



THE FAMILY TABOR

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Cherise Wolas

The Family Tabor

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Wolas C.

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Harry Tabor is about to receive the Man of the Decade award. As he enters his twilight years, this distinction seems like the culmination to a life well lived. A perfect life. A life spent helping Jewish refugees from all over the globe find a better life in America, giving them a second chance. Harry knows all about second chances. He has the perfect marriage—his wife, Roma, is an eminent child psychologist, and they tell each other almost everything. His three grown children, Phoebe, Camille, and Simon, are all accomplished. But his life could have very well taken a different turn if, seemingly a lifetime ago, he hadn't uprooted everyone from their life in Connecticut and brought them out to the desert, literally, where they knew no one and he could start again. In *The Family Tabor*, Cherise Wolas examines the five members of the Tabor family as they prepare to celebrate Harry. Through each of their points of view, we see family members whose lives are built on lies, both to themselves and to others, and how these all come crashing down during a seventy-two-hour period.

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THE FAMILY TABO

CHERISE WOLA



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Copyright

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Dedication

For the girl from Port Colborne and the boy from the Bronx,
who found each other and married,
and became and remain my parents.

Epigraph

It was the mind that was woven, the mind that was jerked
And tufted in straggling thunder and shattered sun.

—Wallace Stevens

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard.

—Anne Sexton

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[GOOD SAMARITAN](#)

ONE

TOMORROW EVENING, HARRY TABOR will be anointed Man of the Decade.

If this were the 1300s, he would be running for his life to escape savage pogroms in France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, or Bohemia.

If this were the 1800s, in Imperial Russia, he would be running for his life to escape savage pogroms in Odessa, in Warsaw, in Kishinev, in Kiev, in Bialystok, or in Lviv.

If this were the early 1940s, in Nazi-occupied Europe, he would be running for his life, the garish yellow Star of David on his chest, *Jew* centered in mock Hebraic, a target to be captured and deported to a savage camp to join the millions of dead going up in smoke.

It is only by a godsend that it is none of those times and none of those places, although those events, in those places, at those times, certainly clarified how one was considered by others.

Instead, it is late in the second decade of the twenty-first century, in Palm Springs, California, and on this scorching mid-August Friday night, Harry Tabor is reveling in the truth of what's coming. Man of the Decade is the desert city's exceptional honor, lofting high the special few who devotedly enrich the lives of others in astounding and uncommon ways. As Harry has been doing for thirty years, manifesting futures of promise and hope for the persecuted, the lost, and the luckless.

In March, when he received the lavish hand-delivered announcement inviting him to ascend into the very select group—only twelve such ascensions since the award's institution—he was hesitant about accepting, and had thought: *Why me?*

But now, as he embraces Roma, the love of his life and his wife of forty-four years, he thinks: *Why not me?* He commands immense respect and admiration as the highly successful head of his humanitarian enterprises, a man who effects miracles, trusting in the honey of bees, not the sting, to make those miracles happen. He shepherds all those he resettles here, thousands now, and looks after them lovingly, with care and pride.

And indeed, this moment, sheet thrown off, bodies damp, souls replenished by their Friday night union, Harry realizes there will never be a better time for this felicitous event, this proffering of esteem, this celebration of him, to which, apparently, eight hundred have confirmed their attendance. How wonderful that it has come now, when he has just begun dipping toes into the spotlight, and while he has not yet lost his hair or his teeth or his height or his hearing or his eyesight, and any notion of him shuffling off this mortal coil is far, far in the future. So far in the future, it bears absolutely no current consideration. In fact, he will not, this night, consider such an eventuality at all.

He runs a hand softly down his wife's back and says, "You're as lovely now as you were at twenty-four when we wed."

Harry says these words often to Roma, and always on Friday nights, for he still sees her as the bride she once was. And every Friday night, Roma says, "And you have matured into an emperor, my love. Enjoy your solitary hour."

Which is what she says now, smiling up at him before cloaking herself with the sheet and duvet. She is instantly asleep in the ceiling fan breeze, the blades' whirring a noise she seems never to notice.

Harry rises then for a quick shower. Under the spray, inside his head, Leonard Cohen is singing, *Hineni, hineni*. All afternoon he listened to that song in his office, its dark exultation curiously increasing his own elation. *Here I am, here I am*, he thinks as he dries off and dons the caftan Roma insisted they buy him long ago in Morocco.

When he draws the drapes, he catches his reflection. He *does* look like an emperor, and he feels like one, too, a happy emperor, a pleased potentate, a benevolent monarch.

Slipping out of their bedroom, he follows the path Roma leaves for him through the house, overheads reduced to small lighted circles, electric breadcrumbs by which she guarantees he will find his way back to her. And he always does, always wants to, always will.

In the living room, a substantial pour of brandy in a cut-crystal glass; then he is through the sliding glass doors, stepping into the late-summer night with its textured, enveloping heat, the hot air scented with life.

On his expansive back patio that smacks right up against the vast desert beyond, he stretches out on a lounge chair, and becomes one with the settled darkness that embraces his large house, that outlines the rows of towering cacti—larger than when they first moved in—silvered by moonlight, thick as terrestrial soldiers, sulfurous as ghosts. This place, this desert, *his* desert, how it stirs his insides, the grandness of everything and of every living thing mixing seductively with the fragrance of the brandy he sips.

A bat shoots by, then another one, and their soaring night search for insects to gobble up no longer gives him the slightest start. He listens to the murmurs, the rustles, the peeps, the faint calls that could mean love or despair out there, the scrabbling of creatures seeking whatever it is they need. The moon is cut in half tonight, the stars preserved rather than gleaming. He remembers when his children were young, pointing out specific stars whose names he didn't know, has never known, saying to each of them, "That star right there belongs to you, Phoebe, and that one to you, Camille, and that one to you, Simon." And they believed him; for years they believed those stars were theirs, their names attached to them in some astral registry. Perhaps he'll offer up stars to the little ones, his young granddaughters, this weekend.

This is Harry's finale on these sacred Friday nights, after he and Roma prepare a lovely dinner at home, drink a bottle of delicious wine, share news about his newest clients, her thorniest patients, their stellar children, their adorable grandchildren, and afterward, in every season, float together in the big pool until the moon appears, then make love. This solitary hour of reflection is when he considers the infinite, and the world at large, and this world of his that he thinks he created out of whole cloth.

Tonight, it's not the infinite he wants to contemplate, but the specific. And specifically, his response to one of the many questions posed by the young *Palm Times* reporter for the profile piece that will be published in Sunday's edition—highlighting, he was told, his installation as Man of the Decade.

When asked, "Do you think great things are ahead of you or behind you?" Harry had replied, "The past no longer exists, there is only the future, whatever it may hold," and something about his answer to that consideration of mystical simplicity has continued to give him pause. He studies it anew now, from multiple angles, and recognizes that the equation that has fueled him all his life is slightly different, less coy and more apt:

"The past no longer exists, but great things are always ahead in my future."

That's what he *should* have said. *That* would have been entirely accurate.

Which leads him to reconsider another of his responses during that long interview conducted in his office. His answer hadn't been at all inaccurate, but he might have fleshed it out, elaborated, said something more than, "Religious faith has nothing to do with my organization's mission. I am a historical Jew."

In the dense heat, Harry unpacks that brief explanatory offering he made to the reporter, with its pithy pearl of a phrase, a definitional near-truth, a mostly accurate shorthand to describe himself, that he thinks his brain magically deduced on its own—it didn't, but no matter.

Yes, he should have explained to the reporter that while he aligns himself with the cultural and ethical lineage of his, the Chosen People, he draws the line at, absolutely doesn't subscribe to, their belief in the power of prayer. He could have said, "Look, prayer failed all of my ancestors, everyone from whom I'm descended," and evocatively illustrated what he meant with a few quick stories:

That his great-grandparents Abraham and Minishka Tabornikov were tiny people, stoic and reverent in their religiousness, with an enormous belief that God was with them, despite the awful men on horseback who rode into their shtetl waving scimitars and swords, eagerly firebombing the place once again, leaving behind a new stack of dead Jews mangled, burned, cut down, sliced straight

through. Every Shabbat and on all the big and little holidays, they prayed in the ramshackle shul that was their second home, rebuilt with *tzedakah* and reconsecrated as many times as it was left smashed and smoldering. They had three healthy sons, not strapping, but smart—the youngest, a Talmudic scholar—all marrying devoted girls who bore lovely grandchildren. Their condensed happiness was like a fragile flower cracking through bone-dry dirt, beauty found if they shut their eyes to the rough world and forced their hearts open. Paltry, pitiful gifts, taken as proof that Adonai was watching out for them, watching over them, hearing their worshipful words.

That his grandparents Aleph and Sonia Tabornikov were a little more progressive than the prior generation. They married, and with their young sons, left the shtetl for the big city, though the big city was barely a town. But with that fifty-mile migration, they reduced, to Shabbat and the top three tiers of holidays, their attendance at their newer, finer shul, whose roof did not leak, looking sideways at those who held fast to the full complement. And when their sons were old enough to understand where they came from, and that because of who they were, they were not wanted—another round of pogroms making that abundantly clear—the family sold their only inheritances, a silver Kiddush cup and menorah, packed up their meager belongings, and hightailed it out of the old country, arriving at Ellis Island, where these Tabornikovs were reborn Americans, renaming themselves Tabor. Worship did not wholly consume the totality of his grandparents' lives in their new country, but to Harry, it has seemed only by a matter of meaningless degrees. For although these new Tabors were free as they had never been before, prayer barely eased their lot in life.

That his parents, Mordechai and Lenore Tabor, were, like all the rest, dead, but after meeting at CCNY and marrying, they chose as their home a comfortable house in the Bronx within walking distance of a conservative synagogue they immediately joined. They did not attend on Shabbat or on the minor holidays, but were present at the ostensibly fun ones, like Purim and Sukkot and Hanukkah, and were always in their middle-of-the-house seats on the most holy of days, those deemed critical, young Harry seated firmly between them. And when the synagogue threw out the fusty old prayer books and adopted looser, more free-form services, with a musician to strum his guitar and a newfangled cantor who sang to the plucked notes, they went with the times. They maintained their minimized calendar of observance and their strong belief that prayer was an answer to so many things that remained, unfortunately, unanswered.

And that on Harry's own Bar Mitzvah, as he ascended the bema, reached the Torah scroll unrolled on the lectern, accepted from the well-bearded rabbi the scepter to guide him along the reversed sentences of minuscule black-inked Hebrew words, he, like all those earlier Tabors and Tabornikovs, had prayed. His prayer hadn't been for global peace, or to make Mordy and Lenore proud, or to be gifted with checks and Israeli Bonds in relatively substantial sums for 1961, but that Eve Flynn, the long-legged redhead in his homeroom, who every single Sunday attended church and sang in its youth choir under a massive crucified Christ, would finally notice him on the very day Jewish tradition declared him a man. Harry had looked out at the congregation and prayed that when everyone was at the after-party in the Tabors' tidy, well-gardened backyard, Eve, dazzled by his new manhood, might, in an enthusiastic clasping of sweaty hands, be led around the side of the house, where, under the silky fronds of the weeping willow tree, Harry would bestow upon her his first-ever kiss. He had seen his pale gingery angel among his dark-haired erstwhile tribe and sang his Torah portion as if it were a love song for her. At the party, he was knock-kneed with love for Eve, who wore a short froth of a party dress in a peach that clashed with her red hair, but exposed her slim thighs, her rounded knees, her thin calves, all that opaline skin. Despite his fervent call to God, as fervent as once intoned by his ancestors, the prayed-for kiss was not to be. Big, blond Bobby O'Ryan, a churchgoer like Eve, had led her away, and in painful defeat, Harry could only imagine Eve Flynn being kissed under that weeping willow tree by a boy who, because he was no Jew, would never be a man at thirteen.

And he would have concluded by saying, “I consider myself a thoroughly modern man, standing at a vast distance from the millennia of bloodshed and obliteration and prayer, and that whatever links me to my ancestors is tenuous at best, a matter only of DNA, and not of outlook, or of temperament, or of faith. Big prayers did nothing for my ancestors, and a tiny prayer did not turn Eve Flynn’s head and heart in my direction. After that, I gave up prayer entirely.”

All these years, Harry has been certain that he prayed just the once and never again. Indeed, he would swear that’s true.

What *is* true is that he left Eve Flynn behind, and met other girls who welcomed his kisses, and he graduated from college, and from a decent business school, and landed, surprisingly, at a hoity-toity, top-tier, gentile-owned stock brokerage firm in Manhattan, where he was the token Jew for a few years, but moved up the ladder with alacrity anyway, fell madly in love with the dazzling Jewess who deigned to become his wife, and created a life far beyond his ancestors’ ken.

What is also true is that thirty-plus years ago, in what still strikes him as a miraculous decision, he moved his family to this desert and made it his mission to do good in the world.

Looking up at the moon and the stars, Harry thinks he ought to be done for the night. It’s late, but not too late, and anyway the brandy is finished, and he wants to be fresh for tomorrow.

He locks the glass door, rinses the crystal, returns it to its living room tray, and snaps off the lights one by one as he winds his way through the house, back to his bed, where his wife, and the warmth of her skin, awaits him.

It is pitch-black in the bedroom, and silent once he cuts the fan’s spinning entirely, and then Roma sighs her heartbroken sigh when she’s dreaming about her grandmother Tatiana and her mother, Inessa. He waits until his strong and happy wife’s nocturnal sadness fades away, then carefully climbs into bed, fluffs his pillows, and closes his eyes.

Soon there is an internal rush of lapping oceanic waves pulling him under, into the ruffled layers of sleep, where he will travel to places he does not know, see people he never knew, and others he once loved, traveling, he thinks, on his own, believing, as he always has, that he alone inhabits his head. Mistaken in his assumption that the past no longer exists. Mistaken, too, in his certainty that the world can be understood, that he understands the world, or, at least, that he understands his own. As his breath grows even and deep, a sensed, rather than articulated, sentiment washes over him: *I have been a very lucky man.*

And *that* is true, absolutely true. But luck is a rescindable gift.

TWO

THE HOURS PASS, AND he sleeps deeply, and then all the blood-soaked history of the Judaic people, and all the history of those to whom he is related, whose lives were cut short or resulted in his existence, and all his beliefs about the past and the future, and about faith and prayer, are fading back into the pleats of Harry Tabor's sleeping mind. It is dawn and he is waking, opening his shining brown eyes, running a large hand through his thick hair, still boisterously dark, threads of distinguished white only recently emerging, in this his seventieth year.

He is quick out of bed, the travertine marble cool under his feet, and in the bathroom, he gives his solid teeth a thorough cleaning, grinning at himself when he finishes rinsing. He picks up the razor, runs a hand over his cheeks, thinking happily of this afternoon, when his children and grandchildren will descend upon the family's substantial and striking mid-century modernist homestead, with its five bedrooms and endless other rooms, all open to the expanse of sky and desert and weather and one or the other of their two pools. He and Roma and their progeny all gathered together for this weekend of Man of the Decade pomp and circumstance.

Maybe there will be time for a hike with his son. Wouldn't Simon be surprised if he said, "I'm finally ready to do *Cactus to Clouds*"? Really, this would be the perfect weekend to hike that tough trail he has always avoided.

He sets down the razor. He'll take the single-edge blade to his face tonight, be glisteningly smooth for the gala event celebrating him.

