



MILL ROCK

Jill Crawford

SHE'S FIRST TO arrive at the macaron shop. The café isn't full, but she takes a table outside, under the awning away from the drizzle. She's wearing a long flimsy dress and sandals and has neither coat, nor brolly, nor shades (as they call them here). A long dress will convey grace and decency. The bright clumped sky makes her squint when she looks across the street.

Tourists gather at the entrance of the shop to take photos. There would be nothing to stop a vehicle from careening off the road into them. Lately, Lexi's usual apprehension about the demise of everyone she loves has graduated into a broader and vaguer fretting over the deaths of animals and people unknown to her, long gone, online, fictitious even. Sabrina, the girl she's tutoring, laughs at her for being a mushball. Her friend Eoin, who experienced a lot of grief early on in life, says that Lexi was haunted by her previous luck. For years and years, she won without trying or deserving it. Then the inevitable turn. Now she's spoiling her own existence by anticipating the many more losses to come.

Lexi has seen this shop—its kitschy, spearmint dollhouse storefront—in other Manhattan neighborhoods, and in Knightsbridge, Le Marais, New Cairo, Dublin city center, even in airports, though not yet in the North of Ireland, where they treasure sugared cream buns. Why would you take a picture of yourself outside a shop that's everywhere, just to appear like everyone? While waiting for him to arrive, as arranged, less than an hour after the latest atrocity of which she's aware, she glances again at his profile, twitching through the images. Generally, they are strong photos, alluring, except for the magazine cover in

which he appears in full combat apparel, looking like a G. I. Joe doll, a caricature. That one's nauseating. The headline above the image says NEW ENLIGHTENED AMERICAN WARRIOR.

Having been a bystander to soldiers throughout her childhood and adolescence, she ought to be inoculated against their presence. They aren't exotic. How does a person get to be so compliant and brutal. Intruders, she never dared talk to them at home. They're still kind of scary. "You're toying with disaster, girl," Eoin would tell her if he were here. But he's in Australia.

If these photos are to be believed, Mike has a pleasant accident of a face, balanced, no feature protruding or receding to excess, not a single element out of whack. He'd have been far too handsome when he was young, impervious. The light would have pinged off him. Look at those even, confident teeth. His beauty has smudged with age, but he'd still appeal to most women, even those without taste. That bothers her.

He's about fifteen years older than she is, if he's telling the truth, which he isn't. Even if he's not saying everything, in his messages he sounded like he knows who he is and what's what. He carries his experience lightly, suspiciously lightly. All Lexi knows is what she isn't, and that's only a theory that hasn't been tested under extreme pressure. Some tweet she read called now a prewar era. It is for her, anyway.

During their final exchange last night, Mike wrote:

Do you burn or do you like the sun?

I prefer to stay pale, she replied. I like to be all one color.

Oh, I see.

You prefer tanned, like you?

Not particularly. There's a chance that tomorrow we may make it to a rooftop pool.

Love swimming but not on a first date.

OK. Not sure what we can do that will preserve your porcelain skin but would like to do something with you.

She'd never said she had porcelain skin. *I have a sun hat. What's your schedule?*

He arrives, at last, in his cargo shorts with his great calves. He's silvering fair, candid blue, has a hint of a paunch, and looks to her like a kind of human lion. They shake hands. He apologizes for taking a while and offers to get drinks. She'll take a decaf latte and a pineapple macaron.

She watches him through the window, discreetly. Here's a man in the simpler sense, wholly at ease with himself. He's unlike anyone she's ever been with. This man could chop down a tree. He isn't carrying a gun, is he? There would be nowhere to conceal it. She might never tell anyone about this. She's shocked at how appealing he is, at how primitive she must be. But she's decided to park her political views. She doesn't want to think ethically today.

Once, Lexi and her then-fiancé Paul got lost on the way to a macaron shop. She wanted to buy a box as a gift to take to her family. They squabbled over a matter that had felt critical, portentous. She's forgotten what the argument was about. He stomped off. She was due to catch a train home, one she subsequently missed. She blamed him totally but concedes now that the responsibility might have been mutual. They continued to fight over WhatsApp. She called him a flake for leaving her exposed like that, in the middle of a strange place with an unwieldy bag. What if something had happened? He expressed disbelief that she kept plucking at his nerves when she knew how stressed he was. She called him pathetic. He called her insensitive. He begged her not to push him any further. She was livid at him for imagining himself to be the victim. He was precious and coddled. He only felt deeply for himself.

Mike returns with her pineapple macaron and a chocolate éclair, half of which he offers her after she has polished off hers without offering him any.

"Oops," she says. "No, thanks, I'm a bit of a purist. I tend to like one thing or the other."

They smile, maybe both thinking that she must be the opposite of him.

"Daryl's a chocolate addict," he says.

"Is that right?" So that's what she's called. "Do you do this a lot?"

He nods. "Always have, always will." He looks amused. "Do you?"

"No, never. I'm not a *unicorn*, I don't think." She just did air quotes. Why did she do that?

"Are you *sure*?" He mimics the gesture.

Her cheeks warm. "I'd say I'm more of a mole or a hedgehog. I don't know. I'm just curious."

"Curious is good," he replies. "We can work with curious."

He says he was born and raised in Manhattan. Nobody in his family was in the military.

"No kids?"

"No way. Daryl got tempted a while back, so now we have a rabbit called Stump."

"Stump?"

"It's got one leg and a stump."

"How does it hop?"

"It doesn't know any different. You have pets?"

"My landlord in London doesn't allow pets. I had some when I was little."

"What are you doing here again?"

"Just taking a break for a while."

"Then you'll go back?"

"Yeah, probably."

"I guess London's not bad if you can stomach the Brits."

"I don't mind them too much."

"My mother's English," he says.

"I'm just sick to death of the city."

"Have you gone to Churchill's War Rooms?" he asks.

"No."

"Have you been to the RAF Museum?"

"Where's that?"

"Hendon."

"I've never heard of it. Maybe I'm just sick of what I've been doing or not doing. There's no time in London." She looks down at the buds of her clenched hands on her lap.

"We had this actress move in with us for a year as our girlfriend. At first, she wanted to be called an actor and then she changed her mind. She said you needed the different word to mark the difference between being a man who acts and a woman who acts. There were these big differences, she claimed."

