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Taddeo
Animal

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of grenades
exploding'

Marion Keyes

'A raging, funny
and fierce thriller'

Financial Times

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LISA TADDEO is the author of *Three Women*, which she is currently adapting for a television series with Showtime. *Three Women* was both a *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* number one bestseller, the most-picked book of the year in the UK in 2019, the British Book Awards Narrative Non-Fiction Book of the Year and the Foyles Non-Fiction Book of the Year. She is one of a select few authors to have published both fiction and non-fiction in *Playboy*, alongside Margaret Atwood, Vladimir Nabokov, Kingsley Amis and Norman Mailer, and she is also working on television projects with Netflix and Annapurna Pictures. She lives with her husband and daughter in New England.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Three Women

**Lisa
Taddeo
Animal**

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

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For my mother and my father

I

I drove myself out of New York City where a man shot himself in front of me. He was a gluttonous man and when his blood came out it looked like the blood of a pig. That's a cruel thing to think, I know. He did it in a restaurant where I was having dinner with another man, another *married* man. Do you see how this is going? But I wasn't always that way.

The restaurant was called Piadina. On the exposed brick walls hung photographs of old Italian women rolling gnocchi across their giant floured fingers. I was eating a bowl of tagliatelle Bolognese. The sauce was thick and rust-colored and there was a bright sprig of parsley at the top.

I was facing the door when Vic came in. He was wearing a suit, which was usual. I'd seen him only once in casual clothes, a t-shirt and jeans, and it disturbed me very much. I'm sure he could tell. His arms were pale and soft and I couldn't stop looking at them.

He was never Victor. He was always Vic. He was my boss, and for a long time before anything happened, I looked up to him. He was very intelligent and clean and had a warm face. He ate and drank voraciously but there

was a dignity to his excess. He was generous, scooping creamed spinach onto everyone else's plate before his own. He had a great vocabulary and a neat comb-over and an extensive collection of fine hats. He had two children, a girl and a boy; the boy was mentally challenged, and Vic somewhat kept this from me and the other people beneath him. He had only a picture of the daughter on his desk.

Vic took me to hundreds of restaurants. We ate porter-house at big clubby steakhouses with red banquettes and the waiters flirted with me. They either assumed he was my father or my older husband or they figured I was a mistress. We were, somehow, all of the above. His actual wife was at home in Red Bank. He said, I know you won't believe this because of what a slob I am, but my wife is actually very beautiful. In fact, she was not. Her hair was too short for her face and her skin was too white for the colors she liked to wear. She looked like a good mother. She liked to buy little salt dishes and Turkish towels, and in the beginning of our friendship, I would walk around the city and if a bamboo salt dish caught my eye I would snap a photo and text him, *Would your wife like?*

He said I had wonderful taste, but what does that mean?

It can feel very safe to be friends with an older man who admires you. Anywhere you are, if something goes wrong, you can make a phone call and the man will come. The man who comes should be your father, but I didn't have one at that time and you will never.

At a certain point I began to rely on Vic for everything. We worked at an advertising firm. He was creative

director. I had virtually no experience when I started, but I had this talent, he said. He promoted me from a regular assistant to copywriter. At first I enjoyed all the praise and then I started to feel like I deserved everything I got, that he had nothing to do with it. It took a few years for that to happen. In the interim we started up a sexual relationship.

I can tell you a lot about sex with a man to whom you are not attracted. It becomes all about your own performance, your own body and how it looks on the outside, the way it moves above this man who, for you, is only a spectator.

While it was happening I wasn't aware of how it was affecting me. I didn't notice until several years later, when three showers a day were not enough.

The very first time was in Scotland. Our company had landed an account with Newcastle beer and Vic suggested I take the lead, go to all the meetings and get the ball rolling. It was a big account and the rest of the guys were jealous. I was new to the company and the work in general. They stopped flirting with me and began to act like I was an exotic dancer, jerking themselves off and judging me at the same time.

Newcastle put me up in this luxurious hotel just outside of Edinburgh. It was cold stone and big windows, and the front entrance was a circular gravel drive. I would look out my window to see the cars that came through, old antiques and bright black G-wagons and small silver Porsches. There was a tartan quilt on the bed and the phone was a mallard duck. The room was fourteen hundred dollars a night.

I'd been in Scotland for about a week when I began to feel blue. I was used to being alone but it's different in another country. The sun never came out but neither did the rain. Plus I was very naive about the work and the Newcastle representatives could see that. I called Vic at the office. I didn't mean to, but I began to cry. I said that I missed my father. Of course I missed my mother, too. But in a very different way, and you'll come to understand why.

