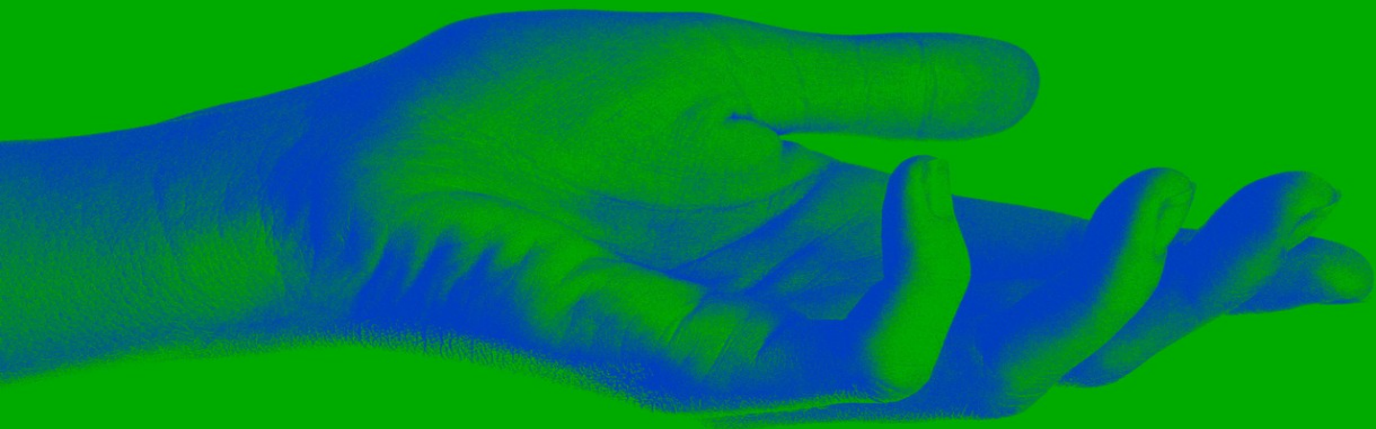


# THE GUEST

# EMMA CLINE

*New York Times* bestselling  
author of THE GIRLS

A Novel



THE  
GUEST

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*A Novel*

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EMMA  
CLINE



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Thank you to Bill Clegg and everyone at the Clegg Agency, and to Kate Medina and the Random House team.

For early help, I'm grateful to Willing Davidson, Hilary Cline, David Gilbert, Alexander Benaim, Sara Freeman, Lexi Freiman, and Megan, Elsie, and Mayme Cline.

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Cline, Emma, author.

TITLE: The guest : a novel / Emma Cline.

DESCRIPTION: First Edition. | New York : Random House, [2023]

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022037681 (print) | LCCN 2022037682 (ebook) | ISBN 9780812998627 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780812998634 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCGFT: Novels. CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3603.L547 G84 2023 (print) | LCC PS3603.L547 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220812

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022037681>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022037682>

Ebook ISBN 9780812998634

Export edition ISBN 9780593597248

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

*Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook*

Cover design: Oliver Munday

Cover photograph: Getty Images

ep\_prh\_6.1\_143680504\_c0\_r1

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# 1

THIS WAS AUGUST. The ocean was warm, and warmer every day.

Alex waited for a set to finish before making her way into the water, slogging through until it was deep enough to dive. A bout of strong swimming and she was out, beyond the break. The surface was calm.

From here, the sand was immaculate. The light—the famous light—made it all look honeyed and mild: the dark European green of the scrub trees, the dune grasses that moved in whispery unison. The cars in the parking lot. Even the seagulls swarming a trash can.

On the shore, the towels were occupied by placid beachgoers. A man tanned to the color of expensive luggage let out a yawn, a young mother watched her children run back and forth to the waterline.

What would they see if they looked at Alex?

In the water, she was just like everyone else. Nothing strange about a young woman, swimming alone. No way to tell whether she belonged here or didn't.

—

WHEN SIMON HAD FIRST taken her to the beach, he'd kicked off his shoes at the entrance. Everyone did, apparently: there were shoes and sandals piled up by the low wood railing. No one takes them? Alex asked. Simon raised his eyebrows. Who would take someone's shoes?

But that had been Alex's immediate thought—how easy it would be to take things, out here. All sorts of things. The bikes leaning against the fence. The bags unattended on towels. The cars left unlocked, no one wanting to carry their keys on the beach. A system that existed only because everyone believed they were among people like themselves.

—

BEFORE ALEX LEFT FOR the beach, she had swallowed one of Simon's painkillers, a leftover from a long-ago back surgery, and already the familiar mental gauze had descended, the surrounding salt water another narcotic. Her heart beat pleasantly, noticeably, in her chest. Why did being in the ocean make you feel like such a good human? She floated on her back, her body moving a little in the push and pull, her eyes closed against the sun.

There was a party tonight, hosted by one of Simon's friends. Or a business friend—all his friends were business friends. Until then, hours to waste. Simon would be working the rest of the day, Alex left to her own devices, as she had been ever since they'd come out here—almost two weeks now. She hadn't minded. She'd gone to the beach nearly every day. Worked through Simon's painkiller stash at a steady but undetectable pace, or so she hoped. And ignored Dom's increasingly unhinged texts, which was easy enough to do. He had no idea where she was. She tried blocking his number, but he got through with new ones. She would change her number as soon as she got the chance. Dom had sent another jag that morning:

Alex

Alex

Answer me

Even if the texts still caused a lurch in her stomach, she had only to look up from the phone and it all seemed manageable. She was in Simon's

house, the windows open onto pure green. Dom was in another sphere, one she could pretend no longer quite existed.

