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Children Are Magic

Barrett could find neither her green belt, the one that matched her dress, nor her youngest daughter, River. The two older girls were already in the minivan, Sheila texting, Vanessa rereading Harry Potter. Only sweet Zoë, dwarfed by the pink turtle-shell of her backpack, helped Barrett search, opening closet doors, calling River's name.

"She's nowhere." Zoë's lower lip quivered as if this disappearance were real.

Barrett gripped the curving banister and shouted up the stairs, "River, come out, or I swear you will not bring Pony to school." She peeled Zoë's fingers from her wrist. "Sugar, go ask your sister what she did with my belt."

In the crime scene that was Sheila's room, Barrett rifled through clothes on the floor and ransacked dresser drawers, turning up two Dove ice cream wrappers, her good tweezers, and a piece of binder paper with the scrawled words *FucK you AnYway*.

"What she said." Barrett actually said this to her reflection in Sheila's mirror, then leaned forward to touch her hair. The return of gray roots at her part and temples was a little death she endured every six weeks.

Zoë slid her hot hand into Barrett's. "Sheila said how's she supposed to know where your belt is?"

“Oh hell damn-it.”

The master bedroom, meant to be a sanctuary, was instead a standoff. Windows and bed were shrouded in yards of ivy printed fabric, which her husband, Martin, claimed to be too von Trapp. He had singing Nazi nightmares, so he'd bought a mahogany gun locker the size of a refrigerator, which Barrett said was too Hatfield and McCoy. Fort Knox, she called it and maintained a trio of scented candles on its surface following the design rule of three: balance, beauty, and energy. A rule Barrett and Martin had broken by having four daughters. Her bedside table held *House & Garden* magazines and a wineglass with a scab of cabernet at the bottom. His held two remotes, one for the flat screen TV, one for the fireplace. Standing sentry in the corner, a gargantuan urn commissioned from a local ceramicist with a painting of Barrett, her arms encircling the girls. It was an expensive failure of a Mother's Day gift, because she and the girls looked terrible, painted in purples and the sickly green of healing bruises. It clashed with Barrett's sensibilities, plus, if you looked closely at Barrett's upper lip, you could see a faint mustache.

She dropped to her knees, and sure enough, River was beneath Fort Knox, naked, gripping her blue plastic pony. Barrett grabbed and River squirmed, until finally Barrett caught an ankle and pulled her girl out by the foot, the same way River had tried to enter the world, hence the C-section, hence the tummy bulge, hence the need for her belt that was nowhere. “That's how you'll go to preschool. We don't have time to get you dressed.”

“Bang.” River brandished her pony at her sister and mother. “Bang. Bang.”

“No violent toys,” Zoë said.

Last week at Children Are Magic Preschool, River had thrown a chair. Patient teacher Susan, translucent ear rims poking through her thin brown hair, said it wasn't punishment that

River should stay home all week; it was a natural consequence. Susan wouldn't be happy about a naked child arriving at school, but wasn't this a natural consequence? Barrett hoisted River to her waist and carried her into the bathroom, where she squeezed too much toothpaste into River's mouth.

“Spicy!” River shrieked.

“Swish and spit.”

#

Seated behind the steering wheel, Sheila deadpanned, “So, she's naked.”

“Absolutely not. Not this morning. You may not drive.” Barrett belted River into her booster seat.

“It's called a learner's permit for a reason.” Sheila unbuckled as though shedding a straitjacket.

“I promise. This afternoon, either Dad or I will take you driving.”

Vanessa marked her place on the page with her finger and looked up. “I have taekwondo after school.”

“You always promise,” Sheila said. “Dad's had an all-nighter, and your life is out of control.”

“I have taekwondo,” Vanessa repeated, this time louder and slower, as if they were all stupid.

“Look around you!” Barrett slammed her door. “I've got four daughters. Wait—where's Zoë?”

“Here,” a voice said from the way back, and Barrett imagined it was the same teacher-pleasing voice Zoë used at roll call. The same teacher pleasing voice Barrett would be using when she dropped River at preschool.

“Sugar, sit up! Put on your seatbelt.”

“Where’re River’s clothes?” Vanessa asked.

Sheila flipped down the sun visor, mascara-ed her lashes in the small mirror. “Sometimes you just need to air that thing out.”

“What?” Barrett watched Sheila reload the mascara wand, her mouth a soft *O* of concentration.

She gave a little shrug. “You know.”

“Air it out!” River sang, her legs now spread eagle, her hands pinching, pulling, spreading.

Sheila holstered her wand. “Will you pay to freeze my eggs?”

“You’re fifteen.”

“Exactly. I don’t want a kid made from old eggs.” She raised her brows, flicked her head back toward River.