Vic was in Scotland the next evening. His last-minute flight had been exorbitant, upward of twelve thousand dollars, and he paid out of his own pocket because I was terrified that our colleagues would think I'd failed. He didn't come to any meetings. He just drew up some talking points. He got his own room down the hall. The first night we had dinner and drinks in the hotel lobby and each went to our separate rooms. But the second night he walked me back to mine.

Smart older men will have a way of crawling up your leg. It won't feel seedy at first and it might seem like it was your idea.

I was wearing a cream wool dress and my legs were bare. I never wore pantyhose or leggings of any kind, even in winter. I wore black Mary Jane heels.

Vic wore a suit. He was perennially dressed like the men in cigarette advertisements. I wasn't attracted to him but I was comforted by his cologne. We were laughing, walking down that green and gold hallway. A couple passed us and I remember the way the woman looked at me. I've gone around with that feeling for a long time.

In my room we opened two medium-size bottles of red wine from the minibar, plus three airplane bottles of Scotch that he drank all on his own.

Probably out of self-preservation, I can't remember exactly how it got started. I'm sure I had a lot to do with it, testing the reach of my sexual power. The extent of my prettiness. But what I remember starkly is the mirror on the wall opposite the windows where I'd listened for days to the sleek cars crunching the gravel. I got up to look in the mirror because he'd said the red wine was in the corner of my lips and I looked like a crackhead. Haha, I said. But that man could never have made me feel ugly.

He came up behind me in the mirror. His head was abnormally large next to mine. My long dark hair made an elegant contrast against the cream of the dress. He placed one hand on my shoulder and the other against my hair, near the ear, tipping my head to one side. I watched the look in his eye as he touched his thin lips to my neck. It sent a shiver down my spine, partly in repulsion, but there was also an involuntary sexual response. He lifted the dress over my head. I stood in heels and a white lace bra and white underwear with little red bows at the sides. I was dressing for someone in those days and I liked to believe it was me. Once, in a little kitchen store in SoHo, I bought an apron with printed rabbits and chalets and little girls licking ice cream cones.

Thereafter came the trips to Sayulita, to Scottsdale for the nice spa. There were blue-tiled bathrooms and wonderful sushi. Tableside guacamole, belly dancers, valet everything.

Eventually I grew too disgusted, but for a long time I managed. There wasn't much physicality overall. You can get away with a lot of nothing if you play it right. Especially if the man is married, you can talk about morality and what your dead father would think. You can make the man feel trepidation to merely hold your hand and all the while you are in these warm places with palm trees and golf carts.

I didn't stop dating all those years. There were a few minor obsessions but no one truly serious. I told Vic about some of them. I said they were friends and I let him balance the suspicions in his head. But mostly I lied. I would say I was going out with girlfriends and then sneak from the office and run toward a subway, looking back the whole time, terrified he'd followed me. Then I would meet some unkind boy and Vic would go home and patrol the Internet looking for signs of me on social media. He would write me around eleven, *Watcha up to kid*. He didn't use a question mark so it would look less inquisitive. You begin to understand human nature at a cellular level when an older man is obsessed with you.

The status quo was manageable. We were both getting what we needed, though I could have done without him. It turned out he could not do without me. He likened his relationship with me to Icarus. He was Icarus and I was the sun. Lines like these, which I wholly believed and still do, made me sick to my stomach. What kind of a girl wants to be a sun over a country she doesn't even want to visit.

ANIMAL

Everything was fine for a number of years, until the man from Montana. I called him Big Sky and, in the beginning, so did Vic. I sent Vic to the depths of what a man can stand. I don't recommend you do it, and you should know what it does to a human being.

I think Vic came to shoot *me* that night, is what I think.

2

If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, *depraved* is the one I would use. The depravation has been useful to me. Useful to what end, I couldn't say. But I have survived the worst. *Survivor* is the second word I'd use. A dark death thing happened to me when I was a child. I will tell you all about it, but first I want to tell what followed the evening that changed the course of my life. I'll do it this way so that you may withhold your sympathy. Or maybe you won't have any sympathy at all. That's fine with me. What's more important is dispelling several misconceptions—about women, mostly. I don't want you to continue the cycle of hate.

I've been called a whore. I've been judged not only by the things I've done unto others but, cruelly, by the things that have happened to me.

I envied the people who judged me. Those who lived their lives in a neat, predictable manner. The right college, the right house, the right time to move to a bigger one. The prescribed number of children, which sometimes is two and other times is three. I would bet that most of those people had not been through one percent of what I had.

But what made me lose my mind was when those people called me a sociopath. Some even said it like it was a positive. I am someone who believes she knows which people should be dead and which should be alive. I am a lot of things. But I am not a sociopath.