—

STILL FLOATING ON HER BACK, Alex opened her eyes, disoriented by the quick hit of sun. She righted herself with a glance at the shore: she was farther out than she'd imagined. Much farther. How had that happened? She tried to head back in, toward the beach, but she wasn't seeming to get anywhere, her strokes eaten up by the water.

She took a breath, tried again. Her legs kicked hard. Her arms churned. It was impossible to gauge whether the shore was getting any closer. Another attempt to head straight back in, more useless swimming. The sun kept beating down, the horizon line wavered: it was all utterly indifferent.

The end—here it was.

This was punishment, she was certain of it.

Strange, though, how this terror didn't last. It only passed through her, appearing and disappearing almost instantly.

Something else took its place, a kind of reptile curiosity.

She considered the distance, considered her heart rate, made a calm assessment of the elements in play. Hadn't she always been good at seeing things clearly?

Time to change course. She swam parallel to the shore. Her body took over, remembering the strokes. She didn't allow for any hesitation. At some point, the water started resisting her with less force, and then she was moving along, getting closer to shore, and then close enough that her feet touched the sand.

She was out of breath, yes. Her arms were sore, her heartbeat juddered out of sync. She was much farther down the beach.

But fine—she was fine.

The fear was already forgotten.

No one on the shore noticed her, or looked twice. A couple walked past, heads bent, studying the sand for shells. A man in waders assembled a

fishing pole. Laughter floated over from a group under a sun tent. Surely, if Alex had been in any real danger, someone would have reacted, one of these people would have stepped in to help.

—

SIMON'S CAR WAS FUN to drive. Frighteningly responsive, frighteningly fast. Alex hadn't bothered to change out of her swimsuit, and the leather upholstery cooked her thighs. Even at a good speed, the car windows down, the air was thick and warm. What problem did Alex need to solve at this moment? Nothing. No variables to calculate, the painkiller still doing its good work. Compared to the city, this was heaven.

The city. She was not in the city, and thank god for that.

It was Dom, of course, but not only Dom. Even before Dom, something had soured. In March she had turned twenty-two without fanfare. She had a recurring stye that drooped her left eyelid unpleasantly. The makeup she applied to cover it only made it worse: she reinfected herself, the stye pulsing for months. Finally she'd gotten an antibiotic prescribed at a walk-in clinic. Every night she tugged on her lids and squeezed a line of medicated ointment straight into the socket. Involuntary tears streamed only from her left eye.

On the subway, or on the sidewalks, woolly with new snow, Alex had started to notice strangers giving her a certain look. Their gaze lingering. A woman in a plaid mohair coat studied Alex with unnerving focus, her expression twisted with what seemed like mounting concern. A man, his wrists white under the strain of many plastic bags, stared at Alex until she finally got off the train.

What were people seeing in her aura, what stink was emanating?

Maybe she was imagining it. But maybe not.

She'd been twenty when she first arrived in the city. Back when she still had the energy to use a fake name and still believed gestures like that had value, meant the things she was doing weren't actually happening in her real life. Back when she kept lists: The names of the places she went



with the men. Restaurants that charged for bread and butter. Restaurants that refolded your napkin when you went to the bathroom. Restaurants that only served steak, pink but flavorless and thick as a hardcover book. Brunches at mid-range hotels, with unripe strawberries and too-sweet juice, slurry with pulp. But the appeal of the lists wore off quickly or something about them started to depress her, so she stopped.

Now Alex was no longer welcome in certain hotel bars, had to avoid certain restaurants. Whatever charm she had was losing its potency. Not fully, not totally, but enough that she began to understand it was a possibility. She'd seen it happen to others, the older girls she'd known since moving here. They defected for their hometowns, making a grab at a normal life, or else disappeared entirely.

In April: A manager had, in low tones, threatened to call the police after she'd tried to charge dinner to an old client's account. Too many of her usuals stopped reaching out, for whatever reason—ultimatums eked out of couples therapy and this new fad of radical honesty, or the first flushes of guilt precipitated by the birth of children, or just plain boredom. Her monthly cash flow fell precipitously. Alex considered breast augmentation. She rewrote her ad copy, paid an exorbitant fee to be featured in the first page of results. Dropped her rates, then dropped them again.

Six hundred roses, the ads said. Six hundred kisses. Things only very young girls would want six hundred of.

Alex got a series of laser treatments: flashes of blue light soaked her face while she looked out of tinted medical goggles like a somber spaceman. In the meantime, she had her photos redone by a twitchy art student who asked, mildly, whether she might consider a trade for services. He had a pet bunny that lurched around his makeshift studio, its eyes demonic pink.

May: One of her roommates wondered why their Klonopin was dwindling so rapidly. A gift card had gone missing, a favorite bracelet. A consensus that Alex had been the one to break the window unit. Had Alex broken the window unit? She had no memory of it, but it was possible. Things she touched started to seem doomed.

June: Desperation made her lax with her usual screening policies—she waived references, waived photo IDs, and she'd been ripped off more than once. A guy had Alex take a cab out to the JFK airport hotel, promising to reimburse her in person, and then stopped answering her calls, Alex on the sidewalk dialing again and again, the wind attacking her dress while the taxi drivers slowed to look.

