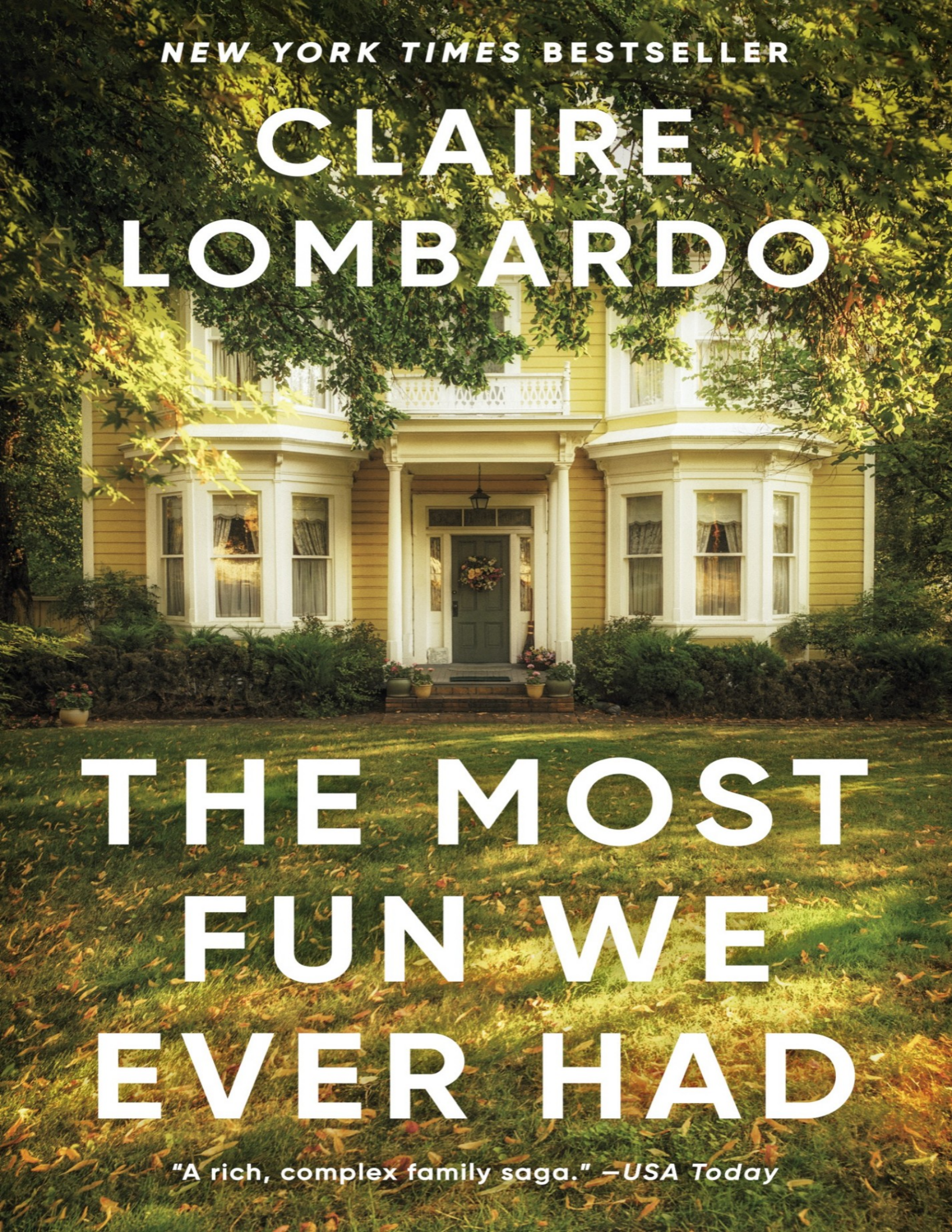
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
CLAIRE LOMBARDO
THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD
"A rich, complex family saga." —USA Today

Praise for Claire Lombardo's

THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD

"[A] juicy saga….Reading about [this family] is a treat."