When Vic shot a hole in himself, the blood leaked out like liquor. I hadn't seen blood like that since I was ten years old. It opened a portal. I saw the reflection of my past in that blood. I saw the past clearly, for the first time. The cops came to the restaurant looking horny. Everyone had been cleared out of the place. The man I'd been eating with asked me if I would be okay. He was putting his jacket on. He meant would I be okay alone tonight and for the rest of my life because I would never see him again. Once he'd asked me who my group was and I didn't know what he meant and now I did. The dead man on the floor was my group. I was part of a group that Dartmouth didn't recognize. After the cops left I walked home to my apartment. I thought I had no carbohydrates in the house, but I found a taco kit. The worst thing about eating too much is that you need more Klonopin than usual. I got just high enough to be decisive. I decided I was going to find her.

Vic was probably cold by then. I pictured his cold tentacles. When someone suffocates you with what they believe is love, even as you feel your air supply being cut off, you at least feel embraced. When Vic died, I was completely alone. I didn't have the energy to make someone else love me. I was inert. *Vuota*. A word my mother would have used. She always had the best words.

There was one person left. A woman I'd never met. This was terrifying because women had never loved me. I was not a woman whom other women love. She lived in Los Angeles, a city I didn't understand. Mauve stucco, criminals, and glitter.

I didn't think Alice—that was her name—would love me, but I hoped she would at least want to see me. I'd known her name for years. I was almost positive that she didn't know mine. For the first time in a long time I was going somewhere for a reason. I had no idea how it would go in California. I didn't know if I would fuck or love or hurt someone. I knew I'd wait for a call. I knew I would be rabid. I had zero dollars but didn't rule out the prospect of a swimming pool. There were many paths my journey could take. I didn't think any of them would lead me to murder.

She'd been untraceable for years, no social media, no real estate transactions. Once in a while I would look for her. But I had too little information, on top of which I was scared to death.

Then one afternoon I went to a dentist because two of my teeth had been knocked out. A man had done it but not technically with violence. It was an expensive dentist but the man responsible for the loss of the teeth was paying for it.

I waited in reception for over an hour, flipping through one of those aspirational magazines for people who make over five million dollars a year. There she was, on the

cover, with four other pretty women who were the best of fitness, Ashtanga, aikido, and so on, in Los Angeles.

I was so drawn to her looks that I read the article and saw her name, which I'd kept on a slip of paper for over a decade. I gasped, and air whistled through the hole between my teeth.

She was prettier than I ever could have imagined. Her breasts were absolutely perfect. An old boyfriend—not a boyfriend but one of those purveyors of multiple and uncertain mornings—once said that of an actress who'd bared her breasts for a scene. Her breasts, he said to me while eating cheap vanilla ice cream, are absolutely perfect. I am still impressed that I didn't kill him.

For years I'd dreamed of her. Oftentimes I dreamed of hurting her. The rest of the time it was something else, equally worrisome.

Within days of Vic's death, my apartment was cleaned out. I was an expert at leaving. I didn't know where I would live. I called about a few rentals near her place of work. But I was low on money and there weren't too many options in my budget. It got so bad that I called a place off of a rental site whose main photo was a bathroom with mold in the grout, a bottle of Selsun Blue in the stall shower, and nothing else.

I mapped out a quixotic, impractical route and drove my Dodge Stratus to California. It was a very ugly car but large, and I was able to fit many things inside. My mother's jewelry in a taupe tin. My best dresses, each

sheathed in plastic and folded over the passenger seat. There were my Derrida and photographs and menus from restaurants where I'd spent memorable evenings. Essential oils from a holy place in Florence. A shallot of marijuana, a pipe, ninety-six pills of varying shapes and shades of cream and blue. Very expensive copper yoga pants and mustard bralettes. Boxes of smoked Maldon and twenty squat cartons of pasta, which I'd heard they did not carry at the Ralphs or the Vons. I took the things that could come with only me, that could not be trusted to travel under anyone else's care. My favorite scarf, my panama hat. My Diane Arbus. My mother and my father.

They were both in plastic baggies. It was the safest way I could think for them to travel. The baggies were in an old cardboard clementine box on the floor of the passenger seat. My father used to call me Clementine, or he would sing the song, in any case. Maybe he did both. He had a goatee and when he kissed my forehead I felt like an angel.

There were eighty million cars on the Pacific Coast Highway. The sun on their hoods made it feel even hotter than it was. The beach looked dry in the distance, more shimmering surface than cool blue depth. Just before the turnoff into the canyon I noticed an outdoor market with furniture and decoration for sale, hollowed oaks made into tables, the heads of gods rendered in resin.

I pulled in because I wanted new vases for the ashes. I'd thrown out the old ones. Naturally it was awful for me, the idea of carrying their remains in baggies, but I was infinitely more shattered by the remnants in the vases

that hadn't made it. I kept thinking that parts of them were gone forever. A toenail might have lingered in a vase. One third of a brow bone.

