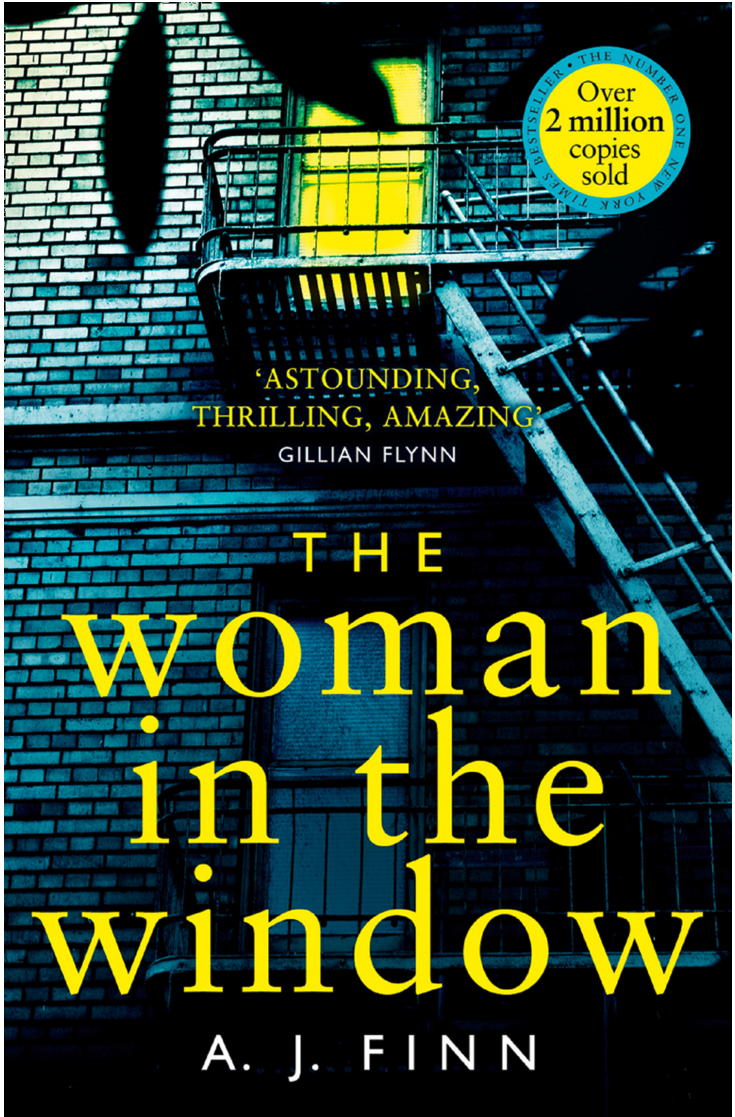
THE NUMBER ONE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
Over 2 million copies sold
'ASTOUNDING, THRILLING, AMAZING'
GILLIAN FLYNN
THE
woman in the window
A. J. FINN

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The Woman in the Window: The most exciting debut thriller of 2018

Аннотация

THE NUMBER ONE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLEROVER 2 MILLION COPIES SOLD!‘Astounding. Thrilling. Amazing’ Gillian Flynn‘One of those rare books that really is unputdownable’ Stephen King'Twisted to the power of max' Val McDermid‘A dark, twisty confection’ Ruth WareWhat did she see?It’s been ten months since Anna Fox last left her home. Ten months during which she has haunted the rooms of her old New York house, lost in her memories, too terrified to step outside.Anna’s lifeline to the real world is her window, where she sits, watching her neighbours. When the Russells move in, Anna is instantly drawn to them. A picture-perfect family, they are an echo of the life that was once hers.But one evening, a scream rips across the silence, and Anna witnesses something horrifying. Now she must uncover the truth about what really happened. But if she does, will anyone believe her? And can she even trust herself?

Содержание

THE
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A. J. FINN

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Praise for *The Woman in the Window*:

'Astounding. Thrilling. Lovely and amazing. I could weave in more superlatives but you get the idea. Finn has created a noir for the new millennium, packed with mesmerizing characters, stunning twists, beautiful writing and a narrator with whom I'd love to split a bottle of pinot. Maybe two bottles—I've got a lot of questions for her' GILLIAN FLYNN

'Twisted to the power of max. Hitchcockian suspense with a 21st-century spin' VAL McDERMID

'A dark, twisty confection with an irresistible film noir premise. Hitchcock would have snapped up the rights in a heartbeat' RUTH WARE

'*The Woman in the Window* is one of those rare books that really is unputdownable. The writing is smooth and often remarkable. The way Finn plays off this totally original story against a background of film noir is both delightful and chilling' STEPHEN KING

'An incredible debut, I absolutely loved it. I read *The Woman in the Window* in a single day. Full of suspense and surprises and told with heart, *The Woman in the Window* will send readers racing through its pages. A stunning first outing from A. J. Finn. He is a tremendous new talent' JANE HARPER, bestselling author of *The Dry*

'Amazing. Riveting. Just plain fantastic!' TESS GERRITSEN

‘A truly phenomenal debut. A taut, utterly compelling story. Smart, heart-wrenching—and really scary’ NICCI FRENCH

‘Amazing. What an elegant, beautifully written thriller. I loved Dr Fox from the word go, and the twists and turns were just exquisite. It’s so rare to find a story so compelling, yet so gracefully told – the flair and class of Hitchcock on every page. It’s quite a cliché, but I was genuinely walking around the house/answering the door/eating my meals with the book in my hand.’ JOANNA CANNON, bestselling author of *The Trouble with Goats and Sheep*

‘Dense, brilliant and unforgettable; tight in focus, widescreen in execution’ JENNY COLGAN

‘A. J. Finn pulled me into the world of *The Woman in the Window* so completely that I barely drew breath until I turned the final page. The vulnerable protagonist, Anna, is isolated from friends, family, community and reality in this gripping, compelling and utterly intriguing novel that is deservedly sure to grab readers by their heartstrings in 2018’ LIZ NUGENT, bestselling author of *Lying in Wait*

‘*The Woman in the Window* reads like a classic Hitchcock movie in novel form, in fact I was half expecting a cameo. Dripping with suspense. Creaking with menace. Beautifully written. There’s a lot of buzz around this book and every single bit of it is totally justified’ SIMON TOYNE, bestselling author of the *Sanctus* trilogy

‘There hasn’t been a debut thriller this good since Scott

Smith's *A Simple Plan* appeared twenty-five years ago. *The Woman in the Window* is compelling, wrenching, and gasp-for-breath exciting—I was blown away' JOE HILL, bestselling author of *Heart-Shaped Box*

'Hitchcock himself would have been proud. Masterfully uncomfortable reading that had me racing to the end for relief' HELEN FIELDS, bestselling author of *Perfect Remains*

'This is a wonderfully dark, elegant thriller, evocative of Hitchcock and classic noir. Tense, twisty and SO beautifully written. Amidst the many twists and turns, which are rolled out to perfection, the descriptions of Anna's dusty, gothic townhouse create a nail-shreddingly claustrophobic atmosphere. And Anna herself is a gift of an unreliable narrator—agoraphobic, alcoholic, by turns tragic and spiky. An absolute one-sitting read' C.J. TUDOR, author of *The Chalk Man*

'*The Woman in the Window* is a tour de force. A twisting, twisted odyssey inside one woman's mind, her illusions, delusions, reality. It left my own mind reeling and my heart pounding. An absolutely gripping thriller' LOUISE PENNY, author of the Chief Inspector Gamache novels

Dedication

for George

Epigraph

I have a feeling that inside you somewhere,
there's something nobody knows about.
—*Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

Contents

SUNDAY,

1

HER HUSBAND'S ALMOST HOME. He'll catch her this time.

There isn't a scrap of curtain, not a blade of blind, in number 212—the rust-red townhome that once housed the newlywed Motts, until recently, until they un-wed. I never met either Mott, but occasionally I check in online: his LinkedIn profile, her Facebook page. Their wedding registry lives on at Macy's. I could still buy them flatware.

As I was saying: not even a window dressing. So number 212 gazes blankly across the street, ruddy and raw, and I gaze right back, watching the mistress of the manor lead her contractor into the guest bedroom. What *is* it about that house? It's where love goes to die.

She's lovely, a genuine redhead, with grass-green eyes and an archipelago of tiny moles trailing across her back. Much prettier than her husband, a Dr. John Miller, psychotherapist—yes, he offers couples counseling—and one of 436,000 John Millers online. This particular specimen works near Gramercy Park and does not accept insurance. According to the deed of sale, he paid $3.6 million for his house. Business must be good.

I know both more and less about the wife. Not much of a homemaker, clearly; the Millers moved in eight weeks ago, yet still those windows are bare, *tsk-tsk*. She practices yoga three

times a week, tripping down the steps with her magic-carpet mat rolled beneath one arm, legs shrink-wrapped in Lululemon. And she must volunteer someplace—she leaves the house a little past eleven on Mondays and Fridays, around the time I get up, and returns between five and five thirty, just as I'm settling in for my nightly film. (This evening's selection: *The Man Who Knew Too Much,* for the umpteenth time. I am the woman who viewed too much.)

I've noticed she likes a drink in the afternoon, as do I. Does she also like a drink in the morning? As do I?

But her age is a mystery, although she's certainly younger than Dr. Miller, and younger than me (nimbler, too); her name I can only guess at. I think of her as Rita, because she looks like Hayworth in *Gilda*. "I'm not in the least interested"—love that line.

I myself am very much interested. Not in her body—the pale ridge of her spine, her shoulder blades like stunted wings, the baby-blue bra clasping her breasts: whenever these loom within my lens, any of them, I look away—but in the life she leads. The lives. Two more than I've got.

Her husband rounded the corner a moment ago, just past noon, not long after his wife pressed the front door shut, contractor in tow. This is an aberration: On Sundays, Dr. Miller returns to the house at quarter past three, without fail.

Yet now the good doctor strides down the sidewalk, breath chugging from his mouth, briefcase swinging from one hand,

wedding band winking. I zoom in on his feet: oxblood oxfords, slick with polish, collecting the autumn sunlight, kicking it off with each step.

I lift the camera to his head. My Nikon D5500 doesn't miss much, not with that Opteka lens: unruly marled hair, glasses spindly and cheap, islets of stubble in the shallow ponds of his cheeks. He takes better care of his shoes than his face.

Back to number 212, where Rita and the contractor are speedily disrobing. I could dial directory assistance, call the house, warn her. I won't. Watching is like nature photography: You don't interfere with the wildlife.

Dr. Miller is maybe half a minute away from the front door. His wife's mouth glosses the contractor's neck. Off with her blouse.

Four more steps. Five, six, seven. Twenty seconds now, at most.

She seizes his tie between her teeth, grins at him. Her hands fumble with his shirt. He grazes on her ear.

Her husband hops over a buckled slab of sidewalk. Fifteen seconds.

I can almost hear the tie slithering out of his collar. She whips it across the room.

Ten seconds. I zoom in again, the snout of the camera practically twitching. His hand dives into his pocket, surfaces with a haul of keys. Seven seconds.

She unlooses her ponytail, hair swinging onto her shoulders.

Three seconds. He mounts the steps.

She folds her arms around his back, kisses him deep.

He stabs the key into the lock. Twists.

I zoom in on her face, the eyes sprung wide. She's heard.

I snap a photo.

And then his briefcase flops open.

A flock of papers bursts from it, scatters in the wind. I jolt the camera back to Dr. Miller, to the crisp "Shoot" his mouth shapes; he sets the briefcase on the stoop, stamps a few sheets beneath those glinting shoes, scoops others into his arms. One tearaway scrap has snagged in the fingers of a tree. He doesn't notice.

Rita again, plunging her arms into her sleeves, pushing her hair back. She speeds from the room. The contractor, marooned, hops off the bed and retrieves his tie, stuffs it into his pocket.

I exhale, air hissing out of a balloon. I hadn't realized I was holding my breath.

The front door opens: Rita surges down the steps, calling to her husband. He turns; I expect he smiles—I can't see. She stoops, peels some papers from the sidewalk.

The contractor appears at the door, one hand sunk in his pocket, the other raised in greeting. Dr. Miller waves back. He ascends to the landing, lifts his briefcase, and the two men shake. They walk inside, trailed by Rita.

Well. Maybe next time.

MONDAY,

2

THE CAR DRONED PAST a moment ago, slow and somber, like a hearse, taillights sparking in the dark. “New neighbors,” I tell my daughter.

“Which house?”

“Across the park. Two-oh-seven.” They’re out there now, dim as ghosts in the dusk, exhuming boxes from the trunk.

She slurps.

“What are you eating?” I ask. It’s Chinese night, of course; she’s eating lo mein.

“Lo mein.”

“Not while you’re talking to Mommy, you’re not.”

She slurps again, chews. “*Mo-om*.” This is a tug-of-war between us; she’s whittled *Mommy* down, against my wishes, to something blunt and stumpy. “Let it go,” Ed advises—but then he’s still Daddy.

“You should go say hi,” Olivia suggests.

“I’d like to, pumpkin.” I drift upstairs, to the second floor, where the view’s better. “Oh: There are pumpkins *everywhere*. All the neighbors have one. The Grays have four.” I’ve reached the landing, glass in hand, wine lapping at my lip. “I wish I could pick out a pumpkin for you. Tell Daddy to get you one.” I sip, swallow. “Tell him to get you two, one for you and one for me.”