Barrett pressed hard on the gas. The car roared. Their circular driveway, the flagstone path, the imposing front door—it was all meant to be stately. Instead, what Barrett felt most driving up to her home, was burdened. What she liked best surprised her: it was the garden, her chickens, the vegetables, even Esmeralda, their pig, another Mother’s Day gift from Martin, and she, like the urn in the bedroom, was huge. What Barrett wanted—what they’d all wanted—was a dog, but Martin thought a pig was funny and temporary, doomed for the deep freeze in the garage. They fed her hazelnuts and pears to flavor the meat, but over time, Martin became

attached, calling her his “Porcine Mistress”; now he refused to have her butchered. At the sound of the minivan, Esmerelda heaved herself up and watched them with her coffee bean eyes, bitter, black, and shiny as glass. Barrett could almost hear the pig grind her teeth. She hadn’t been to the pen this morning, nor had she checked on her other girls, the chickens. Pricked by guilt and disgust, she sped past the coop and Esmerelda and the garden—what was that? Lingerie? A black bra dangled from the pole beans.

“Oh hell damn-it! Whose bra is in the yard?”

#

River’s school was the last drop-off. Susan already held the autoharp on her lap. The children were gathered cross-legged on the floor for morning greeting. The moment Barrett set River down to sign in, River escaped to the circle room. “Bang!” she cried, shooting with Pony. Barrett hovered in the doorway; parents weren’t allowed in the circle room unless they were spending the entire day. Thankfully there were no volunteers today to witness River’s massacre. “River,” Barrett stage-whispered. Children laughed.

“Guns aren’t okay,” moonfaced Clarice said.

“River’s here!” Cyrus told the room.

“River’s naked. That’s not okay either. Right, Susan?” Clarice added.

Barrett smiled with her mouth but could not hide her wasabi-eye, as named by her family. Clarice was a know-it-all.

Susan didn’t stop morning song. “Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me.” She nodded toward Ava, her young assistant in braids and overall shorts, then sang in her contralto, “River needs clothing, please check the lost and found,” without breaking the tune.

“River, you know we wear clothes at school.” Ava reached for her hand. “What happened?”

“I don’t like yogurt.”

“She spent the morning hiding.” Barrett shrugged like an exasperated sitcom mom.

“I was under Fort Knox.” River hopped along beside Ava, switching from one foot to the other. Naked, bright eyed, and smiling, she looked like that man-child from *The Jungle Book*.

“Fort Knox?” Ava asked.

Oh hell damn-it—here it came, the last thing Barrett wanted Children Are Magic to learn about. Barrett threw her whole self into everything she did and still felt inadequate. Wrong clothes, wrong food in her refrigerator, wrong television permitted in her home. She volunteered! On her snack day she brought organic, vegan, honey-free treats that respected the bees. All she wanted was to please. Everyone. Which was why she sat on boards. Why she’d converted. Why she wrote a huge check to Temple Beth-El every month. Her name was inscribed on the tree of life in the foyer, The Martin and Barrett Lee-Cooperman Family. Poised and smiling, Barrett could flatten a penny between her molars.

“Let’s find something for you to wear,” Ava said.

“I want to wear Cyrus’s clothes,” River said.

“Well, bye-bye. Fun day, okay?” Barrett gave a swipe to River’s snarled hair, which she’d neglected to brush in the car. “I love you.” Her hand hesitated on River’s head. She did love this child, she loved all her children, and she couldn’t wait to be on the other side of the door.

#

Back home after the dry cleaners, feed store, liquor store, and a board meeting at the Homeless Garden Project to which she'd brought three dozen croissants for the seven women and one man around the table, all to make up for the fact she'd held everyone up ("We can give the leftovers to the gardeners!"), she heard Martin teasing their nanny, Rowena, in the kitchen.

"Truth, I swear."

"A hamster?" Rowena, with her blond ponytail and Russian accent, even after growing up in the states, was incredulous and gullible, Martin's favorite traits in a woman. "You make me laugh," she said. The only time Barrett's Georgia accent peeped up was when she was angry or during sex. Rowena crossed the kitchen with a stack of breakfast bowls, her jeans tight, her midnight blue toenails peeking from sandals. Rowena had toe cleavage. Martin leaned against the counter, thrust a carrot into a peanut butter jar, and chewed. Still in scrubs and clogs, he'd wear them for hours—to the market, to pick up the girls from school or lessons, all as an announcement: the Jewish doctor is in the house.

"Rowena," Barrett said, "my cooking group is coming tonight. Please set the table for six. Also, I forgot to feed the animals this morning."

"Porcine Mistress hasn't eaten?" Martin feigned incredulity, slid his hand onto Barrett's body, creating an arc of warmth across her back; she kissed his cheek, breathed in the soap and vernix, new baby smells that he hadn't yet showered away. His hand came to a halt on her hip, the boyfriend zone, and after seventeen years, she still felt a buzz. "My shiksa farm wife." He pulled her closer, but his eyes did not shift from Rowena haphazardly loading the dishwasher, plates and pots on the top rack, glasses down below.

Barrett gripped his chin, turned him to face her. "How many babies, Dr. Cooperman?"

"A preemie, a C-section, and twins, Olive and Cork."

“Cork?”

He lightly pinched Barrett’s hip. “Can we finally have my son?”

Both were pleased with the trajectory of names they’d chosen for their girls. From Sheila, to Vanessa, to Zoë, to unplanned River. On their march toward middle age, they were loosening up rather than growing rigid. Cork would be the perfect next name if they had a son, which, of course, they would not, because forty-seven was too old, because River wanted to do Barrett in, and because if they had another child, *she* would certainly be a fifth daughter named Cork.

