

"A family so real in all their
sorrow, joy and complexity
that they could be yours
or mine ... bursting
with wise observations
about the nature of
love and belonging."

J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN,
New York Times-bestselling
author of *The Engagements*
and *Maine*



the
Blessings
a novel

Elise Juska

the
Blessings

Elise Juska



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON



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For Catherine Pierce

Relief

It didn't take long for Abby to discover at college that most people did not have families like hers. Her roommates, Nicole and Mara, were amazed and amused by the letters cramming Abby's mailbox in the student union—notes from her aunts and twenty-dollar bills from her uncles, newspaper articles about the Phillies and the Eagles, her little sister's drawings of stick figures and houses—Philly row houses, tall and wobbly, crowned COME HOME SOON!—which Abby taped on the wall above her bed until it looked like one of her aunts' refrigerator doors. Her roommates laughed—*I didn't get that much mail at summer camp*. Abby had never gone to summer camp; she had never gone anywhere without her family, the entire clan, aunts and uncles and cousins renting houses within the same two blocks at the Jersey shore. They were a perennial mob at band concerts and Little League games, a discreet crowd of cameras in the living room before school dances. (“Are you serious?” Mara had paused here, a spoonful of cereal halfway to her mouth. “Were you *dying*?”) None of this had struck Abby as remarkable before. But since going to college, she has begun to perceive her own uniqueness, to recognize her family as something apart from other families, with its own rhythm and code. *Epiphany*—it was a term she'd learned in her James Joyce seminar: the sudden realization of a larger truth.

On Sunday nights, Abby sank into the sound of her parents' voices, pressing the phone to her ear. It was 1992 and the hall phones were too public—the one time she'd talked to her mother there, voice trembling, she'd drawn sympathetic looks from the girls walking by holding flip-flops and plastic shower caddies—so she started going to the phone booth in the student union and sitting on the floor. Listening to her parents' measured voices, their talk of ordinary things—her new cousin Max's baptism, the eighteen points her cousin Joey scored in the basketball game against St. Cecilia's—she was overcome with a longing so great that it doubled her over, eyes full, knees drawn to her chin. The ruff from her new parka caught in her mouth. It was so cold in New England—why had she decided to go to college in New England? Something about the brochure—the picture of the quad in the snow and the beginnings of a faint tug that would intensify as she got older, the sense that she belonged somewhere else.

But at eighteen, in the phone booth, Abby was so homesick that her stomach hurt. She reminded herself over and over that she would be home soon for Christmas break. For Thanksgiving, she had accepted an invitation to Mara's house in Boston. Flights to Philadelphia were too expensive; it was a ten-hour drive, and she didn't have a ride. Her parents had wanted her to take a bus and train—her dad had even offered to drive up and get her—but Mara's was so much closer, and Abby was kind of pleased to have been invited. But as soon as Abby sat down to Thanksgiving dinner, she longed to be home. She missed her family, their unfancy stuffing and canned cranberry, the beat of calm silence when Pop said grace, the warm bluster of food passed around the long, crowded table, a plywood extender jammed in the middle so that one end nosed halfway across the kitchen floor. Dinner

Mara's was depressingly small (six people, including Abby) and formal. It had actually never occurred to Abby that other people's Thanksgivings might be like this. When she called home that night (collect, as her mother had instructed), every one of her aunts and uncles and cousins took a turn on the phone—baby Max held next to the receiver, crying, even her cousins Stephen and Joe mumbling, "Happy Thanksgiving"—and Abby chewed mercilessly on the inside of her cheek so she didn't cry herself.

For Christmas, Abby had found a girl on the ride board, a junior with a red Jeep who lived in Harrisburg and blared *The Joshua Tree* on an endless loop. She dropped Abby at a rest stop on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, where her dad picked her up to bring her the rest of the way home. And there it was: her old familiar neighborhood, old familiar street. Her driveway with its limp basketball net, her room with its pale yellow walls, the dried corsage from her senior prom drooping on her bulletin board. Her mom had stuffed the freezer with her favorite cinnamon-raisin bagels, and her little sister Meghan, had made a sign for her bedroom door: WELCOME HOME ABBY! But to Abby's surprise, the ache was still there—a hollow feeling in her chest when she woke up the next morning and wandered through the quiet rooms alone. Her parents were at work, her brother and sister at school. As she roamed the house, Abby noticed for the first time the weirdly perfect symmetry of the curtains in the living room, the water rings on the end table in the den where her father watched TV at night, the hugeness of the stuffed panda collection on Meghan's bed. Within hours, she felt restless. She missed the dorm; she longed for noise. She missed the camaraderie of her roommates, the sleepy mornings piled in bed and gossiping about the night before, the clanging radiators and windows laced with frost. She felt a fleeting panic that college was all something she'd invented or dreamed, that maybe she'd never really gone. A few times, Abby dipped her nose into her suitcase, hoping to detect the scent of her dorm room or the New England cold, but she could smell only her house—impossible to define.

But tonight, ten days later, the entire family is together because Abby is about to leave again. In an hour she is driving to Nicole's house in New Jersey, and tomorrow the two of them are headed to Boston for New Year's Eve. Abby is wearing one of Nicole's sweaters, a baggy oatmeal-colored J.Crew roll-neck she's worn practically every day since she's been home. *Take it*, Nicole had said when they were packing, both of them sluggishly, pleasantly, hungover. *It's your good-luck charm!* The night before, Abby had worn the sweater to a party, where she'd kissed Eric Winn, an ice hockey player from Canada. He spoke with an accent: *So you know, you're one of the prettiest girls here.*

The memory brings a surge of heat to her cheeks, and Abby smiles, glances around the table, pushes her hair behind her ears. No one seems to notice. Her mom is clearing the dinner dishes as Aunt Margie brings out the desserts, the last of the plastic-wrapped Christmas leftovers: half a chocolate Bundt cake, a pumpkin loaf, and all the usual holiday cookies—the powdery white snowballs, the jellied thumbprints, the lumpy almond moons. Aunt Lauren puts on water for tea, cradling baby Max to her chest, while his two-year-old sister, Elena, scoots around under the table, crawling under people's knees and popping up in their laps: *Boo!*

Abby reaches for a cookie, something she would never eat in the dining hall, but at home with her family it's as though calories aren't real. The cookie is one Gran made, round with red-and-green sprinkles that look like crushed glass—Abby's known this cookie her whole life and it looks the same, tastes the same. Chewing, she catches Gran watching her, eyes watery behind her thick glasses. When Abby smiles at her, she winks.

If every family has a certain kind of music, Abby's is the murmur of sympathy around a dining room

table. It starts in the pause after dinner and before dessert, when the men migrate to the living room and turn on sports and the women surround the wreckage, spilled crumbs and crumpled napkins and stained wineglasses. They pinch lids from sugar bowls and dip teabags in hot water, break cookies in half and chew slowly. They trade stories of other people's hardships. This is the melody, the measure of her family: the response to sad things.

"Fifty-six years old," her mother is saying.

This story is one Abby already knows. One of their neighbors, Mr. Whelan, collapsed and died the day before Christmas Eve. A stroke. Fifty-six. Two sons in college. *Terrible*. They shake their heads. *A shame*.

Abby arranges her face into a sympathetic expression, but she is thinking about Eric Winn. Mara had heard that he might be in Boston tomorrow, at the party. It was at Chris Teppler's house; Eric and Chris both played on the JV hockey team. As Abby watches her mother talking, she wonders if Eric Winn could be sitting around right now with his own family—in a house somewhere in Canada. Is he thinking about the party? Could he—possibly—be thinking about her?