I got out of the Dodge and walked past hurricane candleholders. I drew a slash in the bushy dust of a gazing ball. I passed topaz seahorses, Mexican sugar skulls, aquamarine sea glass in rope nets.

I was approached by a round-faced boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt in all that heat.

—Miss, he said, how I can help? His happy smile made him seem ignorant to everything going on in the world.

—You can't, I said. I said it kindly, but by that point in my life I had a very low tolerance for unhelpful conversation.

The marketplace shared its parking lot with Malibu Feed Bin. Seed for birds, vats of grain for horses. There were lots of horses in the canyon. Women with long braids rode them over rocks. I picture you being one of these, taller than me, stately in all aspects.

There were vases inside the shed next to some hanging petunias and dusty roses. One vase was black with yellow blooms. A glass frog with orange eyes and feet hung from the lip, peering in. It was vulgar, something you'd find in an elderly person's house in Florida. I was attracted to it.

The young man at the cash register noticed me and then didn't take his eyes off of me. I was in a white nightgown-ish dress, thin as smoke. He was picking a pimple on his chin and staring at me. There are a hundred such small rapes a day.

I picked up the vase and walked around with it, pretending to appraise outdoor pillows and jade foo dogs. The acned clerk got a phone call. I could hear the other boy behind me, moving seahorses from one place to another. People rarely think you will steal something larger than your own head.

With the vase in the car, I felt like I had all the important pieces I needed. The movers were meeting me at the house with the balance. A truckload of pieces I'd sat upon. I began the climb up the canyon. Wilted dark greens rose from the sandy cracks between the rocks. There were hot bushes, maiden-hair ferns, false indigo, and bent grass. There were occasional splashes of color, but mostly it was brown and olive and untidy beyond expectation. The houses I could see from the road were 1970s-style structures built of campfire wood and smudged glass. They looked out over the rattlers and the tanned grass. The view in the canyon was important. The realtor, Kathi, kept saying the word over and over. *View*. Eventually it stopped sounding like a word I knew.

She also talked about the coyotes and the rattlesnakes. But don't worry, she said. On the phone she sounded red-haired and pretty. Don't worry, Kevin likes to catch the rattlers and move them to a happier place, no problem.

Kevin was the former rap star who lived on the property. I wonder if he will mean anything to you. Relevance is fleeting. There was also a young man named River who lived in a yurt in the meadow. The landlord lives nearby,

said the realtor. In case there are any issues. You are going to love it there. It's fucking heaven.

I climbed the winding road until I saw the sign for Comanche Drive. I was filled with terror because already the street didn't look charming. It was treeless and the house was at the top of a steep gravel driveway. It was the highest point of Topanga Canyon, nearly piercing the clouds. Mostly it looked like someplace to make meth.

There was no formal parking area, so I pulled up beside a black Dodge Charger on a strip of land overlooking a steep drop. Up close, the property resembled the pictures the realtor sent but not in the ways that counted. The realtor sent the dream. She sent the view through the glass windows plus the pellet stove. She did not send the rusted bathtub outside the front door that was filled with browned succulents. Next to the bathtub planter there was a wrought-iron table with two chairs. The ginger sand was scattered with pebbles so neither the table nor the chairs stood evenly. The windows were moth-skinned. The house was dark orange adobe and shaped like an ocean liner. There was nothing attractive about its design, nothing symmetrical. Both outside and inside it was the kind of hot that kills the old. When I think of you being alone in heat like that—the way that I would come to be—I have to force myself to think of something else.

I'd been instructed to knock on Kevin's door. His place was a somewhat-attached structure beneath mine. I suppose it was a house with two apartments, but it didn't

read that way. Kevin would give me the keys. His stage name was the White Space. The realtor, Kathi, spoke of him the way that a certain type of white woman speaks of a Black man who's achieved fame.

Before knocking I took a walk around the property. Kathi was right. The view was theatrical. Every time we spoke I pictured her at an outdoor table in the sun, nibbling gravlax. I felt sure that if I got to know her, I would hate her.

Beneath the mountain you could see the ocean and on the other side of the canyon the slim rectangles of the city rising behind the trees. The skyline was underwhelming. I walked to the tallest point of the property. It was miles above the car-phoned traffic. There was a delicate mist that must have been the clouds. When I was ten, my aunt Gosia told me that was where my parents were. Up in the clouds. But are they together up there? I would ask, and she would get up to wash a dish, or shut a window.

There was a large firepit at the highest point. It looked medieval with its big rocks and charred wood. There was a giant store of firewood under a black tarp. A Michelob beer bottle filled with rainwater.

