

“Rebecca Serle is
a maestro of love
in all its forms.”

—GABRIELLE
ZEVIN

One

Italian

Summer

A Novel



REBECCA SERLE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
IN FIVE YEARS

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One Italian Summer

A Novel

Rebecca Serle

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*For my mother, the queen of my heart.
Long may she reign.*

I just feel like I need more time.... I really just feel ambushed, you know? I mean, I thought I had so much more... time. I thought I had all summer to impart my wisdom about work and life and your future, and I just feel like I had something to tell you. Oh! On the bus, make sure you choose a good seat, you know, because people are creatures of habit, and the seat you pick in the beginning could be your seat for the rest of the year, you know?

Get a window seat, honey, 'cause there's so much to see.

—LORELAI GILMORE

Chapter One

I've never smoked, but it's the last day of my mother's shiva, so here we are. I have the cigarette between my teeth, standing on the back patio, looking at what was, just two months ago, a pristine white sectional, now weatherworn. My mother kept everything clean. She kept everything.

Carol's rules to live by:

- Never throw away a good pair of jeans.
- Always have fresh lemons on hand.
- Bread keeps for a week in the fridge and two months in the freezer.
- OxiClean will take out any stain.
- Be careful of bleach.
- Linen is better than cotton in the summer.
- Plant herbs, not flowers.
- Don't be afraid of paint. A bold color can transform a room.
- Always arrive on time to a restaurant and five minutes late to a house.
- Never smoke.

I should say, I haven't actually lit it.



Carol Almea Silver was a pillar of the community, beloved by everyone she encountered. In the past week, we have opened our doors to sales associates and manicurists, the women from her temple, waiters from Craig's, nurses from Cedars-Sinai. Two bank tellers from the City National branch on Roxbury. "She used to bring us baked goods," they said. "She was always ready with a phone number." There are couples from the Brentwood Country Club. Irene Newton, who had a standing lunch with my mother at Il Pastaio every

Thursday. Even the bartender from the Hotel Bel-Air, where Carol used to go for an ice-cold martini. Everyone has a story.

My mother was the first person you called for a recipe (a cup of onions, garlic, don't forget the pinch of sugar) and the last one you called at night when you just couldn't sleep (a cup of hot water with lemon, lavender oil, magnesium pills). She knew the exact ratio of olive oil to garlic in any recipe, and she could whip up dinner from three pantry items, easy. She had all the answers. I, on the other hand, have none of them, and now I no longer have her.

"Hi," I hear Eric say from inside. "Where is everyone?"

Eric is my husband, and he is our last guest here today. He shouldn't be. He should have been with us the entire time, in the hard, low chairs, stuck between noodle casseroles and the ringing phone and the endless lipstick kisses of neighbors and women who call themselves aunties, but instead he is here in the entryway to what is now my father's house, waiting to be received.

I close my eyes. Maybe if I cannot see him, he will stop looking for me. Maybe I will fold into this ostentatious May day, the sun shining like a woman talking loudly on a cell phone at lunch. Who invited you here?

I tuck the cigarette into the pocket of my jeans.

I cannot yet conceive of a world without her, what that will look like, who I am in her absence. I am incapable of understanding that she will not pick me up for lunch on Tuesdays, parking without a permit on the curb by my house and running inside with a bag full of something—groceries, skin-care products, a new sweater she bought at Off 5th. I cannot comprehend that if I call her phone, it will just ring and ring—that there is no longer anyone on the other end who will say, "Katy, honey. Just a second. My hands are wet." I do not imagine ever coming to terms with the loss of her body—her warm, welcoming body. The place I always felt at home. My mother, you see, is the great love of my life. She is the great love of my life, and I have lost her.

"Eric, come on in. You were standing out there?"

I hear my father's voice from inside, welcoming Eric in. Eric, my husband who lives in our house, twelve and a half minutes away, in Culver City. Who has taken a leave of absence from Disney, where he is a film executive, to be with me during this trying time. Whom I've dated since I was twenty-two, eight years ago. Who takes out the garbage and knows how to boil pasta and

never leaves the toilet seat up. Whose favorite show is *Modern Family* and who cried during every episode of *Parenthood*. Whom just last night, I told in our kitchen—the kitchen my mother helped me design—that I did not know if I could be married to him anymore.