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"A sprawling, enchanting debut…this novel jumps back and forth across time to tell the story of one powerful, complicated, and utterly unforgettable family as they navigate love and loss."

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"A classy but juicy read that always has one more surprise up its sleeve."

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"[A] brilliant debut."

—PopSugar

Claire Lombardo

THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD

Claire Lombardo earned her MFA in fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Prior to writing *The Most Fun We Ever Had*, she spent several years doing social work in Chicago. She was born and raised in Oak Park, Illinois.

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THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD

Claire Lombardo

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For Sally and Tony Lombardo,
MY MOM AND DAD

THE OFFSPRING

April 15, 2000
Sixteen years earlier

Other people overwhelmed her. Strange, perhaps, for a woman who'd added four beings to the universe of her own reluctant volition, but a fact nonetheless: Marilyn rued the inconvenient presence of bodies, bodies beyond her control, her understanding; bodies beyond her favor. She rued them now, from her shielded spot beneath the ginkgo tree, where she was hiding from her guests. She'd always had that knack for entertaining, but it drained her, fully, time and time again, decades of her father's wealthy clients and her husband's humorless colleagues; of her children's temperamental friends; of her transitory neighbors and ever-shifting roster of customers. And yet, today: a hundred-odd near strangers in her backyard, humans in motion, staying in motion, formally clad; tipsy celebrants of the union of her eldest daughter, Wendy, people who were her responsibility for this evening, when she already had so much on her plate—not literally, for she'd neglected to take advantage of the farm-fresh menu spread over three extra-long card tables, but elementally—four girls for whose presences she was biologically and socially responsible, polka-dotting the lawn in their summer pastels. The fruits of her womb, implanted repeatedly by the sweetness of her husband, who was currently nowhere to be found. She'd fallen into motherhood without intent, producing a series of daughters with varying shades of hair and varying degrees of unease. She, Marilyn Sorenson, née Connolly—a resilient product of money and tragedy, from dubious socioemotional Irish-Catholic lineage but now, for all intents and purposes, as functional as they come: an admirably natural head of dirty-blond hair, marginally conversant in both literary criticism and the lives of her children, wearing a fitted

forest green sheath that exposed the athletic curve of her calves and the freckled landscape of her shoulders. People kept referring to her with great drama as the *mother of the bride,* and she was trying to act the part, trying to pretend that she wasn't focused almost exclusively on the well-being of her children, none of whom, that particular evening, seemed to be thriving.

Maybe normalcy skipped a generation, like baldness. Violet, her second-born, a striking brunette in silk chiffon, had uncharacteristically reeked of booze since breakfast. Wendy was always cause for concern, despite seeming less beleaguered today, owing either to the fact that she'd just married a man who had bank accounts in the Caymans or to the fact that this man was, as she vocally professed, "the love of her life." And Grace and Liza, nine years apart but both maladjusted, the former a shy, stunted soon-to-be second-grader and the latter about to friendlessly finish her sophomore year of high school. How could you grow people inside your own body, sprout them from your own extant materials, and suddenly be unable to recognize them?

Normalcy: it bore a second look, sociologically speaking.

Gracie had found her beneath the ginkgo. Her youngest was almost seven, an insufferable age, aeons from leaving the household, still childish enough that she'd tried to slip into their bed in the middle of the previous night, which wouldn't have been *that* big of a deal had her parents been clothed at the time. Anxiety did something to Marilyn, always had, drew her magnetically to the animal comfort of her husband.

"Sweetheart, why don't you go find—" She hesitated. The only other children at the wedding were toddlers and she didn't specifically want to encourage Grace's already-burgeoning antisocial love of dogs by suggesting that she go play with Goethe, but she wanted a moment to herself, just a few seconds to breathe in the cooling air of early evening. "Go find Daddy, love."

