ISLAND RULE

ALSO BY KATIE M. FLYNN

The Companions

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For Ren and Thea

Inside the machine's mind, all our lives churn.

—JAMIE LICK, *ORIGINAL DESIGNER*
OF THE UNIVERSAL ALGORITHM

CONTENTS

ISLAND RULE

DISASTER KIDS

Under the corner store's filthy striped awning, the usual cluster of high school girls loiter. Every day at noon, they walk over from their private French school to scroll their phones and smoke their cigarettes. I don't know why they've chosen this spot—cars speed down Richland, plenty of foot traffic, what with the corner store and the laundromat and Sal's Empanada Shop, which got written up in the *Chronicle* last year. We're not Cortland Avenue or Diamond Street, but we stay busy, and the girls have a way of standing, hip cocked, one arm cinched across the waist of a plaid pinafore, the other bent at the elbow, a way of casting their eyes back at you as if you're an afterthought, an apparition, not really there—I don't like it.

I'm on my knees, clearing weeds from sidewalk cracks, when my neighbor the dog walker approaches, pulling a child's wagon full of chicken feed behind her. She lives up the hill and takes lovers. They creep in and out of her house at all hours, if neighborhood gossip is to be believed.

My neighbor gives me a lazy wave. She follows my eyes to the girls who smoke and ignore us. "Again?"

By her tone I can tell she's disapproving, which is perfect. I'd love to talk about my disapproval of those girls. I say many negative things about them, my neighbor nodding along and sipping from her water bottle, my rage being endless and everything. She's listening, yes, but she's also red-faced and enjoying a break before her trek up the hill, sweat collecting at her adorable widow's peak—what a term! Once thought to be an omen of widowhood. I tell her this too, how she most certainly would've ended up a nun or a sex worker, if this were another time. Her massive cardigan yawns open to reveal a second massive cardigan, and I wonder at the shape of her body, remembering the time we ran into each other on my fortieth birthday and I told her, "I feel impossibly old," and she laughed and told me she was the same age, and I thought: *Impossible!* She doesn't look old so much as *feel* old, if that's a thing. This part I keep to myself. I get back to those private school girls. I go on and on until my neighbor tells me that anger gives her indigestion and nightmares. "When I'm especially upset," she says, "I dream of giant rats."

"Giant rats?"

"I took a geography class once. The professor told us about the rats of Flores. Showed us a photo of a rat the size of a household cat. Something to do with island conditions. I don't remember the specifics, but I can see the creature perfectly. That rat haunts all my worst nightmares."

As she starts up the hill, I tell myself I'm not lonely. I picture a giant rat. Doesn't seem possible. Yanking at weeds, I fantasize about marching over to the girls' private French school and telling on them.

Instead I tell Daniel over dinner. He's home late from his Potrero Hill studio, his filthy nail tips frowning at me with a murky brown mix of paint.

Agatha the Great, our five-year-old with the disposition of a tyrant, has already wolfed down her plate of mac and cheese,

the only food she'll eat lately. She did an *okay job* at school, her teacher, Ms. Patty, said at pickup, and that's good enough for me, so she's taking in her single show for the day, animated puffins singing from their rock, lulling Agatha into a vegetative state that I find both disturbing and welcome—her iron will reminds me of the dictators I read about in my darkest punk days, on the hunt for good source material, back when I had the energy to organize a protest band, to dissent. I'd been especially interested in that island dictator, no bigger than a boy, yet his cruelty was an ocean. Now I know I'd fold under a dictatorship—I'm no longer tireless, and I'm definitely no revolutionary.

"So?" Daniel says, slapping a slice of cheese onto a second veggie burger, ignoring the salad. We used to be vegan, but now we're backsliding vegetarians. "You smoked in high school. What's the big deal?"

"It's not the smoking so much as the way they do it, out in the open like no one cares. If they were smart, they'd go sit on the steps."

"It's not safe on the steps, you know that."

The steps—they're at the end of our dead-end street, leading down to busy San Jose Avenue with its commuter traffic and encampments of the unhoused in the shadow spaces below the footbridges.

"Safe? That was never the point when I was a teenager." When I was a teenager, we burned tattoos into our forearms with the lighter-heated tips of paper clips and started a band. I wrote all of Disaster Kids' best songs from the pink stucco fortress that was Orange County before blasting onto the late-nineties punk scene just as it was dying. LA needed an all-girl group, sweating and spitting and showering the angry crowds with diatribes cased in character plays, like "Skinny Gene," about a girl who devours skinny pills until she's so hungry and out of it she eats herself, or "Sheena Isn't Easy, You're Just a Rapist," about, well, date rape. I can't listen to those old songs anymore. They're all so bald, like a bare bottom in a car window taking in the wind, for the world to see.

