

Praise for *House of Beth*

“An uncanny debut . . . What’s fantastical in the novel, ultimately, is not only the ghost that shakes the bride out of her domestic bliss, but the illusion of that bliss itself.”

—*The New York Times*

“Modern gothic meets psychological suspense in this wholly original work.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*House of Beth* is a stunning debut novel that is compelling and surprising and haunting. Kerry Cullen’s sharp and beautiful prose is the lifeline of this book, telling us the story of Cassie—a young woman working in New York—as she returns home to New Jersey and rekindles an old relationship. Cullen subverts our expectations at every step, constructing a book that is unexpected, impossible to put down, and one that is so very satisfying at its end.”

—Laura Spence-Ash, author of
Beyond That, the Sea

“*House of Beth* perfectly captures that tenuous moment in your twenties when your adult life doesn’t yet have a solid foundation. Cassie—seemingly irresponsibly—decides to walk away from New York City and her job in publishing, only to end up in a marriage, a ghost story, and a new life so strange that it matches the strangeness she has always carried inside her. A lovely story about how even though unraveling a life can be dangerous, there are possibilities in the heart of that darkness.”

—Ann Napolitano, author of
Hello Beautiful

“A ghost story, a love story, and a spiral all at once—an intense reckoning with the human mind, *House of Beth* examines both the horror and the resplendence of being alive.”

—Danya Kukafka,
national bestselling author of
Notes on an Execution

“Staggering in its beauty and in its honesty, *House of Beth* is exquisitely tense—every page sparks with angst and desire and piercing insight about what it is to be haunted. A ghost story unlike any other. Eerie and hypnotic and absolutely unmissable.”

—Rachel Harrison,
USA Today bestselling author of
So Thirsty and *Black Sheep*

“*House of Beth* is the ghost story I’ve been waiting for—steamy and audacious; terrifically paced. What begins as an unsettling tale of precipitated marriage and loneliness twists and explodes into an exquisite finale.”

—Sanaë Lemoine, author of
The Margot Affair

“Vivid, addictive, and crackling with life (yes, even the ghost), Kerry Cullen’s *House of Beth* asks us to consider how and why we make the lives we make; how blurry, complicated, and misunderstood our own thoughts and yearnings can be; and where and how we might both love and be loved amidst the mess. I loved this book for its acuity, its urgency, but most of all its beautiful beating heart.”

—Lynn Steger Strong, author of
Flight, Want, and Hold Still

HOUSE OF BETH

KERRY CULLEN

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi



Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition July 2026

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Interior design by Carly Loman

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025936150

ISBN 978-1-6680-7459-6

ISBN 978-1-6680-7460-2 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-6680-7461-9 (ebook)



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HOUSE
OF
BETH

PART ONE

CASSIE

OCTOBER

Every time I woke up, someone died. Usually my girlfriend, Lavender, or my dad, or my boss. Sometimes one of the other assistants. Or strangers I'd seen on the street, unlucky enough to have gotten their faces lodged in my brain, or people I remembered from long ago: the little girl I tutored in college, or Eli McKean. I saw them hacked to bits one by one, or force-fed poison, or tied up together and burnt like witches, their skins blistering over a blazing pyre.

The victims changed, but the murderer was always the same, always me. My hands smeared in gore, eyes alight with frenzied ecstasy. My smile, but wrong, more devious. In my real life, I sat up in bed to rub sleep out of my eyes, I stood in a shower I'd turned hot enough to hurt, I sniffed the armpits of my favorite dress. I kissed Lavender goodbye, or I smiled thinly at my roommates on my way out the door. All while the images poured through me, and I tried to convince myself that they meant nothing, that I didn't want them. I didn't want to kill anyone, I thought.

On Halloween evening, Lavender showed up at my office dressed like the night sky, holding a black umbrella, paper stars strung to it with fishing line. I was Donna Tartt in a blazer I'd thrifted on my lunch break—my old bedbug terror had surged like bile; I'd swallowed it down—and a low bun I'd fashioned to look like a bob.