"I *can't* find him," Grace said, the hint of a baby voice blunting her vowels.

“Well, look harder.” She bent to kiss her daughter’s hair. “I need a minute, Goose.”

—

Grace moved off. She’d already checked on Wendy. Already swung on the porch swing with Liza until her sister had been distracted by a boy wearing sneakers with his wedding suit; already convinced Violet to share four sips of champagne from her fancy glass flute. She was out of people to check on.

It was strange to have to share her parents with others this weekend, to have her sisters back around the house on Fair Oaks. Her father sometimes called her the “only only-child in the world who has three sisters.” She resented, slightly, her sisters homing in on her territory. She soothed herself as she always did, with the company of Goethe, curling up with him beneath the purple flower bushes and running her hand through his bristly fur, the part of his butt that looked like it had been permed.

—

Liza felt a little bad, seeing her younger sister finding solace in the dog while she herself was finding solace inside a stranger’s mouth, but the groomsman emanated a smoky vapor of whiskey and arugula and he was doing something with his fingers to the inside of her thigh that made her turn her head away, deciding that Grace could fend for herself, that it wasn’t possible to learn that skill too early.

“Tell me about you,” the groomsman said, his knuckles grazing the lacy insignificance of the thong she’d worn in the hopes of exactly such an occasion.

“What do you want to know?” she asked. It came out sounding kind of hostile. She’d not quite mastered being flirtatious.

“There’s four of you?” he asked. “What’s that like?”

“It’s a vast hormonal hellscape. A marathon of instability and hair products.”

He smiled, confused, and she leaned forward boldly and kissed him.

—

Violet had never been quite so drunk, sitting slumped, alone, at one of the tables, from which she supposed she'd driven the other guests. The previous night came to her in fizzy episodic sunbursts: the bar that used to be a bowling alley; her blue-eyed companion with his double-jointed elbows, the athletic clasp of his thighs, the back of his mother's station wagon; how she'd made sounds she did not recognize at first as coming from her own throat, porn star sounds, primal groans. How he came first—she'd later felt him dripping out of her, when they climbed back into the front seat—and then made her, with a deft attention to detail, come as well, for the first time in her life. And how she'd made him drop her a block away from her parents' house lest Wendy be still awake.

She watched Wendy, wearing sweetheart-neck Gucci at her backyard wedding to an old-money academic, being spun in circles by her new husband to "You Can't Hurry Love." Her sister had, for the first time, surpassed her, success-wise. She was blithe and beautiful and twirling in circles while Violet was drunk past the point of physical comfort, gnawing at a full loaf of catered focaccia, rubbing the oil on the underside of her skirt. But she felt herself smiling a little at Wendy, at oblivious Wendy getting grass stains on her satin train. Imagined going over to her sister and whispering in her ear, *You'd die if you knew where I was last night*.

—

Wendy watched as Miles, throwing an apologetic smile at her over his shoulder, was pulled away from her by his toddler cousin, their ringbearer, who had solicited his accompaniment to the cake table.

"There's some good daddy training happening over there," someone said, taking her by the elbow. It was a guest from Miles's

side, possibly someone's real estate broker, a silicone goblin of a woman. The people on the lawn at present were probably collectively worth more than the GDP of a midsize country. "It's good you're so young. Plenty of time to flesh out the family tree."

It seemed a crass thing to say for a variety of reasons, so Wendy responded in kind: "Who says I want to split up my share among a bunch of kids?"

The woman looked horrified, but Wendy and Miles lived for these jokes, were allowed to *make* these jokes because neither of them gave a fuck if people thought Wendy was a gold digger; all that mattered was what they knew to be true, which was that she'd never loved another person as fiercely as she did Miles Eisenberg, and he, by some grand cosmic miracle, loved her back. She was an *Eisenberg* now. In the top thirty, at least, of the wealthiest families in Chicago. She could fuck with whomever she wanted.