If your mother is the love of your life, what does that make your husband?

“Hey,” Eric says when he sees me. He steps outside, squints. He half waves. I turn around. On the glass patio table, there is a spread of slowly curling cheese. I am wearing dark jeans and a wool sweater, even though it is warm outside, because inside the house it is freezing. My mother liked to keep a house cold. My father only knows the way it’s been.

“Hi,” I say.

He holds the door open for me, and I step past him inside.

Despite the temperature, the house is still as welcoming as ever. My mother was an interior designer, well respected for her homey aesthetic. Our house was her showpiece. Oversize furniture, floral prints, and rich-patterned textures. Ralph Lauren meets Laura Ashley meets a very nice pair of Tod’s loafers and a crisp white button-down. She loved textiles—wood, linen, the feel of good stitching.

There was always food in the fridge, wine in the side door, and fresh-cut flowers on the table.

Eric and I have been trying to plant an herb garden for the past three years.

I smile at Eric. I try to arrange my mouth in a way I should remember but that feels entirely impossible now. I do not know who I am anymore. I have no idea how to do any of this without her.

“Katy, you’re grieving,” he said to me last night. “You’re in crisis; you can’t decide this now. People don’t get divorces in the middle of a war. Let’s give it some time.”

What he did not know is that I had. I had given it months. Ever since my mother got sick, I’d been thinking about the reality of being married to Eric. My decision to leave Eric had less to do with my mother’s death and more to do with the remembrance of death in general. Which is to say I began to ask myself if this was the marriage I wanted to die in, if this was the marriage I wanted to see me through this, my mother’s illness, and what would, impossibly, remain after.

We didn’t have kids yet—we were still kids ourselves, weren’t we?

Eric and I met when we were both twenty-two, seniors at UC Santa Barbara. He was an East Coast liberal, intent on going into politics or journalism. I was a Los Angeles native, deeply attached to my parents and the palm trees, and felt that two hours away was the farthest I could possibly go from home.

We had a class together—Cinema 101, a prereq we were both late in taking. He sat next to me on the first day of the spring semester—this tall, goofy kid. He smiled, we started talking, and by the end of class he'd stuck a pen through one of my ringlets. My hair was long and curly then; I hadn't yet started straightening it into submission.

He pulled his pen back, and the curl went with it.

“Bouncy,” he said. He was blushing. He hadn't done it because he was confident; he had done it because he didn't know what else to do. And the uncomfortableness of this, the ridiculousness of his, a total stranger's, pen through my hair, made me laugh.

He asked me to get a coffee. We walked to the commons and sat together for two hours. He told me about his family back home in Boston, his younger sister, his mother, who was a college professor at Tufts. I liked the way he saw them, the women in his family. I liked the way he spoke about them—like they mattered.

He didn't kiss me until a week later, but once we started dating, that was it. No breaks, no torrid fights, no long-distance. None of the usual hallmarks of young love. After graduation, he got a job at the *Chronicle* in New York, and I moved with him. We set up shop in a tiny one-bedroom in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. I worked as a freelance copywriter for anyone who would have me, mostly fashion blogs whose hosts were grateful for help with language. This was 2015, the city had rebounded from financial ruin, and Instagram had just become ubiquitous.

We spent two years in New York before moving back to Los Angeles. We got an apartment in Brentwood, down the street from my parents' house. We got married, we bought a starter home, farther away in Culver City. We built a life that perhaps we were too young to live.

“I was already thirty when I met your father,” my mother told me when we first moved back. “You have so much time. Sometimes I wish you'd take it.” But I loved Eric—we all did. And I had always felt more comfortable in the

presence of adults than young people, had felt since the time I was ten years old that I was one. And I wanted all of the trappings that would signal to others that I was one, too. It felt right to start young. And I couldn't help the timeline. I couldn't help it right up until last night, when I suddenly could.

"I brought over the mail," Eric says. My mother is dead. What could any piece of paper possibly say that would be worth reading?

"You hungry?"