In his large closet, he dresses in his tennis whites, then tiptoes, socks and Tretorns in hand, out of the master bedroom with its view, when the drapes are pulled back, of the meditation pool, leaving Roma asleep, her face aglow in a shard of sunlight, dreaming, he hopes, about something pleasurable, not about Tatiana and Inessa, or the youngster she has begun treating who has ceased eating entirely.

In the sunny kitchen, the waft of espresso makes him smile again, that timer on the machine such a modern wonder. He throws back a first cup, rich and unadulterated, looking out over the large aquamarine rectangle in the main courtyard where Roma swims her daily laps before healing the children of the Coachella Valley.

Socks on, laces tied, he gulps down two more espressos, leaves the thimble-sized cup in the sink, and pulls from the freezer three bottles of water, slick as stalactites.

Out into the open-air carport, into his old convertible Mercedes coupe painted in a patina of gold, he revs the engine just a little, to feel the vroom in his being, and leaves his majestic home, which sits on a solid acre, driving past the flowering cacti and soaring palms, and the beds of mimosas, ocotillos, acacias, lemongrass, and the lilies of the Nile, after which the Tabors' street is named, turning left onto his street, onto Agapanthus Lane. He presses the gas, feels the stalwart car gather its power, gliding so easily over the smooth macadam, a hop and a skip to the courts.

He could belong to any of the private tennis clubs in the area, and his tennis pal, Levitt, would prefer playing at his own, but Harry is a man of the people, and he prefers the public courts. After all, he comes from solid stock that knew how to make do with what they had, which was nothing. And he knows how to make do, too, only he has so much more than any impoverished Tabornikov could have imagined possessing back in the Pale of Settlement, when the world was so very, very, very old. Harry Tabor may no longer be chronologically young, but he feels as if he is, lives as if he is, as if this world is a great and wonderful place, and he himself is adding to that wondrousness, waking up every day strong as a bull, his thoughts sharp and important, his very being brand-new. A man self-made, through and through. That's how he remembers his own life, up to this point.

And there is Levitt's showy Maserati cooling down when Harry pulls into his regular spot at Ruth Hardy Park. Younger than Harry by a baker's dozen, but not quite as agile a player, Levitt is a

friend Harry considers “newish” since they met only a decade ago. In the desert, ten years is nothing against the antediluvian nature of the topography.

Creaky parking brake engaged, Henry swings himself easily through the car’s open door, is up on his feet, retrieving his tennis bag from the backseat.

“You ready to lose again, Levitt? I’m telling you, you’d better be tough, give me your prime-A game, because today is my lucky day.”

THREE

ROMA TABOR'S DREAMS ABOUT her *baba* Tatiana and her mother, Inessa, aren't about what she has suffered and lost by their absence, or the bottomless sorrow that never dissolves; instead she dreams of *their* sufferings, *their* losses, *their* sorrows that they packed away after they found a way to escape.

For many years now, when she wakes, she thinks first about luck—about the terrible steps Tatiana had to take to find a shred of it in a world that decreed she should have none, and then about its constancy in her own life. From the time she was young, those strong women defied their experiences to teach her to trust in its tangible reality. She learned the lesson, but honors their before and after by remembering that believing one deserves luck doesn't mean it won't disappear in a flash.

This morning, there is Harry's usual empty space next to her in the king-sized bed, and the sun's heat on her face, and she thinks about luck, then puts it away, and waits to see what name is in her head. Today it is Noelani McCadden, a big name for a little girl who is only eight.

In the intake session on Monday, the mother, Jeanine, said, "One day my daughter was fine, the next day not. She's an only child, and until a month ago, a couch potato. She didn't like playing games during recess, wasn't interested in taking gymnastics or ballet with her friends, or riding the bike we gave her for her birthday while her father and I took our regular after-dinner stroll. We tried to get her to go to camp this summer, where she would swim and learn how to trot on a horse, but she flat-out refused.

"Now, before dawn, she runs through our neighborhood, to the fire road, and keeps going. She's eight. It's not normal at that age to be running seven miles a day. And no matter what we do, we can't stop her. If we try to stop her, she starts screaming, so we let her go, then follow at a distance in the car. Usually it's Steve who does that, makes sure she's safe."

Roma pictured the little girl waking, dressing quickly, sneaking through the quiet house to the front door, carefully turning the locks, slipping out into air that had cooled overnight. So young, but needing to run, perhaps without any idea of why, running in the early-morning dark until light infused the sky.

"In the beginning," Jeanine continued, "she'd come in all red and sweaty, and I'd be making her breakfast and tell her to sit down at the kitchen table. And she would, but she'd keep her mouth tight and turn away from the eggs and bacon or oatmeal I'd serve her. I went out and bought sugary cereals and donuts, but nothing. And last week, when I said, 'Honey, you must drink enough water. You're running so much and we live in the desert, it's a hundred and ten and a body needs hydration,' she smacked the water glass I'd filled out of my hand. Then every time I offered her water or fruit juice or even the soft drink she used to beg me to buy and I never would, she'd smack the glass out of my hand. Glass everywhere on the kitchen floor. So I went out and bought plastic and I keep trying to get her to drink, but she won't. All day long I'm spying on my child, to see if she's drunk something or eaten something without me noticing. Hoping and hoping. I'm checking if glasses are wet. I'm counting the pieces of bread left in the loaf, crackers in the plastic sleeves, cookies in the boxes, slices of American cheese in the fridge, fruit in the crisper; I even counted the Fritos in the bag, but she's not touching a thing."

Roma met with the girl every afternoon this week, two hours each time. It is the immersive approach she prefers with a case that has developed this swiftly, to see if she can get to the essence quickly.

The questions in Noelani's case are: What has speeded this child up? Why is she running so far and so fast? Is there something monstrous she is trying to outrace, and if so, is that monstrous thing within or without? And how is a child so young overriding her natural hunger, imposing on herself an iron-willed discipline at which most adults fail?

Roma has seen elements of this many times over decades in practice, and the causes rarely reveal themselves easily. Noelani is not the youngest patient Roma has had with these symptoms, but what worked with her other patients will have no bearing here. Roma must start at the beginning, treat Noelani as she treats every patient, as the *sui generis* beings that they are.

When Roma asked if Noelani had any other new and uncharacteristic behaviors, Jeanine began to cry. “She lies about everything. I ask her, ‘Have you brushed your teeth?’ or ‘Did you make your bed?’ or ‘Did you feed your goldfish?’ and she says yes to everything, but it never turns out to be true. She lies about things that are verifiable as untrue with one glance, which Steve and I can’t understand.”

Naturally, the parents are scared and shaken. The cherished daughter they knew, whom they tucked into bed and kissed each night and roused in the morning with hugs, has disappeared entirely, as if she never were.

Everything Jeanine spoke about, Roma has seen in her meetings with Noelani, but she has also seen more. In addition to the girl’s obsessions with running and denying herself food and liquid, she has also seen in her anxiety, anger, and impulse control.

In yesterday’s session, their fifth, Roma was tough, clarifying that if Noelani does not immediately start eating and drinking, she will be hospitalized, sustaining fluids forced into her through a tube in her stomach. Roma pulled out a medical book with pictures of children in hospital beds with tubes jutting into their bellies. She pulled out from a box on her desk the medical equipment that would be used to invade Noelani’s body in that way. The impact Roma had intended to create was deliberate, and there it was—the young face soon covered in sprung tears, snot dripping from the little nose. But Noelani had not given in immediately. Thirty minutes discussing the only outcome had been required before Roma was able to wring out a promise, Noelani writing her name in blocky letters on the bottom of the food plan she agreed to maintain through the weekend. Together they had chosen what she would eat: a banana and yogurt for breakfast; a tuna fish sandwich and apple for lunch; salad, chicken, and rice for dinner; and each day she would drink five glasses of water.

“Just the weekend,” Roma had said, “that’s all you need to promise me now.” And the crying girl, her thin forearms laced with trails of mucus, had carried the handwritten food plan flat on her palms, as if it were an offering on fire, holding it out to her mother in the waiting room, who leaned forward in her chair, her cheeks as tearstained as her daughter’s, until the two were face-to-face. Noelani has her mother’s pretty features, although it will take a few more years for those features to fully emerge, arrange themselves on her face. But where the mother was nicely proportioned, the daughter was gaunt, nearly emaciated, and Roma was certain that Noelani has been running for far longer than only the month the parents believe it has been.

Noelani had tried smiling, a brave barely there smile, and waited for her mother to open the outer door to the parking lot, and then she was taking careful steps to their car. Jeanine had turned to Roma and said, “What now?”

“Make sure she follows the plan. She’ll cry, but remind her she promised. And though she won’t grasp this completely, explain she made this promise to herself, not to me or to you.”

Jeanine nodded and Roma said, “Leave me a few messages over the weekend, to let me know how it’s going. Remember, Jeanine, she chose those meals for herself, so give her only those meals, exactly. Of course, you and your husband, one or the other or both, will have to stand guard to make sure she eats.”

Jeanine nodded again, glancing out at Noelani, still crying copious tears, her careful steps replaced by a frenzied pacing around and around the car.

“What about the running?”

“We have to figure out what the running means to her before we can alter the behavior.”

“And the lying?”

“Health first,” Roma said.

It had taken Jeanine McCadden so much effort to extricate her car from its tight spot, backing in, backing out, turning the steering wheel every which way, that the car seemed to be heaving, as if mimicking the tears of its unhappy cargo inside, and Roma watched until Jeanine finally broke the car free, gave her a sad little wave, and joined the quick flow of late Friday afternoon traffic.

This morning, Roma debates the odds of mother and father having the courage to keep to the plan, of Jeanine leaving the updates she requested on her office or personal voicemail. Impossible to determine, but their actions or inactions will provide her with additional information: a child's issues are rarely isolated, there is nearly always some sort of tangential cause and effect, and whatever Roma is dealing with here, with Noelani, she likely will have to address the parents' problems as well.

She rolls onto her side, stares through the gap in the drapes, at the sun spreading across the marble floor, over her body beneath the light duvet. It is Saturday, her work week finished, the morning hours hers alone. By noon, everyone will be here. Phoebe and Simon and his family arriving separately from Los Angeles, Camille from Seattle. Her family all together to celebrate the accomplishments of husband and father. She wishes she had seen Harry this morning, to kiss him, to tell him how proud she is about this honor being conferred upon him tonight. How proud that he righted his ways back then, unwound his wrongs, moved again into the light. They have never discussed that time, but this morning, she would have liked to tell him what an inspiration he is, how she marvels at his devotion to his indispensable work, the magnanimity with which he gives himself fully to everyone who needs him and to those who love him.

Noelani returns to her mind, and then Phoebe pops in. As a psychologist, Roma is used to these jumps in her thoughts, aware there is always a logic to the unconscious leaps she makes, and she considers the connection between her eight-year-old patient and her thirty-eight-year-old daughter, her eldest.

On the phone yesterday, Roma asked whether Phoebe will be bringing the new boyfriend with whom she has been taking long weekend trips since February. No one has met Aaron Green yet, not even Simon, who checks in on Phoebe's cat when this man whisks her away to the Outer Banks, to Santa Fe and Aspen and Nashville, to La Jolla and Catalina and Big Sur; last weekend's trip was to the wine country up north.

From Phoebe's descriptions, Aaron Green sounds like a paragon, but yesterday, her daughter had not been able to answer Roma's question head-on, hemming and hawing, saying only that "Aaron's hoping to be able to move some things around to free up his schedule." And Roma was quickly concerned that Phoebe has again fallen in love with the wrong man, and that the qualities this Aaron Green supposedly possesses might be colored by Phoebe's desperate desire to have a family.

Roma sighs. Oh, yes, she sees the connection now between Noelani and Phoebe. The lying the little girl is engaging in, the subterfuge Phoebe once used as a shield. Is that subterfuge, at odds with Phoebe's otherwise straightforward nature, returning? Over a man named Aaron Green?

Fifteen years since the last time, since Simon's high school graduation party, when Phoebe brought home a boy she insisted on calling her paramour. How irritated she had been with Phoebe's use of that archaic word, her refusal to employ simple language to explain the facts, her preference for befuddling. All Roma had wanted to know was whether her driven daughter was having a romance that involved physical intimacies. How she had hoped for that until meeting the paramour, the boy Roma nicknamed "the prophet," because he was actually named Elijah and seemed to have knocked Phoebe off her feet, her daughter taking Roma aside all that weekend and raising questions about the way she was living her life. She had decided to be a lawyer when she was in high school, would begin her third year of law school that fall, wanted the big firm experience after passing the bar, but, Phoebe had cried to Roma, weren't her accomplishments meaningless, her desire for her routines, her nice apartment, her pretty things wrong and shameful, her need to have everything mapped out insane?

Roma had said, "Phoebe, *we're* proud of all you've accomplished by this tender age of twenty-three, but if you're not, or if you want something different, you can always explore un-

mapping yourself.” By which Roma meant, *Investigate other avenues that might interest you, try being spontaneous, cull your belongings and give all that bounty to charity.*

Instead, some months later, Phoebe had nearly quit everything and run off with the prophet. In the end, at the last minute, she had pulled back and raced to the safety of home, had opened up to Roma completely, had told her mother that the love she had for Elijah had to be cut out of her heart or she would end up becoming someone she was not.

Roma sighs again. In a few hours either Phoebe will be here with Aaron Green, introducing him to her family, or she’ll be here on her own. And if she is here on her own, Roma will carve out time to sit alone with Phoebe, to apply her professional expertise to her own child gently, always gently, in order to expose the truth.

It is true a mother feels something more, or different, or extraspecial for her firstborn, but as a psychologist, she knows the importance of keeping things fair among siblings, and she’s lucky—that touchstone word again—because her children, uniquely different, are easy to equally love.

Camille, her social anthropologist middle child, is perfectly defined by her profession, which employs flat research language and mathematical statistics to disguise its romantic and obsessive nature, and the romantically obsessive nature of those bitten by the need to explore. She was thirteen when she decided she wanted to live with tribes she could study, and she accomplished that goal, spending two years living far away, on islands in an archipelago of coral atolls off the east coast of New Guinea.

Camille will be coming alone this weekend, as always, infrequently talking about someone named Valentine. Maybe this visit Roma will ask Camille directly who Valentine is to her, what is the nature of this unexplained relationship, why she never identifies Valentine by gender. In Roma’s experience with troubled children, those who are also gay and have not yet declared themselves often have a difficult time voicing the particulars of the person who has captured their attention. “They are so cool. They are really nice,” is what they say to her. A conundrum her daughter has solved by always referring to Valentine as Valentine or Val. If she has ever referred to Valentine as *he* or *she*, Roma somehow missed it, which strikes her as entirely unlikely.

If it’s a lesbian love relationship, it would confirm the supposition Roma’s held in her heart. With her patients, Roma doesn’t trade in suppositions, she asks them questions outright, knowing she will have to dig for the truth, but with Camille, a keeper of her own counsel since childhood, who even then averted her mother’s deliberately casual prying with a wise smile, Roma’s always had to be wary of even asking the questions, of horning in on the mental space her daughter refuses to share, of violating her fierce and innate sense of privacy. Thousands of patients and their parents have entrusted her with their secrets and fears, but not this daughter of hers.

Where Phoebe explored clothing and makeup, Camille only explored when coerced by Phoebe. Even today, her external appearance does not command much of her attention; she’s lucky in her natural beauty, somehow not tamped down by the baggy, old clothes she wears, by her refusal, most of the time, to use lipstick or mascara, a blush to brighten her cheeks.