“Okay.”

I glimpse myself in the dark mirror of the half bath. “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

“Yes.”

“Not lonely?” She never had real friends in New York; she was too shy, too small.

“Nope.”

I peer into the dark at the top of the stairs, into the gloom above. During the day, sun drops through the domed skylight overhead; at night, it’s a wide-open eye gazing into the depths of the stairwell. “Do you miss Punch?”

“Nope.” She didn’t get along with the cat, either. He scratched her one Christmas morning, flashed his claws across her wrist, two quick rakes north-south east-west; a bright grid of blood sprang to the skin, tic-tac-toe, and Ed nearly pitched him out the window. I look for him now, find him swirled on the library sofa, watching me.

“Let me talk to Daddy, pumpkin.” I mount the next flight, the runner coarse against my soles. Rattan. What were we thinking? It stains so easily.

“Hey there, slugger,” he greets me. “New neighbors?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you just get new neighbors?”

“That was two months ago. Two-twelve. The Millers.” I pivot, descending the stairs.

“Where are these other people?”

“Two-oh-seven. Across the park.”

"Neighborhood's changing."

I reach the landing, round it. "They didn't bring much with them. Just a car."

"Guess the movers will come later."

"Guess so."

Silence. I sip.

Now I'm in the living room again, by the fire, shadows steeped in the corners. "Listen …" Ed begins.

"They have a son."

"What?"

"There's a son," I repeat, pressing my forehead against the cold glass of the window. Sodium lamps have yet to sprout in this province of Harlem, and the street is lit only by a lemon-wedge of moon, but still I can make them out in silhouette: a man, a woman, and a tall boy, ferrying boxes to the front door. "A teenager," I add.

"Easy, cougar."

Before I can stop myself: "I wish you were here."

It catches me off guard. Ed too, by the sound of it. There's a pause.

Then: "You need more time," he says.

I stay quiet.

"The doctors say that too much contact isn't healthy."

"I'm the doctor who said that."

"You're one of them."

A knuckle-crack behind me—a spark in the fireplace. The

flames settle, muttering in the grate.

"Why don't you invite those new people over?" he asks.

I drain my glass. "I think that's enough for tonight."

"Anna."

"Ed."

I can almost hear him breathe. "I'm sorry we're not there with you."

I can almost hear my heart. "I am, too."

Punch has tracked me downstairs. I scoop him up in one arm, retreat to the kitchen. Set the phone on the counter. One more glass before bed.

Grasping the bottle by its throat, I turn to the window, toward the three ghosts haunting the sidewalk, and hoist it in a toast.

TUESDAY,

3

THIS TIME LAST YEAR, we'd planned to sell the house, had even engaged a broker; Olivia would enroll in a Midtown school the following September, and Ed had found us a Lenox Hill gut job. "It'll be *fun,*" he promised. "I'll install a bidet, just for you." I batted him on the shoulder.

"What's a bidet?" asked Olivia.

But then he left, and she with him. So it flayed my heart all over again when, last night, I recalled the first words of our stillborn listing: LOVINGLY RESTORED LANDMARK 19TH-CENTURY HARLEM GEM! WONDERFUL FAMILY HOME! *Landmark* and *gem* up for debate, I think. *Harlem* inarguable, likewise *19th-century* (1884). *Lovingly restored,* I can attest to that, and expensively, too. *Wonderful family home,* true.

My domain and its outposts:

Basement: Or maisonette, according to our broker. Sub-street, floor-through, with its own door; kitchen, bath, bedroom, tiny office. Ed's workspace for eight years—he'd drape the table in blueprints, tack contractor briefs to the wall. Currently tenanted.

Garden: Patio, really, accessible via the first floor. A sprawl of limestone tile; a pair of disused Adirondack chairs; a young ash tree slouched in the far corner, gangling and lonely, like a friendless teenager. Every so often I long to hug it.

First floor: Ground floor, if you're British, or *premier étage,*

if you're French. (I am neither, but I spent time in Oxford during my residency—in a maisonette, as it happens—and this past July began studying *français* online.) Kitchen—open-plan and "gracious" (broker again), with a rear door leading to the garden and a side door to the park. White-birch floors, now blotched with puddles of merlot. In the hall a powder room—the red room, I call it. "Tomato Red," per the Benjamin Moore catalogue. Living room, equipped with sofa and coffee table and paved in Persian rug, still plush underfoot.

Second floor: The library (Ed's; shelves full, cracked spines and foxed dust jackets, all packed tight as teeth) and the study (mine; spare, airy, a desktop Mac poised on an IKEA table—my online-chess battlefield). Second half bath, this one blued in "Heavenly Rapture," which is ambitious language for a room with a toilet. And a deep utility closet I might one day convert into a darkroom, if I ever migrate from digital to film. I think I'm losing interest.

Third floor: The master (mistress?) bedroom and bath. I've spent much of my time in bed this year; it's one of those sleep-system mattresses, dually adjustable. Ed programmed his side for an almost downy softness; mine is set to firm. "You're sleeping on a brick," he said once, strumming his fingers on the top sheet.

"You're sleeping on a cumulus," I told him. Then he kissed me, long and slow.

After they left, during those black, blank months when I could scarcely prize myself from the sheets, I would roll slowly, like a

curling wave, from one end to the other, spooling and unspooling the bedclothes around me.

Also the guest bedroom and en-suite.

Fourth floor: Servants' quarters once upon a time, now Olivia's bedroom and a second spare. Some nights I haunt her room like a ghost. Some days I stand in the doorway, watch the slow traffic of dust motes in the sun. Some weeks I don't visit the fourth floor at all, and it starts to melt into memory, like the feel of rain on my skin.

Anyway. I'll speak to them again tomorrow. Meanwhile, no sign of the people across the park.

WEDNESDAY,

4

A RANGY TEENAGER BURSTS from the front door of number 207, like a horse from the starting gate, and gallops east down the street, past my front windows. I don't get a good look —I've awoken early, after a late night with *Out of the Past,* and am trying to decide if a swallow of merlot might be wise; but I catch a bolt of blond, a backpack slung from one shoulder. Then he's gone.

I slug a glass, float upstairs, settle myself at my desk. Reach for my Nikon.

In the kitchen of 207 I can see the father, big and broad, backlit by a television screen. I press the camera to my eye and zoom in: the *Today* show. I might head down and switch on my own TV, I muse, watch alongside my neighbor. Or I might view it right here, on his set, through the lens.

I decide to do that.

IT'S BEEN a while since I took in the facade, but Google furnishes a street view: whitewashed stone, faintly Beaux-Arts, capped with a widow's walk. From here, of course, I can set my sights only on the side of the house; through its east windows, I've a clear shot into the kitchen, a second-floor parlor, and a bedroom above.

Yesterday a platoon of movers arrived, hauling sofas and television sets and an ancient armoire. The husband has been

directing traffic. I haven't seen the wife since the night they moved in. I wonder what she looks like.

I'M ABOUT to checkmate Rook&Roll this afternoon when I hear the bell. I shuffle downstairs, slap the buzzer, unlock the hall door, and find my tenant looming there, looking, as they say, rough and ready. He *is* handsome, with his long jaw, his eyes like trapdoors, dark and deep. Gregory Peck after a late evening. (I'm not the only one who thinks so. David likes to entertain the occasional lady friend, I've noticed. Heard, really.)

"I'm heading to Brooklyn tonight," he reports.

I drag a hand through my hair. "Okay."

"You need me to take care of anything before I go?" It sounds like a proposition, like a line from a noir. *You just put your lips together and blow.*

"Thanks. I'm fine."

He gazes past me, squints. "Bulbs need changing? It's dark in here."

"I like it dim," I say. *Like my men,* I want to add. Is that the joke from *Airplane*? "Have …" Fun? A good time? Sex? "… a good time."

He turns to go.

"You know you can just come on in through the basement door," I tell him, trying for playful. "Chances are I'll be home." I hope he'll smile. He's been here two months, and I haven't once seen him grin.

He nods. He leaves.

I close the door, double-bolt the lock.

I STUDY myself in the mirror. Wrinkles like spokes around my eyes. A slur of dark hair, tigered here and there with gray, loose about my shoulders; stubble in the scoop of my armpit. My belly has gone slack. Dimples stipple my thighs. Skin almost luridly pale, veins flowing violet within my arms and legs.

Dimples, stipples, stubble, wrinkles: I need work. I had a down-home appeal once, according to some, according to Ed. "I thought of you as the girl next door," he said sadly, toward the end.

I look down at my toes rippling against the tile—long and fine, one (or ten) of my better features, but a bit small-predator right now. I rummage through my medicine cabinet, pill bottles stacked atop one another like totem poles, and excavate a nail clipper. At last, a problem I can fix.

THURSDAY,

5

THE DEED OF SALE POSTED YESTERDAY. My new neighbors are Alistair and Jane Russell; they paid $3.45 million for their humble abode. Google tells me that he's a partner at a midsize consultancy, previously based in Boston. She's untraceable—you try plugging *Jane Russell* into a search engine.

It's a lively neighborhood they've chosen.

The Miller home across the street—abandon all hope, ye who enter here—is one of five townhouses that I can survey from the south-facing windows of my own. To the east stand the identical-twin Gray Sisters: same box cornices crowning the windows, same bottle-green front doors. In the right—the slightly Grayer Sister, I think—live Henry and Lisa Wasserman, longtime residents; "Four decades and counting," bragged Mrs. Wasserman when we moved in. She'd dropped by to tell us ("to your faces") how much she ("and my Henry") resented the arrival of "another yuppie clan" in what "used to be a real neighborhood."

Ed fumed. Olivia named her stuffed rabbit Yuppie.

The Wassermen, as we dubbed them, haven't spoken to me since, even though I'm on my own now, a clan unto myself. They don't seem much friendlier toward the residents of the other Gray Sister, a family called, fittingly, Gray. Twin teenage girls, father a partner at a boutique M&A firm, mother an eager book-club

hostess. This month's selection, advertised on their Meetup page and under review right now, in the Grays' front room, by eight middle-aged women: *Jude the Obscure*.

I read it too, imagined I was one of the group, munching coffee cake (none handy) and sipping wine (this I managed). "What did you think of *Jude,* Anna?" Christine Gray would ask me, and I'd say I found it rather obscure. We'd laugh. They're laughing now, in fact. I try laughing with them. I take a sip.

West of the Millers are the Takedas. The husband is Japanese, the mother white, their son unearthly beautiful. He's a cellist; in the warm months, he rehearses with the parlor windows thrown open, so Ed used to hoist ours in turn. We danced one night in some long-gone June, Ed and I, to the strains of a Bach suite: swaying in the kitchen, my head on his shoulder, his fingers knotted behind me, as the boy across the street played on.

This past summer, his music wandered toward the house, approached my living room, knocked politely on the glass: *Let me in*. I didn't, couldn't—I never open the windows, never—but still I could hear it murmuring, pleading: *Let me in. Let me in!*

Number 206–208, a vacant double-wide brownstone, flanks the Takedas' house. An LLC bought it two Novembers ago, but no one moved in. A puzzle. For nearly a year, scaffolding clung to its facade like hanging gardens; it disappeared overnight—this was a few months before Ed and Olivia left—and since then, nothing.

Behold my southern empire and its subjects. None of these

people were my friends; most of them I'd not met more than once or twice. Urban life, I suppose. Maybe the Wassermen were onto something. I wonder if they know what's become of me.

A DERELICT Catholic school abuts my house to the east, practically leans against it: St. Dymphna's, shuttered since we moved in. We'd threaten to send Olivia there when she misbehaved. Pitted brown stone, windows dark with grime. Or at least that's what I remember; it's been a while since I laid eyes on it.

And directly west is the park—tiny, two lots across and two deep, with a narrow brick path connecting our street to the one directly north. A sycamore stands sentry at either end, leaves flaming; an iron fence, low to the ground, hems in both sides. It is, as that quotable broker said, very quaint.

Then there's the house beyond the park: number 207. The Lords sold it two months ago and promptly cleared out, flying south to their retirement villa in Vero Beach. Enter Alistair and Jane Russell.

Jane Russell! My physical therapist had never heard of her. "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,*" I said.

"Not in my experience," she replied. Bina's younger; perhaps that's it.

All this was earlier today; before I could argue with her, she laced one of my legs over the other, capsized me onto my right side. The pain left me breathless. "Your hamstrings need this," she assured me.

"You bitch," I gasped.

She pressed my knee to the floor. "You're not paying me to go easy on you."

I winced. "Can I pay you to leave?"

Bina visits once a week to help me hate life, as I like to say, and to provide updates on her sexual adventures, which are about as exciting as my own. Only in Bina's case it's because she's picky. "Half the guys on these apps are using five-year-old photos," she'll complain, her waterfall of hair poured over one shoulder, "and the other half are married. And the *other* half are single for a reason."

That's three halves, but you don't debate math with someone who's rotating your spine.

I joined Tinder a month ago "just to see," I told myself. Tinder, Bina had explained to me, matchmakes you with people whose paths you've crossed. But what if you haven't crossed paths with anyone? What if you forever navigate the same four thousand vertically arranged square feet, and nothing beyond them?