We had initially planned to dress up as Tumblr lesbians, wrapping ourselves in cozy sweaters and twinkle lights. The plan was to spend the whole night entwined. We didn't mind. We'd been together for ten months, and we were near-telepathic. Often when we were separated, I would feel her heart flutter in my sternum; my palms would get sweaty, and I'd text her to ask what was wrong. Just like she knew when I ate stupidly and drank too much by the nausea curling in her stomach. "Would you stop abusing your body," she would say, laughing. "For my sake?"

Okay, the truth: I often faked it. Knowing me made her so happy. And she was so often anxious or sad that predicting her moods was nothing more than pattern recognition. Besides, I loved the way our supposed psychic connection lodged us closer together, made our story the stuff of fate, as if we weren't responsible for our own decisions. Sometimes I thought if I could keep swimming in the current of her love story, I'd never have to make another choice in my life; eventually, I would simply float, thoughtless and free.

For now, fights could take up days, told in three acts, replete with dramatic gestures: we starved ourselves, sobbed for whole mornings, all justified by our status as soulmates. I bragged to friends that it was a more intimate relationship than I'd imagined possible. I was exhausted.

When I added the fourth party to the schedule—a book party, right after work—I asked if we could decouple our costume. I didn't want to enter the infamous publicity director's personal home wearing my girlfriend like an ornament, nor to explain wlw meme culture to my bosses and colleagues. Being a twenty-eight-year-old agent's assistant was already humiliating enough.

I made 26k a year with shitty benefits, my days spent sending endless emails, my nights reading manuscripts on my phone: in coffee shops, waiting for Lavender to get off work, in the bathroom at the bar while she bemoaned nonprofit burnout with her coworkers,

on the subway ride home, in bed after she fell asleep and before she woke up. My eyes burned all the time, like visual tinnitus. Lavender kept saying I should get them checked out, but I didn't have the cash for the copay. If I did, I would start with a gynecologist for the yeast infections I kept getting from wearing the same three pairs of black tights to work every day. After that, I'd see a dentist, once I had the mental wherewithal to handle the questions. *It's from the bulimia*, I'd have to practice saying in the mirror first, with a take-me-seriously face. *Yes, I know it was stupid. No, I don't drink soda. I never have.* After that, maybe a chiropractor, and then the eye doctor.

"I know," Lavender would say to my diatribe, settling in behind me on the old mattress my roommates used as a couch, working her thumbs down my spine. "But what if one day you couldn't read anymore?"

I had forcibly exposed myself to sickening thoughts before—*Stare at the word for ten minutes, but no longer*, I could hear my therapist saying—but this one was too horrifying to contemplate. Reading had been my truest love since I was a little girl. Growing up, I'd read at dinner, during recess and study hall, at parties, sometimes while hidden in the bathroom or the closet; I'd push my hand against the back wall every time, hoping for a door, for something fantastic and otherworldly to appear and change everything.

In publishing, I'd hoped to find more people like me. I hadn't been prepared for the social aspect of agenting: the lunches and coffees, or the secret rules of wardrobe and manner. I certainly hadn't been prepared for my boss, Arthur, with his thrush of gray hair and his stooped walk, like a wizard in a movie. His ancient suits, his eggplant breath. He was a legend in his late eighties. "Don't worry," a senior agent had murmured to me once. "He'll have to retire soon."

"Or die in his office," another agent said grimly.

And I had learned not to over-glamorize the reading itself at work—this was author behavior, waxing poetic on speakerphone

while we all nodded, bored, in the conference room—and in fact, the older I got, the more starkly I saw that books were not magic and never had been. They were a coping mechanism that allowed me to ignore the outside world when I was small, and then I grew up and decided to turn that coping mechanism into a career. One that I was floundering in but terrified to leave. If I couldn't succeed at this job, which I'd essentially trained for my whole life, then what else could I do?

Maybe in a different life, I'd have made friends with the other assistants, but they straight-girl flirted with each other with heady desperation, as if finding a work wife was tied to their biological clocks. They clustered, laughing prettily, long-nailed hands stroking backs and shoulders, and I was never good at casually touching other women. I stayed at my desk, only extricating myself on the rare Fridays when Arthur invited everyone to his corner office, made us Manhattans, and regaled us with stories about the good old days in publishing.

