



FAMILY DRAMA

A NOVEL

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*for my family, with love
and M.C. always*

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1997

Bear right on Argilla Road, past Douglas Orchards, down the hill. Wrought-iron gates mark the Ingram estate (est. 1928) on the left. Turn a sharp corner and the trees out your window peel away, revealing the shoreline. Of course, you can't see the sand in the winter; snow blankets the beach and the marshes, thick and inevitable and heavy. So drive slowly, and follow the caravan of cars toward the ocean.

On the beach, amid the cloud of dark winter coats, you'll see a pair of twins standing small and bereft, their neon parkas incongruous against the sea. They are waiting for their mother to arrive. The air is punishing and the crowd is silent. A small, ancient-looking vessel splashes to shore, *ELYSIUM* painted in large green letters on the starboard side. The crewmen jump off and heave the boat onto the beach; an unusual arrangement, but the captain made an exception for the Bliss family. The young men loiter on the damp sand.

At last she comes, at her leisure, wearing thick makeup and her wedding-day earrings, her car churning up sand and snow. The crewmen shiver as they remove her from the back of the hearse.

"Sebastian, Viola, come along!"

The twins are lifted now, up onto the back of the boat, and they're pushing off—tear-streaked relatives and friends growing smaller and darker as the beach recedes.

It's only on board that the twins realize their mother is not in a box, but a bag. "It's cotton," their father explains, "so she can return to the earth." *Is there earth under the water?* they wonder. The material reminds them of a guitar case, like their mother is an instrument. They glance at their father, perturbed. He's looking at the sky.

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The water is choppy and rain begins to spit against their faces. The bag is still. When they have passed the point where they can see the land, the engines thrum to a stop and everyone gathers at the bow. A shriveled man in a dark suit says a few words. A wonderful person, wasn't she? Strong, courageous in her work as she was in the battle for life. A true New England woman. This, the year of Our Lord, nineteen hundred and ninety-seven. It's hard to hear him against the crashing surf.

Time for a last look. The zipper on the bag ruffles halfway over their mother's body and catches like a broken fly. Nothing in the universe has ever sounded so morbid. The twins stare as the wrinkled man fails to jam it down, catching again and again at the same warped tooth, and settles for crudely spreading the synthetic flaps apart with outstretched arms to reveal their mother's face, a mask in an expression she has never worn. Their father is crying.

From the hold of the ship, the crew produces four cannonballs, wrought iron, heavier than both twins combined. Their father and the captain lower the weights into the bag. Small flowers are pressed into the twins' small hands, *Throw them into the sea*. Someone plays an endless, somber note on a trumpet, and their mother—indelicately—is thrown over the side of the ship.

A bell is rung eight times. The engine skips a beat as it turns back to shore, leaving in its wake a pair of shipwrecked hearts.

Aunt Sadie bulges against the cheap material of her funeral dress, the only black clothing she has ever voluntarily purchased. The nylon rubs against the floral embroidery of the chaise longue in the dining room, and Viola understands instinctively that these are fabrics that do not belong together. She and Sebastian are sitting underneath the dining room table, watching the throng of suit trousers and stockings that have entered their house to eat their food and say nice things about their mother. Most of them are unknown to Viola, and so she fixates on Sadie, whose voice carries across the room, unmuffled by the tiny cocktail sausages that she is shoving into her mouth two at a time.

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“They’re addictive,” she is shouting. “I’m stress eating.”

Sebastian sprawls out longways under the mahogany table, belly down and transfixed by the details of a coloring book that Sadie brought along for him. He is lost in the stripes of a tiger hunkering between the low leaves of a paper jungle. Occasionally he kicks back his legs (still clad in small suit trousers) onto Viola’s lap. For her present, she had received a doll that apparently practices aerobics. The doll is like a Barbie but, importantly, is not a Barbie, so there is no point. *Her hair is dark, like yours.* The not-Barbie’s smile is hollow. The not-Barbie is as pointless as the million tiny grains of sand that have been tracked into the house on the bottoms of people’s shoes. Viola is calculating how long it will take to undo. Even now, on the inside of her Mary Janes, she can feel where sand got in, where it is rubbing against her tights.

“We should go to the zoo,” Sebastian says. He is blending green and blue wax with his index finger on the rainforest fronds. The gaps under his fingernails are crusting with rainbow sludge.

“I thought animals have diseases.” They were going to get a dog before her mother got sick, and now she’s glad they didn’t. She shifts onto her side and takes Sebastian’s idle hand in hers, begins methodically excavating the wax. His hand is limp and compliant.

“Yes,” he says gravely. “They can make fur grow all over your body.”

“Even in your mouth?” Over the past few months, Viola has developed an aversion to all possible carriers of illness. The reason for this is uncomplicated. She avoids: handshakes; the kitchen trash; large, still bodies of water. Sebastian, though messy, is exempt from her precautions because he is more or less an extension of herself. And he reminds her not to worry.

“Yes, even in your nose and all over your eyes.” He reaches up and pops the metal barrette out of her hair and tosses the curtain in front of her eyes. “Like a rug.”