And in July, after the roommates demanded that the back rent be paid in the next two weeks or else they would change the locks, Dom came back to town.

—

DOM HAD BEEN AWAY for almost a year, a self-imposed exile in the wake of some trouble she didn't want to know too much about. Better, with Dom, to never know too much. He said he'd been arrested—more than once—but never seemed to actually spend any time in jail, alluding vaguely to some variety of diplomatic immunity, some last-minute intervention on his behalf by high-ranking officials. Did he think anyone believed the things he said? He lied more than she did, lied for no reason. Alex had promised herself she wouldn't see Dom again. Then he texted—someone who actually wanted to spend time with her, maybe the only person who wanted to spend time with her. She couldn't quite conjure the reasons she'd ever been afraid of him. They had fun, didn't they? He liked her, didn't he?

He was staying in an apartment he said belonged to a friend. They drank room-temperature ginger ale. Dom walked around barefoot, lowering all the shades. There was a line of whipped cream containers covered in stickers along a windowsill, empty seltzer cans in a CVS bag on top of the trash. He kept checking his phone. When the apartment buzzer rang, and kept ringing, he ignored it, giggling, until it finally stopped. He made an omelet at four A.M. that neither of them touched. They watched a reality show: The older women on-screen sat on the sunny outdoor patio of a restaurant, sucking violently at glasses of iced tea. The women's

conversations were heated, faces in a mask of drama. “I never said that,” the dark-haired woman bleated.

“You seen this before?” Dom asked without looking away from the TV. He was cradling a stuffed penguin in his arms, worrying its shiny button eyes.

The woman on-screen stood up, knocking her chair over. “You’re toxic,” she screamed. “Toxic,” the woman repeated, her finger fucking the air. She stalked away, breathing hard, a cameraman backing up out of frame when she came barreling past.

They watched another episode, and then another. Dom lay with his head on her knee, licking the drugs off his fingers. When he put his hand in her underwear, she didn’t move it away. Still they kept watching. All the women in the show hated each other, hated each other so much, just so they could avoid hating their husbands. Only their little dogs, blinking from their laps, seemed real: they were the women’s souls, Alex decided, tiny souls trotting behind them on a leash.

How long had Alex stayed there with Dom? At least two days.

And how soon, after she left, had Dom figured it out?

Almost immediately.

Dom called her four times in quick succession. He never called, only texted. So instantly Alex understood she had made a mistake. The texts came rapid-fire.

Alex  
Are u fucking kidding me  
What the fuck  
Can you just  
fucking  
pick up

Alex had been on hour ten of a nice, swimmy run of benzos when he’d called: a warm compress cooling on the last dregs of the stye, takeout

stinking up the room but blessedly out of sight. The texts from Dom had seemed funny.

But then Dom left a message the next day, almost crying, and he had been nice enough to her. Almost a friend, in his demented way.

She finally responded with a text:

*I can't talk rn. But in a few days, ok?*

Alex had assumed, at first, that some solution would turn up. It always did. So she kept putting Dom off. He checked in almost daily.

Alex?

Things escalated. Dom calling again. Dom leaving voicemails. Acting lighthearted, even jokey, as if this was a low-key misunderstanding. Then swinging wildly into aggression, his voice going to some eerie psycho register, and she was genuinely afraid. She remembered the time—last year. Or it must have been before that, before he left the city. When he woke her up with his hands on her throat. Her eyes locked onto his—his hands tightened. His expression was one of mild concentration. She didn't look away until he pressed hard enough that her eyes closed and she felt them roll back in her head.

Alex could change her number, but what about the ads she'd already paid for, ads that were linked to this phone number? She told herself Dom would get tired of this eventually. He'd require fresh blood.

But then, leaving her place one morning, she'd spotted Dom across the street. Dom lingering on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets. It was Dom, it had to be. Maybe not. Or was it just a coincidence? She hadn't given him her new address. She was suddenly paranoid. The stye was coming back. Her roommates no longer acknowledged her in the common areas. They changed the Wi-Fi password. The bathroom cabinet had been emptied of every medication, even ibuprofen.

Alex had the disorienting sense that she was infectious.

---

IT HAD BEEN A dead night, no takers.

Maybe Alex was giving off a spiky, desperate air—people could tell when you needed things, had an animal nose for failure. Alex kept checking her messages, waiting for a bite, but Dom was lighting up her phone, offering to call her a car, trying to get her to meet him at the subway stop near the park. Alex turned the phone over.

Alex was on her second seltzer in a rocks glass—better not to actually drink, just appear to be drinking—when a man sat down a few stools away from her at the counter. A man in a white button-up and a full head of hair. Normally, she would have clocked the man immediately as a civilian, someone whose self-conception wouldn't include participation in certain arrangements. Those men weren't a good use of her energy. But maybe that had been an error, her focus on more immediate gratifications—because where had that gotten her? She'd been overlooking the protection a civilian could offer. Something more permanent. Adrenaline coursed through her: this was a man who could turn things around.

Who started the conversation, him or her? At any rate, at the man's invitation, Alex moved to the stool next to his. His watch glinted as he made a point of dropping his phone in his pocket: she had his full attention.

"I'm Simon," the man said.

He smiled at her. She smiled back.

Here was the answer, the emergency exit she had always suspected might present itself.