When Lavender showed up, I was already a little buzzed, elated over having just learned the sleazy true story behind the '90s classic I'd loved in college. Lavender had broken away from work to meet me at my office before the book party I needed to make an appearance at. I was making myself sound more important than I was; I hadn't been properly invited, just DMed that morning by a cheery publicity assistant. I'd told Lavender that I could just meet her at her work party and save her the trip to Chelsea, but she knew I had a nasty habit of ditching parties. The trait had originated in high school, when I was afraid one sip of alcohol would coax me to project the inside of my brain like a snuff film on the nearest wall.

In college, I'd avoided gatherings entirely, which may have in part led to the breakdown, the transfer to community college, the

dropping out, the fuck-it move to New York. I'd lucked into my assistant job because of timing; my second boss, Veronica, had read a Twitter thread about the racism/classism of requiring a college degree just before my résumé had landed on her desk. She whispered this excitedly in my interview, like we were in cahoots—fucking the man, together. She didn't seem to care that I was white and had grown up stolidly middle class.

After the book party, we had Lavender's office Halloween party in Gowanus, then my former barista coworker's in Washington Heights, and, finally, a low-key welcome hang for Lavender's best friend Alice, who was visiting the city for the week, staying with a cousin in the West Village. I hadn't met Alice yet—her friendship with Lavender had always been long distance; they'd met at ten years old, attending a summer camp for kids with gay parents, and been emotionally inseparable since. Alice was a textile artist who grew up in Connecticut and now lived in Salem, MA. She'd knitted me a scarf. I was excited. A cold front was coming that weekend, and I couldn't afford any more clothes.

The elevator released us directly into the open kitchen: an island that people were clustered around, flanked by gray marble counters holding bottles of red wine. I sallied forth into the open main room, Lavender behind me. I wanted her to be impressed, but also to know better. I wanted her to feel at home, even though I didn't. Maybe this was the purpose of a work wife: a companion who already understood every social event's subtext.

The author stood in a corner of the room, wearing a high-necked black dress. Her eyeliner was dark and liquid, the wings flaking near the edges. We were Twitter mutuals, but I was hesitant to introduce myself. She wouldn't remember me, and if she did, what would we have to say to each other? I hadn't read her book, and now that I

saw her here, looking nervous and unreliable, I knew I never would. She was talking earnestly to Carl, a slightly older man I knew to be a pretentious ass. I'd danced with him at a party like this once, and he'd drunkenly told me that I should write books.

"What should I write about?" I'd asked, cautiously flattered. I was trying to be a poet, but he didn't need to know that.

"Sex!" he cried. "Everyone should write about sex," he'd continued. "But you should, especially."

I'd thought he was cute until that moment. Maybe even during that moment, and after. Maybe right up until he'd gone home with a different woman, with the tired eyes of someone who had spent hours waiting him out. Lavender proffered a small plate of cheese and crackers, but I shook my head—I'd read a nauseating proposal about dairy farms that morning. "That's the writer, right?" Lavender asked, jutting her chin. "Should you say hi?"

Carl's hand had slid down to the woman's elbow, and her gaze darted around the room. I drained my wine. "This party sucks."

Lavender tipped her glass back—I loved her throat—and shrugged. The less time we spent here, the sooner she'd see Alice. "Onward?" she asked, and took my hand. The elevator doors opened so fast that I startled, knocking over a giant vase filled with glass pebbles. I caught the vase, but the pebbles skittered all over the tile floor, the noise making people turn toward us. One girl stepped back and stumbled; another slipped and grabbed the counter. I heard a shriek.

"Go," I hissed at Lavender, and she stepped into the elevator. We descended.

Four transfers away—the trains were fucked—Lavender walked the empty sidewalk toward a converted warehouse full of nonprofits: a literary magazine that I knew of, a film company that I didn't, and

the mentorship program for queer and trans youth where Lavender was an associate program director.

