Eva

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Not long before I turned seventeen, my parents and I left our apartment in New York to spend a month in Northern California. My mother and father were chefs, and at the time they were waiting for the lease to begin on their first restaurant. They had some artist friends in California who had come to visit us in the early summer, and after one particularly boozy night out, the four of them decided it would be fun to swap houses the following month. None of them could afford real vacations, they said, but this would be the next best thing. The artists would live in our Upper West Side walkup, while we moved into their cabin in the redwood forest just outside a small unincorporated community called Monte Rio.

Like most of my parents' plans this one was made spontaneously, and I had to remind them that they'd promised to host their friend Eva for two weeks in July. I remembered this myself because I'd been looking forward to it for months. She had called soon after Christmas to say she would have some time off in the summer, and my father, transferring her to speakerphone so my mother could join, insisted she come visit us. They needed help developing the menu for their new restaurant, my mother said. At this Eva shrieked with excitement, not having heard the news until then, and while they talked dates I listened quietly from my

place on the couch, where all afternoon I'd been reading and watching the snow fall. She was calling from Norway, where she lived; but my whole body went as hot as though she were right there in the room.

It was because of Eva that I first discovered I was attracted to women. She and my mother had been line cooks together at a restaurant in France, where my parents had attended culinary school. She was younger than they were by about seven years, but during the year or so that they all lived in Montpellier she became their closest friend. She had visited us once a few years earlier, and to this day I recall in great detail the sight of her in our entryway. It was winter then, too, and from the kitchen I watched her take off first her hat and scarf, then her boots and gloves, and finally her long wool coat. As each new part of her emerged, her blonde hair tumbling from the hat, her freckled neck exposed beneath the scarf, and the coat revealing a sweater that hugged every curve of her chest and waist, a disorienting heat filled my body.

"You must be Olivia," she said, when at last she returned my gaze. She came straight over to me and gave me a hug, and I caught a whiff of some fragrance on her skin, something earthy and rich. After enduring a few questions about school and whatever silly book I was reading, I had to escape to the back of the apartment to pull myself together. I didn't understand it yet, then. It would be another year before I admitted it even to myself.

But by the time of that phone call there was no doubt in my mind. I had spent countless hours constructing intricate fantasies about various women in my life, and Eva was at their center. I had thought about her many nights as I fell asleep, had stolen photos of her from my parents' albums and memorized every detail of her face, and nothing could have thrilled or terrified me more than the prospect of seeing her again.

My mother called her to explain the mix-up, laughing at her own absentmindedness, and asked if Eva might be willing to come to California instead. She and my father would cover the cost of changing the flights. Eva said she didn't mind at all; she had always wanted to go to California. My father called the airline, and a few days later it was done. We would pick her up from the airport in San Francisco a week after we arrived there ourselves.

"Cabin" turned out not to be quite the right word for the house. It was three stories high, surrounded by majestic redwoods, with a hovering deck nearly as large as

the house itself. Two of its four sides were constructed entirely of windows, and a row of skylights could be seen from the lower floors, designed to filter rays of sun through the whole house. Beyond the sloping forest was the Russian River, which flowed from Mendocino, to the north, down through Sonoma and into the Pacific Ocean. We weren't far from wine country, and my parents had found a wine festival in Napa they would attend with Eva on the last weekend of her visit. I, being too young, would stay behind and work on the summer homework for my AP Literature class.

The artists had left us a large binder of notes: the nearest restaurants, the best shops in town, the finicky plumbing, the plants that needed watering. Art supplies were stowed in the corners and closets of every room, and there were lots of photos of the artists and their families and friends. Books were stacked on shelves and tables and against furniture and walls.

But I didn't notice any of this until later, after I had made the exhilarating discovery that the two spare rooms were together on the third floor, secluded entirely from the rest of the house. One had been set up as a guest room, the other as a studio, which had been tidied to accommodate a small futon. The rooms shared a wall; Eva and I would be sleeping a mere few yards apart.

My parents and I spent that first week exploring, reading, cooking. We drove into town, strolled in and out of the shops, made our way around the markets and cafés. My mother found a box of board games in one of the closets and coaxed me into playing them with her, while my father started on a Proust volume he'd discovered in their bedroom. Our meals, always experiments, were now an ever-refining rotation of dishes to try out on Eva.

