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Jodi Picoult

A Novel

WISH

YOU

WERE

HERE



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According to Darwin's *Origin of Species*, it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.

—LEON C. MEGGINSON

ONE



ONE

March 13, 2020

When I was six years old, I painted a corner of the sky. My father was working as a conservator, one of a handful restoring the zodiac ceiling on the main hall of Grand Central Terminal—an aqua sky strung with shimmering constellations. It was late, way past my bedtime, but my father took me to work because my mother—as usual—was not home.

He helped me carefully climb the scaffolding, where I watched him working on a cleaned patch of the turquoise paint. I looked at the stars representing the smear of the Milky Way, the golden wings of Pegasus, Orion’s raised club, the twisted fish of Pisces. The original mural had been painted in 1913, my father told me. Roof leaks damaged the plaster, and in 1944, it had been replicated on panels that were attached to the arched ceiling. The original plan had been to remove the boards for restoration, but they contained asbestos, and so the conservators left them in place, and went to work with cotton swabs and cleaning solution, erasing decades of pollutants.

They uncovered history. Signatures and inside jokes and notes left behind by the original artists were revealed, tucked in among the constellations. There were dates commemorating weddings, and the end of World War II. There were names of soldiers. The birth of twins was recorded near Gemini.

An error had been made by the original artists, so that the painted zodiac was reversed from the way it would appear in the night sky. Instead of correcting it, though, my father was diligently reinforcing the error. That

night, he was working on a small square of space, gilding stars. He had already painted over the tiny yellow dots with adhesive. He covered these with a piece of gold leaf, light as breath. Then he turned to me. “Diana,” he said, holding out his hand, and I climbed up in front of him, caged by the safety of his body. He handed me a brush to sweep over the foil, fixing it in place. He showed me how to gently rub at it with my thumb, so that the galaxy he’d created was all that remained.

When all the work was finished, the conservators kept a small dark spot in the northwest corner of Grand Central Terminal, where the pale blue ceiling meets the marble wall. This nine-by-five-inch section was left that way intentionally. My father told me that conservators do that, in case historians need to study the original composition. The only way you can tell how far you’ve come is to know where you started.

Every time I’m in Grand Central Terminal, I think about my father. Of how we left that night, hand in hand, our palms glittering like we had stolen the stars.

—

It is Friday the thirteenth, so I should know better. Getting from Sotheby’s, on the Upper East Side, to the Ansonia, on the Upper West Side, means taking the Q train to Times Square and then the 1 uptown, so I have to travel in the wrong direction before I start going in the right one.

I *hate* going backward.

Normally I would walk across Central Park, but I am wearing a new pair of shoes that are rubbing a blister on my heel, shoes I never would have worn if I’d known that I was going to be summoned by Kitomi Ito. So instead, I find myself on public transit. But something’s off, and it takes me a moment to figure out what.

It’s quiet. Usually, I have to fight my way through tourists who are listening to someone singing for coins, or a violin quartet. Today, though, the platform is empty.

Last night Broadway theaters had shut down performances for a month, after an usher tested positive for Covid, out of an abundance of caution. That's what Finn said, anyway—New York–Presbyterian, where he is a resident, has not seen the influx of coronavirus cases that are appearing in Washington State and Italy and France. There were only nineteen cases in the city, Finn told me last night as we watched the news, when I wondered out loud if we should start panicking yet. “Wash your hands and don't touch your face,” he told me. “It's going to be fine.”

The uptown subway is nearly empty, too. I get off at Seventy-second and emerge aboveground, blinking like a mole, walking at a brisk New Yorker clip. The Ansonia, in all its glory, rises up like an angry djinn, defiantly jutting its Beaux Arts chin at the sky. For a moment, I just stand on the sidewalk, looking up at its mansard roof and its lazy sprawl from Seventy-third to Seventy-fourth Street. There's a North Face and an American Apparel at ground level, but it wasn't always this bougie. Kitomi told me that when she and Sam Pride moved in in the seventies, the building was overrun with psychics and mediums, and housed a swingers' club with an orgy room and an open bar and buffet. *Sam and I*, she said, *would stop in at least once a week*.