I don't know. The first profile I spotted was David's. I instantly deleted my account.

IT'S BEEN four days since I glimpsed Jane Russell. She certainly wasn't proportioned like the original, with her torpedo breasts, her wasp waist, but then neither am I. The son I've seen only that once, yesterday morning. The husband, however—wide shoulders, streaky brows, a blade of a nose—is on permanent

display in his house: whisking eggs in the kitchen, reading in the parlor, occasionally glancing into the bedroom, as though in search of someone.

FRIDAY,

6

MY FRENCH *LEÇON* TODAY, and *Les Diaboliques* tonight. A rat-bastard husband, his "little ruin" of a wife, a mistress, a murder, a vanished corpse. Can you beat a vanished corpse?

But first, duty calls. I swallow my pills, park at my desktop, knock the mouse to one side, enter the passcode. And log on to the Agora.

At any hour, at *all* hours, there are at least a few dozen users checked in, a constellation sprawled across the world. Some of them I know by name: Talia from the Bay Area; Phil in Boston; a lawyer from Manchester with the unlawyerly name of Mitzi; Pedro, a Bolivian whose halting English is probably no worse than my pidgin French. Others go by handles, me included—in a cute moment, I opted for Annagoraphobe, but then I outed myself to another user as a psychologist, and word swiftly spread. So now I'm thedoctorisin. She'll see you now.

Agoraphobia: in translation the fear of the marketplace, in practice the term for a range of anxiety disorders. First documented in the late 1800s, then "codified as an independent diagnostic entity" a century later, though largely comorbid with panic disorder. You can read all about it, if you like, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. *DSM-5* for short. It's always amused me, that title; it sounds like a movie franchise. *Liked* Mental Disorders 4*? You'll*

love the sequel!

The medical literature is uncommonly imaginative when it comes to diagnostics. "Agoraphobic fears … include being outside the home alone; being in a crowd, or standing in a line; being on a bridge." What I wouldn't give to stand on a bridge. Hell, what I wouldn't give to stand in a line. I like this one, too: "Being in the center of a theater row." Center seats, no less.

Pages 113 through 133, if you're interested.

Many of us—the most severely afflicted, the ones grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder—are housebound, hidden from the messy, massy world outside. Some dread the heaving crowds; others, the storm of traffic. For me, it's the vast skies, the endless horizon, the sheer exposure, the crushing pressure of the outdoors. "Open spaces," the *DSM-5* calls it vaguely, anxious to get to its 186 footnotes.

As a doctor, I say that the sufferer seeks an environment she can control. Such is the clinical take. As a sufferer (and that *is* the word), I say that agoraphobia hasn't ravaged my life so much as become it.

THE AGORA welcome screen greets me. I scan the message boards, comb the threads. 3 MONTHS STUCK IN MY HOUSE. I hear you, Kala88; almost ten months and counting here. AGORA DEPENDENT ON MOOD? Sounds more like social phobia, EarlyRiser. Or a troubled thyroid. STILL CAN'T GET A JOB. Oh, Megan—I know, and I'm sorry. Thanks to Ed, I don't need one, but I miss my patients. I worry about my patients.

A newcomer has emailed me. I direct her to the survival manual I whipped up back in the spring: "So You Have a Panic Disorder"—I think it sounds agreeably jaunty.

Q: How do I eat?

A: Blue Apron, Plated, HelloFresh … there are lots of delivery options available in the US! Those abroad can likely find similar services.

Q: How do I get my medication?

A: All the major pharmacies in the US now come straight to your door. Have your doctor speak to your local pharmacy if there's a problem.

Q: How do I keep the house clean?

A: Clean it! Hire a cleaning agency or do it yourself.

(I do neither. My place could use a wipe-down.)

Q: What about trash disposal?

A: Your cleaner can take care of this, or you can arrange for a friend to help.

Q: How do I keep from getting bored?

A: Now, *that's* the tough question …

Et cetera. I'm pleased with the document, on the whole. Would have loved to have had it myself.

Now a chat box appears on my screen.

Sally4th: hello doc!

I can feel a smile twitching on my lips. Sally: twenty-six, based in Perth, was attacked earlier this year, on Easter Sunday. She suffered a broken arm and severe contusions to her eyes and

face; her rapist was never identified or apprehended. Sally spent four months indoors, isolated in the most isolated city in the world, but has been getting out of the house for more than ten weeks now—good on her, as she'd say. A psychologist, aversion therapy, and propranolol. Nothing like a beta-blocker.

thedoctorisin: Hello yourself! All okay?

Sally4th: all ok! picnic this morning!!

She's always been fond of exclamation marks, even in the depths of depression.

thedoctorisin: How was it?

Sally4th: i survived!:)

She likes emoticons, too.

thedoctorisin: You are a survivor! How is the Inderal?

Sally4th: good, i'm down to 80mg

thedoctorisin: 2x a day?

Sally4th: 1x!!

thedoctorisin: Minimum dosage! Fantastic! Side effects?

Sally4th: dry eyes, that's it

That's lucky. I'm on a similar drug (among others), and from time to time the headaches nearly rupture my brain. PROPRANOLOL CAN LEAD TO MIGRAINE, HEART ARRHYTHMIA, SHORTNESS OF BREATH, DEPRESSION, HALLUCINATIONS, SEVERE SKIN REACTION, NAUSEA, DIARRHEA, DECREASED LIBIDO, INSOMNIA, AND DROWSINESS. "What that medicine needs is more side effects," Ed said to me.

"Spontaneous combustion," I suggested.

"The screaming shits."

"Slow, lingering death."

thedoctorisin: Any relapses?

Sally4th: i had a wobble last week

Sally4th: but got thru it

Sally4th: breathing exercises

thedoctorisin: The old paper bag.

Sally4th: i feel like an idiot but it works

thedoctorisin: It does indeed. Well done.

Sally4th: thanx :)

I sip my wine. Another chat box pops up: Andrew, a man I met on a site for classic-film enthusiasts.

Graham Greene series @ Angelika this w/e?

I pause. *The Fallen Idol* is a favorite—the doomed butler; the fateful paper plane—and it's been fifteen years since I watched *Ministry of Fear*. And old movies, of course, brought me and Ed together.

But I haven't explained my situation to Andrew. *Unavailable* sums it up.

I return to Sally.

thedoctorisin: Are you keeping up with your psychologist?

Sally4th: yes :) thanx. down to just 1x week. she says progress is excellent

Sally4th: meds and beds is the key

thedoctorisin: Are you sleeping well?

Sally4th: i still get bad dreams

Sally4th: u?

thedoctorisin: I'm sleeping a lot.

Too much, probably. I should mention that to Dr. Fielding. Not sure I will.

Sally4th: ur progress? u fit for fight?

thedoctorisin: I'm not as quick as you! PTSD is a beast. But I'm tough.

Sally4th: yes u r!

Sally4th: just wanted to check on my friends here—thinking about u all!!!

I bid Sally adieu just as my tutor dials in on Skype. "Bonjour, Yves," I mutter to myself. I pause for a moment before answering; I look forward to seeing him, I realize—that inky hair, that dark bloom to his skin. Those eyebrows that bolt into each other and buckle like *l'accent circonflexe* when my accent puzzles him, which is often.

If Andrew checks in again, I'll ignore him for now. Maybe for good. Classic cinema: That's what I share with Ed. No one else.

I UPEND the hourglass on my desk, watch how the little pyramid of sand seems to pulse as the grains dimple it. So much time. Nearly a year. I haven't left the house in nearly a year.

Well, almost. Five times in eight weeks I've managed to venture outside, out back, into the garden. My "secret weapon," as Dr. Fielding calls it, is my umbrella—Ed's umbrella, really, a rickety London Fog contraption. Dr. Fielding, a rickety

contraption himself, will stand like a scarecrow in the garden as I push the door open, the umbrella brandished before me. A flick of the spring and it blooms; I stare intently at the bowl of its body, at its ribs and skin. Dark tartan, four squares of black arranged across each fold of canopy, four lines of white in every warp and weft. Four squares, four lines. Four blacks, four whites. Breathe in, count to four. Breathe out, count to four. Four. The magic number.

The umbrella projects straight ahead of me, like a saber, like a shield.

And then I step outside.

Out, two, three, four.

In, two, three, four.

The nylon glows against the sun. I descend the first step (there are, naturally, four) and tilt the umbrella toward the sky, just a bit, peek at his shoes, his shins. The world teems in my peripheral vision, like water about to flood a diving bell.

"Remember, you've got your secret weapon," Dr. Fielding calls.

It's not a secret, I want to cry; it's a fucking umbrella, wielded in broad daylight.

Out, two, three, four; in, two, three, four—and unexpectedly it works; I'm conducted down the steps (out, two, three, four) and across a few yards of lawn (in, two, three, four). Until the panic wells within, a rising tide that swamps my sight, drowns out Dr. Fielding's voice. And then … best not to think of it.

SATURDAY,

7

A STORM. THE ASH TREE COWERS, the limestone glowers, dark and damp. I remember dropping a glass onto the patio once; it burst like a bubble, merlot flaring across the ground and flooding the veins of the stonework, dark and bloody, crawling toward my feet.

Sometimes, when the skies are low, I imagine myself overhead, in a plane or on a cloud, surveying the island below: the bridges spoked from its east coast; the cars sucked toward it like flies swarming a lightbulb.

It's been so long since I felt the rain. Or wind—the caress of wind, I nearly said, except that sounds like something you'd read in a supermarket romance.

It's true, though. And snow too, but snow I never want to feel again.

A PEACH was mixed in with my Granny Smiths in this morning's FreshDirect delivery. I wonder how that happened.

THE NIGHT we met, at an art-house screening of *The 39 Steps,* Ed and I compared histories. My mother, I told him, had weaned me on old thrillers and classic noir; as a teenager I preferred the company of Gene Tierney and Jimmy Stewart to that of my classmates. "Can't decide if that's sweet or sad," said Ed, who until that evening had never seen a black-and-white movie. Within two hours, his mouth was on mine.

You mean your mouth was on mine, I imagine him saying.

In the years before Olivia, we'd watch a movie at least once a week—all the vintage suspense flicks from my childhood: *Double Indemnity*, *Gaslight*, *Saboteur*, *The Big Clock* … We lived in monochrome those nights. For me, it was a chance to revisit old friends; for Ed, it was an opportunity to make new ones.

And we'd make lists. The *Thin Man* franchise, ranked from best (the original) to worst (*Song of the Thin Man*). Top movies from the bumper crop of 1944. Joseph Cotten's finest moments.

I can do lists on my own, of course. For instance: best Hitchcock films not made by Hitchcock. Here we go:

Le Boucher, the early Claude Chabrol that Hitch, according to lore, wished he'd directed. *Dark Passage,* with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall—a San Francisco valentine, all velveteen with fog, and antecedent to any movie in which a character goes under the knife to disguise himself. *Niagara,* starring Marilyn Monroe; *Charade,* starring Audrey Hepburn; *Sudden Fear!,* starring Joan Crawford's eyebrows. *Wait Until Dark:* Hepburn again, a blind woman stranded in her basement apartment. I'd go berserk in a basement apartment.

Now, movies that postdate Hitch: *The Vanishing,* with its sucker-punch finale. *Frantic,* Polanski's ode to the master. *Side Effects,* which begins as a Big Pharma screed before slithering like an eel into another genre altogether.

Okay.

Popular film misquotes. "Play it again, Sam": *Casablanca,*

allegedly, except neither Bogie nor Bergman ever said it. “He’s alive”: Frankenstein doesn’t gender his monster; cruelly, it’s just “It’s alive.” “Elementary, my dear Watson” does crop up in the first Holmes film of the talkie era, but appears nowhere in the Conan Doyle canon.

Okay.

What next?

I FLIP open my laptop, visit the Agora. A message from Mitzi in Manchester; a progress report courtesy of Dimples2016 in Arizona. Nothing of note.

IN THE front parlor of number 210, the Takeda boy draws his bow across the cello. Farther east, the four Grays flee the rain, charging up their front steps, laughing. Across the park, Alistair Russell fills a glass at the kitchen tap.

8

LATE AFTERNOON, AND I'M POURING a California pinot noir into a tumbler when the doorbell chimes. I drop my glass.

It explodes, a long tongue of wine licking the white birch. "Fuck," I shout. (Something I've noticed: In the absence of others, I swear more often and more loudly. Ed would be appalled. *I'm* appalled.)

I've just seized a fistful of paper towels when the bell rings again. *Who the hell?* I think—or have I said it? David left an hour ago for a job in East Harlem—I watched him from Ed's library—and I'm not expecting any deliveries. I stoop, cram the towels against the mess, then march to the door.

Framed within the intercom screen is a tall kid in a slim jacket, hands clasping a small white box. It's the Russell boy.

I press the Talk button. "Yes?" I call. Less inviting than *Hello,* more gracious than *Who the hell?*

"I live across the park," he says, almost shouting, his voice improbably sweet. "My mom asked me to give you this." I watch him thrust the box toward the speaker; then, unsure where the camera might be, he slowly pivots, arms orbiting overhead.

"You can just …" I begin. Should I ask him to deposit it in the hall? Not very neighborly, I suppose, but I haven't bathed in two days, and the cat might nip at him.