When the day of her arrival finally came, I had to wait until late at night to see her. She didn't land until evening, and at the last minute I couldn't bring myself to go with my parents to pick her up. I didn't want to be confined with her in the dark for so long; it would be too much, too soon. After they left, I wandered around the house eating leftover crab cakes and finishing the dregs of the wine from dinner. Then I lay on the futon in my room and tried to read *Wuthering Heights*. But I couldn't concentrate, and kept having to read the same passages over and over. Finally, close to midnight, a pair of headlight beams streaked across the ceiling. I waited until I could hear voices inside the house before going downstairs.

She was just as I had remembered her. A few strands of hair had fallen loose from her bun, and she was wearing some kind of flowing white garment that slid off her shoulder and stretched taut across her chest, revealing the darker color of her bra underneath. She carried several large duffels in her arms, and she was laughing at something one of my parents had said.

"Ah, there you are," she said when she saw me. There was a sleepy sweetness in her eyes; I knew she'd been traveling for nearly twenty hours. She put down her bags and folded me into a hug. "Gosh, you've grown up!" she said. "We missed you on the ride."

I blushed and looked away. "I have a bunch of homework for my AP Lit class," I said.

"Oh, I loved my literature classes in school," she said. "What are you reading?" She was looking at me with genuine interest, and something else, too: a kind of searching.

I named some of the titles, *Wuthering Heights* and *Anna Karenina* and *Beloved*, and she asked me about them while my father led the way up the stairs.

"This is perfect," she said when we got to her room. "I'm afraid I won't be much fun tonight. I can't even remember the last time I slept!"

"We'll allow it tonight," my dad said, patting her on the back.

"We have two whole weeks together," Eva said, grinning at us. "I can't wait."

In the morning, my father suggested that we drive to Bodega Bay. It was about half an hour away by car, and Eva and I sat together in the back seat. On the way, she told us about the family for whom she had worked as a private chef the previous year. "They were this cranky old couple about a thousand years old," she said. "And they absolutely hated each other."

"Did they really?" my mother said, laughing. "Or was it like a love-hate?"

"Oh, no," said Eva. "Pure and true hate. They always tried to veto each other's orders. I was constantly having to change the menu. Back and forth, back and forth. And the worst was when they tried to pull *me* into their fights. 'Eva agrees with me that those pants make you look like a circus clown.'"

My parents were in hysterics, and I couldn't contain my laughter either. The couple was German, and she did their accent perfectly.

"But the breaking point," she said, "was when the old man started hitting on me. He wasn't even subtle about it. Right in front of his wife, with a mouthful of

food, he would stare at my chest like he was bird-watching. And he'd say, 'My wife never had tits like that.'"

"No!" my mother shrieked, tears running down her cheeks.

She went on until we were lightheaded from laughter, and while she spoke, I listened closely to her voice. It was lyrical, brimming with life. I had never heard anything like her Norwegian accent, which lent a soft swish to certain words, her voice landing lightly on the consonants before lifting off again.

As we approached the coast, she began to marvel at the landscape. On one side were hills and meadows dotted with grazing black cows; on the other, the vast white-capped ocean churning against the cliffs. The distant mountains stood serenely over the whole scene. It reminded Eva of the Scottish countryside, she said. I could tell my parents were pleased by her reaction, and I felt quite proud of the place myself. Although I suspected Eva was easily impressed, there was a thrill in having something so grand to show her, even if it wasn't ours.

It was too early for lunch, so we took a scenic drive around the bay and then pulled over beside a small beach, where a few people were wading in the waves. Eva was as excited as a child. She had been looking forward to swimming in the ocean for months, she said, and stopping only long enough to strip down to her black bikini, she ran straight into the water. My parents laughed and waved to her as they set up their chairs; they didn't like to swim, preferring to read in the shade of their large umbrella.

We watched Eva leap over wave after wave. I knew how cold the water was, having swum in it the first time we'd come to the bay, and although she shrieked and hopped up and down, she went farther and farther out until she had submerged completely. Then, with her hair dripping and flecks of water coating her body, she came back to the beach and straight over to me. "Come on," she said, still breathless from the cold. "I need a buddy."

We hardly spoke after we had submerged in the waves. She had been so talkative since she'd arrived; but something shifted the moment we were alone together. For a long time we floated beside each other, in a silence broken only by our hard breathing and the smacking of the waves against our skin.

We ate lunch at a crab shack nearby, which my parents and I had discovered a few days earlier. There was a window where you could order prepared food, a few picnic tables to one side, and to the other side a big dock where the fishermen

sold fresh catches straight out of their boats. There were rows and rows of large metal traps, and a few white-haired guys in rubber boots and overalls working on the boats and carrying large buckets across the lot.