Where Phoebe had boyfriends, Camille had friends who were boys. Roma has no idea who Camille dated in college, in graduate school, in her PhD program, or if she dated at all. Girls, boys, those who prefer the personal pronoun of *them* and *their*, or *s/he* and *he/r*, the intersex, the third gender, the transgendered—truly Roma does not care, nor would Harry, if Camille is gay, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual, or asexual. What she cares about is how Camille gates her inner life with Roma outside.

When her daughter’s little-girl desire for a penis of her own did not abate, as such desire usually does, she’d wondered for the first time about Camille’s sexual orientation. And then Camille convinced another little girl to remove every stitch of clothing. When Roma found them in Camille’s bedroom, Camille’s left hand was on the girl’s flat chest, her right hand between the girl’s thin legs. Roma had seen the Band-Aids on both girls’ knees, and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry, because

it might only have been the kind of exploratory game children play. Despite her expertise, she's never been sure.

How old was Camille then? She was eight. Ah, the same age as Noelani.

Her youngest, Simon, worships Harry, is a lawyer like Phoebe, and somehow has become the family outlier. So young when he began college, so adaptable with intellectual heft and high emotional intelligence and the looks of a playboy—Byronic curls, soulful eyes, girls fell under his spell—Roma figured he would play the field for a long while, settle down in his forties. Instead, he is the first of her children to create his own separate family, happily married to Elena Abascal, father of her granddaughters, Lucy and Isabel. Nothing jumps out at Roma when she considers Simon in the context of Noelani, nothing ties them together, except that Simon has been on a running jag lately, putting in the miles, he says, every morning before work, either running the hills in his neighborhood, or in a foreign park across from his hotel when he's litigating abroad. She's never asked how many miles he runs, but given how often he's out of town, and the way he works late into the nights, it seems unlikely he's running seven miles at a shot.

The clock on her nightstand reads 7:20 *a.m.* Roma pulls open the drapes, smiles at the meditation pool, at the brightly colored desert flowers and the shrubs. Harry has his tennis this morning and then a stop at the tailor to pick up the new tuxedo he will wear tonight. He'll be arriving back home just before the kids show up. Everyone will be hungry. She shopped yesterday, has only to put out the spread, but all that can wait. First her hour of laps in the big pool, then coffee.

In the bathroom, she stands naked, inspecting her reflected hair. Fernando did a nice job on the color this time. Last time it was much too light, bold in an odd and punkish way. Over the years she has undergone a slow but steady transformation, from boring, uncommitted brown to lighter and lighter hues, until she gave in, said to Fernando, "I might as well admit life is more fun as a blonde. Let's do the whole head." It wasn't true that life was more fun as a blonde, but she was tired of fighting it, of facing daily the unfairness of her hair transmogrifying into old age long before Harry's. She rubber-bands the honeyed chunks, brushes her teeth, then pulls on her bathing suit. She lifts her cap and goggles from their hook in her closet and shuts the door.

IN THE MAIN COURTYARD, the pool is a sapphire under the sun, shooting liquid rainbows into the house at oblique angles. How she adores submergence. She is a healer of human cracks and fissures, her days spent dealing with her patients' struggles and agonies, the emotional and psychic often embodied in the physical. She uncovers all the states and syndromes that can spark and catch fire from infancy on, searing a being, those flames rarely sputtering out on their own. She works hard quenching the symptoms, providing parents with answers, and the toddlers, children, and teenagers with techniques to manage their frightening infernos, helping them douse the alarming heat and gain interior strength against what is burning them up. Resolutions if the sufferer and loved ones are lucky, cures if kind spirits are shining down, so that as they grow and mature their lives will be happier, sweeter, so that they will be saved from total annihilation. She gives them all of her time, but this hour belongs only to her, swimming with an uncluttered mind, feeling the expectant delight of having everyone together, remembering that however involved she will become with Noelani, she belongs by blood and love to others, and those others, by blood and love, belong to her.

How fortunate she and Harry have been that they and their children have never been afflicted with any kind of serious illness, not physical, emotional, or mental, everyone on their right paths. Closely knit all these years, enjoying being together, genuinely liking one another. Of course, there are the occasional, normal tensions and skirmishes among her children, and sometimes she wishes they didn't force her to read their faces, would simply admit to what's bothering them, but eventually, always, the issue is revealed, and she guides and advises them so judiciously they frequently think they have arrived at the solution on their own.

Head underwater, she holds her breath, then pushes off, stroking strongly to the other side of the long pool. One, two, three ... fourteen long and solid strokes to reach the wall today before reversing course.

Half of fourteen is seven, and she's thinking of Noelani McCadden's toothpick legs racing her away from home, or toward something. In her session notebook, she had written: *Does the actual mileage hold an unconscious significance for Noelani?* Jeanine McCadden was adamant that her daughter runs exactly seven miles each morning, no more, no less, as if the girl were fitted with an internal mileage counter. Before her first meeting with Noelani, Roma had researched the number and discovered that in numerology, seven represents the seeker, the thinker, the searcher of Truth who knows nothing is exactly as it seems and is always trying to understand the reality hidden behind the illusions. Roma had realized that definition described herself as well, born on the seventh day of June. And in astrology, seven meant—

No, she is not going to break her promise, no pondering about Noelani, about any of her patients, while swimming.

She will think about ... She will think about ... Okay, yes, what sort of sea creature would she be? Not a shark, not a whale. Not a seal. What's the difference between porpoises and dolphins?

Then a mental bolt to that weekend when Phoebe brought home the prophet. She heard moans coming from Phoebe's bedroom, and had breached her daughter's trust, carefully turning the knob, peeking through the crack, almost hoping to find Phoebe tangled naked in bed with that long-haired young philosopher whose pacific calm was threatening upheaval in Phoebe's life, but that's not what had been happening in there. Elijah had been at her daughter's feet, washing them. Between his knees, filled with water and suds, was the irreplaceable silver bowl passed down to Roma from Baba Tatiana.

Roma, she says sternly, silently, *no more, just swim*.

FOUR

ON CAMILLE TABOR'S THIRTEENTH birthday, when her breasts were just budding, her mother gave her a book written by a woman who had journeyed to the South Pacific to discover whether adolescence was a universally traumatic and stressful time, or whether the adolescent experience depended on one's cultural upbringing. Camille, a voracious reader, especially liked stories set in faraway places featuring the kinds of people never seen in Palm Springs.

After she unwrapped the present, her mother said, "A little explanation. The book is a vivid account of Samoan adolescent life and was incredibly popular, although eventually Margaret Mead and her research methods came under harsh attack. She was smack in the middle of a scholarly-scientific wrangling that began in the mid-1920s and has yet to be conclusively determined, the nature-versus-nurture debate. To what extent are human personality and behavior the products of biological factors, like the genetics you've inherited from Daddy and his ancestors and from me and mine, or are products of cultural factors, like where you live, how you're being raised, the school you attend, the music you listen to, the television shows you watch, the friends you have. You are now a teenager and it's important you learn to distinguish between the two so you can make thoughtful decisions from your head, rather than automatic ones, perhaps from your heart, whose underpinnings are harder to understand."

Her mother was a prominent child psychologist and often said to her children, "You can do anything you want if you have thought it through and are capable of articulating your reasoning. In other words, so long as you can show your work."

What Camille had already determined was that she wanted a life that was anything but quotidian, ordinary, middling, mediocre, words she knew and never wanted used to describe the life she would have, the person she would become. At home, she wasn't at all surrounded by the quotidian, but the fear was so deep, she was sure she'd been born with it. Who she would actually be and what she would actually do was all hazy in her head, until she devoured *Coming of Age in Samoa* by the redoubtable Margaret Mead.

She read that birthday book many times, but it was the first reading that set her on her path, when Camille knew she would become a social anthropologist, studying exotic tribes in exotic places, researching their rules of behavior, their interpersonal relations, their views on kinship and marriage, their motivations and ambitions, their language, customs, forms of currency, music, stories, and material creations, their taboos, ethos, moral codes, the nature of their self-governance, their notions and beliefs about the communal world in which they existed, the gods they prayed to, the visions that manifested in their dreams.

By the time she delivered her valedictory speech to her graduating class at Palm Springs High, she had stormed through all the ethnographies, memoirs, autobiographies, collected correspondence, and biographies by and about every female social anthropologist she could find. They became Camille's personal heroines.

She entered the University of Washington, thrilled to be facing a lengthy and arduous education. She thought fortitude should be required to become an expert in the rarest field, so temporally and spatially expansive it touched on everything in the world.

At nineteen, light-years ahead of her fellow collegians who hadn't any idea what interested them, she knew she intended to spend her life in unruly, woolly places beyond the pale, engaged in on-the-ground research, discovering, analyzing, reflecting, and publishing her own important ethnographies, adding to the understanding of humanity.

She was a natural, cruising through the intro and second-level anthropology courses, through biology, statistics, research methods, data analysis, and chose Polynesian as her first foreign language, because of Margaret Mead. She declared her major early, was admitted to the university's highly

competitive and selective Anthropology Honors Program, took the 300- and 400-level courses, accomplished her yearlong honors project in ten months, graduated first in her class with a BA.

Then on to her master's, with its first-year core curriculum and evaluation, its second-year sequence of courses in ethnographic methods and research design, and the completion of a research competency paper.

Then on to her PhD, demonstrating her fluency in Polynesian and, by then, also in Abo, a Bantu language spoken in the Mounjo department in southwestern Cameroon, and in Kilivila, spoken on the Trobriand Islands. She passed the general exam, acquired training and experience in teaching at the university level, and finally, nearing the summit of the mountain she'd been climbing all those years, the creation of her own research project, which, like her heroines', would birth new ways of understanding one tiny world, and, through extrapolation, the great big one.

It did not affect her that her friends, colleagues, and siblings, scholarship completed, had begun making serious salaries, were renting large and lovely apartments, acquiring the trappings of burgeoning achievement, because no matter what they accomplished, their lives were known, while hers would always be of breathtaking mystery, and that was the barometer by which she measured her personal success. The university gave her a stipend for teaching. Her tiny apartment, where she'd been since her junior undergraduate year, had an aura of impermanent student lodging warmed up with walls she frequently repainted in cheery colors, and, doing her part to reduce the rampant waste of fickle people, she filled with discarded furniture that was perfectly usable, stenciling on quaint polka dots and stripes when her brain required a break. It was home with a very small *h* and all that she needed.

And new in her life then was Valentine Osin, her Russian-Jewish lover, the two of them burning for each other from the first moment they met at the university's omni-anthropology cocktail party for doctoral candidates. She had never before been so spontaneously attracted to a man, and never to a man who was all heavy beard and worn denim. But there was an intensity between them she had never experienced, and never thought of denying. She'd had bad luck dating nonanthropologists, and that Valentine Osin was a physical anthropologist of the Leakey variety only further increased his mammoth appeal.

That he was Jewish was irrelevant—she didn't believe in any of it—she was sold, instead, by his accent, trimmed away and smoothed over, but retaining the hint of otherness she preferred, and by his upbringing in a town on the outskirts of a forest, and by their deep conversations, and by their impassioned sex, his swiftness, his directness, the way he could shake her up with the slightest touch, the way he stared at her as if she were a greater achievement than his eventually winning the Charles R. Darwin Lifetime Award. They were equally matched, in restless and driven natures, the desire to live unparalleled lives.

Their insistent love was only six months old when she began thinking about where she would go for her doctoral research. Her heart had pounded and her fingers had trembled when she pulled from the pages of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the list she had maintained since the age of thirteen, of tribes who dwelled in untamed places. A precious list she had amended and revised, that grew smudged and torn, that reflected changes in her handwriting, the list from which she would find a people she could call her own for a while, in a place where she would put down temporary roots.

She quickly crossed out the isolated Amazon tribes. Interaction with them, the study of them, was prohibited by non-engagement policies at last put into place, to preserve their isolation and their lands; a safeguarding with the dual purpose of resisting further exploitative encroachments into the rainforest and protecting it for the environmental health of the entire planet.

But there was serious anxiety when she began crossing out contactable tribes already claimed by others.

Then near panic, until she found the name of one virginal tribe she had scribbled in pencil: the Sentineli, a Stone Age tribe on the Andaman Islands, in an archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, between India and Myanmar.

In the anthro library, she found scant research on them, which impelled her hope. All she could learn was that they were an uncontacted people who spoke an unclassified language, who used arrows for hunting, harpoons for fishing, and untipped javelins for shooting at those who dared to encroach. They had been fending off researchers since 1880, and although they weren't necessarily cannibals, they did often display heads on warning stakes. She imagined herself the first social anthropologist to befriend that protective hunter-gatherer tribe, the first to learn their unclassified language, to capture that language in what would become the seminal Sentineli dictionary.

She wrote up her findings, her intentions, the ethical and methodologically sound research she would perform in the Andaman Islands, but when her adviser, Dr. Jin, saw *Sentineli* on the cover he said, "I was hoping you wouldn't alight on them. I don't need to read anything else. The answer is absolutely not. The tribe has been classified not merely as uncontacted, but as uncontactable and too dangerous. The Indian government would likely refuse you a permit for those reasons. Choose another tribe, in another place."

She had called Valentine, and he was sympathetic, but the frequent futility of his work, of physical anthropology itself, eliminated his ability to understand that this was the first time she was experiencing such futility. She'd hung up, heartbroken to find herself in the wrong era. In the 1800s and early 1900s, when her heroines were out in the field, dozens of untouched tribes in unexplored locales were up for grabs. But in the hypermodern twenty-first century, with travel to remote places standard and Google mapping uncovering the most distant rock, there was no accessible tribe left whose existence had not already been the subject of cogent boots-on-the-ground participant observation, and somehow she, who missed nothing, had missed this cardinal piece of intelligence.

When she'd worn herself out crying bitterly, she searched her shelves for one of the books written by the lambent creator of modern social anthropology. Published in 1929, the title had a patronizing hegemonic tone that nonetheless encouraged one's prurient curiosity to see what was inside. Of course, she knew what was inside, but she sat upright on her frayed old couch and read Bronislaw Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages* again, first page to last, as the hot pot of coffee by her side cooled to mud.

When she finished, she thought: So she would not be the first explorer on the Trobriand Islands. So she would not be following in any of the footsteps of those women responsible for directing her life path, but rather in *the* man's, in Malinowski's, who had established the imperative of researching a tribe, not from comfortable university library chairs, but out in the field with the people one was studying, engaging in their community, eating their food, taking part in their everyday lives, and she decided that wouldn't be so bad, not at all. (She wouldn't have admitted to her staunchly feminist friends that there was something appealing about following a pseudo father figure.) Plus, she already spoke Kilivila.

Malinowski had done all the heavy lifting there, but she would go anyway to those seemingly very happy islands in Melanesia, where sex reigned, and if luck was with her she would add to the knowledge about them her own penetrating and revelatory findings, hopefully as groundbreaking as his.

Which is what she did: two years in the Trobriand Islands, researching every aspect of the Trobrianders' lives and how those lives had been altered and impacted by the researchers who had come before her. Then fourteen months writing her dissertation, working at the anthro library, eating dinners and having sex with Valentine. Physically, she was in Seattle, but mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and psychically, she remained in Melanesia, carrying with her the Trobrianders' vibrancy, their lust for life, who *she* was there, doing the work she relished. And then she had gone topsy-turvy, crashing hard the very afternoon she successfully defended her work. After the kudos, and

the back pats, and the champagne toasts with Dr. Jin and the oral-defense examiners, she walked home through campus, seeing the late-summer colors bleeding away, the greens and golds turning pale, then transparent, and by the time she reached her apartment, her life force was gone. She was no longer the Camille she had always been.

