincere on their parts, I believe. They truly thought this was the best way forward in this situation, and possibly they were right, or at least, this would have been the right advice for some women in my situation. It's not like you can just casually drop a note in a guy's file that says *BTW he drugged and raped me*. If you say one word about it, you have to

undertake a giant legal battle that's going to force you to relive the whole experience over and over, like you weren't doing *that* already. But maybe if you could just drop a *He raped me* note in a guy's file, the world would be a slightly less comically shitty place, because at least you'd be doing *something,* and once a guy had four or five rape stickers on his file somebody might notice.

So anyway I didn't proceed, and I already had a therapist back home who I didn't tell all this to for a while but eventually did. I also eventually told my best friend P., who saved me many times. A funny thing happened, funny as in unexpected, which was that I actually got through freshman year fairly well. I saw the guy constantly, even after I started doing everything possible to avoid him, which is what happens at a little school like this. But somehow I held it together, and I thought when I came back sophomore year, everything would be ten times better because he'd be gone and I'd be able to let down my guard and live. But the opposite happened. I came back to school that fall and felt so much worse. Like I basically wanted to die. In a confused paradoxical way, I think having him around had given me a reason to keep going—I was holding myself together to prove to him I could. But when he was gone, so was my reason. In that way it's fair to say I missed him.

Anyway from about the second day sophomore year felt like death. I stopped going to class. I stopped going anywhere. By October I'd lost a bunch of weight and my mom freaked out and put me into rehab at one of those places you've probably seen a documentary about if you haven't been in one yourself.

Let me clarify a couple things. (1) Although I was in many ways a pretty naive kid, naive enough to think that if I willingly and cheerfully sucked a guy's dick a few days after meeting him, he wouldn't later rape me and that people at a supposedly oh-so-wholesome place like Westish could kinda sorta be trusted, in other ways I wasn't naive at all. I'd been drinking and having sex since I was fifteen. I grew up beside a university campus and had been to a zillion college parties before I ever got to Westish (at the time of the Incident I actually had a boyfriend who was a junior at Northwestern, but that's a Separate Story). Let's just say, without implying that

anybody's ever at fault for drinking the punch, that I was way too experienced to drink the punch. For years I'd been mixing booze with all sorts of meds, my own and other people's, and some sked 1 drugs as well. Never ever had I had an experience like this of blacking out entirely and remembering virtually nothing. I got roofied, full stop. Ben-Josh, the same thing happened to you. Maybe you should just consider it a window onto the female experience and feel grateful that nothing truly devastating happened when you were under. I thought about shoving a cucumber up your ass but restrained myself. As I've said, and I meant it, I respect you for turning me in and telling your dad and going on TV to fight for your rights. I wish I'd done the same, back when I had the chance.

(2) I don't blame what happened to me at the sacred Parties for all or even most of my problems. I was plenty screwed up in high school, and my mom has the psychiatric bills to prove it. It's not because I was raped and it's not because my dad is a sleaze whose girlfriends are basically hotter versions of me and it's not because of my genes or my ADHD or my dysmorphia or whatever diagnosis appeals to some particular doctor on some particular day. There is no great big BECAUSE. If there was one, it would be different from what I or anybody else thinks it is. I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing, etc., etc. I haven't wanted to make any of this about me, because as soon as I "tell my story," I play into your stupid premade narratives. But if I don't "tell my story," I play into your premade narratives too. There's literally no way out, so fuck it.

It wasn't the first bad thing to happen to me, and it won't be the last, and it was certainly way less bad than so many things that happen to so many people every day. So for God's sake no sympathy. I'm just setting the record straight.

By the way, the name of the guy who raped me was Jeremy Talbot.

THAT LAST SENTENCE had been deleted by the moderator by the time Irma read Dahlia's post, which had gone live at 5:23 a.m., but the words had

been preserved in multiple screen-grabs made by insomniac or overseas Brightness readers who'd been scrolling the blog when the post was published.

Jeremy Talbot was now—as Brightness readers had quickly discovered—a pharmaceutical rep in Rochester, Minnesota, with a fiancée named Lauren and a beagle mix named Trevor. Irma, in the final moments before Lauren made them private, flipped through Lauren's social media photos. She was a medical student, as lean as Irma and maybe not much taller, with sharp greyhound features, a ponytail of fine blond hair, and, in many of the pictures, a road racer's waxy bib affixed to her T-shirt. Jeremy was a blandly handsome guy who'd grown a brown beard to hide his double chin. They hiked, they went to Vikings games, they took Trevor the beagle mix to picturesque outdoor breweries. The Land of Ten Thousand Lakes sparkled behind them. Under every photo, comments from Dahlia's supporters proliferated like spores. *So now you know what kind of scumbag you're with.*

Irma clapped her laptop shut. She wasn't certain, based on Lauren's photos and her own memories of that long-ago October Saturday, but she was as close to certain as she could be. Dahlia had only done one extracurricular.

She opened her bottom left desk drawer and dug through her notebooks and files from freshman year. Tucked in the back, behind her Pella-and-Judy-annotated response papers, she found the little folded playbill from *The Tempest*. She flipped to the actor bios, where she'd first learned of Dahlia's Shakesperience:

> Jeremy Talbot, a senior from Minnesota, moonlights as a linebacker for the varsity football team. This is his seventh Westish production and his first time playing Prospero.

Irma dialed Dahlia's number, not expecting Dahlia to pick up.

"Hey, Dahl," she said to the voicemail. "I just want you to know that what you did took a ton of courage and I'm proud of you. I'm here anytime if you want to talk...I...I hope you're getting some rest...okay...bye."

She hung up the phone with a sinking feeling. She'd intended to say *I*

love you instead of *I hope you're getting some rest*, but she'd lost her nerve. She felt strange telling Dahlia she was proud of her—it seemed like a lie somehow. Mostly she just felt afraid.

Poor Lauren, Irma thought, and chastised herself because she should have been thinking *Poor Dahlia*. Dahlia, who'd spent an entire autumn onstage with the guy who raped her. Wearing her white dress, calling him "dear Father," listening to him flub his lines. Dahlia, a trillion times the better actor, who'd wanted to play Prospero herself. Dahlia, who'd been so brave.

Irma couldn't imagine. Maybe it was easier to relate to Lauren, who'd just had this depth charge dropped into her life, nullifying or challenging all she'd thought she'd known. Irma felt something similar. She too had not known. She too felt her world retroactively rearranged.

Holy shit, she texted Pammy.

I know.

I feel stupid, Irma wrote.

Don't feel bad, Pammy wrote. She didn't even tell her mom.

I guess she told her now.

I'll say.

So what do we do? Irma asked. She hoped that Pammy, who'd already known what happened to Dahlia, would be less unmoored than Irma by Dahlia's letter and would know how to respond.

Irma thought maybe they should drive down to Evanston, cram Dahlia into the jump seat of her truck, and go on the lam. Dahlia had outed not only Jeremy Talbot but also, effectively, herself for having roofied Ben-Josh, which Irma was pretty sure was a felony. Dahlia could wind up in prison while Prospero walked free. At the very least, Ben-Josh's dad was going to sue her.

I don't know, Pammy wrote. I guess we just sit tight.

Irma couldn't help feeling disturbed by what Dahlia had done. Not that Dahlia was wrong to have named her assailant. Not that Jeremy Talbot didn't deserve to be outed and receive whatever punishment came his way. Probably vastly less would happen to Jeremy Talbot than he deserved. Even Lauren would probably get over it or refuse to believe it at all, for Trevor's sake, and the wedding would go on as planned. Dahlia was right to do as she'd done. But there had been some enormous unshaped power, call it art

or witchcraft or myth, in what Dahlia had been up to, first with the tattooing of the boys and then with its viral offshoot, the tattooing of the girls, with all her shiftiness and lack of disclosure, her refusal to be defined, and Irma feared that Dahlia had squandered that power now.

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17

Early on New Year's Day, Nicholas collected Pella in his banged-up sedan, and they headed upstate.

Pella had imputed an airy, spacious clarity to the very word *upstate*, but as they drew nearer to Sylvie's property, the undulous, brush-clotted landscape felt claustrophobic and close. The surrounding hemlocks seemed to loom and encroach, diminishing the light, increasing the perpetual gloom.

From the outside, Sylvie's ranch house had a mongrel look, having been added onto several times with different materials, presumably in the era when the property was part of a kind of commune and inhabited by many people. Now most of that original acreage had been sold. Nicholas had warned Pella that the rotting barns where Sylvie once made her gigantic artworks had been torn down by their new owners, that the artworks themselves were long gone, but Pella still felt a burst of disappointment as they climbed out of the car. She'd expected, despite herself, some visible sign or tribute to Sylvie's genius.

Sylvie shuffled down the driveway to greet them, her slow steps aided by a scuffed aluminum cane. Nicholas hugged her, and though Sylvie shrugged indifferently, Pella could sense her affection for her son and her unstated joy at his return.

"Hi!" said Pella, holding out her hand. "It's so lovely to meet you."

Sylvie, ignoring the hand, cut her eyes mirthlessly toward Nicholas, as though to say, *You've chosen another winner, I can see.*

While Nicholas and Pella unpacked the car, Sylvie retreated to the paunchy leather recliner in the wood-paneled room where she spent her time, the footrest lifted, the television on, chain-smoking and drinking Diet

Coke, of which she kept several bottles on the table beside her so as not to need to get up. A local newspaper lay in her lap unattended.

Nicholas went out to chop wood. Pella, sensing that interrupting Sylvie's TV time would only incur her derision, spent the rest of the morning quietly poking around, seeking and failing to find any trace of a sensibility she could connect to. The place contained little that was beautiful or shapely or colorful and nothing at all to suggest an interest in politics or feminism. What books there were belonged to Nicholas.

The house, in fact, seemed divided into spaces Nicholas had reckoned with and spaces he had not. The former were untidy, the latter derelict. The room where Sylvie watched television and the one behind it where Nicholas read were cramped and dingy, the smeary yellow-brown coating of smoke unavoidable, but it was clear that beneath the disarray of weeks' worth of cigarette butts, dust, dirty dishes, and plastic bottles with sticky cola dregs, these rooms were cleaned each time Nicholas came.

There were other signs of his care: The bathroom walls and shower had been equipped with rails to help Sylvie maneuver. The laundry machines occupied a makeshift, declivitous add-on to the house, and here too there were well-placed rails and handholds to help Sylvie navigate, the machines situated to require no stooping or bending, and the space was meticulously organized—which suggested that Nicholas was the only one who used it.

Pella thought of the sewing room in Nicholas's apartment, with its dense and fascinating archival clutter. She had been guilty of believing Sylvie's house would be like that. Guilty of attributing the sewing room to Sylvie and the rest of the apartment to Nicholas; guilty of imbuing the present-day Sylvie with the emotional tone of the sewing room and of *Kitchen Film*. Guilty, despite Nicholas's warnings, of imagining Sylvie as the determined, alluring artist in the photographs and the film. Guilty of imagining Sylvie as a feminine version of her own father at sixty—curious, engaged, and sophisticated.

In the late afternoon, Nicholas went out to run errands. Pella stayed behind to begin making dinner. As she poked around for cookware, she found in the low cupboard along one wall what looked an exploded bag of chocolate sprinkles: mouse poop, in extraordinary volume.

Sylvie was in the next room, the TV blaring, a cigarette burning. Pella pulled the pots and kettles from the shelves, soaked them in soapy water,

scrubbed them, and set them to dry. With a damp towel she began to wipe out the filthy shelves, scooping the scat into piles.

An old metal toaster was tucked to the rear of the bottom shelf. She yanked it out, the cord trailing, and upended it over the trash bin. A barrage of blackened crumbs rained down. When she gave the metal bottom a thump with the heel of her hand, a bigger object dislodged and plunked into the bin—the shriveled body of a long-dead mouse.

Nicholas walked in bearing Sylvie's prescriptions, roses in green paper, a bottle of wine. His beautiful face clouded when he saw the pots spread over the counter, the toaster in Pella's hand.

"Hey," he said cautiously. "What's happening here?"

"I was just tidying up." Pella nudged the trash bin with her knee to knock the small dried carcass out of view.

"Seems like more than tidying."

"Well," she said. "I opened those cupboards there...and...maybe we should buy some mousetraps while we're here?"

Nicholas steeled himself with an inward sigh. He walked through the kitchen, grave and unspeaking, into the room where Sylvie was sitting. Pella felt an awful sinking. She didn't want to meddle; she didn't want him to regret having brought her here. She felt relieved when he returned and his face was soft. "Which cupboards?" he asked. "Those?"

Pella nodded. So did he. "I never go in there," he said. "I've cleaned the others recently, more or less."

"I'm sorry," Pella said. "I was just—"

"It's okay," he said, and she could sense his shame. "It's fine."

She felt a surge of affection for Nicholas for both his loyalty and tolerance toward Sylvie and the unguardedness of his frustration. Both parts were sincere, and she was grateful to be allowed to see them.

She was grateful, too, for a glimpse into Sylvie's life, even if it was terribly depressing. She had, she knew, been on the lookout for some romance in Sylvie's situation. She was finding none, seeing only Sylvie's stasis and bitterness and a silence far less graceful than that of *Kitchen Film*. Sylvie had been notorious and beloved and brilliant, and now she wasn't anymore. She had turned from it or had had it taken away. Call it purity, call it fear, call it the plight of woman, or the artist, or the woman artist—call it what you will, the consequence was ugly. Pella wondered

whether even Nicholas could fully discern how disconcerting it might be to a newcomer; she couldn't shake the thought that if he had fully discerned it, he would have continued to decline to invite her.

"Thank you for inviting me," she said as they lay in bed that night.

His head lay on her chest, his ear a stethoscope pressed to her heart. Her fingers stroked his hair. In these moments, he reminded her of Jack, and she felt him to be a boy. Perhaps that was the allure of his tender body and selfish honesty: the qualities of a boy. Perhaps all women wanted to mother Nicholas, to hold him and stroke his hair.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I think my mother likes you."

Pella would have been delighted had she found this possible to believe. "Why would you say that?"

"She told me as much," Nicholas said. "Not in so many words—that's not really Sylvie's style. What she said was 'Why did Pella ignore me all day?'"

"Ignore her!" Pella said. "She just sat there watching TV. I wanted to give her some space."

"Normally I'd call that wise," Nicholas said. "But I don't know. Maybe she likes you."

The following morning, after breakfast, Nicholas went out to finish stacking the wood. Pella lingered over the dishes, listening to the drone of the television, mustering her courage. She dried her hands, replenished her coffee, and walked into the wood-paneled living room.

Sylvie was half recumbent, her small squat body wrapped in a barn coat and dwarfed by her leather recliner, the smoke from her cigarette curling toward the fireplace mantel. The flickering blue of the television lit and unlit her face.

She looks, Pella thought, *different today*—which couldn't have been true, so it must have been a change in her own perspective. Maybe what Nicholas said last night was giving Pella the confidence to observe more closely, or maybe she felt calmer, less eager to efface and impress, simply because she'd been here for a day. Sylvie's strokes had slackened the muscles around one side of her mouth, but when she was at rest, as she was now, watching CNN and ignoring Pella's presence, a trace of the face Pella knew from *Kitchen Film* was visible, and a little light, or at least a little anger, seemed to flicker in Sylvie's eyes.

Quietly, Pella crossed in front of the television and sat in the club chair near Sylvie's recliner, which must have been where Nicholas sat when he and Sylvie were here alone. The segment was about Donald Trump, the surprise front-runner for the Republican nomination.

Sylvie stabbed out her cigarette and muted the TV. "Who're you going to vote for?" she asked.

"Probably not him," Pella said.

"You could do worse," Sylvie said. "You could wind up with Hillary."

Pella was struck by the way she said *you*, as though Sylvie herself inhabited some other country. "Are you voting for Bernie?" she asked.

"I don't vote." Sylvie lit another cigarette. "What are your intentions with my son?"

"My intentions?" Pella felt pleased and quickened by the question. She paused, considering how to respond.

"That was a joke," Sylvie said, and unmuted the TV.

THAT AFTERNOON IT snowed. Pella and Nicholas went for a hike around the property, picking their way between the trunks of fallen firs. He showed her the decrepit barn where Sylvie had welded her sculptures. A creek wound below it, frozen in spots. Fat white flakes gathered on blue-gray ice.

They drove into town to pick up wine and a takeout dinner and returned to find Sylvie slowly setting the kitchen table. After they ate, Nicholas brought out a deck of cards, and they sat at the table and played gin rummy, the TV off, until Sylvie went to bed at nine.

"Can we stay the day tomorrow?" Pella asked as she and Nicholas lay in bed. "Drive back in the evening?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday," Nicholas said. "On a holiday weekend. If we don't leave early, we'll sit in traffic all night."

"Please? I just need one more chance to talk to your mom." She cuddled close to him and slid a hand over his stomach beneath his T-shirt. She knew Nicholas hated waiting in traffic—he hated waiting, full stop. But she sensed that she and Sylvie were close to a further breakthrough, and she didn't want it to slip away.

Nicholas sighed. "I tell you what. I haven't been snowshoeing in forever—I'm always running errands when I'm here. I'll get out tomorrow

morning, leave you two alone for a while. And we can drive back after lunch. Will that satisfy you?"

"No," Pella said as she pulled him toward her. "But I know what will."

IN THE MORNING, when Nicholas went out to snowshoe, Pella joined Sylvie in front of the television. Sylvie had switched from cable news to a nature show. Thousands of salmon wriggled upstream.

"Having reached the stream where she was born," droned the narrator, "the female seeks out a spot with clean gravel and steady water flow. She begins to build her nest, dislodging pebbles with her tail."

Sylvie muted the TV. "What do you do for work?" she asked.

"I tend bar at a brewery," Pella said.

Sylvie nodded. They sat in silence for a while, the TV still on mute. Pella realized it was now or never.

"I loved *Kitchen Film,*" she said. "I've watched it a dozen times."

She paused to allow Sylvie to scoff or glower or otherwise shut her down, but Sylvie only glanced at her warily. It left room for Pella to continue, if only she could figure out how.

Pella wanted desperately to say something intelligent, not to impress Sylvie but to convey some sense of the profundity she found in the film. It felt impossible, though, to boil it down—to reduce what was simmering within her to some essential remark.

"It's helped me think about my life," she said.

At this, Sylvie cranked her recliner upright and slowly rose from her chair. Pella's heart sank. She'd offended Sylvie somehow, if only by her stupidity—she'd chased Sylvie from the room.

When she reached the hallway, Sylvie turned around. "Wait here," she instructed.

She moved stiffly toward her bedroom. Only after several minutes did she reappear, holding a jewel case in her hand.

"Here." She sank down in the recliner and flung out an arm, extending the case toward Pella, who had to stand to take it from her. Beneath a clear lid sat a silver DVD, unmarked.

"What's this?" she asked.

Sylvie nodded toward the TV console. "Pop it in and find out."

Pella pressed the power button on the DVD player and ejected a copy of *Dumb and Dumber.* She slid in the mystery disc.

“Don’t worry,” Sylvie said as she pointed the remote. “It’s only twelve minutes long.”

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18

The screen came to life. THE DEATH OF MY HUSBAND, read the title, white letters on a black background. Birds chirped. A burble of running water could be heard. Pella shivered.

A woman sat on a tree stump, her knees spread wide, her elbows on her knees. She wore a bulky sweater and over it a workman's waxed jacket, unzipped. Her bootlaces were untied. The jacket's flaps fell to the sides of her knees. She looked straight down at the ground. Though her clothes were heavy and her face averted, the long, light, crinkled hair was unmistakably Sylvie's. Pella stole a glance at the Sylvie sitting next to her. She watched intently, an unlit cigarette in her hand.

The camera, though close enough to feel intimate, was far enough away to take in both Sylvie's figure and a sample of her surroundings—the dark gnarled pillars of tree trunks, though not the branches above. A dusting of snow lay on the matted grass. All this was in black-and-white, with a striped, flickering graininess running through.

Sylvie—the one in the film, not the one in the recliner—looked up. Her somber eyes met the camera. Pella shivered again. Having spent so many hours with *Kitchen Film,* watching Sylvie cook with her back to the camera, it felt like a culmination, a completion, to look her in the eye.

Compared to the bright lithe mom who scrambled over boulders, this Sylvie looked both younger and bleaker, her shoulders freighted with cares. Perhaps part of it was the difference between color and black-and-white.

A male voice spoke from behind the camera. A soft, musing voice, the voice of a friend or lover: "*Husband* is a funny word."

Sylvie looked at the camera dead on. "*Husband* comes from the Old English, and before that the Norse. It means 'head of a household.'"

"And *wife*?" asked the interlocutor.

Sylvie: “*Wife* is Old English too. *Wife* means woman. There are two kinds of people. Women and heads of households.”

“Why do you want to make a film called *The Death of My Husband*?”

Sylvie: “I’d like my husband to be dead. I’d like to make a film about him, but only if he’s dead. If he was dead he’d make a beautiful subject.”

“How would you shoot him?” asked the interlocutor.

Sylvie smiled. “With a camera? Or a gun?”

“Either.”

Sylvie: “In the city it’s considered impolite to carry a gun unless you’re a mobster or something. Up here, everyone shoots.”

“I know,” said the interlocutor.

“I’m fascinated by the fact that”—Sylvie held up a hand to form the accustomed shape—“no matter how slowly you squeeze the trigger, the bullet comes out the same speed.”

“A line is crossed.”

Sylvie nodded her approval. “A line is crossed. The machine takes over.”

Interlocutor: “Several times you’ve asked me to kill your husband.”

Sylvie smiled. “You can’t tell whether I’m joking or not.”

“That’s true. Are you joking?”

Sylvie: “I don’t think I’d like to owe you as much as I’d owe you if you killed my husband. Our relationship is temporary too.”

“Yours and mine.”

Sylvie nodded.

Interlocutor: “Why couldn’t it be permanent?”

Sylvie: “Nothing’s permanent.” She gestured around at the trees and low scraggly underbrush. One fallen tree (a pine, Pella guessed) formed a dark angled line that neatly divided the frame. In a silence long enough, the tumble of the stream could be heard.

“Especially us,” Sylvie said. “You’re a bit ugly, and I’m having trouble.”

Interlocutor (already sounding surprised): “What kind of trouble?”

Sylvie (looking at the camera, eyes ablaze): “I’m pregnant.”