Alex was hitting all the correct beats, like she had been training for this exact moment, and maybe she had. She allowed Simon to order her a real drink. When she laughed, she covered her mouth with her hand, as if she were especially shy. She watched him take this gesture in, like he took in her two modest glasses of white wine, her napkin spread primly on her lap. The conversation came easy. Alex must have looked, to Simon, like a normal girl. A normal, young girl, enjoying her life in the city. But not

enjoying it too much: she turned down a third glass of wine but accepted an after-dinner coffee.

Everything had gone right. Simon asked her on a date. An actual date. And then another. Alex stopped seeing the other men. Avoided certain triggers, parts of the city. Alex never invited Simon to her apartment. She stopped answering late night calls. Resisted the urge to take anything of Simon's: the pearly cufflinks, the cash he wadded carelessly on his nightstand.

When did things get dire—a few weeks later?

August was right around the corner, Alex still stalling Dom, trying to figure out who she could crash with if—when?—her roommates kicked her out. Her apartment keys vanished from her purse—or had the roommates repossessed them? She spent a whole night waiting on the stoop until the nicest roommate finally came home from his late shift. His face, like everyone's seemed to lately, fell at the sight of Alex. At least he let her upstairs to shower, though he wouldn't let her linger.

Then Simon had swooped in to save the day.

His house out east. He'd love it if she came with him for August. She could stay through the month. He had a fun party every Labor Day—she'd have a good time.

Alex abandoned the shared apartment without paying the outstanding back rent, though she left behind most of her old clothes, all the cheap pressboard furniture, as a partial payment. Alex ignored calls and texts from her former roommates, blocked Dom's number. Dom would get over it, at some point. No one from what she was already thinking of as her old life knew about Simon, knew where Alex had gone. None of the people she had, in whatever way, vague or acute, wronged.

She had disappeared herself—it had been easy.

—

THE REST OF THE summer she would spend here, with Simon, and then in September—Simon had his place in the city. There was talk of Alex moving

in. Whenever Simon alluded to any possible future, Alex dropped her eyes; otherwise, her desperation would be too obvious. Simon still believed Alex had her apartment, and that was important. Keep up the appearance of self-sufficiency, let him feel he was navigating all of this. At this point, restraint was best.

—

SIMON.

He was a kind person, mostly.

He had shown Alex photos on his phone of himself as a young man, handsome with an avid face. He was in his fifties now, but that full hair was still there, and he was in good shape. It was all the halibut that crowded the freezer, the white slabs he grilled with so much lemon that Alex felt her mouth vibrate. He had a trainer who hooked him up to electrodes that shocked his muscles to tightness, who suggested ice baths and organ meats, all the novelty add-ons of the professionally healthy. Simon maintained such psychotic discipline because he seemed to believe even the smallest lapse in vigilance would result in catastrophe. And probably he was right. Occasionally the control dropped: Simon took a jar of peanut butter to the couch, eating with fastidious care until it was empty, the spoon licked clean by his surprisingly pink tongue. He gazed sadly into the scraped jar, as if offended by the sight.

Simon had a daughter who didn't live with him, and an ex-wife on the other side of the country, but there was no rancor, not that Alex could sense. Simon always left the room to talk to his daughter on the phone. Caroline had the dark glossy hair of the wealthy, the groomed eyebrows and garments in dry-clean-only fabrics. One of those daughters of the rich who were pitiable because, in the end, they could buy everything but beauty. Alex had only seen photos of Caroline, a skinny girl always clutching her own elbows, a girl who appeared to be frowning even when she was smiling. She hoped desperately to become a singer. Alex saw sorrow in the daughter's future but that was probably just projection.

Simon's house out east was near enough to the ocean. The living room ceiling was twenty feet high, cut with beams. A polished concrete floor. Big paintings that, by pure dint of their square footage, implied high value. Simon's specialty was the secondary market, and Alex cultivated a thoughtful expression when Simon showed her a run of JPEGs or if they went to a dinner at a collector's house. Sometimes she tried to guess the price of things, or guess what Simon might say when they were alone. But Alex never guessed right—there were too many invisible contexts. Maybe there had been a poor showing for similar work at the evening sales. Maybe an artist had used certain materials that tended to degrade, making the piece too volatile to be covered by insurance. If the wrong person had owned something beforehand—a newly flush collector with a naïve eye, tech CEOs under federal investigation—that could taint it in some way. The value was based on a network of factors that were constantly in flux. Sometimes the work was a mere idea of the work, existing only as an image emailed back and forth, collectors reselling a piece they'd bought before they'd ever even seen it in person.

This game of convincing people how much things were worth—in that way, she and Simon were not so different.

—

THE LAST WEEKS HAD passed pleasantly. It had been easy to slot herself into Simon's life here: its textures and habits were so finely woven that Alex had only to submit. They went to his friends' houses for dinner, assistants emailing first to inquire about any dietary restrictions. None, Alex always chirped back. That was the point of Alex—to offer up no friction whatsoever. They went to garden parties in the buzzy, buggy afternoons and Alex stood there while Simon talked and drank white wine. His friends looked at Alex with unspecific smiles—maybe they assumed they had met some previous time, had confused Alex with one of Simon's other young women. Nice to see you, they always said, the safe phrase allowing the possibility to go in either direction. Having fun? someone might say, finally



directing a question to Alex, and she would nod but their eyes would have already slipped back to Simon's. They were sometimes patronizing, Simon's friends, but she had long ago become inured to the disapproval of strangers. All those times she had sat in public across from men twice her age, men with sweating, exposed scalps. She felt the presentiment that she would be looked at and understood how to keep herself steeled against those stares.

