

MERCY STREET

A NOVEL

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JENNIFER
HAIGH



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Dedication

To the one in four

Epigraph

I'm walking up and down Beacon Hill
searching for a street sign—
namely **MERCY STREET**.
Not there.

I try the Back Bay.

Not there.

Not there.

—ANNE SEXTON

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Winter

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Spring
Chapter 23

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by Jennifer Haigh
Copyright
About the Publisher

Winter

1

It's hard to know, ever, where a story begins. We touch down in a world fully inhabited by others, a drama already in progress. By the time we make our entrance—incontinent and screaming, like dirty bombs detonating—the climax is a distant memory. Our arrival is not the beginning; it is a consequence.

The starting point is arbitrary. When Claudia looks back on that winter (as New Englanders can't help doing), the days fuse together in her memory: the weak light fading early, salt trucks clattering down the avenues, a bitter wind slicing through her coat. She had no sense, at the time, of forces aligning, a chain of events set into motion.

Like everyone else, she was distracted by the snow.

The season had arrived late, like a querulous old man who refused to be rushed. The first weeks of January were arid and silent, bare pavement and short blue afternoons, a blinding glare off the harbor, seagulls diving in the slanted winter sun. Then a massive nor'easter roared up the coast, spinning and kicking like a kung fu fighter. A foot of snow fell overnight. Schools were closed, flights grounded, entire neighborhoods without power. The clinic's waiting room was empty, Mercy Street nearly impassable.

Three days later, the second storm hit.

Snow and more snow. With each passing week, the sidewalks narrowed. Pedestrians walked single file, stepping carefully. Parking spaces shrank and eventually disappeared, replaced by towering piles of snow.

ON A FRIGID WEDNESDAY MORNING IN MID-FEBRUARY, A CROWD gathered in front of the clinic, their backs to Mercy Street. Claudia stood at a second-floor window in the staff kitchen, counting heads.

"Thirty-six," she said.

Seen from above, the group looked organized. They stood in concentric circles like the growth rings of a tree. In the center were the professionals—Archdiocesan priests in slick nylon dress slacks, a few monks from the Franciscan monastery in New Bedford, the tails of their brown robes peeking out from beneath winter coats. In the outer rings were the regular people, holding rosary beads or carrying signs. They had come straight from church, their foreheads marked with dark soot. *Like gunshot victims*, Claudia thought. That morning, riding the MBTA train to work, she'd seen a lot of dirty foreheads. In Boston—still, despite recent events, the most Catholic city in America—Ash Wednesday could not be ignored.

Mary Fahey, the intake nurse, joined her at the window. “For Ash Wednesday, that’s not so impressive. Last year we had twice that many.”

Claudia said, “It must be the snow.”

The staff kitchen was small and cluttered, a fresh pot of coffee brewing. The television was tuned to NECN, the New England Cable Network. Winter was the top story—the snowiest in 364 years, which was roughly how long people had been complaining about the weather here. Another storm was on the way, a low-pressure system forming in the Caribbean. *Batten down the hatches, folks. It’s another monstah nor’eastah.* The weatherman, a shovel-faced man in an ill-fitting sports coat, couldn’t hide his glee.

“Did you count those guys in back?” Mary asked. “Behind Puffy.”

A few lurkers stood at the margins, staring at cell phones like bored strangers at a bus stop. Whether they were protestors or indifferent bystanders was impossible to say.

“No,” said Claudia. “I wasn’t sure about them.”

Thirty-six, she felt, was a sizable number. In their bulky coats they might have been carrying anything. There were twelve staff working at the clinic—except for Luis the security guard, all female, all unarmed.

She studied the foreheads. The significance of the ritual was a little murky. The idea, apparently, was to remind the faithful of their mortality—as though anyone could possibly need that. How it all ended was a poorly kept secret. Spoilers were everywhere.

Thirty-six was a sizable number. And anyway, it only took one.