The pause that ensued was potent, the silent equivalent of a gasp. Was it possible the interlocutor did not know this in advance? That this revelation might be both real and unscripted? It certainly seemed possible to Pella, watching. New meaning was given to Sylvie’s mannish, wide-legged posture on the tree stump, her knees widely spread and pointing outward,

her elbows on her thighs, her eyes downcast at the bed of leaves before her or, when she glanced up, gazing into the camera with willful defiance. Until now, this posture reminded Pella of Westish jocks sitting on the bench. She'd thought it, if not an affectation on Sylvie's part, an emphasis on a different aspect of her being. Her country self, perhaps. Now it struck Pella differently. The pelvis tipping, the legs spread wide, to create the negative space to accommodate new realities.

The pause ended.

Interlocutor (returning, perhaps, to the gesture Sylvie made just before her revelation, of sweeping a hand at their surroundings; returning, Pella imagined, to the script or loose set of cues Sylvie had provided before they began, which had not included the revelation of her pregnancy): "Do you like it here?"

Sylvie (shrugging): "It's dreary here. I like the guns and that's about it."

Interlocutor: "You also like the mountains."

Sylvie: "I like the mountains, but I don't enjoy liking the mountains. It's a dull existence."

Interlocutor: "You like the waterfalls."

Sylvie paused as though loath to admit this. "You're right," she said. "I do."

Interlocutor (his voice unsteady; could he really be this good of an actor?): "How far along are you?"

Sylvie: "Fourteen weeks."

Interlocutor (relieved? Angry? Both?): "It's your husband's child."

Sylvie: "That's one way to put it. My vision for the film is very beautiful. Would you like to hear it?"

Interlocutor: "Please."

Sylvie: "For years I've dreamed of killing my husband. I drew up plans for how he might have an accident, and where he would be found. I thought it would make a good project. What would it be like if he were found there"—she pointed—"face down in the creek? This tall, elegant man, always pretending to be a man of the people while wearing the perfect clothes, some flannel shirt he paid thirty dollars for, though he was born poor and has no money, but he always has to look better than everyone else, with his impeccable clothes—what about a movie where you found that

beautiful man in his beautiful clothes face down in the creek, his sleeves and pant legs floating and waving in the current, and time went on and on?”

Interlocutor: “The film would begin this time of year.”

Sylvie: “November, yes. Just when it’s getting cold. Heat is entropy—we learned that in school. Cold is slowness. In the winter, he would stay handsome for a long time. His body intact until spring. You could keep the camera on that face-down body for weeks, months, years, as the water worked its way through the clothes, and the fish nipped at him, and the bugs and hawks and buzzards came, and the fuzz of his flannel wound up in the nests of the birds, and a raccoon scooted off with his belt buckle.” She locked eyes with the camera and laughed. “You’re looking at me like I’m a criminal.”

Interlocutor: “I suppose it *would* be illegal.”

Sylvie: “It’s not illegal to dream about it. That’s art.”

Interlocutor: “It would be a difficult film to screen.”

Sylvie: “You could never screen it at all. No matter how great it was, it could never be shown.” She sighed, looked down at her hands and back at the camera. “Yep, sometimes I wish I was making that film.”

Interlocutor: “If you made it, you’d be tied to your husband forever.”

Sylvie: “Tied to his absence, yes. That’s a good reason not to make it.”

Interlocutor: “Would you consider killing one’s husband a revolutionary act?”

Sylvie: “Revolutions just go round and round. I’ve been trying to become an artist.”

Interlocutor: “Did you consider having an abortion?”

Sylvie: “Yes.”

Interlocutor: “Have you had an abortion before?”

Sylvie: “Yes.”

Interlocutor: “How many times?”

Sylvie: “Just two.”

Interlocutor: “Where did you have them?”

Sylvie: “One was in Puerto Rico. I was eighteen.”

Interlocutor: “Was that a frightening experience?”

Sylvie (frowning): “I told you all about it.”

Interlocutor: “Tell me about the other.”

Sylvie: “The other was a hundred percent legal. I just went down to the

post office and Uncle Sam took care of it."

Interlocutor: "Was that one your husband's child?"

Sylvie: "It was nobody's child. But yes."

Interlocutor: "Why did you decide not to have an abortion this time?"

Sylvie: "I don't know."

Interlocutor: "Could you hazard a guess?"

Sylvie sounded annoyed, as though she hadn't expected to be pressed: "Next question."

Interlocutor: "Where is your husband now?"

Sylvie: "He's traveling out west. He likes"—she gave a sardonic twist to the next phrase that made it sound painfully lewd—"*wide-open spaces.*"

Interlocutor: "Tell me about him."

Sylvie: "He's an organizer. An environmentalist. He believes government and industry are raping the land. He believes the American Indian with his tribal wisdom should be in charge. He believes *he* should be in charge so he can grant power to the American Indian. He believes many noble things, all of which lead back to the fact that the world would be perfect if he were in charge."

Interlocutor: "What else?"

Sylvie: "He believes the land is sacred and wild. A man, to be healthy, must escape civilization and spend time in nature."

Interlocutor: "What about women?"

Sylvie: "What about them?"

Interlocutor: "What does your husband think of women?"

Sylvie: "Women are sacred and wild, like nature. A man, to be healthy, must spend time in women."

Interlocutor: "Does he believe in violence as a political tool?"

Sylvie (shrugging): "In theory, yes. He likes to say that Jesus came with a sword. In practice, I'm not sure. He does have guts."

Interlocutor: "Has he ever raped you?"

Sylvie (with a sad hint of a smile): "Now you're just playing with words."

Interlocutor: "Do you know whether it's a boy or a girl?"

Sylvie: "No."

Interlocutor: "Which would you prefer?"

The look on Sylvie's face—so glum, so pained! She couldn't be acting

now, Pella thought. She could only be contemplating, communing with, the life that was growing inside her.

Sylvie: “There’s no way out.”

THE SCREEN WENT black. In the silence Pella noticed, for the first time, the ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner of the room.

The languid winter light. The saturated inkblot-black and shaky silvery whites of the trees and the stream. The dark recumbent fir trunk that transected the background. The way Sylvie seemed to be sitting just a touch too far away and speaking just a touch too softly—tantalizingly, almost irritatingly so, so that Pella, though she could hear every word, found herself straining forward, wishing to be closer, longing for more.

It was riveting to hear Sylvie speak and to watch her body as she spoke. She possessed, even while perched on a stump, the same lithe energy as her son, and it was easy to imagine her as a similarly unshakable dynamo, a partner impossible to hang on to or to quit. Presuming she was indeed pregnant with Nicholas, Pella calculated she would have been twenty-eight—exactly Pella’s age.

There was, despite all the speaking, a muteness to the Sylvie in the film. Muteness and a deadpan humor. Grim and indeterminate, she refused to let the needle settle. She wasn’t articulate in the way of her son; she was different. Even when young, by the time she made *Kitchen Film*, she’d known what to do with that muteness.

Pella assumed everything Sylvie said in the film, though stylized and partly scripted, reflected the facts of her life. She assumed Sylvie had been fourteen weeks pregnant with Nicholas and had a lover to whom she disclosed her condition while keeping the camera on herself. She assumed Sylvie had had two abortions and that Nicholas’s father raped and otherwise abused her. She assumed Sylvie wanted to kill him. She wondered how much of this Nicholas knew.

Sylvie lit a cigarette. “So,” she said gruffly. “What do you think?”

Pella was surprised by the question—surprised that Sylvie would care about her opinion and make herself vulnerable enough to ask. What Pella really wanted to know was what Sylvie thought.

“I loved it,” Pella said.

Sylvie took a long drag of her cigarette, her eyes still trained on the crackling fuzz of the screen. “This was the first film I ever made.”

“Are there more?” Pella asked.

Sylvie shook her head. “For years I tried to make films. Dozens of films. Nick was in them all—somehow I could never do anything without him. But they sucked, and I destroyed them. The only thing I ever thought was decent was the kitchen one. And somehow this.”

Sylvie pointed the remote. The old DVD player issued a groan. Half the disc emerged like a silver moon.

“Take it,” Sylvie said.

Pella felt stunned. Stunned and overjoyed. “Do you have other copies?”

“Nope,” Sylvie said, and sounded proud of this fact. “There’s a Super Eight in a box somewhere, but damned if I know where.”

“You should keep it,” Pella said. “For your archive.”

“There’s no archive,” Sylvie said. “Nobody gives a shit. Except maybe you.”

Sylvie pointed the remote again. Muteness gave way to the patter of talking heads. Pella stood, slid the silver disc from the machine, and perched on the edge of her club chair, feeling flagrantly alive.

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IV

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Pammy held a six-pack aloft as she walked into Irma's room. "Congrats!"

Irma peered at the beer warily. The doctor said one drink was fine, one drink would not interact, but Irma mistrusted this advice. Everything interacted. "What for?"

"For turning in your thesis, dummy. Why weren't you at dinner?"

Irma thought about claiming a stomachache, which would explain her absence from dinner and excuse her from the beer, but she didn't want Pammy to fuss.

"I ate early," she said, feeling conscious, as she uttered the lie, of how robust Pammy looked as she slung her wide-handled craft bag from her shoulder, plopped down at Irma's desk, and popped the caps from two Spotted Cows. She and Monty had gone to Florida for spring break, and their days in the sun had made Pammy radiant. "Sorry. I was starved."

Pammy nodded, accepting this perhaps too easily. She handed a bottle to Irma and picked up her own. "I'm proud of you," she said. "I'm sure you'll win all the prizes."

Irma glanced away, deflecting this remark. "Now we just have to finish yours," she said.

"Mine's not for honors," Pammy said. "It's just a senior project."

"Yes," said Irma. "But."

Pammy slid her laptop out of her backpack's sleeve and set it on Irma's desk. She began to unload her craft bag. "Feel like helping?" she asked.

"Sure," Irma said as she sat down on her bed.

Her task was folding tissue-paper flowers in the manner Pammy had taught her. Despite Irma's manual dexterity, her facility with sewing and handicrafts, she had taken a few nights to figure out how to do the flowers properly. Now she was in the flow of it. Pammy handed her sheafs of tissue paper: lemon, tangerine, lavender. Irma folded and folded. She finished a flower and lay it softly beside its fellows on the bed.

"How many of these do you need?" she asked.

"I don't know," Pammy said. "As many as possible."

Pammy sat in Irma's desk chair, the chair turned toward Irma, the long straps of her sandals wound up over her ankles to the bottoms of her calves, her cutoff-jeans shorts riding up into the creases of her hips. She held an embroidery hoop against her bare thigh. That was what Pammy did these days: embroidered pillowcases. Like the flowers, it was part of her project for the senior art show.

Irma only half knew what Pammy was putting together. Pammy said she couldn't talk about it or even think about it much; she just had to let it happen. Irma had resolved not to ask questions and to be surprised by the outcome, even as she participated in the making. She knew the important fact: that it was a tribute to Dahlia.

Irma might have imagined that Dahlia's death would bring her and Pammy closer, but that wasn't exactly what had happened. Much as she and Pammy cared for each other, it was Dahlia who'd made their friendship make sense and in her absence still did. Pammy spent most of her time with Monty. Irma liked Monty; everyone did.

Anderson leaped onto the bed and dug a claw into a robin's-egg stack of paper. "Hey!" Irma said as she shoved his furry flank. "Scoot." The cat hopped down to the rug. Ears lifted in indignation, he stalked in an inward spiral, looked up at her, and gave a pitiable meow.

"You goof," Irma said. As close as she felt to Anderson, she could never approach Dahlia's deep and ardent affection for him. The way Dahlia opened herself to Anderson was total. It was the opposite, Irma thought, of the way she'd closed up around people.

Irma didn't like to banish Anderson to the bathroom, but when she was folding flowers, it was inevitable, since Anderson couldn't help nosing into the pile of delicate pastel constructions and destroying them with his claws.

She crumpled a lemon sheet of tissue paper into a ball, leaned down off the bed, and flung the ball sidearm over the rug. She was trying to make it roll like a tumbleweed, but being nearly weightless, it stopped right away. Anderson moseyed toward the yellow puff, sniffed at it, and deigned to give it a lazy swipe.

The puffball danced across the rug. Anderson was thrilled by its movement, and his whole shaggy body snapped into alertness. He pounced, claws extended, and his front paws corralled his inanimate prey.

"Isn't it funny how cats do that?" Pammy said.

“What?”

“You know, create a drama. Set something in motion and then forget they’re the ones who set it in motion. Look at him: He totally believes it’s a mouse. It’s like they have two selves.”

“Yeah,” Irma said, and thought about Dahlia, and dramas, and setting things in motion. “But then he gets bored.”

If you have two selves, Irma thought, *you always have someone to talk to.* She slung Anderson into the bathroom and, before he could protest, shut the door.

“SHE’S SUCH A jerk,” Pammy said.

“I know.” Irma sighed. It had been four months, almost long enough that, in certain moods, they could talk this way, in the present tense, with the casual callousness of intimate bonds—bonds that were now eternal, because nothing could happen in the tiny space of Irma’s or Pammy’s lifetime to break them.

Dahlia’s note was so short.

My project fails
Which was to please.

Which was just fucking like her. Two half lines of Shakespeare, wrenched out of context and made her own. *The Tempest*—the final lines of his final play. Prospero’s famous soliloquy, which Irma had read three zillion times since, long after it had been burned into memory so that when she looked in the mirror, she could see the ink on the whites of her eyes.

My project, at least superficially, referred to the tattoo project, but it was also, Irma thought, the project of being a woman in this world. The job of a woman, first and foremost, was to be pleasing. If you took on that project, you were bound to fail. And if you refused to take it on, you were bound to fail as well.

There was no forgiving Dahlia for what she’d done. *But to be unforgiving*, Irma thought, *this is my way. And so I have to forgive.* She argued with Dahlia in her head all day. They carried on longer

conversations than they ever had during Dahlia's life. But Dahlia wasn't there. It was so lonely without her, because Irma was so angry with her and wanted to rail at her, but she was railing alone.

When Pammy called to tell her that Dahlia had died, Irma had just returned to Westish after Christmas break. Pammy was still in Indiana. Irma, as she answered Pammy's call, was walking up the stairs of Phumber Hall.

She lay down on the Witches rug and cried. She had never cried like that before—with such intensity and vehemence. With her chest heaving and wheezing, without even the comfort of tears, hyperventilating, her lungs turned inside out. She tried for hours to vomit, to relieve her sick dry nausea, but nothing would come. She lay on her stomach in the posture of a child having a tantrum, pounding her fists against the rug, her shins and the tops of her feet banging down. She tried to burrow down into that fucking rug. She pressed her cheek into its soft fibers hard, trying to merge with it, trying to imprint the rug's being and messages into her own skin. The rug smelled of everything in her life at once, of everything she'd lived in this room for the past four years, the old wooden furniture and the Westish dust that was different from the dust back home and Anderson Cooper's fur and the apple cider vinegar she put in her hair and the dish soap she used to clean the furniture and the sharp odor her armpits never stopped emitting and spring pollen and Dahlia's cigarettes and the Febreze that Dahlia sometimes carried in her big bag in a full-size plastic bottle, a comic thing to carry around, though Dahlia was earnestly deadpan about it, which made it all the more comic, and triggered it out into the air after smoking a cigarette, *whish whish whish*, whether in apology or because it wasn't enough for her to befoul the air once, she had to do it twice so that you knew that, although it was Irma's room, Dahlia owned the place.

Irma slammed her palms into those fibers and her elbows and knees and the tops of her feet into the soft blue wool at the crux of the *W*. She tried to squeeze herself into it, to crawl down into it; she couldn't get close enough to it. Like the rug was a locked door she was trying to break down. Like the rug was time itself, the wall between present and past, and if she could burrow deep enough into it, she could go back. She pounded her hand against it in a blind panic. She grabbed the lip of the rug and, with the combined effort of many futile yanks, pulled the lip from under the bed's

metal legs and their brown plastic saucers. Having freed one long edge of the rug, she gripped it with both hands, hoisted it over herself, and barrel-rolled, twisting stiff layers around her body as she thumped across the floor. Finally she slammed against the dresser and bookshelf on the room's far side. She lay face down in darkness, her body cocooned in the Witches rug, the rug that Dahlia had named.

A long while later, her dry sobbing slowed and she slipped into a state that resembled sleep, from which she awoke with a start. When she looked at her phone again, she had nineteen missed calls from Pammy. When she went to Student Health, she learned she had a broken bone in her hand.

"I mean, who leaves a note?" Pammy said now.

"Do you think she thought it would work?" Irma said. "People try to kill themselves all the time. That doesn't mean it's going to work."

"I don't know," Pammy said solemnly.

"It's almost like a suicide-*attempt* note," Irma said. "Not the real thing."

"What would the real thing be?"

"I don't know," Irma said. "'Love you guys'?"

"Yeah," said Pammy. "She wasn't really like that."

Dahlia's mom had told Pammy about the note. It wasn't a physical note. Irma tried but failed to remember Dahlia having ever been in haptic contact with a pen or pencil or a piece of paper. She'd left her laptop open, the screen long gone black, and when it was revived there were the words on a white background with a blinking cursor beside them. The deliberateness of this was not lost on Pammy and Irma—the way she'd turned off the computer's password lock and become, in her absence, free of secrets.

IRMA HAD SO many dreams of Dahlia's body. Dahlia had that cold clinical aspect to her, that distant virtual aspect. The cool irony of the blinking cursor, the untouched meal. The way she seemed to wax and wane. Then she had the opposite, the crazy profusion of her body, the spillage, the everywhereness of it. The hair that was up and down and off to the side. The way her hundred and twenty pounds seemed to fill an entire room. There was something lush and rich about her, something vivid and natural and off-kilter, a winding of vines, the sound of a squawking bird. Her teeming humidity, the lolling, lovely, little-bit-lopsided breasts that seemed

somehow to gape and goggle back at you when you snuck a peek at them, the way she wanted you to smell her hair and look at the fuzz on her tongue. The way she seemed to be saying, *This body is a little much for me. I could use a little help.*

And these two aspects, the cold and the swampy, the dark and the bright, the virtual and the overwhelmingly, overpoweringly real, met and merged in her death, and in Irma's dreams. That selfsame body, cold.

It was Dahlia's mom who'd found her, curled up in the back seat of her mom's Volkswagen inside the little hobbitlike stone garage behind their house in their Evanston neighborhood, the engine running, her pumpkin-colored stainless-steel water bottle on the floor mat reeking of vodka, an empty Altoids tin beside it along with two or three dropped pills. She had a pillow beneath her head and a blanket draped over her body. She'd sat in the driver's seat and turned the key. She'd known that her mom had recently filled the gas tank. She'd climbed in the back and took her medicine and curled up under the covers.

The stone garage was small but drafty; she had bet on its smallness and against the draftiness, and won, or she had bet on its draftiness and against its smallness, and lost.

"We shouldn't have let her go home," Irma said. "We should have kidnapped her." It was unthinkable to Irma how a person of Dahlia's talent and spirit, a person capable of so much contagious vigor and joy, could do it. No matter how Irma tried to look at it, she couldn't see how.

"It wasn't up to us," Pammy said.

It was Pammy who had been Dahlia's roommate freshman year; it was Pammy who really knew her. That was an accident, the whim of the housing office, but the world was composed of accidents. Irma couldn't help wishing all the humdrum daily knowledge Pammy possessed about Dahlia had been her own. Irma hadn't had a freshman-year roommate; she'd been the winner of the Maria Westish Award; she'd thought she was such a hotshot, to have a spacious room and bathroom all her own. She couldn't help but envy Pammy the casualness, the completeness of her knowledge of Dahlia, though *completeness* was the wrong word. Pammy's knowledge of Dahlia was far from complete. So what was it? *Quotidian. Mundane.*

Irma wished that, instead of a fancy scholarship, she'd had Dahlia for a

roommate. That would have been the real prize.

“You said she said something?” Irma asked. “She hinted at it?”

“Yeah,” Pammy said. “I called her on Christmas and we were chatting, and Dahl was in a pretty good mood, talking about, I don’t know, how she’d watched *Kill Bill* again, and then she went down this whole path about suicide statistics, about how men supposedly kill themselves—I forget, is it four times?—four times as often as women.”

“What did she say?”

“Lots of things,” Pammy said. “Was it true, first of all. Or was it one more slanted statistic designed to make us invisible. *Us* being women. Was it just because men loved guns. But there were plenty of ways to die without a gun. She wanted to know...” Pammy paused her embroidering, her flower-strewn hoop dormant in her lap as she tried to remember. “She wanted to know whether the women got erased in the counting because the ways they killed themselves didn’t count or whether the right to suicide was yet another right denied to women.”

“Right,” Irma said.

“Because the one conclusion that seemed ridiculous was that women would *want* to do it less.”

“What did you say?” Irma asked, dropping an aquamarine blossom onto the pile.

“God, it sounds so horrible to repeat it,” Pammy said. “Like, so obvious. Beat me over the head.” She was smiling, her broad face turned fully toward Irma. “You know how she is. Was. Of course I was worried, but it really seemed okay. Like a conversation. After we talked about the women, she talked about old men. Apparently old men commit suicide more than any other group by far. She kept saying how sad it was for the old men, that it was very concerning. That maybe it was because old men were less likely to have pets. The government should buy all the old men a cat.” Pammy shook her head. “Somehow the way she was talking made me feel not worried at all.”

Irma nodded. “She had a lot of sympathy. For people in pain.”

“Sometimes,” Pammy said.

“Sometimes,” Irma agreed.

“Oh, I remember: She wanted to start a program. To save the old men. You trade in your handgun for a cat.”

“Felines for firearms.” Irma suggested.

“Pussies for pistols.”

“Good one,” said Irma, through tears.

“Right?” said Pammy, through hers. “It was like an *anti*-suicide talk.”

“But not really.”

“But not really.”

“That wasn’t the last time you guys talked,” Irma said. She herself had not talked to Dahlia since Dahlia’s Brightness post. The voicemail she’d left that morning—*I hope you’re getting some rest*—was the final interaction between them.

“No,” Pammy agreed. “The last time she sounded even more fine.”

WHEN IRMA CLOSED her eyes, she saw Dahlia dancing at the Parties, just before everyone at Westish and everywhere else learned her name. Dahlia flickering in and out of the strobe, elbows flung over her head, spinning away from Ben-Josh and toward him again. Appearing and vanishing, there and gone.

