

WE ALL

WANT

IMPOSSIBLE

THINGS

a novel

CATHERINE

NEWMAN



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HARPER

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Dedication

*For Ali Pomeroy, 1968–2015
Brightest star, most missed.*

Epigraph

And February was so long that it lasted into March.

—Dar Williams, “February”

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Prologue

“Edi. Are you sleeping?”

I’m whispering, even though the point is to wake her up. Her eyelids look bruised, and her lips are pale and peeling, but still she’s so gorgeous I could bite her face. Her dark hair is growing back in. “Wake up, my little chickadee,” I whisper, but she doesn’t stir. I look at Jude, her husband, who shrugs, runs an open palm over his handsome, exhausted face.

“Edichka,” I say a little louder, Slavically. She opens her eyes, squinches them shut again, then snaps them back open, focuses on my face, and smiles. “Hey, sweetheart,” she says. “What’s up?”

I smile back. “Oh, nothing,” I say. *A lie!* “Jude and I were just making some plans for you.”

“Plans like banh mi from that good banh mi place?” she says. “I’m starving.” She rubs her stomach over her johnny. “No. Not starving. Not even hungry, actually. I just want to taste something tasty, I guess.” She tries to sit up a little and then remembers the remote, and the top of her bed rises with the mechanical whirring that would be on my Sloan Kettering soundtrack mixtape, if I made one. Also the didgeridoo groaning of the guy in the room next door. The sunny lunch-tray person saying, “Just what the doctor ordered!” even when it’s weirdly unwholesome “clear liquids” like black coffee and sugar-free Jell-O.

“Banh mi can definitely be arranged,” I say. I’m stalling, and Jude sighs. He pulls a chair over by her head, sits in it.

“Awesome,” Edi says. She fishes a menu from the stack crammed into her bedside drawer. “Extra spicy mayo. No daikon.”

“Edi,” I say. “I have been madly in love with you for forty-two years. Am I going to suddenly forget your abiding hatred of radishes?”

She smiles dotingly at me, flutters her eyelashes.

“Wait,” I say. “*Extra* spicy mayo? Or extra-spicy *mayo*?”

She says, “What?” and Jude says, “Edi.” She hears it in his voice, turns to him and says, “What?” again, but I’m already starting to cry a little bit.

“Shit,” she says. “No, no. You guys.” She wrings her hands. “I’m not ready for this. Whatever this is. What is this?”

Here’s what this is: Out in the hallway, Jude had asked about Edi’s treatment. “Isn’t she supposed to get her infusion today?” he’d said, and the nurse had said cheerfully, “Nope! We’re all done with that.” And so, it seemed, we were. Nobody exactly talked to us about this decision. It was like it had already happened, in some other time and place. You order a burger and the kitchen makes an executive decision in the back. “We’re out of burgers,” your server says. “There’s just this plate of nothing with a side of morphine and grief.”

Ellen, the social worker, had taken Jude and me into her office to give us a *make the most of her remaining days* talk—while simultaneously clarifying that this most-making would need to happen *not there*. We were confused. “I’m confused,” I said, and Ellen had nodded slowly, crinkled her eyes into a pitying smile, and handed us a pamphlet called “Next Steps, Best Steps.” It was about palliative care. Hospice. “But these are the *worst* steps,” I said, because apparently nothing is too obvious for me to mention, and Ellen passed me a box of tissues. “I feel like I’m mad at you, but also like this might not be your fault,” I said, truthfully, and she laughed and said, “I promise you I understand.” I liked her after that.

Ellen tried to help us figure out what to do. Edi and Jude’s son, Dashiell, is seven and has already spent three of those years living with his mom’s illness. Ellen wondered if bringing her home for hospice care might simply be too traumatizing, and suggested that inpatient care might be a better option, given the likelihood of a swift and harrowing end-of-life scenario. This seemed not unsensible. Dash’s last visit had been a disaster: when Edi bent to kiss him good-bye, blood had poured out of her nose and terrified him. It had just been a garden-variety nosebleed, it turned out, but Dash, already fragile, was stained. Literally stained. Figuratively scarred. “You might even have him say good-bye to her sooner than later,” Ellen offered. “So that he isn’t worrying about when it’s coming.”