"Like what?"

"Like the actress-whore overlap."

"Being a whore is hardly particular to being an actress," Lexi says. "And if someone's a whore it's because someone made them one."

"Anyway, this girl—Vera—she didn't have a single acting job the whole time she lived with us. She just lay about the house watching Ken Burns documentaries."

"What did she do for money?"

"She used to sell photos of her feet online. Yeah, she was insane. She drank a shot of vinegar before every meal. A total screwball. But she was hot. And she was up for anything. Yeah, we were kinda blissed out for a while. We were doing okay until she told her parents. Stupid girl. They said she was a freak, living with freaks, giving up a chance to have a husband, kid, normal life. So, she moved out."

"Were you sad?"

"Yeah, we were. We missed her being around."

"She sounds, uh, all over the place."

"She went back to her douche ex. Hope they're satisfied. We'd have married her if we could, but we're already married to each other, so no can do. I mean we loved her and all."

Lexi gives him a skeptical look.

"Daryl was more into her than I was."

"Ha, you felt left out?"

"No, not really."

It's obvious he did. "Do your family know that you and Daryl are . . . ?"

"Everyone knows. I'm an open book. My sister-in-law set us up. She met Daryl at some charity gala and thought: Who is this hot, skinny, freethinking chick that's into guns? Mike's gotta meet her."

"She's into guns, too."

"Of course. You been married?"

"I almost was. I was in my head." She gulps quietly. "No kids."

"You didn't keep the ring."

"We didn't have a ring."

"There should always be a ring. What are you doing here, again?"

"Just a freelance job over the summer."

"And what are you doing after now?"

"I'm heading to BK to do a favor for a friend."

"Where?"

"The basement of a pub."

"What's the favor?"

"It's a scratch performance of a new play."

"About?"

"Metamodern love."

"What's that?"

"No idea. It'll be funny. She's funny, my friend."

"You wanna grab a drink first with me and Daryl?"

"Already? It's a bit soon. I mean I'm not sure about this. I haven't done anything like it. I don't know if I can. I'm just seeing."

"That's cool. But Daryl will like you."

". . . OK. As long as nothing is assumed."

"That's the spirit. Let me call her."

As he speaks to his wife, Lexi takes out her own phone, checks her emails and texts: nothing.

"You damaged your phone," he says.

"It flew out of my hand when this tiny old lady bulldozed into me in the line for the bus."

"Man."

"She was rude. At home, people queue. Anyway, I can't send it off to get fixed. I don't know my way around yet without Google Maps." She rubs together her finger and thumb. Specks of the broken screen have pierced under the skin. Her fingertips tingle, burn. She sucks one.

"Let me look." He reaches for her hand.

"It's fine. Don't touch." She holds her hand against her stomach.

He nods.

"Sorry, it takes me a while . . ."

"No worries. Do you like to dance?"

"When I'm off my head. I'm too shy otherwise."

"We're on a cleanse. No booze for close to six months and counting."

"Don't you think a certain amount of drinking eases life along?"

A child comes up beside her as they're talking, looking into the shop window to get a better view of the display, bewitched by its arrangement of macaron pyramids in vibrant shades. Instinctively, without faltering in her conversation, she tilts away from the boy toward the glass.

Mike frowns and then roars at the boy, really startles him. "Hey, step away from her! Give the lady her space!"

Lexi jumps, jogging the metal table and her coffee. Taupe slush skites across the tabletop. Her hand flies to her mouth.

Mike stretches out an arm and firmly pushes the child back, with a big hand against the narrow breastbone.

The boy twists and jerks into the pavement, bumping into his mother, who's hand in hand with a little girl, who topples off the curb into the road. A motorbike swerves wide. The rider wails something over his shoulder, propelling on. The mother lunges to snatch the child and

pulls her up to relative safety. Having regained her balance, the mother throws them a jarring white-hot look, like she's about to speak. Her lips open, but she doesn't say anything. They fumble off in the direction they'd come.

"No manners," Mike growls.

Her hand's still over her mouth. She lets it fall. "Keep your hair on," she says quietly. "It was just a kid."

"Vermin," he replies. His eyes are so low that she can't see to tell if he's for real or winding her up.

"Fuckin' hell." She laughs. "You're sick." She feels dizzy. What if the biker hadn't swerved? What if the little girl had toppled into the path of a wheel? Her toes are stiff and lurid pink. "I'm cold," she says.

HER METROCARD beeps as she tries to pass through the turnstile; she's out of juice. He leans back and swipes his card a second time to let her through.

"Thank you. I'll pay you back next time."

"Next time?" He smiles.

He stands close on the crowded train car. He's solid while she feels like gas. He's at ease as he eyes her. He doesn't hide it, and she half enjoys it.

The rain is heavy when they walk out of Penn Station. He doesn't seem to mind. They duck into a pharmacy. Brollies are arranged in a stand beside the door, black and squat and at twenty dollars a rip-off. She buys one, sausaged in plastic, and breaks it open with her teeth.

People shelter beneath the lips of buildings, under liquefying scaffolds. A breeze ribbons through the dripping city. Her feet slither in her sandals, slime and grit between the toes. She nearly falls. He catches her arm, holds her up. Her skin burns slightly. The pressure feels right.

As they approach the park, he tells her about the state-of-the-art gun silencer he's involved with. What he does is advocacy work, he says. And he's an entrepreneur.

"I have a design place in New Jersey. We build and customize fire-arms and armor."

"For the army?"

He laughs. "No, for personal use. And stunt work. TV and film." He winks.

She can't bring herself to smile.

"So, there's this auction next week. They're selling the last fragments of steel left over from the rubble of the Twin Towers. The larger pieces have all gone to museums, memorials, that kind of thing. And I'm working with this guy who's gonna bid for the last few shards. Our plan is: we melt them down and make an ultralimited run of bespoke handguns. 9mm, and eleven of them."

"You want to make guns?"

"And bullets. We're gonna inscribe them with the date—it's gonna be classy. People are gonna eat it up."

"Shit."

"I was a first responder, you know," he says, glancing at his old phone. "I headed straight down there."

