2015

Bad luck girls

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/14015

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BAD LUCK GIRLS

by

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B.A., Skidmore College, 2010

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

2015
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BAD LUCK GIRL

Chapter One

The walls in the conference room were gray, the color of indecision and sorrow, Margaux’s mother would say. Not good for a Cancer, already prone to this sort of thing. Cancers should surround themselves with reds and oranges, hues to warm their watery natures. Margaux no longer believed in her mother’s folklore, but she continued to think in those terms. She was, after all, still a Barbaret. A dour man looked over her résumé, glanced at her, looked back at her résumé, then set it down with a sigh. They sat across from each other at an oval table meant for ten.

“And why do you want to work for Hotel Barlow? It’s a bit of a departure from dentistry.”

Margaux moved her ring from finger to finger. It was important to look the interviewer in the eye, to speak slowly, to articulate, to radiate confidence. “Yes, I know. But I’ve always been interested in hospitality, so when I saw the payroll administrator opportunity, it seemed like a great” — what was the word? — “a great opportunity.” She was speaking quickly, way too quickly. The author of Ace the Interview! would not be pleased. “You know, because I’ve already been a payroll administrator, so I already know how to do that.” She imagined her mother sitting in the corner, legs crossed, head shaking. I told you you weren’t ready.

The dour interviewer cracked his knuckles one by one. The initials HB were emblazoned in gold on his jacket pocket. They were emblazoned on the carpet, too. “And why did you decide to leave your previous job?”
Margaux sat up tall and folded her hands in her lap. Body language was key. “It was a small dentist’s office in Saint Albans, Vermont. A good way to get experience but, after about a year, it felt like I had grown as much as I could in my role. So I moved to Boston and” — she opened her arms as if to say, *behold* — “here I am.”

The interviewer cleared his throat and scribbled something on a yellow legal pad. “So you moved here without a job lined up?”

She started picking at the raw flesh under her Band Aid, a nervous habit that had been exacerbated by the move. On the day she’d arrived at her apartment in Watertown — a studio above The American Diner — she had picked her thumb so bloody, she’d had to fashion a tourniquet out of her only dishtowel. She sat on her hands. “I guess you could say I took a risk. It seemed like time for a change, especially after living at home for so long. If you met my mother you’d understand.” Margaux laughed. The interviewer did not.

“What payroll system did you use at your previous job?”

“Well—” Oh lord. What *was* it? It had a name from Greek mythology, which was funny, considering how un-mythological accounting software was. She had only been working at the dentist’s office for nine months before she impulsively moved to Boston, the car packed so full, she couldn’t see out the rear window. She drummed her nail-bitten fingers on the table and strained to remember. It had been named after one of the gods. What was his name? “Kronos,” she said, a triumphant smile on her face. “It was called Kronos.”

Margaux had the most terrible urge to ask the interviewer how she was doing. Was
this right, how she had her legs crossed? Did that laugh sound okay? Was that answer too short? Too long? When it came to social grace, she was woefully out of practice. She had no close friends. No distant friends, either. She had never had a boyfriend, unless she counted Duncan, her middle school sweetheart. She still ached for him, sometimes. The only family she had was her mother and her “Aunt” Denise, co-owner of As The Crow Flies, a funky home goods store that sold hand-made candles and potpourri pillows that smelled like clove in winter and lavender in summer. Her father was dead, had died the day she was born. Or maybe the day after. Or the month after. Her mother changed the story every time she told it.

Margaux must have sent out a hundred résumés since she first arrived in Boston. This was the only lead she had gotten. It probably shouldn’t have surprised her, considering she had only worked at the dentist’s office and, before that, her mother’s store. After just a month of city-living, her savings were running out. There was probably no rescuing the interview, at this point. He wasn’t even taking notes anymore. Margaux smiled vacantly as the interviewer explained this was not just a costumer-driven company. It was an employee-driven company. Everyone was empowered to make their own decisions, even payroll administrators. It was important to be a self-starter, to be a people person, to have a certain élan.

“Oh yes,” she interrupted. “I love people. I mean, I am definitely a people person.”

Margaux hated people. She particularly hated finicky guests and phony customer-service agents. Any job that involved salesmanship sounded like a circle of Hell, even worse than having your head twisted all the way around and being forced to walk
backwards. That was the fourth circle, reserved for sorcerers and false prophets, probably the kind of place her mother would have for a summer home. The interviewer closed Margaux’s file and set it aside, the universal gesture for, *thanks but no thanks*.

“It was nice to meet you, Ms. Barbaret. Thank you for coming in. Now wait a minute. Don’t get up. You’re also meeting with Mrs. Boyce, don’t forget. She’s the assistant general manager, very hands-on.” His tone was crisp, a hint of irritation, perhaps. “I’ll send her in. Won’t be a minute.” Christ, she had forgotten. *Another* interview. When Margaux neared a critical mass of anxiety, her fingertips began to burn. Her doctor had never heard of that before.

Mrs. “Call-me-Nan” Boyce was an energetic woman who looked about sixty. Her straight grey hair was cut in a twenties-style bob and her outdated pantsuit, complete with shoulder pads, was covered in lint. “From the laundry room,” she explained, swiping at her sleeve with short, quick strokes. Her lips were thin and pale. *Never trust a thin-lipped person*, Margaux’s mother would say. She never explained why, though. A large thermos of coffee was wedged between Nan’s knees.

“I’m sure Thomas already gave you the rundown on the position and asked you all the important questions. I just like to meet all of our candidates — keeps me busy, I tell you— and make sure they have an idea of The Barlow standards. The hotel is small, relatively speaking, but very good, highly rated in *Boston Magazine*. Maybe you read the most recent issue? No? Well, that’s all right. You’re new in town. Just moved from Vermont, I see. Such a beautiful state. I used to go there with my husband in the fall. Massachusetts has nice foliage, but somehow, Vermont’s is better, more vibrant. Odd,
considering how close together the states are, don’t you think?”

The panics always came on suddenly, often when Margaux thought she was doing a pretty good job of keeping calm. Nan’s voice started to sound muffled and far away, as if she were talking under water. Then, Margaux felt her hands go numb. Chills ran up her legs like insects and the room — no, her vision went blurry. It was a peculiar sensation, like suddenly falling out of step with her own body. Her breath was sharp and shallow. A dew of cold sweat collected on her forehead. Hopefully Nan hadn’t noticed. Margaux felt the chair beneath her and thought, chair. Then she felt the floor, solid under her heels, floor. The table was cool and smooth, table. It was a little self-taught exercise to pull herself back from a full blown attack.

“And of course we would expect you to be sociable. Even the financial people need to make friends with the front desk, with housekeeping, etc. The Barlow is not just a business. It’s a community. Your résumé says you speak some French?” Nan pulled a lint-roller out of her purse and started running it over her shoulder.

“Yes,” Margaux said, dabbing her face with her sleeve. “Conversationally.” The words came out all choked and quiet. Luckily, Nan seemed more intent on her jacket than on Margaux. Hopefully, she would not remember this half-truth. Margaux knew school-French, and a collection of swear words from her mother. Her maternal grandmother emigrated from Marseille but, in an effort to Americanize, had refused to speak French at home. Margaux’s mother peppered her discourse with French words, but this was a pretension, not fluency.

“Excellent,” Nan said. “Most of the housekeepers are from Les Antilles. They
speak a form of Creole. I know it’s different from French, but do you think you’d be able to converse with them?”

Margaux nodded. Her saliva felt thick in her throat.

“Wonderful!” Nan got to work de-linting her other shoulder, talking about the recruiting system they had set up with a Caribbean temp agency. Interestingly, productivity plummeted in the winter. Could Margaux guess why? Seasonal affective disorder. All the maids, used to tropical climates, got the most terrible case of it. Nan had had to buy one of those light machines and put it in the break room. Margaux smiled and nodded, all the while experiencing the curious double-sensation of sitting still and falling through space. Nan said, “Anyway, that’s pretty much my spiel. What questions do you have for me?”

“Um, do you like it here?”

“I do. It’s like a home, to me. I think you would find the Barlow a very—” she looked at Margaux as if just noticing her there. “Are you okay?”

Suddenly hyper-aware of her face, Margaux smiled, then frowned. “I’m okay. I’m fine.”

Nan gazed at her for some time, probably just registering the sheen of sweat. “We have a nice little community here. It’s the secret to our success. That’s why we take the hiring process very seriously, why we’re so careful about the employees we choose. Do you have any more questions for me?”

*Ace the Interview!* said it was important to have lots of questions. It proved that you were engaged, that you were discerning, that you had done your research. She tried to
think of something clever but, before she had the chance, Nan was already standing up.

“Well, if that’s all then I’ll be going. I have another interview in” — she checked a thin, silver watch — “oh dear, three minutes.”

“Wait!”

Nan stopped in the doorway and turned around.

“Um, I just wanted to say” — now that Margaux had her attention, she was not sure what to do with it — “it’s very important to me to get this job. I...I don’t know how my interview went, and I just wanted someone to know that I really, really do want to work here. Probably more than anybody else.” Her head felt tight and hot. “Definitely more than anybody else.”

Nan looked stunned. “Well, I’ll definitely keep that in mind.” Her tone was gentle, motherly, and Margaux felt painfully exposed. “Good luck to you, Ms. Barbaret. I’ll be in touch.”

On her way out, Margaux nodded stiffly at the front desk attendant. She pushed through the revolving doors and breathed the fresh air. It was autumn, usually the season of smells — dried leaves, wood smoke, overripe apples. Here, it was just pavement and cigarettes and gasoline. Was it possible to miss a place you hated? Her mother had called three times, an improvement on yesterday’s seven. They had not spoken since their fight, yet every hour or so Margaux had to suppress an urge to call back. *Come get me, Mom. I’m sorry.*

She imagined her at home, lying on the couch, surrounded by dirty dishes and bloody tissues and black candles burned down to nubs. Her mother’s nose bled easily,
particularly when she cried. Margaux had mercifully evaded that particular gene. Though she *had* inherited her mother’s original nose, a small, sharp thing. On her eighteenth birthday, her mother had offered to pay for plastic surgery. It was memories like these that made her happy to return to her poorly ventilated apartment above the bacon greasy diner.

It took two subways and a bus to get back to her place. On the red line, Margaux sat with her ear buds in and gazed at the advertisement opposite her. “Are you asleep in your own life? Are you down? Tired? Unmotivated? Disinterested in the things you used to love? If you are 18 years or older, and answered yes to one or more of these questions, then you may be eligible for a depression research study. Compensation up to $2,000.” The train went by Beacon Hospital and marketers assumed everyone on that line must be ailing in one way or another. Perhaps they all were. It made Margaux feel a little better to think so, like she was part of a secret tribe. The Red Line Invalids.

An hour later, she was sitting on her quilt with a burrito in her lap. Her only furniture was the blow-up mattress she’d brought from home and a floral armchair she’d found on the curb. The chair was covered in a heap of laundry and a single Tupperware container, specked with rotting marinara sauce. Her bed was a tangle of clothes, un-cased pillows, and coffee-stained sheets. Since she’d moved to the city, she ate burritos for almost every meal. The diner downstairs made one called The Kitchen Sink that was packed so full, it didn’t close. It dripped with spicy meat juices, guacamole, sour cream, sriracha, black beans. Her mother would recoil at the sight of it. She was a health maniac. She exclusively ate foods that regular people did not recognize: bulgur, fiddleheads, okra.
Margaux had first become friends with Duncan because his mother let her eat Pop-tarts.

Now, she went to the American Diner so often, the waitress with the electric blue hair had started to recognize her. They’d chat while she assembled the sandwich, then wrapped it, then slipped the tin-foiled cylinder into a paper bag. “It’s getting cold, out there! Can you believe it’s fall already?” the waitress would say. “Just wait until the snow comes,” Margaux would answer. “Parking will be murder,” the waitress would say. “Have a nice evening,” Margaux would answer. “Take care, now,” The waitress would say, and so on. Sometimes, it was all she needed to get through the day, those five minutes of contact with others. She had long practiced the art of distance, of pleasant but forgettable conversation. The trick was to only talk about the present: the weather, the outfits they had on, the new painting in the corner. If the conversation ever threatened to go beyond the parameters of the diner, Margaux took her burrito and made a polite exit. That was enough for her. Most days that was enough.

The floor was littered with tinfoil wrappers, unread library books, and unpacked boxes. One of the walls was half painted “sun-dance” yellow. A flecked tarp was lain out, a paint bucket and a roller on top, from the day after she’d moved in, back when she still had visions of a home, her home, decorated with potted plants and paper lanterns. Now, a month later, Margaux could not muster the energy to finish the job. Unlit twinkle lights were tacked around the window, from that same optimistic day. She realized too late there was not a plug nearby, so there they stayed, bulbs connected by green wires, ugly without light. She’d started a to-do list on the fridge. It had a single item: “buy extension chord.” One of these days, when she had the energy, she would do it.
She cleared a space on the mattress and lay down, easing her laptop onto her stomach. She put on a movie to help her fall asleep. Something stupid. These days, she couldn’t sleep without background noise. Her mind inevitably drifted to Vermont, to her mother, to the moments when they were happy — sunbathing on the roof — and the ones when they were not. “You make me sick,” her mother had shouted, looking crazed. “Stop crying. You don’t fool me.” Margaux pressed her hands against the soft mattress. 

*Bed,* she thought.
Chapter Two

One week and still no word from Hotel Barlow. Margaux had started taking long power walks, all the way to downtown Boston and back out to Watertown, in order to outrun a feeling of impending doom. She had enough money saved for one month more, then it was back to Vermont, beaten down and five pounds heavier, from the all-burrito diet. Though nearly broke herself, she gave money to every beggar she passed, a charitable gesture that was motivated more by a fear of karmic retribution than compassion. Yet another neurosis she could thank her mother for.

She was still terrified of and fascinated by the city. Unwilling to get lost down side roads, she took the loud, busy Western Ave all the way in, marveling at the sheer density of buildings and pedestrians and garbage bins and advertisements and cigarette butts and little dogs in jackets. She tried to look like everyone else, nonchalant, bored even, crossing the street whenever she damn well pleased. Her end point was the Boston Garden, where she would sit on a park bench and watch people pass. Just being there, in the center of things, felt like a personal achievement and, although Margaux would remember those early days in Boston as tedious, lean, and draining, those long, park-bench afternoons were a bright spot in her memory.

In an effort to save money, she had been skipping breakfast. After a three-hour walk, she still had not eaten, was hollow and light-headed. It was always a relief to get back out to Watertown where it was quiet and where there were trees, not many, but enough. Unused to exercise, her legs were burning when she got home, and it took every ounce of her will to climb the two flights of stairs to her apartment. On that particular
afternoon, it had started raining partway through her walk, so she came home drenched and irritable, to find her mother on her landing. She was sitting cross-legged on the welcome mat, her giant purse parked next to her.

A little burst of panic erupted in Margaux’s chest. She would not give her the satisfaction of asking how she found her. She would play it cool. Damn cool. She was a grown-up now, could be a metropolitan career woman, for all she knew.

“Who let you in?”

“Have you gained weight?”

Her mother was in her standard uniform: leggings and a tunic long enough to cover the “unsightly upper leg area.” Her face was perfectly made up, as usual and, as usual, her long, dyed-brown hair fell over her shoulders in shining ringlets. Every morning, she spent hours blow-drying, straightening, then curling her hair so that Margaux had expertly learned to minimize her time in the bathroom.

Her mother said, “Oh don’t look at me like that. I just wanted to make sure you were alive.”

Margaux gestured as if to say, here I am. Alive.

“Aren’t you going to let me in?”

As she searched her coat pockets for the keys, Margaux laid out the ground rules.

“You cannot comment on the size of the apartment. You cannot comment on the cleanliness of the apartment. You cannot rearrange the furniture. You cannot lecture me on Feng Shui.”

“Is the bed facing away from the door? It’s just that, if you —” Sylvia raised her
hands as if at gunpoint. “Okay, okay.”

Once inside, her mother immediately started picking up tin foil wrappers. “Oh my God, what have you been eating?” She got some incense out of her purse and perched it on a dirty dish on the windowsill. Margaux watched her strike a match and light the stick, cupping her hand around the flame. Cinnamon smoke filled the room, a smell so painfully evocative of their house in Vermont, she felt, and strained against, a sudden rush of homesickness.

“Where’s your stove?”

Margaux pointed at a hotplate on the floor.

“Go make some tea, will you? Wait—” She held up a plastic baggy of loose tea leaves, a mixture of yellow, violet, and green buds. “With this.”

Margaux took her time heating the water. She wanted to extend the period of peace before the inevitable shouting match. Her mother seemed surprisingly calm, but that did not mean she wouldn’t switch to rage at any moment. Margaux pretended not to notice her prowling around the kitchen, sending critical little glances at the hot plate, just now starting to glow red.

“So are you going to tell me?” Margaux made her voice flat, indifferent.

“Tell you what?”

“How you found the place?”

Her mother inspected the half-painted wall, touching experimentally to see if it was wet. “You know, most girls would be happy to see their mothers.”

