

A NOVEL

I HAVE
SOME
QUESTIONS
FOR YOU

AUTHOR OF THE PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST
THE GREAT BELIEVERS

REBECCA
MAKKAI

ALSO BY REBECCA MAKKAI

The Great Believers
Music for Wartime
The Hundred-Year House
The Borrower

**I HAVE
SOME
QUESTIONS
FOR YOU**

Rebecca Makkai

VIKING

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*for CGG
in joyful memory*

“You’ve heard of her,” I say—a challenge, an assurance. To the woman on the neighboring hotel barstool who’s made the mistake of striking up a conversation, to the dentist who runs out of questions about my kids and asks what I’ve been up to myself.

Sometimes they know her right away. Sometimes they ask, “Wasn’t that the one where the guy kept her in the basement?”

No! No. It was not.

Wasn’t it the one where she was stabbed in—no. The one where she got in a cab with—different girl. The one where she went to the frat party, the one where he used a stick, the one where he used a hammer, the one where she picked him up from rehab and he—no. The one where he’d been watching her jog every day? The one where she made the mistake of telling him her period was late? The one with the uncle? Wait, the other one with the uncle?

No: It was the one with the swimming pool. The one with the alcohol in the—with her hair around—with the guy who confessed to—right. Yes.

They nod, comforted. By what?

My barstool neighbor pulls the celery from her Bloody Mary, crunches down. My dentist asks me to rinse. They work her name in their mouths, their memories. “I definitely know that one,” they say.

“That one,” because what is she now but a story, a story to know or not know, a story with a limited set of details, a story to master by memorizing maps and timelines.

“The one from the boarding school!” they say. “I remember, the one from the video. You *knew* her?”

She's the one whose photo pops up if you search *New Hampshire murder*, alongside mug shots from the meth-addled tragedies of more recent years. One photo—her laughing with her mouth but not her eyes, suggesting some deep unhappiness—tends to feature in clickbait. It's just a cropped shot of the tennis team from the yearbook; if you knew Thalia it's easy to see she wasn't actually upset, was simply smiling for the camera when she didn't feel like it.

It was the story that got told and retold.

It was the one where she was young enough and white enough and pretty enough and rich enough that people paid attention.

It was the one where we were all young enough to think someone smarter had the answers.

Maybe it was the one we got wrong.

Maybe it was the one we all, collectively, each bearing only the weight of a feather, got wrong.

Part I

1

I first watched the video in 2016. I was in bed on my laptop, with headphones, worried Jerome would wake up and I'd have to explain. Down the hall, my children slept. I could have gone and checked on them, felt their warm cheeks and hot breath. I could have smelled my daughter's hair—and maybe the scent of damp lavender and a toddler's scalp would have been enough to send me to sleep.

But a friend I hadn't seen in twenty years had just sent me the link, and so I clicked.

Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot*. I was both stage manager and tech director. One fixed camera, too close to the orchestra, too far from the unmiked adolescent singers, 1995 VHS quality, some member of the AV club behind the lens. And my God, we knew we weren't great, but we weren't even as good as we thought we were. Whoever uploaded it two decades later, whoever added the notes below with the exact time markers for when Thalia Keith shows up, had also posted the list of cast and crew. Beth Docherty as a petite Guinevere, Sakina John glowing as Morgan le Fay with a crown of gold spikes atop her cornrows, Mike Stiles beautiful and embarrassed as King Arthur. My name is misspelled, but it's there, too.

The curtain call is the last shot where you clearly see Thalia, her dark curls distinguishing her from the washed-out mass. Then most everyone stays onstage to sing "Happy Birthday" to Mrs. Ross, our director, to pull her up from the front row where she sat every night jotting notes. She's so young, something I hadn't registered then.

A few kids exit, return in confusion. Orchestra members hop onstage to sing, Mrs. Ross's husband springs from the audience with flowers, the crew comes on in black shirts and black jeans. I don't appear; I assume I stayed up in the box. It would have been like me to sit it out.

Including the regrouping and singing, the birthday business lasts fifty-two seconds, during which you never see Thalia clearly. In the comments, someone had zoomed in on a bit of green dress at one side of the frame, posted side-by-side photos of that smear of color and the dress Thalia wore—first covered in gauze as Nimue, the enchantress, the Lady of the Lake, and then ungauzed, with a simple headdress, as Lady Anne. But there were several green dresses. My friend Carlotta's was one. There's a chance that, by then, Thalia was gone.

Most of the discussion below the video focused on timing. The show was set to begin at 7:00, but we likely started our mercifully abridged version five minutes late. Maybe more. The tape omitted intermission, and there was speculation on how long the intermission of a high school musical would last. Depending on what you believe about these two variables, the show ended sometime between 8:45 and 9:15. I should have known. Once, there would have been a binder with my meticulous notes. But no one ever asked for it.

The window the medical examiner allowed for Thalia's time of death was 8:00 p.m. to midnight, with the beginning of the slot curtailed by the musical—the reason the show's exact end time had become the subject of infinite fascination online.