Irma thought about how she’d spent Owen’s wedding imitating this wild exuberance of Dahlia’s and how strangely successful she’d been. Was it because the glamour of the wedding overwhelmed her, seemed too much for her inept and persnickety self, that she’d felt such a need to channel Dahlia? Had she needed an alternate self and so needed to channel *somebody*? She’d long had two models for living, Dahlia and Pella, and she couldn’t spend the weekend channeling Pella, who was there. No matter how hard she tried, she’d never be mistaken for embodied Pella, who just seemed to live and feel, even if she could never make up her mind. Pella, who looked the best even when she wore the worst dress; Pella, who didn’t need to say anything smart to make people smile; Pella, who sometimes said things less smart than what she was thinking. Pella, who knew how to please.

Irma would never be mistaken for Dahlia either. But her constant dangling thought—*What should I do?*—flowed into an easier question: *What would Dahlia do?*

Looking back, Irma understood that she’d been channeling Dahlia not only in an attempt to succeed at the wedding, but also as a way of clinging

to her friend and grieving for her departure. She'd been trying to conjure Dahlia's presence in order to keep her near. That was so painful to think about now. Because at that point Dahlia had merely been gone to Evanston. She hadn't been *gone*.

Sometimes late at night a voice rose up to berate Irma, insisting it was all her fault. That sex and death were one. That she'd betrayed Dahlia by stealing her soul. It all felt entangled, inextricable, her efforts to behave like Dahlia, her updo and bright red lipstick, her sex with Nicholas, and Dahlia being gone. People used to believe that a mirror could steal your essence, that a camera could steal your essence; perhaps a friend, a so-called friend, could steal your essence too.

It's all your fault, I. It's all your fault. This voice was Irma's first encounter with a force inside herself that could not be calmed or argued down—not madness itself, but a terrifying taste of what it might feel like to go mad. *It's all your fault, I. It's all your fault.* Before long the voice was berating her not only as she lay in bed but all day long, increasing in intensity and volume until it threatened to drown out all other thoughts.

ON THE DAY of Dahlia's memorial, Irma and Pammy drove down to Evanston in Irma's truck. It had been three weeks.

The morning was the bitter late-January sort when sparse hard crystals of snow click like salt against the windshield beneath an iron sky. The Ram's heater barely worked, and its cavernous cab let the cold bleed in, the windows unsealed and shaking in their tracks at sixty, which was as fast as it could go. Pammy and Irma were bundled in dresses and tights and their best coats and scarves, shivering. Pammy slouched on the bench with her mittens jammed in her pockets while Irma stretched her right leg taut to keep the gas pedal floored, her gloved hands gripping the wheel. She had the sensation of being a child going to church and not wanting to.

The commenters on the Brightness blamed Jeremy Talbot above all. Many shared their own stories of rape and trauma, self-harm and attempted suicide, and tentative recovery. Irma commended their courage, but she could hardly bear to read even the most condoling posts. None of it seemed to capture the Dahlia she wished to remember.

Hunter Stroman had done one final segment about Westish at the end of

a Friday show. He spoke at length while hovering above him a new-old photograph his producers had dug up from the drama department's website: a shot of Dahlia onstage in *The Tempest,* looking as cherubic and glamorous as Irma recalled, with her tattered white dress and storm-tossed blond hair. As Irma toggled the mute button, unable either to listen or to stop listening, Stroman blamed Dahlia's death on a combination of radical feminism and online culture, both of which he considered perverse. At no point did he mention her rape or express any regret for the way he'd attacked and villainized her.

Oonie had texted and called several times to offer her sympathies and to invite Irma to compose a remembrance of Dahlia for the Brightness. "It would be so beautiful," Oonie said. "You could show your version of her to the world." But when Irma sat down to try, she wrote and wrote without ever getting anywhere.

Pammy tugged a mitten off with her teeth and held her palm against a vent to see how much lukewarm air was blowing out. She fiddled with the radio, found a song she liked, indifferently hummed along.

"The funeral already happened," Irma said.

"Yeah," said Pammy. "Just family."

"So what's today?"

"I don't know. It's at the house. It's called a tea."

When they entered Illinois, the surrounding traffic both thickened and gained speed. Sleek sedans with darkened windows slalomed from lane to lane. Pammy tugged off her other mitten to check the map on her phone. "Get off here," she instructed.

Irma did. "Let me know when we're getting close," she said as she maneuvered the Ram through tight city streets. "I need a big spot."

"We're getting close," Pammy said.

Irma put on her blinker and parallel-parked. She and Pammy climbed out of the truck. They took a few steps along the sidewalk, and Irma stopped.

A couple of houses down, President Molina waited on a slab of front stoop, one hand raised to ring the doorbell, beside a figure with whom she shared a curious symmetry. They could almost have been mother and son, both stocky and somber with curly dark hair, each crammed into a dark squarish suit that was just a touch too small. President Molina was dressed

in the deepest shade of her perpetual navy, a gold Harpooner pin glinting on her lapel, while Ben-Josh stood beside her in gray.

“Why are you stopping?” Pammy asked.

“No reason,” Irma said. “I was just surprised.”

“We knew Molina was coming,” Pammy said. “She offered us a ride.”

“I know,” Irma said.

Ever since Ben-Josh’s appearance on Hunter Stroman, Irma had nurtured a distant resentment toward him. If she glimpsed him across the dining hall or the atrium of the library, her thoughts grew muddled, and she looked away. She blamed him for Dahlia’s suspension and felt they were enemies.

Now she could muster none of that. Swaying beside Molina, staring off through the frosty air, Ben-Josh looked wrecked. He looked almost as wrecked as Irma felt.

The door opened, and the twosome vanished inside.

As Irma and Pammy approached Dahlia’s house, it seemed to Irma to be receding—so did the neighborhood, so did the sky. She felt Pammy’s arm slide through her own.

They were greeted at the door by a woman with curly gray hair who introduced herself as Dahlia’s aunt. She commandeered their coats and ushered them in.

Pammy went to pour them the promised tea. Irma, squirming in her shoes, looked around. People were scattered through the front rooms, holding cups and saucers as they chatted. They all seemed to know one another and to be around Irma’s parents’ age. It resembled a low-key Westish event, a reception to honor a guest lecturer or a mixer for alumni—the kind of events Irma worked at as a server. The house was bland and spotless, decorated in neutral colors. Pammy came back with the tea.

“Where’s Dahlia’s mom?” Irma said.

When Pammy introduced them, Dahlia’s mom greeted Irma with a distant smile, pretty and mild. “It’s nice of you to come all this way,” she said. “I hope the roads weren’t too bad.”

“The roads were fine,” Irma said.

“Are you missing many classes today?”

“Just one,” said Irma.

Dahlia’s mom nodded. She seemed inscrutable to Irma—abstracted and

composed. And pretty, like Dahlia if she were fifty and wore her hair in a kempt nifty bob on the border between blond and colorlessness and dressed like a university dean and was a university dean. Her dress had an academic-seeming houndstooth pattern, tiny hooked-together slivers of black and white, so the overall impression was dark but actually the dress was half white, which, Irma thought, gave it a yin-yang quality and perhaps was meant to convey an overall hopefulness. Or maybe Irma just had a penchant for overreading.

President Molina approached. The dismal circumstances seemed to suit her. She could never land the light jokes in her speeches; she was made for crises and funerals.

She held out both stout-fingered hands, and Dahlia's mom, with a sudden drowning urgency, seized them in her longer, paler ones.

"Valerie Molina," Molina said, though it was clear she had already been recognized, that the two women had had many conversations, despite not having met. "I'm sorry for your loss." Dahlia's mom swallowed and nodded. The two of them stepped away, toward privacy, and Molina began to speak in a low steady voice.

Irma realized that Ben-Josh was standing beside her.

"Hi, Irma," he said quietly.

Irma's heart went out to him. "Hi, Ben," she said, and added, for something to say: "Thanks for coming." It wasn't her gathering; this sounded strange.

"I'm grateful to President Molina for suggesting it," he said, and Irma appreciated the gravity in his tone. "I think she thought it would help me."

He paused. His eyes were puffy and red. "I'm sorry about your friend," he said.

"Me too," Irma said.

She could see the guilt and pain in his eyes, and she wanted to absolve him or tell him he needed no absolution; that none of this was his fault, that he had only played the role that Dahlia assigned. If he played that role so well that he blundered into vengefulness—well, that only showed the steady hand of the director who'd cast him. He could have made different choices, but he couldn't have changed the outcome. He hadn't been in charge. Dahlia had. She'd finally become Prospero.

As Irma thought this of Ben-Josh, in the half-flash it took to think it, she

realized she was trying to say it to herself. *It's not your fault, I.*

To Ben-Josh she said: "You know, she really liked you."

He had been tugging at one cuff with the opposite hand, glumly and with a touch of absent vanity. Now he dropped his head. "No," he said. He didn't seem to be disagreeing with her statement so much as keeping it at bay.

"It's true," said Irma. Perhaps she should not persist; Ben, still shaking his bowed head, his nose arcing slowly from shoe to shoe, seemed ready to burst into tears. "It was obvious when I saw you two together," she said. "Both times—at the Parties and then in my room that day. I think she knew you were in love with her."

Ben lifted his eyes to meet her own. His mouth opened slightly, revealing his healthy teeth, as though he were ready to mount a protest, but no protest was forthcoming, and his eyes contained a gratitude.

"She picked you for a reason," Irma said. "Even if she couldn't admit it."

Ben shook his head. "She thought I was a moron."

"You were right about a lot of things," Irma said.

"Like what?"

"Like, you know. 'We Are One.' We're all in this together."

The platitude seemed to undo him. His eyes glistened, and he swallowed a sobbing noise. With a tender, almost comic sincerity, he reached out his arms and wrapped Irma in a hug.

The embrace, while awkward, reset something between them. The rest of the room returned to Irma's view, with its assemblage of dully smiling guests. A silver vat with a spigot stood on the credenza. Ben refilled Irma's cup with twig-colored tea. Then he piled little white cookies on a filigreed porcelain plate, handed her the plate, and, with a kind of sad chivalry, waited for her to choose a direction and went the other way.

Irma stepped through a pair of French doors into a room less formal than the others. A large television hung on the wall across from an L-shaped sofa of dusky rose. An exercise bike lurked in one corner beside a wall unit full of CDs and old magazines. It was painfully easy to imagine Dahlia here, lounging on that sofa with her laptop, the TV on for its sound.

Pressed together on the sofa's L were a half dozen women Irma's age, their knees touching so everyone could fit, phones and teacups arrayed on the glass-topped table. Dahlia's hometown friends, or the ones Dahlia's

mom had seen fit to invite. Pammy had joined them and was perched on the cushion nearest the base of the stairs, chatting with two of the girls.

Irma squeezed in beside Pammy, set the plate of cookies on the table, and tried, though she was starting to feel nauseated, to take a sip of tea.

“Well, Middle Eastern studies, but really I’m premed,” one of the girls was telling Pammy as she fiddled with her eyebrow ring. “We did academic decathlon with Dahlia junior year. Second place in the region.”

“Poor Breughs,” the other said, sighing. “She knew everything about Shakespeare. And pop culture, of course. When was the last time you saw her?”

The first girl tried to remember. “Graduation, I guess? To be honest, I was surprised to get her mom’s email, but of course I was eager to come. What happened was so unexpected.”

Irma’s whole body was shaking. Surely the Dahlia these girls knew needed mourning too, but she wasn’t *Dahlia*-Dahlia; she wasn’t the troubled beloved person Irma had tried to know. She wanted to charge up the stairs and fling herself into Dahlia’s bed, burrow under Dahlia’s covers, smell Dahlia’s lingering smells, but there was a collapsible wooden barrier stretched across the foot of the stairs as though to prevent just that.

Irma glared at it in anguish and disbelief—this accordioned XXX of pale slats of wood, no higher than her thighs, secured at the ends by feeble rubber stoppers. Did Dahlia’s mom think she could hold back the flood with *that*? It seemed monstrous to pretend such a thing was normal or civilized. As though such barriers were designed not to impede the progress of toddlers or dogs but to prevent curious guests from entering your daughter’s room at a tea after her suicide.

Irma turned away from the gate. No mysteries would be solved today, she angrily thought; they would not even be alluded to. The whole event felt sickeningly artificial; neither a celebration of Dahlia’s life nor an authentic picture of what that life had been, but a carefully constructed nothing. The older guests seemed to be colleagues of Irma’s mom; the younger ones had been handpicked for their banality. It would have been better not to have bothered. It would have been better not to pretend. Who could derive any comfort from this? Where, anywhere in it, was Dahlia?

Enlivened for a moment by rage, Irma glimpsed the existence of another history of Dahlia’s life, full of characters who were not here. Full, for

instance, of men: Dahlia's father. The boys and men she'd slept with, seduced or been seduced by, who'd loved or hurt her or both. Jeremy Talbot. The only one here was poor Ben-Josh, forced to bear the weight of them all.

My father's house has many mansions was the scrap of Gospel that floated through her head. Dahlia's brief life had many rooms, rooms from her past she had lived in, rooms from her future she never would.

"DIDN'T YOU THINK that was creepy?" she asked Pammy on the ride home. The Ram's heater had truly conked out. Her breath clouded whitely before her.

"What?" Pammy, shimmying on the bench seat for warmth, drummed her mittens against her knees.

"The pet fence. By the stairs."

"Creepy?" Pammy said. "What do you mean?"

"Her mom doesn't have a dog," Irma said. "There weren't any kids around. What was the fence for? It was just to keep us from going upstairs."

Pammy shrugged. "Maybe Dahlia's mom didn't want us to go upstairs."

They rumbled unspeaking up I-43, through the north Milwaukee suburbs, past Belgium and Oostburg and Kohler. If only Dahlia had taken the cat, Irma thought; if only Irma had insisted. She imagined Anderson slipping through the fence's diamond vacancies or hopping nimbly over the top, an envoy between two worlds.

Irma had hardly cried since Dahlia died. Even that first awful night on the rug, she'd been racked by sobs that were mostly choked and dry. Now the tears flowed down her face as the towns rolled by. Haven, Cleveland, Clover. She stared at the freeway, both hands squeezing the wheel. She felt a little better, or at least less lonely, when she heard Pammy crying too.

WHEN THE FIRST panic attack came, she didn't know what was happening. It was five after eight on a Wednesday night in February. She was sitting at her desk, trying to work on her thesis, feeling like a fraud and a failure. Since Dahlia's death, she hadn't written a word. That wasn't the problem, exactly. The problem was her thoughts. *It's all your fault, I. It's all your fault.*

She shoved back her chair and stalked across the rug, her hands clasped atop her head, her breathing shallow and quick. She banged a shin against the bookcase and turned around. Some sick and desperate angel had flown into the room and seized her throat. She lurched back and forth in zigzags, slamming into walls and furniture, the room too small to contain her. Her hair, unbearably heavy, bothered her shoulders and back. Anderson, agitated by her frantic pace, danced around, meowing, and brushed her bare calf. “Get away!” Irma snarled. She couldn’t bear to be touched, not by Anderson, not even by her own hair. She’d never felt so terrified. Not of dying, exactly—of living in a world made of death. Of going mad, madder than her mom, madder than Dahlia, not that either of those two were mad. She was the mad one, and whatever was happening now was the proof.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to tighten the circle of her pacing so as to stay on the rug and not crash into things. A long while later she opened her eyes. She saw her phone on the bed and thought about whom she might call. Judy. Pammy. 911. But to stop pacing, to take her hands away from her head, felt impossible.

When she finally was able to slow her walking, her body still coursed with a crazy energy. She flopped down on the bed and watched her limbs shake. One leg and then the other, back and forth for hours. She held her arms up like a zombie and watched them shake too. She fell into fitful sleep. Her body was covered in bruises.

A few nights later it happened again, at exactly the same time. Five after eight, she realized, was when Pammy had called to tell her about Dahlia.

She called Judy and asked her what to do. Judy suggested she go to Student Health, which Irma did the following day. The counselor at Student Health taught her something called box breathing and referred her to a psychotherapist in town who was covered by Irma’s insurance. Irma tried to practice box breathing, but the name reminded her of coffins. Dahlia, Pammy had told her, had been cremated.

The therapist’s office was in a shambling wooden Queen Anne across the street from Carapelli’s. Though better maintained than the house where Irma had attended the Parties, it looked otherwise identical, and as she climbed the stairs she could feel Dahlia and Ben-Josh dancing behind her.

The therapist greeted Irma from the doorway of an upstairs room. She was fortyish, with curly brown hair and red rectangular glasses. She smiled

warmly and, as Irma entered the book-lined room, gestured toward a plaid love seat. Irma, in a nervous daze, immediately lay down, but the love seat was too small for her body, and she wasn't sure whether to drape her legs over the far arm or fetally bend her knees. She opted for the latter.

"Most people sit up," suggested the therapist gently. Embarrassed, Irma sat up.

The therapist asked Irma whether she would like a cup of tea. *Enough with the fucking tea*, Irma thought, detesting the therapist's calm, but she nodded and said yes.

The rest of the hour went much the same. The therapist, whose name was Beth, asked Irma why she had come, and Irma felt enraged by the question. She described the physical details or her panic attacks and beyond that could say almost nothing. She stared at Beth's blue jeans, down below the knee. She stared at Beth's New Balance sneakers.

The second session went much the same except that Irma knew not to lie on the couch. She accepted a mug of peppermint tea, then watched it grow cold between her hands while she tried to think of something to say. Occasionally Beth would make some mild interjection into the silence, trying to coax her along, and Irma would feel a burst of murderous anger.

The third week, Irma stomped in and refused the tea. She plunked down on the love seat and started to talk. And talk and talk and talk. Not just about Dahlia, but Nicholas and Pella too, and even her mom, and the pet gate across the stairs. "I killed her," she said, her cheeks and forehead burning. "I loved her and so I killed her. I drove them all away. If I hadn't had sex with Nicholas, none of this would have happened. My parents haven't had sex in twenty years."

Beth nodded. Irma, enraged, wanted to jump up and punch her red glasses and kindly therapist face. Instead she kept talking. Amid her shame and anger something else bubbled up—a hint of pride at being willing to say what she was thinking, even though it made no sense, even though it made her sound mad. She had no idea when her parents had last had sex.

At the end of the session, Beth walked her to the door.

"One thing you might consider," she said, "would be a prescription for an antidepressant."

"Oh." Irma found herself trembling. She'd hoped maybe she'd had a

breakthrough by virtue of talking so much and would now go home and be cured. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“That’s understandable,” Beth said. “But you could consider it going forward. We could consider it together.”

“I think I’ll just have the therapy for now,” Irma said. She sounded ridiculous to herself, like she was resisting an upsell at a restaurant.

She continued to see the therapist. The panic attacks kept arriving. And on the nights one didn’t arrive, she could feel it glide in the stairwell, promptly at 8:05.

“ARE YOU ON an antidepressant?” she asked Pammy soon after the therapist raised the topic. They were at the dining hall with Monty.

Pammy, in a kindly way, looked at her like *Duh*.

“Since when?” Irma asked.

“Since senior year of high school.”

“But why?” Irma asked. “I mean, you’re so laid-back. Nothing rattles you.” Having said this, Irma felt uneasy—she seemed to be hinting that Dahlia’s death hadn’t rattled Pammy enough. “Most things, I mean.”

“You only met her after she went on it,” Monty said. “You have no point of comparison.”

“That’s true,” Pammy said. “I was pretty low for a while in high school.”

Irma found this depressing. It was depressing that Pammy had felt low in high school. It was depressing that, as Monty said, Irma had never known a pre-drug version of Pammy—the original Pammy, so to speak. It was depressing to think that Pammy’s buoyancy, which Irma had always admired, although admittedly she sometimes equated it with a lack of the deepest depths, might be owed to a drug.

The unknowable swarmed around Irma. She didn’t know what Pammy had been like in high school compared to how she was now. She didn’t know what she, Irma, would be like if she filled the prescription in her backpack, and she didn’t know whether she would know how she had changed if she did fill the prescription, because the self who would be trying to observe and describe the change would be the same self that underwent the change, so there would be no firm ground on which to stand

and evaluate. But nobody seemed to worry about that, about their selves being changed.

“How did it feel to go on it?” she asked.

Pammy shrugged, took a bite of her sandwich, waited till she swallowed. “Good,” she said. “Easy.”

“Did you feel different?”

“I felt more myself. I could do more of the things I wanted to do. Taking pictures, painting—I was doing a lot of painting.”

“You made more art.”

“I definitely made more art.”

The despair Irma felt at Dahlia’s absence and the thought of the pain that had led to Dahlia’s absence: That was not a despair she wanted to tamp down, or diminish, or look away from. It felt like a betrayal of Dahlia to do so. She turned to Monty. “Are you on antidepressants?”

“Me?” Monty touched his sternum, beside the penguin on his pec. “No.”

“How come?”

Monty furrowed his forehead. “Not sure,” he said. “Never occurred to me.”

“Don’t you get depressed?”

“Not lately,” Monty said, with a glance at Pammy.

Pammy smiled. “Good answer.”

“But when you feel depressed,” Irma said, persisting. “What do you do then? To feel better.”

Monty pondered this. “In the fall there’s football,” he said. “And in the winter there’s ice fishing. And I always feel good in summer. Spring can be rough, because I take my hardest classes, and my allergies are bad. In spring I pop a lot of Zyrtec. I guess Zyrtec is my antidepressant.”

“He’s high on it right now,” Pammy said.

“Are your friends on antidepressants?” Irma asked.

Monty shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

“But why?” Irma said. “Why are the women on them but not the dudes?”

“Maybe we’re more realistic and less stubborn,” Pammy said.

“Maybe the weight of an unequal society is pressing down on us,” Irma said.

It was impossible to think about her pain without thinking about

Dahlia's pain, not only because Dahlia's pain had triggered her own but because Dahlia's pain felt so much greater, so much more awful and consequential. Dahlia's problems were now impossible to solve. Irma's problems felt, by comparison, not worth solving.

Was she simply too rigid, too invested in a spurious notion of purity, to add a drug to her life? Beth had referred her to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist had given her a prescription, which Irma had been carrying around in her backpack for a week. She'd stayed up nights reading message boards where women described their attempts to reduce and be free of their SSRIs and the torturous symptoms that followed. Few of them ever succeeded.

To take an antidepressant seemed to require a loss of faith, whether it was faith in a Catholic God, or her own idea of God, or nature, or herself—just, finally, *faith*. Was there such a thing as an objectless faith—a trust not directed toward or dependent on some particular savior? A trust that didn't trust anyone or anything in particular, but merely trusted? Irma didn't know whether such a concept existed or not. But she felt she would be faithless, would be relinquishing something she was reluctant to relinquish, if she filled the prescription the psychiatrist had given her. She would be giving herself to the pill, or the doctor, instead of to whatever she'd trusted before.