Months passed in which her bed became her safe place, her bedroom a cave, the blinds shuttered to hide the cheeriness of the walls, the phone ringing and ringing, the messages piling up and never returned, Valentine bringing her soup, singing to her, leaving reluctantly when she did not respond to his words, to his overtures, and his patience was worn. Then in late December a knock on her door, and Dr. Jin was standing there. “So you’re here, Camille. I’ve sent you dozens of emails, left you numerous phone messages. I thought maybe you were away on a long holiday and hadn’t let me know. Then I ran into Dr. Osin and he told me what’s been going on. Dress and come to my office.”

She managed to shower, to wash her matted hair, then stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were cloudy and red-rimmed, and how weird that she’d forgotten their light hazel hue. She was the only one in the family without dark, darker, or darkest brown eyes, and her father used to tease her, calling her “Witch Hazel.” She’d hated that nickname as a kid, like glass shattering inside, but looking into her eyes, she finally understood what he’d been trying to teach her: that humor could coexist with seriousness, that she had needed to find the humor in herself even at that young age. She could hear him saying, “Come on, Witch Hazel, smile,” and she tried smiling at her reflection, but it was impossible. Still, with her father closer to her heart, it was a little easier to pull on dusty jeans and a wrinkled shirt and, under cover of a large orange umbrella, make her way in teeming rain to Dr. Jin’s office on campus.

“Sit,” Dr. Jin had said, handing her a fragile cup of green tea. “This happens to the most committed social anthropologists. Your world in the Trobriand Islands, kept alive through all the work on your dissertation, it’s still more real to you than this one, isn’t it?”

She had nodded.

“I know how difficult it can be to reenter one’s former life. I wish I had an instant fix for you. Sadly, there aren’t any assistant professorships available right now. I could make a few calls, to *American Anthropologist*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Ethnology*, *Oceania*, see whether they have a rare vacancy. I haven’t heard of any, but I’m happy to double-check.”

She had shaken her head slowly because it hurt to make abrupt moves in the brightness of his clean office. “Dr. Jin, I think I just need another expedition, to be back out there. Is there a new one I could join? I don’t have to lead it, just be a team member.”

It had been Dr. Jin’s turn to shake his head. “No university-funded expeditions here or anywhere for the next two years. But even if there was, based on what Val Osin tells me, months barely functioning, you wouldn’t pass the psych eval right now.

“Here’s a way you could retrench. Return to the Trobriands by diving back into your dissertation. Take yourself to the library and try turning it into a book. Not a study that, alas, few will read these days, but something for a broad audience. There are publishers who would be interested in exciting nonfiction based on the real-life adventures of a young and interesting scientist. I know a few. When you’re ready, I could reach out to them on your behalf.

“It has real potential, Camille, a young woman who investigated the sexual practices of other young women living in a very different society. It’s been a long time since Malinowski’s *Savages*, and other than refuted Mead, with the adolescent Samoans, never investigated by a woman.”

“I was more intrigued by other aspects I researched,” she’d said, the words falling from her mouth one by one, and Dr. Jin nodded repeatedly. “Yes, of course. And I understand. But times are different now, not much call for ethnographies. And it’s very disappointing, but sex sells. From what I’ve been told, it also greatly helps if the young and interesting scientist is actually *in* the book.”

A nod was the most she could muster. She placed the fragile cup of untouched green tea on his uncluttered desk and left. The rain was still teeming, but the umbrella remained rolled up tight

by her side. She had no energy for any project, but an exploitive tale about the Trobrianders and sex, with herself as a character? It was exactly what she couldn't do: replace the wildness of the Trobriand Islands with an airless library, reduce her vibrant experiences into a trite narrative, massage that extraordinary time—the raucous freedom, the exploration of others, the bonding with people so unlike herself—into something so frivolous.

When she reached home, she was soaked through, more hopeless than before.

Since that meeting with Jin, she hasn't so much as glanced at her dissertation, seven hundred pages of text, another two hundred of graphs, statistics, citations, and sources, thick as a tombstone gathering dust on her kitchen table. In fact, she doesn't even notice it anymore, when she drops her keys next to it, or sits down to eat a quick meal.

Although never one to ask for help, when her depression did not lift, she took herself to the university counseling office. The counselor-in-training was useless, said only, “Wow, so you lived among natives, wild. Must be great to be back in the real world,” then adjusted her necklace. Camille didn't bother seeking out a different counselor. She had no confidence anyone else would understand her nature more clearly and felt only exhaustion thinking about repeating her story again, explaining all the reasons why that other world remained realer to her than this one—the Trobrianders' love for one another, their ties to the earth and the sky, their belief in rituals and magic. She decided to nurture herself with long walks every day, and applauded herself when she managed to do so sometimes.

On the last day of last year, on one of those walks, she stopped at a row of free-paper kiosks and took one she'd not read before. At home on the old couch, she flipped through it and came to a picture and article about the House of Lilac Love. She recognized the pretty lilac-painted building, not far from her apartment, but would never have guessed it was a hospice. As she read about the people cared for there, she imagined them as a tribe of the dying, and a minute amount of her vanished strength made itself known, enough to pick up the phone and inquire whether any jobs were available.

It had felt odd interviewing for a job that didn't include discussions about prior tribe contact, what the research hoped to reveal, the term of the expedition, housing accommodations, shots required for travel, but there was Patty Donaldson, the head of Lilac Love, who looked to Camille like a highly experienced team leader. She had army hair, a crew cut strictly maintained, gigantic hoops in her ears, an easy laugh. Her bulk was crammed into a well-tailored Day-Glo lime-green pantsuit, and when she shook Camille's hand, she said, “I like to be a splash of color for everyone. Now let's talk about you,” and then exclaimed over Camille's background, her experience in fieldwork, expressing veneration for her accomplishments, and her certainty that someone highly trained in dedicated listening would be a great addition. With Patty's unceasing, honest smile aimed directly at her, Camille had felt the slightest renewing of what once had been her natural optimism.

Since January, for the last seven and a half months, she has been working as an end-of-life caregiver at Lilac Love. It is a job for which she needed no formal training: she does not insert needles into veins, or clear phlegm from throats, or dispense morphine, or arrange and empty bedpans. There are compassionate nurses for all of those tasks, selfless women who sail through the place like loving spirits. Now, five or six days a week, Camille wakes early, showers, dresses in clean and pressed clothes, fills up her thermos with her special coffee blend, makes a sack lunch, and walks to the hospice, to sit by bedsides, to ask questions that encourage exhausted tongues to recount their owners' stories, to write dictated letters to family and friends, sometimes loving letters, sometimes letters filled with angst, sometimes letters filled with vituperative hatred aimed like poison-tipped darts at their intended recipients—as sharp, surely, as those arrows the Stone Age Sentineli carried and Dr. Jin prevented her from viewing up close. She can honestly say she feels most at home in that small, vertical palace where futures are preordained.

When she has tried to explain this inexplicable shift in her focus to Valentine, his inquisition leaves her shrugging her shoulders, and he, increasingly frustrated by her curious new inability to express herself in terms he can understand, says, “Yes, yes, I know, the Trobrianders sucked all the

life right out of you, but you've got to pull it together. And what I don't understand is your new fascination with death."

To Valentine, death has no immediacy; it has been reduced to the examination of skeletons, the unlocking of genes, the analyzing of migratory patterns, and dust. His pursuit of the dead shares nothing with her experiences, the way the process of death has parameters, permutations, crosses enigmatic boundaries. That they view death differently did not bother her, but his admonishment hurt, because the funny thing was, she thought she was starting to pull it together. That the desolate period of her life, ragged and ugly, the very definition of quotidian before she started at Lilac Love, was tapering off. She's no longer in the trough of the black depression into which she sank; the blackness is fading into a pallid gray, the depression softening into a lassitude, although when she's home by herself it reverts to inertia. It is too soon, she knows, to figure out how to resume her prior life; she still can't imagine how she once possessed such gargantuan dreams, such energy.

But she's awake every morning, sometimes before the alarm, interested in where she is going, and there is something so restful about being among the dying. Not those who are still denying, or angry, or bargaining, or depressed—the first four stages of Kübler-Ross's American model for death and dying, which she has now learned all about—but those who have reached the fifth and last stage, acceptance. Those people, who have accepted their outcome, are extraordinary. They aren't at all what she expected. She thought she'd find them huddled up to their gods, worn or new Bibles close by, and she, a disbeliever, would have nothing to say to them, would be unable to find common ground. A few do hang onto old remnants, but most have no atavistic reliance on religion, have cast away what they might have been taught in childhood, despite the crosses or Jewish stars hanging around old necks, lost beneath heavy drifts of wrinkles. Few prayers are uttered; they have left behind the realm of hope, seek no last-minute godly redemptions, no heightened revelations, are instead most interested in assessing all those years in which they put on their faces and their suits and braved the act of living. Had they lived? Truly lived? Lived enough? "No," they say, it is never enough, but no god is going to set things right at this late date. "Don't waste time on any of that nonsense," they tell her repeatedly. "I won't," she says.

But it's more complex than that. Her unbelieving is giving way to a belief in all the variants of the holy, those she learned from her anthropological studies, those she observed in the Trobriand Islands, those she's apprehending in these rooms listening to the multitude of ways in which these men and women found their own higher meaning in the physical and emotional world.

Those closest to death and still sensate pay scrupulous attention to schedules being precisely maintained. Breakfast at seven, lunch at twelve, dinner at five. No matter their lack of appetites, no matter if they slumber through mealtimes, they want those trays in their rooms, visible confirmation upon awakening of their continuing existence. Sometimes that small proof of life is all it takes to bring a slight smile to their faces, though often the slight smile is rictus in nature. Those lucky to have more time ahead of them are resisting the natural inclination to retreat into insularity, are instead expanding their horizons, insisting on being bundled up and wheeled down to the kitchen to watch the cook bake a delicacy that might taste in their mouths like their own Proustian madeleine, regardless that they can barely manage a second bite. One man has hired a college student to teach him to play chess, a game he once refused to learn because his father had been a competitive player. A woman has taken up knitting, despite fingers petrified by age and rheumatoid arthritis, the most minor of her afflictions. Wherever they fall on the incline toward death, they share a surprising stoicism. The nature of the stoicism ranges, but has a common denominator: an undistinguished day is welcomed, even if in their prior lives they would have bucked against such dullness. Religion for them is now art and music, gazing through dimming eyes at reproductions in heavy books, listening with fading hearing to love songs, operas, symphonies, Neil Young, Barbra Streisand, the Rolling Stones, even Metallica; one old gentleman requires fifteen minutes a day of what he calls his "nerve-settling polka music," which unsettles everyone else.

Most of them have become humanists, without calling themselves such, nearly evangelical in extolling its creed about the value and agency, individually and collectively, of human beings, advising her to waste no time worrying about the end. The end is irrelevant, it only matters what came before, during all those days when they lacked sufficient awareness of their own freedom and progress, when they were fully, but perhaps ungratefully, alive. She is grasping it all. And their need of her, the way they attempt to raise themselves a little higher on their pillows when she steps through their doors, has provided her with a modicum of the purpose she felt in the Trobriand Islands.

Sitting with them, talking with them, hearing all that they want to say, allowing herself to be the surrogate for those they once loved, for those who preceded them in death, for those who have disappeared, or abandoned them, or are too far away, or busy, or disinterested, to make their way to Lilac Love, to enter one of these quiet rooms, to hold a translucent hand that reveals its thinned blue veins, its age spots, its bird-fragile bones, its spasms—to give comfort and succor as once, surely, the fragile people shriveling away in their neatly made beds gave comfort and succor to them. Being present with the dying is a powerful draw. She is not out in the field, but she has a seat at the edge of eternal space. And it's helping her.

She has submitted an application to the Peace Corps, selecting Nepal, Peru, Vanuatu, Mongolia, and Burkina Faso as places where she would be interested in serving, because imagining herself exploring the world again helps lift the heaviness; it's what she needs to hold onto. She felt proactive executing the paperwork for this potential alternative, which could eliminate waiting two years for the next expedition. It also had the unpleasant effect of reinforcing her current unsteadiness—never before would she have doubted the security of her place on any expedition, but she was questioning herself so much that she could no longer presume her luck was not already broken. She hasn't mentioned the Peace Corps to her family or to Valentine. She tells herself it's because she hasn't yet been accepted, but the truth is, even if she's accepted, she's been thinking she's not ready to go, is far from full strength, needs more time at this final station before death, with its eschatological light, and the personal trinkets on bureaus like lucky charms overseeing what everyone hopes will be a painless transition to whatever is on the other side. Although they take nothing from their old religions, what remains is the contradictory notion that on the other side there might be some unearthly bliss.

In spite of her own state, being at Lilac Love is providing Camille with a palliative kind of earthbound bliss.

But there are bad nights when it is difficult to shake the belief that she is losing, has already lost substantial ground, in the race of life. Everyone else is moving forward, moving up, growing up. Actually, they've grown up. They have spouses and life partners. They have kids, are having kids, are actively thinking about having kids, or are already fearing they've left it too long, going for checkups and tests to determine sperm motility, egg viability. They have capital-*H* homes, with great aesthetics, and original art on the walls. They have window washers, housekeepers, nannies, personal trainers, and sometimes chefs. They have mutual funds and 401(k)s and stock portfolios, vacations booked in advance, clothes for every conceivable occasion. And yet lately, when she forces herself to go to a cocktail or dinner party, the favorite conversational topic is about giving everything up. These discussions, in which Camille does not participate, go on for hours while everyone drinks artisanal vodka and small-batch IPAs and eats complicated catered food.

Last week, at another such gathering, Camille listened again to her friends pronouncing they would pare down to the basics, live in some uninhabited place. They made suggestions to one another and promises and began drawing up plans. The flying rhetoric had set those friends aflame, but demonstrated only their ignorance.

She had pictured herself holding up a hand to end the inane conversation, saying: "Look at me. Look at Camille Tabor, your friend. I am a PhD. I have studied hard and done serious fieldwork. I have been named an up-and-comer in my profession, of which only a few make it to the top, which I am expected to reach. I have led a research expedition to the Trobriand Islands. I managed half a million

dollars for that expedition. I did groundbreaking research there and wrote a massive dissertation deemed phenomenal. And to accomplish all of that, I have given up so much. It's demanding, consuming work, and this life of mine does not lead naturally to riches. I understand, it was my choice, but trust me, I'd like the financial freedom you take for granted. You're all pretending to pine for some nonmaterialistic, Waldenesque life, but here are the facts: none of you know what you're talking about. None of you would do well outside of your comfort zones, without your possessions. If you were really interested in a life off the grid, you would have interrogated me about my years in the Trobriands. I'm the only one whose career ensures I will live, have already lived, the very existence you now say you want. And yet you asked me nothing about the Trobrianders, about what life there is really like. If you had, I would have told you that they have a different outlook on sex, and on families, and subscribe to a collective notion of cohabitation, rather than the isolation you all expect and prefer. And they have spirits, and commune with the natural world in a way that has nothing to do with your gardeners planting rows of organic vegetables for you to pluck and wash and show off. Gardeners you plan to bring to your Walden when you chuck everything. Instead, you asked me the flying time to the Trobriands, and what months are the high season, and if AmEx is accepted there? So stop your silly bellyaching, your insulting chatter about how your lives would be so much better if you didn't want private schools for your children and the getaway home on one of the San Juans. Admit you like your easy and luxurious existences in this world you've conquered with your own drive and ambition."