He's still on the stoop, box held aloft.

"… come in," I finish, and I tap the buzzer.

I hear the lock unbuckle and move to the door, cautiously, the way Punch approaches unfamiliar people—or used to, back when unfamiliar people visited the house.

A shadow piles up against the frosted glass, dim and slim, like a sapling. I shoot the bolts, turn the knob.

He's tall indeed, baby-faced and blue-eyed, with a flap of sandy hair and a faint scar notching one eyebrow, trailing up his forehead. Maybe fifteen years old. He looks like a boy I once knew, once kissed—summer camp in Maine, a quarter century ago. I like him.

"I'm Ethan," he says.

"Come in," I repeat.

He enters. "It's dark in here."

I flick the switch on the wall.

As I examine him, he examines the room: the paintings, the cat spread along the chaise, the mound of sodden towels melting on the kitchen floor. "What happened?"

"I had an accident," I say. "I'm Anna. Fox," I add, in case he goes in for formalities; I'm old enough to be his (young) mother.

We shake hands, then he offers me the box, bright and tight and lashed with ribbon. "For you," he says shyly.

"Just set that down over there. Can I get you something to drink?"

He moves to the sofa. "Could I have some water?"

"Sure." I return to the kitchen, clear up the wreckage. "Ice?"

"No, thanks." I fill a glass, then another, ignoring the bottle of pinot noir on the counter.

The box squats on the coffee table, next to my laptop. I'm still logged in to the Agora, having talked DiscoMickey through an incipient panic attack a little while ago; his thank-you note is writ large across the screen. "Right," I say, sitting beside Ethan, setting his glass in front of him. I snap the computer shut and reach for the gift. "Let's see what we've got here."

I tug the ribbon, lift the flap, and from a nest of tissue remove a candle—the kind with blooms and stalks trapped inside like insects in amber. I bring it to my face, making a show of it.

"Lavender," Ethan volunteers.

"I thought so." I inhale. "I lav lovender." Try again. "I love lavender."

He smiles a bit, one corner of his mouth tipping upward, as though tugged by a string. He's going to be a handsome man, I realize, in just a few years. That scar—women will love it. Girls might love it already. Or boys.

"My mom asked me to give this to you. Like, days ago."

"That's very thoughtful. New neighbors are supposed to give *you* gifts."

"One lady came by already," he says. "She told us that we didn't need such a big house if we're such a small family."

"I bet that was Mrs. Wasserman."

"Yes."

"Ignore her."

"We did."

Punch has dropped from the chaise onto the floor and approaches us gingerly. Ethan leans forward, lays his hand on the rug, palm upward. The cat pauses, then slithers toward us, sniffing at Ethan's fingers, licking them. Ethan giggles.

"I love cats' tongues," he says, as though confessing.

"So do I." I sip my water. "They're covered in little barbs—little needles," I say, in case he doesn't know the word *barb.* I realize I'm not certain how to speak to a teenager; my oldest patients were twelve. "Shall I light the candle?"

Ethan shrugs, smiles. "Sure."

I find a matchbox in the desk, cherry red, the words THE RED CAT marching across it; I remember dining there with Ed, more than two years ago now. Or three. Chicken tagine, I think, and as I recall, he praised the wine. I wasn't drinking as much then.

I strike a match, light the wick. "Look at that," I say as a little claw of flame scratches at the air; the glow blossoms, the blossoms glow. "How lovely."

There's a soft silence. Punch figure-eights around Ethan's legs, then vaults to his lap. Ethan laughs, a bright bark.

"I think he likes you."

"I guess so," he says, crooking a finger behind the cat's ear and gently niggling it.

"He doesn't like most people. Bad temper."

A low growl, like a quiet motor. Punch is actually purring.

Ethan grins. “Is he an indoor-only cat?”

“He has a cat flap in the kitchen door.” I point to it. “But mostly he stays inside.”

“Good boy,” Ethan murmurs as Punch burrows into his armpit.

“How are you liking your new house?” I ask.

He pauses, kneading the cat’s skull with his knuckles. “I miss the old one,” he says after a moment.

“I bet. Where did you live before?” I already know the answer, of course.

“Boston.”

“What brought you to New York?” I know this one, too.

“My dad got a new job.” A transfer, technically, but I’m hardly going to argue. “My room’s bigger here,” he says, as though the thought has just occurred to him.

“The people who lived there before you did a big renovation.”

“My mom says it was a gut job.”

“Exactly. A gut job. And they combined some of the rooms upstairs.”

“Have you been to my house?” he asks.

“I’ve been a few times. I didn’t know them very well—the Lords. But they had a holiday party every year, so that’s when I’d come over.” It was nearly a year ago, in fact, that I last visited. Ed was there with me. He left two weeks later.

I’ve started to relax. For a moment I think it’s Ethan’s company—he’s soft-spoken and easy; even the cat approves—but then I

realize that I'm reverting to analyst mode, to the seesaw give-and-take of Q&A. Curiosity and compassion: the tools of my trade.

And in an instant, for a moment, I'm back there, in my office on East Eighty-Eighth, the small hushed room sunk in dim light, two deep chairs opposite each other, a pond of blue rug between them. The radiator hisses.

The door drifts open, and there in the waiting area is the sofa, the wooden table; the slithering stacks of *Highlights* and *Ranger Rick;* the bin brimming with chunks of Lego; the white-noise machine purring in the corner.

And Wesley's door. Wesley, my business partner, my grad-school mentor, the man who recruited me into private practice. Wesley Brill—Wesley Brilliant, we called him, he of the sloppy hair and mismatched socks, the lightning brain and thunder voice. I see him in his office, slouched in his Eames lounger, long legs arrowed toward the center of the room, a book propped in his lap. The window is open, gasping in the winter air. He's been smoking. He looks up.

"Hello, Fox," he says.

"My room is bigger than my old room," Ethan repeats.

I settle back, fold one leg over the other. It feels almost absurdly posed. I wonder when I last crossed my legs. "Where are you going to school?"

"Home school," he says. "My mom teaches me." Before I can respond, he nods at a picture on a side table. "Is that your family?"

"Yes. That's my husband and my daughter. He's Ed and she's

Olivia."

"Are they home?"

"No, they don't live here. We're separated."

"Oh." He strokes Punch's back. "How old is she?"

"She's eight. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen in February."

It's the sort of thing Olivia would say. He's older than he looks.

"My daughter was born in February. Valentine's Day."

"I'm the twenty-eighth."

"So close to leap year," I say.

He nods. "What do you do?"

"I'm a psychologist. I work with children."

He wrinkles his nose. "Why would children need a psychologist?"

"All sorts of reasons. Some of them have trouble in school, some of them have difficulty at home. Some of them have a tough time moving to a new place."

He says nothing.

"So I suppose that if you're homeschooled, you have to meet friends outside of class."

He sighs. "My dad found a swim league for me to join."

"How long have you swum?"

"Since I was five."

"You must be good."

"I'm okay. My dad says I'm capable."

I nod.

"I'm pretty good," he admits modestly. "I teach it."

"You teach swimming?"

"To people with disabilities. Not, like, physical disabilities," he adds.

"Developmental disabilities."

"Yeah. I did that a lot in Boston. I want to do it here, too."

"How did you start doing that?"

"My friend's sister has Down syndrome, and she saw the Olympics a couple years ago and wanted to learn to swim. So I taught her and then some other kids from her school. And then I got into that whole …"—he fumbles for the word—"scene, I guess."

"That's great."

"I'm not into parties or anything like that."

"Not your scene."

"No." Then he smiles. "Not at all."

He twists his head, looks at the kitchen. "I can see your house from my room," he says. "It's up there."

I turn. If he can see the house, that means he's got an easterly view, facing my bedroom. The thought is briefly bothersome—he's a teenage boy, after all. For the second time I wonder if he might be gay.

And then I see that his eyes have gone glassy.

"Oh …" I look to my right, where the tissues should be, where they used to be in my office. Instead there's a picture frame, Olivia beaming at me, gap-toothed.

"Sorry," Ethan says.

"No, don't be sorry," I tell him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He scrubs his eyes.

I wait a moment. He's a child, I remind myself—tall and broken-voiced, but a child.

"I miss my friends," he says.

"I bet. Of course."

"I don't *know* anyone here." A tear tumbles down one cheek. He swipes at it with the heel of his hand.

"Moving is tough. It took me a little while to meet people when I moved here."

He sniffles loudly. "When did you move?"

"Eight years ago. Or actually nine, now. From Connecticut."

He sniffles again, brushes his nose with a finger. "That's not as far away as Boston."

"No. But moving from anywhere is tough." I'd like to hug him. I won't. LOCAL RECLUSE FONDLES NEIGHBOR CHILD.

We sit for a moment in silence.

"Can I have some more water?" he asks.

"I'll get it for you."

"No, it's fine." He begins to stand; Punch pours himself down his leg, pooling beneath the coffee table.

Ethan walks to the kitchen sink. As the faucet runs, I get up and approach the television, haul open the drawer beneath the set.

"Do you like movies?" I call. No answer; I turn to see him standing at the kitchen door, gazing at the park. Beside him, the

bottles in the recycling bin glow fluorescent.

After a moment, he faces me. "What?"

"Do you like movies?" I repeat. He nods. "Come take a look. I've got a big DVD library. Very big. Too big, my husband says."

"I thought you were separated," Ethan mumbles, crossing toward me.

"Well, he's still my husband." I inspect the ring on my left hand, twist it. "But you're right." I gesture at the open drawer. "If you'd like to borrow anything, you're welcome to it. Do you have a DVD player?"

"My dad's got an attachment for his laptop."

"That'll work."

"He might let me borrow it."

"Let's hope so." I'm starting to get a sense of Alistair Russell.

"What sort of movies?" he asks.

"Mostly old ones."

"Like, black-and-white?"

"Mostly black-and-white."

"I've never seen a black-and-white movie."

I make full moons of my eyes. "You're in for a treat. All the best movies are black-and-white."

He looks doubtful but peers into the drawer. Nearly two hundred slipcases, Criterion and Kino, Universal's Hitchcock boxed set, assorted film noir collections, *Star Wars* (I'm only human). I inspect the spines: *Night and the City*. *Whirlpool*. *Murder, My Sweet*. "Here," I announce, prying loose a case and

handing it to Ethan.

"*Night Must Fall,*" he reads.

"It's a good one to start with. Suspenseful but not scary."

"Thanks." He clears his throat, coughs. "Sorry," he says, sipping his water. "I'm allergic to cats."

I stare at him. "Why didn't you say so?" I glare at the cat.

"He's so friendly. I didn't want to offend him."

"That's ridiculous," I tell him. "In a nice way."

He smiles. "I'd better go," he says. He returns to the coffee table, sets his glass on it, bends to address Punch through the glass. "Not because of you, buddy. Good boy." He straightens up, shakes his hands over his thighs.

"Do you want a lint roller? For the dander?" I'm not even sure I've still got one.

"I'm okay." He looks around. "Can I use your bathroom?"

I point to the red room. "All yours."

While he's in there, I check the sideboard mirror. A shower tonight, for sure. Tomorrow at latest.

I return to the sofa and open my laptop. Thanks for your help, DiscoMickey has written. You're my hero.

I rattle off a quick reply as the toilet flushes. Ethan emerges from the bathroom a moment later, rubbing his palms on his jeans. "All set," he informs me. He treads to the door, hands stuffed in pockets, a schoolboy shuffle.

I follow him. "Thanks so much for coming by."

"See you around," he says, pulling the door open.

No, you won't, I think. "I'm sure you will," I say.

9

AFTER ETHAN LEAVES, I watch *Laura* again. It shouldn't work: Clifton Webb gorging on the scenery, Vincent Price test-driving a southern accent, the oil-and-vinegar leads. But work it does, and oh, that music. "They sent me the script, not the score," Hedy Lamarr once griped.

I leave the candle lit, the tiny blob of flame pulsing.

And then, humming the *Laura* theme, I swipe my phone on and take to the Internet in search of my patients. My former patients. Ten months ago I lost them all: I lost Mary, nine years old, struggling with her parents' divorce; I lost Justin, eight, whose twin brother had died of melanoma; I lost Anne Marie, at age twelve still afraid of the dark. I lost Rasheed (eleven, transgender) and Emily (nine, bullying); I lost a preternaturally depressed little ten-year-old named, of all things, Joy. I lost their tears and their troubles and their rage and their relief. I lost nineteen children all told. Twenty, if you count my daughter.

I know where Olivia is now, of course. The others I've been tracking. Not too often—a psychologist isn't supposed to investigate her patients, past patients included—but every month or so, swollen with longing, I'll take to the web. I've got a few Internet research tools at my disposal: a phantom Facebook account; a stale LinkedIn profile. With young people, though, only Google will do, really.

After reading of Ava's spelling-bee championship and Theo's election to the middle school student council, after scanning the Instagram albums of Grace's mother and scrolling through Ben's Twitter feed (he really ought to activate some privacy settings), after wiping the tears from my cheeks and sinking three glasses of red, I find myself back in my bedroom, browsing photos on my phone. And then, once more, I talk to Ed.

"Guess who," I say, the way I always do.

"You're pretty tipsy, slugger," he points out.

"It's been a long day." I glance at my empty glass, feel a prickle of guilt. "What's Livvy up to?"