Then her sister, Meghan, enters the room, and their mother stops talking about Mr. Whelan, because the night he died Meghan was so upset she couldn't sleep. "Football is stupid," Meghan announces, probably hurt that the boys aren't paying attention to her. She tags along with them relentlessly, especially Joey, the cool one.

"How about some dessert, Meg?" their mother says, extra brightly, just as Elena runs in and flings herself around Meghan's knees.

"Elena!" Meghan exclaims, scooping her up in both arms and hoisting her awkwardly onto one hip. "Do you want a cookie, Elena? Do you, cutie?" she says, doing her best imitation of a grown-up, and before Aunt Lauren can protest, one moment dissolves into the next—Elena taking a big bite of a snowball cookie, Meghan marching back downstairs with Elena in her arms, the kettle whistling, the baby beginning to cry.

"So," Aunt Margie says, and turns to Abby, wiping two powdery fingers on the napkin in her lap. "When are you heading back?" The party is at Aunt Margie's house tonight, hers and Uncle Joe's, and it's marked by all the usual Aunt Margie things: the chalky pink and green mints on the coffee table, the onion dip in the snowflake-shaped bowl, the wooden Jesus hanging on a cross above the toast oven.

"Tonight," Abby says. "After this."

"Oh?" Aunt Margie reaches instinctively for the little gold cross around her neck, worries it between two fingers. She has the same pink, freckled complexion as Abby's mother—as Abby herself—but where Abby's mother is tall, broad-shouldered, Aunt Margie is slight, tense and thin. "Tonight? Really?"

"But only to New Jersey," Abby explains. "One of my roommates lives in New Jersey. Tomorrow we're going to Boston. For New Year's Eve."

Her aunt is nodding, still rubbing the necklace. Abby doesn't mention the party, not after all her mother's questions—whose house and where does he live and will his parents be home? She'd had to lie about that last part (Mara had reported that Chris's parents would be out of town), though she never mentions Chris Teppler at all felt a little like lying, or at least pretending, Chris Teppler who Abby has never spoken to directly and who almost definitely didn't know her name.

"It's just two hours," Abby adds. "To New Jersey, I mean."

"And when are you coming home again?" Aunt Margie asks.

There will be other questions, but these will be the main questions, asked over and over tonight and

for the next twenty years—*when are you leaving and when are you coming home again?*

“March,” Abby says. “Spring break.”

“Good,” her aunt says, and Abby smiles. She knows they all expect she’ll move back here after graduation. But Abby has always harbored a quiet, slightly worrying suspicion that the life her family adopts so effortlessly—meeting someone local, getting married and having babies and staying in Philadelphia, carrying on all the old traditions—won’t happen for her, not so easily. Now that she’s been to college, she feels even more sure. Yet to live anywhere else is unimaginable, too.

There is a commotion at the other end of the table—her cousins Stephen and Joey and her brother Alex, crashing into the room. They descend on the desserts in a flurry of boyishness—shiny jerseys, loose-fitting athletic pants, giant hands, giant appetites. Abby watches her shy, skinny brother cram a snowball cookie into his mouth, and flip his shaggy hair from his face, eyes lowered. He is not as cool as his cousins, but he tries his hardest, hiding behind the mop of hair he thinks makes him invisible but actually makes him more conspicuous.

“Drink? Cake? Can I get you a piece of cake?”

The aunts are in motion, cutting the boys generous slabs and beaming as they head back to the living room, mouths full, sucking frosting off their thumbs—Stephen thick and slope-shouldered, Joey with his bristly crew cut and confident swagger, Alex hunched and bony—where they are absorbed back into the crowd of men around the TV. Abby can just hear her roommates: *You mean women in one room, men in the other?* This has never struck Abby as strange before; it’s never struck her at all. In ten years, things will be different. People will have died or divorced; lines will have blurred. But for now the men are in one room, the women in the other, and this demarcation feels comforting and familiar.

From her seat at the table, Abby watches her grandfather. Pop is sitting where he always does, in Aunt Margie’s: the big, soft recliner in the living room with the brown tweed arms. It is Uncle Joe’s chair, which he gives up whenever Pop is here. Tonight, on his blue sweater, Pop is wearing a sticker with a frog on it—IF YOU SMOKE, YOU CROAK! The frog dangles a cigarette from the corner of its mouth like a waitress in a diner. A few weeks ago, Meghan had a school assembly about the dangers of smoking, and the school nurse had to call their mother because Meghan was crying so hard afterward she made herself throw up. *It was surprising*, Abby’s mother had recounted calmly, but Abby heard the strain of concern in her voice. *It was surprising, how upset she was.* Abby didn’t find it surprising. Meghan was always getting upset about things—whenever Abby went out with friends in high school. Meghan insisted she identify a “dedicated driver” (no matter that they were just going to the mall or to the movies and Abby didn’t even taste a beer until her senior year). Now there’s Pop, wearing that sticker, curling on his blue sweater and losing its stick. But smoking is Pop’s only vice, and one he can’t be blamed for—they all know how he started by smoking the cigarettes in the Red Cross packages delivered to the POW camp in Germany—and he’s always fed the habit quietly, slipping out onto porches and sidewalks, his jacket collar turned up against the wind. Now he’s trying to quit because of Meghan, though in less than two months it won’t matter anymore. In early February, at five in the morning, Abby’s hall phone will start to ring. At first she’ll sleep right through it, waking only at the sound of the sharp knock—*Abby! Phone!*—and will find the receiver swinging from its thin silver cord, pointed at the floor. *Hi, honey.* Her throat will tighten instantly; her mother never calls her honey. *A heart attack. Come right home.* Abby will hang up and stand frozen in the hallway for several long minutes, blinking at the tattered flyers—*Live Music in the Pub!* and *Peer Counseling Hotline!*—thinking: *This is how it feels to get one of these phone calls.* Back in her room, she’ll study the sleeping body of Eric Winn, snoring under her cousin Elena’s crayon scribbles, which Aunt Laure

had translated in big block letters: TO ABBY, I MISS YOU! She will observe, numbly, the strangeness of these worlds colliding—the phone call and the drawings, Eric’s ruddy chest and striped boxers—and how odd it is that he will be attached to this memory forever. How, after this, things could never work out between them. How she hopes Pop isn’t up in heaven, watching. *This is really weird*, she says, *but my grandfather just died*—and Eric will be bleary but kind, and she’ll manage to hold in her tears until he stumbles out, shoes in hand, leaving a sloppy, marked SORRY on the dry-erase board on her door.

But now, tonight, everyone is still here. The talk around the table is getting slower. The women slice cut slivers of cake, wipe children’s noses. They ease their shoes off and flex their stockinged feet beneath the table, squeezing the carpet between their toes. Aunt Lauren is sitting next to Abby, the new baby squirming in her lap. She gave birth four months ago and still looks extra soft, extra tired. *Isn’t he cute?* everybody croons, though Max is red and scrawny. *Too new to be cute*, Abby thinks, then immediately regrets it, hoping she hasn’t doomed herself to having an uncute baby of her own.

“So when are you leaving, Abby?” Aunt Lauren asks, half turning, tucking the baby against her shoulder. She’s wearing a loose pink blouse, a small diamond necklace resting in the tan hollow of her throat. She has the kind of skin that’s tan even in winter, the kind Abby has always envied.

“Tonight,” Abby says. “After this.”

“Oh—tonight?”

“But I’m only going to New Jersey.”