Of course, she didn't say any of that.

She hasn't always judged so harshly; she knows she was lucky growing up as she did, with loving parents and few worries, but in her fluctuating despair, it struck her as particularly unfair that these friends had never been halted, as she was now. And that they believed in the value of their stupid utterances, while Dr. Jin had suggested that the purely social anthropological ramifications of her work on those islands might not be of great interest. *This* world, with its inventions and advances, would always dominate, she understood that. But there was enormous value in exploring her preferred worlds, which offered solutions that would allow everyone, not only those topping the pyramid, to cohabit happily on this planet; solutions embedded in the concept of the greater good. Being among these people she once liked, she was outraged by their obliviousness, and the false, transitory abandonment of their avariciousness. They might think they wanted to be somewhere far away, but their gazes stopped at the gates of their affluent existences.

She had refilled her glass with the expensive vodka she only drinks at these parties, and debated whether to move back to Melanesia. If she wasn't there under the color of official research, she would really be living there. And that meant a life trading what you don't need for what you do—which she greatly admires—or, if you had nothing that anyone wanted, you acquired what you needed by paying for it with bundles of dried banana leaves. She'd be on a Trobriand beach for the rest of her life, wearing a grass skirt on festival days, engaging in intriguing rites and rituals, and creating her own banana-leaf wealth—which she knew she could do—but banana-leaf wealth wasn't exchangeable for currency accepted anywhere other than on those islands. She wouldn't be able to explore all the other tribes she wanted to meet in their distant locales or make her way home to see her parents and sister and brother and nieces. If she returned to Melanesia, she'd be as stuck there as she was here, a difference only between the literal and the metaphoric. Stuck is stuck, wherever you may be.

She'd left that cocktail party buzzed, and angry with herself. With the depression that had flattened her and twisted her out of her life. With Valentine heading to a dig in South Africa, led by a famous physical anthropologist who had found very old bones in a system of caves. She'd seen him off at SeaTac earlier that day, and he was up in the sky on his way to a cave in a valley next to a mountain next to a river in the Cradle of Humankind, drafting the first of the several emails he's now sent her, all iterating the same thing—*Camille, to be clear, we are not taking a break. I say this with love, but you are too young to be spending your days with the dying. Don't you want us to be happy, to live a happy life together?*—while she was unsteadily heading for her front door, thinking

that unlike her friends, her colleagues, her older sister, she wasn't sure about marriage or children, and those were the topics Valentine was talking about before he jetted away. Wanting her to marry him, wanting them to have children, for her to bear tiny versions of themselves. She couldn't imagine any of it, not with her life turned so juvenile. She couldn't see herself with a husband, a mate, a partner. Couldn't envision herself with children who would perhaps have her witch hazel eyes, Valentine's philosophical spirit, their shared hunger for lives filled with the rigorousness of novel experiences. If she were twenty or younger, her mother would have penetrating insights and suggestions Camille could put into effect to unravel her depression, her confusion, but she had never asked before, and at thirty-six, she's aged beyond her mother's vaunted professional expertise.

And yet that party was days ago, and what is she doing right now?

She's heading home to Palm Springs, where she could get some familial, or maternal, or psychological help figuring out how to reclaim her life. She couldn't bear if that life was now closed to her, if she never regained her strength, her tenacity.

She's thinking about all of this as she wheels her small bag from her ground-floor room, down the sidewalk, and into the lobby of the motel in San Luis Obispo, where she spent last night. Her sleep was restless and she needs coffee, and there on the laminated table sit urns of French Roast, Decaf, Hot Water, tiny tubs of dried creamers and sweetener packets, baskets of tea bags and hot cocoa packets, a tray of lopsided Danish, a stack of napkins several inches high. The purported breakfast free with a night's stay.

She's alone, the kid at the front desk busy putting keycards for the rooms into their slots, and then the glass doors spring open, and a clutch of elderly women bustles in, sporting backpacks and fanny packs, sensible walking shoes and sticks. Eight of them, barefaced and wrinkled and happy, talking and laughing, pouring their coffees, dunking their tea bags, splitting Danish, debating whether the day's expedition should be to the Santa Lucia Range, or the La Panza Mountains, or the Montaña de Oro State Park. Maybe it's their age and their brusque warmth that reminds Camille of her heroines.

She nods and smiles and says, "Morning," to the old happy women, and the old happy women nod and smile and say, "Morning," to her.

She takes it as an encouraging sign, her default into researcher mode, wanting to ask them how they've all come together, what bonds they share, where they hail from, who the leader is, who the followers, what this trip signifies, but she doesn't. She'd sound crazy to them, and so she refills her large Styrofoam cup, secures the lid, and pushes out through the lobby doors, into the already-warm air at seven twenty in the morning.

She unlocks her car, new when it was her college graduation present, slips the cup into its holder, the bag into the back, herself into the driver's seat. She is about to start the second and final leg of her drive. In less than five hours she'll be on Agapanthus Lane.

When she left Seattle at the crack of dawn yesterday, she promised herself she would use the nearly twenty highway hours wisely. Instead, she wasted the first fifteen listening to music, to talk radio, to a popular true-crime podcast she found detestable and clicked off after ten minutes. And whenever the thoughts started churning, she shooed them away. But it's time to decide various things:

Whether or not she should end things with Val because she is no longer the person she was when they met.

Whether or not she should attempt to turn her doctoral dissertation into some kind of tell-all book, despite her abhorrence of the idea.

Whether or not she will go where the Peace Corps sends her, if they want her.

Whether she will pretend to Dr. Jin that she's back to normal, and ask him to find out when an assistant professorship in their department might come up, or in any university's soc. anthro department, and to make those calls to the journals, to learn if there is a rare opening, or might be one in the near future, and she could say, "In the meantime, let me be your research assistant, starting fall

semester,” a better proposition than trading distant fieldwork for research of local trends in disease, overpopulation, land use, and urban dialects. She’s not interested in those areas, so why use up the little energy she has to pursue an opportunity she doesn’t want—when winning would mean a chilly office, appropriate business attire, and, likely, immediately quitting. No matter that she’s stalled now; she doesn’t want any marks against her growing reputation. If she still had her natural energy, she knows what she would do: develop a new research proposal, submit it to her university and every anthropological organization that funds exploration, and when she had the money, she’d head off once more, seeking the exotic, with a clear and stated purpose. But figuring all of that out seems impossible, mind-boggling, and utterly exhausting.

And, finally, whether she will reveal to her family the depression she has been suffering from, severe enough that she has relegated her expensive and wide-ranging education and years of diligent, imaginative, and difficult work to a back burner, to the closet, that she is spending eight hours a day tending to those on the way out, when once she was only interested in figuring out how those most uniquely alive lived.

The interstate is quiet this early, and when she sees no police cars ahead or behind, or tucked into the verges and waiting to pounce, she sets her cruise control to eighty, then checks her watch. Last night, Phoebe left a voicemail commanding Camille to call her today. “While we’re both driving to the place we seem incapable of not calling home, we can talk about things we won’t be able to talk about there, or at least not easily, or at least not without Mom sitting down next to us, caressing our hair—wait, I forgot, Mom always knows everything. Shit, I hope that’s not really true—” The message had ended with Phoebe’s laugh.

Does she want to call her pluperfect older sister, founder of her own law firm, who rents a charming apartment, though she could, on a whim, purchase an embassy-sized house in the most expensive Los Angeles neighborhoods, who, despite trouble finding a husband, knows she absolutely wants one of those and the eventual children, who has never experienced a moment of depression or doubt or indecision, who wouldn’t understand what it feels like to be dragged under the waves of one’s life? Camille’s kept everything from her family, including Phoebe, when they trade their infrequent telephonic confidences.

She stares down the long, straight highway. If she calls Phoebe at eleven, she has three and a half hours left to gather herself together, to sound like the Camille her sister thinks she knows, the Camille they all think they know.

FIVE

BEST OF SEVEN?” HARRY calls out to Levitt.

Levitt, already wiping sweat from his forehead with his terry-clothed wrists, says, “Why do you insist on subverting protocol? It’s best of five, Harry. Best of five at the US Open. Best of five at Wimbledon. And there’s no way you and I can go seven in this heat. Best of three, like we do every Saturday. Is this your attempt to psych me out, gain the upper hand?”

“Of course I know the protocol. I’m being a caring friend, offering you a shot at taking me down, because I’m feeling extraordinarily energetic today.”

“Yeah, yeah, Harry. Just serve.”

Harry bounces the yellow ball, six, seven, eight, nine times, to unbalance Levitt, who is bent over at the waist, at the ready, those thick tree trunks of his in a wide, imposing stance.

Harry feels the sun on his face, hears the solid thump of the ball on the warm court, the happy yips of small dogs freed from their leashes. Then, like a thunderbolt to the brain, he’s thinking about King David and Queen Esther, the way they yipped happily, flicking their tails, circling around their new masters as Harry and Roma and Phoebe and Camille headed away from the great rambling house in Connecticut that was no longer their home. It belonged now to the buyers, that replacement family who was waving, the husband and wife the same ages as Harry and Roma, the little boys nearly the same ages as Phoebe and Camille, the family who took title and said yes, they would be delighted to take the Tabor family’s dachshunds as well, agreeing it wouldn’t be right to uproot the dogs from their puppyhood home, and impossible to travel thousands of miles with them, when the dogs couldn’t tolerate speed, would be carsick within minutes.

Levitt calls out from across the court, “You going to serve in this century?” Harry hears him, but he can’t respond, struck by these memories of King David and Queen Esther, dogs he gave to his girls when all four were young, by his ability to hand them over so easily to a family he knew nothing about, except that their financials were in order and they hadn’t required a mortgage. He doesn’t even recall their last name, despite seeing it on nearly every page of the purchase and sale agreement.

Why is he thinking about King David and Queen Esther, when he has not thought about them since 1987, since seeing them in the rearview mirror of the Caravan, as he and his family drove away to a new life. It is a memory he has never called up in all of these years, not even a memory he has ever had, but it is in his mind now. The girls were crying in the backseat, weren’t they? Yes, he can hear his daughters crying, tiny hands hitting the sealed windows, yelling, “Let the dogs in, let the dogs in, we can’t leave them behind.” But he had left them behind. Had let his daughters cry themselves out. Had not turned to witness the emotion on Roma’s face. She had, after all, sadly and reluctantly agreed to the dogs’ dispensation.

“Hey, you okay over there?” Levitt calls out, rising from his competitor’s crouch, loosening the grip on his racquet.

Harry’s heart is pounding, like a bomb is about to go off in there, and he leans over, head between his knees, hoping those forgotten dogs aren’t a very strange version of his life passing before his eyes, hoping he’s not about to be ejected from his existence by a heart attack this minute, hoping he didn’t put himself in the crosshairs of an evil eye last night by thinking how far he is from death.

But then it passes.

The memory is still there, but its toothy grip is easing.

He straightens up and says, “Sorry. Should have had more than coffee this morning. I’m fine. Let’s go. You ready?”

SIX

HE'S SPRINTING UP A winding hill in his neighborhood, his breath loud in his ears, the asphalt black under his beating feet, black ravens flying out of the trees, an avian army buzzing his head, flapping their wings, diving at him, their beaks pecking and pecking and pecking, their claws finding purchase on his head, his neck, his arms, his legs, his back, and then Simon Tabor is awake, fetal-curled, fists clenched, hair and body as wet as if he has just emerged from an ice bath, his insides hollowed out by the certainty that something is desperately wrong. He will never get used to this, to the way he is left with voids—in his heart, as if that organ has lost mass or blood flow; in his throat, as if that narrow tube has opened wide and air is racing inside; and in his abdomen, as if he is starving to death, though it's not hunger at all that he feels. And this morning, there is a new element, unshed tears blinding his sight.

Slowly he unkinks his cramped arms and legs and turns over. The tears settle in the wells of his eyes, and he is loath to blink, loath to touch them, even more fearful than usual because he has no idea what this latest indignity means.

Lions charging at him yesterday, ravens today, during the frightening half hour of near-slumber, and now he is crying. It's Sisyphean, when he's already been laboring with his hijacked sleep, with his terror in having forgotten how to do what is natural, with his inability to figure out why this is happening, at such odds with how he otherwise perceives his life: as a mostly happy man whose marriage, young children, and professional pursuits mostly afford him pleasure and satisfaction.

A movement in the bed, Elena shifting under the striped comforter. In this year of his sleeplessness, he has learned his wife wakes in stages. He had not known that fact before. Deep sleep on her stomach until she shifts to her left side, facing away from him. Then the countdown begins. Twenty minutes until she shifts onto her back, the slightest of whistles coming through her full lips, thinned by dreams. Another twenty before she cracks one eye open, then the other.

He looks at the long line of Elena's hip. When his misbegotten nights were new, she suggested supposedly surefire ways to shut down his nonsensical thoughts: walking after dinner; meditating before bed; taking a boiling-hot shower in their unlit bathroom and crawling wet between the cool sheets. Desperate, he tried it all. Altered his diet, too—no meat, no cheese, cut back on his drinking. Increased his exercise—yoga first, then cycling instead of yoga, and now, instead of cycling, he runs hard and fast and long every morning. But what is a boon for his body has done nothing for his soul, has not altered his inability to sink down into bliss, too aware of the spirits gathering around him in the dark. Only recently has a thought begun to form, that what he needs perhaps cannot be supplied by healthy eating or abstinence or exercise.

In the beginning, in that first month when he thought his failure to sleep was a temporary malfunction, he rocked the bed in the middle of the night and palmed the perfect globes of Elena's ass, hoping sex would empty his brain, but Elena had sighed and mumbled, "I'll get the pills." A sylph in a nightgown that left her shoulders and back bare, the long yards of her black hair tight in a bun, his sleep guru refusing her mission, and when the light in the bathroom flicked on, Simon called after her, "What pills?"

Sleeping pills prescribed to Elena a year after Lucy's birth, expired before Isabel was born.

"They've expired," he'd said when she handed him the orange container. He'd looked inside and been unable to tell if, or how many, she'd ever taken.

"I think it takes decades to break down the components. They're probably as strong, or nearly as strong, as when I got them. Give it a go. Nothing lost and all that."

He had wanted to ask why she needed sleeping pills during that exciting time when Lucy was walking and laughing, her hands reaching out to the world, but Elena's eyes were already closed, her breath even and composed.

For several successive nights, he took a pill that was small as a dot and weightless on his tongue, hoping she was right, but she wasn't; potency was vanquished by time. When he told her the pills didn't work, she looked at him in frustration. "So call the doctor and get a new prescription." Which he did, and he took them for several more nights, but his body refused the sedation, simply wouldn't be knocked out.

Never again has he bothered Elena during his racked hours. Sometimes he watches her sleeping, curious about what she's dreaming, envying the way she goes under and stays under, missing how they used to wake nearly simultaneously, her first smile of the day beaming him fully alive. He's forgotten how to sleep, but something's changed in her, too, and he can't trace the alteration to any specific temporal point, to any specific event, but she no longer smiles and tucks into him or rolls onto him when she wakes. Now, when she comes to, she sits upright, her face hiding its secrets from him, and it's only when he's back from his run, when they're drinking their second cups of coffee, that she graces him with a smile, but it doesn't seem to him her same *I love and adore you so much* smile.