“I’m a rug-a-saurus,” she says, laughing her musical machine-gun laugh. Sebastian pokes her in the stomach and she convulses into sharp tickled elbows and knees. He can’t help following her into hysterics, loud

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and hiccupping, and it sounds like a pair of legs is joining in the laughter until they realize that the noise is actually a loud sob and they remember that their mother is dead. From the floor, Viola can see a pair of tearful silk trousers being comforted by a wide pair of slacks and led away.

“You don’t have to touch them if you don’t want to, Lola.”

“What?”

“The animals.”

Lola is the leftover product of a fat baby tongue that found the three pretentious syllables of her name too complicated. He is the only one who calls her that now. She pushes her hair back and watches as he returns, with a sense of deep purpose, to his coloring book. It is critical that neither of them dies, but in the event that they had to, she would rather they did it together. The idea of living without him makes her sick.

“It’s horrible,” Sadie is saying now, in as hushed a voice as she can force. “It’s just not what she would have wanted.”

Sebastian pulls himself forward and Viola follows his attention. If they lean out through the chairs, they can see Sadie is addressing a long pair of nude pantyhose that resolve in sand-flecked heels leaning against the table. Her face is a mess of runny makeup, dark smudges covering the pouches under her eyes. She is holding, under one arm, a framed photograph of her sister, Viola’s mother. Her legs are splayed wide and unladylike.

“You want a spot on the earth that people can go to,” Sadie continues, her voice rising. “You want to belong to somewhere.”

The slacks cut back in front of Sadie (pardon me, excuse me) and Sadie shifts onto her haunches. All around the room, snatches of her mother are traded between strangers, the currency of grief:

“It’s so unfair. Isn’t it? Just desperately—”

“So young, so much talent—”

“One of Salem’s bright lights—”

“And her looks—I mean, before she lost them, she was—”

“I am not saying I believe in ghosts,” Sadie erupts, “I don’t believe in ghosts. I’m just saying, there’s a way of doing things, you know, you put someone to rest.”

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At that moment, she catches sight of them, tilts herself to inspect the little faces huddled under the table. A clump of black eye paint has smeared over the puggish upturn of her nose. She is looking at Viola like she would like to devour her.

“Come here, sweetheart.”

There cannot be any doubt that Sadie is a contaminated person. Viola can see it in the purple stains crusting on the dry parts of her lips and smell it in the sour belly-breath escaping toward her. Sadie reaches out her fat, desperate hands. Viola looks to her brother, pleading for him to render her invisible, breathing short, panicked breaths.

Don't make me.

Sebastian rolls his eyes and allows her to scuttle behind him.

“Viola!” Sadie despairs. Sebastian, unafraid of his aunt, crawls to her outstretched arms, and Sadie wraps him in a deep embrace. “That’s a good boy,” she says. “Your mommy loved you so much. Do you know that?”

He beams at her as she takes another long slug of wine, places the empty glass on the windowsill. Her hand flaps at the room, everyone in it. “This is too sad.”

In an awkward galumphing motion, Sadie is on her feet, Sebastian tucked under her arm like a football, giggling. She groans, strains to hold him; he is unwieldy now at seven. His head hangs under the table like a bat.

“Come on, you.”

He waves to Viola as he bobs away, out of the room. And she is alone.

“Sorry we can’t stay,” Dan Dunning says, leaving behind a Tupperware of something produced by his thoughtful, accomplished, very alive wife. He pats Al on the shoulder. “The sitter will be waiting.”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Let’s do lunch sometime. At the club. I’ve got a China trip coming up, but we’ll work around it.” Dan is always going to China. And now

he waves goodbye in the way he has always waved goodbye, pressing his lips tight together as if there is something more he wants to say. He closes the door, taking with him the linger of Al's school days, pressed collared shirts and sharp graphite, the safety of a time before.

Al squeezes the Tupperware into the refrigerator with the others. The house is full of strangers now. So many people who saw his wife from other angles, transformed her into different things. Friends from Salem, from Burbank. Bohemian like her, dramatic. Their intimacies frighten him, the way they look at each other with such feeling, and erupt in sobs and warbling anecdotes, as if it is all too much to be contained. As he is closing the refrigerator door, one of them places her hand on his arm and just looks at him, sincere and intense, as though she can communicate with her eyes alone. He doesn't know her. Who is she to have all this sadness roaring just beneath the skin? Someone his wife brushed up against for a moment? He nods and looks away, willing her to leave, hostage to her feeling. His own pain is certain and deep. Susan's absence is already a horrible fact of himself, a motionless mark.

"You just hope it isn't hereditary, don't you," one of them is saying.

"Poor sweetheart."

