



Among the Ten Thousand Things: A Novel

By Julia Pierpont

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* AND *THE HUFFINGTON POST* • Features an exclusive conversation between Julia Pierpont and Lena Dunham

For fans of Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Lorrie Moore, and Curtis Sittenfeld, *Among the Ten Thousand Things* is a dazzling first novel, a portrait of an American family on the cusp of irrevocable change, and a startlingly original story of love and time lost.

Jack Shanley is a well-known New York artist, charming and vain, who doesn't mean to plunge his family into crisis. His wife, Deb, gladly left behind a difficult career as a dancer to raise the two children she adores. In the ensuing years, she has mostly avoided coming face-to-face with the weaknesses of the man she married. But then an anonymously sent package arrives in the mail: a cardboard box containing sheaves of printed emails chronicling Jack's secret life. The package is addressed to Deb, but it's delivered into the wrong hands: her children's.

With this vertiginous opening begins a debut that is by turns funny, wise, and indescribably moving. As the Shanleys spin apart into separate orbits, leaving New York in an attempt to regain their bearings, fifteen-year-old Simon feels the allure of adult freedoms for the first time, while eleven-year-old Kay wanders precariously into a grown-up world she can't possibly understand. Writing with extraordinary precision, humor, and beauty, Julia Pierpont has crafted a timeless, hugely enjoyable novel about the bonds of family life—their brittleness, and their resilience.

Praise for *Among the Ten Thousand Things*

"A luscious, smart summer novel . . . by a blazingly talented young author."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"This book is one of the funniest, and most emotionally honest, I've read in a long time."—**Jonathan Safran Foer**

“Obsessively compelling . . . emotionally sophisticated . . . *Among the Ten Thousand Things* rises above [other novels] for its imagined structure, sentence-by-sentence punch, and pure humanity.”—***Vanity Fair***

“Gripping . . . Pierpont brings this family of four to life in sharply observed detail. . . . An acute observer of social comedy, Ms. Pierpont has a keen eye for the absurd.”—***The Wall Street Journal***

“Pierpont’s language is heart-stopping. . . . Between Pierpont’s literary finesse and her captivating characters, [*Among the Ten Thousand Things*] reads like a page-turner.”—***Entertainment Weekly* (grade: A)**

“A twisty, gripping story—that packs an emotional wallop.”—***O: The Oprah Magazine***

“There are going to be as many ingenious twists and turns in this literary novel as there are in a top-notch work of suspense like *Gone Girl*.”—**Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s *Fresh Air***

“Tender, delicately perceptive . . . Pierpont’s voice is wry and confident, and she is a fine anthropologist of New York life.”—***The Washington Post***

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Editorial Review

Review

“A luscious, smart summer novel . . . about a family blown apart and yet still painfully tethered together, written by a blazingly talented young author whose prose is so assured and whose observations are so precise and deeply felt that it’s almost an insult to bring up her age. . . . [Julia] Pierpont illustrates how hard it can be to grow up, at any age—just one of the many reasons *Among the Ten Thousand Things* is such an impressive debut.”—**Helen Schulman, *The New York Times Book Review***

“This book is one of the funniest, and most emotionally honest, I’ve read in a long time.”—**Jonathan Safran Foer**

“An emotionally sophisticated, nuanced examination of a splintering Upper West Side New York City family . . . *Among the Ten Thousand Things* rises above for its imagined structure, sentence-by-sentence punch, and pure humanity. Weaving readers through the New York streets with the Shanleys, and in and out of each of their minds as they try to survive the infidelity that’s torn them from the life they’ve built, Pierpont has written a debut so honest and mature that it will resonate with even the most action-hungry readers—perhaps against reason. Her story is the one we’ll be talking about this summer, and well beyond.”—**Meredith Turits, *Vanity Fair***

“[An] excellent, insightful first novel . . . a gripping portrait of the disintegration of the Shanley family . . . Pierpont brings this family of four to life in sharply observed detail. . . . An acute observer of social comedy, Ms. Pierpont has a keen eye for the absurd.”—**Maira Hodgson, *The Wall Street Journal***

“Pierpont’s language is heart-stopping. In one scene, with her characters suspended in emotional turmoil, she pauses to describe their empty house. There’s even a sparse, poetic interlude in the middle of the book that skips across the family’s lives for decades. . . . Then she rewinds the decades and picks up where she left off. It’s the kind of structural risk that shouldn’t work, but in her skilled hands it lands beautifully. Technically, of course, this is a domestic drama. But between Pierpont’s literary finesse and her captivating characters, it reads like a page-turner. [Grade:] A”—***Entertainment Weekly***

“Bracing . . . Pierpont’s killer ending reveals the long reach of the affair’s consequences (sorry, no plot spoilers). Consider this a twisty, gripping story—that packs an emotional wallop.”—**O: *The Oprah Magazine***

“What sets Pierpont apart . . . is her storytelling chops. The chapters that follow that dramatic opening make it clear that there are going to be as many ingenious twists and turns in this literary novel as there are in a top-notch work of suspense like *Gone Girl*. The effect is dizzying: as a reader you feel, as the Shanleys do, that the earth keeps shifting beneath your feet.”—**Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s *Fresh Air***