I was not alive when Sam's band, the Nightjars, was formed by Sam and his co-songwriter, William Punt, with two school chums from Slough, England. Nor was I when their first album spent thirty weeks on the *Billboard* charts, or when their little British quartet went on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and ignited a stampede of screaming American girls. Not when Sam married Kitomi Ito ten years later or when the band broke up, months after their final album was released featuring cover art of Kitomi and Sam naked, mirroring the figures in a painting that hung behind their bed. And I wasn't alive when Sam was murdered three years later, on the steps of this very building, stabbed in the throat by a mentally ill man who recognized him from that iconic album cover.

But like everyone else on the planet, I know the whole story.

The doorman at the Ansonia smiles politely at me; the concierge looks up as I approach. “I'm here to see Kitomi Ito,” I say coolly, pushing my

license across the desk to her.

“She’s expecting you,” the concierge answers. “Floor—”

“Eighteen. I know.”

Lots of celebrities have lived at the Ansonia—from Babe Ruth to Theodore Dreiser to Toscanini to Natalie Portman—but arguably, Kitomi and Sam Pride are the most famous. If my husband had been murdered on the front steps of my apartment building, I might not have stayed for another thirty years, but that’s just me. And anyway, Kitomi is finally moving now, which is why the world’s most infamous rock widow has my number in her cellphone.

What is my life, I think, as I lean against the back wall of the elevator.

When I was young, and people asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, I had a whole plan. I wanted to be securely on a path to my career, to get married by thirty, to finish having kids by thirty-five. I wanted to speak fluent French and have traveled cross-country on Route 66. My father had laughed at my checklist. *You*, he told me, *are definitely your mother’s daughter*.

I did not take that as a compliment.

Also, for the record, I’m perfectly on track. I am an associate specialist at Sotheby’s—*Sotheby’s!*—and Eva, my boss, has hinted in all ways possible that after the auction of Kitomi’s painting I will likely be promoted. I am not engaged, but when I ran out of clean socks last weekend and went to scrounge for a pair of Finn’s, I found a ring hidden in the back of his underwear drawer. We leave tomorrow on vacation and Finn’s going to pop the question there. I’m so sure of it that I got a manicure today instead of eating lunch.

And I’m twenty-nine.

The door to the elevator opens directly into Kitomi’s foyer, all black and white marble squares like a giant chessboard. She comes into the entryway, dressed in jeans and combat boots and a pink silk bathrobe, with a thatch of white hair and the purple heart-shaped spectacles for which she is known. She has always reminded me of a wren, light and hollow-boned. I think of

how Kitomi's black hair went white overnight with grief after Sam was murdered. I think of the photographs of her on the sidewalk, gasping for air.

"Diana!" she says, as if we are old friends.

There is a brief awkwardness as I instinctively put my hand out to take hers and then remember that is not a thing we are doing anymore and instead just give a weird little wave. "Hi, Kitomi," I say.

"I'm so glad you could come today."

"It's not a problem. There are a lot of sellers who want to make sure the paperwork is handed over personally."

Over her shoulder, at the end of a long hallway, I can see it—the Toulouse-Lautrec painting that is the entire reason I know Kitomi Ito. She sees my eyes dart toward it and her mouth tugs into a smile.

"I can't help it," I say. "I never get tired of seeing it."

A strange flicker crosses Kitomi's face. "Then let's get you a better view," she replies, and she leads me deeper into her home.

From 1892 to 1895, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec scandalized the impressionist art world by moving into a brothel and painting prostitutes together in bed. *Le Lit*, one of the most famous in that series, is at the Musée d'Orsay. Others have been sold to private collections for ten million and twelve million dollars. The painting in Kitomi's house is clearly part of the series and yet patently set apart from the others.

There are not two women in this one, but a woman and a man. The woman sits propped up naked against the headboard, the sheet fallen to her waist. Behind the headboard is a mirror, and in it you can see the reflection of the second figure in the painting—Toulouse-Lautrec himself, seated naked at the foot of the bed with sheets pooled in his lap, his back to the viewer as he stares as intently at the woman as she is staring at him. It's intimate and voyeuristic, simultaneously private and public.

When the Nightjars released their final album, *Twelfth of Never*, the cover art had Kitomi bare-breasted against their headboard, gazing at Sam, whose broad back forms the lower third of the visual field. Behind their bed hangs the painting they're emulating, in the position the mirror holds in the actual art.

Everyone knows that album cover. Everyone knows that Sam bought this painting for Kitomi from a private collection, as a wedding gift.

But only a handful of people know that she is now selling it, at a unique Sotheby's auction, and that I'm the one who closed that deal.

"Are you still going on vacation?" Kitomi asks, disrupting my reverie.