“When what’s coming?” I said. The inevitability of Edi’s death was like a crumpled dollar bill my brain kept spitting back out. “Sorry,” I said a second later. “I understand.”

We called the recommended hospices from the hospital lobby, but they

all had a wait list. “A wait list?” Jude had said. “Do they understand the premise of hospice?” We pictured an intake coordinator making endless calls, crossing name after name off her list. “Yes, yes. I see. Maybe next time!”

“Sloan says she’s got to be out by tomorrow midday,” Jude said, and passed me the cigarette we were splitting. We were not the only people huddled in our puffy jackets outside the famous cancer hospital, exhaling our stupidly robust good health away into the January cold, where clouds of smoke should have been gathering to form the words *We’re so fucked*.

“There’s a hospice up by us,” I said, and Jude looked at me unblinkingly for a few beats. I live in Western Massachusetts. He ground the butt under his heel, picked it up, and tossed it into a trash can. “It’s nice,” I said. “I’ve visited people there. It’s an actual house.”

“And?” he said.

I didn’t know. “I don’t know,” I said. “Would that be crazy? To bring her up there? I mean, they’re saying a week or two, maybe even less.”

“What would we do?” Jude said. “I really don’t want to take Dash out of school.”

“Yeah, no,” I said. “Don’t do that.”

“But I can’t leave him. Not now.”

“I know.” My hair was stuck in the zipper of my jacket, but I didn’t bother trying to get it out. My eyes were watering from smoke and cold and also from the crying I seemed to be doing.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Ash.”

“I know. I guess I’m not sure what I’m saying,” I said.

“Would Dash and I say good-bye to her *here*?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Could you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, you were at our *wedding*, Ash. ‘Til death do us part. I can’t really imagine leaving her now—who I’d even be if I did that.”

“Jude.” I leaned forward to touch my forehead to his. “You wouldn’t be leaving her. You’d be sparing your child. Edi’s child. You’ve done ‘in sickness and health’ truly magnificently. We’d just be”—What? What would we be?—“seeing her off in stages. Tag-teaming it.”

“It’s kind of your dream,” Jude teased. “Getting her all to yourself.”

“I know!” I said. “I mean, finally!”

“You can be her knight in shining armor like you’ve always wanted.” He laughed, not unkindly. Does he love me? Yes. Do I drive him crazy? Also yes. But it was true that I’d felt stuck away up in New England, happy enough in my life there but wishing I were still in New York with

everybody I'd grown up with, guiltily wishing I were closer to Edi. Now my daughters were mostly grown, and also my husband seemed to have left me. I was in the perfect place in my life at the perfect time of Edi's. Not perfect in the normal sense, obviously.

"You've always accused me of being an opportunist," I said to Jude, and he said, "True."

We cried a little more, our puffy arms wrapped around each other's necks and heads. Then Jude retrieved a bottle of lavender hand sanitizer from his coat pocket, gestured at me to hold out my hands, sprayed them, sprayed his own, misted his hair for good measure. I shook a couple of Tic-Tacs into his palm and mine, and we went fragrantly back in through the revolving door to wake Edi up and ask her something we hadn't even finished figuring out. The worst question in the whole entire world, as it turned out.

Chapter 1

At least I'm not sleeping with the hospice music therapist.

Cedar. He's twenty years old, twenty-five tops, and he has a voice like an angel who maybe swallowed a bag of gravel. His guitar case is covered in stickers: a smiley face, a skull, Drake, Joni Mitchell. "When you're famous, I'm going to say I knew you when!" I said once, and it was a mistake. He shook his head, his baby forehead suddenly crosshatched with distress. I'd gotten him so wrong. "No, no," he said. "This is it. I'm already doing the thing I want to do."