I noticed the canvas yurt in the valley a few hundred feet below me. Down a grassy path in the other direction there was a small red saltbox. It looked like a glorified potting shed, something you bought at a home improvement store but larger and more elaborate. It was the only area with grass on the property, on account of the oaks. Everywhere else the ground was dry nut brown, but around that big potting shed it was moist and green. There were two flower

boxes full of marigolds flanking a Dutch door. I worried the tiny home belonged to the landlord. I didn't want to be so close to him. But Kathi hadn't mentioned that sort of proximity. Not at all.

I peeled the dress away from my body and it clung back down with the gum of my sweat. I would come to learn there was no respite from taking a shower in the Canyon. It was a matter of moments before you turned a t-shirt translucent.

I knocked on Kevin's door. I heard some bluesy rap and after a few moments I knocked again, louder. He cracked it just a quarter of the way, then blocked the view with his frame. It smelled like tinctures inside.

—Miss Joan, peace and welcome to the neighborhood. He was very tall and good-looking and his eyes were friendly. He didn't look at me. He looked through me like I was barely there.

I extended a hand and he stepped outside and closed the door behind him. I'd seen him onstage, crouching with a mike. Strobes and girls in Lycra short shorts. The man in front of me looked like he'd never spoken loudly or danced.

—How was the drive?

I said that it was good.

—Man, I love that drive. It's been too long. Planes trip me out.

He made wings of his long arms. By now my scalp had begun to sweat.

—Planes trip me out, too.

—You want your keys, I imagine? You need some help moving some things?

—I've got movers coming, thanks.

—All right, all right. I ain't got no lemonade to offer. I didn't bake no meringue pies. But I'll get something to you. This is gonna be nice. You'll like it here, Miss Joan. We like it here. We're like a small family. You met my man Leonard? My boy River?

—Nobody.

—Whoosh, he said. The lady swoops in—his palm dove down and sliced by my waist—under cover of night. I'mma get your keys, Miss Joan. Let you get settled. Let you get your house in order.

When he returned, he handed me two keys held together by a twist tie.

—Mailbox, he said, pointing to one. House, he said, pointing to the other. No, wait, other way around. He laughed delightedly. I'm all turned 'round today. Forgive me, Miss Joan. I recorded all night. I do that and then sleep all afternoon. This is five a.m. for me.

I took my keys and our hands touched and I shivered and I thought, oh for God's sake. I looked at him and he considered me; I could see him taking my measurements. Then he smiled. He was over it.

Along the drive I had been wanting to sleep with a real cowboy, someone without social media. Sex made me feel pretty. By the time I reached Texas the trip was almost over. The man I fucked was named John Ford. He wore a western shirt and placed my palm over his zipper in the

lobby of the Thunderbird. The walls were aqua and there were cowhides on the floor. He said he'd once worked on a ranch. But it turned out to be a Boy Scout trip he remembered like it was yesterday. He was in liquor sales out of Chicago. He'd never heard of the film director who shared his name. Or Monument Valley, where the films were made, the soaring westerns I watched with my mother. He belched twice, too loud to ignore, and ordered the flatbread pizza with balsamic onions. But his name was John Ford.

3

Inside the house it smelled of toothpicks. What is it about moving into a new place that makes you want to kill yourself? I imagine this isn't true for women with labeled boxes. Women who own flyswatters, who store their winter clothes for the summer. Me, I had my mother's eyelash curler. I had old yellow lotions from stores that no longer existed. My unpacked boxes would stay unpacked. Full of mementos, full of smells and especially the pungent odor of the mothballs my mother placed inside her handbags. As a child I thought they were balls of crystal.

The house was a giant sauna, three floors of all wood. It could have been beautiful. It was, in a way. But as with many run-down places that had potential, you needed to bring a skill to it. The ability to position certain rugs and lamps. You had to not mind dirt in places you couldn't get to. I imagined Alice to be one of these people.

The first floor was made up of the kitchen and the living room and the only bathroom. In the living room the black pellet stove was filled with lilac crystals instead of wood. The side of the house that faced the mouth of the canyon was all windows. In the photographs the realtor sent me, there was a towering ficus and assorted singed palms. But

without the plants the sun was white-hot and despotic. It illuminated the dust in the sockets of the outlets.

There was no dishwasher and none of the cabinets lined up with one another. The insides of the drawers were sticky, as though honey had been mopped up with plain water. I wouldn't be able to cook long, lovely meals in there. Steaming bowls of mussels or crackling hens. It was a kitchen for turkey sandwiches. I once had a boyfriend from Ireland who would make these schoolboy sandwiches with old tomatoes and cheap turkey, slicked in gloss and full of nitrates. He would leave the turkey out on the counter after making the sandwiches, and in the morning it would still be there and then he would put it away.

I was reminded of that boyfriend in my new kitchen. The notion of making do. The first night we made love it was so hot in his railroad apartment that he was sweating profusely above me. The sweat dripped off the paintbrush ends of his hair onto my face and chest.