Why do they have to drag his daughter into it? Isn't it enough to mourn one person today? It occurs to him that he hasn't seen his children in at least an hour. Is that an instinct he should have, to check on them? *How am I going to do it?*

It's not like he hasn't been alone with them. Susan was often gone for long stretches when she was filming *Life and Times*, the second most popular soap in the country. Merrily, Sadie reminded him of the fact just a few hours ago, arriving at the beach with a large box of home recordings. No official videos were available, and she'd offered him her collection like a box of rare gemstones. *I'll need them back*, she said. *But watch them, it'll be good for you.* As if he could bear to play back all the hours she spent pretending to be someone else. Choosing a different life.

No, Al is no stranger to early weekday wake-ups, packing lunches, getting them showered and dressed and onto a bus. But he always

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had one eye on Friday night, when she would arrive home heroic and exhausted and scoop them up into her arms. She was a natural parent.

If he had known, then, how little time there was, he'd like to think he would have handled it differently. Convinced her, earlier and more forcefully, to spend every one of her precious hours with them. The idea of the family moving out there, though discussed, had been inconceivable. His work, his everything was here. *Don't feel guilty, not now.* She would have grown out of it, with time, settled into the gentle currents of motherhood. He's convinced of that, isn't he? Now she'd never prove him wrong.

She would have hated that.

He has been staring at the microwave for an indeterminate period of time when a hand connects with the area between his shoulder blades and a man is asking him a question.

"What?"

"I said, have you got a lighter, pal?"

"No. I mean, I have matches."

"No. No, it's fine, actually, I'm trying to quit. I've already quit actually. If anyone asks, this conversation never happened."

The man is familiar but unplaceable, and Al watches him cast around the kitchen like he's lost something.

"Looking for something?"

"Me? No, no. Just looking."

He's handsome, the man, angular, young, speaks with an unexpected brogue. *What is a Scottish man doing in my house?* His shoes are nice, polished. Completely inappropriate for the weather. The man is peering at the outside of the refrigerator, the magnets, the abundance of photographs.

"Ah," the man says. "It's you."

"Sorry?"

"You're the husband."

Al looks at him blankly. The man sets his whiskey on the table and opens the refrigerator, begins to root around through the many home-made meals that ooze and chill in plastic prisons.

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“Hope you have an appetite.”

It’s the smile that jogs his memory, roguish but genuine. He’d been on the show with Susan, played one of her boyfriends or something like that. Maybe his voice was different. Al can’t remember. He has only watched a few episodes anyway—how was he supposed to stand watching his wife with other men? How was he supposed to congratulate her? Everyone always told him, you have to separate the character from the actor. But it was her, wasn’t it? Doing those things? They had never had a successful conversation about it, the things she needed to do. Ignoring it made the relationship work. It allowed him to forget.

“It’ll go quickly. The food, that is. Well, maybe everything will go quickly.”

“Everything?”

“Maybe not. Sorry, I shouldn’t presume. I shouldn’t make presumptions about your appetite. Or your sense of time, really.”

“Life and time.”

“Quite.” The man removes something from the refrigerator, closes the door, points at him. “You’re funny. She never said you were funny.”

Al is unsteady by the asymmetry of the conversation. He had never heard Susan mention this man, and now he is slipping out of the room, taking with him memories that Al will never unlock.

“I hope it goes at your preferred pace.”

“What?”

“All of it. Life.”

He wants to shout after him, but doesn’t know what to say. He feels the sudden crushing sensation of his wife’s inaccessibility. That perhaps he never knew her at all.

The halls are swinging back and forth. Sebastian’s face is red with the blood and the laughter rushing into it, as Sadie flies him into the living room and onto his mother’s chair, which—perhaps instinctively—no one has sat in, wide arms and faded florals.

A few people are sitting in the other chairs, though, older peaked faces,

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looking openly at him and his aunt. His silvery birdlike grandmother cranes toward the fireplace, where a few crusty logs are giving up their forms.

This is the old people room, he thinks. He can smell their oldness on their clothes, their breath. It feels unfair that they should be warming themselves in here, so almost dead, when his mother had been—until recently—so very alive.

“Where is your father?” his grandmother asks him. He shrugs, without looking at her face. He hates when his grandmother is in charge, which is a lot recently. She shouted at him earlier for throwing his wet coat on the floor. The room takes on the stillness of a waiting room.

“We’re going to play a little music, all right?” Sadie announces, though it isn’t really a question, she is already thumbing through the reams of plastic CD cases that clutter the stereo alcove. “Jazz, jazz, jazz,” she grumbles dismissively. “Where is your mom’s stuff?”

Sebastian points to a basket on the floor, and Sadie crouches and plucks out a case with a blond woman’s face on it, lasers shooting out of the sides of her head.

“‘Faster Than the Speed of Night,’” she grins. “There she is.”

The old people look uncertain. Their quiet has been disrupted. Sebastian watches his aunt with a new reverence. *She doesn’t care—she really doesn’t care.*

“Honey, will you dim the lights?”

A few piano notes crinkle out of the speakers.

“I’m not sure—” his grandmother begins.

“It was her favorite,” Sadie says with sisterly authority. She holds out her hand to Sebastian and he goes to her and spins into her arms as the ballad begins, and Bonnie Tyler begins to sing: searching, ascendant, eclipsing.