None of us could decide what we wanted. Everything sounded good, and finally Eva suggested we get a few different dishes to share: clam chowder, crab cakes, grilled prawns, crab sandwiches, and a big order of fries. We sat at a picnic table and passed everything around, and I listened to the three of them wax poetic about every bite. The crab was lemony and tender, the chowder creamy and rich, and the prawns lightly flavored with a homemade sweet chili sauce. There was something about having just come out of the ocean ourselves, with our skin still salty and damp, that heightened the pleasure of it; one minute we'd been submerged in the sea, and the next, tasting it on our tongues.

After we had finished, my father retrieved the cooler from the car and we crossed the lot to where the crabs were being sold. My parents and Eva talked for a long time to the fisherman, telling him about their recipes and listening to him talk about the crabs.

"So I guess I don't need to tell you guys to boil them while they're still moving," he said as he counted out the number we needed.

"Livvy hates that part," said my father affectionately, and at this Eva turned to me.

"Do you?" she said. "Well, we must do it humanely then." She asked the fisherman if he could make a slurry. "It's a combination of seawater and ice," she explained to me as he carried our cooler out to the dock. "It numbs them into a stupor. And when we get home I'll show you how to kill them in a flash, so they won't feel a thing."

I'd been embarrassed by my father's comment, but Eva addressed my concern as seriously as a doctor to a patient. Then she draped her arm around me and hugged me close. "You're a good one, Livvy," she said. At the sound of my nickname from her mouth I thought I could die happy, right then.

We were still damp when we returned to the car. The cooler sat between Eva and me in the back seat, and while she asked my parents all kinds of questions about their restaurant, I thought not of the crabs stiffening into their icy torpor but of Eva's body: the warmth of her arm around my shoulders, her firm grip on my hand as she pulled me into the water, the way she had moved with the ease of a dancer through the waves.

We left the cooler outside on the deck until it was time to start cooking the

crabs. When Eva took off the lid, they had gone still in the water. "They're not dead," she reminded me when she saw my face. "Just numb. And now they won't feel a thing." She was crouched over the cooler, and she smiled up at me. "But you don't have to watch if you don't want to."

Normally I wouldn't have; but it felt important to stay, to prove to her that I could.

She lifted the first one out of the water and turned it upside down, pointing at a spot in the middle of its belly. "This is where the nerve center is," she said. "You have to crack it right there, so all remaining sensation will be disabled instantly." I watched, transfixed, as she held it up and then smacked it down hard against the edge of the cooler. When she lifted it again I could see that the body had cracked apart. Then, in one swift motion, she grabbed the clusters of legs on either side and snapped them in opposite directions, so that they came loose from the shell and tore apart, revealing two translucent masses of white cartilage. She placed them in the upturned lid of the cooler and reached for another crab, and I stood there and watched as she expertly killed the whole dozen, one after the next.

Eva fell effortlessly into the rhythms of our family. For the next week she melded so naturally with us that I was finally able to relax in her presence. She played board games with my mother and me, sat chatting and reading with us on the deck, and quizzed me on my vocabulary words, scolding me affectionately whenever my definition didn't perfectly match the one on the flashcard. One day we took the artists' spiderwebbed canoes down to the river, and while my parents paddled ahead of us, Eva and I prodded and teased each other, shrieking at every rock of our boat. After we had nearly capsized, she knelt in the bottom of the canoe behind me and pressed her arms around mine, showing me the proper form for each stroke. Before returning home we went for a swim to cool off, and she gripped my hand and laughed as we slipped over the slick rocks in the riverbed.

In the evenings, she chose records from the artists' vast collection and kept everyone's wine glasses full as we gathered in the kitchen to cook dinner. My parents had never been strict with me, but something about Eva made them relax even their loosest rules. I was allowed to drink and curse to my heart's content while they gradually developed their menu, trying countless variations of each dish. I kept notes on their recipes, gathered herbs from the garden, chopped garlic and onions, tasted spoonfuls of whatever they fed me. Sometimes the three of

them argued over the recipes, once so heatedly that my father went quiet and sulky for the rest of the evening. Their egos were on full display in the kitchen, and I enjoyed the drama of their arguments just as much as the enthusiasm of their collaborations. Always, when no one was looking at me, I watched Eva's every move.

It was just over a week into her stay when I crossed paths with her on my way out of the shower. I was wrapped in a towel, still dripping and flushed from the steam.