"Of course!" I said quickly. "It's such a perfect job for you." And he said, "Yeah, though sometimes I dream that somebody requests something, and I'm like, 'Hang on a sec, I don't know that one. Let me just look it up on my phone.' But while I'm googling 'Luck Be a Lady' or whatever, they die. And that's the last thing anyone ever said to them. 'Hang on a sec.'"

"Shit, Cedar," I said, and he said, "Right?"

Now he's sitting on the end of the bed, strumming the beginning of something. The Beatles, "Across the Universe." Edi's eyes are closed, but she smiles. She's awake in there somewhere. "Cedar," she says, and he says, "Hey, Edi," lays a palm on her shin, then returns to his song, strumming some and singing, humming the parts he can't remember. My heart fills with, and releases, grief in time to my breathing.

We've been—*Edi's* been—at the Graceful Shepherd Hospice for three weeks now. Three weeks is a long time at hospice, but also, because of what hospice means, it kind of flies by. But it flies by crawlingly, like a funhouse time warp. Like life with a newborn: It's breakfast, all milk and sunshine, and then it's feeding and changing that recur forever, on a loop, like some weird *soiled nighties* circle of hell. And then somehow it's the next day again, and you're like, "Who's hungry for their breakfast?" Only *nobody* is hungry for their breakfast. Except Edi. "Oooh. Make me French

toast?” she said this morning to Olga, the Ukrainian nurse we love, who responded, “Af *khorse*.”

The hospice had estimated, when we checked her in, that Edi would be their *guest* for just a week or two. “We don’t think of this as a place where people come to die,” the gravely cheerful intake counselor had said to us. “We think of it as a place where people come to *live!*” “To live *dyingly*,” Edi had whispered to me, and I’d laughed. We all refer to the hospice as Shapely—as in, “I’ll meet you over at Shapely”—because Edi, only half-awake when we were first talking about it, thought it was called the Shapely Shepherd. “Like a milkmaid in one of those lace-up outfits?” she’d said, and I’d said, “Wait. What?” And then, when I pictured what she was picturing, “Yes. Exactly like that.”

Hospice is a complicated place to pass the time because you are kind of officially dying. “Am I, though?” Edi says sometimes, when dying comes up, as it is wont to come up in hospice, and I pull my eyebrows up and shrug, like *Who knows?* “If anything happens to me . . .” she likes to start some sentences—about Dash or Jude or her journals or her jewelry. And I say, “What on earth would happen to you?” and she laughs and says, “I know, right? But just on the off chance.”

Sometimes the hospice physician comes through—the enormous, handsome man we call Dr. Soprano because he looks like James Gandolfini—and she says, “When do you think I can get out of here?” You can tell that he can’t tell if she’s kidding or not, probably because she’s not really kidding. “Good question,” he says, poker-faced, rummaging through her box of edibles and breaking off a tiny nibble of the chocolate kind he likes. “Do you mind?” he says, after the fact, and then, “If anyone’s getting out of here, Edi, it is definitely you.”

Which, to be honest, is not saying much. The average age of the other patients is a hundred and fifty. They’re so old, some of these folks, their bodies so worn down and used up, that sometimes when you peek into their rooms to say hi you can’t even tell if they’re there in their beds or not. They’re nearly completely flat, like paper dolls, with just a tiny fluff of cotton glued at the top for hair. You half expect to see a ghost climb up out of their body, like in a cartoon. One of them likes me to come in and hold her hand. She always offers me a lemon drop from her special tin and says, “Did you come straight off the school bus?” And I say, “I did, Ruth! I came right to you.” Forty-five-year-old me, fresh off the school bus with my under-eye bags and plantar fasciitis and boobs hanging down my torso like beige knee socks with no legs in them. There’s nothing like hospice to remind you that decrepitude is totally relative.