“Oh. Well. That’s not so bad,” she says. Lauren is distracted, nudging a pacifier into the baby’s mouth. In Abby’s family, babies are passed around constantly, casually, like serving bowls around a table, but Aunt Lauren likes to keep hers to herself. Aunt Lauren is an only child, Abby remembers, and it occurs to her then—the sort of awareness she may not have had before going away to college—that maybe Lauren isn’t used to being around big families. She used to be Protestant, too, but converted to Catholicism when she married Uncle John.

From downstairs, there is a sudden gust of cheering, a few hard claps. Then Uncle Patrick comes jogging into the room. The women pause and look up, expectant.

“Fourteen-nothing us,” he reports, and they nod—they don’t watch the games but they want to know the score, to gauge the mood of the room, of the city in the morning.

“Good,” Gran affirms, picking up her cup.

“More tea, Mother?” Aunt Margie says. The oldest siblings, Abby’s mother and Margie, call Gran Mother; the younger ones, the boys, call her Mom. “Anyone? Tea?”

Uncle Patrick reaches over Abby to grab a brownie, rapping his knuckles on the top of her head. The Blessings all look Irish, fair-skinned and blue-eyed, but her youngest uncle is like a flag of Ireland with red hair and freckles so thick that in places they’re solid brown. “I hear you got some new wheels, Abs,” he says.

It is the one thing Abby has accomplished over break—a used Volkswagen, three thousand dollars. Her parents paid half. Her father paced around the guy’s driveway, picking at his fingernails, jingling change in his pocket. It wasn’t like her parents to make big purchases, but it would be easier, she reasoned, for her to get home and back.

“You like it?”

Abby smiles. “I love it.”

“Used?”

“Yeah. But not too used.”

“Be careful driving,” Uncle Patrick says. “Especially in that cold.”

~~When she first arrived home, this was her family’s primary question and greatest source of fascination: *How cold is it up there?* Then: *And you don’t mind?*~~

“Just let the engine warm up first,” Uncle Patrick is saying. Abby nods. She can feel her mother sitting across the table, listening. She’s concerned about Abby driving on highways, driving in snow, driving after dark, driving period. She doesn’t want her leaving tonight, staying in Boston until intersession starts next week: This wasn’t the plan. Of course, her mother has said none of this, but Abby can tell she’s thinking it. Her mouth is drawn, her eyes sad. Even the way she’s chewing that snowball cookie—how can chewing look so pained? It will be years before Abby’s parents get divorced—not until Meghan is in college, after all her problems are out in the open—and only then will their lifelove quietly strike Abby as strange instead of soothing, and she and Alex will grow closer, out of necessity.

“Abs, is he bothering you?” Aunt Kate says, appearing at Uncle Patrick’s side.

“Me?” Patrick says. “Never.”

“Right.” Kate laughs, swatting playfully at his arm.

Abby smiles. She knows this is not really about her—she’s a means to an end, a reason to flirt—but she doesn’t mind because she likes Kate, now Aunt Kate. Kate and Lauren are the same age, only eight years older than Abby, though Kate seems younger. She and Uncle Patrick got married last summer and live in an apartment in Center City. Abby likes how affectionate they are. Once, she saw Kate sitting on Uncle Patrick’s lap, his finger in her belt loop, an intimation of some private, physical ease. Her own parents never touched.

“So,” says Aunt Kate, dropping into a chair beside Abby after Uncle Patrick has headed back to the game. She’s wearing faded Levi’s and long beaded earrings that swing forward as she inspects the desserts. “Got any New Year’s Eve plans?”

Only Kate would ask. A year ago, the answer would have embarrassed Abby (she’d spent New Year’s Eve watching movies she’d rented with her mother), but this year she can answer confidently. “Yeah. A party with some college friends. In Boston.”

“Oh, I *love* Boston,” Kate says, and sighs. She selects a cookie and leans back in her chair. “Are you’re loving school?”

“Yes.” Abby nods. “Totally loving it.”

“Savor every minute,” Kate says, shaking her head wistfully as she chews. Kate went to Bryn Mawr, unlike Abby’s mother and Aunt Margie, who didn’t go to college—*It was a different time*, her mother always says—or even Aunt Lauren, who went to Drexel for two years, then dropped out when she met Uncle John. “When do you declare a major?”

“Next semester,” Abby says. “I’ll do English, I think. Or maybe art history.”

“Or both?” Kate says, and Abby nods, appreciating this sense of possibility. Kate pops the rest of the cookie in her mouth and sweeps her hands together. “Have you met any nice guys yet?”

No one else in the family would venture to ask this either. Abby is grateful for the *yet*, as if her meeting them is one day inevitable.

“Kind of,” Abby says. She glances at her mother, who is pretending not to listen as she presses her fingertip to a plate, collecting crumbs. “One.”

She can’t help herself. She knows it’s a distortion of the truth, painting Eric Winn as anything more than a drunken hookup at a party, but who here will know the difference? All she needs to do is release a hint of him into the family and the rest will take care of itself, gather a life of its own as it gets passed around the table, accumulate legitimate weight and shape.

“Oh yeah?” Kate says. “What’s his story?”

“He’s from Canada,” Abby says, adding, “Toronto. He’s an ice hockey player.” She feels weirdly proud as she offers up this profile, a person so different from the kinds they know at home. Since going to college, Abby has frequently found herself in thrall of such details—people with lives she never considered, never known existed. Like Mara, who had spent Christmas skiing with her mother and stepfather. Or the girl in her dorm who has bulimia, who abruptly confided to Abby at a party that her esophagus was full of holes. Abby was alarmed and kind of excited at the same time.

Then Uncle John calls out from the living room—“Laur, can you grab her?”—just as Elena comes streaking into the room. She is wearing pink, footed pajamas and her mouth is smeared with confectioners’ sugar. She pulls up short, as if startled to find herself there. Lauren is still holding the baby—“Can someone...?” she says, a touch anxious—but Elena, lunging for a fruitcake, has already been scooped onto Aunt Kate’s lap.

“Not so fast!” Kate says, tickling her. Elena shrieks with joy. The rest of the table beams, imagining Kate with a baby of her own.

Kate calls back: “I’ve got her, John!”

It is still nearly a year before Uncle John will get sick. Next Christmas, things will feel different—quiet and careful, fraught with unspoken and unspeakable things. But for now, the cancer in Uncle John’s kidney is not yet there, or not yet known. *My uncle is really sick*, Abby will tell Nicole and Mara next November. *Aww*, they’ll say, a quick frown, a poke of the bottom lip. It is not enough. She will repeat it to other people, inappropriate people—a professor during a conference about her Chaucer essay, a random girl in the bathroom at a bar. Every time, their reactions will disappoint her. She can tell it doesn’t sound as important as it is. *Uncle*—in other families, it means less.

Dessert is winding down. The football game is over. The baby is tired, whimpering, a fuzzy little bundle packed into pajamas. The conversation gets slower, the pauses longer. Abby is thinking of tomorrow—of driving to Boston in her new Volkswagen with Nicole, of the jeans she bought with her Christmas money from Gran and Pop, jeans she’s planning to wear to the party, of the possibility that Eric Winn will be there.

“Do you remember Matt McCabe?” Aunt Margie says. Abby hears the somber note in her voice. The table pauses, looks in her direction. “Joe’s old friend? He played football for Saint B’s?”

They nod, oriented—Joe, football, St. B’s—and wait for the rest.

“His son just died.”

“Died?”

“Died? How?”