"Oh, hey, you," she said lightly. "Could you come help me with something?"

I couldn't imagine what she might need my help with, but I followed her into the bedroom, which had become infused with her musky fragrance. I was intensely aware of being naked underneath the towel. I stood there, dripping onto the floor, and watched her push the door closed and take off her sweater and place it neatly on the bed. Then she turned around and, in one easy movement, took me by the hand and pulled me to her and kissed me.

I had never kissed anyone before, and later would be devastated to learn that not all kisses would be like the ones I had with Eva. It was nothing to do with any special technique or skill she had; rather, it was some intense primal heat between us, which had been building all week and was now impossible to resist. We stayed there kissing for a long time, until finally my father called us down for dinner and we had to stop.

But we did it again late that night. Despite my protests, she wouldn't let me back into her room. "Not with your parents asleep downstairs," she said. Instead we stayed in the hallway and kissed and kissed, until we were weak from exhaustion.

After that, we stole kisses at every opportunity: when my parents went out for groceries, while they sat on the deck reading, once while we were swimming again at the beach, when they had fallen asleep in their chairs. When the four of us were together Eva was careful, but every now and then she winked at me or squeezed my hand or brushed my leg under the table. All week I was in a state of quiet chaos. After we left each other at night I returned to my bedroom flushed and pulsing. Even the sensation of the breeze, scented by the redwoods and drifting coolly against my body through the open window above my bed, nearly drove me mad.

I continued to push her each night to let me into her room, increasingly urgent as the week progressed. She would be gone all weekend for the festival in

Napa with my parents, and then back to the airport Monday morning to fly home.

By Friday night I had nearly unraveled. When Eva said no to me again, I filled with childish rage. I refused to let her talk sense into me, and kissed her only for a few minutes before returning to my room. I barely slept that night, unable to carry out my half-formed plan to go straight into her bedroom uninvited. It was only the sound of my mother calling me that got me up early the next morning.

Quickly I brushed my teeth and got dressed. I didn't make as much effort as I had before, tying my hair into a sloppy bun rather than brushing it. I figured they were only calling me down to say goodbye, that I could see them off and then return to my bed to sulk and cry for the rest of the day.

But when I got downstairs, I found my parents dressed and ready with their suitcases, and Eva, still in her sleep clothes, curled up on the couch.

"What's wrong?" I said, slightly panicked.

"Poor Eva's got some kind of bug," my mother said, looking tenderly at her. "She's going to stay behind with you, all right?"

I only dared to glance at her for a moment. I knew she wasn't sick, knew it instantly, but she was putting on a good show. Her hair, like mine, was tied up without having been brushed. She had made her eyelids heavy, and her voice was quiet and weak as she told my parents how disappointed she was to be missing the festival.

"You just rest up, darling," my mother said. "We'll bring back treats for you."

They gave us the phone number of the hotel where they'd be staying and said they wouldn't be back until late the following night. Then, after they'd hugged me goodbye and blown kisses to Eva, they were gone.

Because of what came later, my memory of those two days has become so distorted that I can no longer see them clearly. But for a few precious years afterward they were the shimmering axis of my inner life, and what I recall from them now are certain scenes I must have replayed so many times that they cemented in my mind: her bare chest against mine, her arms encircling my waist as I poured a glass of lemonade, the shape of her body in the outdoor shower, the curve of her shoulder as she turned to pull me in with her. Her face between my legs, the way her back arced when she cried out in pleasure, the freckles all over her body, darkened and multiplied by the sun. Her fingers gently pulling at my hair; her open mouth smiling against mine.

I wonder now about the accuracy of these memories. I search them sometimes for embellishments, for details I may have invented. But I can never sustain this scrutiny for long. Inevitably I am swept up again in that primal bliss, and cannot keep from indulging with insatiable hunger in each moment I can remember. On some level I understand that we idealize our firsts, and no doubt this is especially true for me, having had so many in one person: my first attraction, my first kiss, my first sex, possibly even my first love.

But accuracy is beside the point. I have never succeeded in convincing myself that the version I have carried with me is not the one that is real. It is as real to me now as anything that has happened in the years and years since.

When I was a junior in college, my girlfriend Madeleine and I went to visit her family in the small town in Rhode Island where she had grown up. When Madeleine found out my parents would be working through the holiday, Christmas being one of their busiest times at the restaurant, she insisted I come home with her. I only had to promise to pretend we were just friends. Unlike me, Madeleine had not yet come out to her family.