But when she tried to explain this, nobody, including her therapist, seemed to know what she was talking about.

She texted Oonie: Could I write about going on an SSRI?

Oonie replied within seconds: You can write whatever you want.

THERE WAS SUCH a painful clarity to these late April days, a painful clarity and a painful length of light. The blue afternoons, whiter near the horizons, deepened and deepened to a cathedral cobalt infinity far overhead, and you could see so far across the lake that the lake seemed infinite too. Dusk was falling only now, after the dinner Irma had not eaten, and it felt as though the expansion of the days expanded the volume of what those days could hold, and what they could hold was grief.

She'd been lying to Pammy, or at least had let Pammy persist in believing an untruth: Irma hadn't come close to finishing her thesis. After Dahlia's death, she'd been unable to write a single word about *The Tempest*.

It felt impossible to approach the play in an academic way, and it felt impossible to shift the focus of her paper when she'd been thinking about *The Tempest* for years. And maybe it wasn't just *The Tempest*—all her classwork, all her frantic urge to succeed, seemed to be falling away. Without it, who would she be?

After weeks of struggle, she'd called Judy. "I haven't been writing my thesis," she admitted. "I'm not going to get it done."

"That's absolutely fine, dear," Judy said. "Don't spend one second fretting about it."

"But I won't graduate with honors," Irma said, near tears at the thought, even as she hated herself for caring.

"I honor you," Judy said. "It's an honor to be your friend."

To be absolved by Judy had helped. Instead of staring at her thesis notes every night till dawn, paralyzed by despair, she'd written a short essay about starting on an antidepressant and sent it to Oonie. The Brightness would publish it soon. And, having finished that, she'd begun writing something else—something long and strange and apparently purposeless because it wasn't for any class or prize but that she typed away at every night until dawn. A remembrance of Dahlia, which had morphed into something else. Maybe it was all that writing, or maybe it was the antidepressant, but she was beginning to feel a sliver of hope.

Now she and Pammy were folding the last of the flowers. Irma was glad for Pammy's visits; she was glad for their chats, and their silence, and for the busywork of folding the flowers—not just folding but cutting, twisting, and knotting them, per the templates and instructions, and scrunching the folds just so. It reminded Irma of sewing, which she had not been doing, and of the needlecraft her mom did. The automatic work of the hands. There were several kinds of flowers Pammy wanted, several templates she had provided—the dahlia template, with its telltale honeycomb dome, was only one.

It felt good to have established this routine, to be with Pammy while each of them worked without the need to speak; it allowed them to speak more freely. It was Pammy's project that enabled this form of companionship. Perhaps that was the key to life, to think up projects for your friends to share. Perhaps friendships followed projects, and not the other way around. *My project fails / Which was to please.*

Irma now knew so many random facts about dahlias, the kind of facts you could scare up online. Dahlias existed in every color of the rainbow except blue. The Aztecs used dahlias to treat epilepsy. Wild dahlias favored the uplands and mountains of Mexico; they were named the Mexican national flower in 1963.

“Did you hear where Ben-Josh is working after graduation?” Pammy asked.

“Nope.”

Pammy, with a reverent sigh of the kind Irma might append to the words *the Sorbonne*, spoke a one-syllable word.

“What’s that?” Irma asked.

Pammy looked at her, wide-eyed. “Are you serious? It’s the new feminist dating app.”

“What’s feminist about it?”

“Women make the first move,” Pammy explained. “Guys can’t fill your inbox with dick pics until you say so.”

“I guess that’s pretty feminist,” Irma said.

“The founder’s a woman. She’s basically our age. She was a vice president at Tinder. She sued them for sexual harassment and started her own company.”

“Really?” Irma said.

“Really which part?”

“She’s our age?”

Pammy fingers played musically over her keyboard as she searched for the answer online. “Or maybe Pella’s age. How old is Pella?”

Irma flinched at this unexpected mention of Pella. She and Judy talked about Pella, of course. Sometimes directly; more often by allusion. Judy would order the roasted artichokes, Pella’s favorite dish, at Green Rooster and marvel at the flavor in Pella-like tones. Irma would punch her slipping glasses higher up on her nose and feel, as she did so, that she was imitating Pella’s imitation of her. Whenever Irma was with Judy, she was always thinking about Pella. But to hear Pammy say Pella’s name was like being dunked in the frigid lake.

“Pella’s twenty-eight,” Irma said.

“This girl’s twenty-five,” Pammy reported. “So halfway between us and Pella. Makes you wonder what we’ve been doing with our lives.”

Irma winced. This was purely a joke—Pammy never wondered what she was doing with her life. Pammy just lived, optimistic and indestructible. Whereas for Irma, the prospect of time unmarked by achievement had always come with a gnawing terror.

She didn't like this about herself, this need to be first, to run at the front. To be fully alive would be better. She recognized the trait and was trying to let it change. Meanwhile she wished Pammy would stop saying Pella's name.

Pammy was still reading about the founder of the dating app. "She's a Cancer, like Monty...God, she's so hot, it's unfair. You know, she and Monty kind of *look* alike." She turned toward Irma. "Anyway, this app is blowing up. It's barely out of beta and most of my friends are on it. You should download it."

"*I* should download it?" Irma said. "Why?"

"Um, because you're single? Because you want to meet guys?"

The thought of using a dating app filled Irma with several strains of dread. "The only guys on it would be the guys we go to school with," she said. "I don't want to meet *them* on an app."

Pammy shrugged. "Why not? You never know who might come out of the woodwork and ask you out."

"I thought women had to make the first move."

"That's true." Pammy squinted at her computer. "But who knows? You might stumble on somebody's profile and realize you have more in common than you thought. A shy guy you overlooked, but you both swoon over Edith Wharton."

"Wharton's world is too narrow," Irma said, just to be objectionable, though this was Judy's opinion and not her own. She kept going, though it didn't matter, and Pammy certainly didn't care: "I mean, Wharton is flawless at describing the world she sees—but the world she describes is restricted to what she *can* see, and see readily. She never gropes around in the darkness—she never reaches toward the numinous."

"Great," Pammy said, absorbing this mini-rant with aplomb. "A shy guy you overlooked, but he reaches toward the numinous."

Despite herself, Irma laughed.

"My point," Pammy continued, "is that this app is blowing up. I wonder what kind of stock options Ben-Josh is getting. He's bound to be a

kajillionaire. Plus almost all the employees are women. Great odds for him, dating-wise."

Since the memorial, Irma had felt a surprising fondness for Ben-Josh and waved whenever she saw him across the quad. "I don't get it," she said. "If this is a so-called feminist company, and all the employees are women, how is Ben-Josh working there? He's basically the scourge of the feminist internet."

Pammy shrugged. "Different feminists, different internets. I heard Molina mentored the founder at Stanford."

"Molina got him the job? As in, 'Hey, kid, if your dad doesn't sue us, I'll get you a job in Silicon Valley'?"

"It's in Austin, actually. That's where all the hot start-ups are. But otherwise, yeah—something like that."

"What will Ben-Josh do there? It's not like he knows how to code."

"Who knows?" Pammy said. "Maybe he'll wear short-shorts and a belly shirt and roller-skate around the office bringing everyone smoothies."

Irma smiled at how easy this was to imagine: Ben-Josh zooming around with a Texas tan, tiny clothes stretched over his beefcake frame, dark curls held aloft by a terrycloth headband, serving as the mascot to an office of ambitious young women, the whole office done up in the streamlined style of an online utopia. No matter how hard they pinched him or brushed him with playful shoves, trying to knock him off his skates, he would always stay on his feet.

"Is millennial pink the same color as mainstream-feminist-marketing pink?" she asked.

Pammy shook her head. "Millennial pink is softer. Like a newborn piglet. Feminist-marketing pink has more of a hard-candy aspect. Like a lawn flamingo."

"And your hair?" Irma asked, because it was fun to hear Pammy talk about colors. The red streaks in her glossy black hair had recently been converted to an eerie, bioluminescent green.

Pammy shrugged. "I bought a killer orange dress for the graduation concert. I thought this shade would match. Call it nuclear tadpole."

Pammy closed her laptop and joined Irma on the bed. They folded crepe-paper flowers, the cheerful heap growing between their socked feet, like a mounting pot in some betting game.

When they ran out of paper, Pammy gathered the evening's flowers into a trash bag, piling them carefully so the lower ones wouldn't get crunched, and pulled Irma into a clinch.

"I love you," she said.

"Love you too," Irma replied.

That was what they said now when they took their leave. That was a nice thing, a good thing; Pammy had started it and Irma approved, but it also made her sad. It felt like a valediction—an acknowledgment that their time together was winding down.

Pammy shouldered her two bags, the smaller full of hoops and needles and thread, the larger full of flowers, and turned to go.

"Speaking of hair," Irma heard herself say, though that had been an hour ago.

Pammy, sensing something in Irma's tone, turned to her.

"I've been thinking mine's a little long," Irma said shyly. "Or a lot long."

Pammy smiled. "We'll talk." She departed with her flowers, and the heavy door swung shut.

Anderson meowed. In a minute, Irma would get up and rescue him from the bathroom. For now she sat cross-legged on her bed, the flowers gone, and steadied herself for the night to come. She hadn't had a panic attack in weeks, but the aftershocks still reverberated through her.

Pammy's mention of Pella had shaken her. Tonight, somehow, Pella's name penetrated in a different way, through the armor-less parts of her, straight to her heart. They hadn't spoken in months. Irma's attempt to get in touch in November had not gone well. She knew she had botched it with her hidden anger over Nicholas and her insistence on making Pella see what she did not need to see, Mike's relationship with Caroline. Sometimes—too often—she wanted to shake Pella by the shoulders to make her wake up and see the world the way Irma did, see that you needed to keep your head down and make a narrow wedge of yourself, work hard, be relentless, slice through the driving wind. She'd wanted to shake Pella out of the pillowy half-charmed dreamworld in which she seemed to live. But Pella didn't need to be shaken.

After the news about Dahlia became public, Pella had reached out, but Irma felt unable to engage. It was easier to respond to Oonie's effusions

than to talk to Pella, who knew Irma too well, who would see instantly how broken she was and would, by seeing it, render that brokenness realer than Irma could stand. After a little time passed, Irma's demurral came to seem like one more of her sins, and another barrier between them.

She kept talking about it in therapy and writing about it in her ever-lengthening document. How she'd berated Pella at the wedding, then betrayed her on the beach. How she'd wished for Mike to pair off with Katrina—not only so that she could pair off with Nicholas but to punish Pella and gain some obscure revenge. And then that unlikely wish came true, as though some unruly part of her controlled them all, as though her whims were running the island, Mike and Katrina and even Nicholas her playthings, spellbound.

But she was no Prospero. She wasn't some omnipotent wizard or witch. Like a child, she was always persuading herself of her own omnipotence, then spinning it into guilt. She believed, like a child, that what happened between Pella and Mike was her fault, that her mother's bitterness was her fault, that Dahlia's death was her fault.

She was no Prospero—or, rather, she corrected herself, she was. She was Prospero at the end of the play, in the passage Dahlia quoted and that Irma would never forget. She recalled how Prospero began—

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own

Yes, Irma thought. What strength I have's mine own. No more and no less.

This was what she needed to learn: Grief without guilt, misfortune without control. Shakespeare's words unspooled in her mind—

And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

As she sat on her bed, Irma could see these words lingering in the air before her. And she glimpsed in them something she hadn't glimpsed until now. That she, too, was the speaker. She, too, was this leveled Prospero of the epilogue, defrocked and devoid of spells, reduced to her own faint strength. She too was the *I*. She would spend her life filling Dahlia's sails, but she couldn't do so alone. She too needed others, their breath, their prayers, their hands. She needed their help and forgiveness. She needed to be freed and filled by them; she needed their presence and love. What strength she had was her own—which meant she was always in need. No woman was an island, or even the master of one.

She felt Dahlia's hand on her shoulder, reminding her of this; she heard the final couplet in Dahlia's singsong, so sardonic and yet so true.

As you from crimes would pardon'd be,

Let your indulgence set me free.

To release, to relieve, to pardon, to pray. To fill and to free. Above all to forgive, beginning with herself. That was all she could do.

The bathroom door shivered as Anderson, his meows growing churlish, rubbed back and forth against it. Irma stood up from the bed to let him out.

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The party was being held in the not-so-secret speakeasy in the basement of the Hotel Finch. Pella, arriving alone, had to hunt in the dark wooden door to find the knot that doubled as a buzzer. When the buzz sounded, she pushed the door and headed downstairs.

Her arrival felt both late and early. Late because the party had begun an hour ago, and she could hear the murmur of voices below. Early because it had been a dazzling June day, and the sun was just now setting, its reddish sidelong rays filling her eyes as she'd passed through Madison Square.

Her eyes adjusted to the dimness as she entered the humming speakeasy. It comprised a long spacious room with an opulent bar—oak, brass, green banker's lamps, glittering rows of glasses hung from slats. The banquettes that lined the walls were covered in an eclectic mix of textures and patterns —leopard spots, bloodred velvet, wild-pink velour. Smells overwhelmed her—perfume, whiskey, wine. She peered through the milling crowd toward the far wall, assuming Nicholas and Sylvie would be sitting down, and there they were.

"You look lovely," Nicholas said as he rose to greet her. "That dress could not suit you better."

"This old thing?" Pella added in her mind in Judy-voice: *By which I mean my husk of a self. The dress is brand-new.* "I'm sorry I'm late. I've been a little under the weather."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Nicholas said, his tone of gentle sympathy slightly tinged by distaste. He had a germophobic streak Pella found annoying; it seemed part of his general preference for perfection. He pecked her cheeks and sat down again, admitting Sylvie to the conversation.

Sylvie was hunched on the leopard-spotted banquette, wearing a fraying black wool peacoat with a turned-up moth-eaten collar. The coat was both

incommensurate with the brilliant weather and the most dilapidated garment in the place. Pella, as always, felt terribly happy to see her. Nicholas had invited Pella upstate twice since her January visit, and she'd eagerly accepted both times. She played gin rummy with Sylvie and cooked her meals and spent many hours sitting beside her, silently watching TV. Donald Trump had secured the nomination of his party; Bernie Sanders had not.

Pella felt content and grateful for these mundane moments in Sylvie's low-ceilinged, wood-paneled living room and for Sylvie's easy tolerance of her presence. None of their subsequent interactions had come close to matching the blistering intimacy of watching *The Death of My Husband* together, nor had Sylvie alluded to the occasion since, but their shared experience that day, and Sylvie's gift of the DVD, seemed to Pella to inform and consecrate their hours of cable news.

"Hi, Sylvie," she said and stretched out her hand, though she wasn't sure whether Sylvie would take it.

"Hey," mumbled Sylvie, and tapped Pella's fingertips with her own. She returned to her Coke, stirring the straw through the ice with the enclosed attention of a sullen child.

Nicholas looked weary, the bruise-like purple bags beneath his eyes more pronounced than usual. He'd left work at noon and driven to the Catskills and back, six hours round trip, to deliver Sylvie to the party. Pella reached up to brush a stray lick of dark blond hair behind his ear. He'd been growing it out since winter, which only magnified his beauty.

"I opened a tab," he said. "Go order yourself a drink. We'll be here."

As Pella headed toward the bar, she was confronted, for the first time since that morning on Block Island, with Katrina, who looked elegant in her flowing black pin-striped pants, their waist impossibly high, and a flowing white blouse with frills and an apron collar. Her rain-straight black hair had been trimmed so that it swished through the air just above her shoulders.

The email Katrina had sent Pella was their first communication since Katrina's texts from the ferry. She forwarded the party invitation—

The *SoHo Review*

invites you to celebrate the appointment

of our new editor in chief
KATRINA BARKER

—and prefaced it with a single line: *Hope you and Nicky can make it! XO—Kat*

Now they greeted each other with a prophylactic torrent of kisses, punctuated by gasps and smiles. “I’m so happy for you,” Pella said. “Who would have thought you’d ever leave *The New Yorker*?”

“I know!” Katrina was clutching Pella’s hands in a ring-around-the-rosy way. “But when I went for the first interview, I just thought, Kat, you’ve *got* this.”

Pella nodded. “You’ve been preparing for it your whole life.”

Katrina’s face shone. “My whole life,” she repeated with a faraway note of wonder. “So how could I fuck it up?”

“You’re going to do an amazing job,” Pella assured her.

“Do you really think so?”

“I know so,” Pella said. “You’re a terrific editor.”

Katrina sucked in a long slow breath, as though inhaling Pella’s words. “Of course, Arturo’s are impossible shoes to fill. But tonight’s not the night for talking shop. Except during my speech, of course. Is that Jane and Janet you’re wearing?”

“Yes,” said Pella, with a glance down at her simple lilac dress.

Katrina’s sigh of disgust was the ultimate form of approval. “Ugh. It’s perfect on you.”

“Owen sends his love,” Pella said. “He’s sad not to be here. You were such a champion of his novel.”

“I’m sad not to have him,” Katrina said. “He’s in LA?”

Pella nodded. After the cable-news host Hunter Stroman repeatedly trashed Owen’s novel, it had flown to the top of the bestseller lists and seemed to have taken up residence there. The Netflix series, which might have lingered in Hollywood limbo for years, was barreling into production. Pella hadn’t seen Owen in weeks. “Things are moving fast,” she said.

Katrina gave an even more disgusted version of the sigh she’d given Pella’s dress: “*Ugh.*”

Pella, noticing Katrina’s empty hand, asked if she could buy her a drink.

Katrina shook her head vigorously. “I have to stay stone-cold sober until my speech. One sip and I turn into a bumbling fool. I don’t know why I keep calling it a speech—it’s just a few words. But I’ll walk to the bar with you.”

The muttonchopped bartender grinned at them with smug contentment, as though he’d just finished having sex with them both. Pella’s stomach churned. She was feeling a rare desire not to drink, but she asked for the cocktail list anyway. She pointed to a name at random and ordered a Coke for Sylvie.

She and Katrina leaned against the bar, silent for a moment, while they waited for Pella’s cocktail to be laboriously compiled from zests and essences. Pella felt achy and listless. She’d skipped dance class this morning and all afternoon felt unable to keep up with Jack, whom she’d taken to the Prospect Park Zoo. This noisy roomful of people was only disturbing her more. She felt annoyed at her torpor; she wanted badly to rise to the occasion of the party, particularly where Katrina was concerned. She felt grateful to be invited and glad for Katrina’s success. The dress was the first she’d bought since Owen’s wedding.

“I’ve always admired you,” Pella said, before she lost her nerve. “So pretty, so smart, so clear about what you want. From the moment we met, I wanted to be like you.”

Katrina’s eyes widened. She seemed far more surprised by this statement, and more delighted, than Pella might have expected. “I always wished I were more like *you*,” she said. “Which was brutally awkward, because you were just a kid. I was supposed to be the sophisticated one.”

A waiter approached with a platter of smoked-salmon canapés. They both shook their heads. “I’m sorry about what happened with Mike,” Katrina said, her voice full of feeling. “That’s by far the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

“It’s okay,” Pella said. “I hope we can be friends.”

“I’d love that,” Katrina said.

The bartender nudged Pella’s cocktail across the bar. It was the pale frothy orange of sherbet, topped by corkscrews of lemon peel. As Pella reached for the glass’s stem, a man in a snug pin-striped suit and a bothered expression approached. Katrina introduced him as the publisher of the *SoHo Review*. He gave Pella a quick top-to-bottom scan, not of the heterosexual sort, and whispered something to Katrina.

“Duty calls,” Katrina said cheerfully as the publisher tugged her away. “I’m so glad you came.”

“Me too,” Pella said.

As she picked up her cocktail, she could feel people’s eyes on her. Nicholas knew everyone, and though Pella rarely appeared at social events, everyone knew who Nicholas was dating. That was what the publisher’s waggish appraisal had meant, and if the gay men looked at Pella that way, the straight women did so many times over.

That poor girl, some faces seemed to say.

I wish I were her, said others.

But actually they were the same faces, and the same voices sang both halves of the chorus—

That poor girl—I wish I were her.

Their desire to be with Nicholas—which many of them had fulfilled, at least for a night—mixed in a volatile way with their conviction that any woman with Nicholas was on the wrong end of an unequal bargain.

I heard they’re in an open relationship.

He is, anyway.

Pella grabbed Sylvie’s soda with her free hand and headed for the room’s far end. The banquettes were lined with stylish, playfully dressed people in their sixties and beyond—the old guard of the *SoHo Review,* editors and contributors during its original and still most revered incarnation who assembled to lend their autumn light to occasions such as these. No one who didn’t know her could have guessed that Sylvie, slumped and molten in her moth-eaten peacoat, had once been the youngest, the most prepossessing, and, Pella thought, the most brilliant in her art. She placed Sylvie’s Coke on the low wobbly table and sat down beside her.

Sylvie gave Pella a nod of thanks, then reached into her bag, pulled out a pack of Marlboros, and struck a match. Even as Pella flinched in expectation of some swift retribution, it seemed to her thrilling and proper, a tantalizing glimpse of a vanished existence, and she briefly indulged a fantasy that everyone at the party would follow suit and the fancy, faux-dingy speakeasy would fill with a cloud of bluish smoke. Instead a hotel employee hustled over, leaned down, and talked quickly into Sylvie’s ear. Sylvie, with a flustered expression, thrust the cigarette into her Coke. Pella walked to the bar to get her another.

The snug-suited publisher imparted a series of abrupt, fuzzy thumps to a microphone. His bald head shone in the lamplight. Conversations yielded to an expectant silence.

The publisher, his locutions prim and stuffy, thanked the current staff for shepherding the *SoHo Review* through the last days of the founder, Arturo Jones. Then he swung an arm toward Arturo's partner, Teddy, who perched alertly on the edge of the banquette, his posture preposterously fine. He had, the publisher said, been a renowned dancer in his youth, before retiring to serve as Arturo's partner and helpmeet, handler of logistics and healer of discords, the nonintellectual engine of everything the *Review* had accomplished for over forty years.

Thus acknowledged, Teddy gave a simple wave. He was past seventy now—the eternally younger man, but without an Arturo to be younger than. His brown skin, covered in intriguing creases, glowed with olive undertones. His easy way of sidestepping the limelight suggested a natural star.

