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The Wedding

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The Wedding

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Hannah Applebaum

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

For Miles Applebaum.

Acknowledgments

A huge thank you to Joseph O'Neill! Thank you for making me laugh. Your intuition, dedication, and wisdom throughout this year have been invaluable in helping me complete this project.

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Ben decided to get married three years after his younger brother, Sam, died. He and Lexi planned for September 7th, two weeks before the anniversary of Sam's death. Ben called his mother, Robin.

"We're getting married next September, Ma."

"Uh... hold on. Not the 15th."

"No."

"Good."

"It's the best time of year to get married," he said.

"Yeah? Says who?"

"I don't know—Lexi. It's a known fact."

"A lot of death."

"What?"

"It's a known fact that there's a lot of death in September." Since the afternoon when Robin received a phone call from the Greenburgh Nature Center confirming Sam hadn't come into work that day, she woke up each morning wishing she hadn't. When the phone rang, she hesitated to answer. If her daughter, Molly, didn't text back, she expected she never would.

"Yeah, I said not the 15th."

"9/11..."

"You weren't there."

"You don't want a wedding in September." Last month had been the first time Robin had heard Ben talk about marriage; she didn't think he was serious.

Ben and Lexi had met only two years before, in Hannover, New Jersey, on a tour of a risk lab that Lexi was giving for MF Global Insurance, a property insurance company, where she worked as an engineer. At the time, Ben worked as a customer success manager for Tile, an AI machine learning software company. His team had just sold MF their software. He still had a magnet from the tour that said *Resilience is a Smart Choice*.

The risk lab was inside a giant warehouse in the woods. Lexi gave the tour while a crew of men in hard hats and goggles conducted demonstrations for the benefit of the visitors: a dust explosion chamber; an earthquake simulation; and a projectile missile launcher hurling a beam of wood at the speed of a Category 2 hurricane into a piece of plywood 18 feet away. Ben hadn't known that there were five categories of tornadoes, or hailstones as large as grapefruits. He didn't know anything about hail. It was impressive that Lexi could be so engaging and knowledgeable about combustible dust, apparently without any effort. And the way she spoke made him feel like he was watching a movie and the actor was speaking directly to him.

After the tour, Ben gave Lexi his number. He told her to text him if something went wrong with Tile, but really it was because he thought she was cute. He admired the freckles on her forearms and ankles and her deep voice. She was a few years older. He had never dated an older woman before.

“We do want September. It's the best time of year.”

“Our family is cursed with death in September. Does Lexi know that?”

Ben knew that, in addition to Sam, Grandpa Keke and Great Grandma Leah and Great Aunt Nora, and their dog Franklin had died in September.

“So? What difference does it make? It'll be a relief, something happy to look forward to.”

“I’ll be relieved if no one drops dead.”

After Sam died, there were very few engagements where his name wasn’t brought up: Hanukkah toasts, Thanksgiving poems, Passover speeches (usually instigated by Robin); even on the Fourth of July, she managed to tie it back to Sam with a moment of silence.

“I may, you know, not have witnessed the Twin Towers fall. But I was there when your brother died. Okay? I was there for—I was there for my son dying and all the rest of our family that’s died in September, so I don’t need to hear ‘you weren’t there’ like there was some party I needed to be invited to in order to be upset about not having been. You tell me, ‘Leave Sam out of it. Sam Sam Sam. All I hear is Sam, Ma.’ You tell me you want a wedding separate from Sam, but you just told me ‘We’re getting married in September.’ You’re sending me—it’s a mixed message, Ben.”

“It’s a coincidence. If I was getting married in May, you’d still find a way to involve Sam.”

“Yeah. And what about a moment of silence at the wedding?”

“No.”

“A moment of silence is nothing.”

“I don’t want—”

“It’ll be over before you know. It’s silent. You won’t even hear it. You don’t even want a moment of silence for your dead brother?”

“My wha—why do you always have to refer to him as my *dead brother*? We never called him my *alive brother* when he was alive. Can you just say *Sam*? That is who he *was*. His name *was* Sam.”

“*Was*, Benny? Sam still *is*. He still *is* your little brother you know.”

“No, Ma, I don’t... you’re not even listening. I don’t want it—a moment of silence. This is about Lexi and me starting our lives together.”

“Lexi is a part of you and Sam starting your lives toge—”

“Oh my god, mom. Oh my god. There you go.”

“Where do I go?”

“You said—you just said ‘you and Sam starting your lives together...’”

“Give me a break.”

“I’m always giving you breaks.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m a mother.”

“Okay, I can’t talk anymore. I have to go back.”

“Back? Back where?”

“I’m at work.”

After Tile, Ben had worked at two other startups. He currently worked for Blink, another startup that sold machine learning software, and he feared that the startup was again going to fail. There had been an increase in complaints from customers unhappy with the software errors. The demo had worked well, but once installed its algorithm wasn’t picking up on mistakes. The errors were not a result of poor technology, but the incompetence of Blink’s engineers. Despite how many times Ben communicated with them, they hadn’t been able to improve the demo. This had been the way things were at his previous jobs. He feared that it was always going to be this way—by the time he was settled at a new job, he would end up having to leave.

Lexi was thirty-two, and she wanted to have children right after marriage. After dating for a year, Ben moved into her apartment in Jersey City, which was a short train ride to Ben's office in the Flatiron District. Together, he and Lexi made three hundred thousand dollars, of which two hundred thousand came from Lexi. It was more than enough to start a family. They had spoken about someday living in a house with a pool and taking vacations in Mexico or Europe regularly. Ben was twenty-eight and couldn't imagine working for start-ups the rest of his life. He had thought about forgetting software and finding a job he enjoyed.

He researched—furtively, in the office—ski resorts out west. He had heard of people getting to ski one hundred and fifteen days a year. He could move where the snow was dry, maybe Utah or Wyoming. He looked at Jackson Hole, Park City, and Alta. He didn't know anything about saving lives, but he had been the captain of his high school ski team and often dreamily thought about becoming a ski patroller. He always wanted to use a walkie-talkie. A part of him hoped to get fired from Blink.

"You're at work? I make the effort to call you, like you've told me to, specifically when you're not at work, and you never pick up. Out of all the times he chooses to call, he's at work. I guess I'll try you when you're at work from now on," Robin said.

"No. Don't. Just don't do that. I'll call later."

"Later? When's later? Tonight? Tomorrow? Next week? A year? When I'm dead?"

"Tonight, okay? Tonight. Goodbye."

Everything had become about Sam for the Madris family. Sometimes David would refer to their dog, Saul, as his son.

“He’s Sam,” he’d say while petting the dog on its head. “Saul and Sam have the same personality. He’s a reincarnation.” And Robin would say to Molly, “Thank God for that dog.”

According to the shelter, Saul had been found by a woman in White Plains who had just moved into a new apartment. She heard whimpers and scratching coming from her bedroom wall. Neighbors on the other side of the wall asked her to control her dog. She told them that she did not own a dog; she thought it was their dog. For another day the noise continued, and finally, the landlord called Pest Control. A litter of puppies was stuck inside of the wall. Lined up, their small dog bodies looked like rows of dough.

No one knew how the puppies got there. One of them had made its way into a section of insulation that was pouring out from the stapled flanges keeping it in place. The puppy lay face down in the pink stuffing. Under the light of a flashlight, its hair appeared wet. The puppy was dead.

On an unusually cold night in September, just before Sam died, the Madrises went to collect Saul. The rescue shelter had given him his name. There was a dirty soccer jersey in the car which David used to wrap around Saul like a crescent roll. Sam and Molly fought over who got to hold him. Sam carried the shivering soccer jersey to the car. Before getting in, he zipped the bundle inside Molly’s sweatshirt (large enough at the time to fit two Mollys), leaving enough room so that Saul’s head could peer out.

These days the sweatshirt Molly wore that night barely fit, and Saul had grown a coat of his own. He weighed one hundred pounds. It was hard to imagine him as something that once fit inside a wall. He still felt like a new dog, in the way that four years without Sam felt like four hours. David often wondered if Saul had known Sam long enough to notice he was gone.

Though they'd seen a casket lowered into the ground at the top of one of the many green landscaped hills of the Gates of Heaven Cemetery in Valhalla—dirt piled and packed on top, grass-grown over—when Saul barked at something from outside, they felt as if Sam was going to come walking up the driveway and through the door. Molly remembered six men hoisting the casket into the back of a hearse. Ben and his friends, all wearing black suits, looked like they were about to perform a magic trick. She imagined Ben asking for a volunteer to hit the casket three times with a wand, and then a dove would fly out from the volunteer's armpit. It seemed more likely that the casket was full of money than her older brother's body. But then she could see by the changing expressions of the six men holding the casket, the give in their knees, Ben's friend patting his back after securing the casket's position in the hearse, that the body inside had moved out of place, like a long sandwich that came in too big a box.

Because of his overwhelming presence in the house, you never forgot that Sam was gone. An island in the kitchen was covered with framed and loose photographs of Sam. On a

countertop next to the fridge, Sam's high school senior portrait sat between the columns of a clay house Molly had made in middle school. David had put it there. In the picture Sam's hands were pressed together. His eyes looked up toward whoever looked at the picture. Molly thought it looked like he was begging for something—the collar of his shirt blended in with a shadow, creating a clerical effect—maybe for forgiveness, or maybe *Get me out. Let me out of the picture.*

The photo had a similar quality to the stock images that came in frames when you bought them, of people holding hands, running on a beach, laughing. Sam's photo could have been the stock image for a deceased loved one. The most off-putting part was that the Sam in the photo disagreed with her memory of him. He looked ordinary and general like he could have been anyone. Whenever she had friends over, Molly would slide the photo behind another photo of her mom with straight hair, wearing a dress suit, the color a Bloomingdale's saleswoman had once referred to as salmon, shaking hands with Bill Clinton—or hide it in a drawer of takeout menus and coupons, hoping her parents would not notice until the next time they ordered in from On's or were going to Bed Bath and Beyond.

“Where's Sam?” Robin would say to Molly

“I don't know. I didn't move him.”

“Who moved him then?”

“Celeste,” Molly said. “She's moving and breaking things all the time.”

Celeste was the cleaning lady.

“You think she did? I'll ask her next time she comes.”

“She’s always moving stuff in my room. I told you not to let her go in there and you do it anyway. My glass animals are broken. My dolphin’s missing a fin, my leopard’s missing a tail. I found missing pieces in my sock and underwear drawer.”

“Those can be replaced.”

“A foot, a neck, a beak—in my favorite pair of underwear.”

“She goes in for a second to make your bed.”

“Yeah, but let me. Let me do that.”

“I do let you. It never gets done.” Even though it wasn’t her responsibility, Robin usually picked up after Molly. That way, Robin wouldn’t have to confront her about an unhung coat, an unwashed dish, an unmade bed, a clogged drain. She preferred the work over conflict.

“She uses Sam’s t-shirts to clean his room. It’s weird. It’s just wrong.”

“I gave those to her, to clean with.” Robin’s idea was that by rubbing his t-shirts on everything his smell would become more potent. “I don’t see the harm. Maybe he’d be happy. He was always very clean. But you know what? I’ll have a talk with her.”

“Why does Sam’s bed need to be remade every time then? Who’s sleeping there?”

“You’re right. I don’t know. I’m tone-deaf. I’m an idiot.”

“She brings her kids with her to work.”

“Yes.”

“And I always end up playing with them.” Molly actually enjoyed playing with Celeste’s children. She showed Andres and Laura a small latch door in the wall upstairs that opened to a laundry chute. She told them that at the bottom of the chute, there were monsters who ate children. Molly gave them eggs to drop down the chute. If they wrote notes, the monsters might

write back. Their faces lit up after dropping an egg. Later, Molly would go downstairs to collect the yolks of the cracked eggs and slide them into socks and dirty pant pockets. She would read the notes so she could forge a reply.

“That’s nice of you.”

“She should be paying me.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“Okay, so do it now.”

“Do what honey?”

“Call Celeste. Call her.”

“I can’t call her now. Now she’s working.”

“She can pick up the phone. We’re her work.”

“No. I’m not gonna call her. She’s actually working. We’ll look for it, we’ll find it.”