The second floor was supposed to be a bedroom. You reached it via a spiral staircase. There was only enough room for the bed. There was a small pine closet. It looked like Colorado in the bedroom. There was an old western saddle slung over a beam. I could picture a different life, Rossignol skis lining the walls.

I climbed a short attic staircase to the third floor, which had been advertised as an office. There was makeshift shelving left over from a former tenant, a few old record sleeves dredged in sand and hair. It felt like walking into

a steam room. By that time droplets were falling from my underarms and plinking the floor.

I sat down on my thin white dress. I could feel the splinters of the wood pricking the silk and knew that when I got up, the dress would be ruined. I'd worn it across the country, washed it once in Terre Haute and again in Marfa, in the sink of John Ford's hotel room. I'd pulled it on wet that morning and let it bake dry against my skin in the sun. It was my mother's dress. She'd kept it for so many years in mint condition.

A silverfish sprinkled across my kneecap and then someone banged on the door. I ran downstairs and opened the door to two broad men in black shirts and denim shorts. I always thought, If I had to fuck one man in the room, to save my life. If I had to be ground down. Which would it be?

With these two, I couldn't tell which was safer. The one with a neck tattoo looked like a man who lets a dog hump his leg until one day somebody sees, so he has to shoot the dog.

They asked me where I wanted certain things. When they saw the spiral staircase, the one with the neck tattoo grunted. For the first few minutes they made me feel alternately like a rich old lady and a babysitter. I didn't want to be either.

The second man, the one with a gold front tooth, looked from my eyes to my breasts so often that I thought he had a tic. I wasn't wearing a bra, so my nipples poked out, looking like whelks. I don't know why these thoughts came

to me, but I pictured myself being bent and raped by the one with the gold tooth over the shallow sink. I reasoned that I might then feel comfortable asking him to build my IKEA furniture.

Halfway through the move I realized that the men were doing meth in my bathroom. They were going in one after the other, every thirty minutes, and coming out like goblin versions of themselves. I wonder what to tell you about drugs. I took pills and I smoked marijuana and there were monthlong stretches here and there when I blew coke alone at night. I would snort it off of my mother's antique makeup mirror with a five-hundred-dollar bill of Monopoly money. Then I would stay up until three and four, buying dresses online. But mostly it was pills. I wasn't strong enough to get through life without being able to go to sleep on command. Maybe you won't need to take pills. I dream that you'll be so much stronger. One time on an island I swam in a green lagoon and saw through the clearness of the water the simple fact of my limbs. I watched the purple, red, and blue fish moving around my body and I paddled to keep myself afloat for a long time. Afterward, I lay down on the sand and concentrated on the sun warming my kneecaps and my shoulders. I can count moments like that on my hands. My dream is for you to have many such moments, so many that you notice only the times you slip into your own brain and recognize those instances for the traps that they are.

In the living room, while the men brought in heavy things, groaning, angry about the weight of my life,

I shook my father into the frog vase and placed it on top of the pellet stove. For the time being I left my mother in the baggie beside it.

I walked around the place looking for interesting things. But the refrigerator was the kind you couldn't put imposing bundles of romaine in. It wasn't for kale or stocking beets. At best, bags of peeled baby carrots. There was barely room in the pantry for all of my pasta and the cartons of College Inn broth. As a child I'd had a girlfriend whose parents were nineteenth-century poor. They had a pantry full of old food in boxes brought by ladies from the church. One night when I was over, the mother opened a package of macaroni and cheese to find milk-colored maggots slipping around, tinkling the dry elbows. The mother picked over the pasta, tossing the maggots in the sink, and turned on the hot water to melt them. Later my friend looked at me across the table with bright, wet eyes. The family said grace and I tucked my chin and pretended to close my eyes but kept them instead on my plate, watching for movement. My dear friend's hand in mine was small and warm. After that night we never played again. It was early enough in the relationship that it didn't feel, at the time, like a wound. But now I think about her all the time. I think about her every time I open a box of pasta.

—Where you want this? asked the one with the neck tattoo. The movers were holding my burgundy Ploum loveseat, an armless velour nest that Vic gave to me. He'd had me on it more than once. That was the point of many gifts.

I wanted it on the third floor, but the movers were sweating. The beads of sweat glistened on their foreheads like those maggots.

I shook my oily hair out of a ponytail and rubbed my shoulder.

—You're clearly very strong, but it's probably impossible to get that up to the third floor?

—Nothin's impossible, said the one with the gold tooth.