“River went to school naked.”

Martin grinned through a yawn. “Why?”

“She doesn’t like yogurt.”

“She likes ice cream,” Rowena said.

“Not the healthiest start,” Barrett said.

“They aren’t that different,” Martin said. “What’s your favorite flavor?”

Rowena scraped table scraps into a pail, including the untouched pink blob in River’s bowl. “Blueberry.”

“Is there such a flavor as White Russian?” Martin said.

Barrett elbow-jabbed him. He was ridiculous. Short, slight, pale, balding, quick to smile, his patients loved him. Caring yet flirty, he made them feel safe and beautiful, even at forty weeks, even between contractions. Women should run the world, he would say, though he used to make a couple of “daddy stitches” after an episiotomy, and he didn’t vote in the last election.

“My boyfriend would love boozy ice cream,” Rowena said.

“That’s right,” Barrett said. Deflect, deflect, deflect. All women were good at dodging. It just shouldn’t be her husband, even in jest, that Rowena had to dodge. “A little Kahlua over

vanilla ice cream and Netflix—perfect evening. I gave you our password, right?” Barrett reached for the compost pail. “I’ll take the scraps. And Rowena, pots go on the bottom rack.”

#

The crunch of her gardening clogs on the gravel path satisfied Barrett. Her Fitbit tracked steps, but the sound her of own doing was more gratifying than the mileage tally. Sun filtered through peach trees, stippling the yard with yellow light. They bore stunted, mealy fruit, yet, like all the green, reminded her of home. Not that she’d kept a garden as a girl, nor had her efficient mother, a lawyer in the attorney general’s office. The produce in their home had been frozen, canned, or wrapped in plastic, but every day Barrett had been driven on her way to school past orchards of pecans and peaches, allées of poplar trees—a deep curtain of Georgia green. She didn’t miss it, but she recognized it was part of her, and if she didn’t have a little something green here in the arid hills of her California beach town, she’d feel a swelling absence.

“Pig, pig, pig.” Murk and animal smells rose from the pen. Esmerelda’s tough skin was marled with inky puddles and bristles of white hair; bathtub sized, she was not pretty. She gnashed her teeth in her demanding chalkboard/fingernail way until Barrett complied, lifting the plastic backscratcher from its fence hook, scratching her sweet spots and overfeeding her.

When Barrett circled toward the hen yard, there it still was, the black bra, demi and lacy, sexier than hers. Now that she held it, she saw it was far too large to be Sheila’s. A whisper of discomfort leaked into her chest like the first wisps of steam from a tea kettle. Sheila’s friend’s? River could have snagged the bra of a sleepover guest. When Barrett was a teenager, they froze their bras at sleepovers, great lumpy things with padding and thick straps, then they’d wave them around like stiff team pennants. In the brief period when they stopped hurting and before they could truly be weaponized, breasts were funny. She looked to the house, thinking back on recent

sleepovers. Sunlight pinged off her bedroom windows, revealing no one. In the kitchen, Rowena wiped counters. Barrett folded the bra the way that little Japanese book about clutter and joy had taught her, and then she tucked it into the egg basket while she hunted in the nests, dislodging her hens. Clarice, the bitchiest chicken, hid her clutch behind the water vat and pecked at Barrett's clogs. Barrett found just four and none of them the smoky Klonopin-blue she loved so much she'd had the dining room walls repainted that color.

#

Martin lay splayed on the bed, wrapped in a bath towel, a remote control in each hand. C-Span filled the screen. Flames too large for the warm day licked against the glass box of the fireplace. Barrett shut the bedroom door behind her, then stood in his way, hands on her hips, one clutching the black bra.

"Hey. It's a white guy at a dais." Martin cocked his head, looking around her. C-Span was how he put himself to sleep after a long night at the hospital. "You're blocking my view of power." Martin's sparse hair, long enough for a comb-over, curled onto the white pillowslip like a giant false eyelash. Tender skin beneath his half-closed eyes was scuffed and puffy, yet his skewed smile drew her in; it was charming, and she knew he knew it. She knew he knew her morning had been long, that she wanted something, and that she had no plan. Barrett watched them watch each other, the air shifted, the wisps of discomfort in her chest dissipated, leaving her less uneasy, more anticipatory.

"I'm your view of power," she said. "Turn off the fire." She climbed on the bed, crawled toward him.

"Okay, She-Ra, I hope this ends the way I think it will."

If she looked down her body, she'd see her beltless dress, the stocky rectangle of her torso, the bra in her hand. She straddled his hips and threaded her arms through the straps.

“Recognize this?”

He wrapped his hands around her waist and pressed her down onto his groin. “It’s racy. Is it new?”

“It was in the garden.”

“Okay.” His voice went husky, the way it did when he wanted sex.

She put her finger to his lips. “Rowena’s downstairs.”

“So?” He pressed down again. “Turn around.”

“Why was there a bra in the garden?”

“Why wouldn’t there be a bra in the garden? We have four daughters. Why are you surprised by anything?” He slid his hands under her dress, up her bare thighs. He was right; nothing should shock Barrett. His tongue touched the center of his upper lip in the slightly creepy way she hated, like he was concentrating on fixing a lamp or looking at porn. “Turn around.”