“They don’t know.” Aunt Margie shakes her head slowly, almost reverently. “No reason. The doctors have no idea. They just found him dead in their backyard.”

A note of disbelief, then murmurs of sadness around the table again, like the lapping of waves. Heads shake, spoons clink gently on teacup walls. Strange, how sadness can sound soothing. Abby remembers an experiment she learned about in Intro to Psych, about the relative improvement in the health of patients who were prayed for. She thinks about mentioning it but doesn’t.

“How old?” they ask.

“Six.”

“Six years old.”

“Can you imagine?”

Slow shakes of the head. They can’t. But would any age be less horrible than any other? Abby

wonders. Is it worse to have known a child for six years, or is that extra time a gift? Instantly she regrets these thoughts. It makes her nervous to have even allowed them in, like tempting fate. Abby knows that being part of a family like hers carries with it a responsibility to be aware of those less fortunate. To be humble, to be grateful. To realize happiness is always edged with peril. As she stares at a stain on the tablecloth, Abby forces herself to think about the boy, six years old, the same way she forces herself to talk to God in church. She wonders what her family would think if they knew she'd gone to Mass only twice at college, back in September, and then only because she was lonely.

Abby feels loneliness now, pooling up inside her even as she sits among the people who have known her all her life. It is the beginning of what will become an unsolvable ache. When she's away she'll miss her family; when she's with her family, she'll miss herself.

The coat pile is on the bed in her cousin Stephen's room—a rack of weights in the corner, posters of Kiss and Ozzy Osbourne on the walls. Abby thinks she smells pot, which seems unlikely. How old is Stephen? Fourteen? An aquarium bubbles in the dark. The fish look menacing and sharp. In ten years Stephen's troubles will have grown so stark that Aunt Margie and Uncle Joe can no longer contact them. But now Abby locates her parka among the long wool coats on Stephen's bed, thinking of the furry pullovers that pile up in the corners of parties on campus, pawed through at night's end.

"You're not driving too far tonight, are you?" Aunt Margie says. She is standing at the bottom of the stairs, holding a glass of pink wine in one hand and rubbing her arm with the other, back and forth as if she's cold.

"Nope," Abby reassures her. "Just to New Jersey." Then she waits for the rest—where in New Jersey, what route she'll take. But Aunt Margie has gone quiet, surveying the room. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes bright, maybe from the wine.

"It's a good moment," she says, "when everyone is okay."

At first Abby isn't sure Aunt Margie wasn't talking to herself. Abby has her coat only half buttoned. Elena is scrambling past her knees, wrapped plates of leftovers are being passed from hand to hand. But her aunt looks at her with an extra modicum of gravity, and Abby sees that this was meant for her. That there will come a time when she looks at life this way, too: when, if everybody is okay, it is enough.

For now, though, Abby finishes buttoning her coat. She recognizes this point ahead, knows that someday she'll accept it as her measure of the world, but today, she's eighteen. Eighteen and in college, living away from home for the first time. Tomorrow is New Year's Eve.

"I better get on the road," she says, kissing her aunt's cheek. "Thank you for the party."

Then she starts her good-byes. Her parents stand by the front door, like the end of a receiving line, ensuring they are the last to say it. Abby makes her way across the living room, thanking Uncle Joe for touching Max's head, protesting as Gran hands her a plate of cookies—for the drive—nodding at parting advice from Uncle John about snow tires and antifreeze. *I'll see you soon*, she says to Pop. *March. Spring break*. He fumbles a twenty into her coat pocket, cups her face in his dry hands. She waves toward Alex, who is frowning at the postgame analysis, leaning forward with his hands on his knees, pretending to care. Meghan hugs her tightly, wrapping both arms around her waist and pressing a warm cheek to her side.

"Bye, bye, bye, bye," her family tells her—they never say *I love you*, but she knows it's true. A flurry of kisses, palms to cheeks, eyes pinched against the cold as the door is pulled open, jostling the jingle bells that hang from the knitted red cap on the knob. Her dad is hovering by the door, h

mother clutching her sweatered elbows in her hands. Flakes are falling, but there's barely a dusting on the ground.

"It's snowing!" someone says.

"Snow! Is that really snow?"

"I didn't hear anything about snow, did you?"

A tremble of worry moves through the room, prompting departures to happen more quickly—kids wrapped into coats, shoes pushed onto feet. Her mother's expression has dissolved into concern.

"It's nothing," Abby tells her. "Look—it's just a few flakes."

Her mother looks outside, presses her lips together. Her hands are knotted at her chest, next to her bright Christmas pin. "Why don't you just leave in the morning?"

"I can't," Abby says, panic swelling inside her. She looks to her father, who looks at her mother. "I leave in the morning—" But she can't bear to finish the thought, because any number of things could happen then: She might get snowed in, get to Nicole's house late or not at all, miss the party. Her mother looks so worried that Abby feels a spasm of annoyance—*it's not a big deal!*—then feels guilty, because she doesn't want to leave feeling annoyed, and because she knows how much her mother loves her, that there are people who would give anything to be loved that much.

"I'll be fine," she says.

"Be very careful, sweetheart," says her dad, the only one who calls her that.

"Call us when you get there," her mother says. "As soon as you get there."

"I know," Abby says, kisses them, and shuts the door.

In the snow, the neighborhood is strangely quiet. Abby's footsteps shush along the sidewalk, leaving fresh prints. Flakes fall gently beneath the glow of the long-necked streetlights, the telephone poles strung with thick, sagging wires. Christmas lights pulse crazily, silently, on the narrow houses—lights twined around railings, Santas blinking on front porches, a red-nosed reindeer raising and lowering its head to a scrap of bald lawn. Abby unlocks her new used car. The smell of it is unfamiliar, still, vaguely pinelike, the trace of an old air freshener. The air is cold, but she doesn't turn on the heat. Instead she shuts the door and watches the bright flakes drift onto the windshield, flashing red and green, landing and resting for a moment before disappearing into the glass. A mix tape waits in the cassette player, a bunch of songs Abby and her roommates recorded in a burst of feverish sentimentality the night before they left. She thinks about playing it but instead just sits, watching her breath bloom and dissolve, feeling a strange heaviness in her chest. Fog creeps in from the edges of the windshield. She looks at the street with all its blazing windows, and it occurs to her how strange it is that families live together in houses—how odd that some combination of fate and genetics brings these three or four or five people together to live, day in, day out, in the same small space.

It's another thought she might not have had before going to college, another of the kind her family might not understand. She looks at Aunt Margie's house, a brick row home with a green slate roof attached to an almost identical one on either side. Gran and Pop live in a red-roofed version six blocks away. Abby studies the porch railing with its plastic braids of holly, the electric candles leaning in the windows, dark shapes moving inside. *Relief*—this was a term she learned in Intro to Art History, the way part of a sculpture can stand out more sharply in relation to other parts. The way her family is not like other families, the way Abby is like her family and she isn't. The way the row homes of Philadelphia look cramped and tiny compared with the houses of New England, separated by wide porches and snowy fields.

The door opens and out come Aunt Lauren and Uncle John, a slice of light widening on the porch behind them. They step carefully down the snow-dusted stairs. Lauren minces along the sidewalk

holding a casserole pan in her gloved hands. Uncle John, tall and handsome in his long gray coat, carries Max in the crook of one arm and holds Elena by the hand. Elena, mittens dangling from her coat sleeves, has her head turned, neck craned sideways. She is looking right at Abby—the only one who sees her sitting alone in her car—and Abby gives her a big smile and a furious wave, letting her know that *everything is fine, everything is okay*. Elena lifts one hand, uncertain or maybe just tired, a single droop of the wrist. Then she is scooped into the backseat, and the doors clap shut, and Uncle John slides behind the wheel, headlights on, snow falling softly through the beams.