"Really . . ." Is he making that up? She can't tell. "You're brave. I'd have run in the opposite direction. I didn't realize you could inscribe a weapon, but I suppose if you can inscribe a piece of jewelry then you can inscribe a gun—and maybe anything."

He flips his phone shut and returns it to a pocket.

"What does Daryl have inscribed on her gun?" she asks.

"Which one? She's got four."

She lets it drop and waits until they arrive at the fringes of Madison Square Park to ask the question she's been wanting to ask. "Have you ever killed someone?"

"I fought in two wars. What do you think?"

"Would you do it again?"

"War, no. Kill? If there's a reason to do it."

"Like what?"

"Who's gonna stop a bad guy with a gun?"

"A good guy with a gun? Come on!"

"Sure, bust my balls. Who would you rather meet on a dark road? I know who."

She gives him a look. "Does that really happen though?"

He laughs and looks away.

"And how do you even know?" she asks.

"Know what?"

"Oh, forget it. Are you a Republican?"

He chuckles. "Would that turn you on?"

"I don't think so."

"Not guilty, ma'am."

At home in Northern Ireland, she never knowingly conversed with a soldier. They used to speak in through the gap in the car window to check who you were and to tell your parents which way they could drive. They'd peer through to the back at her and her sisters.

Just once in her life she shot a gun, when she was in the Venture Scouts, aged 16. It was at the Thiepval Barracks a few months before she took her GCSEs. The army must have been trying to recruit them or something. As if. The army guy, who'd shown her how to shoot the gun, looked like Travis Bickle prior to the mohawk. She'd fancied him slightly. They didn't converse. He just instructed her on how to handle the rifle and aim and shoot. Before she pulled the trigger, he placed his palm on her cheek between her skin and the machine to stop the metal from tearing her face open. Even then, she'd sensed the care in that. Now she understands it better. He can't have been 20 years old, only a few years older than she was. He had an English accent, from somewhere like Devon. Later, she had a dream about him that disgusted and thrilled her.

They were everywhere, but you never talked to them. You never knew who they were or what they were thinking or what they thought they were doing there. They got to ask about you, but you never got to ask about them. It was like they were there and not there at the same time.

Daryl is waiting for them by the milkshake stand. Her beautiful, sinuous ginger hair flows all the way down to her waist. There's not a pick of fat on her. Conspicuous breasts. Miniskirt. Cowboy boots. This is exactly how Lexi imagined Laurel Gray when she read *In a Lonely Place*. Daryl is a lot taller than Lexi, and older, in her forties like Mike.

"Hey doll," Mike says as he embraces his wife.

"Aw, she's cute." Daryl bends to kiss Lexi on the cheek. Making her eyes big, she asks, "Mikey, can I have a shake?" Her voice is super girlish.

Lexi waits with Daryl as Mike joins the line to buy his wife a chocolate shake with sprinkles. There are two couples ahead of him, both with strollers, a pair of women and a pair of men. It's hard to tell who goes with whom. He peers over their heads.

"Just one straw," Daryl calls over.

"Yeah yeah."

"I did a play in college," Daryl begins.

Lexi looks her in the eye. "I'd never have acted if I weren't an actor. I don't enjoy the attention."

Daryl's taken aback. "You don't like what you do?"

"What I did. I don't do it anymore."

Mike is scrutinizing the menu. The back of his neck is densely freckled. His hands are in his pockets. His biceps are still large. On his dating profile, there is a picture of him and Daryl splashing at the foot of a waterfall in Thailand, her skinny legs clamped around his red-brown torso. He's solid. It's nice. For the first time ever, she kind of gets why all those girls at school liked the meaty rugby boys with thick limbs and cauliflower ears. Mike looks back, holds her gaze. Her body swirls.

Paul was slender; he did Bikram yoga. As they'd tramped down that road in Belfast that leads to the bridge where the starlings swarm, she'd yelled at him, and the force of her anger had made him recoil. He'd put up his hands to protect himself from being cast out into the traffic, forever thinking about himself.

"You think I'd shove you into the road?" It hadn't crossed her mind. "Jesus, grow a pair." She'd never scream like that at Mike, just in case. She'd left Paul.

"Have you been in anything I'd have heard of?" Daryl asks.

"I was in a Netflix thriller."

"What was it called?"

"*Blueberry Honey*. I gave it up."

"You should only do what makes you happy."

"I don't know what I'll do. I'm not good at anything else."

"Did Mike tell you that, when I met him, I was married to a dude in the French Foreign Legion?"

"No."

"He didn't tell you that, huh?"

Lexi shakes her head and fiddles with the strap of the bag that's slung across her chest. "Look, please don't take this the wrong way, but how on Earth are you cool with this?"

"With what?"

"This total . . . openness to anything."

"Right. My friends think it's wild."

"My ego couldn't hack it."

"Yet you're here anyway."

"True . . . but it's not the same."

"I'm not like other women, and he's the best man in the world."

"Don't you find it exposing or—I don't know—invasive?"

"Nope. We've nothing to hide. Maybe you're the one who's exposed or hiding."

Mike returns with the milkshake. Daryl rises onto her toes and kisses him. Lips pursed, she drinks through the straw then she leads them to a corner of the park, where they file through a swinging metal gate into a smelly dog run. Their friend is waiting there, on a bench that encircles a tree trunk. Under the bench at her feet lies a young blue Weimaraner.

"Yaz was a catwalk model," Mike says as they approach.

Yaz has a ravaged prettiness. Her eyes are an absurd kind of aqua that couldn't be natural. They make her look unearthly. She flew in last night, she says, from Austria, where she purchased this special bitch. She intends to breed pups to train as service dogs. Yaz keeps mentioning the ripe pimple near one of her nostrils. She can't believe she was catcalled earlier when she looks like hell. Tomorrow she's flying home to her ranch. She asks Mike if he knows anyone with a private plane. She strokes the young dog and says, "Poor baby girl." They'd rather not have to fly commercial.

The pup is nuzzling the gravel and keeping a close eye on its new owner. Yaz begins telling a story about her previous bitch, who was spooked by the fireworks her neighbors let off when Trump won the election.

"Yeah, you told us this," Mike interjects. "We remember."