Besides being gay, Madeleine was old-fashioned in a way I had never encountered before. She'd been raised Catholic, and shockingly enough, to me at least, still was. She attended services at the campus chapel every Sunday, and she was part of a Bible study group hosted by one of the Religious Studies professors. She abstained from drinking and smoking, and was always trying to get me to quit. On paper we could not have been less compatible. But Madeleine was very beautiful, and for that, I am somewhat ashamed to say, I could overlook almost anything. I knew it was shallow, but ever since being with Eva I had been starved for another woman. I'd been attracted instantly to Madeleine, and although it started out as little more than physical lust, we had developed a kind of romance over the following months. Our radically different views and habits were the cause of most of our arguments, but we had learned after a while to tolerate them, and by that winter had grown quite comfortable with each other.

Madeleine's parents and sister came to meet us at the train station, all three of them tall and dark-haired and neatly dressed. Like Madeleine, they wore long peacoats, carefully tied scarves, and boots that appeared untouched by the snow. They each hugged Madeleine and then shook my hand, and for the entire drive asked polite, formal questions about our exams and the train ride.

Their house unnerved me, too. It had all the ingredients of warmth—antique furniture and patchwork quilts, lots of family photos and pastoral artwork and Christmas decorations—but something about it felt off limits to me. It had the feeling, I thought, of having been inhabited for a very long time by stern, humorless elders.

Madeleine's sister Charlotte was even more wholesome than she was. She had lots of wholesome hobbies, baking and watercolor painting and sewing, and every Saturday she volunteered at the local library, where she dressed up as various literary characters and read aloud to children. She was deeply kind, and treated me just as warmly as she did her own sister. She and Madeleine adored each other, which as an only child I envied, and also couldn't quite understand.

Their mother was a different story. Though she was outwardly polite, I detected immediately some tension behind her alert smile, as though she were trying very hard at all times to hold back some kind of outburst. I could tell she was the type of mother who had very specific expectations, and whose love could be won only by adhering to them. Their father was much older, white-haired and good-natured, and though Madeleine had told me once that she didn't think he would mind at all her being gay, it was clear that their mother was the one who decided about such things. Still, Madeleine loved her mother, and it was out of concern for her that she had delayed coming out. She knew it would break her mother's heart.

On Christmas Eve, Madeleine's grandparents and a few of her aunts and uncles came over for dinner. There was no wine, I noticed immediately, but the food was plentiful: ham and turkey and roasted potatoes, vegetables and fresh bread, and for dessert, a spice cake Madeleine's mother had made from scratch. After dinner we gathered in the living room, where the uncles built a fire while Charlotte and Madeleine and their mother sang carols around the piano. Then we went to church for Midnight Mass.

It was a beautiful church in the middle of town: narrow and tall, made of light brown cobblestones, with a towering steeple and large white pillars. Inside was a soaring arced ceiling engraved in gold, beneath which were long rows of cream-colored pews lined with red velvet cushions, a massive silver pipe organ, an elegant white lectern, and an altar framed by vast panels of stained glass and two glowing Christmas trees. The whole space was dimly lit by chandeliers hanging from long brass chains, and a choir stood to one side of the altar and sang a series of hymns as people in their dresses and jackets filled row after row.

I had not often been in church, and while we sat and stood and listened to the readings and prayers and hymns, I felt oddly overcome with emotion. My parents had made a few vague comments over the years about wanting me to believe whatever I chose to believe, but without any real understanding of what my options were, I had never gotten very far. There was something so soothing about this simple narrative: the journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds and the angels, the baby understood instantly to be a savior. I found myself close to tears at the end of the service, when candles were passed around and the lights dimmed, and without any direction, the whole congregation began to sing "Silent Night."

By the time we were back home I felt warmed all over from the evening, and slightly jealous of Madeleine's family. We would be celebrating with my parents in a few days, and although we wouldn't have to hide our relationship from them, there wouldn't be any of this grand communal tradition. I had grown up spending holidays in various restaurants, opening presents in the morning before brunch service, eating leftovers from the Christmas Eve menus, sometimes attending the family gatherings of my friends while my parents worked.

Because her mother had believed we were just friends, Madeleine and I were allowed to share a bed. After the service we lay cuddled and whispering under the heavy quilt in her childhood bedroom. I could imagine how excited she and Charlotte must have been as children, dressing up for church and leaving milk and cookies for Santa, listening for reindeer on the roof. Madeleine and I had fallen happily into one of our long, meandering talks, and somehow we arrived at the topic of firsts.