"Getting ready for tomorrow."

"Oh. What's her costume?"

"A ghost," Ed says.

"You got lucky."

"What do you mean?"

I laugh. "Last year she was a fire truck."

"Man, that took days."

"It took *me* days."

I can hear him grin.

Across the park, three stories up, through the window and in the depths of a dark room, there's the glow of a computer screen. Light dawns, an instant sunrise; I see a desk, a table lamp, and then Ethan, shucking his sweater. Affirmative: Our bedrooms do indeed face each other.

He turns around, eyes cast down, and peels off his shirt. I look

away.

SUNDAY,

10

WEAK MORNING LIGHT STRAINS through my bedroom window. I roll over; my hip cracks against my laptop. A late night playing bad chess. My knights stumbled, my rooks crashed.

I drag myself to and from the shower, mop my hair with a towel, skid deodorant under my arms. Fit for fight, as Sally says. Happy Halloween.

I WON'T be answering any doors this evening, of course. David will head out at seven—downtown, I think he said. I bet that's fun.

He suggested earlier that we leave a bowl of candy on the stoop. "Any kid would take it within a minute, bowl and all," I told him.

He seemed miffed. "I wasn't a child psychologist," he said.

"You don't need to have been a child psychologist. You just need to have been a child."

So I'm going to switch off the lights and pretend no one's home.

I VISIT my film site. Andrew is online; he posted a link to a Pauline Kael essay on *Vertigo*—"stupid" and "shallow"—and beneath that, he's making a list: **Best noir to hold hands through?** (*The Third Man*. The last shot alone.)

I read the Kael piece, ping him a message. After five minutes, he logs out.

I can’t remember the last time someone held my hand.

11

WHAP.

The front door again. This time I'm coiled on the sofa, watching *Rififi*—the extended heist sequence, half an hour without a syllable of dialogue or a note of music, just diegetic sound and the hum of blood in your ears. Yves had suggested I spend more time with French cinema. Presumably a semi-silent film was not what he had in mind. *Quel dommage.*

Then that dull *whap* at the door, a second time.

I peel the blanket from my legs, swing myself to my feet, find the remote, pause the movie.

Twilight sifting down outside. I walk to the door and open it.

Whap.

I step into the hall—the one area of the house I dislike and distrust, the cool gray zone between my realm and the outside world. Right now it's dim in the dusk, the dark walls like hands about to clap me between them.

Streaks of leaded glass line the front door. I approach one, gaze through it.

A crack, and the window shudders. A tiny missile has struck: an egg, blasted, its guts spangled across the glass. I hear myself gasp. Through the smear of yolk I can see three kids in the street, their faces bright, their grins bold, one of them poised with an egg in his fist.

I sway where I stand, place a hand against the wall.

This is my home. That's my window.

My throat shrinks. Tears well in my eyes. I feel surprised, then ashamed.

Whap.

Then angry.

I can't fling wide the door and send them scurrying. I can't barrel outside and confront them. I rap on the window, sharply—

Whap.

I slap the heel of my hand against the door.

I bash it with my fist.

I growl, then I roar, my voice bounding between the walls, the dark little hall a chamber of echoes.

I'm helpless.

No, you're not, I can hear Dr. Fielding say.

In, two, three, four.

No, I'm not.

I'm not. I toiled nearly a decade as a graduate student. I spent fifteen months training in inner-city schools. I practiced for seven years. *I'm tough,* I promised Sally.

Scraping my hair back, I retreat to the living room, yank a breath from the air, stab the intercom with one finger.

"Get away from my house," I hiss. Surely they'll hear the squawk outside.

Whap.

My finger is wobbling on the intercom button. "*Get away from*

my house!"

Whap.

I stumble across the room, trip up the stairs, race into my study, to the window. There they are, clustered in the street like marauders, laying siege to my home, their shadows endless in the dying light. I bat at the glass.

One of them points at me, laughs. Winds his arm like a pitcher. Looses another egg.

I knock harder on the glass, hard enough to dislodge a pane. That's my door. This is my home.

My vision blurs.

And suddenly I'm rushing down the stairs; suddenly I'm back in the dark of the hall, my bare feet on the tiles, my hand on the knob. Anger grips me by the throat; my sight is swimming. I seize a breath, seize another.

In-two-three—

I jolt the door open. Light and air blast me.

FOR AN instant it's silent, as silent as the film, as slow as the sunset. The houses opposite. The three kids between. The street around them. Quiet and still, a stopped clock.

I could swear I hear a crack, as of a felled tree.

And then—

—AND THEN it bulges toward me, swelling, now rushing, a boulder flung from a catapult; slams me with such force, walloping my gut, that I fold. My mouth opens like a window. Wind whips into it. I'm an empty house, rotten rafters and

howling air. My roof collapses with a groan—

—and I'm groaning, sliding, avalanching, one hand scraped along the brick, the other lunging into space. Eyes reel and roll: the lurid red of leaves, then darkness; lights up on a woman in black, vision blanching, bleaching, until molten white swarms my eyes and pools there, thick and deep. I try to cry out, my lips brush grit. I taste concrete. I taste blood. I feel my limbs pinwheeled on the ground. The ground ripples against my body. My body ripples against the air.

Somewhere in the attic of my brain I recall that this happened once before, on these same steps. I remember the low tide of voices, the odd word breaching bright and clear: *fallen, neighbor, anyone, crazy*. This time, nothing.

ARM SLUNG around someone's neck. Hair, coarser than my own, rubs my face. Feet scuffle feebly on the ground, on the floor; and now I'm inside, in the chill of the hall, in the warmth of the living room.

12

"YOU TOOK A TUMBLE!"

My vision fills like a Polaroid print. I'm looking at the ceiling, at a single recessed light socket staring back at me, a beady eye.

"I'm getting something for you—one second …"

I let my head loll to one side. Velvet fizzes in my ear. The living room chaise—the fainting couch. Ha.

"One second, one second …"

At the kitchen sink stands a woman, turned away from me, a rope of dark hair trailing down her back.

I bring my hands to my face, cup them over my nose and mouth, breathe in, breathe out. Calm. Calm. My lip aches.

"I was just headed next door when I saw those little shits chucking eggs," she explains. "I said to them, 'What are you up to, little shits?,' and then you sort of … *lurched* through the door and went down like a sack of …" She doesn't finish the sentence. I wonder if she was going to say *shit.*

Instead she turns, a glass in each hand, one filled with water, one with something thick and gold. Brandy, I hope, from the liquor cabinet.

"No idea if brandy actually *works,*" she says. "I feel like I'm in *Downton Abbey*. I'm your Florence Nightingale!"

"You're the woman from across the park," I mumble. The words stagger off my tongue like drunks from a bar. *I'm tough.*

Pathetic.

"What's that?"

And then, in spite of myself: "You're Jane Russell."

She stops, looking at me in wonder, then laughs, her teeth glinting in the half-light. "How do you know that?"

"You said you were going next door?" Trying to enunciate. *Irish wristwatch,* I think. *Unique New York*. "Your son came by."

Through the mesh of my eyelashes I study her. She's what Ed might call, approvingly, a ripe woman: hips and lips full, bust ample, skin mellow, face merry, eyes a gas-jet blue. She wears indigo jeans and a black sweater, scoop-necked, with a silver pendant resting on her chest. Late thirties, I'd guess. She must have been a baby when she had her baby.

As with her son, I like her on sight.

She moves to the chaise, knocks my knee with her own.

"Sit up. In case you've got a concussion." I oblige, dragging myself into position, as she sets the glasses on the table, then parks herself across from me, where her son sat yesterday. She turns to the television, furrows her brow.

"What are you watching? A black-and-white movie?" Baffled.

I reach for the remote and tap the power button. The screen goes blank.

"Dark in here," Jane observes.

"Could you get the lights?" I ask. "I'm feeling a little …" Can't finish.

"Sure." She reaches over the back of the sofa, switches on the floor lamp. The room glows.

I tip my head back, stare at the beveled molding on the ceiling. *In, two, three, four.* It could use a touch-up. I'll ask David. *Out, two, three, four.*

"So," Jane says, elbows on her knees, scrutinizing me. "What happened out there?"

I shut my eyes. "Panic attack."

"Oh, honey—what's your name?"

"Anna. Fox."

"Anna. They were just some stupid kids."

"No, that wasn't it. I can't go outside." I look down, grasp for the brandy.

"But you *did* go outside. Easy does it with that stuff," she adds as I knock back my drink.

"I shouldn't have. Gone outside."

"Why not? You a vampire?"

Practically, I think, appraising my arm—fish-belly white. "I'm agoraphobic?" I say.

She purses her lips. "Is that a question?"

"No, I just wasn't sure you'd know what it meant."

"Of course I know. You don't do open spaces."

I close my eyes again, nod.

"But I thought agoraphobia means you just can't, you know, go camping. Outdoorsy stuff."

"I can't go anywhere."

Jane sucks her teeth. “How long has this been going on?”

I drain the last drops of brandy. “Ten months.”

She doesn’t pursue it. I breathe deeply, cough.

“Do you need an inhaler or something?”

I shake my head. “That would only make it worse. Raise my heart rate.”

She considers this. “What about a paper bag?”

I set the glass down, reach for the water. “No. I mean, sometimes, but not now. Thank you for bringing me inside. I’m very embarrassed.”

“Oh, don’t—”

“No, I am. Very. It won’t become a habit, I promise.”

She purses her lips again. Very active mouth, I notice. Possible smoker, although she smells of shea butter. “So it’s happened before? You going outside, and …?”

I grimace. “Back in the spring. Delivery guy left my groceries on the front steps, and I thought I could just … grab them.”

“And you couldn’t.”

“I couldn’t. But there were lots of people passing by that time. It took them a minute to decide I wasn’t crazy or homeless.”

Jane looks around the room. “You definitely aren’t homeless. This place is … wow.” She takes it in, then pulls her phone from her pocket, checks the screen. “I need to get back to the house,” she says, standing.

I try to rise with her, but my legs won’t cooperate. “Your son is a very nice boy,” I tell her. “He dropped that off. Thank you,”

I add.

She eyes the candle on the table, touches the chain at her throat. "He's a good kid. Always has been."

"Very nice-looking, too."

"Always has been!" She slides a thumbnail into the locket; it cracks open, and she leans toward me, the locket swaying in the air. I see she expects me to take it. It's oddly intimate, this stranger looming over me, my hand on her chain. Or perhaps I'm just so unaccustomed to human contact.

Inside the locket is a tiny photograph, glossy and vivid: a small boy, age four or so, yellow hair in riot, teeth like a picket fence after a hurricane. One eyebrow cleft by a scar. Ethan, unmistakably.

"How old is he here?"

"Five. But he looks younger, don't you think?"

"I would have guessed four."

"Exactly."

"When did he get so tall?" I ask, releasing the locket.

She gently shuts it. "Sometime between then and now!" She laughs. Then, abruptly: "You're okay for me to leave? You're not going to hyperventilate?"

"I'm not going to hyperventilate."

"Do you want some more brandy?" she asks, bending to the coffee table—there's a photo album there, unfamiliar; she must have brought it with her. She tucks it beneath her arm and points to the empty glass.

"I'll stick with water," I lie.

"Okay." She pauses, her gaze fixed on the window. "Okay," she repeats. "So a *very* handsome man just came up the walk." She looks at me. "Is that your husband?"

"Oh, no. That's David. He's my tenant. Downstairs."

"He's your tenant?" Jane brays. "I wish he were *mine*!"

THE BELL hasn't chimed this evening, not once. Maybe the dark windows put off any trick-or-treaters. Maybe it was the dried yolk.

I subside into bed early.

Midway through graduate school, I met a seven-year-old boy afflicted with the so-called Cotard delusion, a psychological phenomenon whereby the individual believes that he is dead. A rare disorder, with pediatric instances rarer still; the recommended treatment is an antipsychotic regimen or, in stubborn cases, electroconvulsive therapy. But I managed to talk him out of it. It was my first great success, and it brought me to Wesley's attention.

That little boy would be well into his teens now, almost Ethan's age, not quite half mine. I think of him tonight as I stare at the ceiling, feeling dead myself. Dead but not gone, watching life surge forward around me, powerless to intervene.

MONDAY,

13

WHEN I COME DOWNSTAIRS THIS MORNING, sloping into the kitchen, I find a note slipped beneath the basement door. *eggs*.

I study it, confused. Does David want breakfast? Then I turn it over, see the word *Cleaned* above the fold. Thank you, David.

Eggs do sound good, come to think of it, so I empty three into a skillet and serve myself sunny-side up. A few minutes later I'm at my desk, sucking the last of the yolk and punching in at the Agora.

Morning is rush hour here—agoraphobes often register acute anxiety after waking up. Sure enough, we're gridlocked today. I spend two hours offering solace and support; I refer users to assorted medications (imipramine is my drug of choice these days, although Xanax never goes out of style); I mediate a dispute over the (indisputable) benefits of aversion therapy; I watch, at the request of Dimples2016, a video clip in which a cat plays the drums.

I'm about to sign off, zip over to the chess forum, avenge Saturday's defeats, when a message box blooms on my screen.

DiscoMickey: Thanks again for your help the other day doc.