Daniel licks ketchup from his thumb. "All the same, tattling on them? What are we, puritans? Old assholes with nothing better to do?"

He says *we* but really he means *me* and I stab the air between us with my fork. "We aren't kids anymore," I say, wanting it to hurt, "and we haven't been for ages."

Sometimes it shocks me, how angry I am, Daniel too. I can see it in his eyes, awe or fear or maybe even disgust. I mean, I've always been angry, but San Francisco—with its hippie culture and high-rise condo complexes and panhandlers who sleep in doorways—has had an expanding effect on my rage. It's had an expanding effect on Daniel too, forty pounds maybe, as if he could possibly occupy more space. I think this ugly thought, then flee to the kitchen.

"Seriously. Please don't be an asshole," Daniel calls.

"Language!" I shout even though we both know I'm the one with a gutter mouth. I shovel my dinner into the compost bin and leave the dishes. The kitchen looks like a murder scene and I feel helpless and hot, escaping down the back stairs.

In the garage studio Daniel built for me, I wail on my alternately tuned guitar. These days I make noise, improvising, alone. Sometimes I record, posting cuts of my sessions on SoundCloud. A hundred people or so like them. They ask me when the next album is coming out. *Are Disaster Kids ever gonna do a reunion tour?*

I never respond to the comments. What am I going to say? Roo finished her PhD in comparative lit not so long ago—took her forever—but now she's got a sweet associate professorship at Oberlin and she takes her students on bike tours and leads poetry readings and she told me not so long ago on Twitter that she doesn't miss our band days, not at all! I don't have a handle on Flor's whereabouts. She went to Mexico City for a while—*their punk scene's amazing*, she'd gushed

over email. That was a few years ago, the last time she wrote me. I follow her on Instagram, where she appears to be on some sort of global tour. The most recent shots from Thailand and Cambodia and Vietnam are embarrassingly predictable—men with wrecked teeth squatting on the side of the road, food carts and crumbling statues of the Buddha, and Flor, slick with sunblock and barely aged, in a sarong and one of those cone-shaped sun hats.

Unable to agree on a band name, we'd used Flor's copy of the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, leaving it up to chance or, as Flor said, "Not chance so much as unseen forces." We asked about our future and tossed coins and Flor read from the book, "The flying bird brings the message: It is not well to strive upward. It is well to remain below."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Flor thought on it a moment, sucking on the silver ring in her lower lip that was maybe a little infected. "Excess leads to disaster."

We all agreed: *Yes.* Disaster. Disaster Kids, yes! Not even considering how we'd grow up, what disasters awaited us. It was the nineties; how could we possibly know?

In retrospect, that was likely a misinterpretation on Flor's part. *Excess leads to disaster?* More of a message for Daniel. I think the unseen forces were being direct, their message not requiring much interpretation: *Don't fly so high. Stay low.* No way were any of us going to listen, so we told our own story; we became the Disaster Kids until we grew too old to wear that moniker. Maybe that's it—our band dissolved because we became women, and let's face it: if we hadn't made it by then, really broken through, I mean, it was never going to happen.

I pretended I wanted it—the move to San Francisco, the band's breakup—when really I was scared, and running seemed like the best option. Only I wasn't running, I was following Daniel, and here I am, performing to no one in my dark cavern of a garage. Am I mad about it? Not so much mad as ashamed, and shame makes me angry.

By the time I climb the stairs it's late, my hands throbbing. Some neighbor's dog is going nuts, riling the others, the dishes haven't been done, a murder scene preserved as if for forensics, and Daniel's in bed with Agatha again. I watch their slack sleeping faces, identical mouths forming Os, and I know it, this is family, but I also know that getting into our queen bed alone is the most delicious thing. I sprawl and gnaw on a chunk of dark chocolate and watch some dumb show that's supposed to be about politics but is really about sex, and I think about masturbating but I'm too lazy.

In the night I startle up to sitting. Moaning—coming from the street. I go to the window and look up and down the block, but all I see are the hooded strangers who dig through our trash cans, collecting the recycling, and the only sound is the night shudder of broken glass.