Yaz continues recounting the story. She wants to tell it again. The dog ran out onto the highway and got hit by a car. Yaz couldn't get anybody to stop and help her pull the huge body off the road and bury it. The year before, that dear animal had saved her life when she'd collapsed and suffered a seizure in the house, where she lives alone with all her animals. That dog had managed to place its body under her head to stop it from banging over and over against the stone floor. "I would've been dead," Yaz says, "if it weren't for Pearl." She describes the hole in the back of her skull from the brain surgery, keeps pressing into the dent with her thumb. Her hair has grown back. The thought of that scar beneath the hair is grotesque.

Lexi leaves Mike, Daryl, Yaz, and Velvet in the otherwise empty dog park. She catches the A train to Utica Avenue, much earlier than

intended. Did Yaz meet Mike and Daryl online before in real life? Have they slept together?

She drinks a Bloody Mary prior to going onstage and, while performing, loses her place in the script, skipping a page of dialogue. Her friend, the writer, is at the back of the audience with the man she hates who she's fucking. She looks tense.

Walking back to Sabrina's parents' apartment from the station, Lexi checks her phone. There's a humming in her groin. The walk isn't far, but the pressure is growing, and there are so many doors to pass through to get into the apartment: the heavy street door, the brass door into the lobby that must be opened by one of various keys, the two locks into the apartment. She won't last.

As she flanks the park, the wind thrusts back her hair. She'll cross into the park and pee behind a bush. Too late. It's coursing down her legs and through her sandals. She stops where she is on the pavement, helpless to reverse the flow.

When she gets up to the apartment, all's quiet. The family aren't yet home from their weekend house upstate.

She douses the bath with Epsom salts and twists on the hot tap. While the tub fills, she shaves her legs, each foot in the sink. When it's full enough, she lies there, eyes shut, listening to *Glamazon Tyomi's Sex Academy*. She chanced upon this podcaster in an interview she read online about free love in which Tyomi described meeting her future husband on a flight to Chicago. "His focus was so intense," she said, "it felt like he was burning a hole through my afro." In this episode, Tyomi recounts an ornate fantasy about making love to Idris Elba in the lotus position.

At 2:43 AM, when she wakes and checks that her phone is charging, a text is waiting from Mike:

Sorry if it got strange toward the end but Daryl likes you and I am quite taken with you too.

She responds: *No need to say sorry. It was a lot to absorb, like going on a date with more than one person.*

He replies at once: *Next one will be just us if you like.*

She switches the phone to airplane mode. She should stop. It's time to stop. This won't end well. She reignites the phone: *Next weekend?*

By morning, Mike has requested her on Facebook and Instagram. Cool your boots, she thinks. She won't accept. As soon as she accepts him on Facebook, he pokes her. Who pokes people? She pokes him back.

That night, she dreams one of those dreams in which she's on the run from bad people with weapons. She carries a baby in her arms. It is her baby, no one else's. As soon as they escape one threat, a new one arises. She wakes, sobbing, after accidentally severing the child's head by slamming the door of their getaway car. She should never be trusted with a baby.

The following Friday, Mike texts to invite her over that weekend.

What's a grill? she replies.

You know, food cooked over flames in the backyard.

A BBQ! Sure.

Looking forward.

Me too. Will there be others there?

A bunch of waifs and strays. That okay?

Yep.

Do you eat meat?

I do these days.

You can have one of my famous Chadburgers.

?

Just you wait.

What's the secret?

The key ingredient is plastic cheese. I told you, no secrets.

THAT SUNDAY is Father's Day. Before heading to Midtown, she phones her dad at home. He's in the garden. Her mum opens a window and shouts out. Her mum tells her that her dad managed to slice off the top of his thumb while cutting the coppery hedge by the road. Then, she says that she ran into Rona Harkin in the garden center, near the ornamental grasses. "Robert is getting married to a man, and, if you don't mind, he's designing for some designer on their haute couture line in Paris."

"He always had a gift. Where's the do?"

"Never you mind. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Spit it out, Mum. Not Mussenden Temple?"

"Afraid so."

"Good for them. Are you two going?"

"Invites aren't out. Would you mind?"

"I bet it'll be magic. Pass on my congratulations."

"It's not an actual wedding though," her mum says. "It's a civil partnership. They've to do all the official stuff in the town hall."

"Loads of my friends have been married that way."

"If you ever do it another time, we'll do something different from what we'd planned for you and Paul."

"I'm not cut out for that anymore."

"Never say never."

THEIR APARTMENT is on a nondescript street, hemmed by high-rise buildings. They live on the ground floor. Someone buzzes her in. It's a stifling day, a relief to get inside. Mike opens the front door, kisses her on the cheek, and ushers her along a narrow corridor, a hand at her waist.

Once in the apartment, she catches the scent of tinned sweet corn as they pass an opening through to a kitchen, where Daryl is muddling a steaming pot, wearing miniscule shorts and espadrille wedges. Her long legs are pale and knobbly.

"Just making something I can have," Daryl says brightly.

"Doesn't she like Chadburgers?" Lexi asks.

Mike looks back and rolls his eyes. "She has allergies, and she's vegan."

They descend four carpeted steps and pass through a cluttered triangular living room, with a corner sofa on which a fawn long-haired rabbit is curled up. It doesn't stir. It looks kaput. The blinds are closed, perhaps to keep the room cooler. A door opens out to a brick passageway along the side of the building. There's an archery target at the end of the passageway. A punctured mattress is wedged vertically behind the target to protect the wall of the building that edges the yard. Two more yellowing mattresses are slumped on either side. An arrow is poking out of one half of the bull's-eye. A large metal bow is propped against a terra-cotta urn that contains a hearty succulent plant.

Around the corner is a concrete square of backyard, filled by a picnic table and an imposing grill lit by the sloping light of early evening. A defeated-looking guy in an oversized T-shirt with a faded-to-indeterminate logo is seated beside the grill, dunking some crisps into a plastic pot of dip. There's nobody else here.

"A few folks said they'd swing by later," Mike says. He lifts the lid and tends to the luminous charcoal with some tongs.

The guy rubs his fingers on the rear of his jeans. "Luis," he says.

"Lexi." She shakes his hand. It's unexpectedly soft and cool from holding his beer. Somewhere a doorbell chimes.