"We've never told each other about our first kisses," Madeleine said, cozying up to me, a note of mischief in her voice.

After she had told me about hers—seventh grade, a girl in her Girl Scout troop—I decided to tell her the truth about mine. I had thought I would never tell anyone about Eva, let alone Madeleine. But there was something about being so far from our normal lives, all snug in this fairytale town, that made me lower my guard.

"Well," I said, "she was actually a friend of my parents."

"What?" said Madeleine.

"We were on vacation together, in California. She was this gorgeous Norwegian woman who was really sexy and fun. And while my parents were away on a weekend trip we—well, we did everything. She was my first everything." Even then, my body flushed hot with the memory.

"Wait," Madeleine said. She pulled away and propped her head on her hand, looking down at me now. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen," I said.

"What? And how old was she?"

I knew exactly how old she'd been: thirty-four. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe thirty?"

"Olivia," Madeleine said, and it was only then that I picked up the change in her tone.

"What?" I said.

"You were a child."

"I was almost seventeen," I said. "Isn't that the age of consent?"

"What difference does that make?" she said. "She took advantage of you."

Now I was growing annoyed with her, and irritated to have been shaken out of my festive mood. She had missed the point completely, and not for the first time I felt a sense of superiority over her. Of course she wouldn't have understood anything even slightly unconventional. "It wasn't like that," I said. "Just forget I told you."

Her voice softened. "I'm sorry," she said. "Maybe you haven't processed it yet."

"There's nothing to process, Maddie," I said. "I wanted it. It was totally consensual."

"That's impossible," she said.

"What is wrong with you?"

She lay flat again and looked away from me, up at the ceiling. "It happened to Charlotte," she said softly.

"What did?"

"She was abused," Madeleine said. "Last year. It was her track coach. She was sixteen, too. And he was ten years older."

I waited a beat. "Well, I'm sorry that happened to her," I said. "But that is not what happened to me, Madeleine. I wasn't abused."

"We had to go to therapy as a family," she said, as though she hadn't heard me. "It was really traumatizing for her. You don't always realize it at the time, but it's important to acknowledge it, Olivia. You need to start the healing process. I can help you."

"For God's sake, Maddie. There's nothing for me to heal from."

"Is it because she's a woman?" she said. "Because that shouldn't make any difference. She was in a position of power. You weren't old enough to consent."

"Power?" I said, a mocking note entering my voice. "I was weeks away from turning seventeen. Are you saying it would have been okay if it had happened a few weeks later?"

She looked away. "It's just a sensitive topic for me," she said. "Sorry for caring about your mental health."

If we had been at school I may have stormed out, or at least allowed the argument to escalate into a full-blown fight. But as it was, there was still a bit of that warm holiday softness lingering, and I didn't want to spend Christmas in one of our post-fight clouds. I could hear someone in the kitchen below us. Madeleine's father had still been sitting by the Christmas tree when the rest of us went up to bed, and I could picture him down there now, unwrapping some of the leftover spice cake, maybe, or sneaking a glass of whiskey or wine.

Madeleine could always fall asleep quickly, even after an argument. She turned away and muttered some incoherent apology, and within minutes her breathing had deepened and slowed. Wide awake beside her, I found myself trembling. Until then I'd thought of Eva as a thrilling secret, the highlight of my youth. In my mind those two days had been an idyllic, even a heavenly scene. But already, to my intense despair, the memory began to lose some of its light. Although I was certain Madeleine was wrong, a new, predatory version of Eva now entered my mind.

I lay awake for a long time; hours, maybe. At some point I must have been the only person still awake in that quiet town.

Madeleine and I stayed together through the rest of college, but we broke up after graduation. I had grown tired of how easily she was scandalized, and how her incessant moralism could suck the fun out of almost anything: gossiping, drinking, eavesdropping, even sex, which we had at prearranged times and only after she had finished all her schoolwork. But we got together again a few years later, when she moved to New York and looked me up.

We met at a bar in the West Village. I arrived first and got us seats in the window, and the moment I spotted her across the street, I could see that she had grown up. There was some new confidence about her, and somehow she'd become even more beautiful. Her dark hair hung in long waves, and the curves I had always loved were highlighted by a low-cut sweater and hip-hugging jeans, an outfit she never would have worn in college.