Sadie is lifting and swinging him, commanding as she skids him through her legs and sings, TURN AROUND, BRIGHT EYES, her own eyes shining with the woman who isn’t there, happy-sad, pulling joy out of a desperate vortex, and yes—he feels for the first time since she left—magic might still be possible.

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Without Sebastian, the underside of the table is no longer of interest, but Viola has no desire to follow her aunt. Something about Sadie is not put together properly, a part of her brain probably or something inside her that makes her weird. Bodies are full of insides—it's gross when you think about it.

Her father is not in the kitchen, amid the throng of her mother's friends from work, tattooed and emotive, their faces smudged with makeup, even some of the men. *Where is her dad?* If he isn't careful, they might take over the house.

She ignores the dark-painted nails that claw at her hair as she pushes through them, as though she is a dog or a cat, passive. The conversation that she had with her mother—not their last, but their last alone—is tumbling through her mind. *Love is the most important thing*, she was saying, pressing hard into the back of her palm with a finger that was surprisingly strong and urgent. *Love, love*, was coming out of her horrible mouth, dry around the edges, and she had felt ashamed of this alien creature, hairless and wrinkling prematurely, her beautiful face naked of eyebrows and eyelashes. Ashamed also of her own fear, her inability to feel love toward the thing her mother had become. She hates thinking about her now—even the happiest memories are painted in the nauseous colors of sickness. *You can't catch it*, her father had said, *not in that way*.

Sebastian had been braver. He had kissed the strange soft skin of her skull. It didn't matter to him; boys are made differently, out of tougher things. Even if they look the same, if they have the same flushed and fleshy cheeks, the same downy hair on their arms, their insides are different.

Outside the window, a bright snow swallows the house, luminous under the moon, thickening over the driveway. Viola places her small, pale hands on her stomach, prods softly with her fingers, feeling for that invisible organ. A strange name, she thinks: you-ter-us. She finds nothing except her taut skin, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. The thought of it makes her sick.

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As music that she recognizes as her mother's begins to spill from the living room, she leans close to the wall and pushes through the bodies to the front door, the gold knob chill in her fingers. Cold air hits her like a seawall. Under the orange glow of the porch light is the back of a man (not her father), sitting in a dark coat, snow dusting his shiny leather shoes. Next to him is a jar of dill pickles, and he plucks one out and eats it, staring out at the cars disappearing under the snow.

"We're going to have a hard time getting out of here," he says, and his voice is like a voice she has only ever heard in the movies, a somewhere-else voice. Soft. Refined. When he turns to see her, he looks surprised, as though he were expecting someone else. "Oh," he says. He reaches into the jar next to him. "Pickle?"

Viola shakes her head, but walks over to get a better look at him. Kind brown eyes, a thin face, hair tucked behind his ears.

"Don't blame you," he says, crunching into another. "They're intense." He wrinkles his nose.

"Then why are you eating them?"

"I'm trying to quit smoking. Someone said this was a good idea."

"It doesn't seem like the same thing."

He grins. "You're not wrong."

She bends and sits next to him.

"So what do you do, then?" he asks.

What does she do? She's never really thought about it. She eats breakfast, rides her bike, reads books. She plays in the snow, watches the sun set. It's hard to put it into words.

"You know, are you a lawyer, or a banker? You strike me as a lawyer. Thoughtful, analytical sort. Stickler for rules."

"I'm seven."

"Well, I'm twenty-seven. It's not a contest."

What is this pickle-man playing at? "Who are you?"

"Orson." He holds out his hand. "Sorry. Rude of me. I should have said."

"Viola." She eyes him mischievously. She's seen lawyers on TV. They

wear suits and briefcases. It doesn't seem very difficult to her. "I am a lawyer, actually."

"I thought as much. Well, I hope you're on the good side."

She nods, though she isn't sure what the good side is. She hopes she's on the good side too. Will she have to get a suit?

Snow is falling on their knees now. Through the low orange light in the living room, she can see bodies starting to pool in, music splashing out through the glass window.

"That your brother?" Orson asks, nodding at Sebastian, who is spinning around, laughing in the melee of adults jumping into the room.

Viola nods.

"He's a good dancer."

"I guess so." She hadn't really thought about it before, that dancing was something you could be good at. "I'm a good dancer too," she asserts, even though she isn't sure anymore what qualifies one to be good at anything.

"Is that right." He screws the lid back on the pickle jar. "That's the way with lawyers, I've heard. They all wanted to be dancers."

"I'm a lawyer and a dancer."

"Well, that's very American of you."

She looks at Orson, his long hair, his funny, asymmetrical smile. She feels the urge to hug him, to curl up into his lap, but it would be strange, wouldn't it? She doesn't know him at all, really. But he's the first grown-up today to speak to her like a person, a real person instead of a sad child. She's tired of everyone expecting her to be useless.

"Viola, would you do me a quick favor?"

Anything.

"Can you smell my breath and make sure it doesn't smell like pickles?"