It takes me a moment to realize that my father has asked this of Eric, and another second to understand that the answer is yes, actually, Eric is nodding his head yes, and a third, still, to realize neither knows how to prepare a meal. My mother cooked for my father, for all of us—she was great at it. She'd make elaborate breakfasts: goat cheese frittatas with scooped-out bagels. Fruit salad and cappuccinos. When my father retired five years ago, they'd begun to eat outside, setting up on the veranda for hours. My mother loved the *New York Times* on a Sunday, and an iced coffee in the afternoon. My father loved what she did.

Chuck, my dad, worshipped Carol. He thought she hung the moon and painted the stars in the sky. But the deep secret, although it couldn't have been one to him, is that I was her great love. She loved my father, certainly. I believe there wasn't a man on earth she would have traded him for, but there was no relationship above ours. I was her one, just like she was mine.

I believe my love with my mother was truer, purer, than what she had with my father. If you'd have asked her *Who do you belong to*, the answer would have been *Katy*.

"You're my everything," she'd tell me. "You're my whole world."

"There are some leftovers in the fridge," I hear myself saying.

I think about dishing lettuce onto plates, heating the chicken, crisping the rice the way I know my dad likes.

My father is gone, already in pursuit of the La Scala chopped salads that are no doubt soggy in their containers. I can't remember who brought them over, or when, just that they're there.

Eric is still standing in the doorway.

"I thought maybe we could talk," he says to me.

I left last night and drove here. I let myself in like I had thousands of times, with my own key. I tiptoed up the stairs. It was nearly midnight, and I poked

my head into my parents' bedroom, expecting to see my father fast asleep, but he wasn't in there. I looked in the guest room and didn't find him there, either. I went down the stairs into the family room. There he was, asleep on the couch, their wedding photo in a frame on the floor.

I covered him. He didn't stir. And then I went upstairs and slept in my parents' bed, on the side that was hers.

In the morning I came downstairs to find my dad making coffee. I didn't mention the couch, and he didn't ask me why I was up there, or where I had slept, either. We're forgiving each other these oddities, what we're doing to survive.

"Katy," Eric says when I don't respond. "You have to talk to me."

But I don't trust myself to speak. Everything feels so tenuous that I'm afraid if I even say her name, all that would come out would be a scream.

"Do you want to eat?" I ask.

"Are you coming home?" There is an edge to his voice, and I realize, not for the first time in the past few months, how unused to discomfort we both are. We do not know how to live a life that the bottom has fallen out of. These were not the promises of our families, our upbringings, our marriage. We made promises in a world lit with light. We do not know how to keep them in the darkness.

"If you just communicate with me, I can help," Eric says. "But you have to talk to me."

"I have to," I repeat.

"Yes," Eric says.

"Why?" I realize how petulant this sounds, but I am feeling childish.

"Because I'm your husband," he says. "Hey, it's me. That's what I'm here for. That's the point. I can help."

I am overcome with a sudden, familiar anger and the boldface, pulsating words: *Unfortunately, you can't.*

For thirty years I have been tied to the best person alive, the best mother, the best friend, the best wife—*the best one*. The best one was mine, and now she's gone. The string that tethered us has been snipped, and I am overcome with how little I have left, how second-best every single other thing is.

I nod, because I cannot think what else to do. Eric hands me a stack of envelopes.

“You should look at the one on top,” he says.

I glance down. It’s marked *United Airlines*. I feel my fingers curl.

“Thanks.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Eric asks. “I can go pick up sandwiches or something...”

I look at him standing in his oxford shirt and khaki shorts. He shifts his body weight from one foot to the other. His brown hair hangs too long in the back; his sideburns, too. He needs a haircut. He has on his glasses. *Dorkey handsome*, my mother said when she met him.

“No,” I say. “It’s fine.”

He calls my parents by their first names. He takes his shoes off at the door and puts his feet, in socks, up on the coffee table. He helps himself to the refrigerator and puts more soap in the dispenser when it’s empty. This is his home, too.

“I’m going to go lie down,” I say.

I turn to leave, and Eric reaches out and takes my free hand. I feel his fingertips, cold, press into my palm. They seem to be Morse coding the one word *Please*.

“Later,” I say. “Okay?”

He lets me go.

I walk up the stairs. I travel down the wood-paneled hallway, past the room that used to be mine, the one that my mother and I redecorated during my second year of college, and then again when I was twenty-seven. It has striped wallpaper and white bedding and a closet full of sweatshirts and sundresses. All of my skin-care products sit, expired, in the medicine cabinet.