“I believe I may be mildly *demented*,” Ruth whispered once, apologetically, and I was like, “Oh, please. Same.”

Ruth has been here for over a year, which I know is a total inspiration to Edi, although she has never mentioned it. Ruth is also the person who watches *Fiddler on the Roof* every afternoon and also some nights. The volume is turned way up and, for hours every day, it’s the soundtrack of everybody’s dying. You’re helping someone into compression stockings or fresh briefs during “Matchmaker.” Someone is weeping in your arms while Tevye yiddle-diddles “If I Were a Rich Man.” It’s “Sunrise, Sunset,” only you’re cry-laughing because there’s a turd on the floor and you don’t know if it’s human or from one of the resident dogs.

Now we hear the overture starting up, Ruth clapping in delight, whooping from her room, and Cedar says, “That’s my cue,” and zips his guitar into its case. He kisses Edi’s cheek, kisses mine, and closes the door gently on his way out.

“Oh my god, Ash,” Edi says. Her eyes are still closed. “You’re sleeping with Cedar.”

“Edi! Jesus. I’m not a grave robber.”

She laughs and says, “I think you mean *cradle* robber.”

“Ugh,” I say, and palm my forehead. “Yes, sorry.” There are many hidden awkwardnesses in hospice, like when you say things like “This gelato is so good I’m dying,” or “Oof, I ate too much gelato, kill me,” and then remember that there’s an actually dying person also eating the gelato, or a person who might genuinely wish you would kill them. “He’s so cute, though,” I add. “Timothée Chalamet would play him in the movie.” She smiles, wags a finger at me in warning.

“Don’t,” she says, and I mean it when I say, “I would seriously never.”

“Hey,” she says, her eyes still closed. “Honey’s coming over in a little. I hope that’s cool with you. He’s bringing me some stuff.” Honey is my ex-husband. Or he would be, if we weren’t too cheap and lazy to get an actual divorce. The *stuff* he brings Edi is from the dispensary in town, which he owns. Or, I guess, which *we* own, technically.

“Of course,” I say. “He’s practically living at the house again. I think he’s coming by later, to see Jonah.”

“Wait,” she says, “Jonah’s still here?”

“*Here* here?” I’m not always sure how much she’s following. “Like in the room? No,” I say.

“No,” she says, and opens her eyes. “I know that. Here in town.” Her brother comes up from New York on the weekends, and he’s usually gone by Monday. But he’s staying an extra couple of days this week,

telecommuting from my house to squeeze in a few more visits at Shapely.

“Yeah,” I say. “He came by this morning. But maybe you were kind of out of it? From the meds.” She nods, shakes her head, pissed. She doesn’t remember.

“Fuuuuuck,” she says. “This suuuuucks.”

I picture her mind like a bar, her thoughts and memories nursing their last round. It’s closing time, and you don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. I untangle her tubes and wires, hang them on the pole behind her, and climb into her bed. A few little tears drip out of her eyes, which are closed again. “It does,” I say, laying my head on her pillow. I touch a tear with my fingertip, touch my fingertip to my lips. “It totally sucks.”

Chapter 2

Jonah and I are talking about what we always talk about, which is inventions that would save Edi's life. You hear all the time about people dying of cancer, and it makes some kind of sense if you don't think about it too much. Until Edi, though, I had never really wondered about what they died *of*. Because it's not actually an abstraction that kills anybody—the word *cancer*, or the fact of cancer, coming at them, yodeling, with a raised hatchet. It's the breakdown of bodies, of their specific organs and functions.

Edi, like most people with ovarian cancer, will die—if she dies!—because her guts stopped working. What will kill her, ultimately, is (spoiler alert) bowel obstruction and malabsorption, catastrophic electrolyte imbalance and then kidney or liver failure. “It's just fixing a broken pump,” Jonah is saying to me. “Jesus. You practically expect them to have an app for that.”

“I want to put it to the fancy engineering kids at MIT,” I say. “Can't I just send an email? ‘Contest alert! Invent a pacemaker, but for intestines instead of a heart! Win a bubble-tea gift card!’”