His nose brushes her nose, her face, his face, his cold skin, his breath, steaming in the frozen air, sour but not unpleasant, his eyes, her little eyes. "Smells okay to me," she says.

"You're a star. Come on, I've always wanted to dance with a professional."

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He stands up and reaches for her hand. Headlights bob slowly up the driveway and catch on the porch beams, on the white, cold backs of their hands, on the forgotten, empty pickle jar, everything touched becoming more important by the touching, becoming extraordinary.

Al sits with the engine on, staring through the fogging windshield at the house that he bought almost ten years ago (before the kids, before the cancer) with romantic notions of restoration and a return to simpler times. In hindsight, it was an overzealous expenditure of the little that had been left to him in his father's will. 168 Argilla is one of the First Homes of Aldwych and a small round plaque by the door reads 1720. It is built in the New England colonial style, which is to say that the nine windows on the timber facade are straightforward and shutterless, its roof tilts at a sharp forty-five degrees, and every aspect of its bearing promises simplicity.

He had romanticized it. The idea of owning a bit of history, the challenge of constantly renewing the past into the present, the collapsing sense of time, the trace elements of prior inhabitants. Not that he believes in ghosts, just the impressions people make on a place.

Of course, it was all for Susan. She was the kind of woman who deserved somewhere special. No chain-link fences, no neighbors to hear if you shouted. She had taken to the project; sewing new curtains for the kids' room, picking out paint colors. Putting her stamp on things. It is strange to think of her now, just another individual who used to live here, a name that appears on one census and not the next. He itemizes the work that needs doing: dredging the gutters, sealing the leak in the roof that appeared last month. He wonders whether he can handle it alone.

Sue. Suze. Susie-Q. Susannah in the Morning. Mom. How many thousand ways she was with him, in different moods, in different moments. How many dictionaries of their private language had been lost to time. He's not entirely sure how he found himself sitting here burning gas, but it was the only place he could go. Perhaps he thought he'd find her out here, that his version of her might be less suffocated by theirs.

Was it love at first sight? People call it coming home, talk about it

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with nostalgia. But all he can remember is seeing (for the first time) not his past but his future. The man he might have been with a woman like her, a woman who feared nothing, certainly not the rules, and certainly not him. When he was with her, none of it mattered; all of the academic jargon stuffed in his brain gave way to laughter, to easy feeling, desire. At least it was that way at the start. For some reason, now, the start is clearer than the end. She loved him too, immediately, he is sure of that—or he was sure, at the time. Now the certainty is eroding under his inability to confirm that love was the reason she got into his car that first time, the reason she kissed him. Why else, if not for love, would she have done such a thing? *Did you know even then, Susie, that there was only one way for us? Or were you just in a mood?* Desolate questions. What he would give to know what she was thinking. His mind seeks absolutes and absolutism, definitive confirmation that it all meant something.

On reflection, he never truly became the man he hoped to be with her: bold and uninhibited. Everything soft and safety-seeking won out, didn't it? *If I had more of her time*, he thinks. He sighs heavily, mourning, also, himself.

Through the low glow of the windows, the bodies of strangers are passing, congregating in heavy flocks. Exchanging Susans that never belonged to him. That never will. In the trunk of his car, Sadie's tapes sit, meticulously labeled with air dates and episode numbers, a record of the woman his wife was without him. The scale is hard to ignore.

They agreed the show wasn't suitable for the children. Now, without the counterbalance of her, it might never be. It might only disrupt their certainty of who she was, her love for them. Oh, why has it fallen to him to explain this part of her he could not understand himself?

You can't dwell on the bad times, his mother said yesterday. He had been staring at bags of superfluous medical supplies when she came patting his back. Both of them were thinking about his father, who fell away piece by piece, who forgot first their birthdays then their names. He wasn't himself at the end, though it was hard to say definitively when he lost himself.

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I suppose not, he said, and his mother had taken the bags down to the basement, where he would never need to look at them.

Only later he wondered whether she had been thinking of the other bad times, the shouting matches and his sister's departure. She ran off to the Catskills twenty years ago, married a ranger, became a recluse. Maybe she didn't mean the dying, but all the living you didn't want to carry; the fights and wrong decisions, the pain of loving someone who would not choose you. Was that how his mother got by? Scrubbing the record clean?

In a bright moment, it dawns on him: beyond the tapes, there is no evidence of Susan's other life. No box sets or billboards, no plane tickets or memorabilia. All the ghosts will disappear after tonight. The children will hardly remember it, the pain of lost time. And who in good conscience would remind them?

Could it be that simple to unwrite all their mistakes?

He's allowed, isn't he, to toy with the idea. After all, he's been through a lot.

Al blasts warm air onto the windshield, wipes off the dusty layer of snow, throws the car into reverse, and slips into town.

