

YOU
COULD
MAKE THIS
PLACE
BEAUTIFUL

A MEMOIR

MAGGIE
SMITH

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You Could
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A M E M O I R

Maggie Smith

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I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.

—Emily Dickinson

PROLOGUE

Before we go any further together, me with my lanterns, you following close behind, light flickering on both of our faces, I want to be clear about something: This isn't a tell-all. A tell-all would need an omniscient narrator—godlike, hovering over the whole scene, seeing into the houses, listening to the conversations and phone calls, reading the texts and emails. I'm jealous of this all-knowing narrator, even though she doesn't exist. I want to know what she knows.

This isn't a tell-all because "all" is something we can't access. We don't get "all." "Some," yes. "Most" if we're lucky. "All," no. There's no such thing as a tell-all, only a tell-some—a tell-most, maybe. This is a tell-mine, and the *mine* keeps changing, because *I* keep changing. The mine is slippery like that.

This isn't a tell-all because some of what I'm telling you is what I *don't* know. I'm offering the absences, too—the spaces I know aren't empty, but I can't see what's inside them. Like the white spaces between stanzas in a poem: What is unspoken, unwritten there? How do we read those silences?

The book you're holding in your hands was many books before it was this one. Nested inside this version are the others: the version I began deep inside my sadness, thumbed into my phone in bed on sleepless nights; the one I scribbled out with sparks in my hair. You'll see pieces of those books inside this one. Why? Because I'm trying to get to the truth, and I can't get there except by looking at the whole, even the parts I don't want to see. Maybe especially those parts. I've had to move into—and through—the darkness to find the beauty.

Spoiler alert: It's there. The beauty's there.

I know the real people who are part of this story, the story of my life, may read it. Most importantly, my children may read this book someday (hi kids, I

love you). I share this story with them because we share the life. But this tell-mine is just that—my experience. There's no such thing as a tell-all because we can only ever speak for ourselves.

Where do I begin? I could begin in my childhood. I could begin in a college classroom where I sat across from the man I would later marry; or in a Denny's on State Route 23, where we wrote private jokes on the sugar packets; or in our first apartment in Grandview, where I was hit by lightning the night we moved in; or in the hospital where my children were born and I was born and my mother was born; or on our last family vacation, when I packed my sadness and took it with us to the beach; or in my lawyer's office, rubbing a small, sharp piece of rose quartz under the conference table; or at the end of everything that was also somehow the beginning; or in this moment, writing to you, watching fog skim the roofs of houses across the street, as if the clouds had grown tired of treading air and had let themselves sink; or, or, or...

This story could begin in any of these places. I'm beginning here.

PINECONE

It was an unusual pinecone, the one my husband brought home from a business trip as a souvenir for our five-year-old son, Rhett. *Like a small wooden grenade*, I thought.

My son has always been one to collect what he calls “nature treasures”—pinecones, acorns, stones, flowers, shells. I find them when I empty his pockets, doing the laundry. I find them in my purses and coat pockets, where he’s slipped them for me to find.

This pinecone, brought home to Ohio on an airplane, sat on one of our two dining room sideboards. We bought the pair years ago to house our white wedding dishes, the ones we’d registered for, because the serving platters and even the dinner plates were too large for our kitchen cabinets.

The house was built in 1925. It’s periwinkle and white—periwinkle just like the crayon, likely an accident of paint that looked gray enough in the can. Built before central air-conditioning, the house has so many windows, and so few walls without them, we had no idea when we bought the house where we would put the couch or hang the large paintings.

There are so many windows, the house is lit naturally all day long, and you can follow the sunlight as it moves from the back of the house at sunrise to the front at sunset. There are so many windows, I couldn’t bear to hang blinds or full curtain panels. With only café curtains covering the lower halves of all the windows, my head can be seen floating from room to room at night from the street. There are so many windows, living in this house is like living in a glass display case, especially after dark. There are few places to hide.

A few weeks after my husband returned from his latest business trip, one of a few trips he’d taken to the same city in recent months, something felt off.

Something had shifted, maybe just slightly, but perceptibly.

One night he went to bed before me, and I stayed up late writing, sitting on the brown sectional sofa we'd had to float in the middle of the living room. The leather messenger bag he carried to work was sitting in its usual spot on a dining room chair, open, its unbuckled flap hanging over the back of the chair.

Everyone was asleep in the house but me; even the dog, our brindle-and-white Boston terrier, Phoebe, was likely snoring on the couch. I call her "the marble rye" because of the way she looks like a dense loaf of bread when she's curled up.

Everyone was asleep, so no one was watching what I did next, but I felt watched. There are so many windows that someone walking by our house that night could've seen me from the front walk, but that wasn't what made me feel uneasy, nearly seasick, as if I'd just stepped off a boat. It was as if an omniscient narrator—the one I imagine now, the one whose knowledge I envy—was watching me as I set my laptop down and walked over to the chair. I cringe to think of it now—my hand reaching into the bag, rifling through the manila file folders and legal pads inside. I was—*am*—ashamed, yes, for snooping. Though I would be more ashamed if I had found nothing. Nothing was not what I found.