A monstah nor’eastah. It was that year’s accepted usage, the agreed-upon nomenclature. In the winter of 2015, in Boston, a storm couldn’t be

called *severe* or *powerful* or even *wicked*. By Ash Wednesday, the season had been branded. Another Monster Nor'easter™ was on its way.

MERCY STREET IS BARELY A STREET. IT SPANS A SINGLE BLOCK SOUTHEAST of Boston Common, in a part of town once known as the Combat Zone. Long ago this was the city's red-light district, a dark, congested neighborhood of taverns and massage parlors, *peep shows* and *skin flicks*, twentieth-century perversions that now seem quaint as corsets. Prostitutes loitered in front of Good Time Charlie's, calling out to the men in uniform, sailors on shore leave from Charlestown Navy Yard.

They're all gone now—the girls, the sailors. Over the years, the neighborhood has gentrified. By all appearances, combat has ceased. After the Navy Yard closed, the dive bars were razed, the crumbling streets repaved. The porn theaters hung on a few more years, until the digital age finished them off completely. Now lonely men stay home to masturbate in front of computers, a win for technology. There's no longer any reason to leave the house.

Sex left the Combat Zone. Then the builders came. The new erections were office towers, parking garages, commercial space for shops and restaurants, easily accessible by the Chinatown and Downtown Crossing T stops. When they leased the building, the clinic's board of directors—a thousand miles away, in Chicago—had never heard of the Combat Zone. Completely by accident, they made a poetic choice.

The clinic is a member of Wellways LLC—a small but growing network of detox centers, drug-testing labs, and women's and mental health clinics, in eighteen states and the District of Columbia. Of these, the labs are the real moneymakers. Though technically a nonprofit, Wellways is a major player in the urine business.

Drug addiction and alcoholism, depression and anxiety, accidental pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease. These conditions are believed to share a common etiology, the failure of virtue. Whatever their diagnosis, all Wellways patients have this in common: their troubles are seen to be, in part or in full, their own goddamn fault.

Hanging above the clinic's front door is a wooden sign, painted blue and lemon yellow: WOMEN'S OPTIONS, a name no one uses. In Boston it is known, simply, as Mercy Street.

DOWN ON THE SIDEWALK, A PRIEST LED PRAYERS INTO A HANDHELD megaphone—at double speed, like a cattle auctioneer: *HAILMaryfullofgracetheLordiswithThee.*

The crowd answered in a low hum, like a swarm of bees.

“Hey, guess what?” Mary said with a certain satisfaction. “They’re all men.”

“Are you sure?” This was not typical. Claudia blamed Ash Wednesday, the overrepresentation of religious professionals. “I could swear I saw a woman.”

In hats and scarves and chunky winter coats, the protestors were ageless, shapeless, sexless. A few had set down their signs to pray the Rosary. A figure in a blue parka made its way along the middle ring, stooping to wipe the snow from each sign.

“There.” Claudia pointed. “That’s a woman. Coincidentally, she is cleaning.”

“Coincidentally,” Mary said.

The Ash Wednesday protest had been planned for weeks. Mary had heard about it in church. Her priest had made the announcement with great enthusiasm. On the first day of Lent, the faithful would hold a sidewalk vigil on Mercy Street. They would ask the Blessed Virgin to inspire the young women, to save the unborn babies. They would pray for wisdom, for divine forgiveness, for grace.

HAILMaryfullofgracetheLordiswithThee. The words ran together like the disclaimer after a radio commercial, a glib announcer racing through the fine print.

“Those fuckers,” Mary said, meaning the priests. “Anything to change the subject.”

The subject, in her mind, was unchangeable: the child victims, the Archdiocesan cover-up, hundreds of lawsuits settled in secret. There was only one subject, and Mary would not be distracted. Her convictions were solid and unyielding. Each year on Ash Wednesday, she did patient intakes—height, weight, blood pressure—with a smudge of holy soot on her forehead. How or whether she explained this to the patients, Claudia had no idea. It was a lesson you learned over and over again, doing this work: people live with contradictions.

HAILMaryfullofgracetheLordiswithThee. Mary Fahey had heard these words from earliest childhood, her own name offered to the heavens in

prayer.