But this was not that. This thing with Simon. She leaned into Simon and he kept talking but dropped a hand to her low back. On the ride home, he'd tell her about his friends. Their private lives, their hidden problems. And Alex would ask questions and egg him on and he'd flash her a smile, his pleasure suddenly so boyish.

This was real, her and Simon. Or it could be.

During the day, Alex watched television in the sunroom, read magazines in the bath until the water got cold. She went alone to the beach, or swam in Simon's pool. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, a woman came to do laundry and clean. Alex spent hours being chased from room to room by silent, industrious Patricia, who took in Alex's presence with the same unmoving expression she took in any mess.

It wasn't hard. None of it was hard.

Every once in a while, Alex took one of Simon's painkillers to stitch the looser hours together, though she did not share this information with Simon. She was on best behavior. If she drank from a glass, she rinsed it immediately and put it in the dishwasher. She wiped away the leftover ring on the table. Didn't drop wet towels on the bed, or leave the toothpaste uncapped. Monitored the number of pills she cadged to avoid Simon's detection. Made a point of cooing over Simon's dog, Chivas, who Simon kissed on the mouth.

When Simon texted that he was almost done working, Alex splashed water on her face and brushed her teeth. She changed into an expensive T-shirt Simon had bought for her, then sat around, waiting, like the end of every day was a first date.

Had Simon ever had to wait for Alex, did Simon ever anticipate her arrival?

No. But who cared?

These were small concessions considering what they allowed.

—

OF COURSE SHE HAD not told Simon about Dom. She had not told Simon a lot of things. She'd learned early on that it was necessary to maintain some distance. Keep up a few untruths. It was easy, and then easier. And wasn't it better to give people what they wanted? A conversation performed as a smooth transaction—a silky back-and-forth without the interruption of reality. Most everyone preferred the story. Alex had learned how to provide it, how to draw people in with a vision of themselves, recognizable but turned up ten degrees, amplified into something better. How to allude to her own desires as if they were shared desires. Somewhere, deep in their brains, the synapses fired, chugging along in the direction she set out for them. People were relieved, grateful to click in to something bigger, easier.

And it was good to be someone else. To believe, even for a half moment, that the story was different. Alex had imagined what kind of person Simon would like, and that was the person Alex told him she was. All Alex's unsavory history excised until it started to seem, even to her, like none of it had ever happened.

Simon believed that Alex had graduated from college last year and had just moved to the city. He believed Alex's mother was an art teacher and her father coached high school football. He believed Alex had grown up in the middle of the country. He asked her, once, why she wasn't close to her family—she said her parents were angry with her for not going to church anymore. "Poor little sinner," Simon said, though he seemed genuinely moved by the idea of Alex being alone in the world. Which wasn't untrue. Simon thought of Alex as a real person, or enough for his purposes. Alex spoke of the possibility of grad school and this seemed to soothe Simon,

imply a modest life of self-improvement. Ambitious in the mildest version of the word.

—

THERE WAS STILL DEBRIS on the road back from the beach, leftovers from a summer storm, but most of the larger branches had been cleared away. The thin sunlight erased any memory, sugar bright on the cedar-shingled houses.

All the back roads looked the same. Trees meeting overhead, making a hollow cut by the occasional driveway. Roads lined by the same deep summer green, green packed so tight you couldn't see anything beyond. The houses were hidden behind hedges and gates, offering no navigable landmarks.

Alex's mind was elsewhere, so she didn't quite register the street she had turned onto. A sudden movement among the trees made her glance over. A deer, maybe. There were so many of them here, forever darting across the roads.

The sound of a car horn got her attention. Another car was driving toward her. The driver honked again, more aggressively. This was a one-way street, Alex realized. Too late. She tried to back into a driveway to turn around. She must have miscalculated the distance: the noise startled her, until she understood it was coming from her car. Or, rather, coming from Simon's car. The rear bumper made audible contact.

The other driver didn't even stop, didn't even slow.

Maybe if she hadn't been so flustered—the riptide, Dom, the painkiller shroud—this wouldn't have happened. Already Alex was practicing what she would say to Simon, calculating exactly how childish she'd have to act to escape his anger.

Alex left the car running while she got out to look at the damage. She had hit a stone retaining wall with the rear bumper, one of Simon's cherry-red taillights cracked open and missing a not-insignificant piece. She located it in the dirt, now just a scatter of red plastic. Maybe five hundred bucks to replace, not the worst. Though who could tell with these fancy

cars, their particular mechanics, special parts? The imported paint. At least the bumper was only a little bit crumpled. She looked around, as though there might be help coming from some direction, someone who might arrive and take control of the situation.

Simon would be unhappy, his beloved car. This would be a mark against her.

The rest of the car looked okay, but as she scanned she kept her gaze a little blurry—better, for the confession, if Alex didn't know the full extent of the damage. Anyway, it seemed minor.

—

AS SHE STEPPED INSIDE Simon's house, the humidity dropped away instantly, the air-conditioning shocking the afternoon into a slight unreality. The day erased itself.

Simon's office was in a separate building on the property—Alex could see the ceiling fan going through the window, which meant Simon was inside, working. Good. She didn't want to see him yet. She was too rattled.

Don't think of the car, don't think of Dom, don't name this new feeling of dread.

A quick swim, she decided.