I wake to Agatha in bed with me, Daniel gone. New York City, I remember, four nights, too used to it to be jealous. When I met Daniel in '99, he was going through a guerrilla phase, and obviously I found this sexy. He'd scale plastic surgery centers to paint great cuts of a woman's body parts on a platter scattered with garnish. He'd gather up abandoned TVs and computers and fax machines and build junk monuments to Y2K in corporate plazas and open-air malls. This was years before we moved from LA to San Francisco, where people are more "responsive" to his work. Back then I was a minor celebrity in a niche scene, while Daniel toiled in anonymity. He swore that didn't intimidate him, though I find this unlikely. Daniel is competitive by nature; that's why he made it. Me? I hit a wall when we moved to San Francisco, I had a baby and never recovered. It happens to so many women I know—great artists and musicians and storytellers. Well, it happens to the ones whose partners are men anyway. We lose our light. We pass it on to others. The men in our lives could certainly do more. How they shine on and on, the world loving them into their fifties,

their sixties, beyond. Heck, who doesn't love a man who's lived a life? But women? At a certain point, the world turns away from us, it gives us the cold shoulder, telling us that without youth we have no currency. Invisibility comes in handy sometimes, but mostly it's a frosty reminder that you are not the one shining in the spotlight, and you never will be again.

As I dim, Daniel grows ever brighter, getting flown all over the world to paint murals and show his art, and his more famous works have been reprinted on skateboard decks that Agatha the Great and I sometimes see on the kick-flipped boards of the Mission and Lower Haight. And every six weeks when I dye my hair, he tells me I shouldn't give in to the male gaze, like dyeing my hair's for him or something. Twenty years I've known him, been with him, yet he's never felt like more of a stranger.

Walking Agatha to school, I pass light poles lined with sad handmade posters announcing missing pets, with their Xeroxed photos and offers of reward.

Agatha freezes on the sidewalk, panic in her eyes. "Did you pack Bun-Bun?"

"Of course." I give her shoulder a comforting pat.

Bun-Bun is her favorite stuffie, a weathered gray rabbit who emits a creepy mechanical laugh when you squeeze her. Agatha won't go anywhere without the thing. As if she doesn't believe me, she stops to check her backpack, giving Bun-Bun a good squeeze, the stuffie letting loose that creepy laugh.

I consider giving her a talk about lost things, or maybe going deeper, about loss, but all I say is, "Don't forget to zip your bag all the way."

My worst fear is losing Bun-Bun; I have no replacement, no way to console Agatha in the stuffie's absence. She runs ahead, shouting into the overpass, angry at me for not letting her take the footbridge over San Jose Avenue. She loves to watch the cars below, throttling in and out of the city, but it's faster this way. At least she waits at the corner.

I take her hand and she tells me, "Mommy, I want to stay home with you," and oh, my heart stutters. But I have plans to visit that French school after drop-off and we're already on our way and doesn't she want to see her friends? I've even showered, washed my hair, and put on makeup.

I tell her, "Saturday. We'll have a day together, just us." She likes this idea and seems okay at drop-off, crying a little, which is better than what it was like in the beginning when she'd scream for me at the door while Ms. Patty restrained her.

One of the moms, Susan I think her name is, links her arm in mine. She's the kind of mom whose happiness feels like an act of aggression. Flipping her mermaid-long hair off her shoulder, her beautifully full eyebrows arched in compassion, she says into my face, "You poor thing, it's so heartbreaking! Every single day!"

On the way to the French school, I catch myself rage-mumbling. My mother used to tell me that all that anger was aging me, and I see the proof now in the mirror, the frown lines and stress creases, my face not my face. How could it be my face? How I want to disappear! How I *am* disappearing, the world's attention elsewhere, on other brighter stars. But here I am in motion, the French school's front steps swarming with teenagers, and I can't turn back now. I excuse my way through the crowd of young darting bodies. *Just another hag mom*, I'm sure they're thinking, if they're thinking about me at all.

The office manager is an unsmiling blonde with a long hooked nose and a faint French accent.

"Yes?" she says when it's my turn at her desk. The startling awareness of all the people in the room hits me like a hard drug, kids with forms to turn in and teachers getting coffee, other parents waiting for their turn at the desk, all of them listening, and I can't believe I've become this woman.

"I don't know their names, but there are three girls in your school's uniform who stand on my corner smoking every day during the lunch

hour. I have a child, and I don't need her exposed to—" I want to say *secondhand smoke* or, better, *such a nasty habit*, though that may be too judgmental, and Agatha's not even there to see them, in her own school having an *okay day*, but the office manager interrupts me, pen in hand: "What's the intersection?"