Was that weird? Claudia asked her once.

I never thought about it, Mary said.

THE PROTESTORS WERE A FACT OF LIFE, A DAILY NUISANCE LIKE traffic or bad weather. Some days there was only one, an old guy in a Sox cap. Claudia had given him a nickname, Puffy. He arrived each morning like a dutiful employee, in a down coat the color of trash bags. In May he'd swap it for a yellow windbreaker. To Claudia it was like the daffodils sprouting, the first rumor of spring.

In the beginning she tried talking with them. She had no experience with religious people and was surprised, actually surprised, at the way every conversation devolved into godtalk. It was like arguing a point of fact with a stubborn child who parrots a single refrain: *Because my dad said so!* To which a reasonable adult might respond:

He said that? What were his exact words? Are you sure you heard him right?

Or:

I've never seen your dad. Are you sure you have one?

Or:

Who asked him? Seriously, your dad needs to mind his own.

Her attempts at rational discourse went badly. On her very first day of work, a man approached her on the sidewalk—a stocky guy in Dockers and a fleece jacket, the most ordinary-looking person imaginable.

“Please, Mother,” he said.

She can still recall his lilting voice, so gentle it seemed sinister. Also, it was the first time a grown stranger had called her *Mother*, which isn't something you forget.

“Please, Mother. Our Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to you. Please don't kill your baby.”

He had been to Starbucks. She could smell it on his jacket.

“I work here,” she said.

The change in his demeanor was immediate, like an actor breaking character. He looked at her as though he'd stepped in shit.

“You are doing the devil's work,” he said.

Claudia said, “So I've been told.”

When he called her a cunt and damned her to eternal hell, the damnation didn't faze her; as a nonbeliever, she found it slightly comical. The name-calling was more disturbing. Not so much the word itself as the way he said it: triumphantly, as though winning an argument. For a certain type of man, *cunt* was a concealed weapon—discreet, portable, always at the ready. What did it mean to him, this angry stranger who didn't possess (and had possibly never seen) the body part it referred to? A body part he considered loathsome, the vilest thing a person could possibly be.

It was just a word; Claudia knew this. In Britain and Ireland, *cunt* was used casually, recreationally—a good-natured insult between mates who, go figure, were usually men. She had learned this years before, in the early days of online dating, from a Tufts professor of English literature. At a noisy pub a few blocks from campus, he explained that *cunt* was a synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a part stood in for the whole. (“Like *a head of cattle*,” he added helpfully.) Then he delivered a discourse on synecdoche and metonymy, which weren't the same thing but were somehow related. Professing this took quite a while, and required him to use the word *cunt* several times. He seemed not to understand, or maybe he did, that to the female ear, *cunt* is brutal, exquisitely personal—half of humanity reduced to a body part, a single purpose: This is what you are. This is all you are.

The part stands in for the whole.

Claudia didn't explain this to the Tufts professor. She didn't want to say the word, and she particularly didn't want to hear him say it. He was just some guy she'd met on the internet. Her cunt was none of his business.

SHE FILLED HER MUG AND WENT DOWNSTAIRS. THE WAITING room was bright and cheerful, painted a sunny yellow. There were comfortable chairs, tables stacked with cooking and decorating magazines, boxes of Kleenex strategically placed. One wall was covered with giant photographs, taken by the director's son while he was in the Peace Corps: smiling African women in colorful dresses, carrying bundles on their shoulders, backs, and heads. They carried water jugs, bushel baskets of bread or fruit or laundry. They carried all the things you'd expect them to carry, except babies.

That morning, half the chairs were occupied: several pairs of women who might have been sisters or roommates or mothers with daughters; an Indian couple in professional dress, each staring at a cell phone. A boy and

girl, college-aged, sat shoulder to shoulder holding hands. They wore look-alike hoodies and sweatpants, as though they'd just come from the gym.