Did I tell her about our trip? Maybe. But I cannot think of any logical reason she would care.

Clearing my throat (I don't get paid to moon over art, I get paid to transact it), I paste a smile on my face. "Only for two weeks, and then the minute I get back, it's full steam ahead for your auction." My job is a strange one—I have to convince clients to give their beloved art up for adoption, which is a careful dance between rhapsodizing over the piece and encouraging them that they are doing the right thing by selling it. "If you're having any anxiety about the transfer of the painting to our offices, don't," I tell her. "I promise that I will personally be here overseeing the crating, and I'll be there on the other end, too." I glance back at the canvas. "We're going to find this the perfect home," I vow. "So. The paperwork?"

Kitomi glances out the window before turning back to me. "About that," she says.

—

"What do you mean, she doesn't want to sell?" Eva says, looking at me over the rims of her famous horn-rimmed glasses. Eva St. Clerck is my boss, my mentor, and a legend. As the head of sale for the Imp Mod auction—the giant sale of impressionist and modern art—she is who I'd like to be by the time I'm forty, and until this moment, I had firmly enjoyed being teacher's pet, tucked under the wing of her expertise.

Eva narrows her eyes. "I knew it. Someone from Christie's got to her."

In the past, Kitomi has sold other pieces of art with Christie's, the main competitor of Sotheby's. To be fair, everyone assumed that was how she'd sell the Toulouse-Lautrec, too...until I did something I never should have done as an associate specialist, and convinced her otherwise.

“It’s not Christie’s—”

“Phillips?” Eva asks, her eyebrows arching.

“No. None of them. She just wants to take a pause,” I clarify. “She’s concerned about the virus.”

“Why?” Eva asks, dumbfounded. “It’s not like a painting can catch it.”

“No, but buyers can at an auction.”

“Well, I can talk her down from that ledge,” Eva says. “We’ve got firm interest from the Clooneys and Beyoncé and Jay-Z, for God’s sake.”

“Kitomi’s also nervous because the stock market’s tanking. She thinks things are going to get worse, fast. And she wants to wait it out a bit...be safe not sorry.”

Eva rubs her temples. “You do realize we’ve already leaked this sale,” she says. “*The New Yorker* literally did a feature on it.”

“She just needs a little more time,” I say.

Eva glances away, already dismissing me in her mind. “You can go,” she orders.

I step out of her office and into the maze of hallways, lined with the books that I’ve used to research art. I’ve been at Sotheby’s for six and a half years—seven if you count the internship I did when I was still at Williams College. I went straight from undergrad into their master’s program in art business. I started out as a graduate trainee, then became a junior cataloger in the Impressionist Department, doing initial research for incoming paintings. I would study what else the artist was working on around the same time and how much similar works sold for, sometimes writing up the first draft of the catalog blurb. Though the rest of the world is digital these days, the art world still produces physical catalogs that are beautiful and glossy and nuanced and very, very important. Now, as an associate specialist, I perform other tasks for Eva: visiting the artwork in situ and noting any imperfections, the same way you look over a rental car for dings before you sign the contract; physically accompanying the painting as it is packed up and moved from a home to our office; and occasionally joining my boss for meetings with potential clients.

A hand snakes out of a doorway I am passing and grabs my shoulder, pulling me into a little side room. “Jesus,” I say, nearly falling into Rodney—my best friend here at Sotheby’s. Like me, he started as a college intern. Unlike me, he did not wind up going into the business side of the auction house. Instead, he designs and helps create the spaces where the art is showcased for auction.

“Is it true?” Rodney asks. “Did you lose the Nightjars’ painting?”

“First, it’s not the Nightjars’ painting. It’s Kitomi Ito’s. Second, how the *hell* did you find out so fast?”

“Honey, rumor is the lifeblood of this entire industry,” Rodney says. “And it spreads through these halls faster than the flu.” He hesitates. “Or coronavirus, as it may be.”

“Well, I didn’t *lose* the Toulouse-Lautrec. Kitomi just wants things to settle down first.”

Rodney folds his arms. “You think that’s happening anytime soon? The mayor declared a state of emergency yesterday.”

“Finn said there are only nineteen cases in the city,” I tell him.

Rodney looks at me like I’ve just said I still believe in Santa, with a mixture of disbelief and pity. “You can have one of my rolls of toilet paper,” he says.

For the first time, I look behind him. There are six different shades of gold paint rolled onto the walls. “Which do you like?” he asks.