Why would she turn around? Backwards sex was anonymous and kind of dirty. She preferred face to face.

He sat up to kiss her, fidgeted towel and clothing out of the way. “Turn around.” She complied. He rose to his knees; slowly they rocked together, gained momentum. “This is so sexy,” he panted.

It didn’t feel sexy to Barrett, more like she was the Porcine Mistress. On C-Span, in the halls of Congress, there was talk of Russia, collusion and conspiracy, leakers and lies.

“Are you watching TV?” Martin said.

“Of course not, Sugar.” She manufactured pleasure and drama in her voice, dropped her face to the bed.

After, when he was spent and she was frustrated, she only briefly stayed beside him, his eyes drifting closed. “Sheila wants to practice driving. Vanessa has taekwondo. Zoë needs something to take care of, a self-cleaning pet.”

“A rock?” he mumbled. His breathing deepened and slowed.

“Sheila wants to freeze her eggs.”

He made his whale sound, a puff of air expelled from his lips, which meant he was already asleep.

She leaned close to his face, her forehead nearly touching his, and whispered, “You owe me.”

Barrett got up to pee. From beneath her sink, she pulled out the gum massage attachment for her electric toothbrush and took care of herself, then rinsed her face. She clasped the bra over her dress. It wasn't hers.

#

“Rowena?” Barrett found her setting the table, fiercely bobbing her head. Barrett mimed removing an earbud. An angry voice shrieked from the ear piece. Barrett, who tamped down her ire, listened only to music that calmed. “I found this outside. Is it yours?”

Rowena's cheeks pinked. “I was weeding. It was hot.” She crammed the bra into her back pocket. “I hate that boob sweat feeling, you know?”

Barrett did know the sweaty feeling, and yet she could never, ever take off her bra outside. She smiled with her mouth. “Well. Mystery solved.”

#

Martin and Barrett divided the after-school responsibilities. Martin, Vanessa, Sheila, and Zoë all piled into the minivan. Sheila ready to practice driving, behind the wheel in a faded pair of Martin's scrubs, a white T-shirt with *Juicy* scrawled across the chest in glittering all caps. Vanessa, suddenly tall and capable, was tied into her stiff taekwondo uniform. The two older girls were smiling, sure and strong in their bodies. Zoë in her elastic-waisted jeans and unicorn T-shirt maintained her sacrificial expression and waved to Barrett, not goodbye but farewell. They would complain about Barrett to their father. Oh hell damn-it, it was hard to be watched all the time. Martin, riding shotgun, turned up the radio and did his Adele impression, singing with an exaggerated froggy mouth, fluttering his fingers, touching his cheeks. "Hello..." He was fun! He was good! He earned exclamation points.

Barrett drove his sporty car to Children Are Magic. She planned on zipping River up Trout Gulch Road to visit the neighbor's horses and then gather wildflowers for the cooking club. Windows down, she sped in and out of shadows, through a grove of live oaks, their branches twisting skyward. She lost track, obeying stop signs, sure, but it was one of those times when she arrived without exactly remembering how she got there. This happened now and then, stepping out of the shower with wet hair and no memory of soaping up. Standing before a pan of sweating onions she didn't remember dicing. She didn't know where her mind went. No, that was a lie. Mostly it went to Martin. To life before kids. She was a nurse, he was a resident, and their time together was intense, not unlike having a newborn, all about their bodies. They were either working, sleeping, eating ramen hopped-up with an added egg or parmesan sprinkled from a green can, or his hands were on her body, curious, learning. Life then was a different kind of exhausting and so much easier than now; she missed it. She missed a lot of things, for example, life before caller ID. She liked it both ways. When she called, she got a moment of anonymity; if

they didn't pick up, it couldn't be because they didn't want to talk to her. She also liked not knowing who was on the other end of the line when her phone rang, a mini-mystery. Another mystery: no one told her that in middle age she'd have this surge of desire, the last hoorah from her hormones. Yes, her unpredictable period came every two weeks and then not for months, but she was a constantly lit bulb! Sometimes in Pilates she found herself, and this was embarrassing, wet with desire. And now, here she was, in the parking lot of her daughter's preschool, grateful to be alone and yet lonely. She imagined being dead and gone. Rowena serving scoops of blueberry ice cream for breakfast and her entire family gobbling it down. Barrett missed mattering.

#

Inside Children Are Magic, River and Cyrus huddled over a carefully arranged world of plastic dinosaurs. Cyrus's blond hair shone. Twines of River's still-snarled hair clung to her cheek with something sticky, either juice or sweat. Small knobs of her spine rose beneath an unfamiliar yellow T-shirt. Barrett's fingers twitched; she wanted to run her hand along the bumpy ridge. Ava unclipped paintings from a wire stretched across the room. Susan looked up from re-stacking blocks.

"I'm sorry about the nudity," Barrett said. "I'll have her get dressed before breakfast. I'll serve ice cream, anything to be on time and clothed."

Susan tucked her hair behind an ear. "We talked a lot about needing clothes at school today."

They watched the children. River spoke using a deep voice and waved a T-Rex close to Cyrus's face. "Dinosaur wants to sleepover your house."