I'd met most of Lavender's colleagues at the annual gala they'd hosted in September. I'd been rude at dinner, reading a manuscript on my phone in my lap. Now, when we stepped into the warehouse, a bespectacled person shrieked and launched themselves at Lavender, lifting her up and twirling her while I worked my arms out of my coat. They set her down, both red-faced, laughing, and turned to me. "Cassie! I'm a little drunk. Welcome!" They turned toward the party with a flourish. "We're taking bets on who ends up sleeping here tonight. My money's on JP."

I looked at Lavender and she mouthed, *Trish*.

Thank you, I mouthed back.

We wound through the small crowd for drinks. Everyone wanted to say hi to Lavender, and I tried not to compare our work social lives. I remembered now that I'd felt this way at the gala, too. My urgency over the manuscript had been out of an itching desire to prove to myself that I was part of something superior. So what if my job didn't love me back? There was nobility in fighting for appreciation, I thought. Nonprofit types were easy to win over, I reminded myself.

Lavender handed me a drink and nestled her chin into my neck. "Don't worry; we won't stay long."

"Why, do we have other plans?"

She laughed and squeezed my hand, hard. "You're my favorite person here," she said in a confidential tone. Her palm was warm, a little sweaty, and a chill tore through me, coaxing gooseflesh to the surface of my arms.

On the way to the third party, Lavender's eyes were red-rimmed in the blank subway light, a fake cobweb stuck in her hair. I was tired, a premature hangover already pressing into my temples. My fears

were always worse after I drank, so I knew tomorrow would be hell; I would wake up feeling unclean, my head full of rot and blood. I shivered. Sometimes sex helped blot out the thoughts. At first, my brain would feed me a parade of horrors to get a reaction. I would try to let them fall like rain around me: okay, a breast being chopped off, okay, an orifice full of writhing vermin, disgusting, please let's not overanalyze it, the recoil is happening, but let's not worry about whether it's enough. Once I got turned on enough, they would fade away, which was always immensely comforting. And then once an orgasm had been achieved, my fears rose like puffy clouds over the teeming city of my brain. The relief could last for moments, even hours. It was the best feeling I knew. I probably would have become a sex addict in college if I hadn't been so leery of bedbugs.

I slid an arm around Lavender, my fingertips testing the waistband of her leggings. She wriggled away. "Later," she promised, and I pinned the corners of my mouth upward in a smile. I hated that I would use her for my own brief respite, and she would have no idea. I put her in danger every day I stayed with her. At any moment, the evil thing in my brain might finally take control and use my hands to cut her throat.

Nessa gave me a brief, bony hug as she ushered me into her apartment. "Hello, kitten," she said, her black lips shining as she spoke. "Who is this one?"

"Lavender," she replied.

"Beautiful to meet you. Did you warn her about me," Nessa asked, resting her elbow on my shoulder.

"Nessa is pure evil," I told Lavender.

"I don't know about pure," Nessa said. "Come, let me tell you Cassandra's secrets."

"Not my name."

“She’s cute when she’s contrary, no?” Nessa grabbed a round-eyed Lavender by the arm and slithered off.

I could have followed them. I looked around. I hadn’t been here in months. Strange, as Nessa and I used to be the kind of friends who disappeared into each other’s lives, emerging after days or weeks in a wardrobe of the other’s castoffs. Grimy posters covered the walls, and the place smelled like smoke layered over cat piss. I hadn’t been sure about bringing Lavender here. But Nessa’s place still felt like home to me, as in: a disgusting place where I could be disgusting, too. The dim light and lack of order made me nostalgic. I stepped over a small pile of shoes and went to the kitchen for a drink.

Through the kitchen, a tiny room that sometimes belonged to a subletter was populated by a circle of folding chairs. No one was there. I took a moment, sitting on the floor in the center of the circle. Voices hummed in nearby rooms, but here I was alone, in the quiet. I was already too drunk and so tired. I wanted to go home.