“Yeah,” Jonah says. “You could ask Jules.” Jules, my older daughter, is a fancy engineering sophomore at MIT. “It might be kind of a lot of pressure, though,” he adds, and I say, “True,” and sigh.

Jonah, the sighingest person I know, sighs too—he would never leave my sigh hanging unanswered—and rolls nudely onto his back. “Edi's going to kill us,” he says, like he said when we were teenagers, and I say, like I said when we were teenagers, “Not if she doesn't find out.”

Jelly the cat climbs up onto Jonah's chest and peers into his face unblinkingly. “She made some unsettling eye contact with me earlier,” Jonah says.

“Yeah,” I say. “You grunting around in here is not her favorite. If she

had fingers, she would have flipped you off.”

The doorknob rattles, and we yank the sheet up to our chins, the cat flying off the bed, just as Belle, my seventeen-year-old, bursts in. She stops short in the doorway. “Oh my god, Mom, could you be any grosser?” she says, then adds, “No offense, Jonah,” and he says, “None taken.”

“Don’t slut-shame me,” I say, and she laughs, says, “Fair,” and hands me a permission slip to sign. I sit up carefully, keeping the sheet wound around my tragic boobs so as to not depress her further.

“Didn’t you already take a field trip to the wastewater treatment plant in, like, fifth grade?” I say, and she shrugs, says, “I’m just looking forward to napping on the bus,” snatches the paper out of my hands, scoops Jelly up, and is out the door again, yelling back to us, “Dinner in twenty. Enchiladas. Don’t forget Dad’s coming. Maybe lock your fucking *door*.”

“Thanks!” I yell after her, and then grimace at Jonah.

“Awkward,” he says, and I say, “Truth.”

“Do you think I’m a bad mom?” I say, and Jonah rolls back onto his side to smile at me.

“Maybe?”

I can hear Belle clanging around the kitchen, and I can’t tell if it’s normal clanging—the unavoidable sound of the colander hitting the sink—or if it’s pointed *my mom is a gruesome skank* clanging. But the ceiling of my bedroom is slanted and low, and it’s cozy in here, and the smell of cumin wafts in to console me.

“Oh well,” is all I say, and Jonah laughs.

I’ve been friends with Jonah as long as I’ve been friends with Edi, since Edi and I were assigned, in nursery school, to take care of Vinnie, the classroom Venus flytrap. We fed Vinnie bites of bologna from our sandwiches and sang him the Jewish folk song “Dona, Dona” with so much tremulous vibrato that we actually made ourselves cry. The traps swelled with lunch meat, turned black, and fell off, and one day we came in and Vinnie was gone. There was a jade plant in his spot on the windowsill. “Only water for this one,” our nice teacher said, and by then I had already gone to Edi’s house and met her barky German shepherd, Zeus, and her dark-haired older brother, Jonah, and I’d fallen in love with everyone.

I lucked out into getting a big brother along with a best friend. The kind of brother you end up boning, sure, but there were many, many chaste years before that, I swear. It was all Connect Four and *Gilligan’s Island*. It was fifty-cent pizza slices and fifty-cent Sabrett hot dogs, sixteen-cent Chuckles candy and the complete first eight series of Wacky Pack trading

cards, with their wintergreen bubblegum smell. I never even thought to look at Jonah back then. I'm lying! I had a huge crush on him, the whole entire time—and, yeah, I'd sometimes catch Edi looking at me funny. But we were a happy trio nonetheless, and our *don't ask, don't tell* method of shadiness and stealth worked well for us through many decades.

Now Jonah has no hair on his head, but his thick, luscious eyebrows shine auburnly in the last of the light. "Your eyebrows," I say admiringly, and he runs a finger over one, waggles them suggestively, says, "You like?" and then heaves himself up to sitting, bends this way and that to crack his back. "It's a lot for the old bod, spending time with you," he says, before gathering up, and stepping back into, his assorted expensive clothing.