"Hey, little River," Barrett called.

River ignored her.

“Your mommy’s here,” Cyrus told her.

Without looking up, River whispered, “She’s not my real mommy.”

“Time to head home,” Barrett said.

Ava set the children’s art on a table. River ran to her, hugged her thighs, and tilted her face upward. “She’s not my mommy.”

“Are you playing a fun game?” Ava asked without conviction.

Barrett stepped closer. “I’m happy to see you.”

Her girl screamed. “I want my real mommy. I want to play with Cyrus.”

Barrett swallowed, blinked. In the play yard, trikes were put away in a pretend parking lot. Tractors and dump trucks mounted a mini sand pile. Three faded plastic kitchens lined up against a shed.

Susan knelt beside River and placed a hand on her back, exactly where Barrett had wanted her own hand just a few moments ago. “Are you having a hard afternoon?” she asked.

“I want my really mommy,” River sobbed.

Four daughters. There were certainly moments when her girls, particularly Sheila, may have wished for a different mother. But at least they had the manners to keep it to themselves. River wouldn’t be happy until she held Barrett’s beating heart in her small, hot hand. Barrett snatched River’s backpack from her cubby, scribbled her name on the sign out sheet. “River doesn’t *have* hard afternoons, she *makes* hard afternoons.”

Susan maintained her beatific smile. “Everyone has hard afternoons, even mommies.”

Barrett carefully controlled her breathing. “If we leave now, we can visit the horses on the way home.”

River went rigid. She looked down at her empty hands and let out a high-pitched wail. “Where’s Pony?”

Everyone stopped. The class rabbits twitched their ears and hopped to the back of the cage. Cyrus sucked on his fingers, observing River’s escalating tantrum, and then swiftly went into action, searching the dinosaur box. This was the kind of man River would need in her life. They all looked beneath tables, in toy bins, in her backpack, in the circle room, everywhere for the blue plastic pony while River moaned. It was Barrett who found Pony, in the bathroom, kicked beneath a sink. When she stepped back into the playroom, River grabbed the toy and collapsed into Barrett’s arms, her small body shuddering, all bones and damp skin that smelled both sweet and off, like gone milk.

“Did you wash Pony?” Cyrus asked, his eyes solemn. “You have to wash things that was on the bathroom floor. It’s a life rule.”

River handed over Pony, and Cyrus ran into the bathroom. The toy was dripping when he brought it back. Perhaps Cyrus and River could live together now. Barrett could set them up in a little apartment with a Waldorf play kitchen. “Thank you, Cyrus,” Barrett said.

She loaded her daughter into the car, gave up on the horses and flowers. River immediately fell asleep. This time Barrett did not zone out but drove fast, angrily. Tonight, thank god, the girls were Martin’s project.

#

The house smelled of rice, nutty and calming. The table was set with Barrett’s good dishes. Rowena had also scattered tiny green peaches, unripe strawberries, and twigs down the center—a beautiful waste. In the kitchen, the chef Barrett had hired to teach her cooking group Indian cuisine was already at work, chopping, banging, laughing with Rowena. When Barrett extended

her hand, it took him a moment to wipe his on a tea towel, and then his shake was disappointingly brief. He turned to the stove, expertly tossing onions in a sauté pan. Barrett poured herself a juice glass of wine and looked back from the door; he was beautiful, dark eyes, long black hair in a braid, his khakis cuffed to reveal slender, knobby ankles and brown clogs, which Barrett found sexy. Doctors and chefs wore clogs. “I’m just dashing upstairs,” she said, and they nodded in her direction. She changed from her green dress into jeans and an old blue oxford of Martin’s, pinned on a silver and turquoise brooch, a beetle they’d found together at a little shop in Mendocino one weekend when they’d managed to get away. She pulled her hair back into a knot, swallowed half a Klonopin with the wine, and still, a point of heat was banked inside her skull. Martin and the girls arrived home with an ecstatic Zoë and a guinea pig. When Barrett had requested a self-sufficient pet, she’d meant a goldfish or a kitten, but Martin claimed cats were coyote nibblets, and who could pet a fish? Okay, she said, but who’ll be cleaning the cage? He shrugged. “Rowena.”

Zoë ran upstairs to clear space on her desk. “What should I name her, Mommy?”

“Cork?” Martin suggested.

“Cork is nice.” Barrett leaned closer to the cage. The nose and eyes were dark and blank as three holes in a tiny bowling ball. “Oh, Sugar, she’s beautiful. How about Lysistrata?”

“Ha!” Martin laughed and kissed Barrett’s cheek.

#

After the tikka masala and biryani and samosas, the mango rice pudding, after the chef with his sexy ankles and clogs got his applause and his check, the women in Barrett’s cooking club lingered in the candlelight. No one was ready to leave the companionable space or the half-full wine bottles dotting the table, least of all Barrett, whose entire day was a mobius strip: naked

daughter, frozen eggs, bra in the garden, sex compliance, Juicy shirt, River's betrayal, and, unbelievably, another pig. She'd been so wound up she didn't look at the recipes once, didn't watch the chef for knife techniques or to learn about mirepoix and the necessity of toasting seeds. He was smashing cardamom pods when she whispered to Phoebe, "Is it possible to be just a stay-at-home? Without the kid part?"