“You’re fully stocked here,” my mother would say. She loved that I could sleep over if it got late, and I didn’t even have to pack a toothbrush.

I stop at the entrance to her room.

How long does it take for someone’s smell to fade? When she was here, at the end. When the hospice nurses came and went like apparitions, the room smelled like illness, like a hospital, like plastic and vegetable broth and soured dairy. But now, all trace of sickness gone, her scent has come back, like a spring bloom. It lingers in the blankets, the carpet, the curtains. When I open the doors to her closet, it’s almost as if she were crouched inside.

I flick the light switch on and sit down among her dresses and blazers, jeans ironed, folded, and hung. I breathe her in. And then I turn my attention back to the envelopes in my hand. I let them slip down to the floor until I'm just holding the one on top. I slide my pinkie in the seam and wiggle it open. It gives easily.

Inside, as I expect, are two plane tickets. Carol Almea Silver was not a woman who handed her phone to the gate agent to scan. She was a woman who demanded a proper ticket for a proper trip.

Positano. June 5. Six days from now. The mother-daughter trip we had talked about for years, made manifest.

Italy had always been special to my mother. She went to the Amalfi Coast the summer before she met my father. She loved to describe Positano, a tiny seaside town, as "pure heaven." God's country. She loved the clothes and the food and the light. "And the gelato is a meal itself," she said.

Eric and I considered going for our honeymoon—taking the train down from Rome and hitting Capri—but we were young and saving for a house, and the whole thing felt too extravagant. We ended up finding a cheap flight to Hawaii and spending three nights at the Grand Wailea Maui.

I look at the tickets.

My mother had always talked about going back to Positano. First with my father, but then as time went on she began to suggest the two of us go together. She was adamant about it—she wanted to show me this place that had always lingered in her memory. This special mecca that she played in right before she became a woman and a wife and then a mother.

"It's the most spectacular place in the world," she'd tell me. "When I was there, we'd sleep until noon and then take the boat out onto the water. There was this great little restaurant, Chez Black, in the marina. We'd eat pasta and clams in the sand. I remember like it was yesterday."

So we decided to go. First as a fantasy, then as a loose, down-the-road plan, and then, when she got sick, as a light at the end of the tunnel. "When I'm better" became "when we go to Positano."

We booked the tickets. She ordered summer sweaters in creams and whites. Sun hats with big, wide brims. We planned and pretended right up until the end. Up until the week before she died we were still talking about the Italian sun. And now the trip is here, and she is not.

I edge my back so it's flat against the side of her closet. A coat rubs up against my shoulder. I think about my husband and father downstairs. My mother was always better with them. She encouraged Eric to take the job at Disney, to ask for a raise, to buy the car he really wanted, to invest in the good suit. "The money will come," she'd always say. "You'll never regret the experience."

My mother supported my father through the opening of his first clothing store. She believed that he could create his own label, and believed they could manufacture the product themselves. She was quality control. She could tell how good a spool of thread was just by looking at it, and she made sure every garment my dad had was up to her standards. She also worked as his desk girl, answering the phones and taking the orders. She hired and trained everyone who ever worked in their business, teaching them about an invisible stitch, the difference between pleating and ruching. She planned the birthday parties and the baptisms of their employees and their children. She always baked on Fridays.

Carol knew how to show up.

And now here I am, hiding in her closet in her absence. How did I not inherit any of her capability? The only person who would know how to handle her death is gone.

I feel the paper crinkle between my fingers. I am gripping it.

I couldn't. There's no way. I have a job. And a grieving father. And a husband.

From downstairs I hear a clattering of pans. The loud sounds of unfamiliarity with appliances, cabinets, the choreography of the kitchen.

We are missing our center.

What I know: She is not in this house, where she died. She is not downstairs, in the kitchen she loved. She is not in the family room, folding the blankets and rehanging the wedding photos. She is not in the garden, gloves on, clipping the tomato vines. She is not in this closet that still smells like her.

She is not here, and therefore, I cannot be here, either.

Flight 363.

I want to see what she saw, what she loved before she loved me. I want to see where it was she always wanted to return, this magical place that showed up so strongly in her memories.

