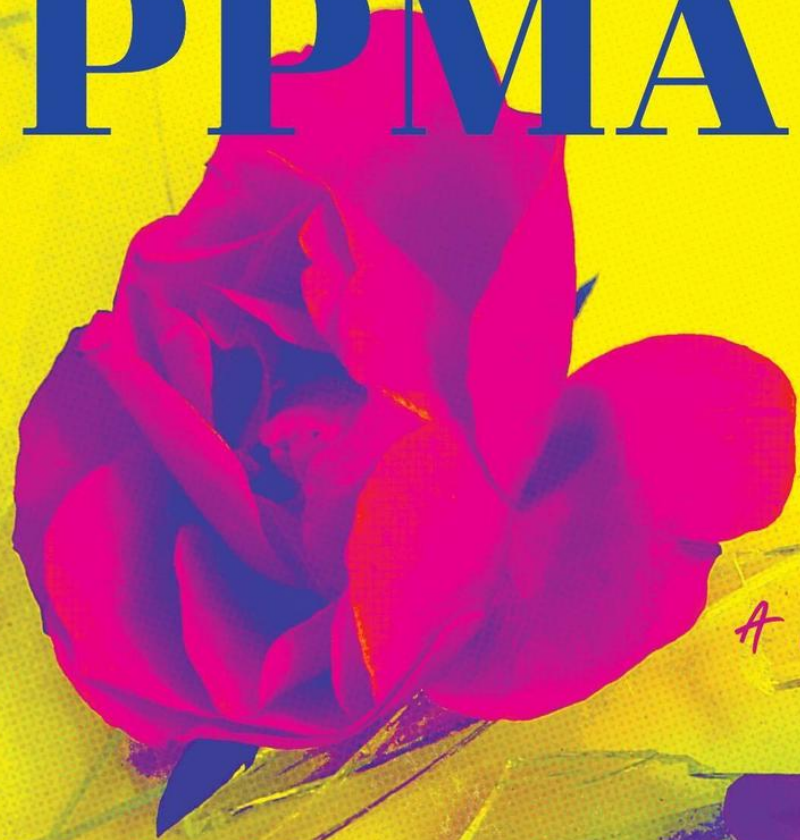


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURA LIPPMAN



A Novel

Prom Mom

"Surprising, transgressive, and sexy. Laura Lippman is an absolute master of plot and timing, and I would follow her anywhere—even to the prom."

—EMMA STRAUB, *New York Times* bestselling author

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LAURA LIPPMAN

PROM MOM

faber

*This book is for everyone, 2021–2022,
who texted, emailed, or DM’ed me:*

“How are you doing?”

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PART I
BEFORE

What was she thinking?

MAY 1997

The Girl

The lights were off in the bathroom, but the door was ajar and sunlight had begun seeping into the room. The day came at Amber in a series of unpleasant sensations. Hard—she was lying on the floor. Cold—she had on only her strapless bra, the floor was tile, the air conditioning had been set low.

Sticky. That was the blood. So much blood. She didn't know a body could lose this amount of blood without going into shock. Maybe she *was* in shock? She had taken a first aid course at the Y and remembered what to do for someone else in shock—get them to lie down, elevate the legs—but no one ever told you how to know if you yourself were in shock. Besides, she was already lying down.

“Joe? Joe?”

No answer. He wasn't here, of course. Why hadn't he tried to check on her? Was he so busy mooning over his ex-girlfriend that he couldn't be bothered to see if Amber was going to rally and make it to the after-party? He must have gone without her—fair enough, given how she had demanded the only room key and bolted from the prom, never to return, but couldn't he at least have pretended concern?

He doesn't really like you, her mother had said when Amber had told her about the invitation. *Not in that way.* That's okay, Amber had replied, and it had been okay, because she believed it was only a matter of time before he realized he did like her. She had thought it would happen last night.

Instead, she had rushed up to the room alone, assuming she was sick from the crab ravioli at dinner. The ravioli and the swigs of whatever had been in Zach's flask, although she had tried to take only the tiniest swallows, what her stepfather called “nips.” No one could get drunk from those little sips, those nips, could they?

Her head was pounding with a cartoon frenzy and it was impossible to separate what had really happened last night from what she wanted to believe had happened. Her stomach had started cramping badly about twenty minutes into the dance, but she had ignored it until Joe danced with Kaitlyn “for old times' sake.” Amber felt as if she was about to throw up, and that had to be done in privacy, always. “Give me the room key,” she had demanded, her fear and shyness making her sound rude, imperious, as if she was mad at Joe.

She *was* mad at Joe.

Back in the room, she had taken off her dress and laid it across the bed, fearful it would be stained. She then crouched by the toilet in her bra and underwear, waiting to vomit.