"That's called agoraphobia."

When the food arrived at the table, she'd been surprised by her hunger—two plates of masala, and she practically licked the pudding from the bowl. Now, chin propped in her hand, she watched her friends and wondered, how were they so solid? Pamela had no children, plus she had a wife, so there was that. Trina, with her otter sleek hair and elegant hands floating near her waist—perpetually ready to receive a bouquet or a cocktail—was a walking reminder that Barrett needed to lift weights! Do Kegels! Kat, perfunctory and pragmatic, with her skull-hugging hairstyle and shiny stud earrings, was a therapist, so she had coping skills, and adorable fraternal twins she'd taught to knit pink pussy hats. Lauren and Phoebe, closer to the rattled end of the spectrum, made Barrett feel at ease.

"That was delicious," Phoebe said, "but I'll never cook it." Thick braids threaded with the first signs of gray wound around her head, carnelian earrings grazed her neck. Phoebe painted faux finishes on walls and furniture to pay her bills. All the women had a wall or a table. Barrett had both.

Lauren, with her dimples and charm and wildly popular food blog, suggested, "I could adapt it for a slow-cooker. Weeknight-dinners-from-around-the-world post on *Field Trip*."

"What's wrong with Totchos?" Phoebe asked.

Barrett snorted and knew she'd had too much wine. Her tater tot loving girls were upstairs, running in and out of one another's rooms, slamming doors, all those arms and legs, hair and lips, breasts and breast buds, ovaries, petty cruelties and veiled desires. She dropped her face into her hands, noticed beneath the table a nest of detritus—yellow sock, pink hair scrunchy, lip balm, a crayon, her green belt—and, suddenly alert, as if responding to a smoke alarm, she thought, I have to get Sheila on birth control pills.

“My clients are reliving Me Too trauma,” Kat said. “How're you all handling the news?”

“If we're going to have this conversation, I need more wine.” Trina tapped her empty glass with her lavender nail. Soon two more bottles floated along the table.

“I bet everyone here has been threatened or abused by a man,” Kat said.

“Someone used to leave gardenias on my windshield when I was in my twenties,” Lauren said.

“That's the best you can do? A serial flower-leaver?” Pamela swirled wine in her glass.

“Anxiety is anxiety,” Kat said.

“No, listen. I'd leave a bar, the laundromat, or, I don't know, the derma-fucking-tologist and find a gardenia on my car. The first time there was a note too, about how beautiful I was. It went on for months. I was afraid to go out alone.” Lauren was beautiful, pale skin, blue eyes, curly black hair; she was a middle-aged National Velvet. “I hate gardenias.”

“I was trapped on a beach in a tiny, hidden cove. It was my first date after I came out.” Pamela leaned forward; the flickering light softened lines on her tan face. “We were skinny dipping.”

“You were frolicking!” Phoebe said.

Pamela sipped her wine, smiled. “Okay, we were frolicking. A man stood at the top of this rope ladder; it was the only way out. We couldn’t climb up because he was lurking, and we couldn’t walk off the beach. We had to press against the cliff and wait for him to leave, or we had to swim.”

“Two lesbian lovelies arriving naked from the ocean? It’s like a Greek myth,” Phoebe said, “or a Cheever story!”

“We were so scared.”

“How old were you?” Barrett asked.

“Sixteen? A family gave us towels and walked us to our car. We dated for about six months. She taught me to play tennis.”

Lauren laughed. “Of course she did!”

Pamela nodded, ticked up one side of her mouth, both sly and coy. “It all worked out, right?”

“Walking home from school,” Trina said, “a car slowed and followed me and my sisters. We turned away from our street because we were scared for him to see where we lived. The car kept following until finally this shirtless man called out, ‘*Chérie*.’ Then he held up his hand and squirted a stream of lotion into his palm.” Trina mimed jerking off.

The table erupted in disgusted laughter. “Even French men are gross,” Phoebe said.

“Not just gross. A few weeks later, our neighbor was raped.”

“Did they catch anyone?” Barrett asked. That wisp of anxious steam returned to her chest. How would her girls be safe in the world?

Trina shook her head. “We knew it was lotion-man.”

“My mother took me hitchhiking,” Phoebe said.

"Wait, your mother what?" Kat placed her hands flat on the table, leaned in.

Barrett and Lauren both nodded. They'd heard Phoebe's stories, hitchhiking, fasting for Thanksgiving, Phoebe's mother, high on mushrooms, falling from a tree in the middle of the night.

"The driver turned off down a dirt road, just to scare the shit out of us. I was ready to jump from the car, but he went back on the street." Phoebe swallowed the last of her wine. "And then there was the Quaalude in art school. Woke up in a hammock with my pants around my ankles and a boy on top of me."

Lauren tucked her hair behind her ear. "Me too. It was a shower, not a hammock, college, not art school, but the missing clothes, the boy, and the Quaalude? Same-same."

"My dad was the scary one. He used to wait on the porch with a breathalyzer and his belt," Kat said.