I curl my knees to my chest. I sink my head down into them. I feel the outline of something in my back pocket. I pull it out, and the cigarette, now warm and mangled, disintegrates in my hands.

Please, please, I say aloud, waiting for her, for this closet full of her clothes, to tell me what to do next.

Chapter Two

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you?” Eric asks.

I’m standing in the entryway to our house, the one I have no idea if I’ll be returning to, with my suitcases at the door like an attentive child.

Eric is wearing a salmon-colored polo T-shirt and jeans, and his hair is still too long on the sides. I haven’t said anything about it, and neither has he. I wonder if he notices, if he realizes he needs a cut, too. I’ve made all those appointments for him. Suddenly his inability to get his hair cut feels hostile, an intentioned attack.

“No, Uber’s on the way.” I hold up my phone. “See, three minutes.”

Eric smiles, but it’s small, sad. “Okay.”

When I told Eric I wanted to go to Italy, to take the mother-daughter trip alone, he told me it was a great idea. He thought I needed a break—I’d been caring for my mother around the clock. Months earlier I’d taken a leave of absence from my job as an in-house copywriter for an ad agency in Santa Monica. I’d left when she first came home for treatment, and I didn’t know when I’d go back. Not that anyone had asked. At this point I’m not even sure the job will still be waiting for me.

“This will be good for you,” Eric said. “You’ll come back feeling so much better.”

We sat at our kitchen counter, a box of pizza between us. I hadn’t bothered to take out plates or utensils. All that was next to the box was a pile of napkins. We had given up caring.

“This is not a vacation,” I said.

I resented the idea that what was standing in the way of a new outlook on life was a few sun-soaked weeks on the Italian coast.

“That’s not what I said.”

I could see his frustration and his want to control it, too. I felt a bolt of compassion for him.

“I know.”

“We still haven’t talked about us.”

“I know,” I said again.

I had come home a few days earlier. We slept in the same bed and made coffee in the morning and did laundry and put away plates. Eric went back to his job, and I made lists of people to reach out to—thank-you notes that had to be written, phone calls that needed to be returned, my father’s dry cleaner.

It only resembled our old routine. We were skirting around one another like strangers in a restaurant, pausing to acknowledge if we bumped into each other.

“You came home. Does that mean you’re staying?”

In college, before a big test, Eric would bring over a sandwich from this deli called Three Pickles. It had Swiss cheese and arugula and raspberry jam, and it was delicious. He had taken me there on one of our first dates, and insisted on ordering for me. We took the sandwiches outside, found a curb, and unwrapped them. Mine looked like melted, colored wax, but the tang of the Swiss with the peppery greens and tart raspberry was sublime.

“You can trust me,” Eric had said then.

I knew he was right.

I trusted him on our move to New York, on the purchase of our first home. I trusted him through my mother’s treatment, even. The plans the four of us made, where her care would be best, the medications, the trials.

But now. Now how could I trust anyone? We had all betrayed her.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I genuinely don’t know if I can be married to you anymore.”

Eric exhaled like I’d socked him in the stomach. I had. It was unkind and harsh, and I shouldn’t have said it like that. But he was asking me an impossible question. He was asking about a future I could no longer fathom.

“That’s brutal,” he said.

Eric plopped a piece of pizza on a napkin. It was a ridiculous thing to do now. To eat. To *begin* eating.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

My apology pivoted him. “We can get through this together,” he said. “You know we can. We have been through everything together, Katy.”

I picked up a slice. It seemed like a foreign object. I wasn't sure whether to eat it or take it outside and plant it.

The problem, of course, is that we hadn't really been through everything together, because we hadn't been through anything before. Not until now. Our life had unfolded with the ease of an open road. There were no forks, no bumps, just a long stretch into the sunset. We were, in many ways, the same people who had met at twenty-two years old. What was different was where we lived but not how. What had we even learned in the past eight years? What skills had we acquired to get us through this?

"This is too big," I said.

"I'm just asking to be a part of it." He looked at me with big, round brown eyes.

Before Eric and I got engaged, he asked my parents for permission. I wasn't there, of course, but Eric reports that he went to their house one evening after work. My parents were in the kitchen, making dinner. Nothing would have been unusual about this. Eric and I dropped by my parents'—separately and together—often. On this particular evening he asked if he could talk to them in the living room.