"It's my plan to outlive everyone and spend my days reveling in a disgusting level of opulence," she said. And she rose from her seat and went to straighten her new husband's tie.

—

The trees, David noted, were burgeoning that day, big prodigious leaves making dancing shadows across the grass, which they'd tried to keep the dog off of for the sake of aesthetic preservation, David and Marilyn rising early in the mornings and pulling on raincoats over their pajamas to walk him instead of just opening the back door like they normally did. He watched as the rented tables and chairs wore their grooves into the pristine lawn, legs melon-balling the expensively fertilized sod in a way that made his gut churn. Goethe was now roaming around the yard like a recently released convict, traversing the verdant grounds with the proprietary confidence of a horticulturist. David took a breath of damp air—was rain coming? It might make the guests leave sooner—and marveled over the sheer number of people that could accumulate in a lifetime, the number of faces in his yard that he didn't recognize. He thought of Wendy as a

toddler, when they lived in Iowa, creeping onto the porch where he and Marilyn rocked together in the rickety cedar swing, fitting herself neatly between them and murmuring, already drifting back to sleep, *You're my friends.* He was nearly overcome, standing there, feeling as out-of-place as he had a quarter of a century ago, before they'd married, a chilly December night when Marilyn had lain against his chest beneath the ginkgo. He did a visual sweep, eyes blurring the sea of pale spring colors until he found his wife, a tiny ballast of forest green: hiding beneath that very same ginkgo. He slipped along the fence until he came to her, and reached out an imploring hand to the small of her back. She leaned instinctively into it.

"Come with me," he said, and led her around the trunk, into the shade, where he pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"Sweetheart," she said, worried. "What is it?"

He pressed his face into the crook of her neck, breathing in the faint dry warmth of her scent, lilacs and Irish Spring. "I missed you," he said into her clavicle.

"Oh, love." She tightened her embrace, tilted his chin until he met her eyes. He kissed her mouth, and then her cheekbone and her forehead and the inlet of her jaw where he could feel her pulse, and then her mouth again. She was smiling, lips a flushed feverish plum, and then she was kissing him back, the periphery blurring away. The thing that would always mean more than everything else: the goldish warmth of his wife, the heat of their mutual desperation; two bodies finding solace in the only way they knew how, through the language of lips, his hands along her spine, her spine against the tree trunk, the resultant quiet that occurred when they came together, until she pulled away, smiled up at him and said, "Just don't let the girls catch us," before she buried herself once again against him.

—

But of course they saw. All four of the girls watched their parents from disparate vantage points across the lawn, each alerted initially

to their absence from the reception by that pull, a vestigial holdover from childhood, seeking the cognitive comfort that came from the knowing, the geolocation, the proximity of those who'd created you, those who would always feel beholden to you, no matter what; each of their four daughters paused what she was doing in order to watch them, the shining unfathomable orb of their parents, two people who emanated more love than it seemed like the universe would sanction.

PART ONE

SPRING

CHAPTER ONE

Violet made a habit of avoiding Wendy. Though they'd been inseparable for a time, unbidden contact was now unheard of, and she assumed her sister's most recent lunch invitation pertained either to a favor or to some newly harvested existential crisis that Wendy would want to discuss, at length, regardless of the fact that some people had busy lives that prevented them from taking frivolous weekday meals in the West Loop.

The restaurant was trendy and inconveniently located, and she'd had to valet even though it was 2:00 p.m. on a Wednesday. Wyatt had to be picked up from preschool at 3:30. That was her out, and she planned to present it smoothly to her sister: *There are two children whose lives and pre-K commutes depend on me.* Of course this was ungenerous; of course Wendy found comfort in drama, in midday alcohol, because of all that she didn't have, because she'd never finished college, because of Miles, because she would always win, trauma-wise.