Lavender stepped into the room, Nessa behind her, grinning. Lavender looked upset. “Cassie,” she said. “Who the fuck is John Mark?”

Right. The night I met him—months before I met Lavender, came out, and changed my life—I’d just ended a situationship with an experimental cellist and I was feeling grandly morose, flinging my limbs around at a bar with my friends. I’d been cocooned with the cellist for months, so they were all annoyed at me, but still, they rallied. I was making a scene, dancing when no one else was, feeling everyone’s amusement at my antics plateau and fade.

When John Mark wrapped his hands around my waist, I tipped my head back and looked into his eyes. He was attractive enough. Eventually, he guided me to a chair at a table full of empties. He went on about some Marvel movie. Eventually, he asked me to go home with him. I might have. But at one point, when he leaned toward me, I breathed in. His smell—not bad, just off, not like mold, not like

sweat, something else; it was something less than what I wanted. So I lied, said I wasn't from around here, I was staying with a friend, I was sorry. He only asked the once. He left, and I forgot him for months.

I guess I must have swiped left. I don't even remember it happening. My interactions with Tinder were rabid spells of loneliness and hope; I barely paid attention. I said it was a numbers game. All I know is that even though I said no that night, swiped left some other time, he screenshotted my profile. Screenshot, I told a friend later, enjoying my own crassness, not yet knowing to be afraid. With a first name, my college, and my face, I was easy to find. He must have requested scads of other people on my friends list first, so that by the time the ask popped up in my inbox, we had mutuals, and I just assumed I knew him somehow. I accepted. You never really know anyone, anyway.

He was in the gay dive I hung out in with my friends. He was in the café with the Eiffel Tower painted on the wall. He was across the street when I walked home, and when I waved, he started—cartoonish, overdone. My friends teased me about having an admirer, and I laughed along, laughed it off. “He’s not an admirer,” I finally protested one night, too loudly, when I was with Nessa and her newest shitty boyfriend. John Mark was sitting at the bar, nursing the same brand of cider I held. “He doesn’t hit on me or even look at me. He’s just there. Everywhere.”

“Yo,” CJ said. “That’s actually kinda creepy.”

Once he said it, we all knew it was. They looked at each other and not at me. Nessa said, “Catskin, maybe you talk with him.”

“Yeah, tell that nerdass dick to leave you alone.”

I sighed. I was starting to chafe at Nessa’s performative irony around then—dating the literal worst dudes was part of it, I was sure, though she wouldn’t admit it—but I hadn’t yet met Lavender, who would so easily slide me out of my tenuous orbit around Nessa and take up all of my free time.

“You want me to fuck him up,” CJ added.

“Nope!” I said. “I’ll talk to him. You guys stay here, okay?”

I claimed the stool next to John Mark. Without asking, the bartender plunked down another cider. I traced the rim. I could feel everything I’d already swallowed sloshing in my gut.

“Cheers,” I said to John Mark. “I’m Cassie.”

“I know.”

“Right,” I said. “Um. Did I like, tell you that?”

“We’re friends on Facebook.” He spoke in a monotone with a weird flavor, something implicating in his emphases. Had he talked like that when I’d met him, that first night? I’d been so drunk; the only facts stuck in my head were the ones I’d kept to make fun of later. He reminded me of a group of boys I’d known in high school, video game obsessed, their every conversation a fortress of inside jokes. I’d had a crush on one of them, but I always felt stupid next to him, somehow deemed both stuck-up and inferior.

“So, I know you, right? From that night a few months ago. We danced?”

He nodded, sort of smiling.

“Okay,” I said. “Did you want to talk or something?”

He stared flatly at me. I caught a hint of that scent. I gulped my cider, and the cold of it spread down my ribs. He slid his hand up my thigh, his hair shading his face; I couldn’t see his eyes. I placed my hand lightly over his, wondering how to remove it without pissing him off. But at my touch, he looked at me, disgusted, slipped from his barstool, and left, letting the door slam behind him.