She was still by the toilet, but she had not vomited.

She struggled to a sitting position. There was so much she couldn't remember, so much she couldn't forget, and those opposing camps warred with each other until her thoughts were more jumbled than ever. Her situation would make more sense if this were a dream, because, as in a dream, nothing made sense. She should be waking up in the bed, next to Joe, not on this sticky bathroom floor. She shouldn't be waking up at all, because the plan had been to stay up all night. When she had never come back downstairs, the others had probably gone on without her to the after-party. But why hadn't Joe come back to change

into the more casual clothes he had brought for the trip to the reservoir? How could he not have checked on her, even once?

She pressed her palms against her temples, then into her eyes, not wanting to see what the creeping daylight would reveal. She would have to take care of things, take care of herself. It wasn't Joe's fault Amber had gotten sick, even if it was watching him dancing with his ex, Kaitlyn, that had prompted her to keep bringing the flask back to her mouth. And it wasn't Joe's fault that the sudden pain had made her desperate to be alone. She didn't want to throw up in the public ladies' room adjacent to the ballroom. She could imagine nothing worse than other girls listening to her retch.

Now she could.

There was nothing left to do but drag herself to her feet and turn on the bathroom light.

Oh god, oh god, oh god.

You can do this.

The voice kicked in, the voice that had been with her all her life, telling her what to do when no one else had any advice for her. It was the voice that had told five-year-old Amber to wait quietly in the bookstore where her mother left her while she shopped. The voice that said, *Say nothing*, when she was accused of cheating on a test because her grade was so high. To pretend ignorance when a teacher asked who might have defaced her locker.

Clean first, then shower.

She worked quickly, using all but one of the bath towels, then took a shower. She changed into the clothes she had packed for the activities that had been planned for the morning. If the evening had gone as anticipated, she'd be at the Towson Diner right now, having eggs and hash browns and maybe a Diet Coke. Twenty-four hours earlier, her gravest worry had been that the others would tease her for not liking coffee.

Joe's overnight bag was on the luggage rack, zippered. Why hadn't he come back to the room? *Kaitlyn*, she thought miserably. *Kaitlyn*. He obviously still yearned for her, despite everything that had happened between Amber and him over the past year.

She left the prom dress behind, draped across the bed. She hated abandoning it, but it would be ruined if she tried to put it in her bag—crushed, maybe even stained—and she had too far to walk to carry it over her shoulder. Besides, it would look odd, walking down York Road on a Saturday morning, a party dress slung over her shoulder. *Don't draw attention to yourself*, the voice told her. *Just try to get through the day. Maybe it will be all right. You don't really remember doing anything, so maybe you didn't.*

She wore rayon pants with a small floral print, elasticized at the waist, a loose-knit yellow T-shirt, and lace-up espadrilles, which were flat, but not particularly good for walking, and she already had blisters from the shoes she had worn the night before. How thoughtfully, how pridefully, she had assembled this outfit, stalking bargains at stores she seldom could afford. She had chosen the espadrilles because their pale green color uncannily matched the tiny pistils of the flowers on the pants and the laces made her feel dainty, like a ballerina. She had not expected to be walking far in them. What had she expected? The after-party downtown, then back to the hotel to change into this very outfit, sunrise at Loch Raven, breakfast at the Towson Diner. They had pledged not to sleep a single minute until they were home, reunited with their own beds.

Of course, that was before Joe had danced with his ex-girlfriend and Amber had started feeling those weird stomach pains and gone up to the room. She honestly couldn't remember what had happened after that. There was no denying what she had seen in the room, but she had no memory of it. She was in shock. She should see a doctor. No, she should *not* see a doctor.

When she reached Regester Avenue, she lingered for a moment on the sidewalk,

regarding her house as a stranger might see it. The small, treeless front yard was decorated for spring—the five plaster geese that marched in formation year-round, from biggest to smallest, wore gingham-checked sunbonnets; the second largest, presumably the mother, had a matching apron. A month ago, there had been Easter baskets and giant eggs, but those had since been replaced by flowers, real and fake. In early June, right before Flag Day, the yard would be transformed into a bower of patriotism, all red, white, and blue, which stayed up past the Fourth. August brought a back-to-school theme. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Winter Wonderland, Valentine’s Day, Spring. Amber knew that most people found her stepfather’s house tacky, even creepy, but she had always taken comfort in the way the calendar marched through their front yard, the constancy of the geese. Every season, every month, the geese were always there.

Her stepfather was in the kitchen, reading the paper. Rod asked if she had a good time at the prom. “It was fine,” she said. He had been her stepfather for ten years, but she never stopped feeling a little shy around him, a perpetual guest in his home. Her mother was always emphasizing how *lucky* Amber was that Rod treated her like his own daughter, and the consequence was that Amber didn’t feel she was worthy of his kindness and attention at all, much less his love.