The publisher went down the row, acknowledging each member of the older generation. Sylvie, when her name was pronounced, didn't offer a friendly wave or smile, the way the others did, but merely plucked at the folds of her pants.

A raucous cheer went through the room when Katrina was introduced. Alone beside the corner of the brass-railed bar, the microphone in one hand and a sheaf of note cards in the other, she seemed ready to implode with nervous excitement, her elbows flying out and her knees knocking as she issued a full-body shiver and said, to much laughter from the crowd: *"Whew!"*

Katrina launched into her speech with a charm Pella had not known her to possess—a developing charm, Pella thought. Even the stack of note cards conveyed a sense, not of sedulous preparation, but of breeziness and ease, as Katrina spread them in her hand like playing cards and fanned herself as she spoke with extemporaneous grace about the mission of the *SoHo Review*. Then she quickly flipped through the stack, remembering a few extra people to thank. She stuck out her tongue at one card and skipped it. At the end she gave a little bow, and the crowd exploded.

When Oonie Jiri appeared at the bottom of the stairs, Pella recognized her instantly, though she'd never seen Oonie in person. In Pella's early

lovestruck days of sleeping with Nicholas, she had stalked Oonie's social media with an abject commitment she cringed to remember, this former model and influencer-intellectual who had literally a million followers despite maintaining an unerringly tasteful and clever feed. No bikini shots, no sordid selfies—nothing that Pella would have scrupled to post herself. Just stacks of books, haute couture, and wokeness. And promotion of the Brightness, everybody's favorite website, of which she was the founder. In short, Oonie was unassailable.

Oonie was wearing an extravagant trench coat with belts and epaulets and vented yokes and hems that seemed to extend and expand from her person in every direction like the risen armor of some beautiful armadillo, all of it trimmed in a long helix of gold chain. *She came as the Golden Notebook,* said the Irma in Pella's head, and Pella smiled—but once they'd enjoyed the joke, she and Irma agreed that Oonie looked borderline royal.

Not wanting to stare, Pella turned away—and caught sight of Katrina catching sight of Oonie. Katrina made a beeline for the late arrival, who enveloped her in a hug. Katrina beamed. The two of them, tall and beautiful, walked toward the bar, Oonie's long arm wrapped around Katrina's shoulders.

Somehow it surprised Pella immensely when, after they collected their drinks, the person Katrina guided Oonie toward was *her*.

"Hi, Oonie," Pella said as Oonie's fingers netted her own. She'd been too flustered to hear whatever introduction Katrina made, but at least she hadn't surrendered her composure so far as to do something truly bizarre, like pretend she didn't know who Oonie was. Nonetheless there remained much to pretend not to know: that Oonie's thirty-fifth birthday party shut down Minetta Tavern for a night; that she was a Leo with Aquarius rising and a Sagittarian moon; that she'd attended both Oxford and Cambridge. Pella knew everything about Oonie except what she was wearing beneath that gold-trimmed coat.

"I can't stay long," Oonie said. "Just long enough to chug this drink. But I couldn't miss this occasion. Cheers to Katrina!"

"Cheers," said Pella as the three of them clinked glasses.

Oonie was obviously kidding about chugging her drink. But there was something earthy and appetitive about her, an aptitude for chugging, and she did finish half her bloodred cocktail at a swallow. She projected a

fearless capacity for mischief that in photographs Pella had construed as a modeling shtick, a sexy kind of mugging for the camera, but that became far more intimidating in person, where it declared itself native and real. Pella had imagined Nicholas's ex to be severe and Olympian; instead, she fairly dripped with cupidinous life.

"We're starting all the new publishing projects," Oonie said, "and taking over all the old ones."

"I'll drink to that," Katrina said.

We was clearly all of womankind, but Pella, having neither started nor taken over a publishing project, felt left out as she lifted her glass.

Oonie turned and looked at her. "You're Irma's friend."

"Oh," said Pella, startled. She felt unworthy of this designation, though lately she thought of Irma constantly. "Yes."

"Did you know Dahlia as well?" Oonie asked.

Pella shook her head. "I never met her."

"That poor girl," Katrina said with a glance down into the glass of wine that, her speech accomplished, she'd already polished off. Overcome by the thought of Dahlia's suicide, she fell silent and blinked back a tear, looking pious and glum.

The expression on Oonie's face, by contrast, remained simple and penetrating. She was the one who, without setting foot in the Midwest, had gotten to know Dahlia; she was the one who, for five or six popular episodes, had shared a podcast with her. Her already mellow voice deepened as it became confiding:

"It's a terrible thing to lose a friend like that," she said. "It's happened to me."

Pella had never lost a friend in that sense. She'd lost both her parents to death; her friends she had lost by other means. *You're Irma's friend.*

"How's she doing?" Oonie asked, meaning Irma. Her tone was suffused with a soft concern that made Pella quiver. It was plain that for Oonie, the heart of the matter was the living.

"Okay," Pella said, and felt herself blush. She had no idea how Irma was doing and to lie about it filled her with shame and longing. Here she was, posing as Irma's friend—an impostor, a fraud.

Back in January, after Mike shared the news of Dahlia's suicide, Pella

had tried to reach Irma. She felt desperate to hear her friend's voice, but Irma would not answer the phone. Finally Pella texted her:

Dear I—I'm so, so sorry to hear about your friend. If you want to talk anytime, day or night, please do not hesitate. If there's anything, anything I can do, please please let me know.

It felt awful to have to compose this condolence so carefully—to work so hard to say so little. Their rapport had been broken, so Pella's message couldn't travel along the effortless current between friend and friend. She'd needed to build it out of stilted words. It devastated Pella to imagine Irma's grief and feel incapable of helping. I am so (so) sorry / if there's anything (anything) I can do / please (please) let me know—clumsy stock phrases whose stockness she'd tried to hide by typing certain words twice, as though repetition might improve them rather than doubling their doomed stupidity.

Irma wrote back immediately:

Thanks, P. I'm not really able to talk right now. Emotionally able, I mean.

I understand, Pella wrote. I'm here anytime. I love you.

Love you too, Irma answered. I'll be in touch.

Pella tried several more times throughout the winter. Each of her messages went without reply. Sending them filled Pella with paradoxical guilt—she was the one reaching out, Irma the one not responding, but it didn't feel that way. She felt she'd abandoned Irma by staying in New York and that Irma was right to ignore her. She felt her messages were burdening Irma, whose burden Pella had already increased by getting together with Nicholas...and so on. It was with sadness but also relief that Pella had ceased to try.

"I just wanted to support her," Oonie was saying of her own correspondence with Irma. "Be a big sister, you know? And to offer her the Brightness as a forum, if she wanted to commemorate her friend. She decided against it, ultimately.

"And then, boom, out of the blue, she pitched me her piece about Lexapro."

"That essay was brilliant." Katrina sighed.

"It was," Oonie agreed. "She's a stone-cold genius."

Pella murmured her assent. She'd read Irma's essay a hundred times;

entire paragraphs had slipped inside her whole.

> And so I consented to do what I had both sworn and assumed I would never do: Start taking a drug I might never be able to stop taking. Start taking a drug I didn't want to take. Start taking a drug I felt was being foisted on me by a medical establishment, a pharmaceutical industry, a politics, and a culture that I did not trust; that I thought—no, forget the past tense; that I *think*—is determined not to understand my pain and determined that I not understand it either. I did not want their drug. I wanted to work it out on my own terms, in my own time, without their fucking drug.
>
> But I was lost.

Pella narrowed the aperture of her mind so as not to remember any more of the essay; Irma's lostness was too much to contemplate without bursting into tears.

"It was brilliant," Katrina said again. "I've been meaning to send her a note."

"You should," Oonie said. "In a piece for the *Review,* she could really stretch her wings."

"Yes." Katrina pulled out her phone and typed herself a reminder. "Yes."

"We tried to hire her full-time, now that she's finishing school," Oonie confided. She shot Pella a friendly look, as though to say, *Sorry to bore you with stories you already know*. Pella smiled enigmatically. She wanted neither to reveal her ignorance nor to deter Oonie from saying more.

"I didn't care what we hired her to do," Oonie continued. "A girl like that, with a brain like that. Write, tweet, dance around the office—whatever! Just get her in the door. Figure the rest out later."

Oonie's eyes found Pella's. "If I was smarter, I would have called you to help recruit her. Maybe together we could have convinced her. In the end she turned me down."

"But why?" Katrina blurted, and the source of her surprise was obvious—she couldn't imagine anyone turning down Oonie.

"She's starting grad school in the fall," Oonie said. "At the University of Wisconsin. She said she wanted to be close to home."

“That makes sense,” Katrina said. “I can’t imagine what she’s been through.”

“You should invite her out to visit,” Oonie suggested to Pella. “We’ll all four have dinner.”

“Oh, that would be terrific!” Katrina said. “Please let’s make that happen.”

“We could go out to Fishkill some weekend,” Oonie said. “Hit up the museum. Or the strip club—whatever you guys prefer. My house up there is pretty cozy. A low-key getaway.”

“*Yessss,*” sighed Katrina. “I’m emailing you both right now.”

Pella winced as Katrina whipped out her phone again. She assumed this to be skillful chitchat on Oonie’s part, not meant to outlast the evening, and that Katrina was erring by forcing an awkward exchange. But the thought of a weekend with Irma filled Pella with longing. “I’d love that,” she said.

A hand landed on the small of Pella’s back. “What a gathering *this* is,” Nicholas said.

It was, Pella noted, a gathering of three of his lovers talking about a fourth. They widened their circle to admit him. With the usual contrast between his sheepish gestures and radiant confidence, he ducked inside. “Oonie,” he said. “Hello.”

They kissed on both cheeks, which required a slight dipping of Oonie’s knees, as though she were leaning down from the royal dais to bestow a medal.

“I was hung up in a meeting,” she said. “I missed Katrina’s speech.” This, Pella could tell, was her generous way of cuing Nicholas to praise it.

“That’s a shame,” Nicholas gallantly replied. “It was an exemplar of the genre. I feel ready to run through a wall in the service of art. And I learned some tidbits about the *Review*’s history I hadn’t known.”

“That’s not easy,” Oonie teased. “You know a lot of tidbits.” She lifted her coupe to the light and inspected the thin red line of cocktail that remained. “At the risk of toasting with an empty glass,” she said, “I think we should celebrate Katrina one more time.”

They lifted their glasses.

“Kat, you’re an inspiration to me and to women everywhere. You’re going to crush it, and Pella and I are going to help. Here’s to a bad-ass new era.”

“Hear, hear,” said Nicholas.

“You *guys*.” Katrina, beaming, gave the same knee-knocking shiver of elation she’d given at the start of her speech. “You’re making me blush.”

Soon thereafter, Katrina excused herself to go circulate among her guests. She seemed reluctant to do so—reluctant to leave their conversation and, Pella suspected, the ambit of Oonie’s charms.

Oonie was charming, but Pella felt less charmed, and less intimidated, than she might have expected. She felt slightly disturbed by how Oonie had spoken of Irma: a bright young thing to get in the door, and then, like a tactical weapon, figure out how to deploy. Good for Irma for resisting—good for Irma for taking it slow.

“Come,” said Nicholas to Oonie. “Say hello to my mother.”

“Of course,” Oonie said. “And then I have to dash.” Her voice sounded warm, but Pella thought she noticed a flicker of annoyance cross her face. It was easy to imagine Oonie and Sylvie not getting along.

Nicholas and Oonie made their way toward the distant banquette where Sylvie was seated. The dense crowd parted before them with remarkable ease, as though eager to make some small contribution to the happiness of such magnificent creatures.

Pella drifted to a corner of the room, where she watched from a distance, her view obscured by passersby, as Oonie leaned down to hug Sylvie. Sylvie seemed to wince at the contact. Oonie and Nicholas sat down on either side of Sylvie and chatted back and forth. Sylvie gazed off into the crowd, her expression as vacant and sullen as ever.

Eventually, Oonie squeezed Sylvie’s hand in farewell, and she and Nicholas disappeared into the crowd, leaving Sylvie alone. Pella waited several beats so as not to seem to have been loitering, then walked over and sat down beside her.

“Hey,” she said.

Sylvie turned and peered at her with a sudden keenness that bordered on suspicion. “You look different tonight,” she said.

Pella shifted on the banquette. Even a few months ago, she would have found this party enormously thrilling; tonight she was finding it tiresome. She’d come to make peace with Katrina and to sit in silence with Sylvie. Beyond that, she didn’t want to be here.

“I feel different,” she said.

They sat and watched the party as though it were cable news.

Oonie did not depart, nor did she take off her gold-trimmed coat before finding another bloodred cocktail in her hand. Pella, watching from afar, wondered whether Oonie was showing off the coat or leaving it on as a mercy, so as not to inflict upon them the even greater fabulousness of whatever she was wearing beneath.

“They might as well have given *her* the job,” Sylvie muttered—and Pella felt amazed at how much disdain for both Oonie and Katrina Sylvie could cram into so few words.

“Katrina’s a serious person,” Pella said. “She understands what you and your friends accomplished.”

“Flnnhff.” Sylvie half laughed, half coughed. “We didn’t accomplish shit.”

Nicholas, plainly, was the reason Oonie stayed. This didn’t surprise Pella; even a woman as otherworldly as Oonie might find Nicholas hard to leave. What struck her was Nicholas’s manner. Pella had lived through many months of knowing that Nicholas was sleeping with other women. This knowledge troubled her, but she’d taken solace in the assumption that Nicholas behaved more superficially, less authentically, with other women than he did with her. She had sensed herself, for all her anxious craving of him, somewhere near the center of his life.

Here, however, was Nicholas, nodding at Oonie’s words as though hypnotized, a mundane dreaminess in his green-gold eyes. And when admirers of Oonie’s approached to chat and ask for a selfie, Nicholas seemed not just tolerant but proud, willing to stand meekly by holding Oonie’s purse while she posed for yet another photo, her arms draped around strangers, her laugh a beautiful bray.

Pella knew she had a subtler mind than Oonie, who called magazines and websites “publishing projects” and thought that women running them would solve what ailed the world. She knew that, even if Nicholas never depended on her sexually to the extent she depended on him, he took immense pleasure in the things they did in bed. She knew that, against the distracting backdrop of Nicholas’s exploits, his openness about openness, they’d grown close. But she also knew he would never look at her with that worshipful tilt of his head.

Pella thought of the silver disc Sylvie had given her in January, the lone

extant copy of *The Death of My Husband*, which she'd watched an embarrassing number of times. She felt mesmerized by this Sylvie who—unlike the Sylvie of *Kitchen Film*, unlike the Sylvie of life—looked dead into the camera and revealed her thoughts at length.

After each viewing, Pella carefully replaced the disc in its jewel case and tucked the case into the top drawer of her bureau, beside the manila folder that contained her photograph of her mom. The potency of this pairing wasn't lost on Pella—the talisman of her birth mother beside that of her adopted artistic one.

Upstate back in January, after Pella, with a wild sense of triumph, plucked the silver DVD out of its player, Nicholas appeared in the living-room doorway, his cheeks radiant with cold, his snowshoes tucked under his arm. Furtively, but with infinite care, Pella slid the silver wheel into the pouch of her hoodie. As she rose to kiss Nicholas hello, she carefully turned her torso aside so as not to let her secret cargo brush against him.

Nicholas didn't know that *Death of My Husband* existed, this film his mother created while he was in the womb, in which she tacitly disclosed that Nicholas's father had raped and beaten her. This secret, this gift and curse of superior knowledge, cast Pella in the role of older sister, full of pity and understanding. She felt, having watched the film with Sylvie, that she'd known Nicholas all his life—not only as the small boy of *Kitchen Film* but as the cause of Sylvie's wide-legged posture in *DOMH*. She understood Nicholas better than he understood himself.

It was almost as though, by offering Pella that silver disc, Sylvie had offered her the means of emancipation from her son. Pella hadn't known, at the time, that she'd needed emancipation. But her possession of the disc and the secrets it contained had separated her from Nicholas and created a space between them that could only grow into a rift. To what extent Sylvie may have known or intended this, Pella had no idea. Sometimes she suspected that the present-day version of Sylvie, however mute and slow moving, was just as canny as the woman who'd made those brilliant films. But there was really no way of knowing.

Pella had always wanted a sibling, and it felt strange to feel Nicholas, this beguiling man seven years older than she, as her eternally younger brother, a flawed and fragile creature she'd known since before he was

born. She felt infinitely tolerant of him. And, in her tolerance, she had fallen out of love.

AFTER SYLVIE SHUFFLED off to the bathroom, Pella went to the bar and ordered a glass of water. She drained it and asked for another. She meandered through the crowd, entered into conversations, nodded uncomprehendingly at everything that was said. Nicholas and Oonie drifted in and out of view like colorful boats in a fog.

Around midnight, Nicholas came to find her.

"Why, hello there," he said.

"Hi," Pella said. "Having a good time?"

"Fair to middling," Nicholas replied, but his smile showed what an understatement this was. He seemed almost giddy. His cheeks shone with a buffed-apple glow that was indisputably owed to Oonie. "Sylvie should probably be spirited back to her sofa bed before too long," he said, a reluctant note in his voice.

"Okay," Pella said.

"Are you sure you won't join us?"

Pella had decided before the evening, and had told Nicholas, that she would go to her place after the party rather than spending the night while Sylvie was there.

"You and Sylvie should have some time alone," she said. "Besides, I didn't bring clothes."

"You have plenty of clothes at my place," he countered. "I might even have inadvertently laundered some of them."

Pella smiled. Both his persistence and the thought of him folding her laundry would once have pleased her deeply.

"Thanks for sitting with Sylvie," he said.

"Don't thank me for that," Pella said. "It's a pleasure."

"If you hadn't been here, I would have been fretting all night long. You helped me have such a lovely evening."

"It was nice that she could come," Pella replied. She meant Sylvie—that it was nice for hermited Sylvie to overcome the obstacles that prevented her from appearing in public and confer her light on the proceedings, which was true. But the person who had truly conferred her light was Oonie, and

as the sentence emerged from Pella's mouth—*It was nice that she could come*—she found herself revising who the *she* was.

"Yes," agreed Nicholas. "It was."

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2

Pella departed the Finch with Nicholas and Sylvie just as the DJ turned up the music and the guests began to dance.

It took a long time to ascend the stairs to the street because of the pace at which Sylvie could climb. She leaned heavily on the railing, hoisting one foot and then the other to every step. Meanwhile a new wave of partygoers plunged down the stairs with heedless, clomping abandon. As they cascaded by in the chutelike passage, they seemed to Pella to offer a complete taxonomy of the forms of androgyny—a pair of rawboned fashion models, stunned and doe-eyed, holding hands; a trio of queens in drag; countless young artists and artists of life, haggard and seraphic, stocky and lithe, with buzzed heads and oversize glasses, their expressions ranging from proudly horny to skeptically chaste. They were busy with themselves, busy with each other, flush with all the markers of anti-fashion and fluidity that lay at the edge of Pella's capacity to interpret them, some so fashionable they presented as awkward, others so awkward it became fashionable, and every shade of possibility in between. Evidently Katrina's afterparty had been deemed the jewel of this particular Tuesday night. Nicholas stayed in front of Sylvie to shield her from being knocked over. Pella brought up the rear, feeling as weary and heavy as Sylvie's plodding steps.

A sudden spring rain had washed clean the streets of Flatiron. It continued to descend, in a soft and diminished fashion, while the rills coursing through the gutters suggested its recent strength. The long slick tongues of red lights slithered up and down the avenue amid an ambient wash of gold and milky green. The three of them huddled beneath the awning of the Finch while Sylvie hungrily smoked a cigarette. To have climbed up and down the stairs to smoke during the party would have been

more than she could manage. Pella wondered why she'd decided to come at all.

To please her son, was the likely answer. However much effort it cost Nicholas to shepherd his mother to an event like this, Pella could see it made him happy, in a way he could not express and might deny. It pleased him to have Sylvie present, even if she behaved as though absent. It pleased him to imagine her as part of the social world. It pleased him to hear the publisher say her name, even if Sylvie refused to wave.

The night had turned cold. Sylvie flung down her spent cigarette and reached back into her purse. Her movements when tapping a cigarette from the pack and lighting it were unblurred and sure.

Nicholas held out a hand, index and middle fingers scissored. Sylvie, restored by her first smoke, rolled her eyes in a way that was almost humorous as she handed him the cigarette. Nicholas took a drag and passed it to Pella. Sylvie lit another for herself. The three of them smoked in silence, Pella and Nicholas sharing, as they gazed out at the street and the rain ceased altogether, leaving only the steady dripping of the awning, like a member of the orchestra who forgets to stop at the end of the song and plays on bravely alone.

Nicholas hailed a cab and held the door for Sylvie, who nodded goodbye to Pella and ducked inside.

"You're welcome to join us," Nicholas said as he stood within the wing of the cab door.

"Thanks," Pella said. "But I should go."

He seemed not quite to believe her. And why should he? She'd never gone home before. She'd never resisted. He leaned over the door of the cab to kiss her good night. His kiss contained something extra; something forceful and liquid, needful and sweet. He was trying to persuade her.

Pella pulled away, adjourning the kiss. She shifted her bag on her shoulder. She realized, in that instant, that she wouldn't be persuaded—not tonight or ever again.

"Nicholas?" she said.

He looked at her. "Yes?"

"You should go back to the party."

"Don't be silly," he said. "Sylvie's tired, we've said our goodbyes, it's getting late."

“It’s not that late,” Pella said.

Their eyes met. Nicholas’s, as always, contained those glinting spokes that made him seem more incorrigibly alive than other people—more capable, more insatiable, readier for more. They astonished her, those eyes, but they did not change her mind. *Yudu yubu.*

“You should go back to the party,” she said, her voice firmer. “I’ll take Sylvie in the cab.”

She was speaking in code. All down Broadway the lights shone red.

“Sylvie can find the apartment on her own,” Nicholas said.

“I know,” Pella said. “But I’d like to take her.”

He stepped away from the cab. Pella was reminded of the first time she’d seen him in New York, waiting for her outside the bar with his boyish, hangdog look, and the powerful sympathy she’d felt for him then, which felt a lot like love and was later given shape and form when she found *Kitchen Film* and watched for two hours his three-year-old self.

He walked toward the Finch and pressed the knurl in the heavy oak door. Sylvie scooted farther across the seat, and Pella climbed in beside her. The cab swished away down the glossy light-washed street, its tire treads tossing up beaded arcs of rain. She’d never gotten over the sweet electrocution of kissing him. The taste of his tongue lingered on her own, altered but not diminished by the cigarette they’d shared. She felt a little queasy.