We had just moved to the house in Culver City. I was twenty-five, and we'd been together for three years, two of them spent in New York, far away from my folks. We were home now, and ready to build a life together, beside them.

"I love your daughter," Eric said once they were settled. "I think I can make her happy. And I love you both, too. I love being a part of your family. I want to ask Katy to marry me."

My father was thrilled. He loved Eric. Eric had a way of fitting into our family that still allowed my father to be the boss. If you asked either of them, the structure didn't need to change.

It was my mother who was quiet.

"Carol," my father had said. "What do you think?"

My mother looked at Eric. "Are you two ready for this?"

In addition to her kindness and hospitality, my mother had a frankness that made her respected and a little bit feared. She could tell it like it was, and she did.

"I know I love her," Eric said.

“Love is beautiful,” my mother told him. “And I know how true that is. But you’re both so young. Don’t you want to live a little more before you settle down? There’s so much to do and so much time to be married.”

“I want to live my life with her,” Eric had said. “I know we have a lot to experience, and I want us to experience it together.”

My mother had smiled. “Well,” she had said. “Then congratulations are in order.”

Looking at Eric across the table, the pizza between us, I thought that maybe her initial hesitation had been right. That we should have lived more. That we did not really understand the vows we’d taken. *For better or for worse*. Because now here we are, experiencing all that life has to deal out, and it has broken us. It’s broken me.

“I’m going to go to Italy,” I said to him. “I’m going to go on that trip. And I think while I’m gone we should take some space.”

“Well, you’ll be in Italy,” he said. “So space seems inevitable.” He tried for a smile.

“No, like a break,” I said.

I knew in that moment we were both thinking about the *Friends* episode, the ridiculous, impossible idea that a break was somehow a hovering, and not a speeding car out of town. It almost made me laugh. What would it take to take his hand, turn on the TV, and snuggle down together? To pretend that what was happening wasn’t.

“Are you thinking about a separation?”

I felt cold. I felt it down into my bones. “Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know what to call it, Eric.”

He turned stoic. It was a look I’d never seen from him before. “If that’s what you want,” he said.

“I don’t know what I want right now except to not be here. You, of course, are free to make your own choices, too.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means whatever you want it to mean. It means I can’t be responsible for you right now.”

“You’re not responsible for me; you’re married to me.”

I stared at him, and he stared back. I got up and put the dishes in the dishwasher and then went upstairs. Eric came to bed an hour later. I wasn’t

asleep but the lights were off, and I was pretending, matching my breathing to the rhythm of a light snore. He crept in, and I felt his body next to mine. He didn't reach for me; I didn't expect him to. I felt the weight of the space between us, how vast and tense eight inches could be.

And now the Uber is here.

My phone flashes with a number I don't know. It's the driver. I pick up.

"I'll be right out," I tell him.

Eric inhales and then exhales.

"I'll call you from the airport," I say.

"Here, let me help you."

The driver doesn't get out. Eric takes my suitcases out to the car. He puts them into the open trunk.

They are filled with dresses and shoes and hats my mother and I picked out together. Every time I'd pack for a trip, she'd come over, even if it was just a weekend away. She knew how to fit ten outfits into a carry-on—"The trick is to roll, Katy"—and how to make a pair of jeans last all week. She was the queen of accessories—a silk belt as a headscarf, a chunky necklace to take a white shirt from day to night.

Once Eric is done, we stand facing each other. It's an unseasonably cool June day in LA. I'm wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. I have a voluminous cashmere scarf in my bag, because my mother taught me to always travel with one. "You can curl up against any windowsill," she'd say.

"So, have a safe trip, then," he tells me. Eric has never been good at pretending. I am better. The heaviness of our conversation hangs between us. It causes the immediacy of what's before us—a split, divorce?—to be in direct opposition to the obvious: that we might already be strangers. That we are standing on opposite sides now. I think, briefly: of course people get divorced in wars. When everything has been obliterated, how do you carry on with doing laundry?

I see the pain in Eric's face, and I know he wants me to reassure him. He wants me to tell him that I love him, that we'll figure this out. That I'm his. He wants me to say *your wife will be right back*. Your life will be right back.

But I can't do that. Because I do not know where she or it went.

"Yeah, thank you."