Aldwych, Massachusetts, is named for London's oldest port, from which ancestral Blisses set sail to exchange tea for beaver pelts. Out the window, you can see the slow-moving panorama of muddy-banked streets. Proctor, Masconomo, Agawam names crossing Puritans on every corner. Flashes of cold marsh threaten to submerge the town, and older buildings hang precipitously over wooden docks, crying out for fortification. On Market Street, a cavalcade of antique stores spew out old rocking chairs and lawn ornaments, the figurehead of an old boat. The children cannot yet judge the value of these things and are mystified by them—worthless or priceless objects, created for purposes that no longer seem necessary. It's up to him to show them what matters. To preserve what is beautiful.

He drives toward the beach, then thinks better of it and veers up Ingram Hill. The sky is deep and close and bare branches ache toward

it, and he climbs until he reaches the dark, vacant summit. When he steps out of the car, cold air shreds his lungs. From the trunk, he lifts the heavy box of tapes, shifts it over his hip.

They had come up here two years ago with the kids, sheathed in snowsuits which they have already outgrown, the new snow hip-deep. Sue kept picking them up and swinging them forward to help them progress, while he dragged the two bright plastic sleds that skittered along the thin crust on top of the snow, bumping into each other and dashing apart.

“We should get a toboggan,” he had said. He had the most wonderful toboggan when he was a kid. Beautiful. A Flexible Flyer. Curved mahogany, steel runners. It took real tactics to steer through powder.

As they reached the crest at the front of the mansion, Susan had turned around with an impish smile on her face. “We used to scoot down hills on trash-can lids. It’s how I lost my first tooth.”

The twins had gazed over the steep edge recklessly, with unshakable faith in their snowsuits. Their mother planted herself on the orange sled and took Sebastian on her lap, curling up her little legs so he could sit between them. Al had done the same for Viola on the purple sled, only his legs were less containable and he’d had to dig his feet into the snow. *It’ll give us a better kickoff.*

“Three, two, one!” Sebastian shouted, and off they’d gone, careening. It was a perfect sensation. Looking down the hill now, Al recalls the almost unbearable joy of racing forward, bouncing against his daughter and the purple plastic, his wife and son a blaze of orange meters ahead. It was the kind of joy that is so in pursuit of itself, that arrives at you with such speed and concentration that it cannot but bring with it a deep dread of the moment where it will inevitably end, where you will have to ask yourself whether joy like that will ever be possible again. That end might have arrived with a sudden scream, the orange sled in the air, flying away from the ground—a jump! someone built a jump! Al banked left to avoid the danger, but somehow, the orange sled landed, its riders squealing and hooting at how high they had gone, how fast.

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They pulled to a stop and collapsed at the bottom of the big hill, flopped into the snow, Sebastian a heap in Susan's arms.

"I think we all need to do that again," she said.

His heart had thudded in his ears, and here it thudded now, terrified even in certainty.

That was the only mother they ever needed.

The backside of the hill drops away sharply, a rocky face falling for forty feet into dead leaves and ice. Al toes over to the darkened precipice, clutching the box.

It's the quiet histories that get forgotten, silenced by the roar of spectacular drama. Their love was a quiet, steady thing. Somehow, he has become its sole keeper. Its greatest threat is in his arms. Why shouldn't he be—just once—reckless with the archive?

Blood throbs back into his cold hands. For so long now, life has just happened to him. Decisions removed from his control. No longer.

A small shelf of snow slips away under his foot.

Now.

NOW.

The box tumbles clumsily over the drop, cassettes plunging into the snow, a smattering of grave plots.

Now you've done it, says the Susan in his mind.

But it's over now, and for the best, yes? Yes—he can feel it lifting, her separate life, so many happy memories making their way back into the light. His fault or her fault, the whole fault-finding mission be damned. Quickly he treks back to the car, their faces flooding his mind, remembering the party spinning on at his house.

Wonder if they've noticed by now. Wonder if they'll ever notice.

Raucous bodies pile into the room, squeezing out the older people, the fire snapping and music playing, everyone knows the words. Sebastian is passed around like party dip, waving his hands, wiggling his hips, and feeling for all the world that his mother is there.

The music dissipates the terrible splash of her body, conjures her

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the way she was before. His mother (the most beautiful woman in the world), hair sprawling, holding their hands on the first day of kindergarten, kissing him on the cheek, baking muffins on a Sunday morning, driving them to the beach on a summer's afternoon. Digging an enormous hole in the sand, burying all but his head. His mother, glorious in sunglasses, glorious in the summer sun. *Isn't that her!*—there in the corner, bending and laughing and gone again.

Sadie, the mistress of ceremonies, switches in Blondie, switches in Madonna. “Now this is more like it,” she says, her eyes leaking black tracks into her dimples. A conspiracy is shared between them. Together they have revived her, shook life back into a dead room. “Don't forget her,” Sadie says, insistent against the bouncy guitar. *Don't forget that she was like this.* Sebastian nods as the imperative lights inside him.

He feels Viola enter the room before he sees her, holding the hand of a strange man, shimmying along, spellbound. They find each other in the pulse of bodies, and a circle clears around them as they link hands and swing, hanging against each other's gravity. *Faster, faster!* Everyone dizzy and delighted, the innocence of them! The necessary weight of her, the counterbalance. He pulls back, she pulls against him, and together as the music gives way, they let go, their love unraveled across the room.