He could be mistaken; it could be some pathology of his sleeplessness that is causing him to blow out of proportion the changes he senses in her, the feeling he has that she's created subtle distance between them. But what he's not mistaken about is that Elena no longer dresses like the woman his heart toppled for. Gone are her gauzy skirts and ruffled blouses, her tight dresses with narrow slits and strappy, sexy heels, her fitted slacks with stiletto boots, all replaced with a uniform: jeans, button-down shirt, ballet slippers. And that soft black river that once streamed over her shoulders and down her spine, that he would gather up in his hands because she left it unbound, is now always center-parted and twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck.

There's a pretty Chinese bowl from a New York museum in the bathroom, a gift for her when he had been gone for weeks on a case, that holds Elena's stock of bobby pins. In the two years since Isabel's birth, he has often considered whether her tightly coiled hair, her adopted uniform, indicates the practicality of doubled motherhood or something far more charged—proof that the loss of her freedom is so wild within her that she must keep herself regimented and pinned together. She is a gorgeous woman no matter the clothes she wears or how she arranges her hair, but she is severe this way, and when he sees the Chinese bowl, he always wants to dump those securing pins in the garbage, shatter that bowl, bring back his sensual, loose-haired Elena, their early-morning lovemaking, her explicit love for him.

Maybe he's a coward. Maybe he already knows the answers, but he refrains these days from asking how she feels about no longer flying away as she used to. Until Lucy, Elena wrote for glossy travel magazines, and in those halcyon days, Simon occasionally went with her to those off-the-beaten-path places when he could. Her nightstand is stacked still with the latest issues of the travel magazines that published her work. When she was breastfeeding at night she read those magazines by the low rosy light, telling him she was keeping pace with what was going on in her absence, would not count herself out of the game. Naturally, their daughters changed everything. Now he's flying as much as she once did, which was a lot, and she refuses to say what it's like being unable to vanish into the excited glaze of the working day. As he does when the hollowness lifts, when he has run his daily ten miles, and drunk his coffee, and kissed his daughters. As always, he kisses Elena last before he's out the door, but where he once found the blackness of her eyes so enticing, now he is afraid to fall into them, afraid of what he will learn, or be told, fearful that if he can't fix his failure to sleep, he can't fix anything else.

And this morning, tears. Poised to spill down his cheeks. There's no way he can rise and run, not when he's this done in. Then he's smothering his face in his pillow, heaving silent sobs, freezing when Elena shifts onto her back, worrying she's woken and waiting to hear why he's crying his eyes out. What would he say? He wishes he knew, but he has no answers. And then deliverance—Elena's soft sleeping whistles.

He wipes his face against the pillowcase, then turns over again, and checks on the crack in the uneven ceiling. A hairline days ago, it has grown wider and longer and looks like it will soon split apart the paint and the plaster.

Does that crack mean the roof is going to collapse?

He needs to do something about it, call someone, make that call this morning, before they leave for Palm Springs, arrange for whatever person fixes cracks in ceilings in old houses in the hills to come Monday, first thing. He'll even forgo his start-of-the-week run to be here, to handle it, to not put another thing on his wife's list of things to take care of. He should pull out the house file, see what the agreement says about the roof, if any issues were noted. He doesn't specialize in real estate, but he is a lawyer, and he would have asked the critical questions. They've owned this ninety-three-year-old house for a mere five years; previous owners must have replaced the roof at least a few times over the last decades.

God forbid they need a new roof. How much would it cost? How long would it take? Would they have to bunk elsewhere for the duration? Where would they stay?

Phoebe's apartment in the flats of Beverly Hills Adjacent is too small to house five; her second bedroom is her study, in which there is no pullout couch.

He has an older colleague at the firm, Tim Devins, who owns some huge estate in Brentwood, is always talking about how he and his wife, childless by choice, have eight bedrooms that are never used, and a guesthouse no one has ever stayed in. Tim is a friendly, generous guy, and if Simon laid out his need, Tim would probably say, "Sure, buddy, no problem, for however long, *mi casa es tu casa*." But how awkward it would be to see Tim in a towel after a shower, or eating his breakfast, or lounging in his Jacuzzi attached to his pool, which surely is Olympic-sized, or kissing his sharp-featured wife before tootling off to the office.

Why is he thinking about asking Tim Devins if the Tabor family can move in while their roof is being fixed? Their roof will not need to be fixed; it is simply a small crack that needs to be filled, the ceiling repainted. And if they do have to fix the roof, and leave home for the duration, he would never ask Tim Devins.

They would stay in a hotel.

No, they would not stay in a hotel; they couldn't afford to stay in a hotel, not if the roof needs fixing. They'd have to stay in a motel. The four of them in a dingy room at some Motel 6, he pulling his tie tight and striding out the door, leaving his wife looking as if she might lift up their daughters and fling the three of them over the second-floor railing, pitching down into a parking lot filled with campers and vans.

Why is he picturing that?

Are the changes in Elena—in her waking routine, her delayed first smile of the day, her distance, her daily uniform—because she has postpartum depression? Lucy is five and Elena was fine after her birth. And Isabel is two—does postpartum depression last for two years? And, really, most of the time, she seems herself, with her customary intensity, occasionally humming as she brushes out Lucy's tangles, as she encourages Isabel to wear something other than the drooping purple tutu, her everyday favorite since last Halloween.

Simon pinches his arm hard. There will be no more crying. There will be no roof fixing, no motel living, no bodies hurtling to their deaths. Elena does not have any kind of depression, while he, on the other hand, cannot sleep, and whatever is keeping him up far exceeds run-of-the-mill insomnia.

But there is the crack in the ceiling, which he can arrange to be handled on Monday.

His watch says it's seven twenty. Elena won't wake until seven forty. The girls will wake up shortly thereafter. Elena's probably already packed for herself and their daughters.

He could get up now and pack what he'll need for the weekend. He could do that, and then start the coffee, make them all breakfast. Eggs? French toast? Pancakes? No, nothing hot because whatever he prepares will go cold before everyone sits down at the table. Lucy will insist on swimming

in the pool before she eats, as she's been doing each day this summer, running out of her room buck naked and leaping into the water, requiring him, half dressed, to follow and sit by the pool until he can convince her his day needs to get under way. And Isabel will cry elephantine tears until Elena climbs into bed with her and reads her a story. The only kid he's heard of who prefers being read to in the morning and not at bedtime. So, no, no reason to cook a family breakfast. And what's even in the fridge? Didn't Elena say she didn't bother going to the market because they would be gone the weekend?

Most of today and all of tomorrow on Agapanthus Lane, with both of the children in tow. A babysitter will take care of the girls tonight while everyone else—Harry and Roma, Phoebe and her new beau, Camille, and he and Elena—dressed up in tuxedos and gowns, will be miles away at the resort in Rancho Mirage, sipping champagne on the Starlight Terrace rooftop, where he and Elena married in front of three hundred guests. They haven't been back to the resort since their wedding, though they considered returning on their first, and second, and third anniversaries. They never did, never even made a reservation, and up there tonight his father will be named Palm Springs Man of the Decade.

What comes with that designation? Will Harry be handed a plaque, or a sculpted piece of glass with his name inscribed, or the key to the city? In their conversations the past month, his father has played down the honor, saying, "I've just done what any other person with resources would have done to help unfortunate souls." Which isn't true, and when Simon said, "Dad, that isn't true," Harry said, "Oh, I don't know."

Simon puts his hands to his face, feels his lips turning up, and he wants to laugh because it's been such a long time since he has smiled in bed. He was crying, and now he's smiling, thinking of his father. Thinking of their spring, summer, and fall camping trips, star-studded nights, sleeping bags unrolled in the desert sand drifts just beyond the back patio, sand that was soft at first, then scratchy as the hours piled up, Harry teaching him how to converse and debate, getting into the grit of politics and free will and truth; the long hikes traversing the mountain peak, talking about manhood, and what it means to be a rare man who qualifies as a full human being. No baseball throwing, no football tossing, no Frisbee silliness, no Boy Scouts, no Pop Warner, no Little League, those activities weren't for Harry, and hence not for Simon. There'd been no sense of loss, of missing out, because they had all those special times together. How he loves his father and his inimitable qualities for probity, his infinite well of paternal love, and marital passion, and universal caring for those finding where they fit in their new world.

Sunday morning, tomorrow morning, he could say, "Dad, let's do our regular San Jacinto hike," and, on their ascent, ask his father if he ever experienced a lengthy bout of sleeplessness, and if he did, what he had done to solve it, where he had looked for the answers.

"Tell me, Dad," he would say, "help me figure out what's going on in my head."

Yes, that's what he'll do. He'll grab his father's hand and say, "I need a little father-and-son time, just you and me alone." And Harry will grin and grab Simon's face, kiss him hard first on one cheek and then the other, and say, "Did I tell you today how much I love you?"

His emotions are seesawing from happiness back to tears.

What is going on with him?

The crack in the ceiling has disappeared because his vision is again blurred. Are these new tears because when he says, "Let's you and me sneak away for some time alone," his father will exude palpable pleasure, or because his father is seventy now, robust and strong and active, but there is a sense of the hourglass, of the grains diminishing in the upper, gathering in the lower?

He tests the notion in his head of a world without Harry, and immediately swats it away. He can't imagine not being able to call his father, talking to him at length on his drives home. He blinks hard several times, forces some of the wetness away.

One thing put to rest is the fear that his sleeplessness is a presage to his own death. He's been to the doctor, had a complete physical, including a stress test, an EEG, an EKG. He is in perfect health, his blood pressure within the recommended range, his cholesterol terrific, his blood revealing no hidden issues, the electrical activity in his brain and heart as it should be. Whatever is keeping him awake, it's not his eventual demise, but something he'd better figure out soon. The one question he forgot to ask the doctor was: How long can a body go without sleep?

THE SILENCE IN THE house is growing heavier, wife and children in that place he no longer goes, a smothering silence ripped apart by the telephone ringing.

Simon's hollowed heart thumps into action, and he leaps from the bed, an errant tear running down the side of his nose, and he grabs the receiver from Elena's nightstand, steps out of their bedroom, his voice low and froggy when he says, "Yes? Hello? Do you know it's seven thirty on a Saturday morning?"

"Mr. Tabor, my apologies," says a deep male voice with a strong accent. "This is Altan Odaman, the president of the International Lawyers Association, calling from Istanbul, Turkey. If I figured the time difference incorrectly, my heartfelt regrets. Nonetheless, I am delighted to personally invite you to this year's conference. To be held in Medellín, Colombia, from September tenth through the twentieth. I am also delighted to inform you that, by special vote, you have been chosen to make a presentation. This is highly unorthodox, as you know. No first-time invitee has ever been afforded the opportunity to address the group. But your legal approach for recovering those Goya paintings is of great interest to everyone. Do you need time to determine your availability, or can I assume you will clear your schedule to attend? Spouses, of course, are invited as well."

In the small landing that leads from their bedroom to the living room, Simon stares at the photograph on the wall—Elena in the hospital bed with their first child barely an hour old, named Luz within moments of her worldly entrance and called, ever after, Lucy—and he sees nothing.

For several seconds, he is made speechless by this call to join the most elite of lawyers who handle global cases that alter the international landscape. But his eight years of experience as a cross-border litigator focused on the repatriation of stolen art, relics, religious icons, and sometimes ancient bones kicks in; he is naturally quick on his feet, able to pivot his courtroom cross-examinations as required, and he gathers his wits and his words and expresses his sincere and honest delight and grateful thanks to Altan Odaman and the nominating committee.

"Yes, of course I will attend, thank you so much for this honor," he says, and Odaman provides him with the highlights about the first-class airline tickets and the five-star accommodations, the ten-day schedule of programs and seminars and social events, telling Simon all will be set forth in a comprehensive email, and then Odaman rings off.

When he turns, Elena is behind him, tousled from sleep, her skin tawny gold, her high cheekbones flushed, her lips again full, and her smile is shot through with such love and intimacy that he doubts his sleeplessness, as if this year of sleeplessness has been itself a bad dream, doubts his concern that there's a slackening of their prior closeness, doubts himself for debating the strength of her love.

"You're not running this morning?" she asks, and when he shakes his head, she says, "Great. Lucy's already in the pool. Why don't you pack. I had your tuxedo pressed, it's in the closet. In a little while, I'll make birds in the nest for everyone."

"I ..." Simon says.

How does he express to Elena the enormity of the high honor he has just received from the president of the ILA, that it is even more meaningful than making partner in February? How does he implore her to accompany him, to carefully suggest it is time to leave the children behind, as they have not been left since their births? How does he convince her that they'll figure out who will care for them in their absence, but going to Medellín, Colombia, is vital, not just for his career, although absolutely his attendance at this conference will thrust him forward exponentially, but so that the two

of them can temporarily escape the tough daily grind, be alone together as they have not been in five years, recover themselves as the couple they once were. Ten days far away from their precious children, who are adorable pixies and love bugs, whose hugs and kisses are indescribable, as are their plaintive, plangent demands that their needs be swiftly met. Ten days far away to remember who they are: Simon Tabor and Elena Abascal, a couple happily married and in love.

“The ILA called, didn’t they?” And Elena’s look is that special intimate look he hasn’t seen in a while, and there is a gentleness to her voice he wouldn’t have predicted, and he is so surprised by both, by his awareness of how long they have been absent, that he must forcibly drag air into his lungs, recognizing with a jolt that his morning hollowness is gone. Whatever evaporates during these nights has resurfaced, reshaping his insides much earlier than usual.

Elena steps closer and closer until the tips of her breasts touch his bare chest. Sparks light up his body; if he looked down, surely he would see fireflies encircling the two of them. Her pink tongue flicks across his mouth, and in a heartbeat she’s tugging at his lower lip, pressing down with increasing force, imprisoning his lip with her incisors, until he tastes blood. She steps back, grips his wide-awake cock, squeezes once, then leaves him there.

He hears the door to Isabel’s room opening, and finds himself speculating, not about why ravens were trying to devour him this morning, or if Elena still loves him, or if he can induce her back into bed—it’s been so long he can’t recall the last time—or what implications the conference will have on his career, but whether, against all the odds, Colombia might be the place where his sleep is restored.

SEVEN

PHOEBE TABOR REPRESENTS MAJOR Los Angeles-based novelists, screenwriters, and playwrights, sculptors, painters, and video artists, musicians, bands, and composers. It's her still-minor clients, those beginning to climb the vines of recognition and success, that she worries about most, because their expectations are consistently unrealistic. They walk into her office presuming fantastic offers are on the table, and she must return them to reality. And it's always tough, because they have written the meaningful novel, the great script, the deep play, have created the phenomenal sculpture, the suite of inspired paintings, and it's her obligation to tell them no one is biting, or the bite isn't as big as they'd hoped, or the film director has rejected the neophyte composer's score, or the gallery has rescinded its offer to mount the young artist's new show. The facts are nearly as hard to deliver as to hear, but by the time Phoebe's clients hug her, they understand where they are, yet still have faith in their futures, because she is a truth teller. Honesty is the pillar upon which she has built her law practice. Inside, past the heavy door with its stylish engraved nameplate, *Phoebe Tabor, Esq.*, she commands a large retinue of lawyers, paralegals, and assistants, and insists that in all their firm activities, they heed her honest manner of transparently conducting business.

And yet recently, in her personal life, she has veered in the opposite direction, adopting subterfuge as her modus operandi, although calling it *subterfuge* is finely glossing the state of things.