“[A] tender, delicately perceptive account of one family torn apart by infidelity . . . Pierpont’s voice is wry and confident, and she is a fine anthropologist of New York life, especially for those creative types who never quite manage to fit in with cultural expectations.”—***The Washington Post***

“[A] sharp, knowing dissection of an unraveling marriage . . . This is the first novel by Ms. Pierpont, . . . and it shows a remarkably mature understanding of the delicate emotional balances in families—how feelings can flow back and forth like electricity in some kind of zero-sum game—and the subtle, irrational

vicissitudes of people's psyches. . . . It is an old story, a crumbling marriage, but Ms. Pierpont gives it fresh insights, making the particular unhappiness (and occasional happiness) of the Shanleys by turns poignant, funny and very sad. . . . The book really comes alive when she gets inside the children's heads and follows them around. Like the best fictional alienated-children-of-New York—Holden Caulfield; the Brooklyn kids in Noah Baumbach's film *The Squid and the Whale*; more recently, the teenager at the heart of Peter Cameron's novel *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*—Kay and Simon exude an irresistible blend of worldliness and vulnerability, knowingness and cluelessness.”—**Sarah Lyall, *The New York Times***

“Pierpont displays a precocious gift for language and observation. . . . She captures the minutiae of loneliness that pushes us away from each other and sometimes brings us back. . . . It's an impressive insight from such a young writer and a reminder that none of us can know for certain what we would put up with in light of this truth.”—***San Francisco Chronicle***

“Fans of [Virginia] Woolf's insight into the human consciousness . . . will savor Pierpont's acute observation of a family in crisis, her deft pacing and deeply human characterization of each member of the family. *Among the Ten Thousand Things* speaks to what makes a person, and a family, tick, even when it can so easily seem utterly inexplicable.”—***The Huffington Post***

“Pierpont orchestrates the narrative with verve, telling her story from the perspective of each family member. There are moments of wry hilarity, and of wisdom. . . . Pierpont leaps into the future in two brief sections titled *That Year* and *Those That Followed*, then back into the ongoing crisis, making the details of how this family unravels ever more touching.”—**BBC**

“[A] sharp debut . . . [a] refreshingly honest family drama.”—***Us Weekly***

“Clever, funny, and completely honest.”—***Bustle***

“Pierpont's entertaining debut is a domestic drama that investigates the way family evolves after being fragmented. When the novel isn't tackling life's questions about time, loyalty, and loneliness, it's sprinkled with humor. . . . [*Among the Ten Thousand Things* is] worth taking with you to the beach this summer.”—***LitReactor***

“An expertly crafted story of a family in crisis . . . richly drawn and heartbreakingly sympathetic. Pierpont wields words like beautiful weapons. This short novel is a treat for fans of Jonathan Franzen, Jami Attenberg, and Emma Straub, and shows off an exciting new voice on the literary landscape.”—***Library Journal* (starred review)**

“The perennial theme of marital infidelity is given a brisk, insightful, and sophisticated turn in Pierpont's impressive debut. . . . This novel leaves an indelible portrait of lives blown off course.”—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“Pierpont's concentrated domestic drama is piquantly distinctive, from its balance of humor and sorrow to its provocatively off-kilter syntax, original and resonant descriptions, bristling dialogue, snaky psychological insights, and escalating tension. . . . With acid wit and thoughtful melancholy, Pierpont catalogs the wreckage, mourns the death of innocence, and measures varying degrees of recovery, achieving a Salingeresque ambience.”—***Booklist***

“Remarkable . . . Julia Pierpont displays not only wisdom, but real tact as a writer, knowing how much to say, how much to leave out, how much to imply.”—**Colm Tóibín**

“Every page of this gorgeous novel contains such joys that you won’t want to stop reading for anything.”—**J. Courtney Sullivan**

“Poignant, surprising, and fiercely intelligent, *Among the Ten Thousand Things* is about the sturdiness and tremendous delicacy of the bonds between parents and children. Don’t miss this powerful debut.”—**Megan Abbott**

“A vicious and enchanting portrait of a fragmenting family that will leave you hungry for whatever Julia Pierpont does next.”—**Courtney Maum**

“Sharply observed and deeply illuminating, *Among the Ten Thousand Things* marks the beginning of what is sure to be a brilliant career.”—**Elliott Holt**

“Why aren’t there more first or second or seventh novels like *Among the Ten Thousand Things*? That’s what I asked myself as I read—actually, devoured—Julia Pierpont’s debut. My conclusion: Very few writers, at any point in their lives, can produce prose of the sort you’ll find here.”—**Sean Wilsey**

“*Among the Ten Thousand Things* succeeds in being both heartbreaking and funny: It’s a wry, sly look at a privileged New York upbringing and the ultimate loneliness at the heart of it.”—**Mary Gordon**

“Julia Pierpont’s voice is as indestructible as her characters. *Among the Ten Thousand Things* brings the news and brings it in technicolor: Here is the real modern family.”—**Darin Strauss**

About the Author

Julia Pierpont is a graduate of the NYU Creative Writing Program, where she received the Rona Jaffe Foundation Graduate Fellowship, as well as the Stein Fellowship. She lives in New York City.