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3

As the cab rolled toward the West Village, Sylvie stared at the little TV on the back of the passenger seat. Pella, for reasons she couldn't name, felt herself through her dress. She turned to Sylvie, a hand on her boob. "My nipples are crazy-sore," she said.

Sylvie's head snapped toward her. It was by far the quickest movement Pella had ever seen her make. "How sore?"

"Like nothing I've ever felt in my life," Pella said.

Sylvie held Pella's gaze. Pella had never really seen her eyes. Her whites were bloodshot, one lid drooped, the irises clear pale green. For an instant, they burned with a Sylvie-like energy—like the Pella-age woman in *Death of My Husband* sitting wide-legged on that stump, glaring stubbornly into the lens. The blaze subsided. Sylvie shook her head softly and sighed. She reached over and, half awkwardly, patted Pella's thigh.

"It'll be okay," she said.

When they reached the building, Pella helped Sylvie climb from the cab and mount the stairs. She entered the apartment ahead of Sylvie, flipping on lights, and made her way to the sewing room. She dragged the coffee table into a corner, creating an empty space in the center of the room. She removed the cushions from the sofa, piled them on the table, and sought out the handle of the hideaway bed. It caught as she tried to pull it—she could feel the rusty segments grinding stiffly together. She braced her lower body and yanked with both hands. The segments released and the mattress began to emerge.

Sylvie appeared behind her in the doorway, a lit cigarette in her hand. "He won't be back tonight," she said, her voice soft. "I'll sleep in the bed."

Pella released the handle. The mattress and frame collapsed into the sofa. "Okay," she said.

Sylvie took a drag of her cigarette. Her other hand clutched a small folded square of paper. “Here,” she said, holding it out between two fingers.

“What’s this?” Pella said as she took it. “The number of a guy in Puerto Rico?”

Sylvie, for the first time in their acquaintance, laughed. One side of her mouth rose much higher than the other. Pella, for an instant, felt immeasurably proud. It was almost worth the trouble she was facing, to make Sylvie laugh like that.

“It’s the landline upstate,” Sylvie said. “Remember I’m a slow old lady. If you want me to pick up, you gotta let it ring and ring.”

Pella turned the square of paper in her hand. Sylvie shuffled down the hall toward Nicholas’s bedroom. In the doorway she turned around. Ash fell from her cigarette to the floor. “Good luck,” she said.

PELLA CLICKED THE apartment door behind her. She walked slowly down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. She passed the bodega on the corner, with its buckets of asters and lilies and awning that read FRESH ORGANIC FRESH. She turned up Seventh Avenue toward Duane Reade. There were three brands of tests on the shelf. She bought all three.

As the cab crept through the Gothic arches of the Brooklyn Bridge, the bridge’s tall suspenders rising around them like a net in which they swung, Pella recalled her earliest days in the city, when she’d walked incessantly over this bridge in both directions, from Owen’s to Nicholas’s to the Dark Farm and back, never taking a cab and often eschewing the trains, working as many bartending shifts as she could, chasing after Jack, chasing after Nicholas, chasing after herself. Trying to dispel or put to use the energy that poured ceaselessly out of her, like the ocean breaching a seawall, after she’d walked in on Mike and Katrina. Their hookup hadn’t created that energy—but it had somehow set it free. It had been pent up inside her, building and building, all her life. Now it seemed to have finally been spent. She’d never felt so tired in her life.

She leaned against the headrest and closed her eyes, the twin lines of taillights before them resonating redly in her mind. She thought of the single mothers who had recently entered her life, like messengers or warnings. She knew nothing about Vivian’s decision to have Jack or who

Jack's father was—Vivian never mentioned it, and Pella had never asked. About Sylvie's decision to have Nicholas and the two decisions that preceded it—the illegal abortion and the legal one—she might know more than anyone on earth, save Sylvie herself. None of that really mattered, of course. She would have to find her own path.

She thought about her own single mother, who'd departed this world so long ago. Pella herself had been conceived of, and conceived, as the daughter of a single mom. She'd turned out, before long, to be the daughter of a single dad.

Her breasts ached, the left one especially. She touched her nipple through her dress and her bra. The pain was so vivid as to be fascinating. She reached up and touched it again.

The cab deposited her before the long green awning of 95 Eastern Parkway. She paid the cabbie, unlocked the glass front door, and rode up in the rickety elevator.

The apartment was dark. Owen was in Los Angeles; Martin was asleep. Maybe I could save them three hundred grand, she thought. She walked into her bedroom and shut the door. She shimmied from the straps and let her dress fall to the floor.

Her bathroom was tiny—a half-size tub, a toilet abutting the sink. She took from her bag her three little packages. Yellow, pink, and blue. She opened the boxes and set them on the back of the sink. She grabbed the glass she used when brushing her teeth. She pulled down her underwear and sat down on the toilet. Her left knee bumped the tub. Maybe I'm crazy, she thought. Maybe this is a dream. By *dream* she meant yet another of the misapprehensions and fantasies that had defined and stymied her life so far. She could smell the mildew on the fringe of the curtain. She could smell the sliver of soap that lay across the drain.

She knew you were supposed to use your first morning pee. She wasn't going to wait. Late-night pee would have to do.

She reached between her legs and filled the little glass. She set it on the rim of the sink. Yellow, blue, pink. Three fortune tellers, three magic wands. They all agreed she was pregnant.

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4

The next afternoon she boarded a plane. She called Mike from the runway just before takeoff.

"Am I still on your health insurance?" she asked. "Now that school's out?"

A year ago, when Pella graduated, Mike added her to his policy as his domestic partner. At the time it seemed a natural prelude to being married. Now it was a form of dependence she'd yet to unwind. The pharmacy at Westish mailed her SSRI to Owen's apartment. She hadn't seen a doctor since arriving in New York.

"For the moment," Mike said. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's great," Pella said. "What are you up to around five?"

She told him she'd gotten a last-minute break from work and was hoping to see Contango and collect a few of her things. "I can put the rest in storage," she said. "I'm sure you'd like it all out of your hair."

"I don't have much hair to put it in," Mike joked. He seemed perplexed but not displeased by her sudden announcement. "Too bad your break wasn't a few days earlier. You just missed graduation."

"I know," Pella said, thinking of Irma. "I know."

She was waiting at the curb marked ARRIVALS at the Appleton airport when a navy-blue Jeep pulled up. Mike climbed down from the driver's seat and, as he pushed his sunglasses up into his widow's peak, rounded the hood to greet her. He wore a rueful, complicated expression—his amber eyes searching her out with boyish keenness, his mouth stretched wide in what amounted to a smile but with a tentative hint of reserve or even fear, as though he were bracing himself for some impact—

"Hi," he said.

It was like seeing old video of him, an apparition from an earlier era. He

looked not just leaner and healthier but younger somehow, as though the pallid, care-freighted Mike of last September had been de-aged in a machine.

They made slight, awkward feints this way and that before deciding upon a hug. Pella's ear fit as snugly as ever between his collarbones. She let it rest there for a moment before she pulled away.

Mike punched a button on his key fob, and the tailgate lifted. He hoisted her half-empty suitcase into the trunk, and they climbed inside the vehicle. Donning his aviators against the sunset, he looked manly, even sexy—the stalwart commander who's seen it all.

"You look good," she said.

He nodded, accepting the compliment. Before replying, he glanced away from her mournfully. "You do too."

The airport road, a corridor of concrete, banked around the parking garage. Suddenly, taillights reddened ahead of them, and Mike slammed the brakes. Out of reflex and old habit, his right arm shot out to protect her. He stopped just shy of touching her.

"You didn't mention where you're staying," he said once they were moving again. "You're welcome to stay at the house."

"Where would you stay?" Pella asked.

"Caroline's."

"Doesn't Caroline live with her parents?"

Mike shrugged, his big hands gripping the wheel at a fatherly ten and two. "The Carapellis and I get along."

"I booked a room at the Tifton," Pella said.

"You'd get more time with Contango at the house," Mike said. "You can't exactly sneak him into the Tifton."

"I was planning to wheel him in in a laundry cart under the towels," Pella joked. "One last caper."

Mike smiled forlornly.

"How's he doing?" Pella asked.

Mike accelerated up the on-ramp, glanced over his shoulder, and merged onto I-41 amid a burst of evening traffic. "Not great," he said. "He's really slowing down. And he's almost blind."

"Really?"

Mike nodded somberly. "It's Caro who spends more time with him.

She’s with him during the day and I’m there in the evenings. Most evenings, anyway.”

“You guys have difficult schedules,” Pella remarked. “With Caroline working nights.”

Mike shrugged. “I eat dinner at the restaurant a lot.”

“Pizza every night?”

“Pizza never,” he said. “Chicken piccata. Salad. Half a glass of wine.” He recited this menu with a pat of his belly and a mournfulness that struck Pella as largely feigned, as though he felt he needed to perform for her.

She was experiencing, in trying to talk to Mike, a radical dislocation of perspective. Less the whirl and spin of vertigo than a camera zooming in and out faster than the eye could follow. They were strangers. No, they were thoroughly intimate. No, they were strangers.

“How’s work?” Pella asked.

“Work’s fine,” Mike began, but then subsided into a gloomy pause. “Jenkins is retiring. At the end of the summer.”

“Oh,” Pella said, confused as to why this was bad. Mike liked Jenkins, as did she, but he was a bit of a milquetoast, and Mike had always done half his job.

“Molina’s running a search,” Mike said. “I was asked not to apply.”

He drummed a thumb on the wheel.

“I’ve been talking to people at Coshwale,” he said. “They might want to bring me in.” Coshwale was Westish’s archrival, a wealthy school near Chicago.

“Damn right,” Pella said. “They’re sick of you kicking their butts.”

Mike smiled and sighed—appreciative of her defense, stunned by the situation. For nine years, he’d devoted himself to Westish.

“What about Caroline?” she asked.

Mike shrugged, hands on the wheel. He seemed reluctant to speak. “She might come along,” he said. “She’s looking for a change.”

A deepening cobalt descended over I-41. Pella, as she’d done in the cab last night, leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes. Wisconsin felt utterly familiar. She could feel the clouds moving west to east, rolling toward Lake Michigan, which loomed some miles beyond her passenger window. She’d seldom traveled this stretch of freeway, but the trees and bushes and crops, the billboards for Christ and fireworks, the mix of

automobile makes (domestic-leaning) and velocities (slow to medium) sharing the road, all felt so natural to her—that is, both natural and estranged, as things tend to feel when one, after a lengthy absence, comes home.

Before long she spotted the unassuming spire of the chapel rising in the distance and inhaled through the open windows the odor of the Westish campus in June, lilacs and allium and damp fragrant sod fresh laid for commencement. She'd smelled no other scents lately that didn't make her feel ill.

It was a dark clear evening with a slight-majority moon. Dense swaths of stars swirled over the lake. The porch light was on as they pulled up to the yellow house.

Mike turned into the driveway and stopped behind the Audi.

"Oh," Pella said. "The Silver Fox."

"You sound surprised."

"I guess I assumed you traded it in. When you bought this."

"Of course not," Mike said gently. "This is Caroline's car. And that one's yours."

They both remained still, seat belts on, gazing through the windshield. Pella felt the painful security of knowing that their thoughts had slipped into harmony. They both were missing her dad. No object embodied Grant Affenlicht like his old Audi, its sleekness redolent of his own, its silver color an echo of his enviable hair. Purchasing it had been his first act upon returning to Westish—a new car for a new life. That was thirteen years ago now.

"Do you drive it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Caro does when I drive this. But it's yours. You should take it with you."

Pella frowned at the side mirror. "I don't know," she said. "I can't really manage a car in the city."

She opened her door. Mike grabbed her half-empty suitcase. Pella followed him through the backyard, and he flipped through his massive ring for the door key.

Pella stepped toward the threshold with her heart overfull, expecting Contango to be waiting there, having loped dutifully to the back door when

he heard them arrive so his magnificent body could be in the way when Mike tried to push it open.

But Contango was not in the kitchen. There on the counter, between sink and stove, stood the electric drip coffee maker Mike had owned since his undergrad days. She'd banned it for its size and ugliness and for the grainy coffee it made and banished it to the back of the pantry; now it had been restored.

Other innovations were plainly not Mike's. The new set of magnets on the refrigerator with their pretty photographs and white and blue script: *Roma. Milano. Firenze.* The fluffy red dishtowels. The CrossFit schedule pinned to the fridge by *Palermo*.

"What's that?" she asked with a nod toward her soup kettle, which sat on a rear burner of the stove emitting a salty, pinguid warmth.

"Bone broth," Mike said. "I've been doing a little cooking."

She passed from the kitchen into the dining room, which was mercifully unchanged. The table, the chairs, the tacky chandelier. Mike's papers scattered over the table.

Poised in the archway, his nose pointed straight at her, stood Contango. He looked as impossibly handsome as ever, the fur on his chest puffed and forward. His blue eye, his gray eye. His expression was quizzical. She knew from Mike that his vision was failing, his world subsiding into darkness, but this knowledge was almost impossible to use when he was standing there, plain and plaintive, with those beautiful eyes gazing directly at her. To Pella those eyes had always seemed all-seeing—able to perceive not only the shape of her person but the quality of her thoughts and intentions. Now, apparently, he was nearly blind.

He could smell her, though. He raised his nose, pointing it at the chandelier above her head, and yelped, just once, with a forceful snap of his jaw. Then he changed voice, slipping into a series of plaintive, keyed-up whimpers, his joy too much to contain. He moved frantically toward her, his toenails scrabbling and scritching the wood of the floor. Unable to rear up and plant his front paws on her chest as he once would have, he butted his head against her thigh.

Pella dropped to her knees to embrace him. She wrapped her hands beneath his belly and nuzzled him nose to nose as he whimpered with

mournful, keening glee and scrambled over the top of her, pinning her to the floor.

“He missed you,” Mike said.

“I missed him too.”

She mumbled happy nonsense in his nearer ear while Contango squirmed with pleasure. Mike stood by the front door, jangling his keys from one hand to the other with an air of discomfort. Pella, chastened, hurried to her feet. She regretted her show of elation toward the husky, their undignified roll on the floor. It made too blatant a contrast with her and Mike’s awkward caution toward each other.

“He smells like soap,” she said.

Mike nodded. “Caro likes to give him baths.”

It was plain that Mike had been correct, that she should stay in the house with Contango, so much so that they had no need to discuss it. Mike placed his hand on the doorknob.

“Before you go,” Pella said, “there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

He looked at her warily.

She reached into the pocket of her sweatshirt. “I want you to have this. To have it back.”

He glanced at her cupped palm and shook his head.

“Please,” Pella said. “I don’t want to offend you. But it’s worth a lot of money. If we aren’t together...which obviously we aren’t...then...”

His face looked stony and disconnected, as though he had to absent himself from his body to bear these words.

“Mike. Please. Maybe you’ll want to give it to someone else.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“It’s a beautiful stone. You could have it reset.”

“So could you,” he said.

The front door opened directly into the living room. They were standing in the liminal zone she had created long ago, with its rug for foot-wiping, its wooden shoe cubbies on either side, the mail shelf and the coat pegs.

“If you and Caroline move to Chicago,” she said, “you might get engaged before long.”

His hand slipped from the doorknob. He folded his arms across the breadth of his T-shirt. WE ARE ONE. “Who knows,” he said.

“You look good,” she said. “You seem happy.”

“I’m always happy.” His face, as he said this, was a puzzle of wistfulness and pain.

“Not always,” she said. “Not at the end of us.”

Mike did not reply. He was behaving correctly, with his closed-down posture and clamped-shut mouth. She was behaving incorrectly, with her questions and suggestions, her prodding attempts to draw him out, her words of any kind. They did not need to be having this conversation. The ring, huge and bright as a star, hung idly in her upturned palm.

“Don’t make me give it to her myself,” she joked.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t talk about this anymore.”

She followed him onto the stoop. He pulled her to his chest in a quick engulfing clinch whose half-paternal briskness masked whatever depths of emotion it might contain. His chin alighted on the crown of her head, and she heard him sigh a slight, involuntary sigh. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Okay,” he said quietly as he released her. He stepped down off the stoop. His keys were in his hand.

Pella nodded. “Okay,” she said.

She waited on the porch for the Jeep to back out of the driveway and head up Groome Street before she went inside.

Contango sat on his haunches just inside the doorway as though waiting to console her. She squatted and held his face in her hands.

“Come on,” she said. “You can sleep in the bed with me. We won’t tell anybody.”

She climbed to the turn of the wooden staircase and waited there, a hand on the newel, but he did not follow. She mimicked an upward run, hoping to inspire him. From his haunches, he gazed up at her with resigned bemusement. Humans and their delusions.

“I have an idea,” she said. “Let’s sleep downstairs tonight.”

There in the living room, she nudged aside the coffee table to create more rug space between it and the couch. Whatever books she’d left scattered across it nine months ago were gone, tucked in a closet somewhere, replaced by stout yellow candles in glass dishes and a bowl of white mints with colorful centers like the one that rested on the hostess stand at Carapelli’s. The whole house looked remarkably clean.

She lay down on the fluffy rug in the trough between couch and table.

Contango curled up beside her, and she wrapped her arms around his warmth.

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5

She awoke early, aided by the time change from New York and the stirring of Contango. Through the west-facing picture window, the dawn that hovered over Groome Street's birches and elms and driveway-parked cars was pale and indistinct.

Her doctor had agreed to squeeze her in for a visit, but not until tomorrow. She doubted they would do much, just give her another test and repeat what she already knew. But it might be helpful to talk to the doctor. Understand the options either way. She was, as near as she could tell, somewhere around six and a half weeks. Between a lentil and a blueberry, according to internet charts. She'd been terrible at tracking her cycle this year. Too busy having sex, she joked to herself, but it wasn't really a joke.

Yawning, she dug through the cupboards to find her hourglass-shaped carafe and burr grinder and brewed the coffee she'd brought with her. It felt peaceful to be here at this time of day, at her favorite time of year, the blissful hinge between spring and summer when you could sense in the air that the students had departed. The house felt familiar, solid and real; for as long as it took to grind the coffee, pour her precise whorl of water, and watch it drip through the grounds, the smell blossoming up to her nose, she felt as though she had simply come home.

She followed Contango out to the patio, where they watched the light play over the dew. She sipped her coffee. It tasted delicious. If you're pregnant, she thought, you can't drink coffee. By *pregnant*, she meant moving forward with the pregnancy; by *pregnant*, she meant deciding to become a woman who thought of the thing in her uterus as an adorable blueberry-lentil, not a vexing bundle of cells. Regarding not drinking coffee, she had no idea whether this was true. One more thing to google.

Here in her little yard, where the robins sang into silence, the absence of

the city's throb entered her more deeply than its presence ever could. Fatigue plunged to her bones. She felt she could sleep for days—like a teenager, a boarding-school student, perhaps, returned to her father's home after a long and taxing year. Black specks of bugs eddied above the grass.

When her coffee was finished, she felt a little revived. She realized her ostensible reason for this visit should also be a real one—she should pack up her stuff and efface all traces of herself from this house. Especially if Mike was leaving Westish. His possible departure was as surreal and shocking to her as the fact that she was pregnant. She'd thought he would never leave. She'd thought he *should* never leave. And yet in her delusional ignorance, she'd been trying to get him to leave. She picked up her mug and headed inside, holding the screen so Contango could follow.

Once she was upstairs, appraising the house in daylight, she realized she'd overrated her capacity for haunting. Stacked in her office were the contents of her life, neatly boxed and labeled in Caroline's hand: DRESSES. COOKBOOKS. SHOES. In another mood, she might have been miffed at Caroline for going through her stuff, but today she just felt grateful. The boxes were clean and new, securely taped, and small enough for Pella to carry. All that remained was to figure out what to do with them.

Caroline had left Pella's desk untouched, a pair of empty boxes beside it. Pella packed up all her materials from independent study—notes, handouts, papers. She had two copies of every draft of every paper she'd written, one covered with notes in Judy's looping, meticulous hand, the other covered even more thoroughly by Irma's tiny scrawl. She taped up the boxes and wrote *IS* on the side.

And that was that. Almost all the house's furniture, an eclectic mix of antiques, had come from her dad's campus apartment after he'd died. But she had no place to put such furniture, and if Mike was willing to keep it, she was willing to let it go. She would collect his dragonfly lamp someday, when she had a long-term place of her own. If she and Mike were in touch.

She walked downstairs and sank onto the couch. Contango lay sprawled on the rug. "I guess that's it, buddy." She sighed. "Not as much work as I'd thought."

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, California, Wisconsin, New York—her life rolled on and past. It felt already like too many states, too many selves, too many serial restarts. She was a rootless person, in a way—no parents,

no siblings, no close relatives of any kind. She'd been engaged once and married once, though not to the same man. If she could have designed her life from scratch, she would have made it more coherent and unified. Less episodic, less picaresque. All this rupture and rebooting, all this uncertain splashing around—it didn't suit her tastes. She would have preferred to be *from* somewhere and to have stayed tethered to that place even as she ventured away.

But you did not plot a life that way, with preconceived theories and themes. You couldn't proceed from some shaping wish regarding how things should be. You couldn't worry about how your life might look from the outside to some observer or reader, even if the reader was you.

The day was idyllic, perfect and blue. Tired as she was, she wanted to see the campus. She hoped Contango would come, but when she held up his leash and pantomimed an excursion, he met her with the same pitying expression he'd worn last night. Mike was right—he had changed and faded. Roused, thank God, by her arrival, but only modestly intrigued by her ongoing presence. She squatted beside him, kissed his head, and murmured that she'd be back soon.

She cut through the practice fields, skirted the large stone bowl of the football stadium, and passed through a mossy brick arch into the campus proper. It was eleven o'clock, the busiest time of day when school was in session, but now the Large Quad was hushed. It felt as though a rapture had happened, the students spirited away. At the north end, workers were dismantling the stage on which the graduation ceremony had taken place. Behind them, filling the tall glass facade of the library, hung a massive banner, navy letters against an ecru ground: WE ARE ONE.

Apart from the banner, the campus seemed stripped of text. The three-sided noticeboards, usually cluttered with construction-paper leaflets, had been reduced to a remnant graffiti of torn tape-corner flecks. The departmental and dormitory windows that surrounded the Large Quad were devoid of signs; the colorfully chalked invitations to a cappella concerts, blood drives, and sporting events had been power-washed from the walkways.

