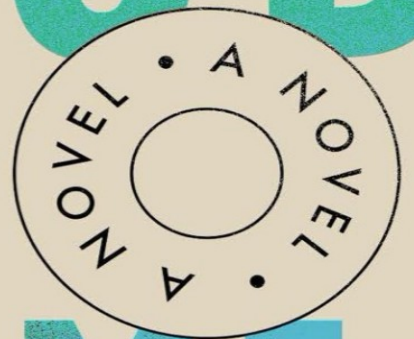


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA

STRAUB



THIS TIME

TOMORROW

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All Adults Here

Modern Lovers

The Vacationers

Laura Lamont's Life in Pictures

Other People We Married

THIS TIME

TOMORROW

Emma Straub

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

NEW YORK

2022



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For Putney Tyson Ridge

Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home.

IAN McEWAN, *Atonement*

• • •

This time tomorrow
Where will we be?

THE KINKS

• • •

Until the future!

LEONARD STERN, *Time Brothers*

PART ONE

TIME DID NOT EXIST IN THE HOSPITAL. LIKE A LAS VEGAS CASINO, there were no clocks anywhere, and the harsh fluorescent lighting remained equally bright during the entire stretch of visiting hours. Alice had asked, once, if they turned off the lights at night, but the nurse didn't seem to hear, or maybe she thought it was a joke, but in either case, she didn't respond, and so Alice didn't know the answer. Her father, Leonard Stern, was still in his bed in the center of the room, attached to more lines and cords and bags and machines than Alice could count, and had hardly spoken for a week, and so he wasn't going to tell her, either, even if he did open his eyes again. Could he sense the difference? Alice thought about lying in the grass in Central Park in the summertime as a teenager, letting her closed eyelids feel the warmth of the sun, when she and her friends would stretch their bodies out on rumped blankets, waiting for JFK Jr. to accidentally hit them with a Frisbee. These lights didn't feel like the sun. They were too bright, and too cold.

Alice could visit on Saturdays and Sundays, and in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when her workday ended early enough that she could hop on the train and get to the hospital before visiting hours had ended. From her apartment in Brooklyn, the subway ride was an hour door-to-door, the 2/3 from Borough Hall to 96th Street, and then the local all the way to 168th Street, but from work, it was half an hour on the C train, a straight shot from 86th and Central Park West.

Over the summer, Alice had been able to visit nearly every day, but since school had started, a few days a week was the best she could do. It felt like it had been decades since her father was still himself, when he looked more or less the way he had for Alice's whole life, smiling and wry, his beard still more brown than gray, but in reality, it had only been a month. He'd been on a different floor of the hospital then, in a room that felt more like an underdecorated hotel room than an operating theater, with a photograph of Mars that he'd torn out of the *New York Times* taped to the wall, alongside a photo of his ancient and powerful cat, Ursula. She wondered whether someone had taken those things and put them with the rest of his belongings—his wallet, his telephone, whatever actual clothing he'd been wearing when he checked in, the stack of paperback books he'd brought with him—or whether they'd been thrown away in one of the giant flip-top waste bins that lined the sterile hallways.

When someone asked how her father was doing—Emily, who she shared a desk with in the admissions office; or Sam, her best friend from high school, who had three children, a husband, a house in Montclair, and a closet full of high heels to wear to her job at a terrifying law firm; or her boyfriend, Matt—Alice wished for an easy answer. The longer it went on, the more the question turned into an empty phrase, the way one might say *How are you?* to an acquaintance passing on the sidewalk and keep walking. There were no tumors to excise, no germs to fight. It was just that many neighborhoods of Leonard's body were falling apart in a great, unified chorus: his heart, his kidneys, his liver. Alice understood now, as she never truly had before, how the body was a Rube Goldberg machine, and every time one domino or lever got knocked sideways, the whole thing would stop. When the doctors poked their heads into the ICU, it was just the word *failure*, over and over again. They were all waiting for her father to die. It could be days or weeks or months, no one was quite able to say. One of the worst parts of the whole thing, Alice understood, was that doctors were almost always

guessing. They were smart people, and the guesses were informed by tests and trials and years of experience, but they were guessing nonetheless.

Alice saw it now: all her life, she'd thought of death as the single moment, the heart stopping, the final breath, but now she knew that it could be much more like giving birth, with nine months of preparation. Her father was heavily pregnant with death, and there was little to do but wait—his doctors and nurses, her mother in California, his friends and neighbors, and most of all, the two of them. It could only end one way, and it would only happen once. No matter how many times a person was on a bumpy airplane, or in a car accident, or stepped out of traffic just in time, no matter how many times they fell and did not break their neck. This was how it went for most people—actual dying, over a period of time. The only surprise left would be when it happened, the actual day, and then all the days that followed, when he did not push away the boulder or stick his hand out of the ground. Alice knew all of this, and sometimes she felt okay with it, it being the way of the world, and sometimes she was so sad that she couldn't keep her eyes open. He was only seventy-three years old. In a week, Alice would turn forty. She would feel immeasurably older when he was gone.

Alice knew some of the nurses on the fifth floor and some of the nurses on the seventh floor—Esmeralda, whose father was also named Leonard; Iffie, who thought it was funny when Leonard pointed out that the hospital lunch often had apples three ways: apple juice, applesauce, and an apple itself; George, who lifted him most easily. When she recognized one of the people who had cared for her father in an earlier phase, it felt like remembering someone from a past life. The three men who worked the front desk were the most consistent caregivers, insomuch as they were friendly and remembered the names of people like Alice who visited over and over again, because they understood what it meant. They were led by London, a middle-aged Black man with a gap between his front

teeth and an elephant's memory. He remembered her name, her father's name, what her father did, everything. His job was deceptively easy—it wasn't just smiling at the people with bunches of balloons who came to visit new babies. No, visitors like Alice would show up and show up and show up until there was no reason to come back, just a long list of numbers to call and things to do and arrangements to make.

Alice pulled her phone out of her bag to check the time. Visiting hours were nearly over.

"Dad," she said.

Her father didn't move, but his eyelids flickered. She got up and put her hand on his. It was thin and bruised—he was on blood thinners, to keep him from having a stroke, and it meant that every time the nurses and doctors poked him with another needle, a small purple blossom appeared. His eyes stayed closed. Every so often a lid would open, and Alice would watch him search around the room, not focusing on anything, not seeing her. At least she didn't think so. When she could get her mother on the phone, Serena would tell her that hearing was the last sense to go, and so Alice always talked to him, but she wasn't sure where her words were going, if anywhere. At least she could hear them. Serena also said that Leonard needed to release himself from his ego, and that until he did so, he would be forever chained to his earthly body, and that crystals would help. Alice couldn't listen to everything her mother told her.

"I'll be back on Tuesday. I love you." She touched his arm. Alice was used to it now, the affection. She had never told her father she loved him before he went into the hospital. Maybe once, in high school, when she was miserable and they were fighting about her staying out past her curfew, but then it had been shouted back and forth, an epithet hurled through her bedroom door. But now she said it every time she visited, and looked at him when she said it. One of the machines behind him beeped in response. The nurse on duty nodded at Alice on her way out, her dreadlocks tucked into a white

cap with pictures of Snoopy on it. "Okay," Alice said. It felt like hanging up on him, or changing the channel.