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PART ONE

New York,

the End of May

Dear Deborah,

Do you go by Deborah? It sounds so uptight. I bet you hate Debbie. I hate Debbie, too.

Jack calls you Deb.

This is a letter about Jack.

I began sleeping with your husband last June. We were together for seven months, almost as long as I've known him.

We did it in my apartment. Or I went to his studio, a lot. One time at the Comfort Inn in midtown, last August. He used his Visa. Look it up. I know about Kay, her getting bullied at school, and I know about when Simon got caught shoplifting at the Best Buy. I never asked to know about your family. It's just that sometimes, he needed me.

In movies, when the woman is dumped, one thing to do is to take all the love letters and pictures from photo booths and old T-shirts, and to set them on fire. This is to help the woman move on.

I don't have any pictures from photo booths. What I have is email, and a little blue folder on my hard drive called "Chats." So, look what I did. I printed them, at a FedEx on Houston Street. \$87.62. I haven't had my own printer since college. The hours and hours made pages and pages, none of it so romantic, a lot dirtier than I remembered. I bought a handle of Georgi at the liquor store so it would really burn—the Jamaican behind the register gave me extra bags because it was hard to keep the pages together—and I carried everything back, the sum of my love rolled in black-and-gold plastic, and dumped it all out into the bathtub.

But it didn't seem fair, that I should be left with the mess, when I use this tub, when I stand in it almost every day. So I got this box together, to give to him.

And then just now I was looking at it, and I realized whom I should be giving it to. You.

Falling in love is just an excuse for bad behavior. If you're fucking someone in a way that you mean it, the rest of you is fucked also. Did I care about you, your children? Did I care about my work? Ask me if I cared. If I care, even.

The thing that kills me, that I can't get over, is I didn't do anything to make him stop wanting me. I didn't change. I held very still on purpose. I weighed myself the other day for the first time in a long time. I thought for sure I'd gained weight, like twenty pounds. Twenty pounds is maybe enough to change the way someone feels about you. But no.

You get migraines, right? He told me you do. I get them too, Deb. Do you think maybe it's him? That the migraines are coming from him? Like if we drank the same dirty water and got cancer, or if we both lived a block from 9/11 and got cancer, or if we did anything the same and got cancer, then we'd trace it to the source, right, and expect a settlement, wouldn't we. What are you settling for, Deb? How much did you get?

There were things you learned early, growing up in the city, and there were things you learned late, or not at all. Bicycles were one of the things Kay had missed, along with tree swings and car pools, dishwashers and game rooms in the basement. The only style of swimming Kay knew was the style of not drowning, any direction but down. Instead of a dog, they had a cat, and before that a cockatiel and a cockatoo, sea monkeys, lizards, gerbils that made more gerbils, one regrettable guinea pig.

She made up for what she'd missed with things New York had taught her. Like how long you had to walk after the DON'T WALK started to blink. The way to hail a cab (hand out but still, fingers together). She knew where to stand in an elevator depending on how many people were on it already, when to hold the poles on the subway and when it was okay just to let go and glide. She knew how to be surrounded by people and not meet anybody's eye.

"If you push harder, you won't shake so much." That was what the other girls all said. They kept a few yards away, pigeon-toed, with hands on their hips or as visors over their foreheads. It was the Sunday morning after a sleepover. Their eyes worked at pinching out the sun.

"Just bike to here, Kay." Racky, on the only other bike, made figure eights around the rest of them, Chelsea and the Haber twins with their twin braids. It had become a group project at these New Rochelle playdates, teaching Kay to ride. She could never get past the wobbly, the fear of falling. That jelly feeling would hit after the first pump, and her foot would come down like a gag reflex, like the time she smacked the wooden stick out of Dr. Frankel's hand when he tried to depress her tongue with it, her foot would hit the pavement and drag her to a stop. Cycle, stop. Cycle, stop. Twenty minutes of this, most weekends, and finally the others would get bored, would propose trips to the multiplex, to TCBY, to the kitchen for facials with an issue of *Allure* and someone's mother's old avocado.

"I can't." It was a hot day and probably there was something good on TV, in the air-conditioning. Central air seemed the greatest of suburban luxuries. It was like living inside a Duane Reade. They had AC units at home, wheezy ones that dripped puddles under the windowsills.

"If Kay bikes to here," Racky said, "she can choose what movie we watch."

"I don't want to choose what movie."

The girls whispered, negotiating behind long strings of blonde that they tucked behind their ears as they came up with new terms.

"If Kay bikes to here," said one of the twins, "she can choose the movie *and* if we get pizza or Chinese."

"I don't care what we eat."

"Lo mein, Kay."

"I can't."

Racky rang the bell on her handlebar. "If she bikes to here," she said, counting off on her fingers, "she gets the movie, Chinese, *and* twenty bucks."

The Haber twins laughed. Kay understood that no one expected her to make it, that they were already telling the story on Monday in the cafeteria, the great lengths they had gone to teach Kay, how hopeless she was.