The next morning, he sat on a stoop across the street, talking to another skinny guy with unkempt hair, a couple of blocky tattoos, and a black T-shirt bearing some nerd-culture reference. I watched them for half an hour. They never looked at me. I went to my local coffee shop to read. Fifteen minutes later, he sauntered in and sat down across the room.

I walked over. “Okay, what the fuck?” I asked. “You need to get a life.”

John Mark shrugged, a little cartoonishly. “Cassandra, this is my life.”

“You don’t even have coffee.” I called to the barista, “This guy is not a paying customer!”

Her expression clearly asked me what she was supposed to do about that. I turned back. “What do you want from me?”

He waited. I felt myself starting to cry. Even when he looked right at me, I couldn’t see who he was. “I’m getting what I want.”

Now, I told Lavender, “It really wasn’t a big deal.”

“Doesn’t he still live across the street?” Nessa asked.

Lavender turned to me. “Seriously?”

Nessa melted away, waving deviously at me over Lavender’s shoulder. Asshole.

“Okay,” Lavender told me. “That’s fine. You can move in with me.”

I allowed myself a moment to indulge this: living with Lavender, in her bed heaped with blankets, wearing her wool sweaters even though they irritated my skin. Smelling like incense, watching her wean off caffeine like she was always threatening to do, learning to love turmeric lattes with her. It looked like a beautiful life. More beautiful than I deserved.

I pulled Lavender around the corner into Nessa’s room. “I can’t move in with you.”

I stroked the inside of her palm as she looked away from me, taking in the room. It was exactly as I remembered it—clothes everywhere, shoes buried like traps. Being here felt like stepping backward, into a former life. I led Lavender to the edge of the bed. She looked hesitantly at the heap of dresses there—castoffs, I assumed, from Nessa’s pre-party try-on session. We used to get ready together,

trading clothes and makeup. Now, I wore Lavender's hair tie and lip balm. I'd given her a sweatshirt in a pink too light for me, and she wore it sometimes in the soft hours before sleep.

Lavender's cheeks were flushed like the inside of a shell, smooth enough to house a living creature. Part of her always seemed raw to me, the things she felt writhing visibly close to her surface. I thought of headbutting her so hard that her skull crumpled in like a can.

She said, "I just can't believe you wouldn't tell me about some guy stalking you. What if he hurt you?"

"He wouldn't do that," I said.

"How do you know? Everything he did is fucking creepy."

"He never did anything to me."

"Not physically—but doesn't it freak you out? This sick person following you around, and you have no idea what they're thinking?"

"No one ever knows what someone else is thinking."

She tilted her head, squinting at me. "What's wrong, Cassie?"

I knew that if I told her the truth about my recurring thoughts, all the revulsion in her face when she talked about John Mark would turn toward me. Maybe she would try to cover it up, to be kind or polite, but she would watch me more closely. Eventually she would glimpse something real and haunted underneath. I couldn't bear to let her see me that clearly. I said, "I think we should break up."

She looked at me. "You're joking, right?"

"No. I've been thinking about this for a while."

She held a hand over her eyes, scrunched her face up, and let out a long breath. "Cassie, this is good. Really good."

I nodded miserably.

She looked at me again. She laughed. "And you aren't even going to try to fight for it."

"I'm doing this for you."

"Oh, come on. Cass, don't be a fucking child. If you'd just open up to me, I could help."

“You don’t know that.”

“So why bother trying?” She stood. “Almost a year and you still don’t trust me.”

It was me I couldn’t trust. But I knew saying that would only make her ask more questions. I turned away, and eventually she left.

I stayed in Nessa’s bed for a while, tucking myself inside her sheets, sweeping out the crumbs of the weird cereal she ate dry. Eventually, Nessa stood swaying in the doorway. “Poor Catskin,” she said. “I liked her.”

I sat up. “Fuck off.”

“You can crash here if you want.” Blood poured down her face, running into her mouth. I watched myself lift the hatchet out of her skull and bring it down again.

“I think I need to be alone,” I said.