This yard's separated from the neighbors' yard by a fence not much higher than the table. The adjacent yard seems narrower but contains a leafless tree adorned with pale fairy lights. Two young guys in black clothes sit at a table with beer bottles, rolling cigarettes. Each has a long black ponytail and a beard. They're either related or in the same band. Kendrick Lamar is seeping out from inside their house.

A girl emerges, carrying a wooden bowl of salad and a jam jar of vinaigrette. Her hair is in two black plaits. She's dressed in a loose slip dress, which gapes when she bends over the table to show that she isn't wearing a bra. She has the kind of adolescent body that they used to call heroin chic. But she's the color of amber. One of the boys pats her on the arse, rises, and leaves the yard, presumably to answer the door. The girl follows him in.

Mike winks at Lexi. "Oof," he says, smiling.

She flinches. Suddenly, her body feels extremely warm and alert.

"Thanks for the meal," Luis says. "One last smoke. Gotta get the last ferry."

"Where do you live?" Lexi asks.

"I'm crashing with my mom and dad in the Rockaways."

Next door, the brothers greet what looks like their father. The dad nods at Mike. The girl takes the dad's briefcase inside. The three men sit and talk as the girl comes and goes, first with a beer for the dad, next with plates, cutlery, salt, and Tabasco sauce.

Luis says goodbye.

"How do you know Luis?" she asks Mike once he's left.

"We were in Iraq together. He does some work for me now and then when he's up to it."

Daryl arrives with a plastic dish and places it on the table. "I'm not much of a cook."

She takes a seat near Lexi and pulls a can from under her armpit. She opens it and takes a sip. The can says Vegan Cold Brew Coconut Cream Latte. She clocks the bottle of wine that Lexi set on the table before sitting.

"Honey, you should have opened her wine." Daryl rises and heads inside. Returning with an opener and a tulip glass, she uncorks the wine and pours some.

"You sure you don't want any?" Lexi asks.

"We're taking a break," Daryl replies.

"We've got better vices," Mike adds.

Daryl checks her phone. She seems distracted, or nervous.

"We were wondering if you're in town next month," Mike says.

"There's a party you could come to as our guest."

Still reading something on her phone, Daryl says, "I don't believe this."

"What's wrong, Dar?"

"Ashlee isn't coming. She promised."

"I told you not to rely on that cunt."

Lexi doesn't protest.

"We both know she's only ever in it for what she can get," Mike continues. "Will you be in town for the party?" he presses.

"What kind of party is it?" Lexi replies.

"It's a kink party on someone's yacht."

"Do you have to be naked?"

"Not unless you want to."

"Do you have to wear a costume?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll lend you something," Daryl offers, poking at her phone.

"They sail us in a circle around Manhattan," Mike says. "You'll get a great view of the city. There's a theme. What's the theme?"

"It's the big bang, I think. As in Einstein, not the TV show."

"We were thinking about putting together a DNA chain gang or something."

"Isn't that . . . ?" Lexi asks.

"What?"

Daryl looks up.

"Isn't that racist?" Lexi says in a hushed voice.

"You need to loosen up and stop reading things into things. Your burger, my lady."

He sets the paper plate down in front of her and goes back to the grill to serve himself. She waits for him to come to the table.

Daryl's plate is empty.

"You should eat something," Mike says to her.

"I'm not hungry. Help yourself to pasta salad." Daryl pushes the dish toward Lexi.

"Look, I'll call her when our date's over?" Mike says, coming to the table.

Lexi bites into her burger. The juice slips down her hand and through the gaps between her fingers. Two yards down, a guy with an undercut steps out, iPad in hand. He props it on a table and disappears back inside. The guy reemerges, his gait altered. With his back to them, he faces the iPad screen and raises a longsword into the air, sweeping it in different configurations.

"He's got a newborn," Mike says, mouth full, "so he won't be getting any action, miserable fuck."

"Is that legal?" Lexi asks, chewing.

"It's actually therapeutic," Daryl says. "Like archery."

"You want to try shooting an arrow before it's too dark?" Mike asks her. "Daryl's really good at it."

"I better not."

"Come on. I'll teach you." He takes another bite. "Dar? You show her! I want to watch. I want to see how well she learns from you."

Daryl stands and sets her phone on the table. She looks like she's about to say something. Instead, she holds a hand to the base of her throat, her eyes kind of glassy.

"Hey, you OK?"

"I . . . I need a sec," she says, steadying herself. Her voice sounds squeezed. "Back in a sec," she says, and rushes indoors.

"Is she all right?" Lexi asks.

"She's cool," he says cheerfully.

"Are you sure she's OK with this, with me? She doesn't seem . . ."

"She's . . . We're handling it," he says. "She's seeing someone to figure out what's wrong with her. She's taking meds. It doesn't matter. You wanna meet Stump?"

Inside Mike turns on a lamp. The rabbit doesn't stir when she strokes him. He's obese. His fluff is patchy, rippling soft in certain places, short and spiky elsewhere. There are trinkets cluttering every surface of this room and a PlayStation under the TV. Mike lifts what looks like a table tennis paddle off the ironing board and bats it against the heel of his palm, making a faint thwack.

"And this," he says, "is for Daryl when she needs to be disciplined. Wanna come over and try?"

Without thinking she rises from the sofa. The warmth in her body intensifies. At the same time, she's repulsed. She remembers how unnaturally thin Daryl's legs are and how unnaturally big her boobs are and how she rolled her head as if she was delirious even though she denied there was anything wrong. "I should probably go."

"Come out and finish your bottle of wine before you leave. It'll go to waste otherwise."

Outside is darker, even muggier than when they went in. The smattering of fairy lights in the neighboring tree are fuzzy yellow now. The father and sons are playing cards while the girl is clearing away plates, in and out. She looks very familiar. Lexi can't place her.

The new dad with the longsword is drawing flourishes in the air. A baby keens and he pauses, listening in the direction of the noise before resuming.

"Is it too late to try your bow and arrow?" she asks.

"You can try anything of mine you want."

It's his lightness, as though everything in life were an entertainment to him. "I can't," she says.

"You could. You want to."

"But I don't want to hurt her. Why does she do this if it hurts her? I don't understand that."