Violet pinched the bridge of her nose, fending off a headache. She was considering a glass of wine. Wendy would have undoubtedly already ordered a bottle, and her sister—despite other shortcomings—had excellent taste in wine, a refined palate for tannins and acidity. Her flats were digging into the backs of her heels. She always felt the impetus to present herself lavishly to Wendy; though most days she was content to ferry the kids around in pricey athletic garb, today she'd opted for a graceful silk butterfly-sleeve blouse and skinny jeans that had fit her better before Eli was born.

She tried to remember the last time she'd seen her sister, and decided that it must have been on Second Thanksgiving, the annual and infuriatingly quirky powwow at her parents' house, over four months ago, and this struck her as absolutely ludicrous, because she and Wendy lived twenty minutes from each other; because they'd

shared a bedroom for almost a decade; because Violet, during the darkest time in her life, had moved in with Wendy and Miles; because they were practically *twins,* after all, separated by less than a year.

"Ma'am? Is there something I can help you find?" It was the valet.

"Just getting my bearings," she said, and he smiled.

"If you need a lifeline, just wave and I'll come in and say someone's stolen your car." Was he flirting with her? He was her savior.

"I'll keep that in mind." She fished another ten from her wallet and pressed it toward him. Somehow she'd become one of those people who punctuated everything with a monetary transaction. He took it without missing a beat. "Wish me luck," she breathed, and he winked—*winked!* At *her*!—and she imagined, perhaps, that he checked out her ass as she walked into the restaurant. She hoped he wouldn't judge too harshly. The hostess ushered her onto the patio in the back and she wished at once she'd brought a sweater then banished the thought as tragically maternal. Wendy was at a table in the far corner, surely so she could smoke without bothering the other patrons, though there *were* no other patrons, because it was early spring in Chicago and barely sixty degrees.

At first all she saw was the back of a head. Presumably a man—and a young one—unless Wendy was going through an exploratory phase and had taken up with some gender-bending yogi from her chakra class. She felt strangely hurt. Of course Wendy couldn't just ask her out to lunch, the two of them: this would, as she should've known, be some sort of look-what-I'm-up-to-now demonstration that would serve to reinforce what a snoozefest Violet's life was, how mired she was in the status quo while Wendy was off doing tantric vinyasa with an androgynous gal Friday.

But then: no.

She would remember, in her car on the way home, after having tipped the valet for a third time, the swelling she'd felt in her chest, a crystallization of *something*. It wasn't that she recognized him. That

was the wrong word. And it wasn't anything poetic, no lightning bolts through her temples, no ice in her veins. She barely caught a glimpse of him, really, because he'd only turned halfway in his seat, so her field of vision included little beyond his left ear and the outline of his nose. But it was enough, apparently, on some molecular level, not like the biological recognition she felt when Wyatt and Eli were born but significant in its own right, a sharp uterine tug that almost made her double over. She didn't recognize the boy so much as absorb him. And in her head, in the car, after she'd fled the restaurant and her sister and the person she'd given birth to fifteen years earlier—a boy who now had dark hair that flopped in front of his eyes—she would imagine all of the things she could have said to Wendy. Big things, cinematic things, *how dare you do this to me; you're dead to me, you fucking psycho; how dare you, how dare you, how dare you.* All the reasons it was okay that she left before she really saw his face.

—

Before Wendy left for the Lurie fund-raiser she went onto the deck to have a cigarette with Miles. She let herself out the back door, Grey Goose in hand, dress hiked up to her knees because she'd settled on an ill-advised black mermaid cut, one Parliament in her mouth and another on the table.

"Today went as expected. Violet booked it before I could introduce them." She lit her cigarette and sighed. "I need your absolution. I didn't know what I was doing when I did it. But he's actually a sweet kid. You'd like him."

Miles didn't reply.

"I'm wearing the dumbest outfit. Your mom would've liked it." She leaned her head back. "I saw my dad yesterday. Retirement seems like kind of a disaster. He told me he was thinking about *bird-watching*. Can you imagine? I can't picture him sitting still for that long."