In some demented way, Margaux was happy to see her, though it was all mixed up
with fear and anger, too. She took a couple of mugs out of a cardboard box — still full to the brim with dishes, cutlery, and tupperware — and dumped the packing peanuts into a plastic CVS bag that doubled as the trash. She felt her mother’s eyes on her, all the while, and it made her conscious of her own movements. She spooned the bright tea leaves into a strainer, then poured the water through it, one mug at a time.

“Aunt Denise told you, didn’t she?” Margaux asked.

“She was just trying to help, Blossom.”

“Don’t call me that.” She handed her the ceramic mug. “Be careful, Sylvia. It’s hot.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Margaux had called Aunt Denise to say goodbye. It had seemed insensitive to leave without at least that small gesture. She had partially raised her, after all, in her own gentle way. Margaux had given her the address on an impulse. Perhaps she was afraid to cut all ties. It was too much like launching into space without an emergency contact. Aunt Denise had not tried to talk her out of leaving. In fact, there had been something like relief in her voice when she said, *Come back and visit, sweetheart, but not too soon.*

Sylvia had discovered the full-length mirror bolted to the door, and was now in front of it, adjusting her hair. She looked skinnier, was probably on that masochistic beet juice diet that made the blender look all gory. At fifty years old, she was no longer naturally beautiful. Now, she was obsessively beautiful. *Beauty is earned,* she always said. Every morning, she woke up before sunrise to exercise, then shower, then sit in a steam tent, then apply a gluey face mask, all the rage in Korea, then an avocado-based
lotion, then a tone-correcting, mineral foundation, on and on, hours and hours of this.

“So,” she said to her own reflection, “I have something to tell you.” Their eyes met in the mirror.

“What?”

“I broke up with Rich.” She turned to the side and sucked in her stomach. “Good riddance.”

Margaux said nothing. She sipped the tea, still scalding, and kept her face neutral. It was almost certainly Rich that did the breaking up. Sylvia was, if possible, a worse girlfriend than mother. A long, tense silence dragged out between them. It was a silence-duel, a test of will to see who could fake indifference the longest.

“So what?” Margaux said at last, hearing the strain of anger in her own voice.

“So, you can come home, now.” Her mother turned around. Margaux did not meet her gaze, just blew into the mug, then took another cautious sip. It was a passionflower blend, a plant to calm the nerves. In ancient times, the tonic was used to try and dulcify lunatic women. “Did you hear me?” her mother asked.

“I heard you.” Feeling dizzy, she sat on the floral armchair without bothering to move the dank heap of laundry. “I need to eat something.”

Her mother looked her up and down. “I think you’ve eaten enough, Blossom.”

The only food in the house was a value-sized bag of rice. Margaux went in the kitchen to cook it and to get away from her mother, who nonetheless followed her in.

“I don’t understand why you’re being like this. Rich is gone. Just, come home.” She flicked her hand in dismissal. “I’ve completely forgotten the fight. Water under the
bridge.”

Margaux went rigid. “How convenient for you.”

Rich was one in a long line of perfectly nice men to be warped by Sylvia Barbaret. All her relationships followed the same trajectory: a calculated seduction, a period of enchantment, a shorter period of intense, reckless infatuation, then jealousy, paranoia, rage, violence, neediness, helplessness, pain, aggression, pain, aggression, pain. After each breakup, Margaux was the one to nurse her back to health. She was the one to feed her dripping helpings of spirulina soup and rose-hawthorn tea. And for these efforts, she was verbally abused, blamed for the breakup, and for all her other misfortunes. Rich was a different case, in this respect. He came into the picture while Margaux was still at Saint Michael’s. The college was a fifteen-minute drive from home, so she did not live on campus, but she spent most of her time there, holing away in the library for hours on end.

Her mother was usually most deranged at the beginning and at the end of a relationship. With Rich, she was awful the whole way through. She had gotten it into her head that Margaux was trying to entrap him. It started as offhand comments. *What are you doing home so early? Here to see me or Rich?* Once, she’d grabbed her by the chin and tilted her face toward the light. *Since when did you start wearing makeup?* Really, Margaux was trying out new personas, new selves. College had given her some confidence, some distance from her mother, and she was beginning to entertain the possibility that she could be somehow *more*. She joined a recreational tennis team, learned enough chords on the guitar to play ‘Blackbird’, did her face up like Brigitte Bardot, dressed like Audrey Hepburn, talked like Lauren Bacall. She wanted to put as
much distance as possible between her new self and her old self, the shapeless, melancholy girl, too afraid to go to parties or to take the bus alone.

Her mother touched Margaux’s arm, then quickly pulled her hand back and started fiddling with her earring, a turquoise teardrop. “I’m worried about you. I’ve had been having the most disturbing dreams.”

“Spare me. You’re just lonely because Rich dumped you.” Margaux covered her mouth. Her mother fell back a step, as if slapped. “I’m sorry,” Margaux said.

It was too late. Sylvia’s face was already twisted with rage. “You ungrateful—I came here to—How dare you!”

Margaux fluttered around her. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t freak out. Please, don’t freak out. I have neighbors.”

Her mother spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. “Who the fuck do you think you are? You think you’re special because you live in the city? Well, excuse me, for trying to take you away from this kingdom you’ve built. How much does this dump cost you, anyway? You’re home on a Wednesday afternoon so I’m assuming you don’t have a job.” She laughed, but her dark eyes were cold and hard.

Margaux moved slowly toward her, as if toward a maniac on a ledge. “Calm down, Mom. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.” Pacifying her mother was delicate work, like untangling a tight knot. “You’re right. I was being ungrateful. I’m very sorry that you broke up with Rich. That must have been hard.”

Sylvia crossed her arms and fixed her with a calculating look. “Like you care.”

The water started to boil. Margaux, grateful for the reprieve, went to add some salt,
then some rice. The bag was so big, she had to hold it under her arm to pour. She covered the pot then warmed her hands over it. She was always cold. Her mother was too, but it was harder to keep warm here. In the Vermont house, there were blankets everywhere, draped on chairs, on couches, stacked in trunks and stuffed in dresser drawers.

“It’ll boil over if you cover it like that. Let me do it.” Her mother repositioned the lid to leave a gap for the steam to escape. “See, this is what I mean.” She cupped Margaux’s cheek in her elegant, bony hand. “You’re not ready to be on your own.”

It was the very thing she’d said to her during the fight, the one that started with Rich giving Margaux a playful slap on the wrist and ended with her mother following Margaux out the front door, pleading, crying, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought Duncan into it. Come back. I didn’t mean it. For God’s sake, Blossom, I need you. I need you here.”

Her mother was now standing next to her, also warming her hands over the hot plate. Margaux’s fingers looked fat and ruddy by comparison. They stayed that way for some time, as if trying to decide whether to argue or to apologize. Finally, Sylvia spoke very quietly, her gaze intent on the opposite wall. “I’m not doing well, Margaux.” Then, in a whisper: “I’ve been having such terrible dreams.”

Sylvia had elaborate dreams, epics, that Margaux always suspected her half made-up. Sometimes she would have a nightmare that, in her interpretation, portended unimaginable calamity, and she felt compelled to tease out the hidden meaning, as if knowing the answer would help undo the omen. She would recount the nightmare to Margaux in stomach-turning detail, then ask, “What does this mean?” her voice
breathless.

Even when Margaux was a child, she would have to sit at the breakfast table, her mouth full of oatmeal, and listen to the latest. “So, I slit my wrists and found onions inside them, like full white bulbs.” In one, Sylvia was walking through an orchard, marveling at an apple that was much larger than the others. It was hanging low on the branch and swaying slightly in the breeze. Then, as she got closer, she realized it was not an apple at all but Margaux’s head dangling off a meat hook. Margaux had been seven when Sylvia told her that one, and had not been able to sleep in her own bed again until she was nine.

When some misfortune eventually occurred, her mother had an ingenious gift for retroactively analyzing the dream in a way that, once deconstructed and put back together, seemed to foretell that very event. It was extraordinary, really. Even Margaux would start to believe there was something mystic to these nightmares. She too would become infected with the superstitious fear that tormented her mother. But no more. She was done with all that.

“I’m sure your dream doesn’t mean anything, Mom.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows, tweezed into thin arches. “Oh no? What about the onion dream?”

“You don’t need to tell me about the onion dream.”

“Injured wrists represent an imbalanced relationship.”

“I know,” Margaux said, dragging out the last syllable in a teenagerly whine.

“And onions are used in voodoo to force someone out of your life.”
“I know.”

“And blood represents passion and death.”

“Please. I’ve heard this a thousand times.” Margaux rooted through the box of dishes, looking for a strainer.

“You have to admit that sounds a lot like an omen for the end of a relationship.”

Her mother and her boyfriend had broken up a few months after that dream. She never let Margaux forget it.

A neighbor was tromping up the stairs. Margaux could tell because her kitchen was built in the overhang that jutted out over the diner and whenever there was the slightest movement in the hallway, the whole structure shuddered. During rainstorms, Margaux was genuinely frightened it would collapse. Her mother looked up, alarmed.

“Oh my God. The kitchen is moving.” She leaned against the counter with the same exaggerated urgency as when she had taught Margaux to drive. Slow down, she’d shout, white knuckling the armrests and stomping on an imaginary brake pedal. “This is ridiculous, Margaux. This place is a hazard.” Instead of answering, Margaux strained the rice, still slightly undercooked, into the sink. When the hot water hit the basin, it made a loud popping sound, as if warping on impact. Her mother sighed. “Was it really that bad living with me?”

Margaux started eating directly out of the strainer. She shoveled in forkfuls, aware that she must look like a starving person. “It wasn’t all bad,” she said. Sometimes they would both play hooky, hole up in the house with a movie and three different bags of junk food. They would talk about taking a road trip to San Francisco or New Orleans or
Montreal, just the two of them. Of course, those were isolated golden eras that were only possible when her mother was neither in a relationship nor grieving one. Sometimes, they would get as far as mapping out a route and booking hotel rooms. Then her mother would meet “the one” and the trip would be “postponed.”

“Why don’t you just come back?” her mother asked.

Margaux closed her eyes. It would be so much easier to just go home, to be fed all her meals and to sleep in her own bedroom where, every night, her mother would rub a garlic/sulfur paste on the doorframe. It was meant to keep out bad spirits but really just smelled like spoiled eggs. She started chewing on her thumb. The cuticle was still frayed and ragged. Sylvia made a tutting noise and swatted her hand away from her mouth.

“Don’t you think people would find it a little weird for a twenty-three-year-old to still be living at home with her mother?” Margaux asked.

“Oh, other people!” She threw her hands into the air. “Who cares about other people?”

“I do.”

Sylvia looked disgusted. “You’d better outgrow that, Blossom.”

“Oh, don’t talk to me about—let’s say I do go back home. What happens if Rich comes knocking, begging you to take him back? Or Jack?”

“Jack!” Her mother scoffed. “That’s ancient history.”

“It would just happen all over again. You’d get paranoid that I was out to seduce your boyfriend and push me out the door.”

“If I remember right, you pushed yourself out the door.” Her mother had that
intense look, the one that meant she was sifting through her mind’s filing system, trying to find the perfect accusation. “And let’s face it. When I walked in on you and Rich, you were about two inches apart.”

“We were making pancakes for you.”

“Please. He had his hands all over you.”

“He slapped my wrist! That’s it! He slapped my wrist because I kept tasting the batter.”

Her mother laughed, head back and hands clasped. “I’m not stupid, Margaux. The energy in that kitchen was pure sex.”

“I really don’t want to have this conversation again.”

“Why? Guilty conscience?”

“Oh, please.”

Perhaps there had been something like flirtation between her and Rich, but not because she was in the least bit interested in him. He was just a man in her house and sometimes she liked it when he looked at her. They’d make breakfast for her mother most Saturdays. It was the only time they were alone together and it was usually completely innocent. Then, some small gesture would tip things into ambiguous territory. He would tell her to grab a bowl and she would reach up to the top shelf, then suddenly become conscious of her body, stretched long, her arm bare and smooth, her stomach taut and pressed against the counter. She’d hold that pose until he’d seen it. That was all she wanted, to be seen, to be superficially desired, and then to be forgotten.

Over the course of the conversation, her mother had been rummaging around the
apartment. Somehow, she had located a bowl, salt, pepper, oregano, chia seeds (likely from her own purse), and dates (definitely from her own purse). She mixed them all into the rice with a soup spoon.

“Eat this,” she said. “It’ll taste terrible but you need the nutrients.” She reached out and touched a pimple on Margaux’s chin. She’d been breaking out along her jawline, lately. “Have you tried dabbing some apple cider vinegar on that?”

“Leave it alone, Mother.”

Her mother’s hand dropped to her side. “So, are you really not going to come back with me? Wait, don’t say anything. Just hear me out.” She ran her finger over her lips as she spoke, smoothing the baby pink gloss. It was a curious mannerism that she only had when she was nervous. “I had this whole speech prepared, but I can’t really remember it anymore.” It occurred to Margaux how tired she looked, even with all that makeup, and she felt a momentary flash of tenderness. She hardly ever slept after a breakup. “I think it’s not safe for you to be alone in the city like this. There could be another—” She chose her next word very carefully “—incident.” Margaux’s whole body tensed. “I won’t be there, this time, if you get any of your”— another pause — “urges.”

“I can’t do this. I can’t listen to this again,” Margaux said. She stood up and started gathering her mother’s things. “I’m sorry but I’ve been patient and now I need you to get out of my apartment.”

“Wait, Blossom. It’s just, I had a dream about Duncan.”

“Get the fuck out of my apartment!” Margaux was shouting now.

“It was—”
“Stop, just—”

“He was full grown—”

“Shut up!” Margaux pressed her hands against her ears.

“But then he was always—”

“Get the fuck—”

“Following you around—”

“Mom, please I—

“But you never noticed and—”

“Get out of my apartment! Get out of my apartment! Get out!”

Sylvia took three swift steps and slapped her across the face. There was a loud crack and then a delayed burning sensation. Margaux touched her cheek, stunned.

Her mother massaged her hand. “I’m sorry.” She straightened her tunic. “You were hysterical.”

In an instant, all the energy had gone out of Margaux. It was entirely pointless to yell at her mother. Every fight they had was just a duplicate of a thousand other fights they’d had. She reached her hand out. “I’m sorry,” she said. Her mother instinctively recoiled, as if disgusted. “Mom, I just want you to be okay with this. I want you to be okay with—”

“Do you know I basically don’t sleep anymore? Not that you care.” Sylvia was looking at her with pure hatred, as if Margaux had wronged her by receiving a slap. She continued to massage her hand and to send her daughter glances charged with loathing. Margaux had spent much of her life dreading that expression. It was like witnessing
something raw and personal and deeply shameful, something her mother worked hard all
day to keep hidden. Margaux looked away, as if to give her privacy.

She said to her mother, “Of course, I care. I just—”

“No, I get it. You know better. You’re an adult.” She spat the word. There was a
tense pause. Margaux’s eyes stung with tears of frustration. Sylvia softened. “I’m sorry,
Blossom. I know you just want to be independent. I wanted to somehow—” Her voice
trailed off. She ran a finger over her lips, re-smoothing the gloss. “I worry about us,
Margaux.” Her eyes drifted out the window, where telephone wires cut across the view of
dilapidated townhouses. “We must have racked up a lot of bad karma in our past lives.”

Before Margaux could answer, Sylvia pulled a few bills out of her wallet and set them on
the counter. “Buy some apple cider vinegar.” She pointed at her chin. “It’ll help.”

She left, quietly closing the door behind her. Margaux stood there in the center of
the room for some time. Every once in a while, a neighbor would come up the stairs and
the apartment would shudder. She imagined her mother returning to her empty house,
lighting incense, making tea, calling Denise to complain about her ungrateful daughter
who had gotten fat, by the way. Eventually, Margaux stood over the sink and finished the
rice concoction. The dates made it chewy and sickly sweet but she kept on eating it for
the protein. The silence was becoming oppressive, so she set her laptop on the counter
and played a TV show. She sank down onto the floor, feeling heavy, and stared at some
middle-distance in her sightline. The sitcom chattered in the background and, every so
often, canned laughter filled the room.
Chapter Three

Margaux checked her email first thing the next morning. Still no word from Hotel Barlow. This time, she didn’t feel the usual sting of disappointment. A new energy was thrumming through her. It was something akin to panic, but a more focused, more controlled version of panic. She needed to move, to act. The money her mother left was still sitting on the table — seven dollars, all in ones. She grabbed the bills and put them in her purse, a big, straw bag she’d had for years.