"Because she enjoys it. If it were easy, it wouldn't turn her on."

"No, that's not right."

"I know her. I know her better than she knows herself. We're a team. We don't lie to each other. Our eyes are open."

"I envy that. I'm so unsure."

"You should be. Everything's deranged."

"Everything? How did Yaz get the money to buy a ranch?"

"She did something for someone."

"What did she do? It wasn't a little thing."

"Who cares what she did? She did what she did to get what she needed. Let's have fun."

She steps forward. His hands are on her hip bones. He's very close. She feels the warmth coming from his mouth. As they kiss, his roughness scrapes her face. His smell is so strong that she pulls back.

"You smell like meat," she says.

"You taste like wine."

Everyone else has gone indoors. It's only them outside.

"Look what you've made me do," he says. "I'm breaking the rules."

The music has stopped, too.

"What are the rules?"

"Daryl is the one who leads." With his hand, he makes a valley in her long skirt, between her legs.

She tenses. "No."

"No?" He takes away his hand.

"Yes," she says.

His hand goes back to where it was and travels on. He's touching her.

"I'm in pain," she murmurs, feeling sad and callous.

"I know you are, honey. I know you are," he says tenderly, inside her.

"We'll make you feel better."

"Don't stop," she moans. "Don't stop. I love that, I need that."

A light clicks on in the swordsman's yard. Slowly, they draw away from each other. A woman emerges into view. She's soothing a bundled lump on her chest. The baby is silent. The woman moves further into the yard and turns to the man, who must be in the doorway.

"I'm not kidding. Either it goes, or . . ." The woman's voice lowers. They can't hear the rest.

"Where are you going to go on Father's Day?" the man says.

The woman says something.

"Come on!"

They disappear inside. Lexi and Mike haven't moved. The light in the far yard goes off.

"You don't have any cigarettes, do you?" she asks.

"Bad for you."

"I know." She shifts away from him. "I need to go."

"Or you could stay and fuck."

She'd like that. "I need to go."

"Can we get you a cab?"

"I'll walk. I want to walk."

"That first time we met," he says, "I couldn't stop looking at your mouth, and I knew what you needed." He puts his hand on her breast.

"Are you a member of the NRA?" she whispers.

"Yeah." His thumb is skimming across her collarbone. "We both are."

She shuts her eyes, and her ears fill with noise. What's she doing? "Don't tell Daryl. This is between us."

"Tell her what?"

"I don't want her to know what we did."

"We'll do more, I think."

"I don't think so."

"I think we will."

HER BODY'S LIGHT as she drifts back to the apartment. At West 70th Street, a bare-chested man with rough hair is dragging himself on hands and knees along the sidewalk. His legs end at the knees. She's reminded of Tony Sher's sketches of Richard III in *Year of the King*. A large spider, the man scurries into the center of the road, bottom showing over the waistband of his jeans. The big American cars falter. A driver toots a horn. The man-arachnid sits, facing an oncoming Hummer, refusing to budge. The vehicle curves around him. The traffic lights turn red. The man weaves through the high shiny rolling machines to the other side and continues along the opposite sidewalk. Why don't they give him a fucking wheelchair? When did it happen? Which conflict? It's not easy to age him. How could he be left like that to fend for himself? What a reward! They don't hide it. They don't even pretend.

Today, the glass case at the church on 73rd contains a poster for a film called *Say Amen, Somebody*.

Sabrina is in the lounge, seated on the rug, stretching her hamstrings while talking to her girlfriend on FaceTime and watching a YouTube video. In every room the speakers are booming Hole's "Violet." Her parents must be out.

Beyond their lessons, they don't have an awful lot to say to each other. It's like this teenager is on the other side of soundproof glass. When she was Sabrina's age, Lexi was all belief, lurching between implausible composure and exasperation at life's slowness. She never would have imagined back then how easy it would be to drain the will out of her.

"Beena," she calls.

"Hold on!" Sabrina turns. "Yeah?" she shouts over the noise.

Lexi wants to ask how much she thinks about the future. And by that, she means more than a year or two ahead; and she doesn't mean about the environment. Sabrina probably wouldn't tell her the truth. Sabrina has been taught to say whatever will get her into a desirable college, not to say what she thinks, not to overthink.

"Will you switch off the music in my room?" Lexi shouts.

"Sure." Sabrina waves and goes back to her friend.

Lexi goes to bed.

TWO DAYS AFTER the barbecue, Lexi receives a friend request on Facebook from Daryl. She stripped her Facebook profile of detail after what Paul did, changed her date of birth, deleted all likes, deleted all previous posts. Now it's pared to almost nothing, just one picture of her, taken by Paul, though she's the only one who'd know. Since her profile divulges little, there's no need to vet it before accepting Daryl's friend request.

As well as a gazillion selfies, there are numerous pictures of Daryl and Mike, a history of their love affair. Lexi scrolls and scrolls. The photos are endless. Daryl keeps reposting old photos she's posted before—how embarrassing. It must be called middle age because you get to 35 or 40 and start looking back all the time instead of moving toward the future that isn't here yet. They look good for their age.

Right now, at 29 and a half, Lexi can't seem to see forward or behind. She longs to catch Daryl in a lie, to know what Daryl isn't saying.

She waits days for Daryl to make further contact. Daryl reposts a photograph from a year ago of her and Mike on horseback in the Clearwater Mountains. Lexi is deluged with envy. Still, no message.

Constantly, Lexi scrutinizes the photos. While Daryl's comments and smiles are all levity, her eloquent eyes seem full of humiliation. The longer Lexi looks, the more attached to Daryl she feels. Is Daryl spying on *her*? Is Daryl streaming *Blueberry Honey*? A dumb name for a thriller. But that Lexi's gone or, at least, transformed. She's mortified at having had such faith in herself and in what she might do one day. Yet those moronic illusions felt better than the present. All that's left are soured feelings for something and someone who no longer exist. Paul fucked off and left her with no one but herself to blame.

She can't message first. She likes and instantly de-likes Daryl's repost with the horses—too obvious. Daryl won't have seen it yet. It's daytime. She'll be at work in her office.