The panic attack. I'd manned the keyboard for nearly an hour as DiscoMickey, in his words, "freaked out."

thedoctorisin: Anytime. You better?

DiscoMickey: Much.

DiscoMickey: Writing b/c I'm talking to a lady who's new and she's asking if there are any professionals on here. Sent her your FAQs.

A referral. I check the clock.

thedoctorisin: I might not have much time today, but send her my way.

DiscoMickey: Cool.

DiscoMickey has left the chat.

A moment later, up pops a second chat box. GrannyLizzie. I click on the name, skim the user profile. Age: seventy. Residence: Montana. Joined: two days ago.

I flick another glance at the clock. Chess can wait for a seventy-year-old in Montana.

A strip of text at the bottom of the screen reports that GrannyLizzie is typing. I wait a moment, then another; either she's whipping up a long message or it's a case of senioritis. Both my parents used to stab at the keyboard with their index fingers, like flamingos picking their way through the shallows; it took them half a minute just to bash out a hello.

GrannyLizzie: Well hello there!

Friendly. Before I can respond:

GrannyLizzie: Disco Mickey gave your name to me. Desperate for some advice!

GrannyLizzie: Also for some chocolate, but that's another matter …

I manage to get a word in edgewise.

thedoctorisin: Hello to you! You're new to this forum?

GrannyLizzie: Yes I am!

thedoctorisin: I hope that DiscoMickey made you feel welcome.

GrannyLizzie: Yes he did!

thedoctorisin: How can I help you?

GrannyLizzie: Well I don't think you can help with the chocolate I'm afraid!

Is she effervescent or nervous? I wait it out.

GrannyLizzie: The thing is …

GrannyLizzie: And I hate to say it …

Drum roll …

GrannyLizzie: I haven't been able to leave my home for the past month.

GrannyLizzie: So THAT is the problem!

thedoctorisin: I'm sorry to hear that. May I call you Lizzie?

GrannyLizzie: You bet.

GrannyLizzie: I live in Montana. Grandmother first, art teacher second!

We'll get to all that, but for now:

thedoctorisin: Lizzie, did anything special happen a month ago?

A pause.

GrannyLizzie: My husband died.

thedoctorisin: I see. What was your husband's name?

GrannyLizzie: Richard.

thedoctorisin: I'm so sorry for your loss, Lizzie. Richard was my father's name.

GrannyLizzie: Has your f ather died?

thedoctorisin: He and my mother both died 4 years ago. She had cancer and then he had a stroke 5 months later. But I've always believed that some of the best people are called Richard.

GrannyLizzie: So was Nixon!!!

Good; we're developing a rapport.

thedoctorisin: How long were you married?

GrannyLizzie: Forty seven years.

GrannyLizzie: We met on the job. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT BY THE WAY!

GrannyLizzie: He taught chemistry. I taught art. Opposites attract!

thedoctorisin: That's amazing! And you have children?

GrannyLizzie: I have two sons and three grandsons.

GrannyLizzie: My sons are pretty cute, but my grandsons are beautiful!

thedoctorisin: That's a lot of boys.

GrannyLizzie: You're telling me!

GrannyLizzie: The things I've seen!

GrannyLizzie: The things I've smelled!

I note the tone, brisk and insistently upbeat; I clock the language, informal but confident, and the precise punctuation, the infrequent errors. She's intelligent, outgoing. Thorough, too

—she spells out numbers, and writes by the way instead of btw, although maybe that's a function of age. Whatever the case, she's an adult I can work with.

GrannyLizzie: Are YOU a boy, by the way?

GrannyLizzie: Sorry if you are, it's just that girls are sometimes doctors too! Even out here in Montana!

I smile. I like her.

thedoctorisin: I am indeed a girl doctor.

GrannyLizzie: Good! We need more of you!

thedoctorisin: Tell me, Lizzie, what's happened since Richard passed?

And tell me she does. She tells me how, on returning from the funeral, she felt too frightened to walk the mourners beyond the front door; she tells me that in the days following, it felt like the outside was trying to get into my house, and so she drew the blinds; she tells me about her sons far away in the Southeast, their confusion, their concern.

GrannyLizzie: I've got to tell you, all joking aside, that this is really upsetting.

Time to roll up my sleeves.

thedoctorisin: Naturally it is. What's happening, I think, is that Richard's passing has fundamentally altered your world, but the world outside has moved on without him. And that's very difficult to face and to accept.

I await a response. Nothing.

thedoctorisin: You mentioned that you haven't removed any

of Richard's belongings, which I understand. But I'd like you to think about that.

Radio silence.

And then:

GrannyLizzie: I'm so grateful to have found you. Really really.

GrannyLizzie: That's something my grandsons say. They heard it in Shrek. Really really.

GrannyLizzie: May I speak to you again soon, I hope?

thedoctorisin: Really really!

Couldn't help myself.

GrannyLizzie: I am really really (!!) grateful to Disco Mickey for pointing me to you. You're a doll.

thedoctorisin: My pleasure.

I wait for her to sign off, but she's still typing.

GrannyLizzie: I just realized I don't even know your name!

I hesitate. I've never shared my name on the Agora, not even with Sally. I don't want anyone to find me, to pair my name with my profession and figure me out, unlock me; yet something in Lizzie's story snags my heart: this elderly widow, alone and bereaved, putting on a brave face beneath those huge skies. She can crack jokes all she wants, but she's housebound, and that's terrifying.

thedoctorisin: I'm Anna.

As I prepare to log out, a last message pings on my screen.

GrannyLizzie: Thank you, Anna.

GrannyLizzie has left the chat.

I feel my veins rushing. I've helped someone. I've connected. *Only connect.* Where have I heard that?

I deserve a drink.

14

TRIPPING DOWN TO THE KITCHEN, I roll my head against my shoulders, hear the crackle of my bones. Something catches my eye overhead: In the dim recesses of the ceiling, at the very top of the stairwell three stories up, there's a dark stain glaring at me—from the trapdoor of the roof, I think, right beside the skylight.

I knock on David's door. It opens a moment later; he's barefoot, in a wilted T-shirt and slouched jeans. I just woke him up, I see. "Sorry," I say. "Were you in bed?"

"No."

He was. "Could you look at something for me? I think I saw water damage on the ceiling."

We head up to the top floor, past the study, past my bedroom, to the landing between Olivia's room and the second spare.

"Big skylight," David says.

I can't tell if that's a compliment. "It's original," I say, just to say something.

"Oval."

"Yes."

"Haven't seen too many like that."

"Oval?"

But the exchange is over. He eyes the stain.

"That's mildew," he says, hushed, like a doctor gently breaking

news to a patient.

"Can we just brush it off?"

"Not going to fix it."

"What will?"

He sighs. "First I need to check out the roof." He reaches for the trapdoor chain and tugs. The door judders open; a ladder slides toward us, screeching; sunshine bolts in. I step to one side, away from the light. Perhaps I am a vampire after all.

David drags the ladder down until it bumps against the floor. I watch him as he mounts the steps, his jeans taut against his rear; then he disappears.

"See anything?" I call.

No response.

"David?"

I hear a clang. A plume of water, mirror-bright in the sunlight, pours onto the landing. I draw back. "Sorry," David says. "Watering can."

"It's fine. Do you see anything?"

A pause, then David's voice again, almost reverent. "It's a jungle up here."

It was Ed's idea, four years ago, after my mother died. "You need a project," he decided; so we set about converting the rooftop into a garden—flower beds, a vegetable patch, a row of miniature boxwoods. And the central feature, what that broker called the pièce de résistance: an arched trellis, six feet wide and twelve long, thick with leaves in spring and summer,

a shady tunnel. When my father had his stroke later on, Ed placed a memorial bench within it. *Ad astra per aspera,* read the inscription. *Through adversity to the stars.* I'd sit there on spring and summer evenings, in the gold-green light, reading a book, sipping a glass.

I've scarcely thought of the roof garden lately. It must be wild.

"It's totally overgrown," David confirms. "It's like a forest."

I wish he'd come down.

"Some kind of trellis over there?" he asks. "Tarp covering it?"

We'd sheathe it in its tarp every autumn. I say nothing; I just remember.

"You should be careful up here. Don't want to step on this skylight."

"I'm not planning on going up there," I remind him.

The glass rattles as his foot taps it. "Flimsy. Branch falls on that, it's gonna take out the whole window." Another moment passes. "It's pretty incredible. Want me to take a picture?"

"No. Thanks. What do we do about the damp?"

One foot drops to the ladder, then the other as he descends. "We need a pro." He arrives at the floor, slots the ladder into place. "To seal the roof. But I can use a paint scraper to get rid of the mildew." He folds the trapdoor back into the ceiling. "Sand down the area. Then put on some stain block and some emulsion paint."

"Do you have all that?"

"I'll get the block and the paint. It'd help if we could ventilate

in here."

I freeze. "What do you mean?"

"Open some windows. Doesn't have to be on this floor."

"I don't open windows. Anywhere."

He shrugs. "It'd help."

I turn to the stairs. He follows me. We go down in silence.

"Thank you for cleaning up the mess outside," I say, mostly to say something, once we're in the kitchen.

"Who did that?"

"Some kids."

"Do you know who?"

"No." I pause. "Why? Could you rough them up for me?"

He blinks. I press on.

"You're still comfortable downstairs, I hope?" He's been here two months, ever since Dr. Fielding suggested that a tenant would be useful: someone to run errands, dispose of the trash, assist with general upkeep, et cetera, all in exchange for reduced rent. David was the first to answer my ad, posted on Airbnb; I remember thinking his email was terse, even curt, until I met the man and realized he'd been downright chatty. Just relocated from Boston, experienced handyman, nonsmoker, $7,000 in the bank. We agreed on a lease that afternoon.

"Yeah." He looks up, at the lights sunk in the ceiling. "There a reason you keep it so dark? A medical reason or something?"

I feel myself flush. "A lot of people in my …" What's the word here? "… position feel exposed if the light's too bright."

I gesture to the windows. "And there's plenty of natural light in this house in any case."

David considers this, nods.

"Are you getting enough light in your apartment?" I ask.

"It's fine."

Now I nod. "If you find any more of Ed's blueprints down there, just let me know. I'm saving them."

I hear the snicker of Punch's door flap, see him slink into the kitchen.

"I really do appreciate all that you do for me," I continue, although I've mistimed it—he's moving toward the basement door. "With the … trash and the housework and everything. You're a lifesaver," I add, lamely.

"Sure."

"If you wouldn't mind calling someone to take care of the ceiling …"

"Sure."

Punch bounds onto the island between us and drops something from his mouth. I look at it.

A dead rat.

I recoil. I'm gratified to see that David does, too. It's a small one, with oily fur and a black worm of a tail; its body has been mauled.

Punch watches us proudly.

"*No,*" I scold him. He cocks his head.

"He really did a number on it," David says.

I inspect the rat. “Did you do this?” I ask Punch, before I remember I’m interrogating a cat. He springs from the island.

“Look at that,” David breathes. I glance up: On the opposite side of the island, he’s bent forward, his dark eyes glittering.

“Do we bury it someplace?” I ask. “I don’t want it rotting in the trash.”

David clears his throat. “Tomorrow’s Tuesday,” he says. Trash day. “I’ll take it all out now. You got a newspaper?”

“Does anyone anymore?” That came out more pointed than I intended. I follow up quickly. “I have a plastic bag.”

I find one in a drawer. David extends his hand, but I can do this myself. I snap the bag inside out, tuck my hand inside, gingerly grasp the carcass. A little shiver jolts me.

I tug the bag over the rat and seal the band at the top. David takes it from me and slides open the trash receptacle beneath the island, dumps the dead rat inside. RIP.

Just as he’s yanking the garbage bag from its container, there’s a sound from downstairs; the pipes sing, the walls start talking to one another. The shower.

I look at David. He doesn’t flinch; instead he knots the bag at the top and slings it over his shoulder. “I’ll take this outside,” he says, striding toward the front door.

It’s not as though I was going to ask him her name.

15

"GUESS WHO."

"Mom."

I let it slide. "How was Halloween, pumpkin?"

"Good." She's chewing on something. I hope Ed remembers to watch her weight.

"Did you get a lot of candy?"

"A *lot*. More than ever."

"What was your favorite?" Peanut M&M's, of course.

"Snickers."

I stand corrected.

"They're little," she explains. "They're like baby Snickers."

"So did you have Chinese for dinner or Snickers for dinner?"

"Both."

I'll have a word with Ed.

But when I do, he's defensive. "It's the one night of the year she gets to eat candy for dinner," he says.

"I don't want her getting into trouble."

Silence. "With the dentist?"

"With her *weight*."

He sighs. "I can take care of her."

I sigh back. "I'm not saying you can't."

"That's what it sounds like."

I bank a hand against my forehead. "It's just that she's eight

years old, and a lot of kids experience significant weight gain at this age. Girls especially."

"I'll be careful."

"And remember she already went through a chubby phase."

"You want her to be a waif?"

"No, that would be just as bad. I want her to be healthy."

"Fine. I'll give her a low-calorie kiss tonight," he says. "A Diet Smooch."

I smile. Still, when we say goodbye, it's stiff.

TUESDAY,

16

IN MID-FEBRUARY—AFTER NEARLY SIX WEEKS shriveled inside my house, after I realized that I wasn't Getting Better—I contacted a psychiatrist whose lecture ("Atypical Antipsychotics and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder") I'd attended at a conference in Baltimore five years back. He didn't know me then. He does now.