At lunchtime I'm out front, soaking my dying lavender bush with the hose, those girls in their usual spot under the corner store's awning. Their features are different, their hair colors and cuts and shoes, but there's a marked sameness to these girls and it isn't the school uniform. They seem to move together, not at the same time, but like a ripple effect. One of them takes a drag from her cigarette, then the other, the other. None of them appear to notice the French school's office manager approaching.

The girls don't even try to hide it, arguing—I can't hear what they're saying, but I imagine it has something to do with their rights to privacy, how this is off-campus, not the school's responsibility, and so on. One of them looks up, in my direction, and I turn back to the lavender, my neighbor making her way down the hill, walking a trio of dogs that bark and pull in my direction.

"Uh-oh," she says, eyes on those girls, "someone's in trouble." Her tone suggests she's pleased by this turn of events, as am I, so I tell her what I've done.

"Really? You actually told on them?" When she says this, I'm outside myself, seeing through my neighbor's eyes what I've become: a middle-aged busybody, a narc. "I mean, that's a line I wouldn't cross, personally," my neighbor says, "but good riddance." The dogs pull her past me, down the hill, her many sweaters flapping open in the wind. When I work up the courage to look back at the corner store, those private school girls are gone.

The man with cerebral palsy who lives under the footbridge is coming up the stairs from San Jose Avenue. He was one of the first

people I came to recognize on the street when Daniel and I bought this house six years ago. I always greeted him. After a few times he decided to walk with me for a bit. I learned his name, Oscar. He told me he'd come out from Wisconsin to live with his brother and his brother's wife, but that hadn't worked out, and I told him my story. Then he asked for money, and I gave him what I could, which is to say I gave him very little, and he wasn't happy.

After that he didn't return my greetings on the street, and I was embarrassed for being so open with him, for telling him that I was uncertain about the move to San Francisco, that it was really for Daniel, and sure, the band was kinda rocky at that point anyway, but it was the move that ultimately broke us up. Daniel's idea. He'd told me I'd thrive here.

Once I caught Oscar in our backyard. I was coming out of my garage studio and he was standing there, eyes surprised, hands quaking.

"Hi," I said. In truth, I was caught off guard, scared. I'd stopped carrying my knife by then, my punk days long behind me. He said he was hungry. He was looking for me everywhere.

"How'd you get back here?" I asked, even though I knew the answer: he'd come in through the front door. Had I left it unlocked? I asked him to go out through the garage, told him I'd bring him something to eat. But when I tried to give him a loaf of fresh banana bread, he waved it off. "Do you have any money?"

I couldn't help myself: "I'm offering you food, but you won't take it?"

He walked away from me then, muttering to himself. I felt his disappointment. I never left the front door unlocked again. Over the years, I've watched him grow thinner, older, aging faster than the rest of us, expiring before my eyes, yet I don't do a thing about it. I see my younger self crinkling her nose at me and passing judgment, but what the hell does she know? She never wanted kids. She wanted stardom, though she'd never admit it. She'd say it was enough to feel

the energy of the crowd, to know her songs were reaching into the hearts of all those moshing men, touching them at their gushy centers, making them question their many problematic relationships with women. That was a reach. Let's face it: At the center of it all was ego. And youth, fucking youth! All that attention, no idea that someday it would be gone.

A few days pass without a sighting of those private school girls and I think it's over, I've done my civic duty, until I find a dead chicken on my porch. It's not a dead chicken like the kind one might buy from the supermarket, but an actual chicken, feathers and all, that has been murdered. The head's missing and it's got a deep cut down the middle of its chest, its clawed feet twined in red ribbon.

I fetch my rubber gloves and a garbage bag, dispose of the thing, surprisingly light, bloodless, missing organs? I hold it out, far from my body, as I carry it up the hill to my neighbor's.

She answers the door in a T-shirt so big it glances her shins, hair damp as if straight out of the shower, water collecting at that widow's peak and dripping down her forehead.

"Are you missing a chicken?" I ask.

"I don't think so."

"You might want to check."

She waves me in. It's the first time I've been inside her house. We talk a lot on the street and I like her and I think she likes me, but it's never advanced from there. I don't even know her name. The rumors of her many lovers feel outrageous in her cluttered home, books and houseplants and shelves full of tchotchkes veiled in dust. A smell like dog, fur everywhere, I mouth-breathe until we're in the backyard and she's unlatched the coop, counting chickens.

"I am!" she says. "I'm missing a chicken."

I hold out the garbage bag. "Someone left it on my porch."

She takes the bag from my hands, gasping as she opens it, dropping it to the ground. The sobbing air-sucking sounds she makes—I wouldn't have pegged them for human.