There was a postcard. I saw a woman's name. An address in the city he'd been visiting for work. Her address. I read what he'd written to her. He didn't know what kind of pinecone it was, the one they'd picked up on their walk together.

After I read the postcard and slid it back into the bag where I'd found it, I kept looking. What else was there? I pulled out the blank book he kept in his bag, like the one I carry for jotting down ideas for poems, lists, phone numbers, funny things my kids say.

I flipped to the last entry, the one followed by blank pages. I wanted what I read there—the story of a walk, a woman, a house, her sleeping children upstairs—to be notes for a novel or a play he was working on. But I knew these weren't characters. They were people. I knew this wasn't fiction. It was his life. My life. Ours.

How I picture it: That life—the past, the beforelife, the beforemath—was a boat. I was on it with my husband, and later our daughter joined us, and still later, our son.

The sea was sometimes calm, and we could see right down into the water. We could see everything beneath us. I felt like we were being held—kept afloat, buoyed—by everything we saw. Other times the sea was rough and gray, ruffles on the waves when they curled over and broke.

There are stowaways in so many stories about long journeys across the sea. There are storms—the water gnawing at the hull, desperately wanting to find its way inside. There are shipwrecks. But sometimes it is less dramatic but more tense. There is something moving, dark and slow, in the water beneath the boat—something you don't want to see, but you have to see it.

Otherwise, what passes for plot?

POSTCARD

That night, standing in my dining room, then our dining room, in the house where we lived, the house where I still live with our children, I slid the postcard and the notebook back into the bag, trying to put them exactly where I'd found them.

Did I go straight upstairs and confront my husband? No, I went back to the couch, opened my laptop, and googled The Addressee's name. I had to see her face. And there she was. And—*click, click, scroll*—there she was again, smiling with her children, the ones I'd read about in the notebook. They were all real, not characters in some story or play. They have names I won't use here.

It was after midnight when I shut my laptop and walked upstairs, entering our dark room. I sat down on our bed and felt him stir. What do I remember about waking him? I remember my husband being disoriented. Of course he was disoriented—his wife woke him up, using another woman's name in the dark, a name she wasn't supposed to know. Maybe you want a scene here—you want “show don't tell,” you want to “see it,” you want the author to “put you in the room”—but I can't build a scene from this amnesia. I can't show you because I can't see it or hear it myself. But while we're on the subject: Why would you want to be in that room with us? Why would you want to see the faded turquoise quilt on our bed, and the laundry basket full of clean, folded clothes near the closet doors, and the narrow sliver of streetlight making its way through a crack in the curtains? Maybe I'm sparing you something.

GRENADE

The night after I found the postcard and the notebook, the next night, I did it again: I checked my husband's work bag after he went up to bed. This time I didn't care who saw me—someone walking their dog after third shift, or the narrator hovering godlike above the house. I pulled out the notebook and opened to the most recent entry, but—where were the pages I'd read the night before? They were gone. I could see where they had been neatly cut out, as if with an X-Acto knife. Surgically removed. Excised.

I can only imagine what the omniscient narrator would've said about that.

That night I held the pinecone like a grenade in my hand, and then I threw it away. I threw the pinecone away, but the pinecone wasn't the problem.

A NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

After I finally read Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*, I joked to my agent on the phone, "Why didn't I think to do *that*? Why didn't I think to novelize my life?" It would've been less vulnerable, less complicated than writing this book. Yes, this could've been a novel—a tell-hers, not a tell-mine. The Wife, our protagonist, rummages through The Husband's work bag and finds a postcard addressed to a woman in another city, another state. Or maybe in the novel it's a letter, because you can do that in novels—change things. The Wife keeps looking through the bag and finds a notebook. She flips to the last written pages and reads about the woman in that other city, that other state. The Wife knows more than she's been told but less than she should.

You know what happens next: The Wife confronts her husband. She wakes him up in bed, shouting or not shouting. The reader leans in, wondering: *Will she tell him that she found the notebook?*

She doesn't. The Wife doesn't want to "catch" him, she wants to be told. The truth won't count if she has to wrestle it away from him; it will only count if he hands it to her. She wants to reach her hand out, palm open, and take it—even though she knows it will burn her hand.

The next night, The Wife returns to the notebook, the way she might press on a bruise to feel the ache of it again. But the pages she's looking for have been cut out—not torn, but neatly removed. The word that comes to mind, not a real word, is *X-Acto-ed*. The audience sees where this is going. It's going nowhere. Nowhere is the only place it can go.

There are versions of this story everywhere. When I watched *The Crown*, I held my breath a little during the scene where Elizabeth finds something in her

husband's briefcase: a photograph of a woman. She says nothing. Because of her role, nothing can change.

I can't change what happened—it's not a novel, it's my life—but I'm glad at least to be living now, and here, free to make this life my own. I'm glad not to be queen.