Those unfamiliar with therapy often assume that the therapist is by default soft-spoken and solicitous; you smear yourself along his sofa like butter on toast, and you melt. It ain't necessarily so, as the song goes. Exhibit A: Dr. Julian Fielding.

For one thing, there's no sofa. We meet every Tuesday in Ed's library, Dr. Fielding in the club chair beside the fireplace, me in a wingback by the window. And although he speaks softly, his voice creaking like an old door, he's precise, particular, as a good psychiatrist should be. "Kind of guy who steps out of the shower to piss," Ed has said, more than once.

"So," Dr. Fielding rasps. An arrow of afternoon light has shot into his face, making tiny suns of his glasses. "You say that you and Ed argued about Olivia yesterday. Are these conversations helpful?"

I twist my head, glance at the Russell house. I wonder what Jane Russell is up to. I'd like a drink.

My fingers trace the line of my throat. I look back at Dr.

Fielding.

He watches me, the grooves in his forehead scored deep. Maybe he's tired—I certainly am. It's been an eventful session: I caught him up on my panic attack (he seemed concerned), on my dealings with David (he seemed uninterested), on my chats with Ed and Olivia (concerned again).

Now I look away once more, unblinking, unthinking, at the books on Ed's shelves. A history of the Pinkerton detectives. Two volumes on Napoléon. *Bay Area Architecture*. An eclectic reader, my husband. My estranged husband.

"It sounds to me as though these conversations are causing you some mixed feelings," Dr. Fielding says. This is classic therapist argot: *It sounds to me. What I'm hearing. I think you're saying.* We're interpreters. We're translators.

"I keep …" I begin, the words forming in my mouth unbidden. Can I go here again? I can; I do. "I keep thinking—I can't stop thinking—about the trip. I hate that it was my idea."

Nothing from across the room, even though—or perhaps because—he knows this, knows all of it, has heard it over and over. And over.

"I keep wishing it wasn't. Weren't. I keep wishing it had been Ed's idea. Or no one's. That we'd never gone." I knot my fingers. "Obviously."

Gently: "But you did go."

I feel singed.

"You arranged a family vacation. No one should feel ashamed

of that."

"In New England, in *winter*."

"Many people go to New England in winter."

"It was stupid."

"It was thoughtful."

"It was incredibly stupid," I insist.

Dr. Fielding doesn't respond. The central heating clears its throat, exhales.

"If I hadn't done it, we'd still be together."

He shrugs. "Maybe."

"Definitely."

I can feel his gaze on me like a weight.

"I helped someone yesterday," I say. "A woman in Montana. A grandmother. She's been inside for a month."

He's accustomed to these abrupt swerves—"synaptic leaps," he calls them, even though we both know I'm willfully changing the subject. But I steam ahead, telling him about GrannyLizzie, how I shared my name with her.

"What made you do that?"

"I felt she was trying to connect." Isn't that what—yes, there it is: Isn't that what Forster exhorted us to do? "Only connect"? *Howards End*—July's official book club selection. "I wanted to help her. I wanted to be accessible."

"That was an act of generosity," he says.

"I suppose so."

He shifts in his seat. "It sounds to me as though you're getting

to a place where you can meet others on their terms, not just your own."

"That's possible."

"That's progress."

Punch has stolen into the room and is circling my feet, eyes on my lap. I hitch one leg beneath the other thigh.

"How is the physical therapy going?" Dr. Fielding asks.

I scan my legs and torso with my hand, like I'm presenting a prize on a game show. *You too can win this disused thirty-eight-year-old body!* "I've looked better." And then, before he can correct me, I add, "I know it's not a fitness program."

He corrects me all the same: "It's not *only* a fitness program."

"No, I know."

"Is it going well, then?"

"I'm healed. All better."

He looks at me evenly.

"Really. My spine is fine, my ribs aren't cracked. I don't limp anymore."

"Yes, I noticed."

"But I need a little exercise. And I like Bina."

"She's become a friend."

"In a way," I admit. "A friend I pay."

"She's coming on Wednesdays these days, is that right?"

"Usually."

"Good," he says, as though Wednesday is a day particularly suitable for aerobic activity. He's never met Bina. I can't picture

them together; they don't seem to occupy the same dimension.

It's quitting time. I know this without consulting the clock hunched on the mantel, just as Dr. Fielding knows it—after years in practice, both of us can time fifty minutes almost to the second. "I want you to continue with the beta-blocker at the same dosage," he says. "You're on one-fifty Tofranil. We'll increase it to two-fifty." He frowns. "That's based on what we've discussed today. It should help with your moods."

"I get pretty blurry as is," I remind him.

"Blurry?"

"Or bleary, I guess. Or both."

"You mean your vision?"

"No, not my vision. It's more …" We've discussed this—doesn't he remember? Or have we discussed it? *Blurry. Bleary.* I could really use that drink. "Sometimes I've got too many thoughts at once. It's like there's a four-way intersection in my brain where everyone's trying to go at the same time." I chuckle, a bit uneasy.

Dr. Fielding knits his brow, then sighs. "Well, it's not an exact science. As you know."

"I do. I know."

"You're on quite a few different medications. We'll adjust them one by one until we get it right."

I nod. I know what this means. He thinks I'm getting worse. My chest tightens.

"Try the two-fifty and see how you feel. If it gets problematic,

we can look at something to help you focus."

"A nootropic?" Adderall. The number of times parents asked me whether Adderall would benefit their kids, the number of times I turned them down cold—and now I'm angling for it myself. *Plus ça change*.

"Let's discuss it as and when," he says. He slashes his pen across a prescription pad, peels away the top sheet, offers it to me. It twitches in his hand. Essential tremor or low blood sugar? Not, I hope, early-onset Parkinson's. Not my place to ask, either. I take the paper.

"Thank you," I say as he stands, smoothing his tie. "I'll put this to good use."

He nods. "Until next week, then." He turns toward the door. "Anna?" Turning back.

"Yes?"

He nods again. "Please get that prescription filled."

AFTER DR. FIELDING leaves, I log the prescription request online. They'll deliver by five P.M. That's enough time for a glass. Or even *deux*.

Not just yet, though. First I drag the mouse to a neglected corner of the desktop, hesitantly double-click on an Excel spreadsheet: meds.xlsx.

Here I've detailed all the drugs I'm on, all the dosages, all the directions … all the ingredients in my pharma-cocktail. I stopped updating it back in August, I see.

Dr. Fielding is, as usual, correct: I'm on quite a few

medications. I need two hands to count them all. And I know—I wince as I think it—I know I'm not taking them as or when I should, not always. The double doses, the skipped doses, the drunk doses … Dr. Fielding would be furious. I need to do better. Don't want to lose my grip.

Command-Q, and I'm out of Excel. Time for that drink.

17

WITH A TUMBLER IN ONE HAND and the Nikon in the other, I settle down in the corner of my study, cupped between the south and west windows, and survey the neighborhood—inventory check, Ed likes to say. There's Rita Miller, returning from yoga, bright with sweat, a cell phone stuck to one ear. I adjust the lens and zoom in: She's smiling. I wonder if it's her contractor on the other end. Or her husband. Or neither.

Next door, outside 214, Mrs. Wasserman and her Henry pick their way down the front steps. Off to spread sweetness and light.

I swing my camera west: Two pedestrians loiter outside the double-wide, one of them pointing at the shutters. "Good bones," I imagine him saying.

God. I'm inventing conversations now.

Cautiously, as though I don't want to be caught—and indeed I don't—I slide my sights across the park, over to the Russells'. The kitchen is dim and vacant, its blinds partly down, like half-shut eyes; but one floor up, in the parlor, captured neatly within the window, I spot Jane and Ethan on a candy-striped love seat. She wears a butter-yellow sweater that exposes a terse slit of cleavage; her locket dangles there, a mountaineer above a gorge.

I twist the lens; the image sharpens. She's speaking quickly, teeth bared in a grin, her hands a flurry. His eyes are on his lap, but that shy smile skews his lips.

I haven't mentioned the Russells to Dr. Fielding. I know what he'll say; I can analyze myself: I've located in this nuclear unit —this mother, this father, their only child—an echo of my own. One house away, one door down, there's the family I had, the life that was mine—a life thought lost, irretrievably, except here it is, right across the park. *So what?* I think. Maybe I say it; these days I'm not sure.

I sip my wine, wipe my lip, raise the Nikon again. Look through the lens.

She's looking back at me.

I drop the camera in my lap.

No mistake: Even with my naked eye, I can clearly see her level gaze, her parted lips.

She raises a hand, waves it.

I want to hide.

Should I wave back? Do I look away? Can I blink at her, blankly, as though I'd been aiming the camera at something else, something near her? *Didn't see you there?*

No.

I shoot to my feet, the camera tumbling to the floor. "Leave it," I say—I definitely say it—and I flee the room, into the dark of the stairwell.

NO ONE'S ever caught me before. Not Dr. and Rita Miller, not the Takedas, not the Wassermen, not the gaggle of Grays. Not the Lords before they moved, nor the Motts before they split. Not passing cabs, not passersby. Not even the postman, whom

I used to photograph every day, at every door. And for months I'd pore over those pictures, reliving those moments, until at last I could no longer keep up with the world beyond my window. I still make the odd exception, of course—the Millers interest me. Or they did before the Russells arrived.

And that Opteka zoom is better than binoculars.

But now shame live-wires through my body. I think of everyone and everything I've caught on camera: the neighbors, the strangers, the kisses, the crises, the chewed nails, the dropped change, the strides, the stumbles. The Takeda boy, his eyes closed, fingers quaking on his cello strings. The Grays, wineglasses aloft in a giddy toast. Mrs. Lord in her living room, lighting candles atop a cake. The young Motts, in the dying days of their marriage, bellowing at each other from opposite ends of their Valentine-red parlor, a vase in ruins on the floor between them.

I think of my hard drive, swollen with stolen images. I think of Jane Russell as she looked at me, unblinking, across the park. I'm not invisible. I'm not dead. I'm alive, and on display, and ashamed.

I think of Dr. Brulov in *Spellbound:* "My dear girl, you cannot keep bumping your head against reality and saying it is not there."

THREE MINUTES later, I step back into the study. The Russells' love seat is empty. I glance at Ethan's bedroom; he's in there, crouched over his computer.

Carefully, I pick up the camera. It's undamaged.

Then the doorbell rings.

18

"YOU MUST BE BORED as hell," she says when I open the hall door. Then she folds me into a hug. I laugh, nervously. "Sick of all those black-and-white movies, I bet."

She surges past me. I still haven't said a word.

"I brought something for you." She smiles, dipping a hand into her bag. "It's cold, too." A sweaty bottle of Riesling. My mouth waters. It's been ages since I drank white.

"Oh, you shouldn't—"

But she's already chugging toward the kitchen.

WITHIN TEN MINUTES we're glugging the wine. Jane sparks a Virginia Slim, then another, and soon the air wobbles with smoke, rolling overhead, roiling beneath the ceiling lights. My Riesling tastes of it. I find I don't mind; reminds me of grad school, starless nights outside the taverns of New Haven, men with mouths like ash.

"You've got a lot of merlot over there," she says, eyeing the kitchen counter.

"I order it in bulk," I explain. "I like it."

"How often do you restock?"

"Just a few times a year." At least once a month.

She nods. "You've been like this—how long did you say?" she asks. "Six months?"

"Almost eleven."

"Eleven months." Pressing her lips into a tiny o. "I can't whistle. But pretend I just did." She jams her cigarette into a cereal bowl, steeples her fingers, leans forward, as though in prayer. "So what do you *do* all day?"

"I counsel people," I say, nobly.

"Who?"

"People online."

"Ah."

"And I take French lessons online. And I play chess," I add.

"Online?"

"Online."

She sweeps a finger along the tide line in her wineglass. "So the Internet," she says, "is sort of your … window to the world."

"Well, so is my actual window." I gesture to the expanse of glass behind her.

"Your spyglass," she says, and I blush. "I'm *kidding*."

"I'm so sorry about—"

She waves a hand, lights a fresh cigarette. "Oh, hush." Smoke leaks from her mouth. "Do you have a real chessboard?"

"Do you play?"

"I used to." She slants the cigarette against the bowl. "Show me what you got."

WE'RE WAIST-DEEP in our first game when the doorbell rings. Five sharp—the pharmacy delivery. Jane does the honors. "Door-to-door drugs!" she squawks, shuttling back from the hall. "These any good?"

"They're uppers," I say, uncorking a second bottle. Merlot this time.

"Now it's a party."

As we drink, as we play, we chat. We're both mothers of only children, as I knew; we're both sailors, as I hadn't known. Jane prefers solo craft, I'm more into two-handers—or I was, anyway.

I tell her about my honeymoon with Ed: how we'd chartered an Alerion, a thirty-three-footer, and cruised the Greek Isles, pinballing between Santorini and Delos, Naxos and Mykonos. "Just the two of us," I remember, "scudding around the Aegean."

"That's just like *Dead Calm,*" Jane says.

I swallow some wine. "I think in *Dead Calm* they were in the Pacific."

"Well, except for that, it's just like *Dead Calm*."