She crossed the waiting room and continued down a long hallway to the call center. The door was open a crack. A woman was talking on the phone, a voice Claudia recognized. Naomi had worked on the hotline for as long as there'd been one, her most dedicated volunteer.

“What was the first day of your last menstrual period?” Naomi asked.

This was always the first question.

The call center was packed with cubicles. Each held a desktop computer and a standard-issue office telephone. At each workstation was posted a printed notice: SILENT CALL PROCEDURE.

In the corner cube Naomi consulted her chart, a cardboard wheel the size of a floppy disk, to calculate gestational age. The younger volunteers used the online version, but Naomi was old-school. She hunched over her wheel like a medieval soothsayer, reading tarot or tea leaves.

“You are eight weeks and five days pregnant,” she said.

The volunteers came in two varieties. Half were gray-haired, old enough to remember illegal abortions, some from personal experience—Pam, Naomi, Janet, Karen. The rest were grad students in psychology or social work or public health—Meghan, Amanda, Lily, Marisol. They were called counselors, but it was a poor description of the work they did. Callers to the hotline needed many things: information, appointments, decent jobs, any sort of health insurance. Childcare, affordable housing, antibiotics, antidepressants. Counsel, honestly, was pretty far down the list.

This was especially true for AB calls. By the time a woman Googled “abortion Boston,” she wasn't looking for advice from a stranger. Her decision was already made. The counselor told her what to expect on the day of the appointment: how long the procedure would take (ten to fifteen minutes), how long she'd spend at the clinic (two hours, including recovery), what to eat that morning (nothing), what to bring with her (socks and a sweater—the procedure room could get chilly).

“Are you diabetic?” Naomi asked. “Do you take methadone, Suboxone, or Subutex?”

Claudia slipped on a headset and settled in at her desk.

They explained the procedure and answered questions. Will I be awake? Does it hurt? Those were common questions, but not the most common.

The most common question was, how much does it cost?

“The first set of pills is mifepristone,” said Naomi. “You’ll take those here in our clinic. The second set is misoprostol. You take those later, at home.”

More and more, women were choosing the medication AB over the in-clinic procedure. Either method, without insurance, cost \$650—a drop in the ocean, compared to the cost of raising a child, but for many of the callers, it was an unimaginable sum. *Holy shit*, Claudia had been told more than once. *Looks like I’m gonna have a kid*.

Her first call was a Pill question. As the caller spoke, Claudia took the following notes: *Started pack three days late. Missed two white, took week two. Missed one pink. Only green left*.

She had long since mastered the Pill question, having heard every possible variation: started late, started early, vomited up a white one, took two pink ones by mistake. She could answer a Pill question in under a minute, in English, Spanish, or Haitian Creole.

“You’ll need to use a backup method,” she said. “Condoms for the rest of your cycle.”

The caller was unhappy to hear this. No one was ever happy to hear this.

“It’s those white pills I’m worried about. Unless you take them consistently the first week, you’re not protected.”

The moment she disconnected, the line rang again.

The second caller gave her name, Tara. In the background a television was playing. Claudia recognized the opening music of *Dr. Phil*, the Texas twang of the doctor himself, testifying like a revival-tent preacher: *This is going to be a changing day in your life*.

“What was the first day of your last menstrual period?” Claudia asked.

Tara was nine weeks pregnant, HIV positive, and sleeping on a stranger’s couch. She took methadone, but not regularly, lithium, but not recently. She lit cigarettes one after the other—scratch, pause, inhale. At ten o’clock on a Wednesday morning, she was already high. As she spoke, Claudia thought of the word problems she’d solved in high school algebra, trains traveling at different speeds, in opposite directions. How long before their paths intersect? The problem, always, was knowing which variable to solve for. Tara’s life was a burning building with a fire on each floor. Which fire did you put out first?

Tara had only one question.

“Six hundred fifty dollars,” said Claudia.
You put out the pregnancy first.

WHAT WOULD BECOME OF TARA? CLAUDIA WOULD NEVER KNOW. The hotline was a portal into a stranger’s life: ambient traffic and distant sirens, kids playing in English or Spanish or Portuguese or Hmong. Music playing, a dog barking, a child crying. A video game that must have been popular because she kept hearing it—the catchy electronic jingle, the cartoon gunfire with its plosive reports.