Molly thought Celeste was more deserving of the blame because she had never known Sam. Celeste replaced Slone, their old cleaning lady from Trinidad, who was more like a nanny and had known Sam for most of his life. She had been in the waiting room of the hospital watching Sam and Ben on the day that Molly was born. She taught Molly how to make it look like her thumb was being pulled off; she showed her a scar on her upper thigh that looked like a spider’s web; She would tickle Molly’s arm starting at the tip of Molly’s middle finger, moving her fingers along Molly’s palm toward her elbow, telling her to “say stop” when she thought Slone had reached the crook of her inner forearm, but she never celebrated any birthdays. She was a Jehovah’s Witness.

Shortly after Sam died, Slone quit. She had spent more time watching Sam grow up than his parents had, and while they took off from work to mourn and sit Shiva, she was expected to work. She feared that Robin and David hadn't given her time off because they resented her for being the last one to see Sam. While she was walking Saul that morning, she waved goodbye to Sam as he turned right on Bessel instead of left.

Next to the drawer of coupons was a drawer designated for Sam's mail, which Robin hadn't stopped and which was forwarded from his college address. A lot of the mail was meaningless. But when she received a letter addressed to Sam, she took it as a message from him to her: he was okay. Robin held on to the letters along with other things of his—such as lube and half-used tubes of toothpaste in his bathroom closet, a bag of hair shavings, his TMJ night guard, receipts, and an alarm clock at his bedside shaped like a sheep, which he had from the time he was a baby and which continued to baa for months after he had died, at 6:45 each morning, until the batteries died.

Once on her birthday, Molly received a photograph from her mother with a note written on the back: *18 years ago today...* She thanked her mom for the card and decided not to bring up the fact that the photo was of Sam. She would rather have a photo of her brother than one of herself. He was a cuter baby. Some nights she kissed the photo and slept with it beneath her pillow, hoping he would appear in her dreams, even as a baby. She hadn't dreamt about him once since he had died.

There were people who the Madrises were unable to contact about Sam's death, people from his high school cross country team and jazz band who weren't on Facebook. There was no way to know if they knew.

Robin was particularly bummed out about not being able to get in touch with his childhood babysitter and kindred spirit, Cindy Cattorini. Cindy Cattorini and Sam had been inseparable. Cindy would be ready to leave and Sam would not let go of her legs. He held onto her velour pants the way he held onto roller coaster safety bars. They had lost touch with her after Sam was too old to have a babysitter. "Thirteen is pushing it," Dr. Marcus told the Madrises. "You started her when she was thirteen, now he's thirteen. You do the math. He needs to individuate." Dr. Marcus was always telling the Madrises to do the math. This gave Molly anxiety, especially when she was younger because she did not like math. Her father told her it was an expression and that she should get over hating math anyway.

Robin and David had friends who never fired their children's babysitters or housekeepers when their kids went off to college. They became full-time live-ins. Robin called it babysitter tenure. Cindy was thirty-seven now and could be anywhere: law school, the Lower East Side, lifeguarding; living at home, in her parent's kitchen making Mac and Cheese (what she had usually made the kids).

Robin once came home to her bedroom to find the TV left on with the volume on low. A plate with a cookie had been left on the bedside table. A sex documentary that she had seen before on HBO's Late-Night played on the screen. Robin picked up the cookie. Men with

cameras were crowded around a woman laying down on an examination table, her legs splayed, tennis shoes supported by metal stirrups. Sam was maybe seven at the time, Ben eleven, Molly two. She could hear Cindy's voice upstairs, reading *A Series of Unfortunate Events* to Sam and Ben, while on the screen the woman's slicked-back ponytail whipped back and forth. The heels of her tennis shoes dug into the stirrups. Robin raised the volume just enough so she could hear what they were saying. A man with red ringlets, wearing a fleece vest, spoke over Cindy as a silicone phallus spun into the woman's pixelated patch. He said some girls like it clockwise and other girls like it counterclockwise. Robin took a bite out of the leftover cookie and turned off the TV.

After every few sentences, smaller voices would echo Cindy's. Robin listened to what she could of the small voices. She would have liked to record their laughs. Moments like this were rare, where Robin could be entertained by her kids being entertained by someone else. She realized that she didn't really know what their voices sounded like. She was so used to hearing them in the company of her own voice. It was nice to be an overhearer for once. She clung to their laughs. Sam's was polished and buoyant, bright like the inside of melon, and Ben's was crumbly like a heavy smoker. Cindy was narrating the beginning of *The Bad Beginning*.

Robin walked to the kitchen to throw away the cookie and wash the plate. She hoped the sex in the documentary wasn't the type of sex Cindy was having and now, as she remembered that moment, she hoped that it wasn't the type of sex Cindy was still having; unless she wanted to have it or enjoyed having it—

Or maybe Cindy was feeding another child Similac or feeding her own child. When Robin pictured Cindy she could only imagine her as a sixteen-year-old putting a child to bed,

reading to them, or feeding them something. She did not imagine her dead, or in jail—for stealing an expensive blow dryer from a babysitting job, she never stole, not once, from the Madrises, plus there was nothing to blow dry because Cindy had pin-straight hair that would break apart from sitting in the sun for too long. A blowdry would have made her bald.

Robin had always trusted Cindy. She remembered Cindy being comfortable enough that if there was ever anything she wanted from the house, she'd just ask for it.

Molly's grandma told her, "Just wait until you're my age. All your friends are dead and your grandchildren don't call you."

After getting knee surgery, her grandma made a Venn diagram. She placed all her friends who were still alive on the left, her friends who had died on the right, and her friends with dementia in the middle. Then she made a list of the friends who had visited her in the hospital and had called her after the surgery. A few of her dead friends were on the list.

"It's easier to talk to the dead ones. They're better listeners. Sometimes I pick up the phone and I'll start talking to Sam. You ever do something like that? You can hang up any time you want. You don't even need to use a phone. Remember when you were younger and you'd talk to me?"

"I still talk to you."

“You’d ask me, Grandma, am I your favorite grandchild? Do you like me better than the other grandchildren? You’d ask me all the time.”

“No.”

“Why don’t you ask grandma that anymore? Is it because you love your father’s mother more? I bet you can’t talk like this with your other grandma. When I was a special ed teacher I taught at a school for the disturbed. I had these two girls, these two elective mutes.”

“Elective mutes?”

“You never heard of that? That’s what we used to call them. They chose not to speak. Little brats. The rest of them were sweet.”

“Oh.”

“You know how I got them to talk? I paid them.”

“How much?”

“I threw them a few nickels, a few quarters, and they’d talk.”

“What did they say?”

“You think I remember? They’d talk to each other, they’d laugh.”

“So you’re gonna pay me to call you?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you bupkes.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You know how much that is?”

“How much?”

“Zero. Nothing at all. Come on. I’m that awful to talk to?”

People did come into Molly's mind, but it wasn't like talking to them and it didn't come from what felt like her own will or with her consent. Like Marty Small, the dog groomer who cut Saul's hair. They stopped taking him there, after one haircut when Saul came back unable to stand up straight for more than thirty seconds. His eyelids were all droopy. They'd heard the rumors, but never believed them (that Marty gave the dogs downers to get them to sit still for their haircuts.)

"He only gives them to the dogs that need them," David said to his neighbor Roger who had passed on the rumor. "Saul doesn't need them. He's the sweetest boy."

"Willy's the sweetest boy too."

"I heard that Willy bit Glen Solomon." Glen, David's boss, was the founder and CEO of Regeneron where David worked as the East Coast VP of sales. Glen lived with his wife Dariel and their thirty-two-year-old disabled daughter at the end of Quarter Mile road, by the abandoned tennis courts where Armonk became Chappaqua and the taxes increased by ninety thousand dollars. Glen went for long runs down Bessel road, where David and Roger lived. It was rumored that Dariel was Bill Clinton's mistress. "I heard he grabbed a hold of his leg and hung on with his teeth. If Marty's giving them, he's giving them for a reason— to misbehaved dogs. Saul behaves."

"Willy behaves."

“A dog that bites the leg of an older man is a misbehaved dog. It’s okay. There’s nothing *that* wrong with your dog. He’s a little misbehaved, that’s all.”

“And you don't think that humping is misbehaving?” Roger asked.

“Not like biting.”

“When I come to your house I can't get Saul off my leg.”

“Biting hurts.”

“You let him do it while we’re eating dinner.”

“It's loving. He's showing you affection.”

“Not while I’m eating.”

“It's not him. It's your leg.”

“My leg?”

“He probably smells Willy. You should wash your pants.”

“I do wash my pants.”

“Willy bites Sam—I mean Saul.”

“It's self-defense.”

“He bites other dogs too and you know it. You don't even leash him.”

“A leash isn't helping your dog. He’s still humping all the other dogs. How do you handle him around children?”

“Saul wouldn't.”

“He knows the difference?”

“It's affectionate.”

“I’m sure it makes the dogs uncomfortable.”

“Oh. They tell you that?”

“No. I speak on their behalf.”

“Biting is vicious.”

“He's bitten once.”

“Once is enough.” David thought about the swing set at his neighbors from when he was a child: Cricket, the Silpe's dog, pouncing on David's leg with his teeth as the swing swung forward, catching his shin in his mouth, pulling David down with him.

“Would you say it was okay if Molly went around humping all the kids in her class at school? You wouldn't call that affection.”

“She's a child, these are dogs.”

But then it was like Marty Small had given Saul a new set of legs that were too small to support the weight of his body. The first time, they hadn't made anything of it, but after a few more haircuts when Saul's feet would slide out from under him like wheels, all David could think was, Not my sweet boy, not my well behaved Saul.

Marty had nice teeth, teeth Molly expected to have when she got her braces off, and he smelt like the elevator in her grandmother's apartment building. He gave out the same type of toothpicks he chewed on, which tasted like Christmas.

It was especially hard for David to believe Marty had given Saul downers because Marty had given their family what felt like inside information about another dog groomer in Chappaqua who sold dogs. Marty was so charismatic when he told them the story, smiling and flashing his nice teeth. The guy, who Marty called Gale, would buy puppies from puppy mills for two

hundred dollars and lie to customers saying they were raised on farms. He would upsell them for five grand.

At a dinner party with family friends and neighbors David told the story of Gale, the Chappaqua groomer, to Roger and Eileen. Eileen said, “Everyone knows that. People have been doing that forever.”

How could such an earnest guy who revealed the puppy mill scammer give his own dogs downers? When Molly found out about the downers she began to think that maybe Marty’s teeth were not real. Maybe her braces would never work.

A group of older girls she followed on Instagram were frequent visitors to Molly’s head. They wore tight black leggings and crop tops and took pictures with a pink and yellow bottle of SVEDKA in the background on weekends. A lot of those girls commented things like “tits” or “thigh gap” and “ano” on each other’s posts. Molly liked looking at the comments more than the likes because they said something about the post or about the relationship between the person who posted and the person commenting.

Molly could get things from these comments, like inside jokes. Raquel Roth had the best comments. People called Raquel “Raqu” because she had nice breasts. Molly always preferred big breasts. Sixth grade was when she began praying each night before falling asleep for peace, love, happiness, health, and wealth for her and her family, and for her breasts to please grow. People said that Raquel’s nipples faced the sky, that it was better to have small perky breasts and a large ass. (Molly had seen Raquel’s breasts before, during nap time in first grade, when they were just nipples on a chest that could have belonged to any seven-year-old. Molly’s class had shared a room with Raquel’s second-grade class. Behind a bookshelf dividing the cubbies from

the carpet, they had laid their towels out on the tiled floor. On the carpeted side of the bookshelf, kids played with a wooden cutting fruit set, jacks, and Monopoly. On the cubby-side, Molly was a surgeon and Raquel was her patient.) Raquel commented things like “best” and “personality” and “pissDROSS” and “lesbo.” It was fun for Molly to decode the secret language and find out what the words meant.

She would feel close to the people whose comments she understood, close, in a way she didn't feel with them in real life. Sometimes it felt wrong and confusing. She would see the people in the hallway expecting them to say hi or to slap her ass (that's how those friends greeted each other). She expected to feel as close to them in real life as she did on Instagram, but instead, when they passed and did not engage, it felt like a slap on the ass that wasn't close or playful, but painful, which made her want to be slapped on the ass even more, only by someone higher up like an adult or a guidance counselor, for having stalked these people on Instagram.