She pushed off the pavement with the girls still laughing and forced herself to pedal a second time, through the uneasiness. For once, she wasn't afraid to fall. If she fell, then at least this all would be over; they'd stop laughing, maybe even feel bad.

She rode right past them—past them!—went another eight or nine yards before sailing into a curb. But still, she had done it. Been bullied into it, but still.

She chose *Harry Potter* and beef lo mein. She never did get the twenty dollars from Racky, but then she never asked.

It was half past nine by the time Racky's mom's minivan pulled up in front of Kay's apartment building. "Your mother's going to have me arrested for kidnapping."

“She won’t care.” Sometimes Kay caught herself making her mother sound neglectful for no reason. She said thanks, for the ride or the weekend generally, to the whole of the car and worked the handle to slide herself out. She could feel the minivan waiting for her to reach the lobby before it lurched away.

Kay’s favorite doorman was on. She never called him by his name, although she knew it, had heard other people address him this way. She was afraid that in her mouth it would come out wrong, that she’d been mishearing it all this time—what everyone else was saying *sounded* like Angel, but no one was named Angel.

“Okay, Kay,” he said when she came shuffling through the lobby, backpack heavy with weekend things. She got to the elevator door just as it opened, and inside her button was pushed already. A magic trick Angel liked to perform. Kay stuck her head out to gape at him, as always, the suggestion of applause, and Angel laughed high and long, different from his laugh with the adults.

The door was sliding shut when Angel held up a finger—wait—and ran around to the service elevator where they kept the packages. He came back with a box.

“For Mommy,” Angel said.

Riding up in the elevator, she turned the box around in her arms. Its flaps were tucked instead of taped together, and there wasn’t any postage or even a street address. And another thing: It was addressed, in black Sharpie, to Mrs. Jack Shanley. No one called her mother that except for Kay’s grandparents, her father’s mother.

In the light of the hall, she noticed something pink where the flaps left an opening. The one thing she would not confess to after that night, for which she would always feel a flush of shame, was the thought that inside the box was a present for her.

Her birthday was not until September, and they observed Easter only in candy aisles the day after. However. If it was a gift for her, she didn’t want to wait until the fall to get it, and if it was for her mother, or her father, or for Simon, then there wasn’t any harm checking.

Inside, it was just paper. So many pieces of paper, thrown together like tickets in a raffle.

i went to that dinner party in red hook tonight. all the talk was about what’s happening in syria, what’s happening in egypt, and i can only think about what’s happening with you.

The feeling that her domino eyes were running over something she wasn’t supposed to see. She tried to make them stop, or to see without reading, but they could not, would not stop.

i can’t explain why i get so sad when you make me so happy

i’ve been thinking of how you pressed my hand against your neck

show me your cunt

And right there, slid off the top, the winning ticket, the pink that had drawn her in: an envelope. This, too, was addressed to her mother, but it wasn’t sealed, and so she opened it. The letter was the only thing in the box that had been written by hand.

Dear Deborah,

And:

I began sleeping with your husband last June.

And:

I know about Kay.

She redid the flaps, held the box under her arm, and let herself into the apartment. Clenching all her parts as she passed her mother and brother in front of the television.

“Kay?” her mother called. “Why so late?”

Quickly to her room, head down to hide her face. There was that little guy in her throat, the one that hurt when she wanted to cry.

Her mother’s shoes clicking nearer, she buried the box under a tangle of shirtsleeves on the floor of her closet just as the door swung open. “Babe? What happened to you? I tried Arlene.” Kay pretended to look for something in her bottom dresser drawer. “She never picks up. I don’t like that woman.” Kay was moving handfuls of clothes from one end of the drawer to the other. “Did you hear me?”

“She’s a good mom.” She hadn’t meant to defend Racky’s mother. Feeling herself start to cry, she dug deeper into the drawer. Nightgown. Where was her yellow nightgown?

“Baby, did something happen?” Deb’s hand touched her shoulder and Kay twisted away. Her mother was quiet and so pretty, with her shiny hair and tiny waist, the evenness and natural tan of skin that Kay had not gotten from her. “Did you have a hard time with the girls, with learning the bike?”

The bike, the sleepover, those things seemed small and far away now, but remembering made everything worse: yet another place where her life was not as she wanted it to be: She had unkind friends. But in a way it was good to remember, it allowed for her tears. Her mother held her, and she let herself be held, in the orb of Deb’s Deb-scented perfume.

“Did you fall?”

Kay nodded. The wet skin under her eye stuck to her mother’s arm.

“Where does it hurt?”

She could follow instructions and give the box to her mother. She could throw it away. She could give it back to Angel, have *him* throw it away. What she couldn’t do, she knew in that moment, was go to her father, who might never tell her mother, if he had the box, because how could she live with him then.

For now the safest thing to do was nothing. The box was a secret she kept, the whole next day at school. She found herself in history, in math, in science, not knowing how she got there, not remembering the halls. Lockers slammed too loud, and Racky, the twins, everyone was always laughing about something, and what was so fucking funny all the time? She felt faraway and alien, her teachers going on about fractions and photosynthesis and the Underground Railroad. What did these things have to do with her life, where did they touch her?

It wasn't Sunday but Monday that everything happened, and Simon might have been slightly, vaguely, barely, just approximately high. A little tiny bit.