A hush descends. His father, framed in the door, radiating a new firmness.

“Time to go, Sadie,” he says.

“Don't be an ass,” she hisses. Without another word, she stomps out of the house. The room is a deflated balloon. One, two at a time, the others make their excuses and depart.

“Do you want to play something?” Sebastian asks when his eyes have stopped staring at the door that his aunt left through. “Or watch TV?”

But Lola is gone too.

Outside, the driveway is roaring with engines of cars warming up, ice leaking away from the windshields, the more intrepid mourners attacking the situation with shovels and scrapers.

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“Orson!”

His legs are dangling out of the passenger seat of a red car, and he is brushing snow off his bare feet, shaking them like they are electric. She doesn't know what she planned to say to him, but couldn't handle the thought of him disappearing into the night. Her imaginings have already been painted in Disney pastels; she knows a prince when she meets one.

“Well, hello. Are you coming with me?”

Everything feels possible. *Yes*, she wants to say. *Yes, I'm coming with you.*

“Where are you going?”

“California. Heard of it?”

She nods her head. It was a place her mother went. “Are you coming back?”

“Come on, get out of the snow,” he says, reaching out to her and scooping her onto the seat beside him. When he pushes a button, a jazz clarinet dances out of the car speakers. Heat is blasting out of the dashboard, and he takes her hands in his and presses them toward the airstream. “It's much too cold here.”

“You just don't know how to dress for it. It's not so bad if you know what to wear.”

“Is that right?”

“Shoes are good for a start.”

“Well, in California you don't need shoes,” he says. “They're really more for decoration.”

The heat is blowing hard against the skin of her hands. On the dashboard, a tiny woman in a hula skirt is standing still, waiting to lurch into life. “Can I come with you?” Viola asks.

“I'm afraid that wouldn't be a very good decision for you,” he says. “You see, California is crawling with lawyers. You'd be better off carving out a niche. Like Borneo. Or the Gambia.”

Snow is falling against the window, and the darkness outside of the car expands like deep space. Her own ignorance presents itself as an

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imperative, the world demanding to be understood. *What is Borneo? What is the Gambia?* Orson can tell her.

“Will you come back?”

Orson sighs, scrunches his leg up on the seat so that he is facing her. The hot air on her hands is reassuring, even as Orson’s eyebrow is bending with some emotion she cannot place.

“Probably not, no. Which is a shame. More so for me than for you; you, madam, are destined to forget me. It’s the beauty of being a young person; you forget anyone who doesn’t matter. Or if you do remember me, it certainly won’t be as any kind of full being. But that’s fine. I’ll happily carry on as a blur of color, occupying a wee back corner of your mind.”

I love you, she wants to say. *Don’t leave*. He cracks the door open and places her out into the snow.

“Have a wonderful life,” he says.

The engine jumps and he is swinging away from her, already lost, the world becoming ordinary again.

Sebastian is backlit in the doorway. “Where were you?”

From the kitchen is the sound of the suck and pop of lids, the scraping of food off of porcelain, and the creaking of floorboards. Her face is wet with tears.

“It’s okay,” Sebastian says. “I miss her too.”

How can she correct him?

Al’s daughter floats toward him in the kitchen, and joins in the ballet of clearing napkins, glasses, trays of half-eaten cheese. The house feels colder than it ever has. He runs his hands under the hot tap, rubbing a sponge over a silver platter, and wills himself to think of warm and pleasant things that have come before, that—if he can only concentrate hard enough—will come again. Fishing boats. Tan lines. The Beach Boys, hot pavement, Florida oranges, the air inside a car that’s been left in the sun. The day he met Susan.

1983

It is so hot she could die.

Sweat prickles the backs of Susan's knees, unbearable under her puritanical woolen skirts. You don't realize it, watching her onstage, how intolerable it is under the fat beams of stage-light. How an amateur would struggle to maintain character on a day like today. But at twenty-one, nothing about Susan is amateur. Even as you fan yourself with the flimsy matinee program and beg your eyelids to stay open against the torpid air, she enchants you with her conviction, her delivery, and—yes—her beauty. *Her looks don't belong here*, you might think, but then, people have been thinking that for years.

Now, backstage and desperate, she unlaces her blouse, hikes her three skirts up to her thighs. Two weeks ago, the air-conditioning unit at the Courthouse Witch Museum in Salem gave up the ghost, and July is unrelenting. Eyes closed, Susan whispers lines under her breath:

I am innocent of a witch.

She takes the washcloth from her makeup bag, wipes the damp backsides of her knees, the nape of her neck. Her brain cells are melting. *How is anyone supposed to work like this?* If this show—this role—were not inscribed into her muscles, she couldn't do it. But after three years, Bridget Bishop—the first Salem woman hanged for no good reason—fits Susan like a second skin. The sting of every slur, every false accusation, the raw rub of the noose on her neck are as familiar as her daily walk to the museum. Susan isn't well, hasn't been well for some time. How can anyone be well under these conditions, when daily you are murdered for being different. But that's the job: making every moment feel like the

first, staying awake to all that pain. It's like keeping a wound open that is trying to heal.