The money went to her bus fare. It was still early and she had her choice of blue plastic seats. She walked to the back, sat down, and watched the city whip by. By the time she was on the red line, wedged between two men in big coats, a plan had partially formed in her mind. She would go to Hotel Barlow and ask to see Ms. Nan Boyce. No, she would demand to see Ms. Nan Boyce. The subway screeched to a halt at Davis Square and a group of tired-looking young professionals spilled on. Margaux checked the time on her phone: 8:34, rush hour. Soon the car would be packed with irritable business people, eating fragrant bagels and blaring music out their headphones. She needed to have a speech prepared, something cinematic that would win Nan over. She imagined falling to her knees and grabbing the hem of her pantsuit. She would beg, Please just give me a chance and I will be the best payroll administrator you’ve ever had. I will blow all the other payroll administrators right out of the water. Too much, maybe. Nan seemed like a reasonable woman. Maybe Margaux would just plainly tell her that she needed the job to stay in Boston.
They were now at Harvard Square. The men with the suitcases got off and were replaced by two young girls, students probably. They talked over Margaux about their Shakespeare professor, who would be more attractive without the knit tie. Somewhere to Margaux’s right, a baby was crying. The mother rattled her keys, which did nothing to quiet the child but did plenty to add to the noise. Margaux was starting to feel oversensitized. She put in her earbuds and played something soothing, something with Jean-Yves Thibaudet on the piano. She closed her eyes. You were young once, weren’t you, Nan? No, better not to reference her age. I promise I will work harder than anyone else you’d hire. Why? Because I want this job a thousand times more. Something like that might be good. Yes, that was what she would say. And she wouldn’t fall on her knees. She would stand and look Nan right in the eyes.

When the train arrived at her stop, something peculiar happened. Margaux could not get up. She had taken her purse and grabbed the handrail. People had shifted out of her way, but she could not will herself to stand. It was as though some kind of inertia was pressing down on her.

A woman in a red jacket gestured toward the doors. “This your stop?”

Margaux looked at her, then at the doors. She ordered herself to stand. Get up, damn it! She opened her mouth but, before she could answer, the doors had shut. The woman shrugged and the train lurched forward. No big deal, Margaux thought. I’ll just get off at the next stop and walk a bit further. But when the doors opened again, the same heavy inertia pinned her down. Margaux slapped the handrail in frustration, making the old man next to her jump, then shift a few seats over. She was a coward. She was a fat,
ugly, lazy, coward who couldn’t do a Goddamned thing without her mother’s help.

Margaux missed the next stop too. By this point, she had talked herself out of going to the hotel at all. What was the point? She didn’t deserve the job. As she silently berated herself, the subway went all the way to Braintree, an industrial looking station way out in the suburbs. All the final passengers got off and a fresh batch got on. Only Margaux remained, still gripping the handrail, still seething. What a waste of a two-dollar ticket. That could gone toward lunch.

While the train made its way back toward Cambridge, she noticed the same advertisement that she had seen coming back from Hotel Barlow. It was a black and white photograph of a young man, looking despondent. He had his head down on a table, a pile of unopened books beside him: “Are you asleep in your own life? Are you down? Tired? Unmotivated? Disinterested in the things you used to love? If you are 18 years or older, and answered yes to one or more of these questions, then you may be eligible for a depression research study. Compensation up to $2,000.”

Margaux stared at that advertisement for the next eleven stops. Compensation up to $2,000. With her phone, she snapped a picture of the poster. When the train rolled in to her station, she stood up, no problem, and exited through the doors.

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It was Saturday and the American Diner was crowded with men in Red Sox caps, kids on tiptoes, teens on cell phones, and frazzled mothers trying to navigate their strollers. Margaux had set up a workstation at a corner booth, an intake packet in front of her. If all went according to plan, she would soon be a participant in a double blind,
placebo-controlled clinical trial. There was a line out the door and people eyed her table, meant for four, with irritation. She had been there long enough to accumulate one bowl and two syrup-sticky plates. The blue-haired waitress came by with a pot of coffee.

“I’m sorry,” Margaux said, gesturing at the papers. “I know people are waiting. I’m just finishing up, here.”

“Take all the time you need.” The waitress refilled her mug, even though it wasn’t empty yet. As she cleared the plates, adding them to an expert stack on her forearm, she said, “We never rush our regulars.”

Warmed by this little display of favoritism, Margaux smiled and said thank you. She had been spending more time in the diner, lately, even though she couldn’t really afford to. She felt a kind of bond with the blue-haired waitress, whose name she still didn’t know. She had started filling out the forms upstairs, using a flipped over laundry bin as her desk, but she hadn’t gotten passed the first question — Do you work 15 hours or more per week for pay? — before she started to feel oppressively lonely. Whenever she was in her apartment too long, she would suddenly experience the crushing sensation of being buried alive. The survey went on for pages, forty at least, and it was an endless variation on the question, *on a scale from one to four, just how messed up are you?*

When she called the number on the advertisement, she had not expected to be recruited so quickly. She was not at all familiar with clinical trials, but assumed they were like anything else in the medical field: bureaucratic and slow-moving. Not so with this study. She had called a coordinator who instantly put her in touch with the research assistant in charge of screening potential participants. The voice on the other end was
cheerful and young and asked questions like, Do you have occasional suicidal ideation? and, true or false, you would like to harm yourself or others? Margaux must have passed the initial screening because the girl told her to come to the Beacon Hospital psychiatry wing and ask for Tina Porter, who would give her the intake questionnaire and schedule an appointment with one of the research doctors. Margaux needed the money, but she was still a little sad when she qualified for the study. No one wanted to be a good candidate for a research trial on “treatment-resistant depression.”

When she arrived at the hospital to pick up her forms, she was surprised by how generic the building was: a giant concrete block with blueish windows, the same kind of building that could be found in any Saint Albans strip mall. Inside, however, the lobby was sleek and moneyed. Afternoon sunshine streamed through a massive skylight and there were potted ferns everywhere, prehistorically huge. Overhead, bright green vines poured out of hanging planters and, as Margaux made her way toward the reception desk, she felt as though she were walking through a highly sanitized jungle. She had been in a hospital exactly four times before, once for her birth, once for her immunizations — her mother had gone reluctantly, forced by school administrators — once after Duncan’s bike accident, though Margaux had never actually stepped inside the hospital that day, only walked and walked around it. And then there was that dark period when she went to the clinic in secret. A gentle nurse with rough hands prescribed her two kinds of antidepressants: one for everyday, another for emergencies. Though in the end, Margaux had been too frightened to take either of them, so the two orange bottles gathered dust under her mattress.
When Margaux arrived at the reception desk, Tina, a deep-voiced woman with fake fingernails, gave her a heavy manila folder and set up an appointment to meet with Dr. Wirth. It was next Monday at ten am, a malignant hour. 10:10 would have been better, more symmetrical. She had almost asked her to change the time but was too embarrassed to explain why. Four A.M. would have been best. The energy vibrations of the spirit realm were at their highest when everyone was sleeping. Until Margaux started to rebel, Sylvia would shake her awake before sunrise so they could groggily pray together. Two thirty in the afternoon was the most hostile hour. It was, according to her mother, the time when her father died. It was also when Sylvia broke her nose, when they discovered termites under the house, and when Margaux took the SATs. Back in middle school, her mother made her bike home, just to avoid being on the road at that hour.

A voice snapped her back to the present.

“Excuse me.” A blonde woman with a Southern accent was standing in front of her. Margaux raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“How much longer do you expect to be here? My family’s been waiting.”

Before Margaux could answer, the blue-haired waitress swooped in. “Excuse me, ma’am. Would you mind waiting behind the white line? We’re clearing a table for you, now. It should be ready in about five minutes.” The waitress led her away by the arm, turning slightly to smile and wink at Margaux. You see, Mother? Here, I am no longer Margaux-the-cursed. Here, I am Margaux-the-regular. Although, in all honesty, she could have handled the situation herself. Margaux had learned to recognize that kind of intervention, particularly from other women. These sorts of women had a tendency to
speak on her behalf, to squeeze her shoulder, to give her encouraging little winks and pats and jabs. They sensed her insecurity and felt a warmth for her because of it. She gave them the opportunity to congratulate themselves for their own kindness. It always induced in Margaux a confusion of gratitude and hatred.

The rest of the demographic section went quickly, thank God. It asked her race, her gender, and her “romantic relational status.” Margaux sighed and circled the “single, not dating” option. The medical history was trickier. In order to qualify for the study, Margaux had to have taken psych meds. She thought of those orange bottles. There had been a long stretch, after Duncan’s death, when Margaux was incapable of feeling anything at all, except perhaps for a dull discomfort at not being able to feel anything at all. It was as though everything in her life was grey and would always be grey and had only ever been grey. She had trouble sleeping, back then, and she remembered watching the sunrise out her window one morning. The sky was filled with rich oranges, buttery yellows and, up higher, bruised pinks and purples. She remembered thinking it was so boring. What a perfectly tedious sunrise.

Margaux now supposed that was depression, though it felt like a diminishment to call it that. If it hadn’t been for her mother, she would probably still be back there. Sylvia said the best way to get through these grey spells — she’d known them herself — was to indulge them, so she took a leave of absence and pulled Margaux out of school. Everyone was very understanding. They knew that Margaux and Duncan had been close. Time had moved strangely, then, as it does in dreams. It was sometimes too fast to keep up with the relentless string of to-dos, sometimes tortuously slow (simply brushing her teeth was a
long and onerous undertaking). Other times — and this was most disturbing — it cut off all together. Margaux would be getting ready for bed and, the next moment, would be standing in the kitchen, eating blackberry preserves right out of the jar, with no memory of what had happened in between.

She had been out of school for several months, long enough for her and Sylvia’s menstrual cycles to sync up. During that time, they read stacks of gossip magazines, ate tubs of ice cream, and watched hours of television (they both got to know all the commercials by heart). They’d sing along in a deadpan monotone. *I want my baby back, baby back, baby back, baby back*. Chili’s baby back ribs. They stayed in their pajamas until holes wore at the knees. They picked things up with their toes to save themselves the exertion of bending over. By the end, Margaux was begging to eat vegetables, to go outside, to feel some sunshine on her face and, eventually, she did rejoin the world in her halting way.

Margaux was careful not to romanticize her childhood, but every once in a while, she ached for those long, grey days when the two of them sat inside with the curtains drawn and with cheese powder on their fingertips. There was something so damn *relaxing* about giving up. But, of course, it was unsustainable. That wasn’t just a period of indulgence. It was also the period when they started talking seriously, again, about the curse. The fights flared up, got vicious, then took a sharp turn into absurd, which was somehow worse.

Margaux brushed crumbs off the cool form. She decided to list the antidepressants she’d been prescribed. After all, it was not a lie. She’d just never taken them. The diner
was getting more and more crowded. Big groups were wedged around small tables. At
the counter, a line of men broke out into uproarious laughter. They seemed to be playing
some kind of table game with sugar packets. Conversations grew louder, and still louder
to be heard over the din. The noise rattled Margaux’s nerves. She would have to leave
soon, before an angry mob threw her into the street and took over her table. She sipped
the lukewarm coffee. It had the sour tang of sitting out too long.

At the end of the section, five lines were provided for a write-in response. “What is
your reason for seeking treatment? Please provide as full an answer as possible.”
Margaux chewed on the back of the pen. She would have to think of something more
substantive than “I need to make rent.” Probably what was needed was a complex and
insightful self-diagnosis, something that said, I’m broken but interesting. She liked to
think of herself as disordered in a cinematic way, like Norma Desmond in a ball gown,
gliding down a cobweb-covered staircase.

“That seems like quite a project.” The blue-haired waitress was at her shoulder,
drying her hands on an apron tied around her painfully thin waist. “You in school?”
Margaux felt her face go blank. “No,” she said flatly. “Just a personal project.”

The girl smiled. She had very white, very small teeth. Baby teeth, Margaux thought.
“I get it.” The waitress started fiddling with a button on her shirt. “It’s none of my
business. I just, I noticed you always order the Kitchen Sink Burrito.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of it?”

“It’s good.”
The girl pointed at herself with both thumbs. “That one’s my invention. I’m pretty proud of it.”

“It’s good,” Margaux said again. She was surprised by the coldness in her own voice. She had meant to set the girl at ease, to smile and make a joke, something witty and self-deprecating.

“Sure, got it. I’m Nori, by the way.” She had a tight, energetic handshake.

“That’s an interesting name.”

“Thanks. I picked it myself.”

“Oh.” Margaux knew Nori wanted her to inquire further, but her inclination was to end the conversation as fast as possible.

“Yeah. My parents named me Jessica.” She wrinkled her nose. “It just doesn’t really go. Know what I mean?” She pinched a curl and inspected a split end the color of cotton candy. “What’s your name?”

“Margaux.”

The girl cocked her head to one side. She had sharp, pixie-like features and straight, serious brows. “Good to meet you, Margaux. You live in one of the apartments upstairs, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Margaux glanced at the waitress then quickly looked away. It stung a little to make eye contact. Her mother always hissed, Look them in the eye, when she introduced her to new people.

Nori nodded slowly. “I thought so. You should come by on Tuesday nights. We do trivia. I bet you’re good at trivia. I sense that in you.” She laughed, delighted by herself.
It didn’t seem arrogant, though. It was more childlike.

Whenever Margaux got nervous, her scalp felt tight around her skull. Her hairdresser in Saint Albans — she would need a new one now — said she carried all her stress in her scalp. Maybe it was true because she had already pulled seven grey hairs since the move to Boston.

“Is that like a party?” Margaux lived in fear of parties.

Nori laughed. “I guess it’s kind of like a party. Yeah. You could say that.”

“I’ll try to make it.” Margaux’s voice was dead, her eyes trained on the table.

“Thanks.”

“Sure, got it,” Nori said, her tone suddenly flat. “Got it.” She walked away without refilling her mug.

Margaux finished the rest of the questionnaire back in the apartment. In the lines provided, she wrote, Feel like an asshole most of the time. She set the pen down and wondered, if she’d had the choice, what she would have named herself. She used to like Sophia — all her barbies were named Sophia — but she could never pull it off. It was a name that put people in mind of porcelain, of doll-like aristocrats languorously draped on divans. Maybe a strong name would have been better: Elektra, Cleo, Xena, warrior princess. But then, those were for women born in armor, who burst out of their fathers’ skulls, helmets first. Margaux probably suited her best, just Margaux.
Chapter Four

Oliver Wirth was meeting with the journalist because Dr. Fishman, the great Dr. Fishman, thought he had nothing better to do. Never mind that he had intake packets to review, meetings to attend, patients to treat. He was still being punished for his last trial. The drug had been in its early stages. No one could have predicted the side effects. Dr. Fishman was just angry that the press had gotten wind of it, and now the hospital had to do damage control. Oliver still kicked himself for messing up his first chance to be the primary investigator, not because the mess-up had been his fault, but because, had things gone differently, it could have made his career. Now he was back to subordinate status, Dr. Fishman’s little helper monkey. It was humiliating.

Marcy Baker waved from a table by the salad bar. She was a health and science writer for The Globe, a friend of the hospital who wrote fluff pieces about their research whenever the communications department felt their “brand” had been compromised. They had agreed to meet in the hospital cafeteria so that she could get a latte and Oliver could break for lunch, something he rarely permitted himself, especially on Wednesday, clinic day, the hardest day. He loaded his plate with meatloaf and mashed potatoes. The smell had awakened his appetite.

“You must be Dr. Wirth.” Marcy extended a hand. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. I understand it was rather last minute.” She was attractive in a British sort of way: soft, shoulder-length curls, blonde barely-there eyebrows, a constellation of freckles all over her body (he assumed).
Oliver shook her hand. “Oh that’s all right. I just hope you’re not too disappointed. I know Dr. Fishman is the psychopharmacology rock star, around here.” This was true. Dr. Fishman was a brilliant psychiatrist who was almost universally adored, an unheard-of combination. He walked around the hospital in a pair of old sneakers that shed rubber on the carpet. He knew everyone’s first name, even the night janitors. He was also highly neurotic and a little manic, always moving, often muttering to himself, occasionally stopping people in the hall to make slightly-too-intimate conversation. His hair was a mess, like a little boy’s bed-head, and his clothes were wrinkled and ill fitting. If he were wandering around the park, people would mistake him for insane or homeless or both.

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” She smiled. Her teeth were straight and strong. “You don’t mind if I record this do you?” She set a slim voice recorder between them and turned it on.

“No problem at all, Marcy. Should we just dive in? I don’t mean to rush you, but I’ve got to meet a patient in about twenty minutes.” A Margaux Barbaret who had the most peculiar intake questionnaire. In her psychiatric medication history she had listed, along with two standard antidepressants, ginko biloba, calendula, valerian root, and St. John’s wort.

Marcy opened a laptop and leaned in close. It illuminated her round face. “Not to worry. This shouldn’t take a minute. I just wanted to get some background on RX-10—” she hesitated.

“RX-1026.”

“Yes. And then I’ll have some questions on some of the drug’s benefits, its risks, its
side effects, that sort of thing.”

Of course, that was not at all how the interview went. They spent all of five minutes talking about RX-1026, an antidepressant that could revolutionize psychopharmacology, and then the rest of the time on RX-1025, the antidepressant that temporarily blinded Grace Hale, nearly killed Emanuel Gonzalez, completely killed Rita Walker, and gave Jonathan Tremblay a staph infection that would ultimately lead to a below-the-knee amputation. Oliver worked very hard to not think about these patients. He blasted music in his ears. He fell asleep to podcasts. He went on knee-busting runs all the way up the Esplanade. He even briefly took up water coloring. Anything, anything to keep them at bay. So when Marcy asked what exactly had gone wrong with that poor Rita Walker, a hot bolt of rage flashed through him.