After high school, Molly might never see these people in person ever again, but it felt like she'd always see them on Instagram. For the rest of her life, she would never have to wonder what they were doing on the weekends, if they had gained the freshman fifteen or not. Molly used to have an American Girl doll. She still had it, but she left it in the basement in a wooden chair facing the wall so she wouldn't have to look at its face. Each time Molly went into the basement, she was sure that the chair would be empty. The doll would be hiding behind a door or in a ceiling vent, getting ready to jump out and kill her, but the doll was still there, in the chair just as she had left it. Sometimes she took the doll out of the chair and banged it hard against the floor.

Molly wanted to take Marty Small and Raquel and put them in chairs and face them toward a wall. She could buy a whole warehouse of rooms, storage units to put the people who invaded her head into chairs facing walls.

That night, Robin sat in the kitchen by her phone with David and Molly, anticipating a call from Ben. She was so excited when his name finally appeared that she began speaking before accepting the call.

“Before you say you don’t want anything, it will hardly be about him, Ben. Grandpa will mention him in his speech. He’s good at public speaking. He’s gonna tell the story about you and Sam—but mostly you if you want—hiding from him in the souvenir shop at Shea Stadium, under the clothing racks, under all that apparel. For over an hour Grandpa thought he had lost you two. Had the whole stadium looking for you two, had the camera staff put a picture he took on his digital camera—of your faces with your foam fingers larger than your heads—on the Jumbotron. Remember? Sam would have wanted to be at your wedding. Let’s honor that.”

“We’re always honoring that. Can we for once not honor that?”

“Your birthday,” Robin said.

“You always have an answer.”

“I don’t have any answers.”

“She does. You always have a hostile answer, Robin,” David said.

“You make me feel like I’m a bad person,” Ben said.

“She does. Ignore her. You know who she gets it from?” David put his hand by his mouth to block the view from Robin as if he was telling a secret into the phone. “HER MOTHER,” he whispered.

“Don’t talk that way about my mother,” Robin said.

“It’s true.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“She’s nasty to me,” David said. “She doesn’t want to come here anymore cause I say it like it is. You and your mother both. You don’t like to hear the truth. You don’t like to be asked questions. And after what she said to Molly, I’ll call it for what it is. She’s racist.”

“So my son thinks I’m a bad person and his father thinks I came from a bad person.”

“Yeah,” David said. “Bad people come from bad people.”

“I said you make *me* feel like *I’m* one,” Ben said.

“I make you? No one’s making you feel anything, Ben.” Ben moved the phone away from his ear.

“I don’t believe my mother would say something like that,” Robin said.

“She did. Go ahead and ask your daughter.” David looked at Molly. “Tell her. What did she say to you?”

“She did, mom. She told me ‘you can bring home an Asian but not a black.’”

“What does she mean by that?” Robin said.

“To marry. It’s disgusting. It’s absolutely twisted and inappropriate for her to be talking like that to your daughter. She’s evil,” David said.

“I’ve never heard my mother say anything like that.”

“You’re in a dream world.”

“She’s not evil. She loves her grandchildren,” Robin said.

“Oh, wait a minute. Molly, her politics are evil. Then you tell her to stop spreading nonsense into my daughter’s brain. She’s totally fooled by the Chabad, those ultra-conservatives that treat women like shit. Oh yeah, that Chabad is so lovely, isn’t it Robin? She’s totally a narcissistic creep.”

“Can you say this with less harsh words?”

“No, I can’t Robin. You don’t want to hear the truth.”

“Who is it hurting for her to go to the Chabad? She likes the spirituality of it.”

“It’s a cult. They make the women into handmaidens. It’s for people who want to be told what to do, who don’t want to take any responsibility, who want everything distilled down to five answers. Stop making excuses for your mother. She’s a racist.”

“Stop yelling. Can you speak in a different way?”

“No, because you don’t listen. I keep having to repeat myself.”

“I don’t like your volume.”

“You defend your mother right away. You’re in denial,” David said.

“I love my mother.”

“It’s not about love, Robin. It’s about the way she’s talking to my daughter.”

“She’s my mother.”

“I’m talking about her politics.”

“And your mother’s perfect? She calls her husband a moron and fatso. She calls her children fat.”

“We are fat.”

“So you hate my mother.”

“Nobody said hate. I didn’t use the word hate. You deflect and you don’t take what I’m saying seriously. Instead, you’re insulted.”

“Say something nice about my mother. Say one nice thing,” Robin said.

“I like that your mother treats her grandchildren kindly. She cares about them.” The phone began beeping. Ben had hung up. They had forgotten they were on the phone. Robin told David to call Ben back and apologize. After calling him three times, Ben picked up.

David said, “You know, Ben, listen to your mother. She’s right.”

“But you just told me to ignore her.”

“No. Ignore your father. He misinterprets what I’m saying. Listen to me,” Robin said.

“If grandpa wants to make a speech, fine,” Ben said. “I was just expecting there to be other stuff, but if that’s it, I’m—”

“Of course that’s it. There’s no Kaddish. Not at a wedding. You think I’m against you. Everything I do is for you Ben. Everything.”

“That’s the problem,” David said.

“Okay, then could you do something for me? One more thing?” Ben asked.

“Of course,” Robin said.

“Tell Molly that if she wants to be a bridesmaid she needs to wear a dress.”

“If? Lexi told her she could choose as long as it was black.”

“Yeah, but Lexi doesn’t actually mean that.”

“Who says something they don’t mean?” David said.

“I mean she’s just saying Molly could wear what she wants but really it hurts her feelings.”

“The suit hurts her feelings?” Robin said.

“Yeah,” Ben said.

“How does a suit hurt someone’s feelings?” Robin said.

“She feels rejected by Molly—that she doesn’t want to wear the dress,” Ben said. “She thinks it’s because Molly doesn’t like her.”

“Well,” Robin said. “Can Lexi separate herself from the dress?”

“Your mother tried to break us up,” David said to Robin.

“It’s her taste,” Ben said, “and it’s implied that Molly should say yes to wearing it.”

“And she was controlling about our wedding. She insisted we get married at that temple off the highway,” David said.

“If it’s implied that she should say yes, then why give her the option?” Robin said.

“She wasn’t expecting anyone to say no,” Ben said.

“She should know better,” David said.

Robin was bored, as Ben put it. “If you weren’t bored, you wouldn’t be so focused on Sam,” he said. “You should get a hobby. Something that doesn’t rely on people. Take something up.”

Something about Ben’s advice felt more like criticism and it put Robin in the mind of things Molly and David had said to her in the past. When Molly was in third grade Robin began working as a substitute teacher in the middle and lower schools. At the time Sam was a Freshman in high school and Ben was a Senior. Robin liked the work and the friends and the sense of community it gave her, but David would complain that she wasn’t making enough money. She was overqualified for substitute teaching. It was like a babysitting job, he told her. Molly had enjoyed seeing her mother in school and the special privileges that came with it. There was the teachers’ lounge vending machine, hallway kiss blows, and rides to school. But when Molly began fourth grade something changed. She would say “Get a real job. You’re a babysitter. Everyone at school knows you’re my mom.” This didn’t deter Robin from subbing, but she did stop blowing Molly kisses. Then when Molly was in sixth grade, Robin was assigned to fill in for Ms. Virgilio, Molly’s music teacher. At the end of the day Robin waited for Molly in the auditorium, their usual meeting spot, but she didn’t show. “I never want to see you with a glockenspiel mallet ever again!” She said, after arriving home from the bus. “They think I’m poor. Why don’t you do something with your life? Why don’t you learn history?”

What did Molly know about history? A *real* job? Robin had had a full-time career before Molly and decided to quit because she didn’t want another child raised by nannies. Molly knew nothing about sacrifice. And what did her friends know about being poor? Her friends’ mothers

stayed at home and thought jobs were redoing their bathroom floors and beading. Robin didn't like the word hobby. She didn't like cooking or gardening or things that other people took up.

"What's your hobby?" She asked Ben.

"Uh, watching the Mets. Soccer and softball on Randall's Island... I go to music festivals. I like to ski."

"Going to a music festival isn't a hobby. And I *have* interests. I'm interested in people, memories, doing things for others."

"That's why you're always disappointed. You can't rely on people."

"So what am I supposed to rely on?"

"I don't know. A book."

"I pick up a book and then I put it down."

"People pick you up and put you down." Moments like this made Robin miss Sam. He was a pleaser, always doing his best to make sure everyone was happy, making funny faces and noises—he reminded Robin of her father, Keke who spoke to strangers as if they were lifelong friends, who never yelled, was a pleasure to have around at parties, played the Harmonica (he could learn any song by ear) and handed out sticks of gum. Because Sam's presence calmed her down, she had called him Samax. He never talked back. Now that he was gone she wished he had talked back more. He might still be alive, she thought and wondered if he were to talk now, what he would say.

Ben suggested that Robin choose a florist for the wedding. Neither he nor Lexi had time to do it themselves. Robin leapt at the idea: there was a wedding expo at the nearby Westchester County Center. The only other expo she'd heard of was from her friend Jennifer whose son,

Jason, had once gotten salmonella from putting his hands in his mouth after touching a bearded dragon.

The wedding expo happened every year, a couple of days after the reptiles. It didn't sit right with Robin that cages of turtles, snakes, and lizards sat where there were now cakes, dresses, and trays of marzipan.

She called her mother before going. Her mother said "They're too much fun. Too much fun can make you sick. I take the chocolate, I put the chocolate in my mouth, but I never swallow. I spit it in my napkin. Everyone says, 'How do you manage to eat sugar and stay so skinny?' I tell them it's my fast metabolism. The doctor says I have the back of an eleven-year-old."

Inside the expo, Robin was given a brochure. She counted twelve different florists. She visited six. She felt plagued by the quantity of flowers. Her eyes were watering and itchy. The flowers were making her sick. She stopped at some cake stands and tested out samples of buttercream and cream cheese frosting, pink and silver fondant which stopped her tears. She forgot all about the flowers. One cup was filled with something sugary that tasted so good she could not figure out what it was.

Past the cakes, there were limousine service stands, tuxedos, bridal gowns, videographers and montage makers, caterers, photo booths, and a mechanical bull. Robin filmed a woman

wearing a veil riding the mechanical bull. The woman being fat made it seem like the bull had a real reason to be bucking her off. Blue gym mats surrounded the bull. The woman would not budge. A school of people crowded the mats. Robin sent the video to Ben

Let's get you and Lexi on one of these for the Horah.

Robin continued, passing honeymoon travel agents, DJs, and beer kegs. She kept checking her phone to see if Ben had responded. He hadn't. She sent him another message

JK.

By this time she had reached the opposite side of the expo where she ran into another mechanical bull stand. This bull had two seats which were more like humps. It looked like a mechanical camel. She took a picture for Ben

you and Lexi can face each other.

At her niece's sleepaway camp, there was a banana boat. On a choppy day at the lake, six girls went out on the boat, four of them sitting back to back, each facing a partner. The driver of the speed boat, Oona said, was from Australia. He drove them in circles, creating large bumps for the banana to fly over. Before one turn all the girls gave thumbs up and moments after the boat sped up, the banana flipped and the girls were flung. In the infirmary, one nurse held a bloody forehead down while another one pried, one by one, two front teeth which were lodged beneath its skin. Robin deleted the message and the picture.

She continued through the expo as though she were on a moving walkway at an airport, and she couldn't get off until it had come to all the stops it had chosen for her. At an entertainment booth, a woman spoke on her cell phone. She stood a few steps away from the booth, making it hard for Robin to tell if she was working or not. Robin had a feeling that the

woman was someone she had known from the past. She had a large mole on her forehead which looked like it could be peeled off and used to seal an envelope. Her face seemed familiar from somewhere, maybe free-swim at Pace. As Robin approached the booth, the woman distanced herself, making a point that she was busy. Robin nodded to let the woman know she understood. Glow Sticks and small trinkets were laid out on a table. Robin picked up a glow stick necklace and a rubber ring with blinking pink, blue, and yellow lights and placed them in her bag. She picked up a brochure and pretended to read what it said so that she could keep staring at the woman.

Along with the glow-in-the-dark array, there was candy: tall vases filled with the party-pack-sized bags of M&Ms and Butterfingers and Milky Way bars. Robin had to dig in the vase with her hand to get to a Butterfinger. She placed the bar in her bag and then reached for another.