But as Pella passed Glendinning Hall, whose brooding deep-set windows she loved, she noticed, affixed to the inner wall of the arched

stone entrance, a flyer. It had eluded the janitorial sweeps and survived into summer. It read:

Senior Art Show
Glendinning Hall 262
May 22–29

Those dates had passed, a fact Pella registered with a pang of melancholy, the source of which was obscure. During her student days she'd never attended the senior art show, and it hardly seemed distressing to have missed it now.

She was lingering in the archway when one of the wide double doors was pushed open from within. An elderly man, professorial-looking but unknown to Pella, nodded to her as he paused, holding the crash-barred door to enable her entrance. Pella walked inside.

She climbed the wide central stairs to the second floor. Seminar rooms lined the hall, their doors mutely shut. As Pella walked past them, she realized where the senior art show had been: the tucked-away room where people mingled over grapes and cheese after talks by visiting scholars. White-walled and serene, it could plausibly imitate a gallery space.

She entered and flipped on the lights. The room was long and narrow, and wooden bracket benches, of the kind found in museums, had been placed at intervals down its spine. All the senior exhibits were gone, reduced to nail holes in the white walls and bits of debris near the baseboards. All the exhibits, that is, save one. Pella walked toward it.

She stopped at the edge of a large navy rug with an enormous ecru *W* inscribed upon it. The rug created a room within the gallery, a cozy, dorm-room-size space.

This room-within-a-room contained standard-issue dorm furniture: A blond-wood desk with matching chair, the seat and backrest covered in navy fabric. A blond-wood dresser and bookshelf. A metal-framed twin bed. An armchair and a nightstand. The tall stalk of a halogen lamp. Scattered over the furniture and over the navy rug lay thousands of twisted tissue-paper flowers in robin's-egg blues, tender pinks, buttery yellows, and every soft color one could imagine.

The flowers spilled over everything, piled in windrows and drifts, as though an easterly wind had swept through the room off the lake. Long sloping heaps of fragile, gauzy flowers—a *profusion*, Pella kept thinking. Life was profuse and death was profuse, they both poured forth, these softly dyed hand-twisted flowers made from once-living trees.

On the nightstand beside the bed stood a small framed photograph. From where Pella stood at the edge of the rug, she had to strain forward to see it clearly.

She felt she'd never been in the presence of such an intimate work of art. Perhaps the smallness was part of the portrait's intimacy. The photo's composition, too, was so simple as to seem uncomposed: a young woman's face and torso, shot head on.

There was something riveting about the subject's expression—wholly present and available, but also soaked in sly humor, sharing a joke with a friend. Her rapport with the portrait-taker was apparent and seemed to Pella to be reaching a pinnacle at the moment the camera snapped. Mischievous, sardonic, but tranquilly so. Dahlia—because of course that's who it was—looked so fully at ease in this frozen moment that Pella wondered whether such an expression had ever been captured by an artist before. She'd seen the glossy retouched glamour shots of Dahlia on the Brightness; she'd seen the raw selfie with the RAPE VICTIM tattoo. Neither contained a hint of this sweet intimacy and joy. Neither had been taken by a friend.

Pella found herself imagining, by dint of their absence, all the difficulties that must at other moments have existed inside Dahlia's face, all the tightly structured internal requirements, the exhausting efforts to try to earn love like a livelihood, with beauty and striving and wit and charm, deference and dominance. All the endless attempts to alter oneself to be worthy of love and to be a social creature in a broken world. The eternal effort to figure out how to be.

An image, long buried, flashed through Pella's mind: Irma sprawled on a blanket with another young woman, the two of them lost in talk, enjoying a picnic on a spring afternoon as Pella passed by, silent and unseen, on the walkway that fringed the quad. A pang of longing had surged through her then—this was soon after Pella had met Irma, and they had not yet become friends. Irma, picnicking, wore such a different mien than Pella had thus far seen her wear, cracking up at the riff being delivered with swirling gestures

by her friend. The scene struck a chord of desire within Pella for that kind of friendship in general, and with Irma in particular.

Pella remembered how, as Irma's friend talked, she gathered her hair with complex motions of her hands and wound it into an odd shape, like a balloon animal, which she pinned to the top of her head, and then, with a sense of perpetual dissatisfaction, even as she laughed at Irma's laughter and continued with her cheerful rant, unpinned it and began again. Even as she sat cross-legged on the blanket, her torso and shoulders rocked back and forth, her constant motion a contrast to the peaceful afternoon.

So that had been Dahlia Breughel. Pella had long forgotten this episode, and none of those other photos she'd seen of Dahlia, either before or after her death, had triggered the memory. But this portrait did.

She saw how the artist who built this exhibit had, in trying to capture the multifarious nature of Dahlia's being, stepped past the limits of what people might think of as art. The improvised dorm room, with its simple furniture, its simple portrait, and its thousands of simple flowers, tenacious in their delicacy, seemed so willing to be pure sentiment, life and not art, that it came back around to being art again—a full encapsulation of Dahlia's life. Pella could not stop looking. *Bloom, bloom, bloom*, she thought.

She plunked down on one of the benches that ran along the spine of the room. She had been sitting there for some time, lulled into peacefulness by the portrait and the flowers, when she heard faint footsteps in the hall. It seemed impossible for her to break her meditation to turn toward the sound; perhaps she was even half asleep.

The door creaked open and the footsteps neared. Pella felt someone slide onto the bench beside her. She still did not turn, nor did either of them speak, but Pella felt her friend's eyes gazing in the same direction as her own, and they looked in silence at the portrait of Dahlia. Pella opened her left hand, her palm upturned, and felt the small, insistent fingers slide tightly between her own.

ONLY WHEN PELLA turned to glance at her companion did she feel a flash of estrangement. Irma's heavy waist-length hair was gone. Not just cut to her shoulders or partway down her back, as Pella had often lobbied for, but *gone*. Mowed, baled, hauled away. What remained was a fuzzy down,

millimeters long, that showed off her elfin ears and the delicate shape of her skull.

The change was so drastic it took Pella a moment to absorb it. Once she had, she smiled. She felt lightened, even exhilarated, by this change that Irma had made, as though it marked the dawning of a new era.

“I’m sorry,” Pella whispered. As the words, unpremeditated, hung in the air, they seemed to contain both condolences for Irma’s loss and an apology for all her misdeeds and delusions.

Irma turned her head, and her gaze found Pella’s just for a moment before falling to the floor. Her shoulders lifted into a rigid V, the straps of her dress shrugged tight to her ears. Her lower lip was quivering.

Pella, on a sudden impulse, slid closer on the bench and wrapped Irma in a hug. Irma flinched and seemed about to squirm away. Pella felt painfully aware of how few times they had ever touched or hugged. She cradled the back of Irma’s shorn head and refused to let go.

Irma relented. Slowly, her shoulders began to soften. She buried her face between Pella’s collarbones and, with a shudder that shook her whole body, began to sob.

WHEN IRMA’S TEARS petered out and her shoulders stopped heaving, Pella ran down the hall to the bathroom and returned with a roll of toilet paper. She tore off a wad for Irma to blow her nose. With another hunk, Pella dabbed at the snot and tears that soaked her shirt.

“Sorry,” Irma said through her sniffles. “That’s pretty gross.”

Pella told her not to worry.

“I haven’t cried like that in months. Something about seeing you. I don’t know...” Irma stopped and stuck out her tongue.

“The flowers are wonderful,” Pella said.

“I helped with the flowers,” Irma said. “I folded so many flowers.”

“It’s your project too.”

At this, Irma smiled, and Pella felt glad for the soft generosity that had risen between them.

“Our joke,” Irma said, “which wasn’t really a joke, was that Pammy would build this room, and then Anderson would live in it—he’d bat around

the flowers for the duration of the show. Like a cat video brought to life." Irma sighed. "Dahlia would like that. But of course it wasn't possible."

"It's perfect the way it is," Pella said.

The word *perfect* caused Irma's lips to tighten. She sat quietly for a while, lost in thought. "Catholicism used to be very strict about suicide," she finally said. "It was a mortal sin. You couldn't be buried in the churchyard. A lot of people think it's still like that, but the doctrine changed years ago. It's still a mortal sin—but now the church says that if you commit suicide, you're ill, and your actions aren't entirely within your control. So it's possible to get to heaven. You go to purgatory, and from there it's possible to repent, to receive prayers from the living, and eventually get promoted to the quote-unquote Kingdom."

Irma, when she talked about Catholicism, spoke with both a bitter distance and a fierce sense of engagement, as though grappling with some formidable angel in whom she did not quite believe.

"Do you pray for her?" Pella asked.

"Yes," Irma said. "But Dahlia will never repent." Her voice contained sadness and pride. They sat and looked at the heaps of flowers, the bland but evocative furniture, the modest portrait of Dahlia.

The longer Pella looked, the more the subtleties of Dahlia's expression rose to the fore. There was mischief and glee in her eyes. A laugh was blooming within the glee. Her lower lip was full.

"She's beautiful," Pella said.

This wasn't precisely what she meant—what she meant had nothing to do with how Dahlia looked. But they were, at least, words that she could form. Perhaps expressing a generous intention was better than being precise.

Irma nodded. "I know."

"When was the picture taken?"

"Last summer," Irma said. "Pammy visited her in Evanston."

"She looks happy," Pella said.

"She wasn't," Irma snapped, and caught herself. "I mean, yes—she does. It just never lasted long.

"She was living something out in reverse," Irma said. "She wanted to be the perpetrator. But that meant she had to get punished too. I almost think

she was conjuring a world in which people who committed certain crimes got punished for them. You know? Even if the one being punished was her."

"A revenge fantasy," Pella said. "Revenge against herself."

"Yeah."

"You can never really take anything out on anyone else," Pella said. "You can only take it out on yourself."

Pella feared she had overstepped by uttering this remark, which sounded as though she comprehended something essential about the life of Dahlia, and that Irma would balk. But Irma only nodded.

Then she turned toward Pella, eyes alight, and said, "What do you think of my hair?"

"I love it," Pella said. "May I touch it?"

"Sure."

Pella slid her fingers over the swirling grain of Irma's scalp, which felt downy and scratchy by turns. "What's this?" she asked as she traced the small white scar, arched like a sliver moon, above Irma's left ear.

Irma shrugged. "Probably something my brother did when we were little. I didn't even know it was there."

Irma cut a very different figure than Pella remembered. Her head was small and even, delicate as an egg, and somehow evocative of the brain inside. No longer crushed, Pella thought, by that heavy avalanche of hair. Her features seemed to have been lifted and lightened, even as she seemed to Pella noticeably older than she had last fall.

With a motherly sweep of a thumb across Irma's eyebrow, Pella withdrew her hand. "When did you have it cut?"

"Last week," Irma said. "Pammy did it."

"It's terrific," Pella said. "Pammy strikes again."

This remark returned their attention to the scene before them. They sat quietly for a while, side by side, and it seemed to Pella that they might need to stay forever. That it was both nourishing and necessary to remain in constant communion with Dahlia via this memorial.

"Well," Irma sighed. "I guess we should bag them up."

Pella was taken aback. "The flowers?"

Irma nodded. "I want to make sure they get recycled. The infrastructure guys don't pay much attention—they're liable to send them to the landfill."

Pella had not expected this—the exhibit having outlasted the senior

show, she'd assumed it would be here forever.

Irma, without hesitation, stepped onto the *W* rug and walked to the blond-wood desk, flowers crunching and crinkling beneath her boots. For a moment, she seemed to Pella to have departed reality and become part of the exhibit. She pulled open the bottom desk drawer, extracted a roll of recycling bags, and unspooled a bolt of translucent blue. She gathered up an armful of flowers and shoved them into the bag.

With a cautious step, as though it might not accept her weight, Pella walked onto the rug. She tore off her own bolt of blue and shook it open. She squatted and scooped up flowers from around the legs of the desk.

They carried their weightless quarry down to a recycling room in the mazelike Glendinning basement. They tossed the bags atop a sliding mound of cardboard and returned to room 262, where Irma had left her bag.

"What about everything else?" Pella asked.

Irma shrugged. "The furniture belongs to the school. They'll put it in storage."

"The rug?" Pella asked. "The picture?"

When Irma finally spoke, she did so with sudden decision. "I think they've served their purpose."

She shouldered her bag and strode toward the exit. Pella followed.

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6

Once she and Irma stepped outdoors into daylight, Pella felt afresh the awkwardness of their long estrangement. Irma seemed to feel it too. They loitered on the concrete apron outside Glendinning Hall, hands shielding their eyes from the midday sun.

"I'm so glad to see you," Pella said. "I thought you'd be gone by now."

"I should be," Irma said. "My truck's all packed. I couldn't tell why I was sticking around."

"Now you know," Pella said.

Irma nodded. "Now I know."

They headed across the Large Quad toward the WE ARE ONE sign in the library window, Pella's flip-flops and Irma's boots sinking deep into rolls of fresh sod laid down for graduation.

The commencement stage had been disassembled; the pieces were stacked on flatbed trucks, waiting to be carted away. The workers were nowhere to be seen. Pella thought of Irma and Dahlia's picnic.

"I should congratulate you," she said as they passed onto the sleepy residential streets. "I hear you're going to Madison this fall."

"Oh," said Irma. "Thanks."

"I confess I'm a little sad," Pella said. "I was hoping you'd move to New York."

Irma seemed surprised. "New York? To do what?"

"I don't know," Pella said. "Write for the Brightness? I met Oonie Jiri the other day. She spoke so highly of you. As did Katrina."

"That's nice." Irma sounded less proud than diffident—puzzled, even, at why these far-off people would be talking about her.

"Oonie said she offered you a job."

Irma did not reply. Pella worried she had overstepped by resharing this

confidence—just because Oonie could pull off such freewheeling candor didn't mean *she* could—but Irma was merely pondering.

"I don't want to be a *personality*," she finally said with a familiar wrinkling of her nose. "I don't want to get pigeonholed into narrow academic work, but I also don't want to get pigeonholed into being liked. Or disliked. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"I have so much work to do," Irma said. "So much reading. So much thinking. I don't want to get too attached to my own opinions—I'd like to have fewer opinions, actually, than I'm accustomed to having. I want to go slowly toward something large."

"Yes," Pella said. "Yes."

When they reached the yellow house, Irma went inside to use the bathroom while Pella walked up the driveway and through the backyard gate, eager to greet Contango. There he was, fast asleep on his usual patch of brick beside the coiled hose. Pella squatted beside him to scratch his neck, then headed to the wrought-iron table and sat down with a sense of enormous weariness. Her mind emptied and her eyes closed until the rising scrape of chair feet over brick roused her to the fact that Irma had joined her.

Irma set two glasses of water on the table. Their trembling convex surfaces conjured rainbows. "I loved your Lexapro essay," Pella said. "Everyone did."

Irma looked down at her glass. "I guess it struck a chord," she said. "I've been getting a zillion emails. Maybe someday I'll feel like reading them."

"I've been on mine forever," Pella said, meaning her own antidepressant. "It's like brushing my teeth."

She'd spent the plane ride googling.

Should you get off your SSRI while pregnant?

How many weeks should you have an abortion by?

Health insurance single mom

"I'm sorry I missed graduation," she said. "How was it?"

"Fine," Irma said.

"Was your mom able to come?"

Irma nodded. "They were only here for a night. I felt sorry for them—

sorry for my dad for having to deal with her on a trip, sorry for my brother for getting dragged along, sorry for my mom for having to leave her comfort zone like that."

"They must be so proud of you," Pella said. "Your mom especially."

Irma squinted at her. "Why do you say that?"

"You know," Pella said. "Because you're living the life she couldn't."

Irma, determined not to cry anymore, pried her tortoiseshell glasses from her face and methodically cleaned them against her shirt. "Careful," she said. "You're inside my comfort zone." She donned the glasses again. "In any case, she hated my speech."

"Your speech!" Pella exclaimed. The graduating Westish Scholar always delivered a commencement address. "I totally forgot. How was it?"

"Inspiring," Irma said. "I told the little chickadees to soar ahead, go confidently in the direction of their dreams, live the lives they imagine, and if they were nice to people they liked and kept up property values in their neighborhoods, everything would work out for the best."

"I bet you didn't," Pella said.

"It was pretty dark," Irma admitted. "'The glaciers are gone, the bees are screwed, the oceans are curdling to a sultry juice.'"

"Good for you."

"Went over like a stone," Irma said. "You can watch it on YouTube if you want."

"I will." Pella swirled the water in her glass and peered down into its tiny rainbows. "I miss Judy," she said. "How is she?"

"She's good," Irma said. "She's in Lisbon."

"Why Lisbon?" Pella asked.

Irma shrugged. "She's spending the summer there. Should we call her?"

"*Call* her?"

"It's a good hour to try," said Irma. "Before she goes to dinner."

To Pella it seemed immensely difficult to call Judy, whether because they hadn't been in touch or because Judy was on another continent. These barriers, however, proved flimsy, as Irma pulled her laptop from her teal and yellow tote, on which was emblazoned THE BRIGHTNESS, and flipped it open. A bleating tone was heard, and Judy's face appeared.

"Girls!" she exclaimed. "You're together! Where are you?"

"Home," Pella said just as Irma said, "Westish."

“How marvelous!” Judy said.

“We’re at my house,” Pella explained. “In fact, we’re sitting on the patio in our usual seats. Irma put her laptop at your place setting.”

“That’s true,” Irma said. “I didn’t even do it on purpose.”

“And the pup?” Judy asked.

Pella glanced fondly at Contango. “He’s in his spot too.”

“How *marvelous,*” Judy said again. “No wonder I feel so cozy. Let’s go out on the balcony, shall we? I too have a little table outside.”

Judy picked up her computer. As she walked, the rooms of a small apartment, a striped wallpaper of crimson and gold, indistinct paintings, the dull glow of a silver fruit bowl, receded behind her. The light changed, blanching for a moment Judy’s face as she stepped out onto her balcony.

It might have been a trick of the light or of memory, but Pella thought Judy’s hair, with its seabird range of blacks and whites and grays, had, after remaining constant in its variety for as long as Pella had known her, slid noticeably toward white this year; a snowier plumage, Pella thought, and a suitable one.

“Now, let me see if I can beguile this contraption into doing my bidding,” Judy said, her hand muffling the laptop’s microphone. The image swung and twisted up toward a spidery hanging plant and the braided metal underside of the balcony above.

“There!” she said as the image righted itself. “Did that work?”

Judy had turned around her laptop to show them the square her apartment overlooked. The camera panned across a beautiful tiled plaza three blocks long. “It’s called Luís de Camões Square,” said Judy merrily.

Pella thought she had never seen anything so beautiful. The pale tiles, shining dully as daylight faded in Lisbon, formed patterns of large pale diamonds outlined in gray, and each diamond contained a dark rhombus with concave sides, like a smaller diamond sucking in its breath. Passersby strolled over these pretty repeated shapes, so plainly reveling in the sweetness of the evening that Pella could feel the temperate weather there.

Judy swept the camera back. In the plaza’s center rose a bronze statue of a bearded man atop an octagonal pedestal. One hand held a downward-pointing sword, its tip resting against the statue’s base. With his other hand, he clutched a book to his heart. The folds of his robe rained down elegantly

over his bent arm. He was so large that his laureled head came almost level with Judy's third-floor balcony.

Judy flipped the laptop around to face herself and settled down in a chair.

"The square is so lovely," said Pella.

Judy, as she sipped from a disposable cup, smiled a sly proud smile: The square, for now, as a reward for her cleverness, was hers, and she was getting to share it.

"How long will you be there?" Pella asked.

"I've rented this little apartment for the summer," Judy reported. "I may do a bit of traveling if I feel the urge, once I've had my rest."

"And what have you been doing?" Irma asked.

"Oh, I ramble about. I plop into a museum. I plop back out. I sit on my balcony and"—she swept an upturned hand over the cozy vista —"contemplate."

"You look terrific," Pella said. "I love that jacket."

Judy tugged at a sleeve of the slim peach jacket she was wearing. "This old thing?" she said, and smiled.

"What are you drinking?" Irma asked.

"This," Judy declared, lifting higher the cup she had in hand, "is a leite perfumado. Milk steeped with sugar, cinnamon, and lemon. The milk comes from a can. It's divine.

"Whereas *this*"—Judy set down the glass and, with demonstrative slowness, held up another in a subtle parody of her own pedagogic manner —"is a Beirão. The most delightful herbal liqueur. I wandered down to the kiosk before you girls called and found I couldn't decide which I wanted. So I ordered both! Holiday will do that to a person."

"Who's Luís de Camões?" Pella asked, her attention still seized by the glory of Judy's view.

"The national poet of Portugal," Judy replied. "Their Shakespeare, it's often said. Although he predates Shakespeare."

"Have you read him?" Irma asked.

Judy reached across the table and lifted into the frame a book: *Os Lusíadas*. "Funny you should ask."

"I didn't know you read Portuguese," Pella said.

"I *don't*," declared Judy proudly. "But I have this in a pinch"—she held

up an English translation, *The Lusiads*—“and my Spanish is passable. I’m just steeping myself in the culture. Like a baby learning to roll over. Kicking my legs futilely in the air. The Portuguese writer I love, actually, is Pessoa—have you girls read him?”

“No,” they each admitted.

“Ah, you must! His lugubriousness is so delicious—you can almost *chew* it.

“There’s a café one block that way”—Judy gestured through the apartment and beyond—“that has a statue of Pessoa sitting at a sidewalk table, enjoying a coffee. A very modest statue, not like this mythic behemoth here. He has an empty chair beside him for an interlocutor. Out of nowhere I suddenly thought, You know, I’d like to sit in that little green-bronze chair and have my photograph taken. I don’t know why but I would. A young woman was walking by—older than you girls, but young. She had the kindest, most candid face, but she was wearing the most outrageously stylish outfit. My goodness, it told a story. I called to her and asked if she’d take my picture.”

Judy paused to sip her drink, and Pella marveled at the intimate, unchecked flow of her talk—so different from the glum, post-Doug Judy of the previous September.

“Ah,” Judy sighed as she set down her glass. “I’m so glad to see you two together—in the same frame, as it were. You both look so hale, so...” She balled her fist. “*Fierce*. Like tigresses.”

Judy continued her story: The woman she asked to take her picture turned out, by chance, to be a professional photographer. Her name was Beverly; she was British, of Nigerian extraction. Beverly and a shifting collection of friends were on a long, loosely defined holiday in Lisbon and the beach towns beyond that would last as long as the summer. They wanted Judy to join them.