He manages a hedge fund, and I have never bothered to actually learn what that means, aside from, I assume, stealing from the poor. I always picture an actual hedge—a topiary shaped like a dollar sign, Jonah going at it with a Weedwacker, heavy bags of money falling on him from a cloudless sky. I describe this to him now, and he says, "It's exactly like that," then gestures at his gray cashmere sweater, his fancy jeans, says, "All this could be yours one day." I pull on the raggedy My Little Pony hoodie I stole from Belle, say, "One day very soon, since I'm hiding it all before you leave."

Downstairs, Belle is making one of her trademark salads, lots of sturdy, difficult vegetables lined up on the cutting board. "Winter in New England," she likes to say piously, "is not a time for lettuce." Rather, it's a time, it would seem, for enormous radishes and dirty rutabagas and purple-topped turnips, everything scrubbed and shredded and dressed sharp with lemon and chiles, all of it surprisingly, bracingly delicious.

"What can I do?" I say, "Besides lighting the candles?"

She asks me to spoon sour cream into a bowl, to clean and chop a handful of cilantro, to warm four plates in the microwave, which I do. The window over our kitchen table still holds a sliver of pale pink daylight beneath the dark blue of evening, and I point this out to Belle. "Mom," she says, her hands massaging root vegetables in the giant wooden salad bowl, "can we please not have our millionth *It's February and the days are really getting longer!* conversation of the week? Yes, the days are getting longer."

"Sorry to be cheerful," I say, and she flips me off, before pulling on oven mitts to retrieve the enchiladas, which smell so good I'm actually dying. (Not *actually*, though!) I'm hungry, I realize. It's possible I haven't eaten all day.

“You are a perfect daughter,” I say truthfully, and kiss Belle’s temple with its dark fuzz of buzzed hair, and she squirms out of my grasp, smiles, and says, “Thanks.”

Belle gets her kitchen talent from her dad, who did all the cooking before he left. He still does some of it here, even now, but he no longer runs the catering business he had for most of our marriage. What that business meant, besides the making of money, was that I drove carpool in a van with *BAT OUT OF HELL’S KITCHEN* stenciled flamingly on its side (he later changed the name to the friendlier *Delish*). And also that the bulk of our meals were composed of wedding and bar mitzvah leftovers.

The kids grew up imagining that fancy hors d’oeuvres were just regular food. “What even is that?” a fellow kindergartner once asked Jules about her mysterious lunch-box contents, and, according to the teacher, Jules had replied, “Stuffed portobello caps.” “Stuffed with *what?*” the kid asked, and Jules squinted at the mushroom in her little hand before shrugging and saying, “Rosemary-scented focaccia?” “All endive, all the time,” was a Honey mantra in those days, and the kids scooped up trout mousse or cranberry-studded goat cheese with the sweetly bitter leaves, because that’s what there was. They ate smoked scallops as an after-school snack, poking them up with toothpicks, dragging them through horseradish aioli, and *mmmming* appreciatively. Food-wise, we were lucky. Maybe otherwise too, to be honest.

Now Jonah thumps down the stairs in his socks just as Honey is opening the kitchen door with a rush of cold air. “This was on the doorstep,” he says, and passes me a delivery box. It’s the metal pitcher I ordered for Edi’s room. She’s so thirsty all the time, and I’m too lazy to fill her cup from the kitchen as often as is required. A piece of paper labeled *ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS* flutters from the box, and I pick it up, while Jonah and Honey embrace and Belle leans over my shoulder to look. The instructions consist only of an illustration of the pitcher, with an arrow pointing to it. Belle laughs. “That’s the queerest!” She’s already reclaimed the word *queer* to describe her own sexuality—but now she also seems to be *re-*reclaiming it for everyday exclamatory use. She magnets the paper to the fridge, puts the Indigo Girls on Spotify, and ushers everyone to the table.