It must have registered on his face, because she immediately backpedaled. “I just bring her up to illustrate how difficult it must be to know what the risks really are. What’s really at stake.”

Oliver smiled, reached across the table, and patted Marcy’s hand. “Of course, Marcy. I understand. It’s your job to ask.” It was charming how she blushed behind her freckles. “As you can imagine, it’s not easy for me to talk about the death of a patient.

She nodded. “Of course, Doctor, of course, take all the time you need.” She pulled her hand back and began fiddling with a dangly charm bracelet.

He took a deep breath, brought his hands together, as if in prayer, and touched them to his lips. He let a silence drag out, sighed, then launched into the speech that PR had prepared for him. “The RX-1025 trial was a tragedy. While there are extraordinary
benefits to clinical research, it doesn’t make the drawbacks any easier.” He went briefly off-script to describe some of these benefits. He talked about a patient — let’s call him Jim — who had not been able to get through a job interview without having a panic attack. Enter SSRIs. Now, three years later, Jim was a happy, healthy venture capitalist at a reputable firm in Columbus, Ohio. Marcy did not write this bit down. She was politely waiting for him to get to the point.

“All right, Ms. Walker had a heart condition and was taking Heparin to prevent clots. This should have disqualified her from the trial, but she failed to declare that she had any heart problems on her initial intake forms. RX-1025 reacted badly with the Heparin and she degenerated too quickly for the doctors to stabilize her.” This was all true and yet, whenever Oliver made the PR statement — and he had done so at least eleven times — it never felt true. Rita would have been disqualified, yes, but it was still unclear whether the Heparin really caused her death, which was probably why the hospital had paid a massive settlement to keep from going to court. The doctors had been able to find no hard link between the Heparin and the sudden outpouring of toxic molecules that infiltrated her bloodstream, that turned her eyes pink and her lips blue.

“Might it have been prevented by the doctors? Perhaps a thorough enough history had not been asked of her.”

Marcy was awfully confrontational for a fluff journalist. “People will make that claim, I imagine, but the truth is the patients need to help us protect them.” Oliver was off script again, something he’d been reprimanded for doing all too often. “That said, we are working hard to put new controls in place to keep this from ever happening again. We
had an expert panel come in to help put in more stringent safeguards.” A group of somber-faced men who were always in the way, conferring in hushed tones and taking notes on clipboards. By the time they left, the clinical trial’s workflow was much more complicated, far less efficient, and perhaps marginally safer. “We continue to be rigorous about getting comprehensive medical backgrounds and, of course, we give our patients the right to walk out of a trial at any time. We don’t want anyone feeling pressured to participate. Again, we can’t promise there won’t be adverse events. These are experimental drugs in their earliest stages. We make it clear that we are testing for efficacy and safety. That’s why we urge patients to read the consent forms very carefully before signing them.”

Since the Jack Bane article, written by a psychiatrist-turned-activist, Oliver found himself defending clinical trials to everyone, even his mother, who only now decided to take an interest in his career. Death was pretty rare in Phase II trials. Rita Walker was Oliver’s first. Though he was not the one to administer the drug, nor the one to try and reverse her swift deterioration, he felt personally responsible. It was sloppy, really. They should have stopped treatment when her lips turned blue. Dr. Fishman had actually been very supportive during that crisis. In an uncharacteristic moment of compassion, he sat down with him to talk about what happened. *I’m sorry, Oliver. You never forget your first.*

Marcy hammered away at her keyboard. “Do you feel confident that RX-1026 will have more favorable results?”

“Absolutely. It’s a really exciting drug to be working on, right now. It’s tested well
on lab rats and even better on people. At least, that’s what the Dose Escalation trial seemed to suggest. This second phase will be able to tell us more. Either way, it’s a huge leap forward, particularly for an anesthetic drug. This particular family of antidepressants could be the beginning of a new generation of treatment for depressive disorders.” Oliver could talk all day about RX-1026, and probably would if he didn’t feel compelled by the laws of politeness to let other people talk sometimes.

Marcy did not look up from her laptop. “Why is that?”

“Well, antidepressants usually take weeks, sometimes even months to acclimate to the body and to start showing effect. But with RX-1026, you’re hitting the depression right at its source.” He stabbed the air with his fork. “It sort of zaps certain nerve cells and tells them to fire or to remain idle, so that, if the nerve cell is well chosen, depression can be switched off in an instant.”

“Sounds a bit like puppeteering the brain.”

Oliver smiled. “I guess you could look at it that way. But just imagine, turning off sadness with a single switch.”

“And you have seen this happen?”

“Well, not on a patient, no. The brain is, of course, more complex than just a depression nerve here, a happiness nerve there. But we have seen this phenomenon in mice. There was — wait a minute let me just check my numbers, here — there was a forty three percent increase in dopamine levels in seven out of ten mice.”

She stopped typing and cocked her head at the chart he was holding. “May I?” She looked it over, her face serious. “So you’ve seen mice go suddenly from depressed to
happy.” She smiled. “What does that look like? Do they burst into song? Throw confetti?”

Oliver laughed. “They just act like regular mice, whereas before they were lethargic. They didn’t run on their wheels. They refused to eat. That sort of thing.”

“Ah, I see. So it’s not so much happiness as it is non-depression, anti-depression.”

He looked down at his hands, hairy things, with fat knuckles. He turned them over, inspected his pink palms. “I should probably clarify that RX-1026, just like any other psych drug, is just one step forward. But for people suffering from depression, that first step is the hardest one to take.”

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Oliver hurried down the long, sterile corridors toward the psychiatric wing. He was late for his appointment. The end of the interview had been better than the beginning, though he wished he hadn’t said all those things about the R01 grant. It wasn’t the right material for a fluff piece. It had just been on his mind, was all. They were in competition with a similar trial over in Cambridge, at a hospital that had not been smeared by the New York Times. They needed to win back some credibility if they were going to be a contender, this year. Oliver needed to publish something soon, or at least co-author something, if he wanted his next research proposal to have a chance. But there had been no real results, yet. It was so early in the process. And it took so damn long to find patients that qualified for treatment, who weren’t on any other medications, who were not too poor, not too sick, not too white. It had taken a month just to scrape together five participants.
Still, he should not have said all those things to Marcy. It shocked him, sometimes, how hardened he had become since med school. Back then, he would have talked at length about self-actualization. He would have said that RX-1026 was just a tool to help people strip away at the blocks that were keeping them from becoming their most authentic selves. He would have said that they were all inherently programmed to reach their potential and, somewhere buried in their subconscious, was the key to their awakening. He would have cited Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Now, he wasn’t sure he believed any of those things. Now, he just wanted the patients to be functional, to be able to get through the day without breaking down. Self-actualization was nowhere on the agenda.

Oliver took a detour into the men’s room and shut himself into a stall. He pressed on his eyeballs as if trying to push them into his skull. His hair had not been washed in days, was wet and matted. Lately, if he wasn’t at the hospital, he was at home, sleeping. That damn woman. If Rita had just declared the Heparin on the intake, none of this would have happened. He leaned his forehead against the cool wall and shut his eyes. The last time he had seen Rita, she had shown him pictures of a cat she was going to adopt. A big orange tabby that was thirteen years old. He wondered if she had had time to follow through and, if so, who was taking care of it, now.

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Margaux was sitting Indian style on the exam table, trying to calm herself down. Her mother always said meditation could induce a greater high than substance abuse, which was pretty rich considering how much gin she drank. Margaux breathed deeply
into her abdomen, then exhaled slowly out her mouth. Every so often, urgent footfalls would hurry past her door and she would stiffen like a cat about to dart. There was something about hospitals that put her on edge. It was the same feeling she got on airplanes, something to do with the plastic equipment, the stale air, and the harsh overhead lighting. She shifted, trying to get comfortable, and the butcher paper scrunched beneath her. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

A tall man entered, wearing a lab coat and a worn pair of leather shoes. He had a broad build, like a bulldog. Margaux instinctively adjusted her hair. Why hadn’t she done something about the acne? She should have swallowed her pride and bought the apple cider vinegar.

“Hello, there. You must be—” he looked at his clipboard “—Margaux Barbaret. I’m Dr. Wirth.”

“Yes, sir, doctor.” She raised her hand. “That’s me.” She realized he’d had his hand extended to shake and she quickly offered hers just as his was dropping to his side. She could feel the blood rushing to her face.

“You know, you don’t need to sit up there. This isn’t a medical examination.”

“Oh.” Margaux jumped down and pulled a chair up next to him. His gaze lingered on her face, or so Margaux imagined. She wasn’t beautiful, but had been told that she was striking and unusual, like those twenties women with big eyes and tiny mouths. “So, how does this usually go?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Well, it looks like you already did the intakes and the medical history, so that
paperwork should be all set. I just have a few questions for you — just about any allergies or conditions that might interfere with RX-1026. Then I give you some information about the research project and, if it all sounds good to you, we can get you started on treatment.”

“Right away?”

“Right away.”

“Okay, great.” Margaux said, not feeling all that great.

“So, I know a lot of this has already been covered in the intake forms but, just so I’m up to speed, are you currently on any medication, psychiatric or otherwise?” He had dark, heavy-lidded eyes. They made him look sullen.

“Nope. No meds.” Sylvia would have a fit if she knew she was about to go on experimental psychiatric drugs. She thought western medicine was backward at best and destructive at worst. They don’t even recognize the chakras, for Christ sake. They’re living in the Stone Age.

“Do you have any trouble sleeping?”

Margaux considered the question. “Well, I can’t sleep without a movie on in the background.”

The doctor smiled. He had a little dimple on his left cheek. “I’m the same way. I can’t sleep without noise. I usually just turn a fan on and—” he mimed sleeping on his hands. “They say it means you’re a musician at heart, highly attuned to different sound frequencies.”

“I like that interpretation. I just thought I was messed up.”
Dr. Wirth laughed. It was a kiddish sound, loud and sincere. “I’ll just write here that you’re a light sleeper, but not an insomniac. Does that sound good? Excellent. You don’t wake up in the middle of night and have trouble falling back asleep, do you?” Margaux shook her head. He said, “Excellent. Excellent.”

“Why do you need to know how I sleep?” She asked. Her mother had instilled in her a deep distrust of doctors.

“Oh, some participants have experienced minor insomnia while on the medication. It’s nothing to worry about.” Margaux started chewing on her cuticles. He went on, “Do you have any allergies?”

“Well, my mother says that sugar makes me irritable.”

The doctor smiled. “Okay. Anything else?”

Margaux tilted her head so he would see her good side, the one with the beauty mark. “That’s all I can think of.”

“Does your family have a history of mental illness?”

“Um, no?” Her mother just happened to believe that if you chopped an onion in half and rolled it out the door, you would have no unwanted visitors that day.

“Are you currently in a relationship and, if not, when was your last one?” Margaux must have looked stunned because he laughed and said, “You don’t have to answer. It’s meant to help measure your emotional maturity. It’s a silly question, really.”

“I am not currently in a relationship. And the last one,” Margaux paused, closed her eyes, and said, “the last one was a long time ago.” She thought of Duncan with his skinny legs and permanent bed-head. In math class, he used to angle his watch so it caught the
light and shined directly into her eyes.

Dr. Wirth cleared his throat, made a quick note, and said, “I’m sorry. It’s just a part of the intake process.” Margaux couldn’t help but wonder if it really was a part of the intake process. Maybe he was subtly assessing if she was single.

“I see. You know, I’ve already answered these questions in the questionnaire.” Margaux wasn’t sure she wanted to tell the doctor about every single one of her inadequacies. It had been hard enough writing them down.

Dr. Wirth pursed his lips. “Yes, I’m sorry to put you through this again. But it’s very important for everyone’s safety that we get as full a history as possible.”

His tone was very grave and Margaux almost asked just how dangerous the study was, but the doctor had already launched back into his interrogation. This question-answer session went on for some time. They covered Margaux’s dietary habits—burritos, mostly—her interests—I like to sit in the park—her aspirations—there’s this payroll administrator position—and her family background—I’ll just refer you to the questionnaire for that one.

Then he launched into a spiel about RX-1026. His discourse was highly technical and hard to follow, so Margaux just nodded along and tried to look engaged. He couldn’t have been more than thirty years old, thirty-five, maybe. There was something dark and brooding about him, perhaps it was his slow, heavy movements. He had a thick head of black hair that he kept pushing away from his face, a nervous habit, perhaps. His arms were large, not fat but thick. Now, he was reading through the consent form in a quick monotone.
You are invited to take part in a clinical trial, a type of research study, because you have depression that has not responded to standard treatment.” Margaux watched his mouth as he spoke. It was thin but wide and very expressive. He articulated each word precisely, as if trying to hide an accent. He was southern, perhaps? Canadian? “This research study is evaluating a drug called RX-1026. You will be given a study medication and it will contain either RX-1026 or placebo, pills with no medicine.”

He would glance up at her and she would lean forward and nod, all the while noting the curious lilt he gave the ends of sentences, as if each one were a question. “Because no one knows which of the study options is best, you will be ‘randomized’ into one of the study groups. Randomization means that you are put into a group by chance, like flipping a coin.” He mimed flipping a coin. He had big hands and thick, blunt fingers. There were dark hairs on his knuckles and Margaux wondered if he was like those men at the beach, who had hair all over their chests and backs and even their necks. She had always been vaguely disgusted by that, but now she found it sexy in a primal sort of way. “The study is double blind which means that neither you nor the research doctor” — Dr. Wirth pointed at himself — “will know what group you will be in. You will have an equal chance of being placed in either group.”

“Sounds good,” Margaux said, giving a double thumbs-up she would instantly regret.

“Excellent. Do you have any questions for me?”

“What are the possible side effects?”

The doctor smiled. “Don’t worry, Margaux. The medication has gone through
several trial phases. It’s quite safe. And I’ll be giving you a packet with all the
information you might need.”

“Could you maybe name a few side effects?”

The doctor cleared his throat. “Well, in a nutshell, there have been reports of
dizziness, insomnia, as I mentioned, constipation, some memory gaps, blurred vision, loss
of appetite, headaches. I believe one patient complained of having a dry mouth, but we
haven’t seen any other instances of that.”

“Wow.”

Dr. Wirth put his hand on Margaux’s shoulder, as if to steady her. It felt soft and
warm and she had the most terrible urge to pull him into her chest and hold him. She
could not remember the last time she had been willingly touched by a man, or anyone
really, except her mother. He looked her in the eyes and spoke very gently, as if to a
child. “I know that sounds pretty daunting, but those side effects are the exception, not
the rule. Most of the patients reported feeling more at peace, more energized, more
engaged. After only a few weeks, their quality of life improved. They’re willing to take
more risks and they were just, overall, much happier than they used to be. Doesn’t that
sound pretty good?”

Margaux sat very still, afraid any movement would make him pull away. “That
sounds okay,” she said.

He leaned forward and said, “Listen, I’m starting you on a very low dose, so I
really doubt there will be any issues. However, if you do start to feel any side effects, just
know that I’m with you every step of the way. You just have to call me up and say, ‘Dr.
Wirth, I have not pooped in three days.’ And I will be there—” he snapped his fingers “—like that.” Margaux laughed. She was starting to feel warm and giddy. He let his hand fall, spinning in his chair to check something on the computer. “All right, Margaux. Looks like we’re going to have to wrap this up. Do you have any final questions for me?”

“Well, I hope you don’t take this wrong way, but how much will I get paid?” Margaux tried not to sound too eager, just casually curious.

Doctor Wirth seemed suddenly uncomfortable. “Of course, I should have mentioned. Payment is offered on a sliding basis. Basically, the longer you stay on the study, the more questionnaires you fill out, the more tests you do, the more you are offered.”

“I see.” Margaux started putting on her jacket. “So, say I do everything. How much would that be?”

The doctor thoughtfully scratched the back of his neck. “Um, about two thousand dollars. But I should warn you, the hospital is quite slow about payment and a chunk gets taken out by taxes, so I hope you’re not depending on that as a real source of income.”

Margaux smiled and shook her head and said that, of course, she was just curious — the money was of no importance at all. Even as she said this, she could feel hot tears at the corners of her eyes. The doctor either hadn’t noticed or was polite enough to pretend he hadn’t.

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As Margaux walked back along the Charles River, she felt a new, proprietary tenderness for everything she passed: the big, wooly trees, all burnished a deep, autumn
brown, the elaborate playgrounds, the university boating stations, the cyclists that whizzed by without warning. She even loved the noise and the manic rush of Storrow Drive. What had been so new and frightening a few days ago was now overlaid with a kind of anticipatory nostalgia.

Although Margaux should have been depressed, she was, on the contrary, jubilant. She wouldn’t get the job at the hotel. She felt certain of that, now, and the hospital wouldn’t be able to pay her before her rent was due. She would have to go home, back to that old life, that old self who needed her mother to rub garlic on her forehead because, although she was pretty sure evil spirits did not exist, why take chances? She clamped her purse tightly to her side. It now contained a copy of the consent form, an educational brochure on depressive disorder, a copay receipt, a two-week supply of pills and a set of instructions. She’d gotten the prescription filled at a little pharmacy in the hospital that looked like an ice cream parlor, the kind that had a service window and, behind that, a cheerful person in uniform.