I smiled and thanked him. I fluttered my eyelids. It was something I actually did. Then I turned and moved sensually toward the kitchen. I don't think there's anything wrong with using sex. I know some people think that there is, but I don't understand why. I'd been coached by my aunt Gosia. Gosia wasn't my aunt by blood; she was my father's brother's second wife. She was Austrian and garishly beautiful—blond pompadour, black Dolce & Gabbana suits, excessive filler. She trained me in the art of sexual combat. She told me that women must deploy all their strengths in order to prevail. People will call you names, she said. They are only hating themselves.

As they moved past me with the couch, I saw the lightened spot where I'd scrubbed Vic's semen off. At first it was revolting but lately it had become a faded badge.

—Yo, you know the White Space lives under you? said the neck tattoo.

I told him that I did.

—Fuckin sick, said the one with the gold tooth. What kind place is this? Some artist commune 'n shit?

—I have no idea, I said. The men had become very ugly to me. I looked out the windows, wishing again I had moved someplace where it snowed, with big yellow Bobcats that roared down blizzardy Ketchum mornings. I loved headlights in snowstorms. But I had come to Los Angeles for a reason. I'd stayed in New York for too long when I should have tried to find Alice. New York is a lie, I will tell you. Each city is its own lie, but New York is a whopper. I don't expect you to listen about that. Everyone needs to learn it in their own time.

The men noticed I'd stopped playing. Men are never okay when you stop. I had the fear of angering a man. Of not being an amenable woman. I had the fear of being murdered. To assuage the guilt that I didn't follow up the flirtation by fucking them, I gave the movers each a tip of fifty dollars. I wondered if they had to buy their meth or if it was something to cook in an oxidized Airstream. I pictured them eating oyster crackers from the soup counters of gloomy grocery stores in the Valley.

There had been times in my life when I didn't think of a hundred dollars as anything. But when those fifties left my hand, my forehead grew hot. I felt the familiar fear. There was a month when I drove to a gas station every night and bought scratch-off tickets from the lottery vendor. I scratched them off under a bug lamp next to the air pressure machine. I used a dime because it had ridges. One spring evening I won fifty dollars and it made me feel like I could run for office.

I'd considered not tipping the movers, saying I had no cash on hand, that I would send something along in the

mail. I thought, with some perverse relief, that if things got terrible anytime soon, if I couldn't find work, I might perform blow jobs on the burgundy Ploum. I could sit the pizza deliveryman down, and the propane guy, separate their giant knees, and let them depress my head like a flush valve.

4

I knew where to find Alice, but you should never engage a stranger until you understand her world. Don't let anyone have an advantage.

I drove to Froggy's, which was built on the sharpest curve of Topanga Canyon Boulevard. Kathi had told me it was where the locals went. It was a bar and a music venue and a fish market. It was decorated like a Mexican restaurant under the sea. They sold oysters on the half shell, steamers in nets, tacos with carnitas, coconut-crust ed tilapia. I sat near the stage where live music played on the weekends. I ordered shrimp quesadillas to have a plate of food in front of me. I drank a Bloody Mary. It was the only thing stronger than wine that I liked. Perhaps it was the way the thickness of the tomato quieted the vodka, or perhaps it was because my father had ordered them. I used to eat the celery from his, the pimiento-stuffed olives.

There was an old couple at a nearby table with their thirtysomething son who looked like he had cerebral palsy. His hair was trimmed into a crew cut and when he stood his limbs jangled like a puppet's. His father helped him to the bathroom. His mother, a pale and pretty woman in her fifties with glazed eyes, sat at the table when her men had

gone and squeezed a lemon into a Coke. There was someone, I thought, who might understand me.

I watched a career waitress say to the bartender, You have to take my tables. I gotta go back there. I'm gonna be some time. Somethin didn't agree with me.

The waitress ran into the kitchen, her gray ponytail thwapping behind her. Now that I was looking in that direction, I saw the next wrong thing sitting at the bar with dirty-blond hair and light eyes the color of blue hydrangea. He looked back at me and smiled and then suddenly he was smiling more and walking over.

—Hey, he said, I saw you walking out to your car before, at the house. I would have come over, but I was.

He didn't finish his sentence. He was one of the sexiest men I'd met in person. He didn't have to do anything except not be cruel.

—Sorry. I'm River. I live in the yurt. You must be Joan.

—Must be, I said, biting my lip inside my brain.

—Mind if I sit?

He was twenty-two, I'd been told by Kathi, who also called him eye candy. He had pink cheeks and his bottom lip was thick and I thought I'd learned my lesson. He'd brought his mug of beer with him. His demeanor was gentle but indifferent, the gutting indifference of the young.

I said, I don't mind, even though he'd already begun to sit down. "Werewolves of London" was playing. Behind his head a great silver and blue marlin hung from the wall. He asked what had brought me to California, and I said, Acting. That was what I was telling everyone so they

would leave me alone. I figured there was enough shame associated with trying to be an actress in one's late thirties that they wouldn't press me.