In college, I was diagnosed with OCD. My bedbug fear began during finals, freshman year. It was then that internet research and a series of therapists led me to a diagnosis. And with the diagnosis, much more about my life made sense: the hemophilia fear that had taken hold after my mom left, my preoccupation with leeches, even my anxious personification of inanimate objects. Many of my childhood oddities fell into place—which was especially satisfying for someone like me, I liked to joke, even though I didn’t have that kind of OCD. My disorder had never had anything to do with order. Put me in a room of clutter and I suffered not at all. I didn’t line up pens on my desk or color-code my notebooks. Sure, in college I carried a bottle of bleach in my purse, but that was to kill the bedbugs. More often, my compulsions involved research. I tried to build barricades of facts around my doubts, scrolling through Wikipedia, WebMD, Reddit threads. When I opened Google, the search bar autofilled with *how do i know*.

I suspected that my blood-drenched thoughts were a subtype of OCD that focused on harm. Every obsession or theme has a trigger: the moment that caused the person to ask the question that would then worm through their head and ruin everything. Mine was a manuscript I read a few months ago—a fictionalized memoir by a serial killer, written in fragmentary stream-of-consciousness ravings. It wasn't even good. I have no idea why it sank in my head and ruined my life. Maybe the guilty longing in the voice found a kindred spirit in me, a bisexual girl who had refused to know herself for years. Maybe subconscious rage boiled beneath my surface, and this self-torment was the only outlet I'd allow it. Or maybe my brain was just primed for a new horror that day, and if I'd read a book about bird flu instead, I'd be washing my hands raw instead of googling "common attributes of serial killer" twenty times an hour.

I'd thought of reaching out to Meredith, the therapist I'd seen back in college, before she'd switched practices, her fee no longer covered by my insurance. She'd offered me a lower rate, but I hadn't wanted to take up her time. Her other clients probably paid full price, and their problems were probably easier to stomach. Wives waffling over leaving their husbands, kids dealing with class bullies; real-world stuff. I knew OCD was not a rare diagnosis, anxiety far less so. But what if this time it wasn't OCD? What if Meredith took one professional look at my brain and called the police?

Back in my apartment, I felt wrung out and strange. I'd spent hours staring at a screen again, and it was getting dark. Who knew what might happen in the dark? I would stay inside, keep the world safe from me. I ate the rest of a pint of ice cream and binge-watched a comedy about roommates. I couldn't afford myself the space for new thoughts. I woke up with my lamp still on, a scrim of melted chocolate at the bottom of the carton, three episodes further than I remembered, and thank God, thank God, I felt a little better. I

turned off the show, turned off the light, masturbated for the endorphins, and fell asleep as fast as I could.

On Monday, I woke up missing Lavender, like a normal person. I wondered if we would ever get to be friends. As I stepped into the shower, my horrible thoughts felt flimsy, almost nonexistent. Maybe they had left, I thought. And then the showerhead rained blood. I could see myself stuffing my roommates' fingers into my mouth and biting down, stabbing their soft bellies with a carving fork. We didn't own a carving fork, I reminded myself. My brain didn't care; it had new concerns. How would I pay my rent after I'd murdered my roommates in the kitchen? Let alone recover my security deposit.

Outside felt too bright. I couldn't see people normally. I used to like watching strangers chatting, but now, on the train, everyone's expressions looked off, plastered like bad makeup on their faces. Even interactions that seemed sweet—a mom holding her little girl's hand—carried menace; I imagined that the mother abused her daughter behind closed doors, pinching her hard on the soft spots covered by clothes, careful to leave no visible marks. The man smiling at the baby was a pedophile. A boy with John Mark's black glasses squeezed in through the closing doors and I turned away, facing my own faint reflection in the glass. Was it him? I couldn't look. I hated my transparent face. I lunged out the door at the next stop, twenty-two blocks from work.

I hoped no one would notice my lateness. Veronica, the boss I liked, was out of the office all week. Without her, my day would be emails, meetings, smiling sweetly at Arthur no matter what he said. I would forget to eat until after three, then lurch toward the office fridge for the cup of overnight oats that was currently congealing in my bag. The sun would go down while I was at my desk, and I would be spit out into the cold city, to be leered at on the