She made her way back to Western Ave at a pace that would take her all day to get home. But then, what else did she have to do? It had become a familiar route and she no longer needed to consult her phone for directions. She was free to daydream about Dr. Wirth’s dimple, his dark eyes, his big hands sliding up her back, skin on skin. Her body tingled all over and she had to tell herself to calm down. *Calm down, Margaux. None of that.*

She had a systematic regimen for shutting down desire. When she was attracted to the blond boy in her Victorian Lit seminar, she immediately dropped the class. She did all
her other coursework for that week, then the following week, then the one after that. She became, for that semester, a straight “A” student. When she ran out of homework, she bought a book on anatomy and memorized all the bones in the human body. When she ran out of bones, she moved on to cooking or gardening or coin collection. She had cultivated a truly astounding body of knowledge. She didn’t know any subject deeply, but knew a little about a lot of subjects. The 1913 Liberty Head V Nickel, for example, was worth about three million dollars. Such was the power of her sexual frustration.

She slept badly during these periods, so she spent her nights reading astronomy factoids online. There was a star called Lucy, named after the Beatles song, because it was a massive, cosmic diamond of about ten billion trillion trillion carats. About seventy percent of the universe was made up of dark energy. Twenty-five percent was dark matter. The sun’s diameter was 109 times that of the earth. And the largest known star in the universe was about ninety times larger than the sun. Margaux still sometimes turned to astronomy when she couldn’t sleep. She liked to feel insignificant, like a primitive, microscopic organism in an unthinkably huge universe that was getting huger all the time. Better an indifferent cosmos than a hostile one. These research sessions had the fringe benefit of arming her against her mother. Sylvia would say that Mercury’s retrograde was throwing a shadow on Margaux’s house of communication, which was why she was being so unreasonable. Margaux would answer that Mercury was a ball of iron with a thin silicate crust that had an orbital period of about eighty-eight earth days.

Strangely, Margaux was indifferent to most men. She could go months without wrestling with her “urges” as her mother put it. But every once in a while, she’d meet
someone who struck a nerve. She’d go reeling, careening into obsession and, sometimes, her desire was so intense, none of the distractions would work. In those cases, all she could do was push her desk in front of the door, turn her music up loud, and do unspeakable things to her bed pillow. For the rest of the day she’d feel flushed and guilty and she’d light a row of candles on the mantle for Clemencia, goddess of forgiveness. She thought of Dr. Wirth. She thought of his arms. She thought of their heft, what it might be like to feel their weight on her. *None of that, Margaux.*
Chapter Five

After Margaux took a little yellow pill, she turned the shower on hot and the pressure on high. She took off her clothes, lay down in the tub and let the water pelt her. It was uncomfortably hot, but anything less would have been cold. The dial’s heat settings were pretty black and white. She sprayed some Eucalyptus oil into the steam. It said on the bottle that it would give her peace of mind. Now, all she could do was wait and see if the pill would take effect, if it was a bullet or a blank, so to speak. She had decided to stay on the trial for as long as possible. She would take a dose every evening for the next two weeks. Then she would have her check-in appointment with Dr. Wirth. And then, well, there was no sense thinking too far into the future.

Her momentary elation had given way and she’d now moved into a kind of deadness. Her mother had called. Margaux hadn’t picked up but, stupidly, had listened to the voicemail. Honestly, Margaux. I know you’re there. You’re probably sitting on that disgusting armchair, waiting for the phone to stop ringing. I was just calling to say that I’m still not sleeping. Remember when I got those red spots on my eyes? They’ve come back. I’ve been dabbing my lids with tea tree oil but it doesn’t seem to be doing anything. Anyway, I know you don’t care. You’ll probably just delete this without listening to it.

Once the whole apartment filled with steam and Margaux’s body turned an angry red, she shut off the water and wrapped herself in a thin, scratchy towel. She padded out to the living room, where she’d finally started unpacking. All her clothes were on the floor, organized in different heaps: the winter heap, the business heap, the sleepwear heap. She’d started the project when she got back from Beacon Hospital, but then she got
to thinking about what this unpacking meant and she couldn’t bring herself to finish the job. The very idea of going home and helping her mother rub essential oils on her eyelids was more than she could bear.

Somewhere in the mess of clothes and boxes and books and tin foil burrito wrappers, Margaux’s phone started buzzing. She tore around, upsetting all her heaps, mixing business with winter, stubbing her toe on a crock pot, swearing. Eventually she found it in a box cryptically labeled “Etc.” It must have fallen off the chair and into the box when it started vibrating. By the time she had it in hand, the call had gone to voicemail. It was not her mother. Margaux’s heart-rate quickened. It was an unknown number, an unknown number with a Boston area code. A “New Voicemail” notification lit up the screen.

“It could be nothing,” Margaux told herself. She sat down on the floor. “It could be nothing.” Her finger hovered over the play button for some time. She wanted to extend this moment for as long as possible. If she didn’t listen to it, there was still the chance Dr. Wirth was calling to ask her out, to declare his love, to offer his place, rent-free. “Oh shut up, Margaux.” She took a deep breath and pressed play.

“Hello there, I hope I’ve reached a Miss Margaux Barbaret. The mailbox has not been set up yet, so do let me know if I have the wrong number. This is Nan Boyce from Hotel Barlow. Margaux, I wanted to give you some very exciting news. Or at least, I think it’s exciting and I hope you do too! Anyway, give me a call back at this number. Looking forward to speaking with you!”

Margaux’s hands started trembling. She paced around the apartment, holding the
phone tightly against her chest. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.” She sank into the armchair and felt an overwhelming lightness. “Oh my God.” Calm down, Margaux. It could still be nothing. She could be calling to say she hired a fantastic payroll administrator, some guy with fifteen years of experience. Margaux breathed in deep, shook her hands to release the tremors, and called the number back. The phone rang six times before someone picked up. Margaux was so taken aback that she basically just said the voicemail she’d been preparing in her head.

“Hello, this is Margaux Barbaret. I’m returning Nan Boyce’s call in regard to—”

“Ah, Margaux, good! I’m glad I had the right number.”

“Yes, you—”

“Listen, I want to apologize on behalf of Thomas for not getting back to you sooner. Unfortunately, he decided to give the payroll administrator position to someone else.”

“Oh.” Margaux dug her nails deep into her palm.

“But, I so enjoyed our conversation, I pulled some strings and managed to finagle you a position at the front desk!”

“Oh!”

“I know that you were more hoping for an admin position but I thought that this could at least get your foot in the door. Many of our front desk attendants go on to become managers.” As Nan was talking, Margaux’s mind started spinning. The front desk meant people, a lot of people, all the time. It meant talking to people on the phone. It meant listening to their complaints. It meant pretending to be delighted by their spastic
children. It meant recommending family-friendly restaurants with crayons and ball pits.

“Margaux?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I’m just taking it all in. Thank you, Nan. Really.”

“Now, hold on. It pays a bit less than the payroll administrator position. Do you think you’d be okay with a ten-dollar hourly rate? You’d also be eligible for benefits, of course. I know you’d get health. I’m not sure about dental. Anyway, all that will get sorted by HR. I just wanted to call to personally congratulate you. I do hope you’ll join the team.”

The idea of health insurance seemed downright decadent. Better yet, she could call her mother and tell her to take her off the family plan. She wouldn’t be needing that anymore.

“Thank you, Nan. This is fantastic news.”

“Oh, grand! I love giving good news. Paula Day will be sending along the offer letter in the next day or two. I’ll look forward to working with you, Margaux.”

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To celebrate, Margaux splurged on a bottle of Champagne. Or sparkling wine, as the cashier snootily corrected. When she got home, she leapt onto the kitchen counter, popped the cork, and raised the bottle into the air.

“To me!” she shouted, as foam spouted out the top and spattered on the floor.

Margaux did not drink much. Actually, she didn’t drink ever. She had never had that moment of maturation when she could tell the difference between a good wine and a bad wine. To her, they all tasted like a grapey nail polish remover. But that champagne,
that eight-dollar, made-in-New-Jersey sparkling wine was the most delicious thing she’d ever tasted.
When Nick got up that morning, the rain had already started. The peak of the storm would hit at high tide and his wife, Louise, was worried about her mother’s house. Her backyard sloped right into the harbor.

“Her poor hydrangeas will drown.”


“No, I guess not.”

Tilly was moving out of the Manchester house and into a smaller place just five minutes from Louise and Nick. Both had been surprised by this decision. She had lived her entire adult life in that town. Louise had grown up there and, two years ago, Henry, her father, had died there. Tilly had woken up to his lifeless body — a heart attack in the night. The expression on his face was frozen in a kind of perplexity, as if he’d just borne witness to something puzzling.

Tilly’s ten-bedroom house was on a large property and would be difficult to manage on her own. She had plenty of money to pay for help, but it seemed morbid and depressing to continue living in the house where her husband had died. Some months after his death, Louise had suggested she move to a smaller place, one near her and Nick. That way, they could take care of her. Actually, she wanted Tilly to move into their house, but Nick refused. He didn’t put his foot down often, but Tilly full-time was just not going to happen. When Louise first suggested the move, Tilly had been against it, insisting that she too would die in that house. She’d always been dramatic.

Nick and Louise sat across from each other at the kitchen table, a coffee pot and
carton of milk between them. A light drizzle flecked the window above the sink. For a while, there was only the sound of cutlery scraping plates. Nick and Louise were both adept at silence. Then, the ring of the telephone pierced the air, startling them both. Louise took the call in the other room and, when she returned, she began eating her toast in giant bites, slurping coffee to wash it down.

“What happened?”

“I’m being called in. I have to meet with a patient at eight.” Louise, a nurse at Beverly Hospital, had almost no days off. Nick let out a pained moan. She said, “I’m sorry, love. I’m pretty sure our unit coordinator has a personal vendetta against me. We can reschedule, if you like. You don’t have to talk to her alone. I can call the movers and have them help with packing. You don’t even have to go.”

Nick was between jobs, at the moment. He had been for some time. Louise never made him feel guilty about this, but he felt guilty, just the same. “No it’s okay. You go to work. I’ll talk to Tilly.”

“You’re a saint.” She got up and kissed the top of his head. “Seriously, though, if it’s too much with the move and everything, just wait for me. We can ask her together.

“I’ll ask if it comes up.”

“These things don’t just come up, honey.”

“I wish you could come too. She bullies me when we’re alone.”

Louise started moving about the kitchen and gathering her things. “I have to work.”

There was an edge to her voice. Nick must have looked hurt because she immediately softened. “It’ll be all right. She’s not as mean as she used to be. She’s changed,
somehow. I’m actually a little worried,”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. There’s something _obsessive_ about her.”

“You mean the painting?” After Henry died, Tilly had decided to try her hand at art. Every canvas was of the same view out her kitchen window: the harbor, a gazebo off to the left, and boats way in the distance. She’d done it in oils, watercolors, charcoal, pastels, and then, after they dried, she put them all away in a closet.

“Actually she’s moved on to something else.”

"What?"

“Atlantis.”

“Atlantis?” Louise rolled her eyes. “She saw something on the National Geographic channel.”

“How does Atlantis become your hobby?”

“She reads books about it. She watches documentaries, movies.”

“Christ almighty, Tilly Ealing obsessed with Atlantis. She really must have changed.”

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By the time Nick got on the road, the rain was coming down hard. He drove slowly with the wipers at maximum speed. Public radio murmured in the background as he practiced what he would say. “Hello, Tilly. May I please have fifteen thousand dollars? — Hey, Tilly, you look great! Is that a new polo shirt? Could I have fifteen thousand dollars? — Look, it’s been a rough couple of years for both of us. Could I have fifteen
thousand dollars? — I’m poor and infertile, Tilly. May I have fifteen thousand dollars?”

She probably wouldn’t refuse, but she would make it very difficult for him to ask. She would demand every excruciating detail. Then she would pontificate about the importance of investing early, as if she knew a thing about it. Marrying Henry was the only real financial decision she had ever made. Nick would promise to pay her back and Tilly would sigh and say, Don’t bother, Nicholas. I can afford it. Then, as if changing the subject, she would say, Have you written anything, lately?

Back in his early twenties, Nick had surprised everyone by publishing a novel that actually sold. That was right after he married Louise, and it seemed like the beginning of a promising career. He’d done TV interviews and radio shows. Indian Summer had been number five on the Boston Globe’s local bestsellers list for three months. But then, inevitably, the hype died, sales dropped, and his agent started pushing for a second book. Nick had tried. He’d tried for years, but something happened to him when he sat down in front of a word document. His hands trembled and his mouth went dry. Eventually, his agent realized what Nick had long feared: he didn’t have a second book in him. Every time he visited the Manchester house, Tilly managed to ask him what he was writing.

Nick pulled into the driveway, a dirt road turned swampy by the storm. Beyond the mowed lawn and the yellow marsh grass, the harbor was all pockmarked with rain. Tilly’s hydrangea garden was really just a small strip along the property border. She had planted them when she moved in — a year before Louise was born—and the flowers had re-blossomed every spring. Now, their purple, blue, and white heads bowed under the onslaught. He parked around back, in a patch of gravel by the woodshed, then idled there
for a while. Once he went inside, there was no telling when he would come out again.

The woman always locked him into an interminable conversation.

Nick breathed in deep, wiped his sneakers on the welcome mat, and opened the screen door.

“Hello!”

“Oh, Nick, thank heavens! I’m in the sunroom!”

As he made his way through the mudroom, the kitchen, the pantry, the den, the dining room, the living room, the library, he felt a mounting panic. Nothing was packed. *Nothing.* Things had been taken off their shelves. Things had been spread out and lined up on the carpet, but nothing was in boxes.

The rain pelted the skylight in the sunroom. Tilly was sitting at the wicker table, meticulously wrapping a painting in brown paper. Her hands were curved from arthritis and she did everything with the very tips of her fingers.

“Tilly, nothing’s packed! What happened to all the boxes I brought over last week? Didn’t you hire someone to help you with all this?”

The old woman looked surprised. “Hire someone? I have you!”

Nick sank down on the floral couch. “This is going to take us all day, maybe all night.” He shut his eyes and massaged his temples.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve done all the clothes and I’ve almost finished the paintings.” She smiled as if she knew it was absurd. “I’m sorry. Don’t be angry. I made lemonade.”

For the next hour they packed in silence. Nick angrily drank lemonade — made
from pink powder — and Tilly repentantly refilled his glass. Each in their own corner, they packed the knickknacks and heirlooms that had once made up the sunroom. Now they moved on to the library. It was much quieter there and the tension between them eased a bit. This had been Henry’s favorite room. He would have been crushed to see its leather bound books, fountain pens, and Mickey Mouse telephone — Henry had loved Walt Disney — transformed into a stack of boxes.

“So, what have you been writing, lately?” Tilly asked.

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose but remained calm. She had been through Hell, losing Henry. Still, Nick couldn’t help but feel that Tilly was using her husband’s death to get away with things, though he knew this was ungracious of him.

“I think my writing days are over, Tilly.”

She looked at him a long time. “I’m sure that’s not true.” Her tone was neither sympathetic nor snide. “You just need some help.” Nick’s heart beat faster. This was his opening. He set down a stack of books and wiped the dust off his shirt.

“Yeah, some help. That reminds me. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

She didn’t look up from the vase she was wrapping in newspaper. “What’s that?”

He couldn’t do it. It was too humiliating. He tried to think of an alternate topic. Tilly looked up, squinting to read his face. “What is it, Nicholas?”

“Louise and I have been trying to have a baby.”

“Good heavens! At your age?”

“Well, yeah. And, right, as you say, our age has been complicating things. But, I
mean, it’s not impossible. I’m forty. Louise is thirty-eight.”

Tilly set down the vase. “Well, it would be fun to be a grandmother.” She clasped her hands together and looked suddenly delighted. “It would be such fun.”

Nick smiled. “Yes, I’m glad you think so. There’s just one problem.” Tilly’s hands dropped to her sides. She looked like Louise in that moment. They both had a way of assuming the worst. Their faces would fall at the first mention of difficulty, as if prepared to admit defeat. “I won’t go into too much detail. Let’s just say that Louise and I, we’re not really at our reproductive prime and we’ll need some help from hormones.” Actually, what the doctor had said was that Nick had a low sperm count and Louise had a “hostile” uterus.

“In vitro?”

Nick was surprised. “Yes,” he said. “In vitro.”

Tilly went back to wrapping the vase. “You know what I saw on television? A couple in South Dakota got in vitro and had quadruplets, something to do with all the eggs they put in the mother. It sounds very expensive, if you ask me.”

Nick started picking at his cuticles. Tilly was the only person who could send him vacillating between rage and tenderness and back to rage in a single, offhand comment. “Yeah, well, that’s television. We’d be lucky if we just had one baby. Look, I know this is a lot to ask and please don’t feel pressured to accept, I just, we just—it costs about fifteen thousand dollars to get in vitro. It’s a long process. Louise would need to take hormone shots for six weeks and then there’s the procedure.”