Abby waits until they drive off before she turns the key. The dashboard glows. She sits and lets the engine warm, the way Uncle Patrick told her. When she looks up at the house one last time, she is startled to see her mother standing in an upstairs window. She's parting the curtain with one hand, the other palm resting on her middle. She's probably been watching Abby this entire time. The sadness this ignites in her is so acute it makes her eyes fill. She swipes quickly at her face. Now that her mother is watching, she needs to get moving. Abby rubs her palm on the windshield, clearing a circle in the glass. She can't see well, but well enough. As she turns the headlights on, she pictures the drive to Boston tomorrow morning—the way the landscape will decompress as she moves north, the buildings flattening and the sky opening, the pine trees gathering along the sides of the highway, the way the change will feel both slow and sudden.

Widows

I

What struck Lauren most at the funeral was how hard her niece Meghan was crying—long, shuddering sobs that echoed through the quiet cavern of St. Bonaventure’s. Cheeks mottled, eyes swollen, her older sister Abby leaning down to whisper in her ear. It was alarming, Lauren thought. Not that it wasn’t a sad thing, a terrible thing. Her grandfather, after all. The suddenness of it, and the open casket. It must be confusing for an eleven-year-old girl. Maybe Meghan, poor thing, thinks her death had something to do with his smoking. Lauren recalls how her sister-in-law Ann had described Meghan’s reaction to the school assembly on cigarettes, crying so hard that she made herself sick. Lauren had nodded at Ann’s story, hoping her face conveyed the proper mix of sympathy and understanding, but she was thinking: *That doesn’t seem right.*

Now, at the luncheon, Lauren is watching as Meghan stands next to the buffet table, eating cheese and crackers. Her face is streaky, swollen, the aftermath of her sobbing at the cemetery when they had sprayed holy water on the coffin. Her ponytail, tight and smooth three hours before, is drooping, pieces falling loose from its sparkly neon band. Even when she was a little girl, back when John first started bringing Lauren around to family parties, Meghan had always seemed like a concern. She had a slightly feverish quality about her, chubby cheeks flushing with color as she flung herself into people’s laps or clung to their knees. Lauren watches as Meghan swipes her bangs out of her eyes with one hand, reaches for a cracker with the other.

From her lap, a sigh. Lauren looks down to find the baby gazing up at her with his serene brown eyes. “Well, hello there.” Lauren presses him closer, inhales him. “Are you getting hungry, little man?”

Lauren is relieved—pleased—about how her children are turning out. Both of them are easy babies, good sleepers. (Whoever said you don’t get two easy ones was wrong.) Elena, two and a half, regularly draws compliments from strangers. *Isn’t she well behaved? And gorgeous. Look at those big, big eyes.* Elena’s are the kind of baby eyes that seem to absorb everything—long-lashed, inky, almost violet. She didn’t get them from Lauren, with her brown Armenian features, and not from John, with his light blue eyes and clean, crisp face. (Was it possible for a face to actually look Catholic? If so, her husband’s did.) The eyes, Lauren thought, belonged to her maternal grandmother. It pleased her that her small, scattered family had triumphed in some minor way over her husband’s big, close-knit one.

She scans the room, finds John stationed by the door. He is shaking hands, receiving condolences, thanking people for coming. Old neighbors. Friends of the family. Colleagues of his, old co-workers.

of his father's. Young men in crisp black suits, stooped men in brown ones. Lauren watches him clasp an elderly man's hand, kiss his wife's cheek. Chivalrous and confident. John always was. It isn't arrogance—it's as if doubt simply doesn't exist for him, as if he doesn't know the feeling. This, more than any financial savvy, is the key to his success. In his dark suit, he looks terribly handsome—an inappropriate thing to think at her father-in-law's funeral, but Lauren can't help it. At the family parties, John sometimes recedes a little, gathering around the TV, accepting plates of butter cake, becoming the younger brother to his older sisters, who fuss over him and Patrick, assigning them some old helplessness they remember from childhood. Here, though, he is the strongest presence in the room. It comforts her. Lauren has never felt completely at ease around John's family—their bigness, the competence, the tight sphere of constant togetherness. But it doesn't matter because at the core of her life is this: her husband, their children. Their little family of four. The moments John says *How did I get so lucky? Or: Do you know how much I love you?* Like feeding her babies, these are the hidden intimacies, the private exchanges, on which she builds her life.

The baby squirms. Lauren looks down, sees his little pink face working up to a cry. "Hang on, little one," Lauren says. "I know, little one. You're hungry." She scans the room for someplace private to steal away. It's a large, multipurpose room, wood-paneled, the kind that can be modified to suit any occasion. Tables draped in starchy white tablecloths, now covered with balled-up napkins and discarded plates. A hearth adorned with tasteful sprays of flowers. On the far side, Lauren spots what looks like an unused coat closet. She'll have to wade through all these people to get there, but she has the baby—an excuse to keep moving. Lauren wraps a few cookies in a napkin and tucks them discreetly in her diaper bag. Then she fixes her face in a polite smile, shoulders the bag, and starts across the room. In an hour, she thinks, the babysitter will arrive with Elena, who John had agreed (thank God) was too young for the funeral. When Elena appears, she will lighten everybody's mood. She'll be wearing the puffy pink dress Lauren laid out for her this morning. She will recite her litany of new words—*happy, chicken, phone*. Early Monday morning, when they returned from John's parents' house and retrieved Elena from the neighbors', she had crawled right into her father's lap, as if sensing his sadness, and curled her head into his neck.

The call had come at one thirty in the morning. Mrs. Blessing had called Ann and Margie, who had called Patrick and John. John's father had been asleep in bed, and somehow John's mother had heard—sensed—he wasn't breathing, the intuition from a lifetime of nights spent beside him. Everyone had rushed to the house, the children and the grandchildren, wearing their middle-of-the-night clothes, sneakers and sweatpants, plastic hair clips and eyeglasses. John took charge, calling the paramedics and later Mike Leary, an old high school classmate, now co-owner of the local funeral home. Patrick and Kate sat together at one end of the couch, holding hands. Kate looked remarkably put together for the hour—jeans, a sweater, even makeup and earrings. Maybe they'd just gotten home from somewhere when they got the call? (Lauren's nights were now devoted entirely to nursing. She couldn't fathom being out that late anymore, and didn't miss it.) But despite this, Kate looks genuinely upset—she always wore the right expression and always seemed to mean it, both traits Lauren envied—as she rubbed Patrick's wrist with her thumb. Patrick was crying, his shoulders slumped and shaking. The teenage boys stood around uncomfortably, looking stunned and uneasy in their hooded sweatshirts and huge plaid flannel pants. It was like some alternate, late-night version of a family party, twisted and vulnerable and strange.

John's father was still in bed. John had told the Learys to wait an hour before coming so everyone had the chance to see the body. In small groups, they filed in to see him in his blue-striped pajamas, a wooden rosary twined around the bedpost, his arms by his sides. (Had someone moved his arms,

place them there so neatly? Was this the duty of the wife?) Lauren stood slightly behind John, saying nothing, feeling her pulse beat in her cheeks. The glowing arms of the bedside clock pointed to two forty-five. She kept one hand on John's back, as if bracing him, or maybe herself, and held the baby with the other. Mr. Blessing looked colorless, frozen, his mouth agape. One eye was open, one half-closed. Rigor mortis. Somehow she hadn't anticipated this. But more shocking than the body of John's father was the presence of John's mother, keeping vigil over this terrible tableau. Lauren was almost afraid to look at her, but when she did, Mrs. Blessing was startling in her composure: eyes two tidy pools of water, spine ramrod straight. It was as if she'd been preparing for this moment all her life.