I point to one stripe in the middle. “Really?” he says, squinting.

“What’s it for?”

“A display of medieval manuscripts. Private sale.”

“Then that one,” I say, nodding at the stripe beside it. Which looks exactly the same. “Come up to Sant Ambroeus with me,” I beg. It’s the café at the top of Sotheby’s, and there is a prosciutto and mozzarella sandwich there that might erase the look on Eva’s face from my mind.

“Can’t. It’s popcorn for me today.”

The break room has free microwave popcorn, and on busy days, that’s lunch. “Rodney,” I hear myself say, “I’m screwed.”

He settles his hands on my shoulders, spinning me and walking me toward the opposite wall, where a mirrored panel is left over from the previous installation. “What do you see?”

I look at my hair, which has always been too red for my taste, and my eyes, steel blue. My lipstick has worn off. My skin is a ghostly winter white. And there’s a weird stain on the collar of my blouse. “I see someone who can kiss her promotion goodbye.”

“Funny,” Rodney says, “because I see someone who is going on vacation tomorrow and who should have zero fucks left to give about Kitomi Ito or Eva St. Clerck or Sotheby’s. Think about tropical drinks and paradise and playing doctor with your boyfriend—”

“Real doctors don’t do that—”

“—and snorkeling with Gila monsters—”

“Marine iguanas.”

“Whatever.” Rodney squeezes me from behind, meeting my gaze in the mirror. “Diana, by the time you get back here in two weeks, everyone will have moved on to another scandal.” He smirks at me. “Now go buy some SPF 50 and get out of here.”

I laugh as Rodney picks up a paint roller and smoothly covers all the gold stripes with the one I picked. Once, he told me that an auction house wall can have a foot of paint on it, because they are repainted constantly.

As I close the door behind me, I wonder what color this room first was, and if anyone here even remembers.

—

To get to Hastings-on-Hudson, a commuter town north of the city, you can take Metro-North from Grand Central. So for the second time today, I head to Midtown.

This time, though, I visit the main concourse of the building and position myself directly underneath the piece of sky I painted with my father, letting my gaze run over the backward zodiac and the freckles of stars that blush

across the arch of the ceiling. Craning my neck back, I stare until I'm dizzy, until I can almost hear my father's voice again.

It's been four years since he died, and the only way I can garner the courage to visit my mother is to come here first, as if his memory gives me protective immunity.

I am not entirely sure why I'm going to see her. It's not like she asked for me. And it's not like this is part of any routine. I haven't been to visit in three months, actually.

Maybe *that's* why I'm going.

The Greens is an assisted living facility walkable from the train station in Hastings-on-Hudson—which is one of the reasons I picked it, when my mother reappeared out of the blue after years of radio silence. And, naturally, she didn't show up oozing maternal warmth. She was a problem that needed to be solved.

The building is made out of brick and fits into a community that looks like it was cut and pasted from New England. Trees line the street, and there's a library next door. Cobblestones arch in a widening circle from the front door. It isn't until you are buzzed in through the locked door and see the color-coded hallways and the photographs on the residents' apartment doors that you realize it's a memory care facility.

I sign in and walk past a woman shuffling into the bright art room, filled with all sorts of paints and clay and crafts. As far as I know, my mother has never participated.

They do all kinds of things here to make it easier for the occupants. Doorways meant to be entered by the residents have bright yellow frames they cannot miss; rooms for staff or storage blend into the walls, painted over with murals of bookshelves or greenery. Since all the apartment doors look similar, there's a large photo on each one that has meaning to the person who lives there: a family member, a special location, a beloved pet. In my mother's case, it's one of her own most famous photographs—a refugee who's come by raft from Cuba, carrying the limp body of his dehydrated son in his arms. It's grotesque and grim and the pain radiates

from the image. In other words, exactly the kind of photo for which Hannah O'Toole was known.

There is a punch code that opens the secure unit on both sides of the door. (The keypad on the inside is always surrounded by a small zombie clot of residents trying to peer over your shoulder to see the numbers and presumably the path to freedom.) The individual rooms aren't locked. When I let myself into my mother's room, the space is neat and uncluttered. The television is on—the television is *always* on—tuned to a game show. My mother sits on the couch with her hands in her lap, like she's at a cotillion waiting to be asked to dance.