“And you want me to pay for it.”
Nick let out a puff of air. “Louise—we both wondered if you’d be willing to help out. It would only be a loan, of course.”

Tilly nodded slowly. “Let’s break for lunch,” she said, at last. “They had the most beautiful tomatoes at the farm stand this morning.”

The dining room table was already set. Tilly brought out a tray of tomato and mozzarella salad, and sent Nick to fetch the sandwiches out of the pantry. She made a point of emphasizing she had gone into town to get them — a very chic little shop that had replaced that silly restaurant. Did he remember? The one with the chili lights. Nick could feel his blood pressure rising. Was she just going to pretend he had never asked? This was a classic Tilly-maneuver: misdirection. Maybe if he’s looking over here, he’ll forget what he said over there. After she poured them each a hefty glass of white wine, however, she came back around to it.

“So I have been thinking about your request,” she said. Nick took a long drink. “And I have decided to help you.”

“Oh Tilly, that would be so great. Really, we’ve been—”

She held up a hand. “Wait a minute, Nicholas. I haven’t told you how I would help.” She unfolded her napkin, shook out some crumbs, and refolded it. Nick bit the insides of his cheeks. Physical pain had a grounding effect. “In some ways, it’s better than just giving the money.”

“What is it?” He asked, his voice low.

“It’s an idea for a novel. A brilliant idea. Now don’t look like that. You haven’t heard it yet.” Nick gazed out the window. Rain continued to fill the harbor. It’s waterline
crept upward, still far from the garden, but not very far. He hoped her hydrangeas would drown. “It’s a retelling of the myth of Atlantis.”

“Science fiction isn’t really my thing. Look, I don’t have time to write and publish a novel. If we’re going to get in vitro, we have to do it soon.”

Tilly nodded. “The continent may actually be out there somewhere, you know. Plato believed it was a real place. Many think that it’s near the straits of Gibraltar. Now, in your version, none of that matters.”

Nick massaged his temples. “My version.”

“The book will open in paradise.” She waved her hands as if opening curtains. “You will explain how the people on the island learned to harness the power of the universe.”

“And how did they?”

“With crystals,” Tilly answered. “And they used that energy to control the weather, to build flying cars, to stay young, and so on. Now, I know what you’re thinking, everyone will know that the story ends with a flood. Where’s the surprise? I’ll tell you. The flood will come in the second chapter. Their temples, their homes, their flying cars, everything completely engulfed. It’s absolute chaos. Nobody saw it coming.” Tilly looked somewhere over Nick’s shoulder. Her eyes were intense, as if she were really seeing it all come to pass. “There’s only one survivor,” she said.

Nick humored her. “And who is it?”

“Oh I don’t know. You decide. You’re the writer. The point is that someone lives and becomes obsessed with understanding why the flood happened, why his loved ones
had to die, why paradise had to be destroyed.”

“Why did the flood happen?”

Tilly smiled. “Well that’s the twist. They created it themselves. They brought on the flood. How? Hubris! They thought they could harness the power of the universe but all they could do was borrow it for a while. In the end, it overpowered them.” Nick didn’t say anything for a long time. A crack of thunder exploded overhead. “So what do you think?” Tilly asked, drizzling balsamic onto her tomatoes.

Nick shook his head. “I don’t want to write a book, Tilly. I want to have a child.”

“But this way you can do both.”

“I don’t want to do both!” The outburst surprised them both.

Tilly shrank back. “I am trying to help you.”

For an instant, lightning lit the room. “If you wanted to help, you would give me the money! Or at least pack the fucking house!”

Tilly gasped and held the table’s edge, as if suddenly dizzy. “How could you, Nicholas?” To his horror, tears filled her eyes. She looked away and dabbed them with her napkin. He couldn’t think of anything to say, so instead he got up and cleared his plate. He took his time washing, drying, and putting it away. There was, of course, no reason to take so much care. It would just be put in a box and get recleaned in the next house. When he came back in, Tilly was in the same position.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” He sat down beside her and looked at the back of her head. She had a helmet of hair that she continued to dye silver-blond. She said she was “phasing into grey,” a process that had lasted for twenty years, at least.
It was always curled in the forties style that swooped around the eye. The only time he had seen her hair messy was at Henry’s funeral.

Nick put a cautious hand on Tilly’s shoulder. “Do you even want to move?” he asked. She looked out the window and, still holding the table, shook her head. “Then why are you doing it?”

“To be closer to you and Louise.” Tilly had a gift for pushing him to his limit, then making him feel like a complete asshole. “I still remember moving into this place,” she said. “It was perfect, just perfect, with the harbor and the egrets and the marsh grass. When the tide was low, Louise and I used to tromp around the mudflat, looking for mollusks. We’d come back perfectly coated in mud and Henry would pretend to be very frightened of us, running through the house shouting, ‘Save me from the mud creatures!’” Tilly laughed. It was alarming, how well she impersonated her husband.

“Louise told me about that. Sounds like a pretty incredible childhood.” Nick had grown up in Worcester, in a dumpy apartment building wedged up against another dumpy apartment building. His parents still lived there.

Tilly’s expression darkened. “It was. Then Louise got married. Henry died.” She waved her hand, dismissing all of it.

Sometimes Nick forgot there was a time when Tilly was a young girl, fresh from Louisiana, eager to make something of herself. And she had, in her way. Henry would never have succeeded in the insurance world if it hadn’t been for Tilly. She had fostered relationships with the wives of his clients. She had advised him on who to hire and who to let go. She had surrounded him with people who could give structure to his chaotic —
periodically naive — way of running things. And she let him take credit for every win. Nick wasn’t even sure if she knew how much of a role she’d had in his success.

“You know Tilly, if you want, maybe as a trial run — nothing permanent, mind — but just to see how it would work, maybe you could—”

“Relax, Nick. I wouldn’t want to live with quadruplets, anyway.”

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The waterline had climbed to cover the marsh grass and part of the lawn. It was still a bit short of the garden and, now that the storm was letting up, the hydrangeas might be spared, after all. They packed the rest of the afternoon without saying anything.

Dinnertime came and went without much of a fuss. They made peanut butter sandwiches and shared a bag of cookies for dessert. By nine o’clock, the whole first floor was tucked away in boxes and they had moved on to one of the guest bedrooms.

When he and Louise came to visit, it was the room that they slept in, and Nick felt a little pinch of nostalgia to see it one last time. It only then occurred to him that he had not contacted Louise all day. He checked his phone — four missed calls and an unread text message: How’s it going? Did you ask her? He typed a few answers, deleted them, then went with, I’ll fill you in tomorrow. Lots of packing to do. He decided not to ask her again. He didn’t want her to think he’d helped pack the Manchester house for money. He knew that this place was a loss for her, almost as big a loss as Henry himself.

Then, as if continuing an ongoing conversation, Tilly said, “Is having a child something you really want? Or something Louise wants? Because, I know Henry and I made it sound easy, but raising Louise almost killed us. It was much harder than writing a
novel, I promise you.”

Nick set down the pillowcase he was folding. His impulse was to answer defensively, but he thought better of it. “I don’t know, Tilly. Louise wants it so much.”

The truth was, whenever Nick tried to see himself as a father, his imagination failed him. It had been easier to fantasize about his book, although it had been a curious letdown to see it in print. He thought it would be the emotional climax of his life.

Tilly examined his face. “Sounds like you two need to have a conversation.”

“Tilly—”

“Oh, don’t make that face. I’ll help you. And don’t bother paying me back, Nicholas. I can afford it.”

He strode across the room and hugged her, picking her up off the ground. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Oh get off me, you silly man! I still think your passing on a bestselling idea.”

Nick laughed with his head thrown back. He felt giddy. “I don’t know. There were some plot holes.”

Tilly stiffened. “There were not!”

He sat on the bed, now just a bare mattress. “All right. How did your protagonist survive the flood?”

“Bah! Details!” Then she considered for a moment. “How about this: the survivor sees the disaster coming in a dream.”

“It’s a little cliché. And what exactly is the force of the universe that they’re harnessing? Is it electricity? Sunlight? Gravity?”
Tilly laughed and raised her hands into the air. “It’s love, Nicholas! What else?”

***

It took them all night to pack the house. At around two, Tilly went to bed, and Nick kept working until sunrise, drinking gallons of lemonade to stay alert. He debated waking his mother-in-law to say goodbye, but thought better of it. She would need her strength when the movers came that morning. As he made his way through the empty rooms, he said a little goodbye to each of them. Poor Henry would have been crushed to see the house like that.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The water had engulfed the garden, but only just, so that blossoms rose out of its surface. As he drove home, he thought about how he would write the flood: rushing down the streets of Atlantis, bursting through windows, sinking whole monuments, swallowing up families. He smiled and shook his head. Of course he wouldn’t write the novel. It was a ridiculous idea. But if he did, he would have the survivor carried away in the current. Their survival would be a miracle. No dreams, nothing like that.
Life should be lived backwards, Alice thought, as she covered the penis cake in flesh-colored frosting. She imagined herself backing into Jack’s office, un-quitting, the shock on his face dissolving into neutrality. Will would have been unpacking, and his achingly platonic forehead kiss would have been the beginning of a ten year love affair that grew happier and happier each day. Instead, Alice was living in the cabin on Lake Auburn while Will moved out of their apartment and Jack searched for a new marketing director. It took exactly four days for a life to go kaboom.

The cabin had transformed since Alice arrived last week. For one thing, it was pink now because, damn it, she liked pink and it in no way reminded her of happy weekend getaways with her not-so-lifelong partner. She’d painted in a hurry so that the windows were speckled and a spider’s web was glazed into the wood. The surrounding landscape looked like Sleeping Beauty’s castle, all overgrown and brambly. She had told the girls to take a left onto Lake Shore Drive and then look for the Barbie dream house. They didn’t know, yet, about the sinkhole her life had become. She had decided to tell them after Olive’s wedding.

Bachelorette and co were arriving any minute and the whole first floor was a cock palace. There were martini glasses with multi-colored cock straws, a game of pin the junk on the hunk, bunches of penis shaped balloons, glittery cock confetti, and a champagne bottle, painted and papier-machéd to look like a very unfortunately shaped member. She may have gone a bit overboard, had spent all night crafting balls of pink, black, and white tissue paper, which hung from the ceiling like giant loofas. She had even made each guest
a gift bag containing a nip, a bottle of aspirin, a ring pop, body glitter, edible underwear, and a permanent marker for writing a word of marital advice on the panties she’d asked each girl to bring. Now, she used a makeshift icing dispenser to write “The best is yet to cum” across the shaft of the cake-penis. She’d gotten all her ideas from Pinterest.

A car horn blared outside, followed by an explosion of female chatter, laughter, footsteps, a knock at the door. Alice hurried the cake into the fridge.

“It’s open!”

In they trooped, her fast-talking friends: Gina, Hadley, Olive, and Dana, all exclaiming over each other about the decorations, the color of the house — did Will know? He would die — and oh the gift bags! How clever! They all hugged. It had been too long.

“Now, enough fucking around. I am baby-free for exactly twenty four hours.” Gina dropped her suitcase and headed to the punch bowl. Her frizzy, dark hair looked unbrushed and unwashed. She used to wake up early to blow-dry, straighten, and style it but, since the baby, she just strained it back in a giant clip. She still had not lost the pregnancy weight and continued to wear maternity clothes. No, she had on a pair of leggings and a giant T-shirt with “Baby on board” written across the front, though the baby had disembarked some time ago. She was the first of the four to have a child, a seven-month-old who was already walking and therefore special. Gina called Alice at least once a week to say, between sobs, I am so happy. I really am. So, so, so, so happy. I just can’t stop crying.

“I can’t believe you did all this,” Olive said, picking penis confetti off the ground.
“When Alice says ‘low key,’ never believe her,” said Dana, the lawyer.

Hadley held her cell phone in the air and waved it back and forth. “Oh God. No.”

“Sorry. There’s a town on the other side of the lake if you really need to make a call.”

Now all the girls were holding up their phones, all except Olive, who smiled and said it couldn’t hurt to unplug for a while. She had already thrown open a window and was leaning out of it, breathing the damp air, nostrils flaring. She was built like an adolescent boy — long limbs and sharp joints and no breasts.

“You’ll let mosquitoes in,” Alice said. Sometimes, she felt compelled to test the limits of Olive’s patience. She was one of those soft-spoken moon children who still believed in fresh air and positive reinforcement. She was Dana’s little sister, and the youngest in the friend group by about fifteen years. She had met her fiancée at Hill School where she taught kindergarten and he ran the IT department. She always talked about him with a blushing enthusiasm that sent Alice into a confusion of cynicism and irritation and guilt and envy.

Alice and Olive weren’t particularly close, but Dana was her best friend, had been her roommate all four years of college, and that made Olive a friend by default. Still she had been surprised when she asked her to be a bridesmaid. In fact, Olive had asked all of Dana’s friends. It was the first time it occurred to Alice that she might not have many friends of her own.

The girls ladled themselves generous servings of punch and looked out the wide windows. The lake was aglow with the warm colors of twilight.
“I can’t believe this dump doesn’t have service,” Dana said. She was filling her pipe with cherry-flavored tobacco, using her pinky to pack it in tight. I had a thick, sweet smell like molasses. She’d started smoking it in college as an ironic affect. It had since become a genuine addiction.

Hadley sighed. “Go easy on the negativity, okay?” She had a new habit of holding her throat when she spoke, as if protecting it. She had gotten divorced last year and had since gone on a string of yoga retreats. She used the phrase “non-judgmental self-awareness” to a suicide-inducing degree. Her face was bare and had the raw look of a recent cry. She used to approach her appearance with a painterly perfectionism. Her liquid eyeliner was always straight and even, like the sharp cut of an X-Acto knife.

“Alice, you’re not drinking.” Gina was already tipsy. “Here.” She pressed a solo cup into her hand. “Drink up. It’s good for you.” She laughed. “It’s medicine.”

“Why didn’t you tell us there wouldn’t be any service? We should have gone to Vegas.”

“Look, guys. I brought cake pops!”

“Shut up, Olive.”

Hadley swatted at Dana. “Be nice to your sister!”

“Is that rowboat yours, Alice? We should go out for a midnight ride.” Dana pointed with her pipe.

Gina whispered wetly in her ear, “Seriously, though, why aren’t you drinking?”

Alice quit alcohol after Will left, not out of a healthy instinct to improve herself, but out of an embarrassing new tendency to sob hysterically when drunk. On the upside,
she had lost four pounds.

“I don’t know. I’m not in the mood.” She should have thought of an excuse beforehand.

“Oh my God.” Gina yanked her aside and whisper-shouted, “Are you pregnant?” She touched her stomach, as if feeling for a fetus. Alice laughed. Alcohol had dulled Gina’s intuition, which was usually unnervingly penetrating, and she did not pick up on the note of pain in her friend’s voice.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she breathed. “I’m so happy for you both. Will must be over the moon.” She took a long drink. “He’ll have you home for at least, what, a few weeks of maternity leave? I know you’ve heard it a thousand times but you need to step back from your job. Take a breather.” Another drink. “Not that child-rearing is much of a breather.”

Yes. She had heard it a thousand times. The word “workaholic” had been thrown around, and not in a joking way. Will had begged her to quit over and over, in a series of escalating threats that ended in the final ultimatum — KPI Group or him. She chose wrong, then chose right too late. Will didn’t know that she quit. She didn’t know how to tell him. She had meant to tell him but when she called, she couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud. Please come back. I made a mistake. I choose you. It was too embarrassing.

“Think you’ll tie the knot, now that there’s a kid in the picture? Sorry. Was that nosy? I might be drunk. I’m a little drunk.” Gina touched her fevered cheek.

“Maybe once the baby is born.” It was just easier to lie.

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The punch was strong and, by the time the sun had set, every one was pie-eyed and merry, even Olive, queen of moderation. Alice tried to herd them into the living room for a game of bachelorette bingo — she’d made the game board herself, had spent hours hot-gluing lace borders onto each card — but they had gotten into the champagne and were descending swiftly into chaos. Hadley stood on the kitchen table, flute aloft, and gave a wayward speech about love, commitment, and therapeutic breathing. Gina interrupted periodically to shout, *Let’s go skinny dipping!* but did not move from her slumped seated position. Olive listened to the speech, eyes glistening, while Dana played a solo game of pin the junk on the hunk. The speech kept veering toward conclusion then flaring back up.

“Christ.” Dana put an arm around Alice’s shoulder and whispered hotly in her ear.

“This speech has more endings than *The Return of the King.*”

“And I would just like to thank Alice,” Hadley said, “for letting us use her charming cabin.”

“With no cell service!”