That night Mike sends her an email with no words, an invite attached. The invite is to an "exclusive dusk-to-dawn party for New York's satyrs and nymphs" on the Love to Love, sailing from Pier 36. There's no way in hell she'd go to that. Someone might recognize her. She archives the email.

Mike sends the invite again the following week.

She replies: *Hey, Thanks for this. Thing is I don't like guns, and I'm just not OK with the violence. Each to their own and all. Don't want to be a hypocrite.*

He answers: *That's what you tell yourself but you're curious.*

She doesn't respond. Something peals inside her. She googles "first responder USA": *October 28 is National First Responders Day, recognizing workers such as police, firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics.* Which was he, if he was any? What made him—specifically—run to a disaster? She googles "first responder ground zero" and finds an article by the American Association for Cancer Research: "The Toll of Heroism." She googles "first responder Mike NYC": Mychal Fallon Judge—not him. Michael O'Connell—no. She doesn't know Mike's real surname because he goes by "Mikeygolucky" online.

One afternoon off, on the way back from her daily swim, she heads to the public library. She doesn't know where to start. In the adult non-fiction section, she locates an old book and reads it at a desk until the library closes for the night. Unable to register with the library due to being only temporarily in the country, she returns every day after her swim and resumes from where she left off. She taps slivers into her phone:

"There is no proactive word for nonviolence [in English]."

A rosy-cheeked guy, sitting opposite, catches her attention and eventually slides a note over to invite her for something to eat at a diner nearby. Flustered, she agrees.

Before they enter the diner, he insists that the meal is on him. She orders an omelet. He orders a coffee with half-and-half. She wonders why he isn't eating, slow to realize he can't afford it.

"You buy me, and I'll buy you?" she suggests. "Modern."

He won't hear of that. They don't do it where he's from.

Total boyfriend material, he walks her back to her block and shakes her hand goodbye. She doesn't go back to the library and abandons *Non-violence: Twenty-Five Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea*.

At the end of the month on a Friday, she wakes to find a bunch of Instagram messages from Daryl:

Don't be shy!

Come with us! Three bumblebee emojis.

You won't know what you're missing!

Promise to look after you! Purple devil's face.

Dare ya! And a cluster of emojis: Striped candy. Lightning bolt. Heart on fire. Sailboat. Statue of Liberty. Sundown. Honey-pot. Water droplets. Explosion of light. Starred eyes.

Quickened, Lexi looks for an emoji she might use in response, but she can't communicate like that. At last, she writes: *OK!?*

LEXI HAS SIGNED in advance a nondisclosure agreement, using her middle name because what if she's famous one day? As soon as she arrives at their apartment, uneasy, with a bottle of vodka, Daryl cracks open a Tupperware box, containing treats. That morning, Daryl had baked vegan, gluten-free, double-chocolate pot brownies.

In not too long, Lexi doesn't care about anything. Has she ever felt this smooth and unheavy? She chooses a wet-look latex skater dress that skims her butt cheeks but isn't all that flagrant. It's one of the quietest outfits Daryl's wardrobe has to offer. Daryl and Mike are wearing his-and-hers rubber lederhosen, with nothing underneath. Lexi finds their matching costumes extremely amusing. Before stepping outside, she puts her long jacket over the skater dress.

THEY TAKE A CAB to Pier 36. During the short drive, Mike speaks on the phone to one of the friends they're meeting up with. Daryl describes some of the different rooms they might find on the yacht. Lexi admits that she doesn't have a fetish. She doesn't think she has any fantasies either. Daryl mouths *wow* and shares a look with Mike.

THEY GET LEFT OFF a little distance from the destination. When the cab's gone, they pause to put on masks. Mike's is a dragon head of gold leather and black stitching. Daryl's wearing a Tyrolean hat with a thin veil, covering her face.

"I brought you one," Daryl says.

Out of a tote bag she draws an inconspicuous mask in the shape of a moth, two gray-and-black wings reaching across each eye.

"Let me." Mike turns her by the shoulders until she's facing away from him, places the mask on her face, and ties the pink ribbon at the back of her head. His hand slips down the collar of her jacket. She leans back against him, raising her chin, baring her throat, snickering gently as his thumb rubs her neck, trying to excite her. She's trying to be excited. It's so hard to not think.

IN THE QUEUE, Lexi whispers to them: "We only have to do what we want, right?"

"Don't have to do anything, honey, except obey the rules."

"You read the rules?" Daryl asks.

"Uh-huh, of course." She'd scanned them. Lexi looks out across the heads of people waiting to gain access.

Daryl holds her fist in front of Lexi. It turns, opening. In Daryl's palm is a little pill in the shape of a fish with bulging eyes. Daryl's asking if she wants.

Lexi doesn't know if she wants or what she wants. Her hand rises in defense.

"Half?"

Lexi doesn't know what she wants, and that's why she's here.

Daryl bites off half and swallows.

Lexi's turn.

LEXI ISN'T feeling as good as she did. The security asks them to show their digital tickets and ID, in her case a passport. "I'm super thirsty," she says.

"We'll get drinks inside," Daryl replies.

Her throat's dry. Is her throat closing? Is her throat going to close? Her throat's not going to close. "When will I feel it?" she asks. "Should I be feeling it now?"

"Not yet," Daryl says.

After they've deposited their unwanted things in the cloakroom, Mike takes Daryl's hand. Daryl holds Lexi's wrist. She trots in their wake, looking around. Everyone seems to have ignored the theme and worn whatever they wanted. At first, she thinks they're exploring, but,

no, they've been here, of course. How many times? With how many Lexis?

They're taking her somewhere. In every room they pass through, glimpses of bodies all over one another. Some people's faces are bare. And some of the costumes are sinister. She hates it when you can't see a portion of their faces. Someone's wearing a mask that covers their entire head. At first glance, it resembles skin but isn't skin. There are holes only for the eyes and mouth. The flesh of the cheeks, the forehead, the nose and neck have a lifelike translucency that is plasticky and unnaturally smooth. Fishnet, lace. A floor-length ponytail. Someone is totally covered in black, from the crown of their head to the soles of their shoes. They are chained to another person whose womb is a ball of light. Very occasionally someone's face is bare. Because she can't see their faces, people merge. She can't retain the sense of them being independent from each other, of being separate. Is she doing this? Can she do it? She hasn't even slept with either of them yet. She keeps close to them, gripping one of Daryl's straps.