An older-looking woman with a facelift and yellow hair had joined Robin at the booth and was standing beside her, looking like she had something to say. Robin continued to struggle for a second Butterfinger while looking up at the familiar-faced lady, who was still talking on her phone, and back down at the vase. The facelift woman tapped Robin's shoulder.

“Are you sure that's worth it?”

“Excuse me?” Robin said, closing her fist around the Butterfinger. The woman, as much as she could with her inflexible face, also looked confused. She bowed her head like a puppy with a cone around its neck. “I'm sorry. I forgot my line.”

“What?”

The woman lifted her head. She was sweating. Her mascara had run and was gathering at the inner corners of her eyes.

“I’m supposed to be Joan Rivers’ lookalike.”

A lookalike was one of those things Robin had only ever heard about or seen on TV.

“I was supposed to be insulting your fashion sense, but I couldn’t think of my line, so.”

“You’re not Joan Rivers and you don’t look like her.” Robin loosened her fist. She could feel the chocolate melting inside its wrapper.

“Lots of people say I do.”

“Who says that?”

“Everyone.”

“No, no. Just because you have facework doesn’t mean you get to be Joan Rivers. It’s not Halloween. You don’t get to talk to me like that.

As she spoke, it felt like Robin was doing her own impression of Joan Rivers. But Joan Rivers was right here in front of her. She was like a scam caller, only in person. A scam person.

“I’m sorry,” said the lookalike. She was. Normally if she had upset someone it meant she was doing her job well, but the look on Robin’s face made her think she had taken it too far.

“It’s fine.”

“No. It’s not.”

Robin studied the ridges of the lookalike’s crocodile-embossed loafers and imagined the woman unzipping her elastic face after a long gig and rigging it to the mast of a boat, then sailing off to some hidden fortress in the Hudson River where all the lookalikes lived. A real Joan

Rivers would be in heels, she thought. The skin on her shoes looked more real than the skin on her face.

“Who else do you do?” Robin asked.

The lookalike lifted her head. “Just Joan,” she said. “I don’t look like anyone else. And if Joan is out of favor then I am out of work.” She told Robin that their company had casting agents. They found lookalikes on sidewalks, in parking garages and parking lots, picking up their kids from school. They did Howard Stern, basketball players, regular people too. Not just celebrities. They could do relatives and friends.

Robin scrolled through her phone to find an image.

“So they could find someone like this?”

“Sure,” she said.

The answer surprised Robin. She had assumed the lookalike thing wouldn’t work if the person was Sam. She felt an opportunity to do something different. The idea that a person—dead or alive—could be imitated was uplifting. The familiar-faced woman was off her phone now. She was standing behind Robin and the lookalike.

“Show Joy,” the lookalike said to Robin.

She opened the face of her phone toward the familiar woman. Joy looked at the phone and then at Robin and back at the phone.

“Your son?”

“Yes.”

Joy gave Robin a reassuring nod. Robin took the lookalike’s business card that said Notable Productions and made her way out of the expo, passing the bull. She thought she saw the

same woman riding, only now she was skinnier. All that riding paid off. Robin imagined herself riding a mechanical bull every day. She could eat all the Butterfingers she wanted.

It had been a week since Robin had gone to the expo. She sat on the floor of her closet where she gathered boxes of books and envelopes filled with photographs. She hadn't been able to get the lookalike off her mind. She created piles: Keke, Leah, Nora, Franklin, Sam.

From a slit in the plastic covering of one album page, Sam's eighth-grade class fell out. Ben in Bye Bye Birdie, Hawaii, ducks when it rained and their backyard became a pond.

Keke was charismatic. He was always asking people if they wanted gum. Robin would buy gum for the impersonator to go around and hand out to people at the reception. Robin wanted a younger aunt Nora. For the later portion of Nora's life, she had developed lymphedema which made her into a balloon animal, her left leg all blown up. Robin imagined that if she pricked a pin through her leg, fluid would gush out of the photograph. There were photos of Nora in a photo book from Robin's wedding when Nora was thin and beautiful and cancer-free. If Nora were to come down from heaven, she'd come down looking like she had at Robin's wedding, and she'd probably arrive twenty minutes late.

Sam's pile was the highest. There was a photo for every second he was alive. Robin would bring back every one of those Sams if she could afford it. There was a printed photo

Robin had taken with her phone from a few weeks before he died. She placed this in a separate pile. Sam had filled out because of the medications he was taking. In the photo he looked as though he was trying the best he could to smile even though the medication made it difficult. He looked exhausted like he'd spent all day getting toppled over and tossed around by waves at the beach. Everything felt numb, he said. He had stopped practicing his guitar. It felt like all the blood in his body had been replaced by sand. He couldn't run.

Robin picked up Sam's eighth-grade class. Mrs. Rivland stood on the right of the class and a woman with a large mole which Robin recognized stood on the left. It was the same exact mole as the one she'd seen on Joy's forehead at the expo. The woman in the photo looked much younger than the woman from the expo, but Robin was almost positive that it was her. Robin held on to the class photo, stored the piles and albums underneath the dresses in her closet, and closed the door.

Robin placed the class photo in her bag, put on her shoes, and went out for a walk. She walked down Bessel Road and headed toward the Glazier Preserve. She walked past Roger and Eileen's and past the Reichler's whose horses, Bear and Eldorado, were out grazing. Robin admired the dry stone wall bordering their property. The wall was low enough that occasionally she and Molly would mount it to feed the horses carrots. Robin walked past the golf course. She still had a dent in her door from when a ball had flown off course. The country club claimed it was an accident, but Robin was sure she had seen some teenagers fleeing from the scene when she stopped her car to inspect the damage. Some of the houses surrounding the course were lined with walls made of stone mortared in place, twice the height of the Reichler's.

Robin had turned onto Quarter Mile and was headed up the hill toward the Solomon's when she hit the ground. A fluffy white dog the size of a pony had tackled her from behind. Robin stayed down while the Samoyed licked her face. Then, from around the bend at the top of the hill, five bald men in black suits and sunglasses came jogging down. At first, Robin thought they were coming to rescue her. The men had clear telephone coils attached to their ears. One of them held a leash in his hand and let it drag behind him as if he were pulling something invisible. Robin grabbed the dog's collar, but it slipped from her hands when the dog pulled away at the sound of a whistle. A cruising black Escalade appeared. The men ushered the Samoyed into the car and all drove off before Robin could say a word.

She sat on the curb, dumbfounded. Then she felt overcome by loneliness. She had seen something unbelievable, like a UFO. She felt guilty and somehow envious that the furry beast had been abducted and not her.

"Where were you?" David said when Robin walked through the door. He was sitting on the steps clasping a leash to Saul's collar.

"I was on a walk," Robin said. She didn't feel like telling him about the Secret Service incident.

"And you didn't take Saul."

"No," she said. "He gets in the way. He pulls. I wanted to be alone."

David threw his hands up and dropped them to his sides. "I guess I'm taking him now," he said. "Why am I the only one in the house who cares about this dog. Was he fed?"

"Yes," Robin said. She walked past David to get her keys.

"What time did you feed him?"

“This morning,” she shouted from the kitchen.

“And was he walked early?”

“Yes.”

“What did he make?”

“He didn’t go.”

“Well, I’m taking him now. He must be dying to go.”

In her Junior year of high school, Molly—who for six years had played on a travel club team with girls from all over Westchester—made the varsity soccer team. Molly thought that being on varsity would transform her into a version of herself she’d been waiting to become, but when she made the team she felt worse. She was sick of soccer. She wanted to quit both the club team and varsity. David told her that it was important to finish things. If a college were to notice that she didn’t follow through, it would lower her chances of getting in. And how was he going to get his money back from the club if she quit mid-season? Getting into the college she wanted was Molly's only hope of becoming the person she was still waiting to become, so she agreed to continue playing. Soccer felt like a waste of time; she no longer liked the friends she had originally made from the sport, and unless their team was winning by a lot she was benched. The season before, while her teammates cheered on their striker during a penalty kick with hopes of

making it to states, Molly prayed for their opponents' goalkeeper to block the shot and for the season to end early.

Robin limped to her car. When the dog had tackled her she had twisted her ankle. Now she was running late to pick up Molly from a winter futsal clinic at the Tarrytown sports dome. Robin was part of a carpool of three women whose daughters were on the team with Molly. She thought of calling one of the mothers, Justine, but decided against it because she had just announced that she would be dropping out of the car pool. Her daughter, Willow was recovering from her sixth concussion, and her doctor had recommended that she stop playing soccer. Molly told Robin that Willow was going to get a nose job. For the past couple of practices, Willow had sat out and watched. For games, she was designated ball girl.

As she drove, Robin thought about how Molly might react to her limp. She would probably be embarrassed and ask Robin to stop limping in front of her friends. She thought of waiting in the car and calling Molly to come out of the dome, that way she wouldn't have to see her limp. By the Pleasantville train station, Robin reached a red light. The light turned green, but instead of continuing straight toward Tarrytown, she turned right. She followed the car in front of her, a silver Acura, which stopped by the entrance to the train station. Robin stopped behind it. There were a few cars behind Robin's, but she watched as a woman with a dark purple coat and large mittens got out of the Acura. The woman walked through a tunnel under the platform and reappeared on top. Then she disappeared into a warming booth. Robin had only caught a glimpse of the woman's face, but she was sure it was Slone. Cars behind Robin were beginning to honk. She drove away.

Ben increased the incline on his treadmill. After his workout, he and Lexi were going to see the flowers Robin had picked out from the expo. All week, Lexi had been asking him to see photos, but his mom insisted that photos wouldn't do the flowers justice and it would be best to see the flowers in person. Robin didn't tell him that she had forgotten about the flowers and didn't have any photos to show them.

It was difficult for Ben to get excited about flowers when things at work were so stressful. He had started to question his decision to get married. He was no longer sure if what had first attracted him to Lexi was the simulated earthquakes, dust explosions, and catapulted wood, or if it was her. He remembered feeling aroused by the power Lexi emanated as she gave the tour.

A short man with large calf muscles walked into the gym. Ben had regularly seen this man using the treadmills. The man walked past the juice bar to the locker room, glancing en route at his reflection in the glass door of a refrigerator filled with chia pudding and water bottles. Ben hoped the man wouldn't choose a treadmill anywhere near his. They had once been alone in the steam room when the man peed into the drain. Now when he passed Ben in the locker room, the man smiled like nothing had happened. The man came out of the locker room,

ready for his workout. Ben increased his pace as if to run away. His row was mostly empty. The man stepped onto the treadmill next to Ben's.

In front of Ben, a woman using a rowing machine was wearing jean-printed leggings. What was the point of pockets if you couldn't use them? In high school, Ben's history teacher had told the class that a psychological study had found that wearing pajamas and sweatpants to school made you more likely to be depressed and less productive. He wondered what those psychologists would say about this woman's pants.

Behind Ben was a row of ellipticals. Ben decreased his pace. He waited a few minutes before decreasing his incline. Then he got off the treadmill and moved to an elliptical. Two men from the gym's cleaning staff started cleaning the machines. One of the cleaners sprayed while the other wiped. When they were halfway through cleaning Ben's row, one of them moved to the treadmills. The other cleaner was almost finished with an elliptical two down from Ben's. It would be difficult for him to clean the elliptical next to Ben's while Ben was still using it because the machines weren't spaced very far apart. Ben got off his elliptical to get some hand wipes from a dispenser that was next to the treadmills.

"I can clean these two," Ben said to the cleaner.

"It's no problem," the man said.

"It's okay," Ben said and began wiping down the elliptical next to his.

"We're not supposed to let you," the cleaner said.

The other cleaner was eyeing Ben. "It's our job," the other cleaner said.

"Oh, right. Sorry," Ben said, embarrassed. He thought he was doing them a favor.

“You can stay on,” they said. Ben realized they could get in trouble if their boss saw that he was cleaning instead of them. He went back to using his elliptical and watched the man as he cleaned the one next to it. He took his time, cleaning between the ridges of the pedals and inside the cupholders. Ben wouldn’t have told a chef at a restaurant that he could just cook the food himself. It was something he imagined his dad saying if the service was really slow, and he would probably say it to the waiter, not the chef.

When the man finished cleaning the elliptical, Ben got off.

“It’s okay. I’m finished anyway,” Ben said.

“Okay,” the cleaner said.