“Olive, if you’re looking for a model couple, look no further than Alice and Will. Their unselfish commitment to one another is an inspiration. They give the rest of us poor bastards hope.” A fireball of jealousy erupted in Alice’s chest, as if Hadley were speaking of another couple. She forced her mouth into a smile. All those times she and Will had fancied themselves superior to their friends now seemed childish. They thought they were bullet proof. They didn’t need marriage, she’d proclaim, they were bound together by mutual respect and giddy, ecstatic, stupid, teenage adoration, the kind that no one else can
stand to be around.

Gina bristled. “What about me and Dave? We’ve been together eight years!”

“Yes, Gina and Dave also. To all the happy couples!” Her cheerfulness was aggressive.

Olive helped Hadley down from the table. “That was so moving. Thank you. I love you so much. I love you guys so much.”

They girls did shots, all but Alice, who was now pretend-pregnant. After the second round of tequila, a full-on tornado of drunkenness descended upon the cabin. They were all crammed onto the same sofa, tossing olives at each other. Now they were singing the theme song to *Friends*. Now Gina was showing them how to do the Charleston. Now Hadley was crying. Now Olive was demonstrating how to give a good blowjob on the champagne bottle. Now Dana was making pasta. Now Hadley was in downward dog. Now Gina was telling everyone that Alice was pregnant.

An eruption of squeals. An onslaught of hugs. To everyone’s surprise, Dana wept. *I just wanted this for you so badly.* Hadley knelt down and spoke to her belly. *Hello there, little minnow.* Stunned, Alice didn’t set them straight.

“Look at her, she’s glowing.”

“Do you know the sex, yet?” Hadley asked.

“Not yet.” Lying was so easy, a magic trick, a dove thrown into the air. She knew she would have to do damage control in the morning, but that felt like a long way away. Perhaps it would never come. Will had always wanted to have kids. Alice had too, in a maybe-some-day kind of way. One morning, he had kissed the tip of her nose and said he
dreamt of their son. They’d named him Declun, after his grandfather. Over my dead body, she’d answered.

Olive stood apart, still holding the champagne bottle. She watched Alice in a way that made her feel transparent. Did she know something? She couldn’t see how. To Alice, Olive was just Dana’s wide-eyed little sister, an anemic waif who didn’t have friends her own age. And yet she was frightened of her too. It was as though she had a secret figured out and was laughing at the rest of them, the almost middle-aged women, still playing at adulthood.

“I’m sure this little baby will be the most beautiful, smartest, funniest, best-behaved little bastard child on the planet,” Dana said, dabbing her eyes with the cuff of her button-down shirt.

Hadley laughed. “How do the parents feel about all this?”

“Will’s mom wants us to get married,” Alice said. This was true. “My parents don’t care.” This was also true, and not just of her relationships. They were indifferent to almost everything in Alice’s life, except her career and, before that, her GPA.

“You aren’t considering it, are you?” Dana asked, looking a little disgusted at the notion. She had always had a dismal view of marriage and, since becoming an attorney, had only become more set in her cynicism.

Alice sighed. She was so tired of answering this question. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe”

“Wait.” Dana set her solo cup down on the coffee table, an action that seemed to take all her concentration. “Alice Bailey is thinking of getting married? What about all
that talk about not needing a piece of paper to prove your love?”

It had been a recurring argument between her and Will. He had proposed just a year after they started dating and she turned him down, listing a lot of statistics, as well as childhood sob stories about her own parents’ marriage. Looking back, she didn’t think Will had ever really forgiven her for rejecting him all those years ago.

“I know. The wedding would be more for Will than for me.”

Hadley took her elbow. “Honey, are you crying?”

“I’m just so happy,” Alice said. Through a haze of tears, she caught Olive’s gaze. The girl was frozen in place. It was the first time she had ever seen her look angry.

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Everyone sat on the carpet in a circle, the penis cake in the center. It now read, “The best is yet.” They attacked it with forks and told secrets about themselves and about friends and about movie stars. There was something almost immoral about being the only sober person in the room. It was like listening in on a deeply personal conversation, particularly when Hadley got into the grisly details of her divorce. She spoke precisely and clinically, perhaps to keep from triggering an emotional outburst.

“I had sort of an online flirtation that dipped into an emotional affair. Looking back, I think it was just a way to feel wanted again. Jay and I had been married twelve years and we had become so ordinary to each other. We didn’t fight or anything. We just didn’t really see each other, not in any meaningful way. Of course, we tried to keep things interesting — lingerie, weekend getaways — but it just felt superficial and forced. I wanted to be craved, you know?” She made her hands into claws. “Like, in a primal way.
Anyway, Jay found some emails. You’d think that would be enough to end things right there, but we tried counseling first.” Hadley laughed and took a swig of tequila. “Our marriage didn’t get good and broken until his affair, which was probably a kind of revenge. She wasn’t even that young or pretty.” She sounded totally unlike herself. It never ceased to amaze Alice how pain transformed people. Perhaps that was Alice’s fate too, once the reality of her split set in. When exactly had their lives gone from winning to losing? There had been a time when it seemed the wave they rode would always rise, would never crash against the rocks.

“Did you love each other in the beginning?” Olive asked, seeming to brace for a blow to the heart.

“Yes,” Hadley said. “We thought we’d be together forever. But, you know what? Forever’s a long damn time. I traveled for work. So did he. We just sort of drifted.” She pointed the tequila bottle at Olive. “You want some marital advice? Don’t turn your attention away for a second. It’s just too damn easy to hook your interest on something else.”

A somber quiet followed. Olive held her stomach and folded forward. Wind shuddered against the screen door. Alice picked cake crumbs off the rug with her finger. “Party in the USA” was playing out someone’s iPhone. Gina put a hand on Olive’s shoulder.

“Every relationship is different, sweetheart.”

Realizing her mistake, Hadley nodded vigorously. “Oh of course. I’m sure you and Sam will be very happy.”
“There are plenty of good relationships that stand the test of time,” Dana added. “I’ve never been in one, because I’m emotionally stunted, but look at Alice and Will. And Gina and Dave. And Nancy and Ronald Reagan.”

“That’s right,” Gina said. “Dave can drive me nuts, but I wouldn’t trade him.”

“And of course Alice and Will have been together for a decade and they’re still nauseating.” Dana leaned over and whispered in Alice’s ear. “Say something.”

Alice stood up and started gathering cups. “What a mess,” she said.

***

By two in the morning, Gina was throwing up in the bathroom and Hadley was trying, and failing, to grate cheese onto chips. Dana had fallen asleep on the couch and was snoring softly. Olive, who seemed to have sobered up a bit, was helping Alice with the dishes.

“So, you and Will might get married, huh?”

Alice took her time drying a plate. “We’ll see,” she said.

Olive handed her a dripping glass. “I’ll admit, I was a little upset when you announced you were pregnant.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” Alice sounded cool. Damn cool. She had a gift for lying. Apparently, fifteen years in marketing had corroded her conscience.

“It’s so stupid. I liked having all the attention on me. I liked being the one with the good news.”

Alice let out a long exhale.

“But then, after all that stuff Hadley said, I’m glad you’re happy. It gives me hope.”
Alice suddenly didn’t know where to look or what to do with her hands. She set the glass down, still wet. The cabin started to feel very small. Could the other girls hear them? Probably not, with the faucet running. Olive was elbow deep in soapy water. She fished some cutlery out from the bottom.

“I mean, Sam and I are so happy. He’s my best friend, you know? He’s sort of my only friend. I don’t know why, but I just don’t connect with people that easily.” She laughed. “At least, not people who are over six years old. I know that soul mates don’t exist, but Sam and I, we’re like soul mates.”

Alice sighed. She had said that once.

“The idea that we won’t feel that way forever is just so—” Olive trailed off. “Sometimes, we’ll be having a great time cooking or whatever and then I’ll just look over at him and think, how much longer do we have?” Her eyes were wide. “If you have any marital advice, I’d really like to hear it.”

Alice fiddled with the dishtowel, twisting it into a tight rope, then twirling it undone. Very quietly she said, “Olive, I’m not pregnant. Will and I broke up.” Olive sort of fell against the counter. Alice stared down at the ground. She knew if she looked at the girl’s face, she wouldn’t be able to keep her voice steady. “I don’t know why I kept the charade going. It felt sort of good to pretend. Even us cynical old ladies want a happy ending, I guess. The truth is, you might fall out of love with Sam. It just, it happens a lot. And if it does happen, it doesn’t make you bad people. So, in terms of marital advice, I don’t know. Make sure you stay financially independent.”

A high pitched blaring gave them both a start. The smoke alarm was going off. That
was when Alice noticed the haze of smoke. “Oh my God!” Hadley screeched. “Oh my God! Oh my God! Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!” She had put a paper plate in the microwave and now the nachos were in flames. The scream had awakened Dana who, in her rush to help, banged her shin against the coffee table. A stream of expletives spewed out of her. Gina careened out of the bathroom, still zipping up.

“What’s going on?”

Alice pushed Hadley out of the way, opened the microwave, and bat the fire out with the dishtowel. The smoke burned her eyes and filled her lungs. She folded over in a coughing fit. Dana climbed up on the counter and tried to rip the detector out of the ceiling. When this did not work, she grabbed a nearby broom and stabbed the device to death with the handle. The quiet was like a flood of fresh air.

“Christ, Dana, you could’ve just opened a window,” Alice said.

“Sorry. I panicked.”

“Where’s Olive?” Gina asked.

There was a long quiet as everyone looked around. Alice felt as if she were sinking through quicksand. “Oh no,” she said.

***

Olive wasn’t in the bathroom or in the loft or in the basement or in the car. All her belongings were still folded neatly on her suitcase. Fear had sobered everyone up, a bit. After Alice had wrestled the car keys from Dana, who was in a complete panic, she watched her wander aimlessly down the road, screaming Olive’s name into the pitch black.
“Stop fucking around, Olive. You’re scaring me!”

The other girls, still not entirely sober, kept searching the cabin, hoping for different results. Hadley whimpered that it was her fault. It was all her fault. How could she be so stupid? If they never found Olive, she’d throw herself into the lake. Of course, Alice thought, the lake. She slipped out the screen door to search the dock. It was summer, but the lake still got cold at night and Alice hugged herself tightly. The lights of town dotted the opposite shore. The water was so still it looked solid.

“Olive!” That was when she noticed the rowboat was gone. “Holy shit.” A wave of nausea curled through her. “Holy shit.” That fucking girl was going to drown herself. “Holy shit.” Clothes on, Alice dove into the water. The cold shocked through her and she gasped, swore, flailed. “Olive!” she screamed, then swam. In the darkness, it was hard to understand which direction she was going. Her shirt billowed out like a jellyfish and her pants suctioned onto her legs. Unused to exercise, she tired quickly. Her clothes were heavy. They were dragging her down. Somewhere on the opposite shore, a dog was howling. “Olive!” She wondered how long she could tread water. At some point, gravity would win. It always did. Her mind fed her images of pale sharks gliding underfoot. If she died, that wouldn’t be so bad. She wouldn’t be able to live with the guilt, anyway.

“Olive!”

“Alice!”

In her excitement, Alice swallowed a murky gulp of lake water. “I’m over here!” She sputtered. The boat was quite far. Olive had moved quickly, and it took some time for her to maneuver her way back. Alice was splashing and waving and laughing with
relief. It took a few tries to get her into the boat. Luckily, Olive was much stronger than
she looked.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?” Olive rubbed Alice’s arms.

“I was rescuing you.” Alice lurched forward and threw her arms around Olive’s
tiny frame, soaking her through. “For the love of Christ, why did you disappear on us?”

Olive went limp in her embrace and rested her head on her shoulder. “I’m sorry. I
was upset. I wanted to call Sam. You said there was service in town, so I thought I’d take
the boat a bit closer, just to get a few bars. I didn’t mean to go so far out.”

Alice laughed, wringing the lake water out of her hair. “I thought you were trying
to kill yourself.”

“Oh.”

They bobbed silently for a while, watching the movements of the dark, velvety
water. Hadley’s tall silhouette was waving from the dock, calling their names.

“We’re okay!” Alice shouted. “I found her! She was trying to make a phone call!”

Hadley called something back, but it dissipated before it reached them. The girls
took their time rowing to shore. It was a clear night and the sky was bright with stars.

“I’m sorry about what I said. I haven’t been at my best, lately.” Alice trailed her
finger in the cool water. “The truth is, if I hadn’t been so fucked up, Will and I would
probably still be together.”

Olive stopped rowing. “What do you mean?”

“I worked all the time. Nights, weekends, holidays. I just became addicted to doing
well, I guess. I went through a phase where I didn’t eat breakfast or lunch and then I
binged at night.” The boat turned in a slow circle. “So, you can’t really blame Will for leaving. He gave me a choice and I chose the job. Maybe I thought it was the feminist thing to do.” She scoffed. “The funny thing is, I couldn’t work after he left. Just being in the office made me sick.”

“Did you quit?”

Alice nodded, then it occurred to her that Olive may not see her in the dark. “Yes.”

“Have you told him?”

“No. I was going to but, I don’t know. In so many ways, I’m no different than I was. It’s like, I spent years furiously spinning a wheel and, even though I’ve stopped, there’s too much momentum The wheel just keeps on spinning. You know what I’ve done with my time off? I’ve repainted the whole cabin, retiled the bathroom, and spent an entire night creating weird ball decorations out of tissue paper.” She had even spent a day sorting the clothes in her closet, darkest to lightest so that, by the end, it looked like one of those bar charts of the color spectrum.

Olive looked up at the sky. Somewhere in the distance, the dog kept on howling. Alice started to shiver, but she didn’t want to go back. “You have to tell him,” Olive said. She spoke softly, but her voice was authoritative. Alice imagined she had a similar tone when scolding her kindergarteners.

Alice sighed. “I hate to lose an argument.” They laughed. Their friends were now lined up on the dock, a crowd of swaying silhouettes calling out their names.

“You know,” Olive said. “The wheel will stop spinning.” She took Alice’s cold hand and squeezed it. “That’s just physics.” They sat that way for some time as the
current drifted them out to open water. Alice felt that as long as they stayed there, in the middle of the lake, nothing bad could happen.
“It doesn’t make sense,” Mom said, leaning over a pot of boiling water. Her face was dewy from the steam. “All the signs pointed to Steven.” She dropped in a handful of dried hawthorn berries, the fruit for heartbreak.

“I know.” We stood shoulder to shoulder. Mom stirred with a wooden spoon. I picked the petals off a rose and dropped them in, one by one. They floated brightly, then withered.

That morning, Steven had written Mom a seven-page letter about “incompatible values” and “divergent paths” and “the deceptive nature of lust.” It had included a poem by Thomas Hardy called “Neutral Tones.” Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove/Over tedious riddles of years ago. It was a romantic flourish that was unlike him. She pushed the letter on me, told me to look for clues, to analyze the meaning underneath the meaning, to read the words behind the words. Mother often turned to me for advice because I was younger and closer to source energy. She had taught me that there were clues everywhere, symbology embedded in every moment. The universe yearned to offer its guidance. It was very important to understand the signs, she said. It was dangerous to misunderstand.

A few years ago, this letter would have shocked me. No, shocked is too feeble a word. It would have devastated me. My most foundational beliefs would have been pierced through. After all, there had been signs. Mother met Steven in December, when the sun was in Sagittarius, her seventh house of long-term partnerships. On their first date, they had gone for a walk in Aldis Hill Park and she had seen their initials in a
spiders web. Not too long afterward, Steven had accidentally worn his tee-shirt the wrong way around, an excellent omen. When they went on a weekend trip to Maine, there had been the Ella Fitzgerald miracle. Mom’s phone was plugged into the tape deck so she could play her favorite song: “I Can’t Get Started.” When it ended, she switched to radio.

“It was playing the same exact song,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

“How often have you heard ‘I Can’t Get Started’ on the radio?”

“Almost never.”


I’d begun to doubt the signs. This was not my mother’s first breakup. Before Steven there had been Eduardo, the tree doctor with the impressive mustache, thick and black and lovingly maintained. He didn’t seem to like me much. Whenever I hung around too long, he’d ask if there was any homework I should be doing. On their first date, a cat had followed them home — a shabby, tortoiseshell thing — and, just as Eduardo was about to kiss Mom goodnight, it sneezed. This could have meant rain, good fortune, or a happy love affair. Mom chose to believe the latter. After seven months together — an erratic period when I would find them entangled on the couch, then fighting venomously moments later — Eduardo stopped calling. I guess the sneeze meant rain, after all.

Before him, it was Linus, my sixth grade math teacher who seemed genuinely frightened of both of us. Whenever he found himself in a room alone with me, he talked frantically about coordinate graphs and mixed operations. Mom met him during a parent/teacher conference. She said that the moment she saw him, her nose started
itching, a sure sign that she would soon be kissed. She had pursued him aggressively, a bit too aggressively, maybe, because the moment Mom slackened her grip, he darted. Before him, there was a long golden era of no men at all, just me and Mom and Joni, our cockatiel, who had red cheeks and whistled like a human. She disappeared one day and Mom said she must have gotten out through the chimney. I hope she’s still alive somewhere, swooping over neighborhoods and hunting for chicory greens.