A quiet descended upon the table. Strangers, boyfriends, fathers. Everyone did have a story.

"This is more common than breast cancer," Kat said.

"What about you, Barrett?" Pamela asked.

#

They'd used fake IDs to get into the show. Barrett and her sister, Savannah, were under twenty-one and lithe. In the South, adults around a dinner table used words like *lithe*. They'd been listening to the album and blowing marijuana smoke out Savannah's bedroom window all winter. Now it was spring, tight pink blooms appeared on trees, dogwoods sprouted tender, nearly sheer green leaves, and the band was coming to a club in Athens. The sisters had no trouble lying to their parents. Savannah drove. She had no boyfriend at the time. Barrett told her boyfriend she

wanted a night with her sister, and he exacted a price, backing her up against the garage door, pressing lips to her neck, her chest, her mouth, unzipping his fly and pushing her down. “Break up with him!” Savannah told her.

The ramshackle club had dark walls covered with warped wainscoting, rows of distressed pews lined up before a small stage. Punch ladled from a white bucket into plastic cups—“swamp water” the color of Coca-Cola—cost a dollar. Savannah and Barrett sat up front, watching the band test mics. They had two drinks in quick succession, and before long they were laughing. Savannah flipped her head forward and back to achieve that Farrah Fawcett look. Barrett licked her finger and stroked her eyebrows like a cat. They swayed to the radio, waiting for the real music to start.

In line for the bathroom, there he was, the musician from the front of the album, smiling, fatter in person. He asked her name and told her, though she must have heard it before, that she was surely pretty. She told him how much she liked his album, that she and her sister listened to it every day. He said she had such a nice voice, did she sing? She laughed and then mentioned the marijuana, though she didn’t know why. When he pushed into the bathroom with her, she was surprised and uncomfortable, but she was also flattered and tipsy, so she said nothing. He was famous. Maybe he wanted to smoke marijuana with her? He neither asked nor offered, simply leaned against the wall and crossed his thick arms over his chest. His shirt sleeves were rolled up his hairless forearms. There was no stall in the tiny room. Just a toilet and a drain in the corner with a urinal cake, size of a scooter pie, that made the room smell too sweet. She reached around him for the doorknob. “I’m sorry, I can wait.”

He said she should just use the toilet. He'd seen plenty of women pee. She could have said, "Get out of my way!" She should have said, "Get out!" People on the other side of the door would have heard.

"Don't be shy," he said.

Barrett's heart ping-ponged. Scared and curious, she had three problems: She felt stupid. She couldn't pee in front of another person. And she was wearing the Norma Kamali with white polka dots, which required unzipping and lowering to her knees. He would see her bra, her stomach, her thighs. He just stood there, watching, waiting, breathing. She unzipped, peeled down her jumpsuit, and sat on the toilet. He talked about the city where he lived and her lovely skin, then he pushed off from the wall, stepped across the tiled room, and touched her shoulder. His fingers spider walked to her sternum and inside her bra, where he pinched her nipple. Her stomach knotted and she couldn't pee.

"Maybe you should leave?" she said.

Instead he turned the faucet to a slow trickle and waited, rubbing her nipple, sending shocks through her body while they listened to the water in the drain and then, finally, to the stream of her pee hitting the toilet water. "Nice." He lifted his hand from her body, ran it through his hair, leaned down, held his open mouth to the tap, his thick tongue lapped up water, which he swished and spit. "I'll dedicate a song to you, Barrett. Listen for it."

Washing her hands, she felt low-grade elation. He was famous. He'd chosen her. She'd let him in. She'd unzipped. She'd peed. It was creepy and she was unharmed. She wouldn't tell her sister.

Even still, the experience left her strangely exalted and ashamed. Whenever she heard the famous song, she felt as if she had a lump of half-chewed meat in her throat.

#

“What about you, Barrett?” Pamela asked again.

“If I ever wanted to go out with my friends, my boyfriend demanded blowjobs.”

“Did you break up with him?” Kat asked.

“It was easier to just do it.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Pamela smacked the table with her palm.

“Maybe she enjoyed giving blowjobs,” Trina said.

“Lucky Martin,” Phoebe said.

The table erupted in laughter again. But it was troubled, uneasy.

“I was only eighteen. Boyfriends gave you credibility.” No one heard Barrett in the laughter. Heat flared in her cheeks, and she was glad for the excuse of wine and spicy food. Hers was the only story that involved culpability.

“Do you think it will be like this for our girls?” Lauren asked.

“It’s like this for everyone but straight white men.” Pamela stabbed her fork into the soft candle wax.

“I bet Donald Trump was abused by his boarding school cronies,” Kat said.

“Not often enough,” Trina added.

“It’s fucking humans,” Lauren said. Everyone turned, surprised. Lauren was the glass half-full, jolly food person. “What?” she asked.

“That’s the second f-bomb from you tonight. Are you okay?” Pamela said.

“Well, it is—fucking humans. We’re all so mean to one another.”

“Who’s mean?” Martin appeared by Barrett’s chair, wrapped in cold air. “May I say, you are all quite the vision!”

“What about you, Martin?” Trina teased. “Have you ever felt threatened or abused?”

“I live with five women.”