River liked Japanese folk tales. He sold solar panels to celebrities in the Canyon. The company was owned by a couple of bros in Santa Monica and they'd promised him a stake. He drove the work truck during the week and on the weekends he had his fixed-speed. If he went out with friends they'd pick him up. They'd drive all the way into the Canyon from West Hollywood or downtown LA or Culver and they'd head down to Bungalow and drink whiskey near the water. Last week he'd sold a bundle to Lisa Bonet. Her hair was all cornrows and she was in raw silks. She had hundreds of children around her and they kept goats and the children drank the milk of the goats. River tasted it and said it was the flavor of grass.

—How do you get home at night, from the bars in Hollywood? I asked him. Kathi had told me there were no real taxis that went from Hollywood up to the Canyon. Or if they did, they were hundreds of dollars.

—Usually I don't come back up here, he said. And of course I knew what that meant.

River was from Nebraska. He talked about hunting deer with his father and selling the meat to local purveyors.

—Where I'm from, he said, they sell deer meat at the gas stations. You can pay at the pump and someone will walk out a big bag of meat.

I pictured the bloody bag and the snow falling at a gas station on a country road. He leaned back in his chair and

rested one foot on the bottom rung of my seat. He was wearing very light jeans that I don't think were in style. You will always meet a new kind of man just when you thought you'd exhausted the supply.

“Werewolves of London” played again. Something must have been stuck in the system.

—Good thing I like this song, I said.

He laughed in a way that meant he'd never heard it. Sometimes I dreamed of being married to Warren Zevon, eating drugs with him at Joshua Tree and curry out of stained boxes in the rains of Shoreditch.

—Have you met Lenny? he asked.

—No.

—He's an odd duck. He lost his wife a few months ago. He's still pretty fucked up over it.

—How long do you think people should grieve?

—My father died eighteen months ago. That's why I moved out here.

—I'm sorry.

—He had a heart attack while he was shoveling snow. I came home and found him on the driveway. You could see the asphalt in some parts. He was almost done.

I shook my head in pity. I meant it. I felt so much for him, but I was always feeling more than I should when it came to death. The bartender came and removed our dirty glasses. I was about to ask for another round when River said he should be going. He needed stamina to ride his bike up the two treacherous miles.

—I can give you a ride if you want.

He thought for a moment and said that would be great. For a third time, “Werewolves of London” came on. I said I hoped it would go on forever and realized that made me sound ridiculous.

—So nobody told you how the bills work, he said.

I told him no. The word *bills* filled me with dread. I was deeply in debt across many different cards. I’d sold some of the things Vic had bought for me and that had paid for the trip across the country, the movers, two months of rent.

—How it works is you and Kevin and Leonard are on the same propane, water, etcetera. I’m totally off the grid, so every month I read my meter. My total kilowatt-hour usage hovers around twenty-one hundred. My last reading was twenty eighty-five. So over the last twenty-four days I used ninety-seven. My total solar-power production is nine hundred eighty-seven. That means I produced a hundred and thirty-seven kilowatt-hours over the last twenty-four days, and that was directly subtracted from the group bill. So I’m responsible for minus-forty kilowatt-hours. I owe zero dollars and ten dollars was subtracted from the bills. Does that make sense?

I just looked at him.

—I save you guys money. I produce energy.

—And the rest of us suck it, like cows.

He laughed.

—It’s a good thing we like this song, he said.

I left two twenties and followed him into the warm, fragrant night. At the valet stand we waited behind a man in his sixties with a woman in her twenties. The woman

wore a pink bandage dress and cheap shoes. The man had his palm on her rear. He moved his finger pads in concentric circles. He didn't tip the valet.

River looked from them to me and smiled. Few things are more aphrodisiacal than looking down on another couple.

In the car his knee touched mine. And his hand touched mine when I shifted in the parking lot. Something about his youthful spirit made me think of all the times before something terrible happens.

—There are a lot of wild places in the Canyon. Great hiking spots. I've been thinking about getting a dog. But the coyotes.

—And the snakes? I said.

His bike bumped around in the back. I drove slowly because the trunk was open. The first thing he did was open his window all the way and stick his elbow out.

—The snakes are not as bad as the coyotes. Listen, be careful around Leonard. Lenny. I mean, he's a great guy. But he's really needy.

—Okay, I said, thinking of the way the young feared need. I was concentrating on the curves, which frightened me. I felt like the side of my body was scraping against the faces of the rocks. I was still wearing the white dress but I'd added lime oil to my neck and wrists and a thin gold bracelet of my mother's.

River told me that Leonard's father had envisioned something of a commune back when. A McCarthy-era bunker. Had I seen the Japanese soaking tub behind Leonard's place? At one time there had been a fixed stream