Steven had been the best of the boyfriends. He was steady. When he had a date with Mom, he penciled it neatly into his agenda. He hadn’t complained when she fed him maca cookies to “increase libido and stamina.” He has a good complement to Mom’s bohemian disarray. He did his taxes. He knew and was proud of his credit score. When they weren’t fighting — and didn’t couples always fight? — they seemed at ease with one another. Their relationship had been over twice as long as Mom’s marriage to Dad. Although, to be fair, Dad didn’t dump her. He died.

Mom filled a ceramic mug with the dark red tea. She had moved from hysteria — body-sobbing on the bathroom floor — to total vacancy. She held the mug with both hands and stared at the crochet tablecloth. It was covered in crumbs and tea stains. I sat down beside her and put a hand on her back.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I thought Steven was different.”

Mom winced at my touch, and I knew she was experiencing an episode of hatred. They never lasted long, but they were intense, not the irritation of an overworked mother, but the venomous loathing of a parent who wished her child had never been born.

***
A round plastic clock was mounted on the classroom wall. It had giant black numbers and a bright red second hand that ticked loudly. There was the old study hall monitor, wearing her long, floral skirt and her giant, bobbly earrings, sending us authoritative glances as we sat in horseshoe formation, reading our purple paperback editions of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There was Duncan Hughes, angling his watch so it caught the light and shone directly into my eyes. There was Lou-Lou beside me, a sort-of-friend who liked me because I didn’t play four-square, didn’t go to dances, and never had a lab partner. Most of the kids didn’t like me much. They said I smelled like garlic, which was true. Mom rubbed it on my forehead at night to keep the nightmares away.

Still, it was a relief to be in school. School made sense, for the most part. It had set schedules, strict rules, predictable outcomes. Things were tense at home, and not in the usual way. Mom took all her breakups badly, but this one was different. There was usually a bigness to her emotions. They were fires that burned high and fast, exhausting fuel in moments. She would cry animalistically, pull her hair, pace, chant, moan until veins strained out of her neck. Then it would go suddenly quiet. I would find her sitting on the kitchen floor, eating peanut butter out of the jar. This time, however, there was no fire, only a stiff cheerfulness that put my teeth on edge.

Duncan lobbed a pencil eraser at me. I deflected it with my book. The class tittered. “Settle down,” said Mrs. Kimball. She looked as happy as we were when the dismissal bell rang. I got caught in the stream of kids pouring out the door, all talking, laughing, retreating to their parents’ cars, bags half-open, jackets spilling out of them. Duncan and I were the only eighth graders who biked home. Both his parents were district attorneys.
with demanding schedules. They had no time for carpool lines. Mom was generally free in the afternoon. She took the early morning shift at the home goods store she ran with Denise, her best friend. Even so, she didn’t like to pick me up at school. 2:30 was a bad luck hour.

It was one of those bright fall days in Vermont, when the trees practically screamed with color and the wind washed over you like cool water. Back then, just the act of biking, of pumping your legs and zipping through space, was its own kind of jubilation. Remembering it now, I still feel a little lift in my heart. Duncan was monkeying around ahead of me, popping up on his back wheel, skidding sideways, vaulting off of other people’s porches. He had names for all these tricks: wheelies, bunny hops, endos. He loved to terrify me, used to drink hot sauce straight out of the bottle just to see the look on my face.

When we were in the fourth grade, he brought a potato launcher into school and shot it off the roof of the sports shed, the one with the lacrosse sticks, soccer balls, that sort of thing. Something must have gone wrong because the launcher exploded right in his hands. Strangely, I don’t really remember this day. Mother says amnesia is a common reaction to trauma. She says I was in a catatonic state when she picked me up from school. I do remember she put her hands on the top of my head and asked the Prince of Peace to come and establish his dominion in me. For some reason, the idea of an otherworldly prince establishing anything in me was downright terrifying. Duncan should have died. Instead, he had a burn scar on one side of his face. The other side was freckled and handsome, in a rusty, redhead sort of way. This incident was back when we were
still close friends, before he became popular and started lobbing pencil erasers at me.

Duncan leaned his bike into a tight U-turn. He started barreling toward me at full speed. I skidded to stop.

“Be careful!” I squealed. He whooshed by me, a near miss, and biked off in a peal of boyish laughter.

***

I came home to two ceramic dolls on the kitchen table. They stood with their arms out, all white and glazed. Their eyes were blue, their cheeks two red dots, their lips a streak of pink, and their ceramic hair was black and short, like Betty Boop’s. When I examined them closer, I noticed that one was bright and new, the other faded, almost faceless, with a red ribbon tied around her middle. Also, her feet were charred black, as if they had been dipped in fire. They were both naked and jointless in a way that unnerved me.

“Mom!”

“I’m in the bathroom!”

I knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Mom was in the bath, scrubbing her body in methodical, downward strokes. Purple candles were lined up along the window sill, all of them lit.

“Christ, Mom.”

“You should never be afraid of a naked body, Margaux.”

Many small leaves floated in the bathwater, a sudsy bed of greenery.
“What are those?”

She didn’t stop scrubbing downward. “Raspberry leaves.” A good sign. Raspberry leaves were for healing. “How was school?” She asked.

“I got an A on my chemistry test.”

She sighed. “You’re getting to be more and more like your father.”

All I knew about my father was that we were alike in disappointing ways. Whenever she compared us, it felt like an attack. Although when you took all the comparisons together, they did nothing to elucidate what kind of person he was. I would be reading a book or cutting pictures out of a magazine or painstakingly building a diorama for science class and Mom would sigh, shake her head, and say the resemblance was uncanny. If I pressed her to explain, she would tell me sharply to respect the dead. There was a splash as Mom stood up and I turned to face the wall.

“When did you become such a prude? I have to talk to you about something. Go get the basin out of the fridge. The water is already distilled. Don’t contaminate it.”

“Okay. Where do you want me to put it?”

“Just set it by a chair in the kitchen and then very carefully add the ingredients I left out on the table. They’re in a tupperware container.”

As I moved about the kitchen, washing my hands, setting down the tub of water, sopping up its overflow, I kept my eye on the dolls. Their expressions were frozen in wide-eyed delight, as if in a state of perpetual amazement. I set them facedown on the table, then dumped the ingredients into the basin. Little purple stones sank to the bottom, and — judging by the smell — cloves floated on top. I sat down and waited for Mom to
come downstairs. She had a labor-intensive post-bath process that involved blowdrying, straightening, and curling her long, dark hair. She was beautiful in a self-conscious way. When she was little, she broke her nose in an iceskating accident. At the hospital, she lied to the doctor, told him the accident had misshapen it, and would he please make it smaller? I think it bothered her that I was born with her original nose.

She came down in jeans and a knit sweater. Her hair was perfect, as always.

“So, what’s with the dolls?” I asked.

“Those are frozen Charlottes.” She set the dolls upright, then ran a thumb over one of their glossy eyes. “This one, here, I got from storage, from that little box under the stairs.” I knew the one. I liked to root around in there and hold its curiosities to the light. It was full of dark crystals, staticky fabrics, brittle herb branches, elaborate chalices, tinkly little bells, and a tangle of slender chains. They were leftover from Mom’s college days, back when she was still experimenting with spells. She told me that any good spiritualist went through a Wiccan phase. She said, “I got that one from Marianne,” nodding toward the newer doll.

Marianne was mother’s psychic. She lived below the tracks. In Saint Albans, Vermont, “below the tracks” actually meant something, particularly the tree streets — Poplar, Cedar, Maple, all off limits after dark. I wasn’t sure why she went to her, because she always returned worse off than she had been before. The last time, she came home with a baggy of crystals to “cleanse and activate the fourth chakra.” I’m all blocked up, she’d said, then burst into tears.

“When did you see Marianne? Weren’t you at As The Crow Flies?” Sometimes I
worried that she was skipping shifts. I knew she had before because Denise left angry voicemails.

“I went on my lunch break. I needed to understand why Steven left.” She leaned back and sighed. “I needed to understand why they all left.

“And?”

“She said that she saw a dark spot on my aura, bad energy, a curse.”

A tingling sensation spread up my neck. “A curse?” I asked. Mom looked at me strangely and my head felt tight and airless. “That’s right, Blossom. She thinks I’ve been cursed.”

“By who?”

“How should I know?” Her eyes were trained on me, accusing.

“So what’s with the dolls?”

“Marianne says that negative energies come in through the feet,” she said, as if this explained it.

“So, is this one supposed to be you?” I asked, pointing at the one in her hands.

“That’s right. I already did the burning spell. Now I have to do the washing spell to seal it. Marianne said it would be more powerful if you and I did it together.”

I swallowed. The saliva felt thick and gluey in my throat. “And what’s the other doll for?”

She looked at it for a long while. “That’s for the one who cursed me,” she said in a voice that was low and somehow new.

***
Duncan kissed me. He kissed me. I didn’t even know he liked me. A hot flush of happiness engulfed the days that followed, even though Mom was deteriorating, somehow. It was as though she had disappeared into a back room of her mind where I couldn’t follow. Duncan and I had been biking home, as usual. He had been doing tricks, as usual. Then, as he landed from a wheelie, he hit a stick in the road and fell sideways. I ran up to him, in a state of panic. My hands were shaking and I was crying and I knelt down and touched the burned side of his face and asked if he was okay. Beads of blood rolled down his shins, but he said it was just a scratch and why was I crying? That was when he kissed me, right on the mouth. It was softer than I imagined, wetter too, more anatomical. Right afterward, he mounted his bike and sped off.

***

Later that week, when I came from school, the kitchen smelled like scorched eggs. This generally meant that Mom had spread a sulphur paste on the doorframe, something to keep out bad spirits. She was at the table, chopping carrots for soup. The dolls were standing in the nearby windowsill, gazing at her with happy surprise. They both had blackened feet, this time.

“Why’d you burn the other one’s feet?”

“Just a little experiment,” she said.

“Oh.” I sat down across from her. Without looking up, she handed me a carrot and a giant knife. I chopped carefully.

She said, “Duncan Hughes called earlier.”

A spasm of joy-terror went through me. “What did he say?”
“He said to call him back, and his shins were better.” Mom scraped the carrots into the bubbling water. “Did something happen between you two?”

She always wanted to know if I had a boyfriend. The merest mention of the opposite sex would illicit an excited, borderline aggressive barrage of questions. What was his sign? What time was he born? What shape were his eyes? Did he have thin lips? Thin-lipped people could not be trusted. Did he wear body spray? Body spray could mask pheromones. Smell him after soccer, then I would know if he was a good match. This time, however, she seemed entirely indifferent. Actually, she seemed a little irritated.

“I think he might like me,” I whispered. My face was hot.

Mom hacked an onion in half. “Be careful, Blossom.” She chopped with quick strokes.

“What do you mean?”

The sharp smell of raw onion burned my nostrils. “I mean that you’re a Barbaret woman. The curse could be genetic.” She looked up at me. She was wearing dark eyeliner, thickly applied.

“I don’t believe in the curse,” I said. Then, feeling the seductive thrill of rebellion, I repeated it. “I don’t believe in the curse.”

Mom stopped chopping. “You don’t have to believe in it for it to be real.”

“It’s not real. The signs aren’t either.” My voice was rising. “Or the dolls, or the omens, or any of this stuff.”

“What happened to Duncan’s shins?” Mom asked.

“That was just an accident.”
“There are no accidents.”

“There are no accidents.”

“If the signs were real, Stephen would still be with you.”

Mom set the knife down with a dull thud. She leaned heavily against the table, her eyes fixed on me. “How long have you been in love with Duncan? Since the potato rocket?” The implicit accusation went clean through me. “I know this sounds cruel but I’m saying it out of love, Blossom. You want to protect him? You leave him alone.”

***

I didn’t leave him alone. We hardly spoke in school, but when we biked home, we’d pull into some ditch or other and kiss aggressively, feeling each other’s bodies with fumbling, adolescent urgency. I think we were both too frightened to take it further than that. Afterward, we would readjust our clothes and pull the twigs out of each other’s hair and talk about this or that. It’s strange to remember how happy I was during those bright, fall afternoons. Now, looking back, all I feel is pain. On our way home, Duncan would do increasingly risky bike stunts, goaded on by my outcries. He once leapt his bike onto the hood of a parked car, then landed hard on the other side, wobbling to regain balance. I shouted at him to stop with a terror that bordered on rage.

***

When I got home, Mom picked me up and swung me in a circle.

“Welcome home my little turtledove! My chickadee! My cuddle bear!”

“Woah. You’re all dressed up.”

She was wearing her long black dress. Her nails were painted silver, her makeup was heavy, and she’d left her hair straight, so it fell down to her waist.
“Steven called. He wants to meet for a drink!” She pinched my face. “A drink, Margaux!”

I smiled and clasped my hands together. “That’s so exciting!”

“It’s not just exciting! It’s a miracle!”

She knelt down and kissed my feet.

“Gross, Mom!”

“No, no, miss grumpy. None of that. It’s all happy, happy, happy, from now on.”

***

At around midnight, the screen door slammed. I raced down the stairs to see if Mom had brought Steven with her. I stood on the last step and watched her walk barefoot past me, holding her high heeled shoes in her hand. I followed her to the kitchen. She opened the liquor cabinet, and pulled out a bottle of something clear.

“Sit down,” she said, her voice hard. She filled a glass, drained it, filled it again.

“Sit down.”

I obeyed. “What happened, Mom?”

“What happened” — she drained another glass — “doesn’t matter. It’s all just the same shit. Now, be a love and pass me the dolls.”

I stood up and then froze. My impulses were split equally between obedience and dissent. “Both?” I asked.

She slammed the table. The salt and pepper shakers rattled. “Damn it! I’ll get them myself. Now, sit down.”
“Mom, you’re drunk. Maybe we should do this tomorrow.”

“It won’t take long.” She filled a glass bowl with water, then sloshingly set it down next to the doll. “Oh heavenly Father,” she slurred. “This blessing is given under the auth—author—authority of Sylvia Barbaret. I baptize this baby, Margaux Barbaret.” She dunked the doll’s head into the bowl. Its face distorted under water. “Come here, Margaux.”

I was going to say, *Which one of us are you talking to?* But thought better of it. I went to her. “There we go,” she said, plucking a hair out of my head. From sheer surprise, I didn’t react. I didn’t even flinch. She dropped my hair onto the ceramic Betty Boop curls. “Now, fetch me a black ribbon from the box under the stairs.”

I dared not disobey, and watched as she tied the dolls to each other, so they were fastened by the waist, their faces pressed against each other, still happily astonished. She worked quickly, with the precise movements of one used to tying knots. “There,” she said, addressing the bounded, frozen Charlottes. “Now you can’t fuck with me.” Mom drifted to the sink and vomited.

***

That night, I hardly slept. I was very frightened, though I couldn’t have explained why. The next day passed in a haze. I avoided Duncan, which wasn’t difficult, considering he never paid attention to me at school. I tried to get a head start so we wouldn’t bike home together. I pedaled very fast, recklessly fast, driven forward by an anxiety I didn’t understand. In the end, he was still faster than me. He caught up within
moments. He looked pained, called after me, asked what he had done. I want to shout at myself, “Don’t stop for him!” It would have been the loving thing to do. Instead, I pulled off the road, dropped my bike, and let myself get carried away by an impulse that I have learned to hate.

Trauma does strange things to memory. I see it now in vivid flashes of disconnected moments that may or may not have happened. I was embarrassed that I wasn’t wet enough, and the friction of skin on skin was painful. Cars zipped passed and I worried about being seen, though we were partially shielded by bushes. Pine needles stabbed my back and I was relieved when it was over. I remember thinking I preferred kissing.

Then we were on our bikes again. Duncan was popping up on his back wheel and I was telling him to stop. Then we were somehow next to each other, biking side by side. Cars kept zipping past, blowing our hair every which way. Duncan stood up on the seat of the bike, lifted his hands off the bars, and laughed at my protests. I can’t recall what happened next. Or, I can, but I remember it vividly in two different ways. In one version, he loses his balance and cracks his head on the pavement. In another, I see he is beginning to lose balance and, in a fit of panic, I reach out to catch him, but end up pushing him instead.

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Something like a fever overtook me. It made me languid and emotionless. Mom nursed me with peppermint-elderberry tea. She apologized for her behavior, but she
didn’t untie the frozen Charlottes. People had been calling the house phone, but we never answered. Mom said it was a fragile time, energetically speaking. The newspaper said it was an accident, a terrible accident. Some of my teachers came to visit. They were puffy-eyed but kind. Poor girl, they said. It was tragic to witness something so gruesome, particularly at such a young age.

Mom took some time off work and the two of us holed away, watching TV and playing card games. Sometimes, she would cry, and I would hold her head in my lap, stroking her long hair. The house smelled like rose-hawthorn tea. Mom told me to drink it because now my heart was broken too. I didn’t know anymore if it was the week or the weekend. I missed a test in Algebra, a test in History, a test in French.

“Isn’t this nice?” Mom said, pulling a knit blanket out of the wooden chest. “Just two girls, taking cover. Two bad luck girls.” She threw the blanket over us and we nestled on the couch for another day of television and tea. “Let’s leave the men to lesser women. We know better. Don’t we, Blossom?”