The short man with large calves jumped off his treadmill. He tried to get the attention of the man who was cleaning the treadmills.

“There’s a bird,” He said. He pointed up at the rafters.

“What? We just leave it.”

“What?”

“This is a problem that fixes itself.”

“Don’t birds carry disease?” the large-calved man said.

“Eh, usually they’ll leave on their own.”

A group of people were now pointing at the ceiling. As the bird hopped to another rafter, the people moved with it. It was exciting to see a bird indoors—one person took out their phone to take a picture—but Ben was more interested in the people looking at it, the treadmill that was moving without anyone on it.

Before Ben and Lexi came, Robin went into town to the Korean market, where they sold flowers. She picked out the first thing that grabbed her attention: a bouquet of pussy willows wrapped in brown paper. They sat in the living room, which looked out into the backyard. Robin handed a branch of pussy willow to Lexi.

“Feel it. It’s so soft. It’s like Franklin.” Robin looked at Molly, who nodded her head in agreement. Lexi touched the silver tuft.

“That’s nice,” Ben said, “where are the flowers?”

Even though Robin had picked the pussy willows out only hours before, she felt as though it had taken her years to find them. “These *are* them.”

“I like them,” Lexi said.

“Ben,” Robin said, “who was softer, Franklin or Saul?”

“I don’t know.”

“Franklin,” Molly said.

“Feel it,” Robin said, shoving the branch toward Ben like a saber. “Go ahead. They’re so soft. Lexi felt one.” Ben took a branch from the bouquet and felt it with his fingers.

“Are you feeling it? It’s soft, right?”

“Yeah. I feel it.”

“I don’t know if you are really. Lexi, it doesn’t look like Ben’s feeling it, right?” Lexi shook her head. “Is it soft for you, Ben?”

He twirled the branch between his fingers. “I can feel it, mom. It’s soft. Okay? I know.”

“Okay.”

“Where are you gonna go on your honeymoon?” Molly asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Ben said.

“Somewhere warm,” Lexi said.

“You should go somewhere where people don’t speak English,” Molly said.

“Why?” Ben said.

“Why not,” Lexi said.

“You should go swimming with the dolphins,” Molly said.

“I think we’re too old for that,” Ben said.

“Oh,” Molly said.

“They’re not too old. I just watched something on that,” Robin said. “This documentary followed people with PTSD—*war victims*. The men—it was mostly men—*of all ages* were healed by the dolphins. It was so uplifting. I’d like to swim with the dolphins.”

“You should,” Lexi said.

“We could all benefit from swimming with the dolphins,” Robin said.

“I’m good,” Ben said.

“You’re so serious,” Robin said.

“It’s not for everyone,” Lexi said.

Lexi played with a loose thread on her sleeve. Ben looked at the floor, focusing on a branch that had fallen out of the bouquet, avoiding eye contact with his mom. She was looking out the window.

“What’s wrong?” Molly asked.

“Nothing,” Robin said. Outside, a couple and their dog walked past the stone wall separating the Madrises property from the road. From where she sat, the wall looked lower than usual. It was just below the couple’s knees. Robin had always thought of the wall as being as high as someone’s hip. “I think our wall needs some work,” she said.

“What’s wrong with it?” Molly asked.

“I can see too much. I don’t need to see all these people and cars driving by.”

“Why does it matter? They’re far away,” Molly said.

On the day that Sam went missing, after hearing that Slone had seen him turn right on Bessel, Robin felt that she too had seen him driving in the wrong direction. She was in the kitchen, talking on the phone when he left—she would have been able to see his green Volvo moving past the stone wall. Lately, Robin had been contemplating whether or not she had actually seen him. She wasn’t sure if she had made the memory up. If she had seen his car, she argued to herself, she would have done something about it.

“I feel exposed,” she said. If the wall was higher, she wouldn’t have to wonder anymore.

“I get that,” Lexi said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Molly said.

Ben was still staring at the branch. Now Saul had it in his mouth, holding one end down with his paws, snapping it in half.

Robin said, “Ben, what do you think?”

“I asked for flowers and you brought me twigs,” he said.

“What about the soft part?”

“I don’t care about the soft part! What about tulips, hydrangeas, roses, lilies?”

Robin stood up. “Molly,” she said, “get that pussy willow away from Saul.”

“Okay.”

“I have to get something. I’ll be back. It’s something you might want, Ben.” This was not true—she went into the laundry room to get away from them. But now she had to quickly find something.

Robin came back with a shirt. It was the only thing she could find. The shirt was Sam’s, which Robin knew would usually upset Ben, but this one looked like his style.

“Stop that,” Robin said. Molly was cleaning under her nails with a broken end of the branch.

“It was already broken,” Molly said.

“Look.” Robin held the shirt out to Ben. “Brand new. You should wear it. For the dress rehearsal.”

“No, I don’t like it.”

“What’s not to like about it? It was your brother’s. He liked it.”

“It wasn’t his shirt if the tags are still on. He never wore it.”

“But he would have worn it.”

“It has two breast pockets. I won’t wear a shirt with two.”

“I’ve never heard of that. What’s wrong with the breast pockets?”

“It draws attention to—” Ben felt his chest for his breast pocket. “I only like one breast pocket.”

“Okay,” Robin said. She folded the shirt and placed it on the floor a few feet away from where she sat.

Ben got up from his chair. “Where are you going?” Robin asked.

“The bathroom.”

“Use the one in the basement. The one up here isn’t flushing.”

Ben went to the basement. He sat down in a bean bag chair. It was the same bean bag chair he would spend hours sitting in when he was in high school. He felt bad for leaving Lexi up there without him, but if he had stayed he would have yelled at Robin. He wanted to do more than yell. He wanted to pinch her. No matter what he said and how loud he said, it wouldn’t get through to her. He wanted her to go swimming with the dolphins and never come back. He wanted her to be a dolphin; he would have an easier time forgiving her.

The shirt, the flowers, the dolphins, and the rock wall were trivial, but somehow together accumulated into something large. What he hadn’t said or screamed at Robin turned in on him into a physical irritation and he slouched deeper into the bean bag. In college, his roommate, Andy Papacostas, had said that ‘fighting with your parents was very high school.’

Ben adjusted his position in the bean bag. He could feel himself starting to think about his mom like he had when he was in high school. The Ben that sat in the bean bag chair for hours wrote angry letters to his mom. Bean bag Ben called his mother a bitch.

On his way out of the basement, he stopped at the door. He was remembering hanging out with Ian Andriello and Paul Lerner. They were playing Guitar Hero. He had locked the door to

the basement so Sam couldn't hang out with them. Through the gap between the door and the floor, he could see Sam's heels. The whole time, he felt Sam's presence leaning against the door, listening to Ben and his friends, humming along with a song, laughing with them when someone made a joke.

Ben walked upstairs. Lexi was sitting on the couch now, with Robin and Molly. Robin sat in the middle. She was showing them photos from her wedding album.

"Actually, I'll take it," Ben said. He went to pick up the shirt. "The breast pockets are fine," he said.

David was coming up the driveway. When he saw Ben and Lexi leaving the house, he rolled down his window and honked the horn. From inside Robin watched the three of them converse. Ben held the shirt up to his chest for David, and Lexi showed him the bouquet. When she could see that the conversation was winding down, Robin grabbed Saul's leash. "Molly!"

"What?" Molly said.

"I'm taking Saul on a walk." David would be upset if he found out that Saul hadn't been walked since earlier that morning. "What?" Robin said.

"I didn't say anything, but okay," Molly said.

Robin used the back door. She walked Saul through the backyard, over the stone wall, and onto Bessel. She turned left, running into Ben and Lexi at the stop sign on Pleasant Road. They rolled down their window.

“Goodbye again,” Ben said.

“I love you,” Robin said, and they drove off.

Robin walked down Pleasant Road. She planned to walk to the cul-de-sac and up through the Fishers’ meadow. Two familiar women were walking up the hill from the cul-de-sac. For years, Robin had run into these women on walks, but she couldn’t remember either of their names or if they were sisters or lovers. She did know the name of their parakeet, Teddy, which one of them always carried on her shoulder. When they were close enough to say hello, the women stopped. The woman who didn’t have Teddy on her shoulder had a cane. Saul started barking at her cane.

“Oh! Who’s this?” the woman with the cane asked. Saul usually barked at ceiling fans, strollers, skateboards, sometimes wheelchairs, and untied shoelaces.

“I’m sorry,” Robin said, holding Saul by the collar. “It’s Saul.”

“Oh! What a cute boy, what a handsome man.” The women petted him.

“We’re gonna walk up through the meadow,” Robin said.

“We just came from there,” the woman with the cane said, “only we walked down.”

“We do it all the time,” the woman with Teddy on her shoulder said.

“Oh, are you friendly with the people who live there?” Robin asked.

“No, not really. We've been here for seventy years,” the woman with the cane said. She pointed her cane at the house behind her. It was white and had a worn-out tin roof. The mailbox in front of it had a big red 26 painted on its side and a red flag. “Our parents had a dairy farm.”

“There used to be a small farmhouse where the Fishers’ house is,” the Teddy woman said “It’s been renovated since. Before the Fisher’s came the woman who lived there, her husband was off on a business trip. She killed both of her children.”

“Where was the husband?” Robin asked.

“In DC on some trip.”

“God.”

“She called her neighbors two doors down the street and she tells them ‘I’ve just drowned my babies in the bathtub and I’m going to jump off my roof.’”

“And she did it. She killed her babies and she jumped off her roof and killed herself.”

“I wonder if he uses that tub,” Robin said.

“Oh, so you know that modern house, the newly renovated—”

“It’s beautiful,” Robin said.

“Yes, it is a beautiful house. There was a man who lived there. He comes back from Vietnam and he hangs himself from an apple tree right on his lawn. The neighbors found him.”

“I didn’t know about any of this,” Robin said.

“And the family that lives there now is so lovely.”

“Yes,” Robin said, “I’ve substitute-taught the girl.”

“Oh, here she comes. Here comes the girl that lives there now.”

“Let’s not say anything.”

“Don’t tell the girl.”

“And the apple tree?” Robin asked.

“Oh, they probably chopped it down.”

Robin walked along a path cleared by the Fishers in their meadow. The path was lined with gold and dark gray growth: a result of the goldenrod and blue joint that had died in the winter. The branches and weeds looked like an assortment of metals. The wiry entanglement bled into the backyards of homes, stopping at swingsets, trampolines, pools, basketball hoops, and tetherball poles. In one backyard, a little girl slid down a fireman’s pole. Robin began to laugh. She laughed so hard she began to cry. She felt relieved. There was something about the way the women had presented the deaths that made them seem so normal and absurd.

The waiting room was full of mostly women, some of them looking ready to pop and resting their hands on their ball-like stomachs. Lexi wanted to place her hands on her stomach like those women did, on top of her bag, which was in her lap. When she was younger, her mother had a large leather bag. Lexi had called it a stomach. She loved emptying the bag and finding gum and pens and loose change and lipstick.

While Lexi looked at the stomachs surrounding them, Ben looked at his phone. He had been the one who suggested that he come with Lexi to her appointment: it was a 4 pm

appointment, they could make a field trip out of it and see a movie after. Now he was buying movie tickets on Fandango.

Lexi was due for a pap smear, which Ben's father had called 'the schmear.' It was only recently that Ben had learned it was smear and not schmear. He had never been to a gynecologist before. The office was at NYU and Ben searched for movies showing nearby. He had thought he would buy them at the theater, but Lexi had told him to buy them in advance because they would sell out. Lexi had suggested that Ben wait outside of the building and go on a walk, but he said he wanted to wait in the waiting room.

Lexi watched the door to the examination rooms. Each time a name was called, Lexi looked up. She imagined that the person whose name was called had made it to the next round of a game. As the number of people waiting lessened, the game felt more competitive. Before, it had felt like there was a camaraderie between the women.

In the waiting room, everyone was just waiting, but in the examination rooms, each woman's condition looked different: chlamydia, birth control, fibroadenoma, cervical cancer. As soon as her name was called, Lexi would walk right into the examination room as if she had never been one of the women waiting. On her way there she would think about the women still waiting to get their names called and feel apprehensive; depending on how her appointment went, she would leave the office in a better or worse condition.

"Lexi?" the nurse called.

Lexi stood up and walked toward the door. Still looking at his phone, Ben followed.