A dog crying, a child barking. Running water, dishwashing, ice cubes tinkling in a glass. Always there was a television. Even in the throes of a personal crisis, it didn’t occur to the caller to turn off the TV.

Some counselors found the noise distracting. Claudia barely noticed it, having grown up in such a household. Her mother, Deb, had been a nurse’s aide at the county retirement home. She came home from work exhausted and often in physical pain, and the first thing she did, always, was turn on the TV and light a cigarette, her reward for getting through the day.

That’s what they called it—*the County Home*—which sounded nicer than what it really was: a place for indigent old people to grow older and eventually die, a process that sometimes took forever and sometimes only seemed to.

For most of Claudia’s childhood, they lived in a single-wide trailer. Not a double-wide. If you know anything at all about mobile homes, you know that the difference is profound. A double-wide feels like a house because of the way it’s constructed, in two separate halves that are bolted together on-site. A single is all one piece, like a shipping container, and like a shipping container it gets hot in summer and cold in winter. In a Maine winter it gets very cold, and a crying child produces a strange echo; it’s impossible to forget, ever, that you’re living in a can. On the plus side, a single is cheap and easy to get. Claudia’s mother bought theirs at an RV lot—no mortgage, no credit check. She hauled it away herself, hitched to a truck her brother had “borrowed” from work.

When Claudia thinks of the trailer, she remembers the carpet—wall-to-wall acrylic shag, the pile so long and dense that it seemed to suck in whatever landed on it. Spilled milk, puzzle pieces, Smarties. Cat food, thumbtacks, melting Popsicles, Lego blocks.

The trailer was fifty feet long and eighteen across. Claudia has lived in smaller places, but never with so many people or such small windows. There was a kitchen and a living room. A bathroom and two tiny bedrooms opened off a narrow hallway. Later, to accommodate the fosters, her uncle Ricky built a flimsy addition, two-by-fours and fiberglass insulation and sloppy drywall, with a skin of Tyvek HomeWrap.

In point of fact, her childhood home was half house, half trailer. They were the sort of people who *built onto* their trailer.

She can still remember the first time she heard the term *white trash*. She was nine or ten years old, watching a stand-up comic on television, and she understood immediately that he was talking about people like her. Her family drank cola with dinner, store brand. They ate off paper plates as if each meal were a picnic. This was not a whimsical habit, but a practical one: her mother sometimes couldn't pay the water bill, and for a few weeks each year, there'd be nothing to wash dishes *in*. The paper plates came in cheap hundred-packs and were so flimsy they used two or three at a time, and as a result they produced vast amounts of garbage. Behind the trailer, under a carport of corrugated plastic, their trash barrels overflowed with it. In summer the smell was overpowering: soggy paper plates and food scraps rotting in the can. As a family they were both an environmental catastrophe and a sanitary one, as poor people often are.

When Claudia heard the words *white trash*, that is what she thought.

She never found out who that comedian was, or what compelled him to mock what was probably a large share of his audience. Poor people watch a lot of television. Claudia's family was sometimes without water, but they always had an expensive cable package, and her mother always managed to pay that bill on time.

If Deb was at home, the TV was playing. To fall asleep she watched something monotonous, golf or C-SPAN. Every day of her short life began in the chipper company of the network morning shows, with their simpering hosts and human-interest stories and celebrity guests preparing favorite dishes, as though movie stars actually cooked. She was out the door by seven thirty, leaving Claudia to dress and feed the fosters.

The minute her mother left for work, Claudia turned off the TV.

The fosters, Deb called them—as though it were their last name, as though they were brothers and sisters in a large, multicolored (for Maine), ever-expanding family. They had one at a time, then two, and finally three

or four. Claudia was in middle school—old enough to babysit—when Deb hit on this way to make extra money. Each month, the state of Maine paid four hundred bucks per kid.