When Lauren followed John back to the living room, she felt dizzy. The Learys had pulled up outside, headlights shining in the dark. They were approaching the house. They were both wearing suits. Someone was sobbing, a hoarse, deep sound—Stephen, of all people, a stocky fifteen-year-old in sweatpants and big sneakers, crying raggedly. Margie went to touch her son's shoulder, but Stephen shook her off, stepping onto the porch and slamming the door, the long shade shivering against the glass. Then Meghan started to cry again, and the baby began whimpering in Lauren's arms—oh, thank God.

She stole off to the spare bedroom and quietly closed the door. It was John and Patrick's old room with two twin beds with blue bedspreads, a small rabbit-eared TV, a rocking chair with a flat braided mat on the seat. A simple wooden cross hung above the door. Lauren sat and rocked as she nursed the baby. Then she worried the others might hear the floorboards creaking, so she sat perfectly still. She watched the dark sky out the window. She heard activity in the room next door. The low rumble of voices, the squeak of a metal hinge—or a zipper? She shut her eyes. She just wanted this strange awful night to be over. She thought about how it was something they would all remember forever. How this was family: to own such moments together. To experience them in all their raw shock and sadness, then get the food from the refrigerator, unwrap the crackers and fill the glasses, keep the gears turning, the grand existing beside the routine, the ordinary.

The Learys drove away. For the next two hours, they all stayed. It was nearly five when she convinced John's mother to try to get some sleep—would she get back in that bed? Lauren couldn't help wondering—and five thirty when she and John pulled into their driveway, the first faint pinprick glimmer of dawn coloring the sky. John turned the engine off and put his head in his hands. It was only then that he cried. Lauren had never heard her husband cry before. It was an awful sound, halting and awkward, as if his body weren't sure how. He moaned. Lauren touched him lightly, tentatively, on the shoulder. She couldn't imagine what he was feeling. Both her parents were alive and in good health, living in a retirement village in Florida. In twenty-six years, real tragedy had not touched her life at all. She rubbed John's wrist—a gesture, she realized, she'd stolen from Kate—and murmured some things about getting through it, calling out of work, eating something, getting some sleep. Imperfect, but it seemed to calm him somewhat, and as she slid into bed an hour later, having collected Eleanor from the neighbors' and put both her children back in their cribs, Lauren felt relieved—even a touch proud—that they were surviving this sad thing.

Lauren peers out from behind the thick curtain of the empty coat closet. From this vantage point, she can nurse the baby and observe the entire room unseen. "Come on," she whispers to him. "I know you're hungry." Max cranes his neck, twisting his head, distracted by his new surroundings. Lauren touches his cheek, steadying him. "Up here," she says, and he looks up at her, blinking slowly, and latches on.

If Lauren could, she would breast-feed forever. Part of it is the closeness, the almost magical intimacy. ~~The way her milk lets down when she hears her children cry—it still happens even with~~ Elena, who switched to formula before Max was born. But breast-feeding has also become her escape. It allows her to step away from the family without penalty, to go collect herself in a spare room. Because she isn't like Kate, who socializes with everyone so effortlessly. She isn't like John's sisters—look at them standing by the hearth in their muted dresses, dark blue with discreet gold earrings, gracefully accepting condolences. John's mother stands beside them, equally composed, eyes brimming but never spilling over. All of the Blessings excel at this: looking right, acting right. At the wake, they had been tirelessly gracious, which was no easy feat—John's family seemed to know ha of Northeast Philadelphia. (When Lauren first told them she'd grown up in Upper Darby, they had paused—*the other side of City Line*, one said, and the rest nodded, as if orienting her on the other side of the moon.) The wake had lasted four hours, the line stretching down two city blocks in the biting February cold. For the past week, the entire family had been together constantly, shifting from house to house at night. Only the setting changed, and the food, which seemed to appear as if from nowhere, all of it appropriately subdued. Nothing decadent, not too much spice or frosting. Nothing delicious. Plain and practical, just sustenance: pound cakes, cold salads, casseroles, triangles of ham and cheese.

A sharp cry—Max is peering up at her with a furrowed brow, as if sensing her inattention. “I’m sorry, bug,” she says, cajoling him to latch back on. She hikes up one side of her bra and switches sides, repositions his rosy mouth, then reaches into her bag for a cookie. When she looks up again, biting into it, Kate is standing in her line of sight. She is impossible to miss—tall and blond, with a daringly short bob. She’s wearing a short, satiny jacket and wide gray trousers. Fashionable even at a funeral. An hour earlier, when Lauren went to the car for the diaper bag, she’d run into Kate in the parking lot, smoking furtively. “Oh, I know!” Kate had said. Her voice always had the slight rasp of someone who’d been yelling over loud music all night. “It’s terrible,” she’d said, dropping the cigarette, grinding it out with her sharp heel. “It’s so incredibly inappropriate—especially here. Please don’t tell on me.”

“Don’t worry,” Lauren had said, though she did find it disrespectful, considering. She had hugged Max to her chest, fumbling for her keys, as Kate pulled a little tin of mints from her purse.

Now Kate is standing by the drinks station, chatting easily with the nephews: Stephen and Joey and Alex. The boys look stiff, drawn, awkward in their black or brown suits, holding dimpled plastic cups of Coke. Lauren never would have approached the boys, especially not all together. From time to time she manages a conversation with Alex, who will offer a few polite details about school. Joey is friendly enough, but always in motion. But Kate is at ease talking to anyone—even Stephen, who Lauren finds intimidating, with his dour expression and broad shoulders and whiskered upper lip.

It would all be much easier if she and Kate were close, Lauren thinks. They’re the same age, but Kate is entirely different from her—stylish, outgoing, an exception to everything. She went to Bryn Mawr and has no children. She calls Patrick *babe*. To family parties, she brings frozen appetizers you warm in the oven or those giant chocolate-chip cookies they sell in malls, and somehow, from Kate, this seems charming, understandable, as if she has more important things to do than cook. Lauren wouldn’t dare. She slaves over coleslaw and three-bean salads, following the recipes she was given in a pretty flowered binder at her wedding shower—*The Blessing Family Cookbook*—along with a food processor, an electric mixer. For Kate’s shower, they’d all pitched in to send her and Patrick on a long weekend down the shore.

It doesn’t matter, John likes to say. *It’s not a contest.*

He enjoys teasing her, finds her discomfort endearing. He knows his own family too well

appreciate how they make her feel: like standing so close to a mirror you can't see your own face. Because how could she *not* feel inferior around them? Between the supremely capable sisters and the supremely confident sister-in-law, she has every right—though in truth, Lauren has always been prone to feeling this way. When she was eleven, the one time she agreed to try overnight camp, she had refused to do the trust fall, the one where you flop backward blindly into strangers' arms. The other kids were pressuring her and Lauren became so adamant, so agitated, that the blood rushed to her head, and she started to faint, so they caught her anyway.

II

When John first felt the pain in his back, they assumed it was a pulled muscle. A strain from all the swimming. They'd had the in-ground pool dug over the summer and he'd been doing twenty laps each day before work. This was John: determined, disciplined. He set his mind to something and he did it. He stretched his muscles, took Extra Strength Tylenol. At night, watching TV, he pressed a heating pad against his side.