The screen door to the backyard had been manufactured in such a way that it was impossible to slam; it closed behind Alex in slow-motion silence.

Simon's assistant, Lori, sat at a table by the pool with two cellphones in front of her. She lived an hour away, in some cheaper town, woke up before the sun rose to drive to Simon's. She had a tattoo of a rose on her left forearm and a live-in girlfriend who sometimes dropped her off but never got out of the car. Among other duties, Lori was in charge of Chivas, Simon's dog. Lori was always trying to train Chivas to wear a tiny hiking backpack so he could carry a water bottle when she took him for walks. Whenever they returned, Lori spent an hour cross-legged on the floor, eyes squinted, checking Chivas's fur for ticks with unbroken attention that bordered on the erotic.

“It’s the worst season on record,” Lori had noted, multiple times. “Ticks are everywhere. The deer are crawling with them.”

Now Chivas was barking steadily at the man in uniform who was crouching in the grass, servicing the gas grill before the Labor Day party. When the dog leapt half-up on the man’s back, the repairman looked to Lori for help. Lori didn’t say anything.

Alex could see a few holes in the lawn where Chivas had gone after the gophers. Simon would be annoyed, though he adored the dog—didn’t mind its watery blue eyes, didn’t mind the pale growths festooning its muzzle.

Alex draped the big beach towel over one of the metal chairs and pulled it into the sun to dry. She felt she was moving at a normal speed, doing normal things.

“How was the beach?” Lori said, barely looking up.

There had been others before her, Alex knew, other young women with weekend bags and hopeful, careful bodies, other women who drifted into the kitchen at ten in the morning to drink coffee someone else had made for them, tugging their cotton underpants out of their ass and looking around for Simon. Thin girls in camisoles who ate yogurt standing up. But Alex had outlasted them, had passed into another, more permanent realm. They were ghosts; she was real. Alex lived here; her clothes were in the closet. For the rest of the summer, anyway. She was no longer vulnerable to Lori’s opinion.

“Really nice.” Alex made herself smile, made herself catch Lori’s eye. Hard to guess exactly how much Lori disliked her. “The water was perfect.”

Before she got in the pool, she stretched, long enough that Alex could feel Lori was watching her. Could Lori sense something was wrong?

Alex dove into the water.

—

THE POOL WAS NARROW but long, perfect for laps, which Simon executed daily with manic focus. He told Alex he exercised so much because when he’d gone to business school in Europe, he’d gotten fat from eating

hamburgers—that’s all he knew how to order. Since then, he was obsessed with never being fat again, up at six A.M. to work out on a machine where he climbed the equivalent of eighty flights of stairs, then to the pool where he swam feverish laps until the sun rose.

Even with all those early morning laps, he was a poor swimmer, with a habitual stroke too ingrained to ever improve.

“Maybe try this way,” Alex said, the first day she was here, showing Simon a stroke that would lessen the strain on his tricky back. “It takes the pressure off.”

Simon corrected his stroke for a few lengths, reining in his wild effort, then reverted back to his old form.

“You’re doing it again,” Alex said, making her way to Simon through the water. “Let me show you.”

“It’s fine,” Simon said, his voice clipped, shaking off Alex’s hand.

She made herself laugh a little. She sat on the pool steps. Simon went back to his laps, the water churning in his wake. All this energy he expended. Simon said something to her that she pretended not to hear. Alex made her hands into a scoop and gathered the floating leaves, the torn blossoms on the water’s surface. She made a wet pile on the concrete that edged the pool and tidied it absently. So that was more information to file away—don’t correct Simon. Alex plucked a bee from the pool by the filmy wing and added it to the pile of other dead things.

Who would clean them up? Someone. Not her.

—

AFTER A FEW QUICK laps, Alex floated on her back. She could hear her heart in her ears. She inhaled for four counts, held it for four counts, exhaled for four counts. Straight above was the cloudless sky, a blue that seemed pulled tight. The airport was on the other side of the highway—a small plane arced across her vision, slowing for a landing.

Alex did ride in a helicopter once, with Simon, on their way out here. The noise had been deafening, a noise out of war movies, and it was odd,

this heart-churning racket paired with the dreamlike sensation of rising straight into the air. It had been nighttime, the last hour before the airport's enforced curfew. The helicopter seemed to be flying extraordinarily low, enough that she saw, amidst the dark ruffles of trees, the illuminated swimming pools that dotted the landscape, pockets of blue and green hovering out there in the blackness. She kept bracing for a crash—as if such blatant excess deserved swift punishment.

A muffled sound, a bad feeling: Alex opened her eyes to a shadowed figure standing by the pool. It was Lori, her hands on her hips.

“Sorry?” Alex said.

“I said, do you need anything before I head out?”

—

SIMON'S BEDROOM WAS IN the back of the house, down a long hallway. It was quiet inside, the curtains drawn against the daylight and the heat. The bed was made so tightly. Such shocking cleanliness, edging on the perverse. She wanted to throw herself on those perfect uncreased sheets, but didn't. The perfect sheets, the chilly rooms: they were stupid things, taken one by one, but all together they were a convincing substitute for a life. One where suffering seemed to have no place, the idea of pain or misfortune starting to fuzz out and seem less likely. And who could argue with that, with wanting to be protected? No problem was unsolvable. Could she imagine the trajectory continuing upward? Good fortune accruing and accruing, the world suddenly opening in any direction, like one of those trick boxes, the sides falling down and revealing there were no more limits.