In the corner, a fan beats ineffectively, not even loud enough to mask the familiar lumbering footsteps outside the greenroom.

"Bourke?" Susan calls.

The director cracks open the door, sticks through a snubby noncommittal nose. "He's coming today."

"Are you sure?"

Bourke sighs. Every day, he has promised that someone will come to fix the air conditioner. This is just one of many ways that he has disappointed her.

"And Bourke," she says, "there's a kid asleep in the front row."

To be clear: she doesn't blame the child. They can't help themselves, kids, being honest. The problem is the look on Bourke's face now, the absence of concern.

"The heat is getting to everyone, I think," he says.

Behind the door, his fingers must be scrabbling at his shirt pocket, frantic for a cigarette. *Why do I know that?* she wonders. *It's pathetic.*

"Isn't it bad luck for me to be back here?" Bourke asks. He's teasing her. *Don't*. It is bad enough, being the only one around here who cares about theatrical superstition. Who treats their world seriously. Yes, it *is* bad luck for the director to interrupt the cast in the middle of a performance, but some things are more important than luck. Integrity, for example. Taking pride in your work. Keeping the audience awake. And to think: she once believed this man to be an agent of destiny.

After her final performance at Salem High, Bourke had emerged from the outpouring of parents and siblings and classmates, shook her hand, praised her craftsmanship, offered her a job. In that moment, everything was confirmed; she had been chosen in the way she always imagined she would be—her talents too bright to ignore. Naively she clutched his compliments, jumped blindly into the production, told everyone—including herself—that she was saving up for Broadway's

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bright lights. Reassured her friends, as they swept off toward their own city dreams, that she wouldn't be far behind.

The reality, which revealed itself after months of half-assed rehearsals and uninspired direction, was that Bourke was a lazy bastard. He hadn't strolled farther than a few blocks to find his next Bridget.

The little money she makes here never lingers. It disappears behind bars and into her mother's pocket and the empty hat of the homeless woman on the corner by the fire station. On clothes that call out to her, satin and leather and stonewashed denim that jump off the racks, that demand to be worn. Clothes that feel like a way out. On new ballet shoes for her sister. Who else is going to buy them?

As Bourke begins to close the door, a tide rises within her.

"I'm going to try the new thing," she says.

The door swings all the way open, revealing the entirety of Bourke, a man in his late forties with half-moon glasses and a full-moon stomach. The stale coffee smell of him drifts over the threshold.

"Susan," he says. "We talked about this."

Yesterday in rehearsal, Susan had come onstage in running eyeliner and electric, damn-it-all hair. She never thought she'd still be here, three years later, but if there is a reason, it is Bridget Bishop. Bridget, staring down the gallows, is no bonnet-wearing sad sack. Bridget is wildfire and protest songs. Bridget is resistance. They are nothing if not in this together.

Bourke had not agreed.

"The audience is bored," she says. "You can't just read out the transcript."

"And you can't just make up history," he says. "Cosmetics were banned. Loose hair was banned."

"It's called artistic license," she says, tipping dangerously toward insurrection. Susan isn't normally the type of person to question authority. In general, she trusts easily, believes what she sees on TV. But Bourke has lost her respect. Yes, he may know about history, but she knows far

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more about art, which is to say, telling the truth. And the truth is not a fact, it's something you feel in your bones.

"I am serious, Susan," he says. "This is a museum. Not somebody's basement."

She can't stop herself from rolling her eyes. *Christ, he would be one of them*, she thinks. Or maybe Bridget thinks it.

"Do we have a problem?"

She is too angry to look at him, trains her eyes on the dusty tile floor. "No."

He turns and walks down the hall, leaving the door open, as if to say, *I'm watching*.

A groan escapes her. *Is no one else interested in being alive?* Focus, now, return to the preparation. Take the anger, use it. Her demise is coming. *I am innocent of a witch*, she whispers, the words becoming incantation. Susan doesn't have a process, or at least, she's not sure what other people are talking about when they refer to it. All she ever does is allow herself to feel things, to understand without language a life beyond her own. She wants to live a thousand lives, to be a thousand people—this, more than fame or money or anything is the imperative. To transform so well that other people believe it. That it becomes the truth. So imagine it was you: arriving at death row, young and unready, to find that no one will save you. Not the church, not your mother. Not Goldie Hawn or Kim Basinger or any of the other saints to whom you pray. Not Bourke, not the well-intentioned nerds who complete the cast, not Mary and Angie and Bernie and everyone you know who went to New York. There will be no more nights of dancing or talking about the future, or getting up to no good in this run-down town. *No one came for Bridget Bishop. Who would come for you?*

When she blinks wet lashes and looks up to the mirror, a man is staring at her from the doorway.

This isn't unusual. Men stare. They comment wolfishly on her body outside Boston bars. She tells them what she thinks. Generally, it's that they should go to hell, but sometimes she surprises herself, asks for their