At eight fifteen this Saturday morning, Phoebe, dressed in a black sundress and Grecian sandals, all of her limbs lightly tanned, stands at her closet mirror and arranges the hair her mother calls chestnut into a loose sexy braid. She assesses her image. Yes, she looks the part, will be viewed by her family as a woman in love.

She leans in close, fragmenting her pupils, and in those fragments she sees the unjustified complications she's brought into her life. She pulls back from the mirror and her pupils reassemble, black surrounded by irises of darkest brown, eyes so falsely guileless she has to turn away from herself.

She rustles through closets and drawers, delving through sedimentary layers of acquisitions, flinging out her choices, and packing them into her small rolling bag—used for all her lovely weekends away: an old one-piece bathing suit for the laps she always forgets to swim, a new bikini for chaise sprawling and oiling up next to the big pool alongside her sister and sister-in-law, another summery dress purchased to wear with a man a few years back who pursued her hard for a date and when she at last gave in stood her up, tennis shoes and shorts and a tank top from her youth for taking a walk in the heat with one or some or all of her family members, a college-era tennis skirt and shirt in case her father wants to play, silky pajamas that hold memories of an enjoyable four-week romp during law school, and the tottering high silver heels purchased last week for the gala tonight, along with the ice-blue gown, already in its hanging bag. In go the miniature bottles of shampoo and conditioner and body lotion swiped from hotelsuite bathrooms these last six and a half months. Her lip-shaped cosmetics bag stowed inside the mesh netting.

She zips up the suitcase, sets it down on the floor. The tick-tick of the wheels on the wood puts Benny on notice. Until a moment ago, he was lounging on the unmade bed, but now lets out a quivering meow. He is her sweet affectionate thing, velvety fur hiding a small, solidly compact body. At night, he stretches out on top of her, his paws clinging to her neck, his purrs soothing her lonely heart.

Poor Benny. Her subterfuge has meant she's deserted him for many three-day weekends since February, consigned to the care of her brother. Simon is responsible, showing up morning and night, filling Benny's bowls, keeping his heating pad on the bed on high and cold water trickling from the bathroom sink faucet, playing with Benny for a few minutes before he heads to his own home, to his wife and children. When she returns from her weekends away, Benny is churlish, his outsized paws thumping when he lands on the kitchen counter, the dining room table, following Phoebe around, baying his disapproval at his most recent abandonment. When she is again in the bed that they share,

Benny lets her know he's forgiven her by arranging himself on her head, lashing her cheek with his sandpaper tongue. But Simon and family will be in Palm Springs, too, and Phoebe reluctantly asked a neighbor to care for Benny.

Raquel was thrilled when Phoebe knocked on Wednesday night. "I want a cat sososo much, but I haven't pulled the trig. So how coolio. Yours. Def. No prob."

Raquel is twenty-five to Phoebe's thirty-eight, a secretarial temp slash aspiring actress slash aspiring model who might emote as well as the best but seems to Phoebe too short and curvy to model. And it irks Phoebe enormously that Raquel seems intent on believing they are nearly identical peas in a pod. This specious view of Raquel's, and the fact that Raquel annoys her, has compelled Phoebe to ward off the young woman's obvious desire to be friends. In her own defense, Phoebe would say that a friendship with any neighbor can too easily become an uncomfortable burden, and after an eventful workday, she'd rather not be accosted by anyone waving a bottle, saying, "Thought we might share this." Only twice has Phoebe relented, and both times, watching Raquel swaying back to her own front door, Phoebe assessed the avenues of employment that would afford Raquel the ability to purchase such expensive wine. Ashamed by her assumptions, she has kept her distance from Raquel the last few months.

But Raquel was her easiest choice for cat-sitting Benny, and thinking about the young woman being alone in her house unescorted, peeking into her life, Phoebe is opening and closing cabinets, sizing her things up, determining what they say about her, if she needs to find hiding places.

She scoops out of her nightstand the few books of erotica, the vibrator, the hopeful, unopened box of condoms, and in the bathroom, the nearly full container of Percocet from her wisdom teeth removal last year, and stashes the loot at the bottom of her hamper, throws in the damp towel hanging over the shower door to be safe.

In her study, she slips folders containing client information into the desk drawer, along with her personal bills and checkbooks and bank and money management statements, and locks it with the key hidden beneath.

In the living room her brother calls empty and she calls minimalistic and replete with architectural details—rounded columns leading to the dining room, pristine nonworking fireplace with a mantel holding a single blue vase filled with bright orange gerbera daisies, massive window overlooking the street—she inspects, but aside from the suede sofa and chairs the color of tangerines, the three huge paintings on the white walls she accepted as payment for legal bills owed by painter clients, bookshelves categorically organized, high-tech sound system, and her objects of art displayed in the whitewashed nooks and crannies, there is nothing revealing.

As the coffee brews, she pulls out Benny's dry cat food and cans of wet and places them on the kitchen counter. She wants to make it easy for Raquel, to keep her curtained in the kitchen, then a path straight out the front door.

She pours herself a first cup, hears her doorbell chime, and reluctantly pulls down a second cup.

"HI, FEEBS, REPORTING FOR duty," is what Raquel says when she steps in. "I'm sososo jelly, where are you going? Tell me the deets."

Phoebe hates that nickname to which she never responds, hates the way Raquel insists on shortening most everything. How much extra time does it take to say *Phoebe*, to say *jealous*, to say *details*? Is Raquel's life so jam-packed she can't waste a second, cares not a whit about being fully understood?

Phoebe gives her a big smile. "Come into the kitchen. I'll give you some coffee, show you what you need to do."

"Great, but first I want to hear about your hot and heavy weekends!"

What, Phoebe thinks, is Raquel is talking about?

“Please, please, spill the beans! I keep running into your gorgeous brother when he comes to feed Benny and he mentioned—Well, I got him to tell me why I’ve seen him so much. Because you have a new man in your life! Taking you away to cool places. Is he scrumptious?”

Oh. Raquel is talking about Aaron Green.

“Totally scrumptious,” Phoebe instantly says.

“So where to this weekend?”

“Home for a family celebration.”

“OMG, how exciting! Are you nervous? I’d be so nervous introducing my new man to family!”

Phoebe could correct Raquel’s mistaken impression, but says, instead, “No, I’m not nervous at all.”

“That’s when you know the love is real!” Raquel squeals.

And Phoebe, who doesn’t agree that’s the way you know, pours coffee into the cup on the counter, and points to the sugar bowl, and wishes seeing herself through Raquel’s eyes weren’t so inviting.

Phoebe would never confess to Raquel that the scrumptious man spiriting her away to cool places for long weekends, and whom she has just confirmed she’s taking home to Palm Springs, is fictitious.

She would never admit to Raquel that she created Aaron Green at midnight in late January, just home from the opening of a client’s new art exhibition, her family’s messages on her voicemail pissing her off, words throaty with exhausted hope that there might have been a man there who was “worth another look,” said Roma, Harry calling out, “Love is good, honey.” “Someone I would like,” Simon had said in his message, with Elena adding, “Just so he knows your true value,” and from Camille, “I hope he’s fuckable, because that’s always the point. No, I take that back, I don’t know what the point is,” and Phoebe, who had just hung up her short bronze dress and placed her high bronzed sandals in their box in the closet, stood nude in her bedroom.

She was tired of slicing open wedding invitations. From those she employs, selecting her dinner choices with angry checkmarks, writing the identical sweet comment on the RSVP cards about her excitement in participating in the joyful couple’s bountiful happiness, and from friends whose first marriages cratered—weddings she also attended—but *their* luck had held and allowed them to expunge past erroneous choices and move forward into another future: *Please join us in an intimate celebration of our finding absolute true love—*

From her mid- to late twenties, Phoebe was first in her seat at the monthly brunch with her band of girls, Sunday afternoons of sangria and silly talk about what their futures might hold. One by one, those girls turned into women when they became wives and mothers, delighted their lives had come together so effortlessly.

“You’re gorgeous and brilliant and your turn’s coming,” they said to her, and when Phoebe’s turn never did come, they peppered her with questions: Did she *really* want to marry, have a child, make room in her industrious life for others?

Disbelieving when she said, “Professional success isn’t the sum total of me, it’s not all that I want, but I don’t seem to be having any luck.”

Her friends, *her friends*, would say, “Well, if you *really* want it, as you say you do, then—,” that *then* so forbidding, undefinable, completely elusive, as if they held the secret and were unwilling to share, as if their attainment of the marital, the maternal, the pronoun replacements—from *I* to *we* and then to *us*—resulted in their crowning, their elevation, while she remained on the ground, assumed to be lacking the requisite nurturing abilities that would give rise to love and marriage and motherhood.

All day, every day, Phoebe nurtures everyone, her clients, her associates, her support staff, attending their opening nights, their launches, their engagement parties and weddings, and when dancing is required, she dances as if delighted to be there—what better proof is there that she possesses the necessary talents for success in her personal life? And yet she hasn’t attained love,

marriage, motherhood, the poles of the true shelter she seeks, with her wished-for family, a solid place against inclement weather, toasty inside, living each day together, making plans for the future.

As full as she has made her life, as large as it often is, that she might never again feel crazy in love, never feel her child growing inside, that she might spend the rest of her years alone—it is incalculable sadness, bottomless grief, wide and swollen rivers of self-pity. What is she supposed to do with the pulsing love in her heart, the love she has to give, if husband and baby never appear?

Raquel is still chattering, and Phoebe hears her say, “Really, that’s how it works, you only introduce a real love to the family. Right?”

“Right,” Phoebe immediately says.

The art opening had happened; the client was real, an ageless sprite named Zabi, with her magenta lipstick and Turkish slippers, her enormous fired-metal pieces hanging off the walls, like devices to protect the soft innards of some forgotten race of people less strong than sun-fried Los Angelenos. Zabi introduced Phoebe as her lawyerly god, and Phoebe had smiled, feeling her white teeth perfectly strung in her mouth, and all the time she was scanning the crowd, wishing for just one man who might make her laugh, who would know instinctively how to metaphorically strip her to her core. But there had been nobody. Or rather, there had been many, including attractive men who smiled at her, but none had taken even a half step in her direction.

Driving home, she’d thought about how she insists her clients identify their professional aims, and the personal problems that might hamper their achievement, and she took stock of herself. She was beautiful—an acknowledgment, rather than an assertion of vanity; she had an excellent brain, and a big heart, so why couldn’t she achieve her personal aims? What was missing?

It took a quarter of an hour before she realized what was missing was luck.

When it came to love, she’d once had an abundance of compelling luck. Second grade loves that lasted an hour or a day; sixth grade boys who handed over their pencils when hers broke; high school boys with crushes she turned into boyfriends. College and law school admirers had lined up, relationships in which she determined when they started and ended. Then, well, *him*, and her luck held for a while, then sputtered and died.

It was luck she needed to rebirth, but how did one rebirth luck?

And what she thought was love begets love. There was a particular energy one exuded when in love. She’d experienced it herself long ago, the way she became a magnet for even more love, love she couldn’t then use because she was already happily in love.

How could she again draw the energy of love directly to her?

That steamy, decidedly unwintery January night, Phoebe deleted her family’s messages, then walked naked, as she never did, into the living room, and searched the spines of her novels, flipping through their pages, finding a name to bestow upon the man she was inventing, a love story as balm, trips to places ripened by dreams.

It was the only way she could think of to remagnetize herself, and when she found real love, no one would ever need to know that to obtain it, she had feigned being a woman in love.

Raquel has sugared her coffee and sipped—“*De-lish*”—and Phoebe says, “Follow me. Benny’s on the bed. I want him to get used to you,” and Raquel follows along, beneath the kitchen arch, into the dining room and out, a left down the long, well-lit hallway, and across the transom.

“Jesus, Feebs. SOS, big time. You should get those trees cut back.”

Phoebe takes in the big bosomy leaves of the rubber trees pressing against the large north-facing windows, preventing the entry of outside light, causing the dim watery atmosphere of her bedroom in which she sleeps, dreams, and dresses. She ought to call someone, but she’s grown used to the intimacies of her life spent alone in this oxygenated version of being underwater.

“OMG, OMG, I always forget how totes adorbs he is,” Raquel says. *Always* meaning the two times she’s been invited over, when Benny kept to himself, hiding away in here, behaving unlike the social creature that he is. Aware of the change in airflow, Benny, on the bed, cocks open an eye,

gives Raquel a hard stare, then rolls himself tight into a ball, crosses his paws over his head. Phoebe feels proud.

She shows Raquel the heating pad, the trickle of water in the bathroom, how much dry and wet food to set out in his bowls on the black-and-white checkerboard kitchen floor bright with sunshine.

Raquel jerks her head at the coffee machine.

“Sure. Help yourself.”

“Am I taking care of Benny because your brother’s going to Palm Springs, too?”

Phoebe is as nonplussed by the disappearance of Raquel’s usually overexcited voice as by the words Raquel has spoken.

“Yes. With his family. He’s married, Raquel, with two kids.”

“Oh, I know. But he’s the kind of solid guy I want to end up with. I love chatting with him.”

Simon chatting with Raquel? Phoebe can’t imagine what they would chat about, but her brother is that kind of very nice guy, wouldn’t blow off his sister’s inquisitive neighbor in case he did any harm.

She looks at Raquel, takes in the wide blue eyes, the pink bowed mouth, the itsy-bitsy top from which pulchritude overflows, the extremely short shorts, the bare feet with toenails painted watermelon, for she has come into Phoebe’s apartment shoeless.

Could Simon find this girl attractive? No, too obvious, too overly flirtatious. Especially compared to Elena, who is tall and lithe, a combination of sweet and tough. Her brother’s eyes have never roamed since the day he met his wife.

Simon has Elena.

Camille has Valentine.

They are cozy in love, and it spears her straight through, skewers her heart.

Why is she the crescent moon waning when her siblings seem always to be waxing?

Her mother says Phoebe’s the kind of woman men do not quickly release, and boys from various stages of her life still occasionally beat their man-sized wings in her direction, raising the air around her, blowing the dust off their joint old times, a checking-in, a checking-up, wanting to know if Phoebe has allowed someone to stick, to roost—not them, they know, though they had all tried hard.

But her mother also says that the men from Phoebe’s past will always hang on, because she gave them up in the limerence phase, when romantic euphoria is at its peak. Maybe her mother is right; maybe that’s why she has no flesh-and-blood man, only the perfect golem she dreamt up.

Raquel is holding her coffee cup and doing calf raises at the kitchen counter, and Phoebe says, “Raquel, you have to keep the dry food bowl filled, okay. And fresh water in his bowl, morning and night. And if he hasn’t touched the wet, just dump it out and give him a fresh dollop or two.”

“It’ll be like having my own baby for a few days. I want my own, like right this minute, but I’ll wait until I land my first really big role or a global campaign.”

Phoebe has never asked Raquel the questions she’d ask if they were becoming friends—if she graduated from college, or went to acting school, or auditions regularly for roles, or what category she is considered to inhabit as a model—and it dawns on her that perhaps she’s misjudged, that Raquel must have some measure of success because the rents in this lovely two-story building are high.

“Is there anything big on the horizon for you?” she asks.

“Yes! The Brazilians love me. I’m on billboards there selling Fanta and suntan lotion. And in a month I’ll know if I’m the face and body of a hot Rio designer’s clothing line.”

The look on Raquel’s face is absolutely honest—*she’s* not telling any lies. And Phoebe is certain that life will turn out ideally for Raquel—she’ll book that new campaign, find a solid man like Simon to love, be pregnant by next year.