Even this thing with Dom could seem manageable. Like she could fix it.

How? She didn't know, exactly.

Alex calmed herself by making an inventory of the room, watching the trees move behind the curtains. She pretended not to notice the voicemail notifications on her home screen. She played a game on her phone that

involved collecting diamonds before a black turtle could eat them. She kept playing until the turtle finally ate all the diamonds.

YOU LOSE, the screen said, the words vibrating, and she dropped the phone on the bed.

—

THIS PART WAS COMFORTING, the getting ready. Taking concrete action, executing the familiar set of steps. Alex had gotten good at it, over the years, this ceremony of preparation.

She took her time that evening, working up a trance. The bathroom went steamy, the rolls of toilet paper rippled in the humidity. With all her careful labor, the afternoon seemed farther and farther away. Alex stared at the mirror long enough that her face went abstract, too, now just light and shadow.

She used her fingers to dot foundation on her forehead, under her eyes, along her jaw. Brisk work with a damp sponge to spread it all out and disappear the flaws. Then she had to bring herself back to life: blush, a pearly highlighter at the brow bone. She darkened her eyebrows with short strokes—more realistic, the short strokes. She caught her own eye in the mirror as she silently pumped an eyelash curler.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen times.

Like a lot of the other girls, Alex had found out quickly that she was not beautiful enough to model. The lucky ones realized this sooner rather than later. But she was tall enough and skinny enough that people often assumed she was more beautiful than she was. A good trick.

Thin brown hair cut at her shoulders. Short fingers with filthy nails—how could a girl in this century get such dirty fingernails? Add it to the running list:

Keep fingernails clean.

Keep breath sweet.

Don't leave toothpaste in the sink basin.



She shaved her underarms, dragging the razor in the shape of a cross. Then went over the skin again, Alex wincing at the scraped feeling. The skin was smooth, when she finished, stinging a little in the bitten places. Her hair was on the edge of dirty, one more day before she had to wash it but okay for tonight, brushed back. Simon didn't like it falling in her eyes—she hit it with oil to keep it smooth, keep everything in place.

—

“THERE SHE IS,” SIMON SAID, coming into the bedroom. The sight of him was like a tonic—here it was, Alex's life. Just as she had left it.

When Simon was done working for the day, he always seemed a little bewildered. He kept patting his shirt pocket absentmindedly for his phone.

“Wow.” Simon looked her up and down like he always did, the gesture so amplified it was almost slapstick, a cartoon wolf in a suit.

“That's a great dress,” he said. “You have great taste.”

Simon had bought the dress for her.

Most of the clothes Alex owned, now, were gifts from Simon, the brand names like vocabulary words in a foreign language. Her old stuff she'd left in the apartment—it was crap, most of it. Not even worth the resale value—dresses stained with deodorant, the suede heels she'd had resoled multiple times. She suspected Simon was trying to make her appear older than twenty-two, these clothes he chose for her in dark colors. The linen shirts, the trousers, skirts with hemlines that hit her knee. The clothes were still fitted, of course, still marked her waist and breasts. It was just a more oblique way of achieving the same end, more palatable because it was less obvious.

The earrings she was wearing were another gift: Simon had presented the earrings to Alex inside a box inside a cloth bag inside another bag, and the act of opening the many layers extended the whole process to a grotesque length. Which maybe he had intended. She hadn't said thank you: the other girls had taught her that. You don't thank them—you smile and

accept what they give you, as if it was something that already belonged to you.

“So pretty,” Alex had said, holding up the earrings, “I love them,” and the strange part was she really did, the drops of silver. Like earrings she might have chosen for herself. Occasionally she believed that she and Simon were actually in something like love.

“Aren’t you going to keep the box?” Simon had said, and Alex nodded and immediately corrected herself, smoothing the bag into a clean fold and re-coiling the white ribbon.

—

SIMON SAT ON THE BED and Alex joined him, her hand going automatically to the back of his neck. She kneaded hard, then scratched his hair. Lightly. Very lightly.

“Don’t stop,” Simon said.

These moments were nice—Alex was giving him something tangible, playing her nails along his scalp. Simon lay with his head in her lap like a child, his eyes closed. Alex studied him from above. He was fairly handsome. He was trying to drink more water and had started dumping sachets of mushroom powder into his metal water bottle. Alex had tried a sip: it made the water taste swampy and expensive.

“You smell good.” Simon’s eyes were still closed.

“I took a shower,” she said.

“You went to the beach?”

“Yeah.”

Alex pressed her fingers harder on Simon’s scalp, not letting herself dwell on anything that had happened after the beach. No fucking up of the car, the hundreds or possibly thousand dollars of trouble Alex had created. Make it so the tape started at the beach lot, the drive home uneventful, the reel ending with Alex parking the car. Alex could tell Simon about the rip current. The moment she believed she was in danger. She could tell him about Dom. But she didn’t.

“Waves were a little big,” Alex said. “But nice.”

“Mm.” Simon was quiet for a minute, letting Alex rub his neck. “Maybe you should wear the blue dress instead,” he said. “Tonight. It gets chilly on the water.”

“Sure,” Alex said, her voice light.

Silence.

Normal, she told herself, everything was normal. She worried Simon could sense her unease. But of course he couldn't. His eyes were shut. Alex let her hand laze to his crotch, watching Simon as she did. His mouth automatically parted, his lids going heavy. He opened his eyes to look at Alex, then shut them. He widened his legs, pulling Alex to the floor by the wrist. How easily these things went.