Lexi stopped. "What are you doing?"

“Huh—oh.” Ben looked up from his phone. “I didn’t mean to come. I just automatically stood when I heard your name.”

“Okay. Go sit down.” Lexi continued through the door and Ben followed. They were standing on the other side of the door now facing the cubicles of secretaries, and a hall leading to the examination rooms. Lexi turned around.

“Ben?”

“I feel like it’s too late to turn around,” Ben said.

The nurse pointed to a room down the hall.

“It’s this room when you’re ready,” she said.

“It’s not,” Lexi said.

“What?” the nurse said.

“Coming,” Lexi said.

“Should I just come in?” Ben asked.

“What? No,” Lexi said.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Ben said.

“There’s one in the waiting room,” Lexi said.

“Should we see that movie about Eighth Graders or—”

“What—yeah. I don’t care. Just go back,” Lexi said.

Ben walked back to the waiting room. He tried to walk in a way that made it seem like he had been looking for a bathroom.

A nurse led Lexi into an examination room. The nurse looked younger than Lexi. She was wearing a sweatshirt and a headband, and her face was covered with heavy foundation. She

reminded Lexi of a camp counselor from a Catholic summer camp she had gone to when she was ten, a counselor who had lots of dandruff and was a notoriously harsh cleaning inspector.

(Each morning they had a cleaning inspection and were graded on a scale of twenty points. At the end of the summer, a neatness banner was rewarded to the bunk that received the highest score overall. Lexi's bunk made it their goal for the summer to win the banner. During rest-hour in the afternoon, the girls had naked dance parties. Lexi and a girl in her bunk Talia Sweet had put brooms between their legs and had run around the room pretending to fly. The other girls laughed until one of them freaked out. 'I am not touching that. They smell.' And soon the other girls stopped laughing. The brooms were placed in the box benches and for the rest of the summer, no one touched them. Lexi and Talia were blamed by their bunkmates for not receiving the neatness banner that summer.)

Lexi was measured, then weighed. She kept her shoes on, for height, but took them off, with her coat, for weight.

The nurse handed Lexi a blue gown.

"Put this on, backside open."

"Okay."

"Dr. Novack will knock."

Lexi took off her clothes. She didn't understand why Ben was acting so weird. She stood there naked, looking at herself in the mirror, examining a few pimples on her back. She and Ben had seen each other naked so many times that it was nothing to him. Her skin was just another layer of clothing. It felt like she could do anything in front of him and it wouldn't matter. She put the gown on and sat down on top of crepe paper on the examination table. She laid back. She

waited for Dr. Novack to knock. The room was cold. There were no windows and there was no clock. It was like being in a casino. They wanted you to lose track of time so you wouldn't know how long you had been waiting for.

In college, she had been with a guy who said "I know vaginas." He was good at gambling and had used the money he made to pay for his college tuition. In their whole relationship, they hadn't had sex. Instead, they lay next to each other on his dorm room twin, touching themselves. "Call me daddy," he had whispered in her ear, and she did. "Ask me to pay for your college tuition," he said. After he would ask her to get Goldfish from the vending machine. They ate the Goldfish in bed. When they were finished he would tell her she could go home if she wanted.

He was older, and she had thought being with an older guy would be better because he had been with women older than her, which meant he had more experience. "I know my way around your pussy better than you do," he had once shouted when they were touching themselves. And she believed him as much as she knew it wasn't true; the whole time they were together he had never touched her. If knowing vaginas was to never go near them, then she guessed he knew hers well.

Being with Ben was refreshing. He didn't pretend to know vaginas. She had fallen in love with him because they could talk for hours, which was just as good if not better than sex. They talked about their childhoods and Anthony Bourdain and places they wanted to go. Lexi told Ben about people paying her to write their essays in college. She let people in high school copy her homework.

Ben talked about being fat for most of his life. People in middle school had called him bounce house and would throw pencils and paper clips at him. Girls would squeeze his cheeks.

Despite getting teased, he was popular. People thought he was funny. In high school, he lost weight and people complained that he wasn't funny anymore. He told her about being in a fraternity in college. After one year, he realized it wasn't for him; he told her about going mini-golfing in Cape Cod when he was fifteen and calling his little sister who was six years old queer for wearing a newsboy cap. He never saw the cap again. Dr. Novack knocked on the door. Lexi sat up and readjusted her position on the table.

“Come in,” Lexi said.

On their walk to the movie theater, Ben was being quiet. Lexi thought it might have been because he was embarrassed from following her when her name was called at the doctor. He was still immersed in his phone and kept looking down to check it.

“Talk to me,” Lexi said.

“One sec.”

“What are you looking at?” Lexi asked.

“I said one second.” Ben put his phone away. For a while, he didn't say anything.

“I thought you said you wanted to go somewhere cold on our honeymoon,” he said.

“I never said that.”

“You did. You said you’d go skiing. And then you tell my mom and my sister we’re going somewhere warm.”

“Why are you bringing this up now?”

“I remembered it was bothering me,” he said.

“Okay. I would, but I don’t remember saying that,” Lexi said.

“Forget it,” he said. They were two blocks away from the theater.

“Who keeps texting you?”

“Thaddeus,” Ben said.

“Oh. How is he?”

“He left his job,” Ben said.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice,” Lexi said.

“Nice?”

“Well, I thought he wasn’t having a good time.” If not having a good time was a reason to quit everyone would be quitting their jobs, Ben thought.

They had arrived at the theater. Ben pushed the door open and Lexi held it open for a man walking in behind them. Ben had walked straight to the ticket line. Lexi followed him. The line in front of them was long, but moving fast.

Ben said, “Shouldn’t he be working still? I mean, don’t you think it’s a little weird that he quit cause now all the pressure’s on Laney to do well.” Laney was a manager at ESPN. She and Thaddeus were Ben’s close friends from college.

“No,” Lexi said.

“I just find it to be unfair to Laney.”

“She likes working.”

“She must not like it *all* the time. Don’t you think she would start to resent—”

“I wouldn’t care if you—”

“We would all be quitting our jobs if we could,” Ben said.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Doesn’t everyone hate their job? A little? I mean I know you like yours, but don’t you ever get tired of it?” A woman waiting in front of them turned around and looked at Ben.

“I wouldn’t care if you left your job,” Lexi said.

“What? I’m not doing that to you. That wouldn’t be cool.”

“But I really wouldn’t care.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well I’m not going to do that because I don’t think it’s right,” Ben said.

“Okay. Whatever you want.”

“It’s like you want me to quit,” Ben said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just like you’re so *whatever you want*. All the time. It’s like I could do anything and you’d be supportive.”

“Would you prefer if I quit my job?”

“No. What? Of course not.”

“Okay. Because I don’t want to,” Lexi said.

“Like I could say I was moving to the Swiss Alps and you’d be okay with it,” Ben said.

“I’d be sad if you moved to the Swiss Alps.”

“Like I could die and you’d be fine.” The same woman in front of them turned around.

“What? I wouldn’t be fine if you died.” The woman turned back around and moved to an open ticket seller.

“You would say *It was whatever he wanted.*”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“You did before.” Someone behind them tapped Lexi’s shoulder. Another ticket seller was open.

“Sorry,” Lexi said. They walked to the ticket booth.

“What are we seeing tonight?” The seller asked. Ben looked up at the movies and then he remembered.

“Wait I already—”

“You bought tickets online,” Lexi said, shaking her head.

“We bought tickets online,” Ben said to the seller.

“If you want I can print them out for you—since you’re already here,” the seller said.

“No. It’s alright,” Ben said.

“We waited. Print them out,” Lexi said.

Peter was a Sophomore in the acting conservatory at SUNY Purchase. He received emails from the theater department about acting opportunities, including a recent one that said *PAID POSITION FOR STUDENTS: looking for male students ages 18-22 to play the role of a son in a wedding ceremony. Must have good impersonation skills.* Peter read that the company, which was called Notable Productions, provided celebrity and special-request impersonators. The website offered a montage of photos in which a photo of a Johnny Depp impersonator holding up a chicken kebab at a wedding dissolved into a photo of a Ryan Seacrest lookalike surrounded by a bunch of girls in caps and gowns at a graduation party.

There was no image of the son who would be impersonated in the email. Students interested in the role were asked to submit a headshot and a personal statement.

Peter couldn't tell how much interest the impersonation role would get. People's expectations were high, and they were fussy about whether the director's vision matched their own. He didn't know many students who wanted to become character actors. He had a friend who'd been insulted when Peter complimented him he would be a good character actor.

Unlike many of the conservatory students, Peter was not good at networking or making connections. His mother was a costume designer and had networked for him once, but Peter had a bad experience with the woman he (and eleven other interns) had interned for. She had asked him to organize her shelves with a label maker.

"How do you spell my name?" she asked him.

"Do you want me to say it out—"

“Make a label with the way you spell my name.” When the slip of paper printed from the label machine, the woman had ripped it in half. “Is there something wrong with you? You don’t think. You just say you know—but you don’t know. If you don’t know, ask.”

One of Peter’s friends bragged about how he had got a job walking Glenn Close’s dog. The friend spoke about it as if he was becoming a better actor just by walking her dog. He said when he was walking the dog he truly felt like he was Glenn Close. Peter didn’t have to walk a celebrity’s dog to imagine he was one. He didn’t even need a dog.

Peter applied for the impersonator role with a headshot of himself that his mom took. He was tired of acting with students, he wanted to act with real people in front of an audience whose members weren’t interested in becoming actors themselves. A wedding gig would be perfect—the previous summer Peter had worked for a catering company in the city and had worked at many weddings. He told his friends he had signed up for the role as a joke, but really he felt serious about it.

Ben took time off work. He was unhappy, and Lexi suggested that he take a break to assess what he wanted. His company called it a vacation, but it was more like working from home. He still received calls from customers expecting him to do his job. His mother had just become friends with neighbors who were sisters. The sisters were looking for a bird sitter. They were driving to a wedding in Colorado and needed someone to watch the bird for a week. Robin couldn’t watch the bird. She had been asked to sub the whole week for a high school teacher.

Robin had offered her son to watch the bird. She thought taking care of the bird would cheer Ben up. “It’s a beautiful bird, Ben,” she had said. “He has a wide vocabulary. I think you’ll love Teddy.” Ben agreed to watch the bird, not that Robin had given him the opportunity to say no. He thought it would impress Lexi that he was doing something responsible while taking time off from work. When Robin brought the bird to their apartment, Lexi asked Ben to keep it out of their bedroom. “Birds are gross.”

“But isn’t it beautiful?” Ben said. The bird was green with blue-tipped wings and beady black eyes.

“When it’s outdoors,” Lexi said.

Teddy’s screeching kept Lexi and Ben up all night.

“You need to do something about this,” Lexi said.

“What do I do?”

“Figure it out,” Lexi said.

Ben got a blanket and covered the bird’s cage. The bird was quiet for the rest of the night. In the morning, when Ben took off the blanket, the bird started screeching again. He took Teddy out of the cage, but the bird screeched even more. He put Teddy back in the cage and decided to ignore the bird. He spent the day sitting next to the bird’s cage and taking occasional work calls. In between calls, Ben watched YouTube videos of ski patrollers and CPR tutorials. The sound of the videos seemed to calm Teddy down because he stopped screeching while they played. Ben fed Teddy, then he went out for a walk. When he came back, Teddy was gone.

He called his mother. “I lost the bird.”

“What do you mean, you lost the bird?”

“I closed the cage, I thought it was locked, and now it’s gone.”

“It flew away?”

“I don’t know. I looked everywhere. I went outside, I looked in all the cabinets, I asked the neighbors. I’m calling a bunch of pet stores. I’m going to see if I can replace it.”

“You can’t just replace the bird. It’s not a carpet, it’s a living thing.”

“It’s a bird. How will they know the difference?”

“When you lost your childhood blanket and we replaced it, you knew the difference.”

“The smell was gone. It was obvious.”

“What are you gonna do when you have children? You’re going to try and replace them?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Call animal control. Find Teddy.”

Ben began to cry. He laid down on the floor. He saw a small gray head and a green wing under the dresser.

Later, his mother found out from her neighbors that it was the beginning of burrowing season for birds.

Ben and Robin made a plan to meet over the weekend to return the bird. Instead of making Robin come to Jersey City, Ben would meet her halfway on Saturday morning at the Empire Casino Raceway in Yonkers.