I knew I would be happy to see her, but I hadn't expected the surge of affection that came over me as I watched her walk into the bar. We talked for hours. I told her about my publishing job, and she told me about the elementary education program she'd recently begun. Charlotte had just returned from a mission trip to Uganda, where she had discovered a passion for healthcare and decided to apply to medical school. Incredibly, Madeleine had come out to her family, and although they had struggled with it, she thought they were finally starting to come around.

Even more surprising to me was that she was no longer religious. She said that although she was still spiritual, she had become disillusioned with organized religion. This was not long after the *Boston Globe* exposé of the Catholic Church, and she said that while at one time she'd been able to overlook certain issues with Catholicism, she could never turn a blind eye to child abuse. I felt myself tensing as she said this, prepared for her to bring up the story about Eva, or at least to allude to it. But she just took a sip of her beer and changed the subject.

She never drank in college, but that night we got drunk, closed down the bar, and ended up back at her apartment. Even having sex with her was different. She was more assured, more at ease, less inhibited with her pleasure. Over the next months we became reacquainted with each other, and a few years later we moved in together. After the Marriage Equality Act passed in New York, we got married in my parents' restaurant. Madeleine's whole family was there.

We didn't talk about Eva for many years, although Madeleine did hint at it every now and then, to my quiet fury. Sometimes, if there was some sexual assault scene in a movie, she would take my hand with a look of stoic solidarity on her face. Once, when our son Noah asked what a pedophile was, she gave me a quick, pitying glance before answering him. We both commented freely on the attractiveness of other women, but whenever I mentioned anyone significantly older, she just pursed her lips and looked away.

And then, the Me Too movement arrived. Not long after it started, Charlotte decided to speak out about what had happened with her track coach. To their mother's horror she wrote an article about it for a popular women's athletic magazine, and when it came out Madeleine asked me, in a delicate voice, if I wanted to read it. I said that I would, intending to be supportive of Charlotte. But after Madeleine handed me the article, she said, in that same grave tone, that if I ever wanted to talk about what had happened to me, I could always feel safe talking to her.

For the first time, I snapped at her. How dare she, I said. Of course I had sympathy for the women who were speaking out; but their stories had nothing to do with me. She had no right to tell me how to feel, to make nasty assumptions about a person she had never even met.

"I was just trying to help you!" she shouted again and again.

Well, she hadn't, I said. All she had succeeded in doing was to ruin one of the best memories of my life.

At this her face went cold, and for three days we could barely look each other in the eye.

For the most part, I really had managed to hold onto my conviction that it was nothing more than a beautiful memory. Though I had sometimes wavered, most memorably when I turned thirty-four myself and thought, with a shudder, of Madeleine's seventeen-year-old cousin, it had never bothered me for long. But after that argument, and the months and months of more stories coming out every day, something shifted. So many of the women had talked about not realizing, at the time, that what they were experiencing was abuse. I knew Madeleine had always cast that interpretation onto Eva and me; but I knew, too, that she was wrong. Still, I had some abstract need to see for myself that I wouldn't feel traumatized or violated in Eva's presence. To prove that our connection had not been the sordid thing Madeleine had made it out to be, but something deep and real. When it came time to plan our annual summer trip, I suggested Norway.

Madeleine didn't know anything. She had never even known Eva's name. One of her favorite wedding gifts had been the one Eva had sent, a gorgeous ceramic skillet we used all the time; but we'd received lots of culinary gifts from my parents' friends. She hadn't paid much attention to who had given us what.

I had written Eva a straightforward thank-you note, knowing Madeleine was proofreading each one, and hadn't heard from her since. By the time of our wedding my parents had already begun to fall out of touch with her, simply because they were busy and she was far away. But I still had her address, and decided after several glasses of wine one night to write her a letter. I told her we were thinking of coming to Norway, asked if she still lived in Bergen, included my email address. She emailed me a week later. Yes, her address was still the same, and she would love nothing more than to see me. When we had settled

on a date, I booked the trip. After a few days in Oslo, we would take the scenic cross-country train ride to Bergen.

We left shortly after Noah finished second grade. Independently of Eva I had always wanted to travel to Scandinavia, and the three of us had fun in Oslo, wandering around the Palace Park and visiting the Munch Museum and walking on the opera house roof.

I went to meet her on our first night in Bergen. I had prepared a story for Madeleine before we left New York; I said I was going to meet up with my old high school friend Hans for drinks. Hans was a real friend, though at the time he lived in Stockholm and we hadn't been in touch for several years. But Madeleine didn't question it. She even finished off the plan herself: while I was out with Hans, she and Noah could have an early night, so they would be well rested for our tour of the fjords the next day. I had never lied to Madeleine before, and felt somewhat lightheaded as I kissed her goodbye.