He'd skipped the bus home and gone to the Short Stop diner down the hill from school, where the kids sat drinking bottomless cups of coffee with their omelets and buttered toast, tired-eyed teenagers who hibernated through breakfast every morning and so made up for it in the afternoons, ruining the dinners their mothers or housekeepers were making for them at home. Seniors held court over the seven booths, leaving the underclassmen to share barstools, cheek to cheek. Simon was fifteen but arrived with a senior from his religion class, Jared Berkoff, with whom he'd been partnered to present on Confucianism, a topic they'd drawn at random from Mr. Dionisio's just-rinsed, still-damp coffee tumbler. Jared was a stoner, always high except on the social ladder, though the JAPs still invited him to their parties, and when one of the more inspired jocks discovered the effect of switching out a letter in Berkoff, a mascot was born. There were worse people for Simon to show up with. The diner was where deals were struck, where everyone went looking for drugs or for play. Jared was looking to score both.

Both arrived in the shape of Elena Gorbunova, a junior with a broad forehead and pretty, space-alien eyes. Simon had seen her before in the cafeteria, knew the tight turtlenecks that hugged her so that waist-up she might have been a figure skater.

"Gorbunova," Jared said, flipping shut his phone. Clearly she was the one he'd been texting since they sat down in the back booth, next to a quiet senior who did studio art and whose cuffs and cuticles were always edged with paint. "Gorbunova's going to smoke us out."

Elena, with the slightest bend of her knee, managed to curtsy. Probably she and Jared had something—or used to have something or were about to have something—going on. She led them out the door, all hip bone, tonguing a sugar packet.

Elena got a steady supply of weed from her brother, Gorb, now a student at Manhattan College, which was in the Bronx, near their school. Gorb had been expelled from high school his sophomore year, but before that he'd been a star of the varsity fencing team, which practiced in the middle school gym. Simon remembered him, padded white and huge, like a walking sofa bed, with a wispy mustache and a silver mask under his arm, whipping a foil around the breezeway.

In the parking lot beside a shuttered tanning salon, the three of them squatted behind a car, and Elena set a yellow glass bowl on the ground. She pulled the weed apart, packed it herself. Sticky on her fingers, but she worked fast. She might have been failing out of PE, but clearly there were things she knew.

She took the first hit, quickly, as though she was just getting it started for them, and passed it to Jared. Simon noticed a mark on the back of her hand, an almost-star, all but the last two lines drawn. Thin, white lines. A knife, or a razor blade. He watched the star twinkle at him as she fingered another sugar packet. When it was his turn to take a hit, he realized he'd forgotten to watch how it was done, and he'd never smoked anything before. Why couldn't it at least have been a joint and not this bulbous, lemony thing?

His fingers felt clumsy around it. He saw in flashes how it might fall to the ground and ruin everything, the privilege of being there so new. On the inhale the air came too easy and felt like nothing.

"Here," Elena said, moving his finger over the hole on the bowl's side. Like a music teacher, she was patient. "Tap."

He looked at Jared, mercifully unaware, picking something off his tongue.

When Simon pulled it into his lungs, the weed turned to orange embers, darkening again on the release.

“Hold it in,” Elena said, and put two painted fingernails, pink and green, to his lips. It burned him up bad on the inside, but he would never cough onto her rough little fingers, her star scar.

The smoke had to come out somewhere, though, and it came out in his eyes. His vision blurred and tears trembled in the corners, waiting to fall the moment his head tipped a centimeter this way or that. Elena, with no expression he could read, kept her fingers to his lips, almost cruel—was she trying to kill him?

When she finally did take her hand away, Simon tried to keep his choking on the inside. Was he high? Was this high? He was happy and afraid, but this had more to do with Elena’s knee brushing his where they sat Indian style on the poured concrete and sharp bits of pebble and glass.

Now Elena took a long, slow hit and let the smoke out smoothly, as if it were only hot breath on a cold night.

How he knew he was stoned had to do less with a feeling and more with the fact that when he smiled he went blind, eyes so small. Jared’s eyes, at least, were red, but Elena’s were round as ever, calm, curved pools, surface life on the plane of her face. Maybe she’d built up a tolerance for weed, or a total immunity. That would be sad. Or maybe she was high all the time and had one of those miracle faces that never showed it.

“Look at fucking Simon,” Jared said. “He’s turning Japanese-a.”

They both started to laugh. You’re blowing it you’re blowing it you’re blowing it. Stop smiling, you idiot. You have nothing to smile about. The sound of Elena laughing made the cotton in his mouth sink down into his stomach and grow. This helped some, brought his cheeks back to normal, though his eyes still felt small, like pink and green fingers pressed to his lids.

Jared clapped his hands together. “Your face is amazing, man.”

“He’s cute,” Elena said, but like she felt sorry for him. Simon’s mouth was dry and probably he had to throw up. He felt like a science experiment gone wrong, and what if he just cried in front of them.

Elena leaned closer. “You are cute to smile,” she said, her English worse than it should have been. Had he ever even heard her speak before? Was this the first time he was hearing her voice?