It was October then, not a particularly remarkable October, though later Lauren would remember it every moment as if gilded in gold. The dinner party they hosted for some of John's friends from the brokerage. The compliments she received on the stuffed peppers (her own family's recipe). Mark taking his first steps. The Phillies making it all the way to the World Series, then losing in game six. Dropping Elena off at preschool, ripping Lauren's heart out three mornings a week.

Then one morning, a Saturday, John said: *Lauren. Something isn't right.*

The appointment with Dr. Gwynn had been inconclusive, John said. He wanted John to go to the hospital for tests. *Tests?* Lauren said, a tick of alarm. *What kind of tests?* John wasn't worried. Dr. Gwynn was his old family doctor, the one they'd all gone to since they were children. He probably wasn't equipped to deal with more than flus and fevers, skinned knees. They would wait and see what a real doctor had to say.

Aggressive, the oncologist called it—that was the first word that stuck. They were sitting in his office side by side, facing the vast shining expanse of his desk, deep enough to buffer him from the people receiving bad news. *Cancer in the kidney.* Lauren watched the doctor's mouth moving but couldn't absorb what he was saying. Other words drifted by. She heard a few—*fatty tissue, renal cells.* Besides her, John's hands gripped the leather arms of the chair. He nodded, kept nodding, as the doctor showed them the CT scan, pointed to a gray blur. It looked like a smudge, something she could erase with a dab of spit on her thumb. *Lymph nodes*, he said. The sun was coming through the blinds on a slant, striping the desk. Lauren stared at a picture of the doctor's family: his wife and three children, waving from a dock. They were all wearing life preservers. Did the parents usually wear life preservers? The doctor wanted to order more tests—*chest X-ray, bone scan.* He handed them a Kleenex and shook their hands. They left the office in numb silence, rode the elevator with two chatting receptionists, and stepped into the cool, oily dark of the parking garage. Her hands were tingling. She held John's arm

keep from falling. They walked quickly toward the car, as if they'd mutually agreed to just keep moving, get into the car and out of sight. John opened her door, as always, and she took comfort in the small act of consistency, in the businesslike clap of his shoes as they rounded the bumper. But when he slid into the seat beside her, she saw the fear on his face. Something snapped in her brain, and she started sobbing. "It'll be fine," John said. "It'll be fine. We'll be fine." But his voice was stunned. He turned on the car. "We need gas," he said, and Lauren remembered the tank was low, that they'd discussed filling it on the way but had been running late. It seemed inconceivable that this was the same car they were sitting in an hour ago, the same life with its same trivial problems. But the evidence was all there: the two car seats strapped in the back, the saltine crackers ground into the carpet, the needle on the dashboard hovering near E. How could the car need gas in a moment like this? "We'll get through this," John told her. "We will." They stopped at the Hess station and John pumped the gas and drove home.

Once, shortly after they were engaged, Lauren and John had gone to the wedding of one of his high school friends. John was nearly thirty then, Lauren only twenty-two. *Sure you don't mind being with an older man?* John often teased her. She didn't. In fact, she liked that John was so much older, the same way she liked that he was so much taller; it made her feel safe. Toward the end of the reception when John was refilling their drinks, a guy started hitting on her. He was loose and red-faced, one hand on her elbow, his drunken grin too broad and too close. John walked up to him, smiled, and said *I see you like looking at my wife?* It was so out of character, like a line from a gangster movie. It thrilled her, especially because they weren't married yet. *Wife*. She loved just hearing him say it. She had let her mind run wildly, girlishly, imagining the word in different contexts.

My wife and I have an eight o'clock reservation.

Oh, I'm sorry—have you met my wife?

But in the oncology ward of Holy Redeemer, the word carries a different weight. The wife is the one to whom the nurses question, the one to whom doctors deliver the sobering news, the one who talks to insurance companies and signs forms. The wife begins learning a new language—*radical nephrectomy*, which the first oncologist recommended. The second one agreed. *Full removal of kidneys and nearby lymph nodes*. "I'm the wife," Lauren tells them, countless times, the transition from *his* to *the* happening without her noticing.

John is in the hospital for a week. His family is there every day, some in the morning and some in the afternoon. They trade off taking care of the children. Neighbors, family. Abby, home for Thanksgiving. When Lauren misses Thanksgiving dinner, Ann drives over with a lukewarm plate. At home at night, Lauren pumps her milk for the next day and stores it in the refrigerator and holds the baby, who cries for some loneliness he doesn't understand. She eats late at night, whatever she can find. She can't bear being in their bed alone, so she sleeps on the couch. Staring at the darkened ceiling, she thinks that she should have pressed harder for John to see a doctor. Should have made him go when he first mentioned the pain. Everybody knows men are stubborn about seeing doctors admitting weakness, John especially. His sisters, mother—any of them would have gotten him there sooner. This was her job—the wife's job. What difference, she wonders over and over, might those weeks have made?

John insists on coming to Christmas even though he's started chemo and has been vomiting for four days. Everyone moves carefully, quietly, as if not wanting to awaken the sickness. Even the children are uncharacteristically subdued. John has assumed the spot in the brown tweed recliner, the position once occupied by his father, who died only in February—shouldn't that have been their greatest triumph this year? But the family carries on with all the usual traditions. Almond crescents, powdered snowballs, Mrs. Blessing's potato soup. If anything, they adhere to these things even more closely. They stay in motion. The men gather around the TV, the women around the dining room table, telling stories—a friend of Stephen's, a boy Mark, whose father up and left the family, *a shame*—but it feels different with so much sadness right here in the room. Twice Kate gives Lauren's arm a sympathetic squeeze, and Lauren feels a burst of resentment—pure, unmitigated, unjustified. Then John is standing in the doorway, signaling her with his eyes. Her anger leaves her. He is horribly pale. They refuse leftovers, moving quickly—Elena crying because she doesn't want to go yet and Meghan petting her arm consolingly, only making it worse. *Why don't we drop her off later?* Ann offers, but Lauren shakes her head firmly, no. *But thank you*, she manages before hustling them out the door, fastening Max into one car seat and Elena into the other. John leans his forehead against the dashboard as Elena starts kicking the back of his seat with her hard patent leather heels. Then John opens the door and vomits on the sidewalk, and Elena stops kicking, and Lauren drives them all home.

New Year's Day: It feels significant this year. John is plodding through the chemo treatment, determined to get back to normal. But there is no normal, Lauren thinks. The hair in the sink, sweat on his face. Like a fool, she was surprised. She wouldn't have believed, didn't believe until she saw that her husband was as vulnerable as anybody else.

Sunday mornings, they go to Our Lady of Ransom. Though Lauren converted when they got married, she still feels self-conscious in Catholic churches. At least no one here knows her; John's mother and sisters all go to their old parish, St. B's. Lauren recites the prayers but doesn't really think about the words, too preoccupied with trying to remember what to do and say and when. Secretly, the only thing she likes about church is how they look as a family in their nice Sunday clothes. Now, when people look, Lauren sees sympathy on their faces: the sick husband, the two young children. *A shame*.

John is determined to attend a work event: a black-tie dinner, for charity. Lauren worries out loud that it's not a good idea, though secretly she wants to go. She buys a new dress, gets her hair done. John wears his tuxedo, though it hangs loose everywhere. At the dinner, people speak to them too kindly, too carefully. She sees the tension creeping into John's face. After an hour, Lauren's mouth aches from smiling. In the auction, they win two tickets to a B&B in New England: *Romantic Getaway*. They are in the car twenty minutes later, John punching the dashboard. The next day, his knuckles are bruised.