The enchiladas are dark red, fragrant and spicy and delicious, cheese oozing out of them and pooling into the pinto beans, which Belle has simmered with bay leaves and onion. “This is amazing,” I say, and Jonah and Honey agree. I love the people at the table so much, and the food is so good, and Edi is so sick, and I miss Jules, even though she’s only an hour and a half away. Plus, the lovely, changing light! My poor marriage! The

red wine, the candle glow, “Galileo” seeping out of the speaker. I could just cry.

“I could just cry,” I say, and everyone nods, because probably I *will* cry, and nobody is overly surprised by this turn of events.

Belle pats my arm, says, “You’re okay,” like you’d say while you were putting a Band-Aid on a weepy small someone’s invisible paper cut, and I laugh.

Honey catches us up on Edi, as is our habit these days: Whoever’s been with her most recently has to tell everyone else every single thing they heard or noticed. There’s not a ton. She looked tired, Honey notes, somewhat redundantly. She wanted to sit in the chair by the window, but after she tried swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she changed her mind and lay back down. She ate a few bites of minestrone, which Olga referred to as *noodle borscht*. They watched the minestrone exit her palliative venting gastrostomy—the PEG tube—which drains her stomach contents so she doesn’t end up barfing (watching the PEG tube is the new *Naked and Afraid*, as Jonah likes to say). They changed her PICC line. She ate a THC gummy. She talked to Dash and Jude. She cried about Dash. She slept.

“Sorry, sweetie,” Honey says, turning to Belle. I feel that way too. It’s a lot to ask of a teenager, to listen to a conversation that’s somehow incredibly dull but also really sad at the same time, like someone is telling you about a game of golf they played in a dream, but also Mozart’s Requiem is playing.

“Please,” Belle says. “What are we going to talk about? Porcupines eating corn on the cob? I’m good. It’s all good.”

“I mean, not *all*, obviously,” she adds.

Jonah stands up, steps into his expensively robust winter boots—he’s going to Shapely for a little—and I clear the table while Belle puts the leftover enchiladas in a Tupperware. “Take these to Edi, okay?” she says to Jonah, and he says, “Thank you. She’ll love that.”

Honey asks Belle if she wants to play a game before he leaves. “Dutch Blitz?” he says. “Yahtzee? Jacks?”

“I’m good, Dad, but thank you. I should probably do my calculus homework.” She kisses his cheek and disappears upstairs. She is unfailingly sweet with Honey, which I appreciate. It seems fair, somehow, that she saves me all her spitfire and claws and tornadoes. The poisonous cobras and rotting Halloween pumpkins and shouty talk-show guests of her soul. Wait. *Does it seem fair?* I’m not actually sure.

Honey asks me if I want him to go or stay, and I tell him that I just want

to not make any more decisions, so he pours each of us a fresh glass of wine and we sit together on the kitchen couch. Jelly head-butts his chin like a goat, then curls into his lap, and our other cat, Thumper, sprawls out next to him, tummy up. Honey strokes the cats and sings to them a little—Bob Marley’s “One Love,” only he swaps in the word *cat* for *love*.

There’s some silver glinting in Honey’s dark hair, which is falling into his eyes, and some more along his jaw, in the day’s-end scruff of his beard. He still wears the tiny silver hoop earring I gave him when we were first dating. He still wears his wedding ring. My love for him feels like a cramp under my ribs. “This was my home for so long,” he says simply, slightly amazed, like something you might announce from the car as you were driving through your old neighborhood, and I say, “It still is, Hon,” even though it actually isn’t still.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and he says, “It is what it is,” and takes my hand in his—his big, warm, familiar hand—and rests them both on top of the cat.

“I’m always here,” he says. And he could mean here in his old house, which is true—he’s here all the time. Or he could mean here, available to me still, in all of the marriage ways, which is also true.

“I know,” I say. “But I’m so tired.” And his voice is thick, but all he says is, “Ashley.”