Before he realized it, she was kissing him, once, not long but sweetly and sweet, sugar granules pressing off her lips, that thick, musty smell on both their mouths stronger when multiplied, and Simon did the worst thing he could have done. He smiled, so that she kissed his teeth.

She straightened up, wiping her mouth, the star a comet across her face. She leaned her head back against the car door and closed her eyes. Jared had done the same. Simon sat and waited for someone to do anything, but they seemed to have gone to sleep. He cleared his throat. Jared scratched his nose.

Simon saw himself out.

On the subway home, he cursed himself for the smiling and the dryness of mouth. Also, for not buying a soda at the bodega on the corner, that was a mistake.

It was half past six when he got off at the Eighty-sixth Street station and started for home. Coming up on the corner of Broadway was the supermarket where a hundred times on the train he’d imagined himself buying a

can of Sprite, but before he reached it, he saw his sister, sitting on the wooden bench put out by the ice cream shop. She was looking down, apparently into her belly button, and her short, feathery hair fell forward, hiding her face. She hadn't seen him, and the Sprite was so close.

But she looked very small, his sister, and very sad, and he wondered for a second if she knew something, if someone at the school had seen him. If Jared and Elena had been arrested, his name would have come up. The school or some precinct might have called the house, and his mother might have sent Kay out so she and Simon could talk alone. That was how Simon buried himself, in the middle of Broadway, because of something he saw in the curve of his sister's back, what had made her so heavy.

"What are you doing here?"

"Buying ice cream."

She didn't see him look pointedly from her place on the bench to the ice cream shop and back. "You know, you have to go inside for that."

"In a minute." She strangled a shirt button by its thread. The shirt was a leftover from elementary school dress code, white but graying, and she hadn't matched the holes up right. Simon remembered the early mornings when she'd fought against these shirts, before the big middle school privilege of getting to wear what you wanted. The novelty had worn off, though—freedom of expression was another kind of nuisance—and she'd gone to wearing bits and pieces of uniform again.

Simon had meant to avoid Kay's looking at him closely, in case his eyes were strange, they still felt strange, but she was almost crying now, and he sat on the bench beside her. "How much did Mom give you?"

"I had money from lunch."

"You didn't eat lunch?" So it was something that happened at school. Simon remembered that high people got paranoid. This wasn't about him at all. Still, what it was about, she wouldn't say, so he touched her shoulder like someone she didn't know was there and said hey and nodded toward the white light inside the ice cream shop, where the menu hung glowing from the ceiling.

Ice cream helped, a little, even though Kay let most of her grasshopper pie run down her fingers and gather in the cave her palm made. Simon got butter pecan, his favorite, which their father called the geriatric flavor, but he felt wrong to enjoy it with his sister so upset. Plus, he knew, marijuana made pigs out of people.

It was a great test of his burgeoning manhood, but his affection for his sister, or maybe just curiosity, kept Simon from stopping for the soda he wanted. Kay was moving now, dropping bits of cone into the corner trash can, almost home, and he followed her.

The doorguy was helping some building people load luggage into a taxi, a relief to Simon, who liked the doorguy but not always the banter that came with him, how much he joked with Kay. In the gold-green light of the elevator, he stared into the brass plate that framed the buttons, where he and his sister reflected back at him, warped around the engraved numbers, their bodies strange of size. Their eyes were the same in this light, over-small and under-bright. Simon forgot to press the button. But Kay remembered.

Their mother was in the kitchen with a pot of spaghetti and a head of broccoli. Sometime that year she'd started making dinner every night, which meant less meat. She didn't like to handle it. Their dad was still at work. He was never home this early.

It was the smallest decision Kay could think to make, smaller even than doing nothing, which felt like deceit. Showing Simon would be like showing herself, because he was theirs too.

He sat on her bed with the box in his lap. Kay knelt behind him so she couldn't see the changes in his face but could see what he was reading, how slowly he pored over the letter to their mother, he must have read it three or four times, and the sudden speed with which he read the rest, *thank you for yesterday*, until he was crinkling pages, probably getting only the gist of things, *i can't explain why i get so sad when you make me so happy*, pushing through the sea of it, careless, so that some spilled over the cardboard sides. He was angrier than she thought he'd be, and when he'd read enough, without saying anything to Kay, who was about to ask what did he think, without even a word to her, he pushed down on the pages and lifted his chin and shouted: "*Mom!*"

She didn't even look at most of it. That was something Simon couldn't believe, how his mother didn't pore over every page. As furious as he was with his father, he was furious with her too, for reasons he couldn't explain yet but that had something to do with how her reaction was not enough, not nearly enough. Though he didn't know what would be.

This is a letter about Jack. This is a letter Deb held against her lap, in case her hands wavered. *I began sleeping with your husband last June*, and Deb began feeling grateful her children could not see through to her stupid heart, how it lurched there. *It's just that sometimes, he needed me.*

You get migraines, right? He told me you do.

From Kay's bed, she lifted her face to where her son was standing, defiant with his arms crossed, defiantly *not* crying, and where her daughter was shrinking into the wall, trying to press through plaster.