She'd been doing it since he died. She would talk to him—to some ethereal indication of him that sometimes she felt but most times she

didn't. Today was one of the most times, so she just leaned into the side of her chair and smoked.

"Tonight will be a total shitshow," she said after a minute. "The vultures are probably hammered already. Hopefully they won't grope anyone. I, personally, make no promises." She looked upward for some cosmic sign that he was listening to her. There was nothing to see; the sky was overcast and grayish and the stars weren't out yet. Instead she held her cigarette upward, toward where she thought he might be, and exhaled a deliberate jet of smoke. "I hope you're proud of me, dude," she said after a minute. "Because I am really trying to keep on around here, okay?" Somehow she had been without him for nearly two years. She lit her backup cigarette. "I wish I could kiss the inside of your elbow right now," she whispered, almost inaudibly because the people next door sometimes kept their windows open. "But instead I might have to find a Greek shipping heir tonight and let him ravish me a little bit. Not too much. I swear. Fucking fuck, my darling. Man, do I miss you."

She took a few more drags, speaking to him in her head about all of the things she'd done that day, and then when she had one drag left she performed her ritual, which was to inhale as deeply as she could and exhale *I love you* over and over again until she ran out of breath.

—

A few hours later a man in a tuxedo had his hand on her left breast. She fitted her knee between his thighs and he staggered back, bumping into a table, upsetting a calla lily arrangement.

"Careful," she said.

"My bad," he replied. He was, upon inspection, perhaps more boy than man. He'd told her his name was Carson and she'd actually laughed but when he looked hurt she passed it off as nerves and yanked him down the hall by the lilies.

The man-boy's sweaty hand had adhered itself to her nipple in a way that wasn't specifically pleasant. He kissed her neck. She rubbed

her leg a little harder against his groin. Maybe early to mid-twenties. He seemed pretty sure of himself.

"I didn't get your name," he said. Wendy stiffened a little, thought of Jonah across the table from her at lunch that afternoon, the blank innocence of his face, his bald confusion when they both realized Violet had fled. What if this guy wasn't even *legal*?

"How old are you?" she asked, and he pulled away and grinned at her.

"Twenty-two."

She nodded and slipped a hand down the waist of his pants. Just cocky, then, pun acknowledged. An heir, perhaps, of someone who'd invented something that seemed like it had already been invented by someone else. Or maybe the son of a record executive or a spray-tanned Fox correspondent. A boy who would live a life of inconsequence, who would, one hoped, not kill anybody with his car and get away with it. He wasn't a terrible kisser.

"How old are *you*?" he asked.

"Seventy-eight," she said, unfazed.

"You're funny," he said.

She was suddenly irked. "What does your father do?" she asked him, removing her hand from his boxers.

"Huh?"

"Your dad. What's his job? Why are you here tonight?"

"What makes you assume that I'm here with—" He stopped, rolling his eyes. "He's an engineer. Medical software development. Robotics."

"Ah." She'd check the guest list tomorrow, ensure they'd made a sizable contribution. Sometimes the more low-profile guys tried to get away with just buying tickets.

"What's your *name*?" he asked, a little more hostile this time.

She sighed. "Wendy."

"Like Peter Pan," Carlton noted astutely, and it was her turn to eye-roll.

“Its origins have never been explained to me.”

Her mom and dad used to call her Wednesday as a nickname, and when she’d confronted her mother about it—just a few years ago—the response had been underwhelming.

“That was mean,” she’d said. “Like Wednesday Addams? I was skeletal, Mom; did that really seem like a good joke?”

“Honey, you were born on a Wednesday. Just a few minutes after midnight. I had no idea what day it was and your father— It was because of that.”

That was the story of her name, then. *You shattered my conception of the space-time continuum, First Contraceptive Accident*.

She tugged at Carlton’s sleeve. “Come on. Let’s go outside,” she said.

“Wendy,” he said. “Hang on. As in—*that* Wendy?”