Unfair, unfair, she thinks. Raquel will have it all. Simon already has it all. Camille seems to have no interest in marriage or a child of her own, but Phoebe wants those things. She strives and succeeds and reaps the benefits, but the rewards she desperately wants remain out of reach.

Best as she can, she abstains from thinking about a child because there are tsunamic emotions and morning hangovers. All that control exercised in her earlier years, all that prophylactic womb-protecting, when now, even if unguarded, likely nothing would stay behind, take root, reside within her walls for the duration. She is, after all, two years from forty.

Her weekends away with the imaginary Aaron Green, meant to uncover love, haven't panned out, have instead become indulgent curatives she uses to try and settle into the truth: no one is going to show up—not the man to love, nor a child, a cooing baby in her arms, fairy-tale-named Annabelle or Daisy or Giselle. When the charges appear on her credit card statement, she is always surprised that she indeed spent that weekend eating, drinking, and treating herself at the hotel spas, and spending some amount of time researching on her laptop where she supposedly is with her lover, noting it all down, because her family always asks for detailed recitations of her trips.

Last month, at the Laguna Niguel Capri, she was impressed with how adept she has become at eating by herself in sumptuous hotel restaurants, sampling intricate cocktails perched on stools at burnished bars or outside under the stars, and found herself having impulsive relations, loud and uninhibited, with a Philadelphia heart surgeon there for a conference. He had been swimming laps in the hotel's pool, and she, on her way to swim laps herself, was diverted by the whirlpool and by the pool boy asking if she would like a cocktail, and was lounging with a specialty drink in the hot bubbling water when the heart surgeon joined her and struck up a conversation. He was married, twenty years and counting, ten years older than she, with a nice build and manner, and she had gone with him to his room, engaged with him as she hasn't with anyone else during these weekends away. He has since sent her several long romantic email missives, a poet misshaped as a doctor.

She responded only once because the love of her life will not take the form of a married man. When she received his latest email, she had nearly typed, *Best to your wife!*, then deleted it. Why raise his infidelity when it affected her not at all, when she had no intention of ever seeing him again? Who was she to judge another, when she had a pretend lover named Aaron Green?

Raquel hugs her tight, says, "Have a blasto time. Benny will be fine. He'll be alive and happy when you come home. I promise I won't lose your spare key." Then she is gone from Phoebe's apartment.

PHOEBE RINSES THEIR CUPS, locks the front door, snuggles Benny to her chest, and rubs her forehead against his. Then she is at the back door, hanging bag over her arm, wheeling her suitcase out, bumping her way down the stairs, along the concrete path bordered by the rubber trees that prosper, and the hapless, wilted flowers that struggle under the heavy shade, to the row of small single-car garages that belong to the building, where her own car is housed.

It isn't that she, as the eldest Tabor child, expected to outshine her siblings—they all heard their father's exhortations that success in life turns on elements more substantial than money. That fiery lesson he instilled when he burned the dollar bills she and Camille once fought over, saying with the force of paternal disappointment, "We do not fight about money in this family." It seemed a fortune he sent up in smoke when she was nine, especially since he bellowed when they left lights on in rooms they had vacated. She's learned Harry's lesson, about money not being everything, although at that age she'd been confused—were they poor and in danger of the lights being permanently turned off, or rich if money could be burned? It was six years before she stopped worrying, learned they "had money in the bank," as Harry said, dating back to his stockbroker days, the earnings accruing because of his deftness at trading for his own accounts, but that even with deftness, success in the market was mostly a matter of uncertain luck and the exercise of a discipline that forbade seeking out the big score. "Losing it all can happen so fast, it would make your head spin," he told her during that same conversation. "I left the stock market behind in nineteen eighty-six and have never again ventured in. You are not to enter the market at all." And she never has. She earns serious money these days heading up her own firm, and follows her father's precepts and actions for a well-balanced, useful, and honest life, doing mitzvahs, like offering her legal services pro bono to talented, impoverished

artists, but she has failed anyway. She was sure by now she would have attained what her parents attained, what Simon has, the natural additions to that well-balanced life: a beloved spouse, a child or two, road-trip vacations with the kids to places they would not otherwise see, just as Roma and Harry had done with the three of them.

Objectively, she isn't, but there are times she feels like the loneliest girl in the world, and she refuses to emend the terminology, for a lonely woman seems infinitely more pathetic than a lonely girl rightfully still wrapped up in teenage angst and despair.

Still, the critical question remains: How does she keep hope alive when this solitary existence is stunting her as surely as the rubber trees stunt the flowers wriggling hard up through the dirt, only to find themselves in shade, their petals curling, browning, falling away. Death comes early to flowers, to most living things, when there is no sunlight. It's not hard for her to imagine a similar outcome for herself if love and motherhood escape her forever.

She unlocks the garage door and pushes it up. She drops the suitcase in the trunk, hangs the bagged gown on the backseat hook, and backs out of the small garage. Then she is out of the car again, pulling down the door and locking it, strapping in, checking her rearview mirror, backing out into the street, shifting into drive, reaching the long traffic light, which has just turned red.

She tries casting away the momentary descent into darkness by listing her attributes: mildly eclectic, highly educated, the owner of a voluminous vocabulary, which she flexibly mines. Lovely smile employed frequently, contagious laugh. She knows her thoughts are self-absorbed, but if not she herself, who will consider her life? Not her parents or her siblings, or her clients, who range from amenable to misanthropic, whom she handles with a preternatural ease. Given her level of engagement in their singular worlds and the busyness of her firm, it would seem right to assume that her personal life is similarly riotously full. For bursts of time it is, or has been: hours racked up in weekend exercise; in classes where she has learned the rudiments of Chinese cooking, advanced conversational French, wine appreciation, the construction of crossword puzzles for beginners; and in a multitude of rounds of internet dating. In that vein, before she constructed Aaron Green, she toyed with the notion of hiring an old-fashioned Jewish matchmaker, and briefly considered dialing up the level of Judaism she was willing to accept—from Reform, as Phoebe and the rest of the Tabors are, to the more involved Conservative branch—to enlarge the pool of possibilities. Since her college days, she has tried to remember to light Shabbat candles when she is home on a Friday night, saying the prayer in Hebrew, speaking aloud the wishes she harbors inside. And she is a good holiday Jew, driving to Palm Springs to join her parents in the preparation of Rosh Hashanah dinners, attending services at the temple they've belonged to forever, returning ten days later for Yom Kippur dinner and services and the next endless day spent in temple hungry and thirsty, breaking the fast with bagels and cream cheese and the salty types of fish her father particularly likes from his childhood in the Bronx.

When the light turns, she makes a left onto Olympic. Not far from her apartment are two Jewish neighborhoods, one thick with Orthodox, black hats and beards and ear curls, and the other, Modern Orthodox, mostly clean-shaven, identifiable by their kippahs or baseball caps, the acceptable substitute for honoring God above, appearing otherwise normal, but who require a nearby temple within walking distance and are wholly unavailable from sunset on Friday nights until after sunset on Saturdays, rendering null romantic weekends. Studying those two subsets of religious men, she had retreated entirely from the thought of a Jewish matchmaker.

There's a coven, a pride, a flock of the ultrareligious right now, walking on the otherwise empty sidewalk. The men with the sidelock curls, those dangling *peyot*, hands clasped behind their backs, bodies tilting forward, overdressed in their dully black coats that absorb the morning sun. Passing them, she uselessly admonishes herself to not dwell on what's missing in her life.

A bright red car whizzes past. *She* is like that car, carrying herself with spangle and spark, but the strength that has long held her up is weakening. In Palm Springs, she's going to disappoint

everyone when she walks in alone, without Aaron Green. Should she throw out a few hints that the relationship may be experiencing a loss of acceleration?

God, no. Nothing has come of his supposed existence, except for the homework she must do and the need to keep everything straight, but she's not ready to resume her old role as the Tabor offspring unloved outside the familial circle.

Is it wrong that she wants the warmth of her family's attention, to retain their newly revived belief that love is not beyond her reach, that love has found her again?

Absolutely not.

And not telling the truth is kinder—she wouldn't want to be responsible for torching Harry's big award weekend.

That's not the real reason.

She's a coward, plain and simple, lacking the kind of bravery needed to come clean about her whale of a lie.

And that makes her think of the story from Hebrew school that she never got straight—was Jonah saved, regurgitated out of the whale's massive mouth, and into the cleansing water, as she could be if she came clean, or did he die in there? He probably died in there.

The pretend lover, the few relationship details she has coyly shared with her family about Aaron Green, illuminate what she tries to forget: the Phoebe who existed at twenty-three, in love with a long-haired boy named Elijah, who threw himself into life with abandon. The only former love who has never reached out to her.

Over the years, she has debated whether the way she let him go has been responsible for her perennial single status, the diminution, then disappearance, of that magnetism she once took for granted.

Sometimes late at night in her office she searches for Elijah's name, but no engine finds him, not even one other person with his name seems to exist in the whole great world, and she wonders if he went off the grid, as he swore he wanted to do someday. Or if he is dead.

She was a foolish young woman back then, and did him wrong, did herself wrong, too. She had lacked the courage to face him and explain she didn't possess his audacity to live an explorative life, that the idea of dropping out, even temporarily, frightened her, that the life she was living gave her the comfort and certainty she needed and desired. She had disappeared on him, shunned his calls, deleted his emails, hid in the tiny bathroom in the small apartment she then had, until he removed his finger from the buzzer, until his rapping against the door stopped—she imagined him putting his tongue to his knuckles and tasting the blood, inhaling the iron scent of confusion. It had taken four months before he gave up, before she sighed in relief, then flinched in horror, that she had murdered something so rare with silence.

It sounds like a bad country song, Phoebe thinks.

Then she thinks, *no*, it feels biblical, the resultant suffering she has endured since tossing away that long-ago love.

The mundane intrudes. Her car requires fuel and she swings into her regular station. At the pump, she listens to the rush of the gasoline, watches the gallons ratchet up. On the other side of the tanks, a man extracts himself from his low-slung convertible, runs his card through, and starts doing the same.

"Happy Saturday morning," he says to Phoebe across the concrete divide. He is rather handsome. His smile is nice, so are his eyes. But drawing love to herself would never happen at a gas station.

"*Bonjour*," she says.

"Are you French?"

“*Oui*.” And with that floating *oui* comes the thought that she’s wrong about where love could happen. It could happen here, but it’s too late, she’s declared herself French. Why didn’t she simply say *hello* in her native English?

“Are you visiting, or do you live here?”

This interest of his, surely it’s been triggered by the allure of her supposed foreignness. If she’d said, “Hello,” he would have said, “Lovely day, enjoy it,” filled his tank and driven away.

Because it’s a lost cause, she shakes her head and says, “*Je suis désolée. Je ne parle pas l’anglais.*”

“You don’t speak English?”

“*Non.*” She could backpedal the lie that she doesn’t speak English, but not the lie that she’s French.

She feels his eyes on her as she hangs up the hose, screws on the fuel cap, enters the car, shuts the door, and starts the engine. At the exit, she glances in her rearview mirror and the man is looking in her direction, his hand raised in what could be a wave.

When she’s back on the road, she yells at herself. He could have been the *one*, and what a story they could have told, about how their love ignited over premium unleaded at Shell. Real love, maybe, rather than the illusory love she shares with Aaron Green, whose invention was to find the real thing.

She cranks up the music and the first artist loud out of the speakers is like a finger wagging in her face. One of her favorites, with a stage name that’s a play on Chet Baker. She’s never listened to Chet Baker, but she likes Chet Faker, his cool, moody music, and she forces herself to sing along, to drown out how aptly his stage surname applies to her—faker, faker, faker.

EIGHT

HARRY CLICKS THE TEMPERATURE button on his watch. Still early, but the heat is inching up, the norm for August, when Labor Day is still a couple of weeks away. Yesterday at five, it peaked at 114. Today, it could reach 108 by noon. He reaches into his bag for a bottle. Forty-five minutes ago, it could have been a frozen weapon; now it's just plastic holding cold water, which he swigs.

Levitt has gone out the gate, to the parking lot, has popped his trunk, seeking a dry shirt, then holds his phone up in the air. "Hey, Harry, I've got to make a call," he yells.

"Do what you need to do," Harry yells back, and sits down on the weather-worn bench on the court.

Levitt usually receives and returns one or two during their matches, always a patient querying him about her recent mammoplasty, or blepharoplasty, or rhinoplasty, or rhytidoplasty, or platysmaplasty, or abdominoplasty, or gluteal augmentation—the medical terms Levitt has taught him for breast implants, eyelidlifts, nose jobs, face-lifts, neck-lifts, tummy tucks, and rounding buttocks that have fallen down or flattened with age. Levitt's features are slightly simian and he sweats like the hairy beast that he is not, and having some of the work he performs on others executed on his own visage and body would not be amiss, but it is impossible to feel sorry for the plastic surgeon in such demand that he is located on the court for matters involving not life or death, but vanity. He is the most pleasant doctor Harry has ever known and Levitt says it's because the work he does is nearly 100 percent elective, only a tiny smattering medically required, and as a result, he rarely tangles with insurance companies: he's paid up front and in full before he ever numbs an area or puts someone under and lifts the finest of scalpels, ready to perform his surgical-*artiste* magic. As Levitt's Maserati demonstrates, he is cleaning up in his business of smoothing and sanding and defatting and plumping Palm Springs women of a certain age, of which there are many. Men, too, more and more, as Levitt always reminds him.

Harry swigs again, feeling pleased with the way he's playing, keeping Levitt running, even if the memory of those dachshunds is still rolling around in his head. That might be the worst thing he's done in his life, leaving those dogs behind, tearing out his young daughters' hearts. Still, the girls survived, and all his children are healthy and happy, frequently phoning to fill him in on the progress of their lives, visiting regularly. He's done right by his children, whom he loves so much, done right by them all of the time, except for that lapse in judgment regarding King David and Queen Esther.

Levitt, leaning against his car, is speaking into his phone, one hand moving slowly up and down, as if compressing the air, a gesture Harry recognizes as *Calm down*. Some matron is worried about something. From what Levitt has told him, he's never botched a procedure or a surgery or been sued for malpractice; the toughest thing about what he does is convincing people they need to be patient, that swelling requires time to subside, that stitches will dissolve as they should, that bruising will fade, leaving behind vulnerable pink skin as unblemished as a baby's, that they will, eventually, be exactly as they desire.

Harry understands that need people have for reassurance, to be told many times that everything will be okay.

And that's exactly what he told that young Owen Kaufmann from the *Palm Times*.

That dealing with closed countries, secretive emigration quotas, malfunctioning airports, armed military, corrupt officials, extreme weather, and all the other details that attend moving Jews from around the globe to this patch of arid heaven is often easier than providing the necessary calm to families breathlessly checking off days until they have the proper paperwork in hand, are boarding a plane, stretching their necks to view the despised countries they are finally leaving behind, itching to begin their new lives awaiting them here in Palm Springs. No matter the education provided about

what to expect and no matter how clear Harry's people on the ground have been, he must calm them again when they land, are taken to their new home, and discover it is not the sprawling house plus pool of their dreams, but an acceptable apartment near to the very decent first jobs he has found them. And that when they were told they would be living in the desert, it meant a dry place that is usually hot or hotter or hottest, and the items they've packed into their bulging, double-strapped suitcases, like snowsuits and fleece-lined boots, would no longer be required. Acclimating to the heat takes time, they are all repeatedly told when still in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovakia, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia, and, lately, China. And he tells them again when they arrive, but they can't really understand the notion of *desert heat*

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