On my way to Eva's apartment, I picked up a bottle of wine and tried to prepare something to say to her. I still wasn't quite sure what I wanted out of the visit. I knew that if I'd never told Madeleine about her, I wouldn't have felt any desire to see Eva again. I had always found truth in the notion that happy memories are best left in the past. And in fact this was how I'd justified my deception when I booked the trip; it was Madeleine who had raised doubts about my memories, doubts I had every right to resolve. But as I approached Eva's apartment in the fading light, all the vague ideas I'd had about closure and trauma slipped away. Instead, I found myself electrified with excitement.

When she opened the door I thought, for a heart-stopping moment, that she had not aged. She had, of course; when I blinked and looked at her again I could see the glints of silver in her hair, and the very thin creases around her eyes and mouth. By then she was in her late fifties; but I understood instantly that somehow, in all that time, nothing between us had changed.

"God, you look gorgeous," she said quietly, almost to herself. She took the bottle of wine and kissed my cheek. I tried not to linger too long on the effort she seemed to have put into her appearance: low-cut linen dress, mascara, hair still damp and fragrant from a recent shower. I hadn't had time to fuss too much over myself, although I had chosen my own dress months ago.

Her apartment was beautiful: filled with soft furniture and art and fresh flowers, glowing with warm yellow light. For a disorienting moment, I saw in that space a whole alternative life I might have lived.

"Well," she said, "tell me everything. I want to know everything."

But I'd hardly begun to speak before we were drawn irresistibly into each other's arms.

I had not intended to sleep with her. I can still say that for certain, even now. I had never even thought of cheating on Madeleine, in all the years we'd been together. But the moment Eva kissed me, there was no question of stopping it. With our mouths locked together she guided me to the bedroom, where we shed our clothes and succumbed to each other. My body flooded with sensations I hadn't experienced in years. The thought of Madeleine and Noah asleep in the hotel room flickered only briefly through my mind; when it had gone again, nothing could have taken me away from her. We stayed in her tangled sheets for hours. The room spun at the edges of my vision. I lost track of the number of times she made me come.

Afterward, she asked if I was hungry. In fact I was; I'd hardly been able to eat anything at dinner. We went into the kitchen half-clothed, and she poured us each a glass of the wine I had brought. I sat at the countertop in the low light and watched her sear a handful of fresh scallops. While they cooked, she chopped a few sprigs of parsley, then zested and sliced a lemon.

We barely spoke while we ate, whether from exhaustion or a lack of anything much to say to each other I still don't know. Somehow a sacred quality had come over our quiet togetherness, and now my half-formed plans to talk to her about that summer felt melodramatic and ridiculous. I remember that she asked me a bit about my parents and Noah, but that we both pointedly avoided the topic of Madeleine. She told me a little about the restaurant where she worked, and we talked about the some of the details we recalled from the house in California, though not about what we'd done there. We finished the bottle of wine and opened another, and in between sips she gave me long, slow kisses, and by the time I left it was nearly 2 a.m.

I got lost on the way back to the hotel. I was very drunk, I realized only after I had stepped outside, and because it was a residential neighborhood, far from the bars and restaurants in the city center, there was no one around to give me directions. The air smelled of seawater, but I couldn't tell whether I was walking toward the harbor or away from it. It was everywhere in Bergen, I would find out in the coming days: a briny metallic tang just as potent in the mountaintops as it was at the water's edge.

When I finally found the right street, I began to slow down. I was feverish, unsteady, but I thought I understood it now. Eva had known I was too young then, just as she knew I was married now; but it didn't matter. We could not possibly have done anything other than what we had done. In that moment, swaying on the cobblestones, I wasn't sorry. I had sought to prove Madeleine wrong, and I did.

Back in the hotel room, I felt my way quietly to the bathroom and stood for a long time in the shower. I was already nauseated from the wine, and sore between the legs. I took my time drying off and getting dressed, and it wasn't until I had kissed Noah's forehead and climbed into bed with Madeleine that the utter shock of what I had done began to set in.

I have learned to live with it, though, in the years since then. I never told anyone, and I don't believe Madeleine has ever suspected. The guilt comes to me in small moments: when I see old photos from that trip, when I eat scallops, when Madeleine gives me a certain adoring look before she falls asleep.

But guilt, I have come to understand, is something very different than regret.