Lauren no longer hides in spare bedrooms at family parties; she couldn't if she tried. If she had n

clear role in John's family before, she does now: liaison, informant, nurse, repository for everyone's questions and concerns. Her life is public now, available, turned inside out. The phone rings off the hook. *How can I help? What can I do?* They are a family that responds by doing. *What do you need?* Lauren bats away their offers, politely, because what she needs is for them to leave her be. What she needs is for the chemo to be over, for their lives to go back to normal. What she needs is for her husband to get better, which he does—but only briefly, a clean scan, a spasm of unfair hope, before the illness takes a swift turn for the worse.

Metastasized. Another word that sticks.

The family stops asking permission. Help just appears. Casseroles in the freezer. Margie's boys, to cut the lawn. When John is recovering from chemo, someone might show up to take Elena to the mall or to the roller rink, the movies. Lauren wishes they would leave her alone. *We were fine before*, she thinks, smiling furiously. *Just leave her here! Leave us be!* She is so worried about their little girl. If anyone is going to explain to Elena what's going on, it should be her mother. It should be her father—it should be her mother *and* her father. God knows what a sensitive child like Meghan might say. Recently, Elena has had a defiant streak about her. Maybe it's her age. Maybe it's a response to the tumult, the constant visitors, the time spent with her older cousins, the disruptions to her usual routine—all the things she quietly absorbs with those big violet eyes.

Lauren feels ungrateful. She should be glad for the help from John's family, even if it makes her feel inadequate. Other times, gratitude overwhelms her, and she takes comfort in their constancy, in the reliability of small things.

She devotes herself to doing: monitoring medication, cleaning the bathroom, the kitchen, disinfecting the tub, taking care of the children, who need diapers changed and baths drawn and bottles made. She is beginning to understand the comfort in it. How these small tasks keep you busy, focused, make you feel not entirely helpless. Keep your mind from thinking unbearable thoughts. *How can I help? What do you need?*

When his wedding band falls off, John sets it on the dresser beside an army of pill bottles, hand sanitizers, anti-itch creams. Lauren remembers how he proposed, down on one knee—*Will you do me the honor?* He'd bought her a dozen roses, asked her father first—*I promised him I'd take good care of you*, he told her. It had all been just how she'd imagined it would be.

She talks occasionally to friends from high school. *How are you doing, Lauren?* They pause, the silence stretching on the line. *With everything?* They don't mention cancer; maybe they think you're not supposed to. They have no experience with a thing like this. Lauren was the first of them to get married, and they helped her plan the wedding, gushing over the dresses and bouquets. Now they're a

catching up to her. Having their first babies, buying their first houses, modest twins with postage stamp backyards. When Lauren and John moved into their house in Chestnut Hill, the girls had come to see it, awed by the size of it, envious of her new adult life.

John goes in to work, half days. Twice a week, or once. A gesture. Then nothing. He shaves off what's left of his hair. He wears a knit Eagles hat every day. He's grown so thin—Lauren is startled by the contrast, her thigh next to his. The thermostat is cranked to seventy-five. Max scrambles around for just a diaper, hair damp and curling. Outside, it is early April, and when Lauren drags the trash to the curb, the nights are cool and sweet, but the house is always the same temperature, its own climate. world apart.

Friends come—John's friends from high school, a few of his co-workers. A guy who, at their dinner party in October, had done a loud, drunken impression of their boss. Now he refuses the beer that Lauren offers. He makes jokes—business jokes. *Couldn't you market this thing as a diet plan?* Lauren says, and John offers the obligatory laugh. Lauren almost can't bear to look at the guy's face, the terror in his eyes: *A guy like me, reduced to this.*

On warm afternoons, if John is feeling strong enough, the four of them sit by the pool. John dressed in layers, Lauren holding the baby, Elena carefully dunking her feet. When they had the pool dug last summer, John had imagined all the family barbecues they would be hosting. *It'll be fun for the kids* he'd said, and Lauren had cringed inwardly at the thought of their house becoming the locus of all John's family gatherings for the rest of their lives. Now she makes a promise to herself: to keep hosting, no matter what.

Mrs. Blessing is there every other day, like clockwork. Fixing meals, doing laundry, washing dishes. Lauren is too exhausted to refuse. She knows John likes having her there, and there is something steadying about John's mother: the dependability of her habits, the flowered half apron she keeps folded neatly in a kitchen drawer, the warm, simple dishes she pulls from the oven. Macaroni and cheese, potato soup, vats of rice pudding. Another promise Lauren makes to herself: She will never eat rice pudding again.

Lauren's mother flies up from Florida and stays for six days. *My poor little girl*, she says, stepping from the cab in the driveway, as Lauren collapses in her arms. Her mother lines up her travel-size shampoos and lotions on the dresser in the guest bedroom. She coos over the baby, teaches Elena to play Go Fish and Old Maid. Sitting on the couch beside John, she is so tan that it seems an affront. John's mother surrenders the kitchen for the week, but Lauren's mother makes grape leaves, which are too difficult for John to eat. At night, when the rest of the house is sleeping, she quizzes Lauren about things: life insurance, health insurance, items on a list prepared by her dad. *We don't talk about that yet*, Lauren snaps. She thinks she'll be glad to see her mother go until the moment her cab pulls away.

When John is too weak to leave the house, Lauren takes the children to church alone. She feels like a fake martyr, folding her hands, bowing her head to pray. *Say the word and I shall be healed*, she recites along with everybody else. But there is nothing in her head, just words in space. On her knees she concentrates. *God, please help us. Please.* Still, she feels nothing. Maybe she is just not a religious person; maybe she's doing it wrong. Walking to the car, she notices people's sorry smiles and realizes they must be wondering if John isn't there because he's dead.

I wish there were more we could do, the doctor says.

Lauren wants to pull Elena out of preschool, but John insists on keeping things as normal as possible as long as possible. To bring her home would be conceding something. *Not yet*, he says.

When the baby is running a temperature, he is whisked away, quarantined at Ann and Dave's house until the fever goes down.

Around John, Elena is careful. She can't sit on Daddy's lap because it hurts his bones, so she plays with his feet. She can't kiss him because of germs. Instead, they touch heads. She does these things gently without complaining. Whatever other emotions are building inside her are reserved for Lauren alone. One day in the Thriftway, as Lauren is shopping for things John can eat—nothing hard or chewy, nothing spicy—Elena throws a box of Oreos on the floor. "Elena!" Lauren exclaims. Elena stares back at her, unmoved. She throws another box, sending it skidding across the floor, and starts to laugh. "Elena! Stop that!" Lauren says, shocked, thinking: *This is not my daughter. This is not my life!* Elena keeps throwing boxes, one after the other, laughing, until Lauren takes her by the elbow. The spell breaks, Elena's face crumples, and she starts to shriek. People look at Lauren, surely thinking she's a terrible mother. She yanks Max out of the half-full cart, grabs Elena by the hand, and leaves the store.

When I'm not here, you can talk to me anytime.

Lauren is listening from outside Elena's bedroom door. She is struck by how weak John's voice is, weaker because she can't see him.

But where are you going?

Heaven.

Can I come?

I'm afraid not, sweetheart.

But why?

It's not the kind of place you can visit, John says solemnly. He has answers at the ready. Lauren has to push her hands in her mouth to keep from screaming.

But where is it?

It's all around, he tells her. *It's in the air. In the sky.*

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