She turned to see what she’d already known was there: a poster for the fund-raiser, complete with a photo of the cancerous spokesbaby, dotted at the bottom with HOSTED BY WENDY EISENBERG OF THE CHICAGO PHILANTHROPIC WOMEN’S SOCIETY. A robotics engineer would be exponentially less likely to donate if he discovered that the middle-aged organizer was making out with his pretentiously named twenty-two-year-old son. It was the sight of the *Eisenberg* that really got her, though, the prodigious loop of the *g*. It still bothered her to see her name on its own. She backed away from her tailored little charge and tried to smile.

“Do I seem like the hostess of this event?” she asked.

“What’s your last name, then?”

“Sorenson,” she said without skipping a beat.

“Well, could I—can I text you?” he asked, and she smiled.

“I’d like that,” she said ominously. “But I’d better go.”

“I thought we were going outside.”

“Alas, no time. I’m ancient. I’ve gotta go. Coaches. Pumpkins. Life Alert.”

“Well—okay. This was—um—this was nice.”

Ah, he was a sweet one: her prize for taking the high road.

“Do yourself a favor,” she said, still flustered, tugging at the heel of her left shoe. “Next time you think a woman’s funny? Don’t tell her she’s funny.”

“What do I do instead?” Something about the way his perfect face crumpled in confusion tugged at a place deep in her belly and she couldn’t help but smile at him.

“You laugh,” she said, and before she realized what she was doing she was reaching to press a shock of hair away from his forehead. “The next time you meet a funny woman, you laugh at her jokes, okay, Conrad?”

“Carson.”

“Carson. Good luck, kid.”

The room spun again. *Kid* made her think of her parents, suddenly, of her father bowing theatrically to her mother at Wendy’s wedding, hearing Otis Redding—“win a little; lose a little”—and declaring, “It’s our song, kid.” Every song belonged to her parents, it seemed; everything recorded in the last six decades had something to do with David and Marilyn, those two inexplicable people from whom she hailed. She’d thought, when she met Miles, that she’d finally found someone in the way that her mom had.

There were suddenly tears in her eyes, a familiar tightness in her chest. She wasn’t supposed to leave this early but she knew that if she stayed things would continue to go south. She left her coat in the checkroom and spun out onto the street.

Some people told you it took a year for everything to get back to normal; other people said things only got worse after a year. She was a member of this latter camp, she supposed, because Miles had been dead since 2014 but she still hadn’t cleaned out his nightstand; she still bought things at the grocery that he liked and she didn’t; she still operated exactly as she had before, as a member of a unit, as a person who was contingent on the active participation of another person. You couldn’t untrain yourself from that. She’d tried. She’d

moved to the condo in River North, but she set it up a lot like their house in Hyde Park, and she'd taped up the drawers of all his furniture—his desk, his dresser, his nightstand—so that the movers could transport them intact, full of his possessions.

Some people took a year; it was probable that some other people besides Wendy were still complete trainwrecks after two.

—

It swept in with the spring like a melting. Quietude, a kind of solace Marilyn hadn't known since—well, ever, honestly; in utero, maybe, but probably not even then, given her mother's penchant for Tanqueray, given the laxity of the 1950s, whichever you wanted to blame. Life was good. *Her* life was good. The hardware store was doing well, and she was sleeping better than she ever had, and her legs had nearly regained the limber give of her girlhood because she rode her bike to work, and her pansies were flourishing, a bright vermilion burst in the built-in box on the front porch.

She, for once, would have been flying high, were it not for the tethers of her family. Marilyn Connolly—who'd've thought? A business owner, a certified nonsmoker for nearly fifteen years, an occasional churchgoer, proprietess of the most beautiful rosebushes on Fair Oaks. She was wondering if perhaps she was in her *prime,* although she wasn't entirely convinced that one was allowed to *have* a prime when one was the mother of four. She was, instead of flying high, like one of those giant kite people they flew outside of the gas station on Ridgeland Avenue, a big vinyl body swaying in the breeze, trussed to the ground by thick umbilical ropes. A few minutes of bliss and suddenly it was the irritating jangle of her phone and an *Oh my God, Mom,* or a knock at the kitchen window with a mouthed *Where's the rake, honey?*

She put her bike on the porch and stopped to pull some dead leaves from her potted plants. Loomis was waiting for her inside.