We call the police, and in the time before the two officers come to question us I think about whether I'm going to tell on the girls a second time. I know I should. I have Agatha to worry about—I don't want her targeted—but the old feeling is rising in me: dissent. It's been years since I've felt it, too tired, too angry, all my energy invested into making sure Agatha has an *okay day*. It's obvious those girls mean business, but what they don't know is that I do too.

When the officers arrive, they ask if anyone might have a grudge against me, and I give them a perplexed look.

"A grudge?" I say like it's an unfamiliar word. "I don't think so."

They want to take my neighbor's chicken as evidence but she won't have it, in tears now, shouting at them to do their job, patrol more often. "What're you gonna do, take DNA samples?"

I help her bury the bird in her backyard. When we're done, my neighbor rests on the ground next to the dirt mound and asks me, "What kind of monster would do such a thing?"

I nearly tell her the truth—monsters are everywhere—like one of my old song lyrics about that island dictator, but I hold it back, hold it for myself. When I heard that he'd died, that his son had assumed power, I was sad for no reason I understood, a part of me dying with him.

As I'm walking home I get a call from school to pick up Agatha the Great early. She's been bullying another child.

"What do you mean, bullying?" I ask the office manager.

She sighs. "Agatha got into the face of another child, threatened bodily harm."

"Threatened bodily harm?"

"Can you come in?"

The other mother is very upset. An emergency meeting has been called and I arrive to find Agatha slouched in the office chair, complaining she has to poop. The office manager tells her to go on then, and I open my arms for Agatha, but she passes me on the way to the bathroom as if she doesn't know me. I can't meet the office manager's eyes. What's her name? I should know it. I should get to know her. Maybe it would help in these kinds of situations. But I never do this, I never ask her name, I never make conversation in this space that has always felt unsafe for Agatha, for me too.

In the office is Wayne, the school's youngish principal, and the other mother, who's much older than me and the earthy type, in expensive orthopedic sandals. I begin with an apology, and the other mother shifts in her seat to face me. "I want to know what you're going to do to make sure this never happens again."

I turn to Wayne. "What exactly did Agatha say?"

"I wasn't there," Wayne tells me, "but I understand from the parent volunteering for recess duty that she threatened to smash Vida's head."

"What? That doesn't sound like Agatha." This is a lie; that sounds exactly like something Agatha the Great would say.

Wayne raises his thick bourbon-colored eyebrows at me like *go on*, so I say, "I'll certainly talk to her about it at home, and of course there will be consequences." *Consequences*—I sound like some old-school tough guy about to snap an appendage.

They both look at me expectantly, like I'm supposed to do something more, but what else can I do? Am I supposed to beat her, put her in therapy, what? She's five years old.

"It's not like she's said anything like this before."

"Actually, Vida's been coming home complaining about your daughter for weeks," the other mother says.

"For what?"

She enjoys this part openly, turning her whole body toward me.

"For starters, Agatha gets in Vida's face, sits too close to her in circle time and assembly, growling when she tries to get away."

I glare at Wayne. "Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"Honestly, it's the first I'm hearing about it too," he says, which I think he thinks gets him off the hook, but really makes him appear incompetent.

"What're you going to do about it?" the other mother demands again.

"Like I said," I start, and I can hear how defensive I sound. "I hope that after a talk it won't happen again, but as far as assurances? They're not cars or blenders, are they?"

It's kind of a joke and I mean it to cut the tension, but it seems to have the opposite effect. The other mother is glaring at me hatefully and I can see that she's mad at me, as if this is my fault, the failure of an inadequate parent. Now I'm mad.

"They're five years old," I keep on—why am I still talking? "They're going to test boundaries, make mistakes."

The other mother gawks at Wayne like *do something!*

"It is concerning," Wayne says, not looking me in the eye. "If this sort of behavior continues, we'll have to suspend her from school." A five-year-old. Then he smiles, he fucking smiles! It takes tremendous willpower not to destroy him with my gutter mouth. God, to be a parent, to care so much—it's draining the life out of me.

I read a *New Yorker* article recently about some new service you can pay to smooth out the unsightly incidents from your past and set you on a track for success. They call it polishing, and it sounds terrible to me. Who are you without your mistakes, your scars, your ugly truths? Furthermore, as part of the process, they use an algorithm to rate you on a scale of one to ten. That alone sends me over the edge. To be so reduced! Imagine learning you're a six or worse. The article said hardly any normal person gets above a seven without some polishing. To have your mediocrity reflected back at you, no thank you! But also,