Peter got a call from a woman named Joy at Notable Productions offering him the role. Joy said that out of all the applicants he resembled the son (who she called Sam) the most. Peter accepted the role. He thought it would make for a good story. When he was a famous actor, they would ask him what his first paid role was and he would say that when he was a disillusioned theater student he signed up to impersonate a son at someone's wedding.

The woman, Robin, who was hiring through Notable Productions wanted to meet Peter as soon as possible. Joy told Peter that he was the test impersonator for Robin to see if she wanted to pursue hiring more lookalikes. Robin asked if they could meet over the weekend. She lived in a town called Armonk, which was near Peter's college. She asked that Peter meet her at her son's high school track. She didn't say if her son would be there.

Peter waited on the bleachers. He was fifteen minutes early. When he was famous, he would still show up early. He had recently started seeing a counselor, Fran, through his school. When he spoke to Fran, he felt as if he was on a podcast, and people were subscribing to his therapy sessions. By the time he was famous, he would be very good at talking about himself.

The bleachers were cold. Peter kept having to adjust his shorts which were riding up his thighs. He realized he was wearing mismatched socks and thought it might be humbling for someone to be reminded that a celebrity had mismatched socks, too.

Peter stood up on the bleachers and jumped down to the lowest step. There was a group of cheerleaders practicing on the opposite side of the track. On his side of the track, a tall teenager was pole vaulting and a few people were jumping hurdles. Peter wondered if he appeared old enough for it to seem creepy that he was watching them. He moved back to a higher step and sat down. He looked to see if anyone new was in the parking lot. A woman was

in her car, staring into space. He didn't think this was Robin, and he was nervous to go over and find out. Now the woman looked at him through her front door window. She just kept looking at him.

He hoped Robin would like him. He hoped everyone liked him. When Peter met his roommate's parents for the first time, he hoped they liked him more than they liked their son. Peter imagined telling this to a podcast interviewer who would make the connection that it probably had something to do with why he became an actor. It was something Fran would say. Their last session, Peter had told her about his lying habit. When he was younger he told people he was color blind. Fran told him that if he was a good liar, he was probably a good actor.

Peter enjoyed listening to actors talk about who they were before they were famous. When he thought of the interviews he liked most, almost every actor had been bullied or was an outcast growing up. That was never Peter's experience. He wondered if this meant he wouldn't become a famous actor. Peter thought about Bill, his acting professor. In the Fall, Peter had taken a Fundamentals of Acting class taught by Bill; each week he left the class feeling hurt by the teacher. The other students agreed that the teacher treated Peter differently. The teacher had recommended plays to each student, but never gave Peter anything to read. In his final written evaluation, Bill wrote that he was troubled by Peter's distractedness and lack of basic knowledge about acting techniques. He should seek remedial help.

When she got to the track, Robin realized she had made a mistake. He was sitting down on the bleachers. Sam hadn't had such bad posture. She thought to turn around before he saw her and drive away, but she got out of the car and walked toward him. He was wearing Sam's track uniform. Earlier that week, Robin had given Joy three outfits for Peter to choose from: Sam's track uniform, a suit he wore to Molly's Bat Mitzvah, and jeans and a t-shirt.

Peter looked up and waved. "I'm Sam?" he shouted.

When Robin got closer, Peter stood up.

"Sam?" he said again. "I mean, mom?" He went toward her. Robin went in for a handshake, which Peter turned into a hug.

"I saw you in your car, but I wasn't sure it was you," he said. "I was gonna go over... I'm glad you—"

"I'm sorry," Robin said, "but, it's just that he smelt different. And he wouldn't have called me that, I mean he would have said ma."

Peter didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if he should get out of character.

"Oh. I'm sorry," he said.

"Did you wash the uniform?" Robin asked.

"Yeah. I thought—"

"You know what. That's okay," Robin said.

"I can say ma," Peter said.

"No. That's alright," Robin said. "I'm deciding not to do this."

"Are you sure? I could rehea—"

“No. This is not for me. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ll still pay you, but this wasn’t a good idea.”

“Okay. Whatever is good for you,” Peter tried his best to make it seem like he wasn’t upset. Robin could see that he was disappointed, and she felt guilty for making him come all this way.

“Do you want to walk for a bit? I think I’m gonna do a lap.”

Peter looked at the parking lot. “Sure?” he said.

“So you’re in college?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a serious actor?”

“I want to be an actor.”

“I acted when I was in college.”

“Really?”

“For a little, but then I had a teacher who said I would never make it because I had poor coordination and time management. I was also distracted. She said you’re never gonna get the audition if you can’t make it to the audition.”

“Poor coordination? It’d be different if you were gonna be a dancer.”

“I was discouraged.”

“I’m distracted too. I think I might also be a perfectionist.”

“I had to read a page four times to get the gist of it. That’s why I liked acting. I was good at making stuff up.”

Peter nodded.

“Are you hungry?” Robin asked. “You want a cone?”

“A cone?”

Robin pointed to a vending machine near the school.

She got two ice creams. She handed one to Peter. He took it from her and held onto it.

“You’ll want it before it melts,” she said.

“Maybe in a little bit,” he said.

“Before it melts,” Robin said. They continued walking in silence, eating their ice cream.

“Is he fast?” Peter asked.

“Who?”

Peter pulled a piece of the track uniform away from his skin, gesturing to Robin. “Your son.”

“Oh. Yeah, he was. He could run a four-minute mile.”

Ben arrived at his parents’ house with the bird. His mom was supposed to meet him halfway from Jersey City. He waited thirty minutes at their meeting location, the Yonkers Raceway, but she never came. When he got to the house he walked right through the door.

“Where’s mom?” he asked Molly.

“I don’t know, she went out?”

“Where’s dad? Dad!”

“Who’s that? Ben?” David came down the stairs. “I didn’t know you were coming over.”

“I wasn’t. Where’s mom?”

“Oh. She’s on a walk at the high-school track. Everything okay?”

“I called her fifteen times. She doesn’t answer! I called the house and *you* don’t answer. I waited thirty minutes and she doesn’t show—”

“Your mother said she was meeting you tomorrow,” David said.

“No. We said today. I had a phone call with a wedding venue that I just had to cancel. I thought something bad had happened.”

“Where are you going?” Molly asked.

“The track,” Ben said. “I’m done with this bird and I’m done with mom.”

“Why don’t you just go home. Leave the bird with us,” David said.

“No. I’m over this. She needs to see what she did wrong. She needs to take responsibility. It’s so typical.”

Ben drove to the high school. The bird’s cage shook in the back seat, and he kept one hand on the steering wheel while trying to hold the cage in place with his other hand. Teddy was screeching again and was darting around his cage, trying to get out. Ben thought the radio would help, but it only added noise. When Ben got to the high school he saw his mom walking on the track. She was talking intensely with another person.

“That’s weird,” Robin said.

“What?” Peter said.

“My son’s car is here.”

Ben got out of the car. He was holding a cage that swung back and forth as he walked.

“Is that a bird?” Peter asked.

“Oh no,” Robin said. “One minute.” She went off, up the hill, meeting Ben at the top of the bleachers.

Ben placed the cage on the ground.

“I’m so—”

“I missed my appointment to speak with a venue. I had to cancel that,” Ben said.

“I’m so sorry,” Robin said.

“Is that Sam’s?” Ben asked, pointing to Peter. They made eye contact and Peter looked away.

Peter began feeling his pulse. He first felt his wrist and then his neck on both sides with two fingers. He wanted to leave because he felt like he was having a panic attack.

“His name is Peter,” Robin said.

“This is weird mom. You need to figure this out.”

“I know it is. I know. I’m so sorry.”

Peter was pacing now. He didn’t know if he should interrupt. It looked like they were fighting. It was becoming harder to breathe. He was having difficulty calming himself down. He walked up the hill to the parking lot.

“I have to go,” Peter shouted.

“What?”

“I should probably go,” Peter said.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked.

Peter, gasping, slapped his chest with his hand.

“Yeah. This just happens to me sometimes. I convince myself I’m allergic—I’m not allergic to anything.”

They sat down on the bleachers.

“Here,” Ben said. “I have some water.”

“Thanks,” Peter said.

“Count backwards from ten,” Robin said.

“I don’t think I can,” Peter said.

“We should help. We should—I go get help? Should I call someone?”

“You’re making it worse,” Ben said.

“I just. I’m not allergic to anything, but sometimes I convince myself I am. It feels like I’m having. A heart attack?”

Peter got up from the bleachers and walked to the track, stopping every few seconds in place, slapping his chest, and then to the center of the field.

“Where’s he going?” Robin said.

Ben got up and followed him. “You just stay, mom,” Ben said.

Robin followed Ben. Ben got to the fence surrounding the track and locked it so Robin couldn’t enter. She watched them from the outside of the fence. Then she walked back to the

bleachers. They were talking and Robin couldn't hear what they were saying. After fifteen minutes, they came back to the bleachers.

“What did you do, Ben? You saved him,” Robin said.

“I didn't save anyone.”

Peter said, “He did. He helped me calm down.”

Eileen and Roger Falk had offered their backyard to David and Robin for Ben and Lexi's wedding. Eileen had insisted, which bothered Roger. But he agreed as long as none of the guests used their pool or went in their house, and Robin and David left Saul at home.

On the night of the wedding, cars crowded the Falks' gravel driveway and Bessel Lane. The other neighbors had agreed to allow guests to park on the street. Lexi's parents, Charlie and Marissa (who couldn't contribute as much money to the wedding as the Madrises), paid for a valet parking service that aligned the cars, and for the wedding invitations which had encouraged guests to carpool.

The Falks lived in a stone house on a few acres—a flat section dropped off to a second level of flat land, where there was a pool. A transparent plastic tent was planted behind their house, above their swimming pool. From there you could hear Mt. Kisco Road and see the

Kensico reservoir, and sometimes you could perceive a plane leaving or returning to Westchester airport. As the sun went down, white paper lanterns lit up the lawn.

The tent was filled with one hundred guests. Lexi's relatives sat at a table on one side of the tent, and Ben's at a table on the other side. Seated in the middle, between the separated families, were Ben and Lexi's friends. There was a photo booth, an open bar, and a magician who came around to each table while the guests waited for their main course to be served.

David approached the magician at the open bar and ordered him a Negroni. "Do me a favor," David said to the magician. "Make sure you perform for Roger's table. This is *his* backyard."

"Where's Roger's table?"

"I don't see him right now, but I'll point him out to you later. He's the biggest guy in the room."

"Okay."

A man seated at Peter's table was hollowing out a bread roll and consolidating the crumb into a ball. "I think that was a beautiful wedding," he said. The man was David's father, but Peter had forgotten his name.

"It was okay," Jennifer said. Peter remembered the name Jennifer, but not how she was related to David. Peter was seated with David's side of the family. Robin had briefed him on who

everyone was before they were seated: Molly; David's mother, Reva; David's father, Ned; David's sister, Jodi and her husband, Jeffery; Reva's sister, Jennifer; and Reva's brother, Irwin. But Peter had already forgotten who everyone was. The people at the table talked to each other as if Peter wasn't there.

"It was missing something," Reva said.

"Your other grandson," Jennifer said.

"Yes. I miss him."

"But we're here to celebrate Ben and Lexi. Let's not despair," Ned said. He started deconstructing another roll.

"I miss him too," Molly said.

"How come you're the only one not wearing a dress?" Jodi asked Molly.

"Don't make her feel bad," Reva said. "Her suit looks nice. She's sophisticated."

Peter had been invited to the wedding to look after Saul. He didn't know anyone besides Robin and Ben at the wedding. He hadn't been introduced to Lexi's family.

Reva pointed at a long-legged woman standing at the bar. "You like Cousin Rachel's dress?" Reva asked Molly. "It's Pucci. I have one saved from when I was thin like that."

"I like it," Molly said.

"You've heard of Pucci?"

"Yes."

"I used to take you shopping. You loved clothes. Not so much anymore?"

"I still do, but my dad calls me jappy."

“He called you jappy? He’s a jap himself. Everybody likes nice things. He doesn’t think he was spoiled? I spoiled him. He was the firstborn son. What does he think? Every little girl wants clothes!”

“That’s what I say.”

“Whichever one of my granddaughters can fit into my Pucci dress first, gets it. It’s sitting in my closet—waiting.”