"Hello, my darling," she said, rubbing deep behind his ears. They'd become those clichéd empty nesters who turned desperately

to the Labrador the second the last kid shipped off to college.

"Hey, sweet," David called from down the hall. She followed Loomis to the study, and she paused before she entered, watching her husband's back, the vulnerable fuzz on his neck, the hint of a bald spot spreading from the crown of his head like a galaxy.

She didn't need him: it bobbed around in her head, a tiny infidelity. It occurred to her at that moment, melancholically, as she watched him sitting at his desk before a few books of rare quarters and a pile of pistachio shells. He'd become messy, suddenly, after years of passive-aggressively swiping at the crumbs on the counter with a damp sponge, sighing heavily as he cleared long blond-brown strands of hair from the shower drain. He'd become messy and stagnant and extremely libidinous, and when he rose to kiss her, shaking paper-thin flecks of pistachio skin from his shirt, the thought materialized: *I don't need you*. She moved for a peck on the forehead but he went full-on, running a hand through her hair, looping an arm around her waist, teasing her lips apart with his own.

"Mm," she said, pulling away. "I think I'm getting a cold, love."

It was clearly a lie; they had never cared about colds. They passed germs back and forth with abandon, sharing mugs of coffee, pieces of toast, occasionally toothbrushes when they were too tired to turn on the light and distinguish green from blue. David had an immune system like an alligator and Marilyn, way back when, was always low-level sick anyway, from the girls, their sticky hands and their dirty Kleenexes and their leftover macaroni she'd eat from their bowls after dinner. They weren't afraid of germs. Standing before her, David looked wounded.

Of course she *needed* him, on a molecular level, the deepest kind of human need. But she didn't need his *help*. And she didn't want his body, not really, in a way that reminded her of the times after each of the children were born, the times when the three eldest girls were small all at once, the times when the three eldest girls were *teens* all at once, and she'd been too tired to desire anything that required even a fragment of conscious bodily attention.

It felt like that, except she wasn't tired.

“How was your day?” she asked him, leading the way to the kitchen.

“Oh, you know,” he said. “I cut the grass. I walked the dog. Twice.” He was quiet for a minute. “How was *your* day?” he asked finally, and she hesitated.

It had started to feel sort of uncomely, countering his Eeyore monologue with a chirpy account of the hardware store’s thriving profit margin, her funny teenage employees, the delightful moments of existential introspection she’d been having lately during lulls between customers. You couldn’t respond to *I’m depressed and inventing home improvement projects to combat my despair* with *I’ve never been happier!*

“Just fine,” she said. “You going to help me with dinner?”

When they were first married, living in that haphazard green house in Iowa City when David was in medical school, they’d relished the opportunity to make dinner together, trailing each other around the kitchen, making out against the counter while they waited for water to boil, sometimes forgetting the meal entirely and having to fan the smoke alarm with their discarded clothing. Something in his expression now tugged at a sinewy part of her heart; something about the defenseless flop of his graying hair made her go to him and twine her arms around his middle and kiss him. Needing and wanting were different animals entirely.

“I thought you had a cold,” he said, pulling away for a second.

“False alarm,” she said, slipping her hands into his back pockets, impelling his tongue to engage with hers.

“I can cook,” David said, coming up for air. She kissed him harder and felt a flicker of something southward, a gentle reminder of the fact that she loved this man more than solitude. She pushed her hips into his, trying to draw out the feeling, keep it going, but it was gone as quickly as it had come, replaced by stillness, a little ache in her jaw.