"Also, they went sailing to recover from an accident."

"Okay, right."

"And then they rescued a psychopath who tried to kill them."

"Are you going to let me make my point or not?"

While she frowns at the chessboard, I rummage through the fridge for a stick of Toblerone, chop it roughly with a kitchen knife. We sit at the table, chewing. Candy for dinner. Just like Olivia.

LATER:

"Do you get a lot of visitors?" She strokes her bishop, slides him across the board.

I shake my head, shake the wine down my throat. "None. You

and your son."

"Why? Or why not?"

"I don't know. My parents are gone, and I worked too much to have many friends."

"No one from work?"

I think of Wesley. "It was a two-person practice," I say. "So now he has a double load to keep him busy."

She looks at me. "That's sad."

"You're telling me."

"Do you even have a *phone*?"

I point to the landline, lurking in a corner on the kitchen counter, and pat my pocket. "Ancient, ancient iPhone, but it works. In case my psychiatrist calls. Or anyone else. My tenant."

"Your handsome tenant."

"My handsome tenant, yes." I take a sip, take her queen.

"That was cold." She flicks a speck of ash from the table and roars with laughter.

AFTER THE second game, she requests a tour of the house. I hesitate, just for a moment; the last person to examine the place top to bottom was David, and before that … I truly can't recall. Bina's never been beyond the first story; Dr. Fielding is confined to the library. The very idea feels intimate, as though I'm about to lead a new lover by the hand.

But I agree, and escort her room by room, floor by floor. The red room: "I feel like I'm trapped in an artery." The library: "So many books! Have you read all of them?" I shake my head. "Have

you read *any* of them?" I giggle.

Olivia's bedroom: "Maybe a little small? Too small. She needs a room she can grow into, like Ethan's." My study, on the other hand: "Ooh and aah," says Jane. "A girl could get stuff *done* in a place like this."

"Well, I mostly play chess and talk to shut-ins. If you call that getting stuff done."

"Look." She sets her glass on the windowsill, slides her hands into her back pockets. Leans into the window. "There's the house," she says, gazing at her home, her voice slung low, almost husky.

She's been so playful, so jolly, that to see her looking serious produces a kind of jolt, a needle skidding off the vinyl. "There's the house," I agree.

"Nice, isn't it? Quite a place."

"It is."

She peers outside a minute longer. Then we return to the kitchen.

LATER STILL:

"Get much use out of that?" Jane asks, roaming the living room as I debate my next move. The sun is sinking fast; in her yellow sweater, in the frail light, she looks like a wraith, floating through my house.

She's pointing to the umbrella, leaning like a drunkard against a far wall.

"More than you'd think," I reply. I rock back in my chair and

describe Dr. Fielding's backyard therapy, the unsteady march through the door and down the steps, the bubble of nylon shielding me from oblivion; the clarity of outside air, the drift of wind.

"Interesting," says Jane.

"I believe it's pronounced 'ridiculous.'"

"But does it work?" she asks.

I shrug. "Sort of."

"Well," she says, patting the umbrella handle as you would a dog's head, "there you go."

"HEY, WHEN'S your birthday?"

"You going to buy me something?"

"Easy there."

"Coming up, actually," I say.

"So's mine."

"November eleventh."

She gawks. "That's my birthday, too."

"You're kidding."

"I am not. Eleven eleven."

I lift my glass. "To eleven eleven."

We toast.

"GOT A pen and paper?"

I fetch both from a drawer, lay them before her. "Just sit there," Jane tells me. "Look pretty." I bat my lashes.

She whips the pen across the sheet, short, sharp strokes. I watch my face take form: the deep eyes, the soft cheekbones, the

long jaw. “Make sure you get my underbite,” I urge her, but she shushes me.

For three minutes she sketches, twice lifting her glass to her lips. “Voilà,” she says, presenting the paper to me.

I study it. The likeness is astonishing. “Now *that* is a nifty trick.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Can you do others?”

“You mean, portraits besides yours? Believe it or not, I can.”

“No, I mean—animals, you know, or still lifes. Lives.”

“I don’t know. I’m mostly interested in people. Same as you.” With a flourish, she scribbles her signature in one corner. “*Ta-da.* A Jane Russell original.”

I slip the sketch into a kitchen drawer, the one where I keep the good table linens. Otherwise it’d probably get stained.

“LOOK AT all those.” They’re scattered like gems across the table. “What’s that one do?”

“Which one?”

“The pink one. Octagon. No, six-agon.”

“Hexagon.”

“Fine.”

“That’s Inderal. Beta-blocker.”

She squints at it. “That’s for heart attacks.”

“Also for panic attacks. It slows your heart rate.”

“And what’s that one? The little white oval?”

“Aripiprazole. Atypical antipsychotic.”

"That sounds serious."

"Sounds and is, in some cases. For me it's just an add-on. Keeps me sane. Makes me fat."

She nods. "And what's that one?"

"Imipramine. Tofranil. For depression. Also bed-wetting."

"You're a bed wetter?"

"Tonight I might be." I sip my wine.

"And that one?"

"Temazepam. Sleeping pill. That's for later."

She nods. "Are you supposed to be taking any of these with alcohol?"

I swallow. "Nope."

It's only as the pills squeeze down my throat that I remember I already took them this morning.

JANE CASTS her head back, her mouth a fountain of smoke. "*Please* don't say checkmate." She giggles. "My ego can't take three in a row. Remember that I haven't played in *years*."

"It shows," I tell her. She snorts, laughs, exposing a trove of silver fillings.

I inspect my prisoners: both rooks, both bishops, a chain gang of pawns. Jane has captured a single pawn and a lonely knight. She sees me looking, swats the knight onto its side. "Horse down," she says. "Summon the vet."

"I love horses," I tell her.

"Look at that. Miracle recovery." She rights the knight, strokes its marble mane.

I smile, drain the last of my red. She eases more into my glass. I watch her. "I love your earrings, too."

She fingers one of them, then the other—a little choir of pearls in each ear. "Gift from an old boyfriend," she says.

"Does Alistair mind you wearing them?"

She thinks about it, then laughs. "I doubt Alistair knows." She spurs the wheel of her lighter with her thumb, kisses it to a cigarette.

"Knows you're wearing them or knows who they're from?"

Jane inhales, arrows smoke to one side. "Either. Both. He can be difficult." She taps her cigarette against the bowl. "Don't get me wrong—he's a good man, and a good father. But he's controlling."

"Why's that?"

"Dr. Fox, are you analyzing me?" she asks. Her voice is light, but her eyes are cool.

"If anything, I'm analyzing your husband."

She inhales again, frowns. "He's always been like that. Not very trusting. At least not with me."

"And why's *that*?"

"Oh, I was a wild child," she says. "*Dis-so-lute*. That's the word. That's his—that's Alistair's word, anyway. Bad crowds, bad choices."

"Until you met Alistair?"

"Even then. It took me a little while to clean myself up." It couldn't have taken *that* long, I think—by the looks of her, she

would've been early twenties when she became a mother.

Now she shakes her head. "I was with someone else for a time."

"Who was that?"

A grimace. "*Was* is right. Not worth mentioning. We've all made mistakes."

I say nothing.

"That ended, anyhow. But my family life is still"—her fingers strum the air—"challenging. That's the word."

"*Le mot juste*."

"Those French lessons are totally paying off." She grits her teeth in a grin, cocking the cigarette upward.

I press her. "What makes your family life challenging?"

She exhales. A perfect wreath of smoke wobbles through the air.

"Do it again," I say, in spite of myself. She does. I'm drunk, I realize.

"You know"—clearing her throat—"it isn't just one thing. It's complicated. Alistair is challenging. Families are challenging."

"But Ethan is a good kid. And I say this as someone who knows a good kid when she sees one," I add.

She looks me in the eye. "I'm glad you think so. I do, too." She bats her cigarette on the lip of the bowl again. "You must miss *your* family."

"Yes. Terribly. But I talk to them every day."

She nods. Her eyes are swimming a bit; she must be drunk,

too. “It’s not the same as them being here, though, is it?”

“No. Of course not.”

She nods a second time. “So. Anna. You’ll notice I’m not asking what made you this way.”

“Overweight?” I say. “Prematurely gray?” I really am soused.

She sips her wine. “Agoraphobic.”

“Well …” If we’re trading confidences, then I suppose: “Trauma. Same as anyone.” I fidget. “It got me depressed. Severely depressed. It isn’t something I like to remember.”

But she’s shaking her head. “No, no, I understand—it’s not my business. And I’m guessing you can’t invite people over for a party. I just think we need to find you some more hobbies. Besides chess and your black-and-white movies.”

“And espionage.”

“And espionage.”

I think about it. “I used to take photographs.”

“Looks as though you still do.”

That deserves a smirk. “Fair enough. But I mean outdoor photography. I enjoyed it.”

“Sort of *Humans of New York* stuff?”

“More like nature photography.”

“In New York City?”

“In New England. We used to go there sometimes.”

Jane turns to the window. “Look at that,” she says, pointing west, and I do: a pulpy sunset, the dregs of dusk, buildings paper-cut against the glow. A bird circles nearby. “That’s nature, isn’t

it?"

"Technically. Some of it. But I mean—"

"The world is a beautiful place," she insists, and she's serious; her gaze is even, her voice level. Her eyes catch mine, hold them. "Don't forget that." She reclines, mashing her cigarette into the hollow of the bowl. "And don't miss it."

I fish my phone from my pocket, aim it at the glass, snap a shot. I look at Jane.

"Attagirl," she growls.

19

I POUR HER INTO THE front hall a little past six. “I’ve got very important things to do,” she informs me.

“So do I,” I reply.

Two and a half hours. When did I last speak to someone, anyone, for two and a half hours? I cast my mind back, like a fishing line, across months, across seasons. Nothing. No one. Not since my first meeting with Dr. Fielding, long ago in midwinter—and even then I could only talk for so long; my windpipe was still damaged.

I feel young again, almost giddy. Maybe it’s the wine, but I suspect not. Dear diary, today I made a friend.

LATER THAT evening, I’m drowsing through *Rebecca* when the buzzer rings.

I shed my blanket, straggle to the door. “Why don’t you go?” Judith Anderson sneers behind me. “Why don’t you leave Manderley?”

I check the intercom monitor. A tall man, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped, with a bold widow’s peak. It takes me a moment—I’m used to seeing him in living color—but then I recognize Alistair Russell.

“Now what might you be after?” I say, or think. I think I say it. Definitely still drunk. I shouldn’t have popped those pills before, either.

I press the buzzer. The latch clacks; the door groans; I wait for it to shut.

When I open the hall door, he's standing there, pale and luminous in the dark. Smiling. Strong teeth bolting from strong gums. Clear eyes, crow's feet raking the edges.

"Alistair Russell," he says. "We live in two-oh-seven, across the park."

"Come in." I extend a hand. "I'm Anna Fox."

He waves away my hand, stays put.

"I really don't want to intrude—and I'm sorry to disturb you in the middle of something. Movie night?"

I nod.

He smiles again, bright as a Christmas storefront. "I just wanted to know if you'd had any visitors this evening?"

I frown. Before I can answer, an explosion booms behind me—the shipwreck scene. "Ship ashore!" the coastliners wail. "Everybody down to the bay!" Much hubbub.

I return to the sofa, pause the film. When I face him again, Alistair has taken a step into the room. Bathed in white light, shadows pooled in the hollows of his cheeks, he looks like a cadaver. Behind him the door yawns in the wall, a dark mouth.

"Would you mind closing that?" He does so. "Thanks," I say, and the word slides off my tongue: I'm slurring.

"Have I caught you at a bad time?"

"No, it's fine. Can I get you a drink?"

"Oh, thanks, I'm all right."

"I meant water," I clarify.

He shakes his head politely. "Have you had any visitors tonight?" he repeats.

Well, Jane warned me. He doesn't look like the controlling type, all beady eyes and thin lips; he's more a jovial lion-in-autumn sort, with his peppery beard, his hairline in rapid retreat. I imagine him and Ed getting on, laddishly, hail-fellow-well-mettishly, slinging back whiskey and swapping war stories. But appearances, et cetera.

It's none of his business, of course. Still, I don't want to look defensive. "I've been alone all night," I tell him. "I'm in the middle of a movie marathon."

"What's that?"

"*Rebecca*. One of my favorites. Are you—"

Then I see that he's looking past me, dark brow furrowed. I turn.

The chess set.

I've filed the glasses neatly in the dishwasher, scrubbed the bowl in the sink, but the chessboard is still there, littered with the living and the dead, Jane's fallen king rolled to one side.

I turn back to Alistair.

"Oh, *that*. My tenant likes to play chess," I explain. Casual.

He looks at me, squints. I can't tell what he's thinking. Usually this isn't a challenge for me, not after sixteen years spent living in other people's heads; but perhaps I'm out of practice. Or else it's the drink. And the drugs.

"Do you play?"

He doesn't answer for a moment. "Not in a long time," he says. "Is it just you and your tenant here?"

"No, I—yes. I'm separated from my husband. Our daughter is with him."

"Well." He throws one last look at the chess set, at the television; then he moves toward the door. "I appreciate your time. Sorry to bother you."

"Of course," I say as he steps into the hall. "And please thank your wife for the candle."

He pivots, looks at me.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.