(Could that figure possibly be correct? After her mother's death, Claudia asked her aunt Darlene. "It sounds right," Darlene said, but she didn't sound sure.)

Importantly, each foster increased their monthly allotment of what were inexplicably called *food stamps*. These weren't actually stamps but paper bank notes, clearly labeled by the federal government: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE FOOD COUPON. The food stamps were blue or purple, to make absolutely certain no one would ever mistake them for actual money. It was important to make them look like what they were: government handouts for poor people. They were designed for maximum embarrassment. Times have since changed—single mothers on assistance are now issued debit cards—but back then, no one worried about shaming them. Shame was considered appropriate. Shame, it was felt, might teach them some restraint.

When Claudia was sent to the store for bread or milk, the cashier held the food stamps by their edges, as though they were not quite clean.

Claudia's mother grew up poor and having kids made her poorer and yet she continued having them, first her own and then other people's, long past the point where she had any patience for them. She didn't enjoy them in any discernible way, and yet she couldn't stop acquiring them. At a certain point Claudia began to see this as a sickness, her mother as obsessive-compulsive, a hoarder of children. Only later did she grasp what now seems obvious: Deb raised other people's kids because it was one of only a few things she could earn money doing. The world was full of discarded people, sickly old ones and damaged young ones, and she was a paid caretaker. It said something about the world that this was the worst-paying job around.

Raise wasn't the right word. The fosters were given food and shelter and more or less left to raise themselves. They were bathed twice a week—at Aunt Darlene's, if the water was out. They were fed adequately and were never hit, which put them miles ahead of where most had started out in life. Deb said, often, that she treated them like her own children, and Claudia can attest that this was true.

The fosters, her mother called them. There was no suggestion, ever, that they were Claudia's brothers and sisters. The fosters were their own category. At the time this didn't strike her as cruel.

AFTER TARA, THE LINES WENT QUIET. ON WEDNESDAYS THE call volume waxed and waned for inscrutable reasons: twenty minutes of dead silence and then, suddenly, a half dozen calls were waiting in the queue. Tuesdays and Fridays were quieter, Thursdays busier. On Mondays the line rang nonstop—fallout from the weekend, its psychic detritus scattered like confetti after a parade. Women called from taxicabs, windy street corners, T stops, Dunkin' Donuts. Sometimes they called from work. Late period, broken condom, suspicious lesion, their narratives interrupted periodically to serve a customer. *You want fries with that?*

“Well, that was disheartening.” Naomi peeled off her headset and took a tin of mints from her purse. In her real life she was an anthropologist at Harvard. For six weeks each summer, she did fieldwork in some developing country, where she seemed to buy all her clothes. That morning she wore a sack-like dress made of some rough fabric, like a medieval penitent, and a necklace that looked like a chicken bone hanging from a leather cord.

“That poor child is getting married next month. She’s terrified she’ll get her period on her honeymoon, because her fiancé would freak.”

“She said that?”

“Her exact words. ‘My fiancé would freak.’” Naomi gave her Edvard Munch look, mouth open in a parody of screaming. “And I’m thinking, Sweetie, you’re sure you want to marry this guy? Every month, you’re going to worry about him freaking?”

Claudia said, “It sounds like a long life.”

Naomi rose, stretched, glanced out the window. “It’s snowing,” she reported.

“*Again?*” How was it even possible? Across the river in Somerville, Claudia’s Subaru—its trunk packed with a shovel, blankets, and a bag of kitty litter to provide traction—was still encased in the snowbank where the plow had buried it. Digging it out would take a solid hour. It hardly seemed worth the effort.

“There’s another system blowing in,” said Naomi. “The Weather Channel is calling for a foot.”

“Ugh. I was supposed to run up to Maine this weekend. To check on my mom’s house.” Claudia had long referred to the trailer this way—aware, always, that she was being deceptive. Her mother had used the same word, without hesitation; to her, *house* and *trailer* were interchangeable. Deb, when she said it, would have passed a polygraph. To her it wasn’t a lie.