Alex knelt beside the bed. Simon was lying back. Alex undid Simon's pants, keeping a mild expression on her face. It took Simon a while to get fully hard; her mind wandered, then returned. Her thoughts located themselves in different places around the room. The tree branches flashing out the window. The painting over the bed, a recent addition. What had happened to the old one? He got sick of things so quickly. She would have to fix her makeup, after—though she couldn't appear to care. Alex felt Simon surge in her hand. Alex caught his eye, looking, as they all seemed to prefer, right up at him. Her dress was probably ruined—fine. Simon wanted her to wear the blue.

—

TRAFFIC WAS BAD, EVEN on a Monday, the main highway packed in both directions. Simon sighed, flicking through the radio dial, then starting over again. Alex's knee was bouncing, her nerves jittery. She made herself stop.

Everything, Alex told herself, was fine.

Simon hadn't noticed the damage to his car's bumper. Or—this would be best—he noticed and just didn't mention it. Was this possible?

“It's Monday, where are all these people coming from,” Simon muttered. “Jesus.”

Stop-and-go traffic, the air smelling of exhaust. Simon kept trying to see around the cars in front of them, as if he could scout some alternate route invisible to everyone else. And it was possible he could—all these back roads out here, people zigzagging around, greedy for even a few extra minutes.

“You’re quiet,” Simon said, without looking at Alex.

Alex shrugged. “Just tired.”

Alex tried to slow her thoughts down, match them to the crawl of traffic. It was soothing, even, to try to submit to the larger forces at work, the mental static that traffic allowed—there was nothing Alex could do to improve this moment, no angle to consider, no moves to play through. She smoothed her dress on her thighs.

Her purse was in her lap, a soft leather the color of tobacco. Another gift from Simon, it had come with its own cloth storage bag and a special polishing wipe for the hardware. Bags, the other girls had taught her, were the one thing that actually had resale value. None of the other men had ever gotten her nice stuff: plasticky lingerie in too-bright colors, a pair of wan satin tap shorts, cheap stockings that stunk of chemicals. Like they got some punitive pleasure from withholding access to objects with real worth. Alex took very good care of the purse, monitoring any scuff. The first time she had seen a blemish, an inadvertent fingernail scratch, she felt actual sorrow.

Her phone was in her purse, and, if she shifted, she could check the screen without Simon seeing. But why did she want to check? It could only be Dom, texting again with exhortations to Answer. The. Fucking. Phone. And anyway, Simon didn’t like Alex to be on her phone when they were together. He had never said as much, but Alex felt him watching, making his internal notes of disapproval. Best behavior, Alex told herself. She didn’t touch the phone.

The party was at a woman named Helen’s house. Her first husband drowned, Simon told Alex on the drive over. While scuba diving, or something like that, he couldn’t remember. One of those freak accidents the rich suffer—too many people kept them in too good of shape for them to

die from natural causes. Life had ceased to be dangerous, the oxygen tanks and hormone tests and syringes full of B vitamins warding off the old killers.

Traffic was at almost a full standstill.

Simon snapped the radio off. Music didn't seem to give him any pleasure—Alex liked that he didn't pretend otherwise. Younger men had to make everything mean something, had to turn every choice and preference into a referendum on their personality. They had made her uneasy, the men she'd seen who'd been closer to her own age. The possibility of exposure was too great. Much better to have the buffer of an entirely different generation: the older men had no context for Alex, couldn't even begin to inadvertently piece together any semblance of her real self.

Alex let her hand rest on Simon's knee. Out the window, the houses and storefronts passed, then a stretch of empty land. A new development going up, whoever wouldn't mind living right on the highway with all the noise. You could get used to anything, was the point.

"Oh shit," Simon said. "Well, here's the problem."

Traffic snaked around the scene of an accident. A white convertible was crumpled by the side of the road, a chunky SUV askew in the road behind. Two cop cars were parked on the shoulder with their lights going but no sirens.

There were no victims in sight, no injured parties, just a cop in an orange vest, waving traffic along.

Simon whistled, slowing down to look.

"It's that left turn," he said. "It's the worst."

"Maybe everyone was fine." Alex's voice sounded brittle: she tried to soften it.

"Doubtful." Simon was somber, shaking his head, though Alex detected a note of excitement. "No one's walking away from that alive."

Even though Alex understood that they were driving in Simon's car, and even though Alex understood she had only had a fender bender that afternoon, a minor fender bender, Alex had the sudden feeling, for whatever reason, that she had been inside the white car. That she had died, here on

the highway. It was a dumb thought, but she couldn't shake it. Maybe she was going crazy. At the same time, she knew she would never go crazy—which was worse. She'd been almost jealous of the people she'd known in the city who'd totally cracked up, spiraled into some other realm. It was a relief to have the option to fully peace out of reality.

Simon crossed the main road, turning onto a smaller road, and then another. Houses were set farther back until most everything was hidden behind a wall or a hedgerow. Alex could smell the ocean getting nearer.

“You know,” Simon said, gesturing out the window, “all this used to be potato fields. Hard to imagine, huh?”

It was not the first time he'd said this. It seemed to please Simon, imagining the process by which something worthless became something valuable. But it wasn't so hard to imagine—just take away these houses, the big fat boxes waving American flags over the front doors, and it was land, green and golden and not in its way so different from the place Alex had come from.