"Okay, just." She stood. "Guys, I need. Just give me a minute." She picked up the box like it was furniture and considered it there, as if deciding where it should go, as if the whole idea wasn't to be with it somewhere her children weren't. "I'll be right back in a minute."

Simon and Kay watched her go, listened to her footsteps travel the hall, heard the bedroom door creak a little open, then closed. They waited like it was all Kay's room was for, waiting, like they should have had magazines. Each minute took all its time.

Above the bed, Deb weighed the box in her arms and tried to decide if the pages were a lot or a little, for all those months.

“Where’d she *go*,” Kay moaned at the floor.

“She didn’t go anywhere.”

“But what’s happening?”

“She’s upset, dork. Be quiet.”

Kay was and still Simon said, “Quiet.”

Subject: about yesterday

somebody braver would do this on the phone, or in person.

Deb wanted to protect her children. She wanted to put shoes on their feet and coats over their shoulders, coats though the weather had warmed already.

yesterday might be something you do all the time. i’ve never been married—i don’t know what that’s like.

She wanted to carry her children someplace safe, her mother’s or the movies, carry them though they were fifteen and eleven and too big for her to carry.

i’ve been thinking of how you pressed my hand against your neck. it seemed like such a kind thing to do, like you wanted to make yourself vulnerable to me too.

But her first impulse about the box had been to hide it. She was the victim, yes, but in front of her children, she understood at once what else she would become, which was a guilty party, and she began to notice her breathing.

Their mother’s private sounds grew more and more frightening, the longer it seemed they’d never stop. Sometimes just a page turning, and they wondered which page. Or when something slammed—a lighter object colliding against a heavier one, a cascade—what was that? A hand, a fist, a stack of books.

The wound which Deb had tried to tourniquet had reopened, and she’d been so stupid for thinking she could tie it off there, and what were these words her kids had read, these awful words they’d seen? *show me your cunt.*

show me your cunt.

hi! i’m working

i can see your bald cunt.

haha no you can't

i close my eyes and i see it. you're wearing the white skirt and no underwear.

She imagined Simon reading it, and she could scream. Kay reading it, and she could hammer Jack's head into the ground. She pictured them together in some small, dark space, reading, and they were younger in her mind, both somehow three or four, before they even could read. The ages they'd been when she sat with them on the ugly old sofa they used to have to watch PBS and eat. When Jack came home, he'd ask what had happened to the buttons on the remote, the surface of everything shining from grilled-cheesy fingers. They were taller and tougher now, her children, more angled—Simon especially—but it was those kids she imagined the words hurting, growing them up in the worst way.

And she hadn't done anything, but that was the problem. Stupid, idiot woman.

A shrill sound pierced the air, making them jump, what both hoped, horribly, wasn't their mother's voice, what turned out to be the smoke detector singing.

Deb came running out to the kitchen, and Simon and Kay found her at the stove saying, "Shit shit stop it stop," bullying the pot of pasta that gurgled hot foam onto the range. She flapped a dish towel at the little white disk mounted near the ceiling. "Could someone please open a window please!"

Simon leaned over the sink to push out the pane of glass, which got the air to where it was almost circulating. Deb went on flapping. Within their panic it was a relief to have a small, solvable problem, something actionable. When the alarm stopped, the other problems were still there.

She got them both to the table. Simon sucked down glass after glass of soda, so that Deb eventually brought the two-liter bottle out from the fridge and left it to sweat on the wood. Kay wound pasta into a mass on her fork, her face intermittently crumpling into the mask of tragedy. Deb wished she could hear what words rang in her daughter's ears, what thoughts kept breaking through, breaking her pink, round moon face. She began to doubt even this decision, dinner, a sad stab at order where it did not exist, and got out of her chair to crouch between them. She touched the backs of their necks, which felt hot, or maybe she was cold.

Simon was watching the bubbles cling and lose their grip inside his glass. "You're going to get a divorce."

Deb could feel all the insides of her throat, saying, "When Dad gets home—"

"I don't want to talk to him. I hate him." So Simon wouldn't talk and Kay couldn't, could make only a wet whistling sound with her breathing.

"Don't cry. We—" And here Deb looked at Simon too, stressing the word. "We didn't do anything wrong." The sharp eyes her son made back at her made her wonder if he disagreed, if maybe he thought she had done a few things wrong.

They gave up on dinner. Kay cried in the mirror, watching herself brush her teeth. Deb gave her two Tylenol

PMs and sat with her as she fell asleep. She touched her daughter's face with a bent finger. The girl's skin felt like a wettish peach.

In the living room, Simon splayed out on the floor with his videogames, the buzz of his hair silhouetted against the light of the screen. Deb stood over him. The time glared on the cable box: 9:28. Jack, so near an opening, would not be home for another several hours. "Which game is this?"

"Battlefield."

"How does it work?" On-screen it was a gray day, and the camera bobbed through torched forests, past patches of fire and ember. There was the sound of footsteps and a helicopter overhead. Deb flinched at gunfire.

"You kill people." He pressed so many buttons. "It's the Vietnam War." There was shouting in a hard, alien language (real Vietnamese?) and more shooting. A hand that was Simon's reloaded his gun. An American shouted *Grenade, get down!* The color washed out, and the point of view fell to the ground, on its side. "Fuck."