She is younger than most of the residents here. There's one skunk streak of white in her black hair, but it's been there since I was little. She doesn't really look much different from the way she did when I was a girl, except for her stillness. My mother was always in motion—talking animatedly with her hands, turning at the next question, adjusting the lens of a camera, hieing away from us to some corner of the globe to capture a revolution or a natural disaster.

Beyond her is the screened porch, the reason that I picked The Greens. I thought that someone who'd spent so much of her life outdoors would hate the confinement of a memory care facility. The screened porch was safe, because there was no egress from it, but it allowed a view. Granted, it was only a strip of lawn and beyond that a parking lot, but it was something.

It costs a shitload of money to keep my mother here. When she showed up on my doorstep, in the company of two police officers who found her wandering around Central Park in a bathrobe, I hadn't even known she was back in the city. They found my address in her wallet, torn from the corner of an old Christmas card envelope. *Ma'am*, one of the officers had asked me, *do you know this woman?*

I recognized her, of course. But I didn't *know* her at all.

When it became clear that my mother had dementia, Finn asked me what I was going to do. *Nothing*, I told him. She had barely been involved in taking care of me when I was young; why was I obligated to take care of her now? I remember seeing the look on his face when he realized that for

me, maybe, love was a quid pro quo. I didn't want to ever see that expression again on Finn, but I also knew my limitations, and I didn't have the resources to become the caretaker for someone with early-onset Alzheimer's. So I did my due diligence, talking to her neurologist and getting pamphlets from different facilities. The Greens was the best of the lot, but it was expensive. In the end, I packed up my mother's apartment, Sotheby's auctioned off the photographs from her walls, and the result was an annuity that could pay for her new residence.

I did not miss the irony of the fact that the parent I missed desperately was the one who was no longer in the world, while the parent I could take or leave was inextricably tied to me for the long haul.

Now, I paste a smile on my face and sit down next to my mother on the couch. I can count on two hands the number of times I've come to visit since installing her here, but I very clearly remember the directions of the staff: act like she knows you, and even if she doesn't remember, she will likely follow the social cues and treat you like a friend. The first time I'd come, when she asked who I was and I said *Your daughter*, she had become so agitated that she'd bolted away, fallen over a chair, and cut her forehead.

"Who's winning *Wheel of Fortune*?" I ask, settling in as if I'm a regular visitor.

Her eyes dart toward me. There's a flicker of confusion, like a sputtering pilot light, before she smooths it away. "The lady in the pink shirt," my mother says. Her brows draw together, as she tries to place me. "Are you ___"

"The last time I was here, it was warm outside," I interrupt, offering the clue that this isn't the first time I've visited. "It's pretty warm out today. Should we open the slider?"

She nods, and I walk toward the entrance to the screened porch. The latch that locks it from the inside is open. "You're supposed to keep this fastened," I remind her. I don't have to worry about her wandering off—but it still makes me nervous to have the sliding door unlocked.

"Are we going somewhere?" she asks, when a gust of fresh air blows into the living room.

“Not today,” I tell her. “But I’m taking a trip tomorrow. To the Galápagos.”

“I’ve been there,” my mother says, lighting up as a thread of memory catches. “There’s a tortoise. Lonesome George. He’s the last of his whole species. Imagine being the last of anything in the whole world.”

For some reason, my throat thickens with tears. “He died,” I say.

My mother tilts her head. “Who?”

“Lonesome George.”

“Who’s George?” she asks, and she narrows her eyes. “Who are *you*?”

That sentence, it wounds me.

I don’t know why it hurts so much when my mother forgets me these days, though, when she never actually knew me at all.

—

When Finn comes home from the hospital, I am in bed under the covers wearing my favorite flannel shirt and sweatpants, with my laptop balanced on my legs. Today has just *flattened* me. Finn sits down beside me, leaning against the headboard. His golden hair is wet, which means he’s showered before coming home from New York–Presbyterian, where he is a resident in the surgery department, but he’s wearing scrubs that show off the curves of his biceps and the constellation of freckles on his arms. He glances at the screen, and then at the empty pint of ice cream nestled beside me. “Wow,” he says. “*Out of Africa...and* butter pecan? That’s, like, the big guns.”

I lean my head on his shoulder. “I had the shittiest day.”

“No, I did,” Finn replies.

“I lost a painting,” I tell him.

“I lost a patient.”

I groan. “You win. You always win. No one ever dies of an art emergency.”

“No, I mean I *lost* a patient. Elderly woman with LBD wandered off before I could get her in for gallbladder surgery.”

“Little black dress?”