I came here from YouTube, one commenter had written in 2015, linking to a separate video. *Watch this. It PROVES they bungled the case. The timeline makes no sense.*

Someone else wrote: *Wrong guy in prison bc of racist cops in schools pocket.*

And below that: *Welcome to Tinfoil Hat Central! Focus your energies on an ACTUAL UNSOLVED CASE.*

Watching the video twenty-one years after the fact, the memory that dislodged from my brain's dark corners was looking up *lusty* in the library dictionary with my friend Fran, who was in the chorus. To quiet our giggling about "The Lusty Month of May," Mrs. Ross had announced that "*lusty* simply means *vibrant*. You're welcome to look it up." But what did Mrs. Ross know about lust? Lust was for the young, not married drama teachers. But ("Holy apeshit," as Fran would have said, might have said), look, according to Webster, *lusty* indeed meant *healthy and strong; full of vigor*. One of the examples was a *lusty beef stew*. We fled the library laughing, Fran singing, "Oh, a lusty stew of beef!"

Where had I kept that memory, all those years?

The first time through the video I skipped around, really only watching the end; I had no desire to listen at length to teenage voices, poorly tuned string instruments. But then I went back—the same night, two a.m., my melatonin tablet failing—and watched all the parts with Thalia. Act I, Scene 2 was her only scene as Nimue. She appeared upstage in a dry ice fog, singing hypnotically behind Merlin. Something bothered me about how she kept glancing away from him as she sang, looking offstage right, as if she needed prompting. She couldn't have; all she needed to do was sing her one repetitive song.

I climbed carefully over Jerome to get his iPad from his nightstand and brought the video up there, this time zooming in on her face, making it larger if not clearer. It's subtle, but she looks irritated.

And then, as Merlin gives his farewell speech, bidding goodbye to Arthur and Camelot, she looks away again, nearly over her shoulder. She mouths something; it's not my imagination. Her lips start to close and then part, a formation that makes a W sound when I replicate it. She's saying, I'm almost sure, the word *what*. Maybe just to a stagehand, one of my crew holding up a forgotten prop. But what could have been so important in that moment, right before she exited?

As of 2016, no one in the comments section had fixated on this. They only cared about the timing of the curtain call, whether she was indeed onstage for that last minute. (That and how pretty she was.) Fifty-two seconds, their reasoning went, was enough for Thalia Keith to meet someone waiting backstage, to leave with that person before anyone saw.

At the very end of the tape: Our illustrious orchestra conductor–slash–music director, bow-tied, baton still in hand, begins an announcement no one’s listening to: “Thank you all! As you leave—” But the video cedes to a buzz of gray lines. Presumably something about dorm check-in, or taking your trash with you.

Check out Guinevere the last two seconds, one comment reads. *Is that a flask? I wanna be friends with Guinevere!* I froze the video and yes, it’s a silver flask Beth’s holding aloft, maybe confident her friends will recognize it but any teachers in the audience will be too distracted to notice. Or maybe Beth was already too buzzed to care.

Another comment asks if anyone can identify the audience members passing the camera as they leave.

Another reads, *If you watch the 2005 Dateline special, don’t listen to anything they say. SO many errors. Also, it’s THA- like the beginning of “thatch” or “thanks” and Lester Holt keeps saying THAY-lia.*

Someone replies: *I thought it was TAHL-ia.*

Nope, nope, nope, the original poster writes. *I knew her sister.*

Another comment: *This whole thing makes me so sad.* Followed by three crying emojis and a blue heart.

I dreamed for weeks afterward not about Thalia’s head turn, her mouthed question, but about Beth Docherty’s flask. In my dreams, I had to find it in order to hide it again. I held my giant binder. My notes were no help.

The theater crowd had begged for that show—had brought it up constantly the year before, whenever Mrs. Ross had dorm duty. There’d been a Broadway revival in ’93, and even those of us who

hadn't seen it had heard the soundtrack, understood it entailed medieval cleavage, onstage kissing, fabulous solos. For me, it meant castle backgrounds, thrones, trees on casters—nothing tricky, no flesh-eating houseplant, no Ford Deluxe convertible to roll onstage. For the journalists of the future, it would mean endless easy metaphors. Boarding school as kingdom in the woods, Thalia as enchantress, Thalia as princess, Thalia as martyr. What could be more romantic? What's as perfect as a girl stopped dead, midformation? Girl as blank slate. Girl as reflection of your desires, unmarred by her own. Girl as sacrifice to the idea of *girl*. Girl as a series of childhood photographs, all marked with the aura of *girl who will die young*, as if even the third grade portrait photographer should have seen it written on her face, that this was a girl who would only ever be a girl.

The bystander, the voyeur, even the perpetrator—they're all off the hook when the girl was born dead.

On the internet and on TV, they love that.

And you, Mr. Bloch: I suppose it's been convenient for you, too.