“Ha, ha,” someone said.

“Doctor Cooperman in the house!” Phoebe said with her very bad Jewish accent. He’d delivered her sons.

“Not for long. I have rounds tonight.”

Barret brought his hand to her cheek. “You’re cold.”

“I was checking on the Porcine Mistress. She’s fine.”

“You know, Martin, Jews don’t keep pigs,” Trina said.

“What can I say. I have urges. For bacon.” He leaned down, spoke into Barrett’s hair.

“The girls are sleeping. Don’t wait up.”

“I have urges,” Barrett said. Though he’d already pulled away and through the goodbyes and laughter, no one heard and no one was curious. Her friends chatted in the soft light. Her husband smiled. Barrett held her wineglass against her lips, quietly closed her teeth, bit on its thin danger.

#

Once she'd double-checked that no candles were left burning, Barrett gripped the stair rail, headed up to make her rounds. Blankets and sheets were knotted around girl bodies, hair and arms flung across mattresses, sleeping faces were both sweet and troubled. Barrett slid Sheila’s phone from beneath her pillow. On the screen, a picture of a narwhal. What did that even mean? She set it face down on the dresser. Vanessa’s book light was still on. When Barrett lifted it from her bed, Vanessa mumbled, “I can so—” and rolled to her side. Zoë had burritoed herself in blankets on the floor near the cage for her new guinea pig, whom she'd named Sheila. Sheila!

Who used to leave her little sister hiding, not bothering to search in a game of hide and seek. That broke Barrett's heart. The mineral tang of the wine remains she'd just swallowed from the bottom of her friends' glasses, the too-sweet leftover pudding she'd just eaten alone in the dark kitchen, plus ire and recognition rose in her throat. She wanted to shake Zoë. Stop. Don't buy into the big female secret of wanting and not getting. Stand up for yourself or someday you'll explode. She knelt, licked her shaking finger to smooth her daughter's eyebrows apart from each other.

River slept sideways on her bed, mouth breathing, Pony by her head. Barrett stroked her cheek, picked up Pony by his blue mane. River was the daughter she most feared and admired. Sheila had it down, the business of being a teenager, the clothes, the songs, the perfect mix of conformity and aloof detachment. Vanessa, like her father, was happy anywhere as long as she had one good friend or a book. Zoë worried about everyone else while River spread herself wide, no apologies, no prisoners. If her girls were rolled into one person, she would be perfect.

The security light in the garden tripped on. At the window, she half expected to see the shadow of an intruder. When the musician followed her into the bathroom, she'd been agitated, fearful, sure, but also wanting. She wanted him gone, and she wanted him to want her, wanted his rough finger on her breast. That's why the song still upset her. She was ashamed of her failure to either push back or participate. She was ashamed that she couldn't tell her friends the story tonight. If a man followed adult River into the bathroom, she would own her curiosity or she'd scream, Sheila too. Vanessa would have taekwondo moves. Zoë would quietly comply. Oh hell damn-it! Barrett wanted all her daughters to either reach for it or rage against it. Something lurched in the garden, heavy, darker than the night. Esmerelda, probably gnashing her teeth, unwanted and indifferent. Barrett raised Pony. "Bang," she whispered.

“Mom?” Sheila was in the doorway, rankled and sleepy, lit from behind. “What are you shooting?”

“Nothing. The pig.”

Sheila pointed her phone at Barrett. “Did you touch my phone?”

She brought her finger to her lips. “Yes, I moved the brain cancer machine from beneath your head to your dresser.”

“Don’t touch my phone.”

“No phones under pillows. I’m sorry.” The only thing she was sorry about, was that she had to listen to Sheila gripe.

“Nobody gets privacy in this house.”

Barrett leveled her chin, slitted her eyes. She was electric. Swiftly, faltering, she strode toward Sheila, hammering the air with Pony. “Did you know? Did you ever imagine that I might like privacy?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Sheila took one step back. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She felt the lying sting behind her eyes. “Nothing is wrong with me.” She looked at her hand, gripping Pony, shaking. How did she never realize the sting before tears was the same as the sting before milk lets down, the same sting when you could finally pee?

“Mom.” Sheila’s tone was both frightened and irate. “Are you drunk?”

“I could be.”

“This isn’t appropriate,” Sheila said. “You’re freaking me out. I’m your kid.”

“I think, Sugar, I think you overestimate my maturity level.”

“Don’t touch my phone.” And then, as if she’d willed it, Sheila’s phone buzzed with a text and she was gone. Barrett fired Pony at the space where she stood. She fired Pony at the two

sleeping girls and then fired Pony at her own head. “Bang.” There. Now she’d committed a Pony massacre.

#

Bedroom doors opened and closed. Martin checking on the girls. Barrett was no longer drunk and not yet hungover; morning and a headache would both come for her. She'd have to apologize to Sheila and somehow explain. Another door closed, and Barrett let the magazine fall to her chest. She deepened and slowed her breathing, pretending sleep. Martin entered their room, discarding his clogs, removing his scrubs. Tenderly he lifted glasses from her face. Barrett sighed. Naked and tired, she wanted to tell him about her complicated desires. She wanted his hands on her body. She reached for his wrist.