Deb looked at her son in a way he could feel.

"What? I died." Already he was alive again. KILL ASSIST +10 flashed on the screen.

"Who are you playing against?"

"Uh." His words came from far away. "It's live, so. Just anybody."

"Strangers?"

"Uh. Yeah. I mean, I don't know them."

...

Later he went to bed, or at least to his room, where, from the hall, Deb could see the strip of white light underscoring his door. Probably he was online again. Probably had never been off.

The box she'd left in their bedroom, under a blanket on the rocking chair by Jack's closet. That was where it greeted her now, tipping a little forward in the current the window conspired with the open door to make.

you are tracing it with your two fingers, up and down, slowly. are you doing it?

my roommate is in the kitchen

you're doing it

This Jack she knew. He'd said things to her, maybe not quite so dirty. People were less dirty in the nineties, or it felt that way. They weren't typing it yet. But Deb remembered talking on the phone. She'd had a roommate then, Izzy, another dancer in the corps, who was always around, walking through her room to the kitchen, peeing with the bathroom door open to still see the television in their dark one-bedroom converted to two.

now put your fingers inside. get them wet. are you wet?

Deb wondered if he bit her too. This faceless girl, touching herself, who was she?

i'm so hard for you. i've got it in my hand so you can see.

And where was he, writing these words? Here, while she was in class and the kids were at school? *i'm sliding in you. i slide right in you because you are so wet.* He wanted to know about other men, how the girl touched them, let them touch her. *did you like his cock in your mouth? did you suck his balls?* These were the kind of questions he'd asked Deb when they were new to each other, when the memories of other men were still fresh in her mind. She'd tell him about a boyfriend who liked her to drag her teeth up his shaft or dance a finger around his asshole, and the next time they were together, he'd ask for teeth, for assholes. She thought it was cute, that he got jealous, and curious, that jealousy made him want it. "Don't you want to hear my stories?" he'd ask. "Don't you like hearing about things I've done?" No.

I'll be a little late tomorrow, picking up Kay's cake. Let yourself in, take off all your clothes, get down on the floor, and wait for me to make you cum. Deb saw smooth legs opening somewhere in Jack's studio, on the drafting table maybe, and she saw the white skirt.

To call her mother, she went out through the yellow lobby, past Angel, who hopped off his stool, and into the early-summer air that cradled her.

"Hello?" Ruth always picked up. "Hold on a minute; let me turn off the set."

Deb held, wandered the block. Dark around the First Baptist Church, where a woman she worked with at the college had gotten married. The outside was beautiful with its rose windows, stained glass rainbowed like oil in a puddle, but the little room where they'd had the ceremony had plaster walls and low ceilings. For two twenties Simon had helped videotape the wedding.

"Okay, hi, dear." To Deb's quiet she said, "What is it," her voice weighted with every possible wrong.

"They know. The kids. About Jack."

"You told?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Then what, Deborah? Slow."

Deb told her, slow, passing under the warm neon of the twenty-four-hour burger place where they used to give the kids balloons. Deliverymen sat waiting at the green tables and chairs on the sidewalk.

"And you called David?"

Deb walked faster down Broadway, with a snap that suggested purpose. She crossed against the light. David Currie was the divorce lawyer she'd gone to in January, really a friend from high school who had grown up into a lawyer. "I just wanted so goddamn much to be done with it." Her throat had closed up. Past the Korean grocery, where the grapefruits and green peppers outside seemed to glow. The streetlights were orange and red and swam in her eyes.

“I know.” Ruth sighed into the phone. “Oh, don’t I know,” as if she was thinking of her own past.

“I just can’t believe it. I just can’t fucking believe he did this.” That wasn’t true, so why did she keep saying it?

“He’s a son of a bitch, Debby. We knew this.”

“I don’t even want to fucking talk to him.”

“So call David.”

Back in January, what David Currie had told her was to wait. He had been through a divorce himself; they were long and sometimes people changed their minds. “You’d not believe,” he’d said, “what people get over.” He told her about a woman who’d stayed with her husband after his sex-change operation.

“I keep thinking about how someone might say it’s my fault. For not doing anything.” And because she did know what it was like to lose sight, behave badly, and she was afraid of bringing in the mud, the ugly, afraid of what might be used against her if she pressed Jack, and if he tried really to defend himself. “I should have, I shouldn’t have been—”

“But you *did*. You *were*. Honey, no good comes this way. Listen. Look. Lie down. Take a rest. He isn’t home yet?”

“I’m out.”

“Where are you?”

“Can’t you hear I’m outside?”

“What does it matter? No, I couldn’t hear.”

“I’m not coming over. Relax.”

“You could come.”

“I know, you’d love that. Look, I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I was eating.”

“Well, you shouldn’t eat so late,” Deb said stupidly. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Outside the Seventy-second Street subway station, sprinkles of people were gathered in pairs or posed alone against columns, waiting for other people. A red stroller rolled across the square, a woman with short hair leaned on its handlebars. A comfort to find life in other places, people who didn’t know him, who’d read his write-ups maybe, in *New York* or the *Times*, but who didn’t give a fuck about Jack.

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