“Speaking of which,” Judy said, with a glance at her wristwatch, a feigned frown, and an air of one pleasure overlapping with the next, “I’m afraid I must toddle off in a moment. I’m meeting Bev’s crowd for dinner, and I’m in desperate need of a hot bath beforehand.”

Judy had never looked readier for a night on the town, in her trim peach jacket with its sleek collar, her whitening hair gorgeously arrayed. But if a hot bath she wanted, a hot bath she would have. Pella could only keep

marveling—less at Judy's resourcefulness, her unerring eye and indelible charm, her talent for collecting and being collected, than at how many illusions about Judy she herself had managed to maintain all these years.

Judy could go anywhere, anywhere there was a bathtub, and she did. Judy had her own illusions, certainly, but she'd never been some benighted woman held in thrall by the heartless Doug, the way Pella had imagined. No, Judy was just an artful weirdo, living as best she could. If Judy's students were her legacy; if she spent her summers and sabbaticals as she wished, and spent them well; if Doug had been her love, and the love had somehow ended...then this was as it should be and attained the stained perfection of all freely chosen lives.

"Judy?" Pella said—suddenly hazarding, without forethought, a plaintive, vulnerable tone she'd never before attempted with Judy.

"Yes, my dear?"

"What do you think I—"

"Just enjoy yourself," Judy said, so quickly she cut Pella off. "Be playful. Sometimes we're so worried about the ending, we forget to enjoy the play."

Judy's smile was enormous. Her teeth had something of the character of her hair, a range of light and shadow, her four front teeth blindingly white, a soft gradient of dimmer shades beyond. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-eight," Pella said.

"Ah, twenty-eight," repeated Judy with evident pleasure. "I don't know whether it's the infinite shape of that eight or the general voluptuousness of one's twenties or simply the way that year landed in my own life, but I've always thought of twenty-eight as the age when life has the maximum aperture. The field of possibility is so wide, so vivid, so bright, and your powers so great, your own light shining so brightly, that it's almost overwhelming. Daunting. Frightening, even."

It certainly is, Pella thought.

"But don't be frightened," Judy said. "Never be frightened. *Or,*" she continued, with a new emphasis, as if she'd recalled an important caveat, "*do* be frightened. Be utterly terrified. But don't let it stop you."

"Where were you at twenty-eight?" Irma asked.

"New York, of course. Where else would a person be? That was my second year of graduate school. The year I moved downtown and moved in

with Patty. The estimable Miss Evans and me. She was a year ahead of me in the program. We did have a remarkable time."

Patty Evans, Pella thought—P. D. M. Evans. The lone book on Judy's office shelf, its contents hidden behind its placid blue buckram. It had been written by Judy's best friend.

"The following year I met Douglas," Judy said. "And thus began the adventure of a lifetime, you might say."

Judy swept a fragile hand, its wrist spangled with bracelets of thin gold wire, over the balcony and the piazza below, where dim bodies moved and streetlamps dappled the dusk. An expansive gesture, and one that expressed her mood. Perhaps this wasn't her first Beirão of the afternoon.

"And you too, Irma. You girls, both in your twenties...it's a time when you don't know what's ahead. You have no idea what's ahead.

"I don't mean it in a patronizing way. I don't mean, *Ah, you're so young*...I know you've both been alive for about a billion years. And yet despite those billion years, you have no idea what the next twenty, the next ten, the next five will bring.

"To be in your twenties is to not quite know what the story's *about*. One thing happens and another thing happens and another thing...so many things happen that you're spent, you're exhausted, you're lying on the kitchen floor trying to catch your breath long enough to eat a slice of cake. And then another thing happens! And another and another! You think the story will head one way, but instead it heads another. You can't see any shape in it."

"What happens after?" Pella asked.

"After your twenties? Well, as a member of the eminent cabal of old ladies, I don't know that I should divulge all our secrets. Your twenties are far from over, my dear. At your age, a month is an eternity. A *moment* can be an eternity."

"Oh, come on," Pella said.

"Oh, very well." Judy, thoroughly enjoying herself, set down her Beirão and, in serpentine patterns, drummed her fingertips on the table. "At a certain point in your thirties—I suspect it will happen to you, Pella, very soon now—you figure out what your story is about. You become insuperable! You decide what your future is about, and from this you deduce what your past was about. You structure the story. You write it down

in your mind, in your flesh, in your soul. Maybe you even write it on paper and peddle it to others. Everything that lies behind you and ahead of you is shaped and shapely. It's a moment of triumph.

"Then, of course, the next step is to figure out it was all dead wrong. You realize that all the progress you made was a mirage. But actually, you have made progress—in fact, you've gone farther than most people ever go. And that means you're deep in the woods with no one to guide you. And then you're cast into more confusion than you ever thought possible."

"Boo," Irma said.

"Boo indeed," Judy agreed.

As though breaking a spell, Judy clapped her hands together with sparkling decisiveness. "You girls have a marvelous time."

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7

Irma gazed out at the mazy cragged boughs of the crabapple laden with dark pink flowers.

It's time, Pella thought. *It's time to tell her.*

Just as she opened her mouth, Irma turned toward her, her expression so timid and intense and confiding, so fraught with a burning secret, that Pella felt perfectly certain that Irma too was pregnant.

"I made out with a girl," Irma said.

"What?" Pella said. "When?"

"Two nights ago. At a graduation party. I went with Pammy and Monty. I was kind of drunk. But not that drunk."

"Who was the girl?"

"Sort of a punk girl. From Norway. She goes to Green Bay. I'm not sure why she was there."

"What happened?"

"She just came up to me and introduced herself and started gushing to me about the Witches and my essays and how brilliant everything was."

Pella smiled. "A groupie."

"Ugh," Irma said. "Don't say that. She talked about Federici and Audre Lorde and Marx and whatever, but in a kind of stream-of-consciousness way, with a lot of big words—you know when you're in a conversation that's hard to follow, and you can't tell whether it's because the person is talking over your head or not making sense?"

"Yes," Pella said.

"Anyway, she asked if I wanted to go for a walk, and I was kind of bored by the conversation but her confidence was compelling, plus her whole"—Irma swiped a hand down her body—"was pretty compelling too. We walked around the neighborhood and wound up in that park by the

beach, and we swung on the swings and she talked some more, and then we climbed up the play structure into the little turret above the slides. And then we made out."

"Incredible," Pella said.

"It was fun," Irma admitted. "She kept making little purring sounds and saying stuff like, *I couldn't leave till this happened*. Like she'd been postponing her flight to Oslo until we felt each other up. And I was like, *Shh! I've never kissed a girl before. I need to concentrate*. Except of course I didn't say that at all."

Pella laughed. "She was following her desire."

"In retrospect, she was probably on all kinds of drugs. Her eyes were very glassy and intense. Finally I said I had to get back to my friends and bolted."

"Good for you," Pella said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sure you'll get hit on a ton with your new haircut."

"Too butch?" Irma said in a Judy-voice as she touched a hand to her scalp.

"You have such a delicate head," Pella said. "Everyone's going to be hitting on you."

"Boys and girls," Irma said.

Pella smiled. "People you like and people you don't."

Irma felt heartened by the pleasure Pella took in her story. Maybe it was safe to indulge, just for a moment, this fantasy of herself as a beautiful, pansexual being, worthy of desire.

"And then I went home with somebody else," she concluded.

"What?" Pella said. "You did not."

Irma smiled at her own absurdity, a sense of delight pushing up through her embarrassment. "No, I did. I really did."

"Irma Friske! With whom?"

"Just a guy. His name was Manny."

Pella turned and stared. "Little Manny Avila? The baseball player?"

"You *know* him?"

"I know all the jocks," Pella said. "But Manny I know fairly well. He's from Mike's old neighborhood in Chicago—his brother Izzy was on the championship team. Such a nice family."

“He was nice,” Irma said.
“So what happened?”
“I don’t know,” Irma said. “We danced at the party.”
“On the same night. After you made out with the punk girl.”
“On the same night,” Irma affirmed.
“Tell me,” Pella said, and closed her eyes.

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8

Two nights ago, after she'd returned from the playground, Irma went to another party with Pammy and Monty. She was sitting on a padded bench in a semi-dark hallway, spacing out, thinking about what she'd done with the Norwegian girl and whether she should have maybe gone a little farther when someone sat down beside her.

She recognized him vaguely. He was younger, a sophomore maybe. There was something artless and wholesome about his face, like a child's or a Mormon's—someone who'd never tasted coffee. But he was holding two bottles of beer, one of which he extended toward Irma.

"Hey," he said. "We have the same haircut."

His smile was gentle, his teeth even and white except for a dark triangular absence, small but easy to notice, between his top incisors.

Irma took the beer. "How did you chip your tooth?"

He ran his tongue over the slanted edge. "It's kind of an embarrassing story."

"Go for it," Irma said.

"It was a weight-lifting accident. Last year, when I was a freshman. I was using the pull-down machine, but I forgot to put the pin into the weights. So when I pulled down"—he leaned back against the wall with lifted elbows and fists outstretched and yanked his fists toward his shoulders—"*bang*. The bar cracked me in the mouth."

"Did it hurt?"'

He shook his head no. "I was startled. I didn't notice my tooth till I got home."

"You don't really look like you lift weights," Irma remarked.

He nodded sadly. "That's what Coach Schwartz always says." He took a small sip of his beer. "My name's Manny. Would you like to go dance?"

They danced until Pammy came up behind Irma and told her they had to go. Irma thought Pammy was being protective and rescuing her from this guy with whom she was somewhat flirtatiously dancing, but Pammy grabbed Manny's hand and Irma's and dragged them both to the porch, where Monty was waiting.

After Dahlia died, Pammy had more or less moved into Monty's ramshackle house full of football players. She returned to the condo she'd shared with Dahlia only briefly and occasionally, always in broad daylight, ducking in to retrieve a book or a set of paints and ducking out again.

But as the four of them conferred on the porch, Pammy, rosy-cheeked and ebullient, wearing the same shimmery asymmetrical top she'd worn to the Parties last fall, insisted they go to the condo.

"Are you sure?" asked Monty, who was equally bright-cheeked with drinking, his wheat-blond hair plastered to his temples with sweat, but not too drunk to look worried by Pammy's proposal. "We could go to my place."

Pammy, full of drunken dignity, shook her head. "Your place is too noisy."

"We could go to my place," Irma offered.

"Your place is too far." Pammy pointed at Manny. "Your place is too whatever."

"You've never been to my place," said Manny with a smile.

"And I never will." She leaped off the porch and ran into the street, waving for them to follow. They did, and she grabbed Monty's hand and Irma's, and Manny took Irma's other side.

It felt pleasant to move as one down the empty street as though marching for a cause. Irma thought of the Parties and the skipping groups of girls in swinging beads. Tonight, with most of the underclassmen departed and the graduation festivities winding down, the streets were peaceful, the crickets whirring in the trees.

Pammy was on a mission. She had always seemed to Irma so staunchly herself, with no pretensions and plenty of internal fortifications. Now, between a long night of drinking and the company of her friends, she seemed fortified for a special task, the task of returning. Not just to grab clean clothes but to be in the presence of the person who, by virtue of being

there, they would be in the presence of. Irma, unnerved by the idea, squeezed both hands she was holding. Both of them squeezed back.

They passed the sand volleyball court in the courtyard, climbed the external staircase, and entered the sliding door on the second floor. Pammy snapped on the living-room lights. On the shaggy green carpet were stacked a few last boxes. Irma knew Monty and his buddies had packed up the place while Pammy stayed away.

Now Pammy marched bravely in. She passed the kitchen island and opened the freezer. She pulled out a bottle of vodka, Dahlia's brand, its glass cylinder as opaquely furred with ice as the Ram's windshield on a January morning. They sat on the shag carpet, sipping their vodka out of paper cups and softly chatting.

Pammy lifted her cup and caught Irma's eye. *"Za zdorovye,"* she said.

"Za zdorovye," said Irma.

Down a stubby hallway lay both bedrooms and the bathroom. Irma averted her eyes from that area, which radiated an overwhelming aura of Dahlia. But finally she had to pee so badly she couldn't avoid it anymore. She hurried down the hall to the bathroom, shut herself inside, and sat down on the toilet, trembling.

As she was washing her hands, a sudden calm came over her. She saw her new haircut in the mirror and thought she looked almost pretty and almost tough. She thought about dancing with Manny. She thought about Pammy bringing them here. She thought about the gate accordioned across the stairs at Dahlia's mom's house and how badly she'd wanted to jump over it and crawl in Dahlia's bed.

As she walked back down the hall, she inhaled deeply and let her eyes peek into Dahlia's room: A mute square palely lit by the hallway light. A mirrored closet door. A rectangle in the carpet where a bedframe once had been. The round dark loop of a hair tie lay beside the doorstop. She picked it up and slipped it over her wrist.

As she entered the living room, Pammy took Monty's phone from his hand and scrambled to her feet. She tapped at its face until a song came on. With eyes closed, she began to dance the way small children dance, hopping from spot to spot, waggling one arm and then the other, devoted to a reverie that slant-rhymed with the song. Irma moved close to Pammy and danced as she'd done on Block Island, landing stiffly on the balls of her

feet, legs taut, palms tight to her sides as she twirled in dizzying circles. Monty and Manny climbed up from the carpet and joined them. Pammy kept tapping Monty's phone, playing new songs without slowing down.

Before Irma and Manny left, Pammy grabbed Irma's arm and pulled her aside.

"Don't worry," Irma said. "I have condoms."

Pammy burst out laughing. "Me too."

She sought and held Irma's gaze. Her smile faded, and her face was suffused with a solemn, consecrated joy. "Monty and I are engaged."

Irma glanced down at Pammy's bare left hand.

"I told him I wanted to design the ring," Pammy said. "A project for the summer."

Irma nodded. "Something funky."

"Funky but not too fancy," Pammy agreed. "We haven't even told our parents yet. I wanted you to know before we go."

Pammy's expression changed again. She was, contra her typical steady buoyancy, full of distinct and definite moods tonight, each one producing the next like the stages of a Midwestern storm. Her eyes glistened as she glanced toward the open door of Dahlia's empty room. "I was thinking if we ever had a daughter—"

"Ah," Irma said.

"Probably just the middle name. I haven't decided yet."

Irma felt her face start to crack. "Either way's perfect," she said.

As they hugged goodbye, Irma felt grateful to know of the upcoming wedding, which guaranteed she'd see Pammy again. That event aside, it seemed clear they would drift apart—or, rather, they would never drift apart but remain connected, each on her own arcing path, two electrons circling an absent center. From afar, via social media and bcc'ed announcements, she would follow the love-filled childhood of TK Dahlia Devine.

Later that night, or deeper into the morning, Manny ran his hand softly over Irma's fuzzy scalp. Front to back, side to side, around in a circle. He kissed the top of her head, and Irma felt, just for a moment, that her heart was beginning to heal.

By the time their bodies stopped moving, it was light out, and there was nothing left to say. Unlike with Nicholas, she knew for certain she would

never see him again, and she knew that this was okay, better than okay, because someday there would be someone else whom she would.

"Goodbye," she said.

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9

That's a beautiful story," Pella said. "You should write it down someday."

"I might," Irma said. "I've been working on a novel."

"A novel!" Pella said. "About what?"

"About all this," Irma said, and swept an arm at the sky and dormant garden and crabapple blooms. "About Dahlia. And me. And my family." She looked at Pella, one last secret in her eyes. "But most of what I've written so far...is kind of about you."

Pella laughed. "Oh boy," she said. "Here we go again."

"Don't worry," Irma said. "I'll give you final say over all your lines."

Scraps of cloud chased over the sun, casting their faces in fleeting shadow.

"There's one more thing I have to tell you," Irma said. "I'm not going to grad school. At least not next year."

"Wow," Pella said. "Why not?"

Irma shrugged. "I just feel like a different kind of person lately. Like I want to be freer somehow. Maybe I'll still want to be a professor someday, but sometimes I think I might not.

"My truck's packed," she said. "But I don't know where I'm going. I can get a waitressing job anywhere. I can try to write this book."

Abruptly, Contango scrambled to his feet and turned toward them. His bad hip seemed forgotten. He gamboled around their legs, eager for their attention, and darted to the edge of the grass. He turned and barked impatiently, his frost-furred body curled like a comma, puissant and ready.

Irma rose from the table. "He wants to play."

"I don't want to wear him out," Pella said. Why was he squandering so much energy? He should be conserving what he had left.

He dropped low, his front paws extended. *Chase me, you fools*.

Irma dashed into the grass. The husky, thrilled by her pursuit, sprinted across the yard and rounded the trunk of the crabapple tree.

“Come on!” Irma wheeled her arm, beckoning Pella.

“But—”

“Now!” Irma said, her voice both joyous and menacing in its urgency. Pella shoved back her chair and joined the chase.

Contango zigged and darted over the grass, delighting in evading his twin pursuers, who tried to corner and corral him but came up empty time and again. He bounded from garage to crabapple to fence and back, running and turning as though his hips were fine, his blindness a ruse. His spirit, as though ballooning, filled the entire backyard. He seemed to be shedding years and ailments before their eyes and becoming a puppy again—shedding time itself and leaving it there in the grass.

Pella, as she tried to change direction, slipped on a damp patch of grass and went sprawling. Contango stopped, his manner altered; he trotted over and, standing over her, peered down with paternal concern. He dipped his head and licked her face, bottom to top, with a long sloppy drag of his tongue. Pella shivered with pleasure.

And then he was done. He hobbled away, slow and abashed, working his jaw side to side. He skulked to the patio and curled on the patch of brick he always chose, beside the rusty wheel of sun-faded garden hose.

“He’s okay,” Irma said as she flopped down beside Pella in the grass. “He’ll rest.”

“I know,” Pella said.

They lay on their backs, catching their breath, their torsos gently heaving, half in the grass and half in the garden that was not at present a garden but a squarish patch of dark, dried, rutted mud. In spots where the soil was looser, an array of volunteers were shooting up. Pella could see, amid the prickly weeds and thistles, a smattering of ready-to-eat dandelion greens, a cluster of spring onions, and enough lamb’s-quarters to make pesto. And, near the fence, the tender compound leaves of two self-starting tomato plants.

Desire surged through Pella. It was the desire to stay in this house, in this yard, to live here, just for the summer—to dig in her garden and be with her dog. It was late in the year for planting, but not impossibly late; the springs were always bedeviled by cold snaps and pounding rain. She

wanted to plant this ground. If she did so soon, there would be plenty to harvest in late August, September, into October—those golden months that felt distant now, lying as they did on the far side of summer's peak. She longed to see one more tiny harvest to completion. New York would always be there.

She turned her face toward Irma, eyes alight. "Do you want to stay here?" she asked with what struck Irma as a peculiar earnestness. "For the summer?"

"Here?" Irma said. "In your ex-boyfriend's backyard?"

"I own half the house," Pella said. "He can move in with Caroline and her parents."

Irma laughed. "I think they'd rather stay here."

Pella knew her thoughts were idle. But the surge of hope she felt, of infinite glorious hope—it suffused her, it shot through her body, it arranged her cells in patterns of crystalline logic. She felt lit up, her body a delicate lattice of light. She ached with hope; she ached with a purposeless joy. Whether that joy had overtaken her despite what was happening in her uterus or somehow because of it, she had no idea.

They lay side by side, limbs splayed like starfish, like asterisks, like jacks. Their hair against the ground. Her own hair; Irma's fuzzy down. They lay on their backs in the dirt, and above them hung the brightness of the day. And their bodies too were a brightness, a slight emanation of heat and light back into the atmosphere. Their fingers were touching, ever so slightly, their pinkie and ring fingers resting together.

"I'm pregnant," Pella said.

Irma laughed. Then she stopped laughing and turned. "Really?"

Pella nodded. "Really."

"With Nicholas?"

"By Nicholas," Pella said. "But we're not together."

"Wow," Irma said as she slowly absorbed this news. "What are you going to do?"

"No idea," Pella said.

They lay and looked up at the blossoming tree.

"Mike and Caroline are moving away," Pella said. "Which means we're selling the house. I have a little money from my dad that's sitting in an

account. I didn't spend any of it this year—in fact, I worked so much, I saved some money. I could buy Mike out."

Pella felt Irma beside her, listening intently, their fingers still touching.

"You could move into the back bedroom," Pella went on. "You could write at my desk. I could help with your book, you could help with my baby. Judy could come over for lunch. Not just on Fridays—whenever she wanted. We could dig up the whole backyard and turn it into a garden. We could find a new way to live."

As Pella spoke, this life sprang up around her, impossibly beautiful, conjured by her words. Maybe it could be done. Maybe friendship could be a looser, freer realm within which to try the tender experiment of living and of nurturing life—away from the structures and strictures, the painful overemphasis, attached to romantic love.

"A world without men," Irma said.

Pella laughed. "Maybe not entirely."

This new life continued to unfurl in Pella's mind. She thought of the square of paper Sylvie had scrawled her phone number on, which was now tucked in the jewel case of *Death of My Husband*. Maybe Sylvie was done living on a property she hated. Maybe she'd prefer to move to Wisconsin. People liked to be close to their grandkids.

"But that would be crazy," Irma said, her tone more intrigued than dismissive.

"But that would be crazy," Pella agreed.

The view above them was half the dark pink blossoms of the crabapple, filtering the brightness, and half the brightness itself. That blooming, inescapable light was their lives coming toward them, just as Judy had said.

"If nothing else," Pella said, "you could put it in your novel."

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Acknowledgments

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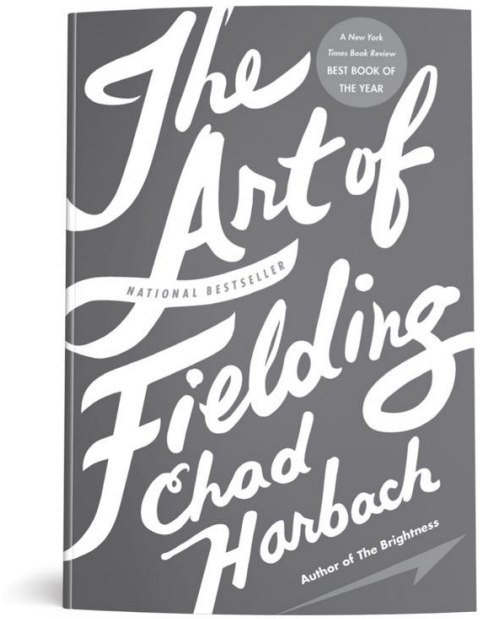
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