SLEIGHT OF HAND

One afternoon I was listening to Derek DelGaudio, a master of sleight of hand, on NPR. He talked about secrets—their weight, their heft. He talked about how carrying them affects your breathing, your speech, your movements. You have to remember who knows what. You have to remember which versions of the stories you've told, and to whom, and when. If you tell the truth, there's nothing to "keep straight," nothing to work at. The truth isn't easy, but it's simple.

What I wanted from my husband was the truth. I asked for it, and I waited for it, and eventually I stopped waiting. What I was given was something different. It was shaped like it's-not-what-you-think. It held the weight of you-don't-understand.

How did I not see the heft? How did I not hear it? The question I keep asking myself is the same question we ask about someone who's good at sleight of hand: How did he *do* that?

Reader, I'm trying to give you the truth here. I'm trying to show you my hands.

SOME PEOPLE ASK

“So, how would you describe your marriage? What happened?”

Every time someone asks me a question like this, every time someone asks about my marriage, or about my divorce experience, I pause for a moment.

Inside that imperceptible pause, I’m thinking about the cost of answering fully. I’m weighing it against the cost of silence.

—I could tell the story about the pinecone, the postcard, the notebook, the face attached to the name I googled, the name I googled written in the handwriting I’d seen my name in, and the names of our children, for years and years. I could tell them how much I’ve spent on lawyers, or how much I’ve spent on therapy, or how much I’ve spent on dental work from grinding my teeth in my sleep, and how many hours I sleep, which is not many, but at least if I’m only sleeping a few hours a night, then I’m only grinding my teeth a few hours a night. I could talk about how a lie is worse than whatever the lie is draped over to conceal. I could talk about what a complete mindfuck it is to lose the shelter of your marriage, but also how expansive the view is without that shelter, how big the sky is—

“Sometimes people just grow apart,” I say. I smile, take a sip of water. Next question.

A FRIEND SAYS EVERY BOOK
BEGINS WITH AN
UNANSWERABLE QUESTION

Then what is mine?

how to carry this

If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes.

—Agnès Varda

A NOTE ON SETTING

If you opened me up, you'd find Ohio. I've lived here, in a roughly heart-shaped state, all my life. The state slogan is *the heart of it all*, and I'm in the middle of the state, which means I live in the heart of the heart of it all. I'm telling you this so you know: Setting is not just *where* I am, it's who I am and what I am and why. It's not just where I live, it's *how* I live.

For me, the heart of the heart is Bexley, Ohio, a suburb just east of downtown Columbus. My house is about fifteen minutes from the hospital where I was born, where my mother was born, where my children were born. The “hospital curve” is what we call the stretch of highway 315 that wraps around Riverside Hospital, which gets its name from the Olentangy River. Fun fact: *Ohio* means “great river,” so *Ohio River* means “Great River River.” The “Great River River” draws the southern border of my state in thick blue ink.

I live now about twenty-five minutes from my childhood home in Westerville, a suburb just northeast of Columbus, where my parents still live. My childhood bedroom, where I wrote my first poem on loose-leaf paper, is now my father's den. A deer head hangs where my armoire once stood, knotty pine with painted green vines and red flowers winding down it. I kept my stereo behind its double doors, and all my high school CDs: The Replacements, Pixies, Liz Phair, Tori Amos, The Cure, Uncle Tupelo, The Breeders, The Sundays. On another wall, a mounted small mouth bass is frozen mid-wriggle.

My family gathers every Sunday for dinner around the same table I sat at as a child. Myself, my son and daughter, my mother, my father, my two younger sisters, their husbands, and their children—all of us gather for a meal each week, and before the divorce, my husband was there, too, sitting beside me.

HOW IT BEGAN

My husband and I became friends in an advanced creative writing workshop in college. You might want to dog-ear this detail in your mind so you can come back to it later. I never would have guessed I'd marry the person who sat directly across the seminar table from me. I was a senior; he was a junior. He was working on plays; I was writing mostly prose poems. All of us around the table wanted to be writers. I don't know if any of us thought it would actually happen, but we were there, trying.

When I graduated and moved home with my parents while applying to MFA programs, he had one year of college left. We stayed in touch: postcards, mixtapes, emails. Yes, postcards.

That fall when he came to Ohio for his senior year of college, we started meeting for Wednesday night beers at a pub about halfway between the college and my parents' house. Pints of Guinness, to be precise, and usually a basket of deep-fried pickle spears and ranch dressing. It sounds disgusting, I know, but it's delicious.

By the spring, we were a couple. Soon before he graduated, he had a short play produced in a festival at a local theater. I remember how proud I felt, seeing his picture and bio in the program with the other playwrights, and sitting beside him in the dark theater, watching actors say the words he'd written. The play was about infidelity, secrets, and betrayal. (I couldn't make this stuff up.) In the play, it slowly dawns on the poor, dumb husband what's been going on behind his back: His friend is having an affair with his wife. I don't remember how he figures it out. I don't remember how it ends.

Narrative is an accumulation of knowledge about the future.

—Sarah Ruhl