“Okay.”

“Your other grandmother’s thin. I wasn’t rail-thin like your mother is. You don’t want to be rail-thin. Right now, my children and grandchildren—everyone’s too fat.”

“I guess,” Molly said.

“So, I wanna ask you something.”

“What?”

“You like Lexi?”

“She’s fine.”

“You better get along. She’s gonna be with your brother.”

“I know.”

“So, I wanna tell you something else—about what your other grandmother said.”

“Okay.”

“I have a best friend whose son married a black woman and the family are wonderful people! The daughter is *gorgeous*. Jesse works for a very big person, the kids are *gorgeous*. They’re happy as can *be*.”

“Okay,” Molly said.

“And you can tell her I said that.”

“I miss Sam,” Molly said. “Lexi didn’t know Sam.”

“And what does your other grandma think of Lexi? Lexi’s not Jewish. She’s Irish-Italian,” Reva said.

Ned said, “Sam will always be remembered as a young man, a young beautiful man. Tragic but beautiful. The image of me will be a laughing nice old guy.”

Reva said, “It’s a shame. He was an adorable little boy, you know, and very handsome as he got older. Sam was four or five and was walking on the beach... and he vanishes, and we go right down to the water and he’s sitting there with his arms folded and his legs folded in a lotus position.”

Jennifer and Irwin were staring at Peter. “Who is he?” Jennifer whispered to Reva and Ned.

Jodi and Jeffery got up. “We’re going to the bar.”

“I think he’s the dog walker,” Ned said and got up too.

“Where are *you* going?”

“The bathroom,” Ned said.

“I thought he was Molly’s boyfriend,” Irwin said.

“No,” Molly said. She looked at Peter. “He’s—”

“I think he’s the bride’s brother,” Reva said.

“I’m Robin’s friend,” Peter said.

“Oh, we didn’t know who you were.”

“How do you know each other?” Reva asked. “You’re one of her students?”

“I go to Suny Purchase and—”

“Do you love it? What do you study?” Jennifer asked.

A man in a black suit and a bowtie came over to their table. “Good evening,” he said.

“Hello.”

The magician pulled three coins from Reva’s ear.

“Oh, what’s he doing?” Reva got up from her seat, bumping into Ned’s plate. The balls of bread fell to the floor. Saul went for them. Peter went to take them out of his mouth.

“He can have that,” Reva said. “His parents don’t feed him enough.”

Peter got up from the table. He took Saul out of the tent and walked him around outside.

The magician opened his hands to show that the coins had disappeared. Reva, Jennifer, Irwin, and Molly applauded him. Then he moved on to the next table. Ned came back. He looked at his plate and then got down on the floor.

“Ned! Get up from the floor. He’s acting like an adolescent,” Reva said.

“I dropped my bread.”

“You missed the magician,” Irwin said.

Ned sat back down at the table. “We will never know what he would have looked like as an old person.”

“He was just here,” Reva said.

“He’s talking about Sam,” Molly said.

“I think my father killed himself. He died a month after my mother,” Ned said. “Most people kill themselves when their wives die before them.”

“You’re gonna do that if I die?” Reva asked.

“No.”

“I’m hoping Grandma dies before me so she doesn’t have to live without me,” Ned said to Molly.

“Oh stop aggrandizing yourself,” Reva said.

“I spoke to my father before he died...”

“What’d he say? *I’m gonna go kill myself now?*”

“You know where they’re going on their honeymoon, Molly?” Jennifer asked.

“I think they’re going skiing in France.”

“Oh, that’s very bourgeois. We were there,” Reva said. “I’d like to go to the beach. That’s what I’d like to do. I don’t think I’d like to go to Cape Cod. Maybe Long Island. Maybe next summer we’ll all go to the beach. I wouldn’t mind renting a beach house.”

“**L**ook at him. Look,” Roger said to Eileen.

He pointed to the magician who was making his way around different tables, pulling coins from people’s ears and scarves from his mouth. The magician hadn’t come to Roger’s table, but Roger kept hearing other guests rave about him. He heard the magician had performed a trick in line at the open bar for Eileen, which she hadn’t mentioned. When she came back to the table, she was blushing.

“Why hasn’t he come to us yet?” Roger said.

“Maybe he’s just doing the relatives and immediate family,” Eileen said.

“Yeah, but I—” Roger looked down at his phone which was buzzing. His friend was texting him score updates from the Yankees-Red Sox game. He and a few of his colleagues at Merrill Lynch, where he worked as a Financial Adviser, were betting money on the game. If the Yankees won, Roger won. The Yankees were down four points. “This is my house. He should be at our table!” Roger said.

“It must have been a mistake,” Eileen said.

“You’re defending him.”

“Who?”

“David.” It bothered Roger that Eileen wasn’t agreeing with him. He could see the way she looked at David. She thought he was attractive. Roger imagined that David had asked the magician to perform for Eileen. He was suspicious the magician was a pawn for David to flirt with Eileen through.

“What does the magician have to do with David?” Eileen asked.

“He’s ungrateful.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why are you blushing?” Roger said. Eileen touched her cheeks.

“I am?” she said.

“If David was grateful, he would have made sure the magician came to our table.”

“The wedding’s not over yet,” Eileen said.

“And that dog! I *specifically* asked that they not bring him.”

The magician came up to Peter, who was walking Saul. “You think it’s okay if I smoke?”

He pulled out a cigarette.

“I think so,” Peter said.

“Want one?”

Peter held up Saul’s leash as if to communicate that Saul was his child and he didn’t want to smoke in front of him. “I’m okay,” he said.

“Oh. Do you know who Roger is? Or where he’s sitting?”

“Roger.” The name was familiar. Robin had said something about Roger. “One sec.” Peter put down Saul’s leash and slid the leg of a chair into the loop of the leash. Peter, followed by the magician, walked to the tent and looked around to see if he could remember. He turned around and saw Saul trying to break away from the chair. Peter quickly pointed to a man at a table at the other end of the tent. “I think that’s him,” he said. He didn’t know.

Saul had knocked the chair over and was running around the yard dragging his leash. Peter didn’t understand why he hadn’t just kept Saul with him, and he could have told the magician he didn’t know who Roger was. Peter chased after Saul but lost sight of him when he ran back into the tent.

Peter went back to his table. “Have any of you seen the dog?”

“Last time we saw him, he was at the table with you,” Reva said.

Peter saw Saul's leash dragging along the floor across the room. He followed the leash and saw Saul jumping onto a man waiting in line for cake.

“That’s it!” Roger shouted. Saul had jumped onto him and was humping his leg. A young man came running up to him. “I’m so sorry,” Peter said. “I put the leash down for a second and he ran—”

“Get him off me. Get him out of here!”

“He smells Willy,” Eileen said.

Peter pulled Saul off Roger. He left the cake line to find Robin.

Roger said, “And *he’s* the one telling me to leash my dog. I’m out of here. I’m going to bed.” He looked at the magician who was leaving the cake line. Two women stopped him. “You were a hit,” the women said to the magician.

Roger looked at Eileen who had also seen the exchange. She was blushing again.

“Oh. Stay,” she said. “You’ll hear the wedding from our bedroom. You won’t be able to fall asleep.”

“I’m tired. I’ll fall right asleep.”

“Eat your cake first.”

“I’m bringing it to bed. You can do whatever you want.”

“Okay,” Eileen said.

Roger made his way out, holding his cake in a napkin. Eileen followed. They made their way to the front of their house where David was with his nephew Eli saying goodbye to guests who had come from far away and were leaving early because they had a long drive home. Eileen said goodnight first.

“David, it was a pleasure,” she said.

“You’re going to bed already?”

“We’re tired.”

“These people are leaving because they’re going back to Long Island! All you gotta do is go upstairs!”

“I know. We’re gonna go. Mazel Tov! I couldn’t find Robin or Ben, but send Ben and Lexi our love.” She walked ahead. David reached out his hand and went to kiss Roger on the cheek. Roger dodged his cheek and gave him a light handshake.

“Goodnight,” David said.

“*Good. Night. You. Schmuck!*”

Ben and Lexi were by the pool with his friends and relatives making S’mores in a fire pit. They were admiring a treehouse in the next yard over.

“Ben, did you ever climb that tree?” Molly asked.

“This tree?”

“The big one in our backyard.”

“You know who used to love to climb trees?” Robin said.

“Who?”

“Regina. She used to love to climb trees,” she said.

“Regina?” Robin’s mother bit into a S’more. “She doesn’t seem like the type.”

“Why not?”

“She was big on top. Heavy.”

“So? Do you have to be a certain body type to climb trees?”

“I’m having trouble visualizing it,” her mother said. Robin used her napkin to wipe away the marshmallow that was dangling from her mother’s chin.

“She was mean to Molly,” Robin’s mother said.

“Molly wasn’t even born yet.”

“Oh, then who was it that was mean to—

Peter came running down the steps with Saul. Eileen was running after him. They pulled Robin aside, not wanting to alarm Ben and Lexi and the other guests.

“They punched him. They punched Roger!”

Ben could hear what they were saying. “What happened?”

“Eli punched Roger and Roger punched David and the magician is trying to keep them all apart! Roger shoved his cake in the magician’s face,” Eileen said.

“The magician is getting people to construct a human wall to block them from fighting,” Peter said.

Robin looked up at the tent. She could see the silhouette of the human wall—a mass of people linking arms—moving in between Roger and David. She started running over. Ben and Lexi followed with Eileen and Peter. They told the rest of the guests to stay where they were.

“Oh stop it! You stop it now,” Robin cried. “What happened?” she asked Eileen and Peter.

“The magician never came to our table,” Eileen said.

“I’m so sorry we didn’t know.”

“Roger took it personally.”

“It’s my fault,” Peter said. “The magician asked me where Roger’s table was and I pointed to the wrong table.”

“It’s not your fault,” Robin said.

When they got to the tent, the men were still fighting. The magician was running after Roger with an inflatable wand the size of a baseball bat. “Oh stop it. Stop that! Someone make it stop,” Robin cried. Lexi ran over to her parents who were a part of the human wall.

“This is your day,” Marissa said. She and Charlie broke away from the wall and went with Lexi to a corner of the tent to console her.

“It’s your day,” her father said.

The men had gobs of frosting and blood and crumbs on their shirts. Roger was no longer attacking people. He was tearing the tent apart. Ripping off the table cloths, breaking all the plates, spilling people’s drinks, smashing slabs of cake onto the dance floor.

“Oh, Peter. What do I do?” Robin whaled.

“Faint into the pool.”

“What?”

“Jump in the pool. Get in the pool. They’ll stop punching if they think you fainted into the pool. Faint and I’ll scream!”

Robin ran down to the pool. Nobody was there. All the guests had moved back to the tent to see what was happening.

“I’m fainting!” Robin fell into the pool.

Ben saw from outside the tent. “Mom! Oh no.” He looked at Lexi.

“She fainted!” Peter said. “Robin fainted!” he screamed.

“She’s in the pool,” Eileen cried.

“I know CPR!” Ben screamed.

The men broke apart and rushed down the steps to the pool. Other guests followed. A few women tripped over their dresses and tumbled down the hill. One woman flew out of her high heels, which stayed behind, embedded in the grass. Robin was lying face down in the green water. David jumped in first, and Ben, Lexi, Roger, Eli, Eileen, and the magician jumped in after him. They gathered around Robin and moved her to the pool’s shallow end. A large group of guests were watching from the land above. Charlie, Marissa, and a few guests moved to the edge of the pool to receive Robin. When they began lifting her out of the pool, she screamed.

“Stop! Stop it. I’m fine.” They continued trying to lift her out of the pool. “Stop. Let me go.”

People were lying on their backs looking up at the sky. Their suits and dresses clung to their bodies. Someone’s silicone sticky-boob floated in the water and glistened under the light. Peter was sitting in a chair watching everyone. They were all quiet. He could hear Mt. Kisco

Road, the sounds of the water splashing against the bodies as they made their way out of the pool. He walked up to the tent which was empty now, except for a few guests who were trying to clean up. He looked around at the shards of glass on the floor, the fallen chairs and strewn table cloths, the froth of spilled champagne. Peter pulled Saul away from a piece of crushed cake he was lapping up on the dance floor. The room smelt like sweat, buttercream, chlorine, and alcohol.