The dance floor releases her, bodies knocking softly. She oozes to the trance music, closing her eyes, then gazing into the lights as if it's only her, then blinking straight into Mike's eyes or Daryl's eyes, not as hesitant as before, unable to think whole thoughts, not wanting to, not wanting to say anything anyway, taking in all the knocking bodies. She's coming up.

She's in a room. The lights are way down. She's with them, among others. She's not solely herself now, touching, being touched in every place, only a body humming and yearning while not in her body anymore, skin and leather, rubber and hair, and wetness, hardness, softness, more than them, she doesn't care, this is what she needs, is this not enjoyment? She wanted not to care. She wants it all. They want to bind her. Yes.

They take her to another room, she between them, and Daryl leading. Daryl's in charge. There's no speaking. This is a quiet room. No music. Nobody else present. She must be quiet, a hand tight across her face. Someone will find them soon. Bindings around different parts of her. Her ankle. The other ankle. Her wrists. Tape sealing her mouth now. The rest is done quietly. As Daryl kisses her, she doesn't look away from Mike. She looks straight into him. He expects to have her after Daryl has finished licking down low. Daryl pushes something warm

into her behind. Some people come in and hover around the edges of the room, looking at them, looking at her, exposed. The blood in her is moving. She can't wait. Someone's wearing another's face. Her blood's gathering. In slow motion, the blood's rising in her fingers and toes and at the top of her skull. The blood is languidly billowing up. She can't wait for the immense wave to plunge and undulate through her. She can't wait but has no option. It's so good. It's so good she could cry. She's crying already and longs to open her mouth but can't. She watches him watch them. He's expecting her after this, and she doesn't know what this man is capable of. Her breath catches. Her throat's too narrow. She doesn't understand what he's done, what he's been capable of doing. She belongs to the prewar era. She can hardly remember childhood. She's forgotten and was only sometimes aware of living surrounded by overt and secret men with weapons. She didn't know otherwise. But he knew different. He was conscious. He's seen and done horrible things. He knows all about reality. She's panting hard now. She can't breathe well enough. He comes nearer and carefully peels away the gag and puts a knuckle in her mouth. Tears are falling. She's too afraid to know what he did. She knows he did gruesome, despicable things. He did things to people like her. He did those things in defense of people like her—or so he chose to believe. And that is real, but she's too frightened to know what reality is even though she also needs to know. Her suspicion is that nothing's clear. Nothing's clear. Obscenity is close. She shakes her head away and rasps, "Not you. Don't want you. Anyone but you. Anyone but you." And then, as she wanted, he fucks her.

MUCH LATER, Lexi is alone on deck. Before ascending, she'd bummed two cigarettes. She lights the second from the tip of the first, throws the spent one overboard, and continues smoking, happy to be alone. They missed the sunset. The night's deep enough to be fading. Manhattan's just countless gold pricks in the air. She doesn't know the name of anything she sees. They motor toward a small black island, then bear right. She walks to the back, holding the railing, and watches the pale track unfurling behind the boat. The drugs are wearing off. She gnaws at the inside of her cheek. What is she? A vapor. At least once, she told Paul to go to hell. The scorn that came of disenchantment. That didn't mean she wanted him dead. She cast him off because he deserved

it, never imagining he wouldn't come back. She didn't do what he did. She's not to blame. What he did was his own fault.

Daryl has followed her up. She stands beside her, looking out, offering her whole face up to the air.

They course alongside the island. Paul killed himself, and she doesn't know what will happen ever.

"You're cold?" Daryl says.

Lexi's shaking. What he did to himself, he did. What Paul did has zero to do with her. If anything, she's the victim here. "He was a fucking quitter," she says.

"Who?" Daryl asks.

Lexi doesn't respond. She turns to Daryl. "Why are you so riveted by army men?"

Daryl blinks. "I likes what I likes," she replies in a funny voice, a joke Lexi doesn't get.

"I wish I was a pacifist, but I'd always want to remain alive."

"It's easy to say words," Daryl remarks.

"Excuse me?"

"You know, saying the words doesn't make them mean something."

"I never said I was right."

Daryl hesitates. "Who is?"

Daryl's clingy and pathetic. She probably pays to have a full-body wax once a week.

"You think you know it all," Daryl says, holding her hand out for a drag of Lexi's cigarette. "You'll see."

"Aren't you on a cleanse?" Lexi reminds her.

"So what?"

"No," Lexi says, staring out across the navy air. "You're not allowed. It's my cigarette. Get your own." What would happen if she stubbed out the cigarette on one of Daryl's starving arms? She wants to.

A way off, they hear a siren. Lexi moves to one side of the yacht to see better. A speedboat, flashing turquoise and blue, is motoring toward them. A large white spotlight clicks on and travels across the dark water. People are appearing on deck to see what's happening. Hearing a metallic voice over a loudspeaker, she pushes her way back downstairs. She sits on a bench in a corridor. The yacht's turning. It's stopping. After a while, they bump against something. She retrieves her jacket and bag from the cloakroom. The metallic voice is ordering people onto the deck.

Outside, she sees they've stopped at a jetty. The police boat is alongside the yacht. The yacht is being tied by a rope to a bollard. On the deck, in his lederhosen, Mike's arguing vigorously with a policewoman. Another cop intervenes, holding Mike back with a hand on his chest. The first cop explains that the organizers didn't bother to get the proper permits.

She walks past Mike. He doesn't see her. She climbs off the boat onto the jetty. They have nothing to do with her. She walks into the grid of the city. There are no cabs. A few streets in, she manages to book an Uber. It will be ten minutes. While she waits, she calls up each of her social media accounts. She deletes and blocks. She blocks them on email. Daryl's calling. She waits for it to ring off, then mutes both on her phone.

ON THEIR PROFILE, they appear to be an adventure couple. He's Brazilian. She's from Oregon, a proud military nurse. Here's a picture of them surfing down sand dunes in Peru. Here they are clinking Singapore slings at a really, really long bar. Ha, there's a wedding photo. Is the woman wearing glasses without lenses? She is.

They message back within a quarter of an hour. Lexi hasn't much time left. She asks what the unicorn emoji means. +