She went straight to bed, which was to be expected, as her mother and Rod assumed she had been up all night. The hotel rooms were changing stations, really, or so the parents had been told. They also were told that the girls would be staying in one room, the boys in another. Had they believed it? Amber had almost believed it, until she saw the flat glare in the eyes of Susannah, Zach’s date. “Of course we’re not staying in the same room,” she said. She was smiling, there was no edge to her voice, but the look in her blue eyes unsettled Amber.

Amber put her bag in the room reserved and paid for by Joe’s parents, while Zach stowed his bag in the one that Susannah’s parents had provided. It was the nicest hotel Amber had ever been in, but then, the only hotel Amber had ever visited was a motel in Ocean City, where she, her mother, and Rod crowded into a one-room studio the last week of every June, when the Atlantic was still cold and the rates were low. She wouldn’t have minded if she and Joe had a little time in this room, just the two of them. They’d been alone only once since January, in late April, the day they had agreed to go to the prom together.

Who had Joe danced the last dance with? Kaitlyn? But Kaitlyn had a date, the college boy she had been seeing since last summer. *Just a dance?* she had asked Joe when she came up to their table. *For old times’ sake?* Amber’s heart had lurched at how Joe’s face lit up. In that moment, she realized how Joe looked when he loved someone. He had never looked at her like that. But he liked Amber; she knew he liked her. He had told her things he had never told other people, not even Zach. They had something special, even if they had never defined it.

In her own bed, with the Laura Ashley comforter her mother had found 90 percent off at C-Mart, she fell into a dreamless sleep in spite of herself.

It was past noon when she came downstairs for a lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches in pj shorts and a baggy T-shirt, hair tousled, traces of makeup still smeared on her face despite the vigorous shower she had taken at the hotel. She was glad, for once, that her mother was not the type to pepper her with questions. Rona asked only: “Well, was it everything you thought it would be?”

“No,” Amber admitted, tipping a bag of pizza-flavored Goldfish into the soup. This was how she had eaten her soup since she was a child. The goldfish got soggy quickly, so you had to eat very fast, scooping them up with a spoon like some game at the Ocean City boardwalk.

“I tried to tell you. Boys like that Joe Simpson—”

“Mom, I have a headache.”

“Were you drinking?”

She decided to tell the truth. *Tell the truth whenever you can*, her inner counsel advised her. “Only a little. And only because everyone else was.”

“That’s not like you, Amber.”

It wasn’t. Her mother had inadvertently hit on what had been bothering Amber since she had awakened on the bathroom floor. Amber was not the same person she had been twenty-four hours ago. She would never be that person again.

The police arrived while Amber and her mother were clearing the lunch dishes from the table. “Don’t say anything, baby,” her mother said, and Amber almost jumped out of her skin. But she already knew not to say too much. Anyone who watched television knew that.

The detectives, two men, said they needed to take her to see a doctor, which made Amber feel hopeful for a moment, that maybe the doctor could figure out what had happened, which still made no sense to her. Maybe she had some weird, unusual sickness and that would explain everything. But then she realized that would not be the point of the visit.

“Why does she need to see a doctor?” her mother asked.

“We believe your daughter delivered a baby last night, Mrs. Deluca.”

Impossible, her mother said. She’d know if her daughter was pregnant, she said. Amber felt the same way. It was impossible.

A maid had found a newborn wrapped in a towel on the floor of the bathroom in room 717. The room was registered to Joe Simpson, but he told police he had stayed out all night with his friends after his date got sick and locked herself in their room, taking the only key. He had tried to go to the room to change at about four a.m., but Amber wouldn’t open the door. He had breakfast with his friends at the diner and drove home from there.

“I woke up and the baby was dead,” Amber said, even as her mother and Rod shushed her.

Did Amber want to tell them anything more about last night? Amber shook her head no over and over again. She had nothing more to tell. She had said the only thing she knew to be true. She remembered nothing except pain, searing pain. Pain and blood and darkness, and then suddenly it was sunrise.

Still, she could ask a question, right? Asking them a question wasn’t the same thing as talking.

“My dress?”

“What about it?” asked one of the detectives, a Mr. Lenhardt, who had the kindest face she had ever seen, but maybe it was simply that Amber realized in that moment his would be the last kind face she would see for a long time. No one was ever going to be kind to her again.

“I left it behind in the hotel room. Do you think I could have it back, when everything is over?”

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

Amber let the real estate agent lock the door of Rod's home, which was the only way she could ever think of the house on Regester Avenue. It was Rod's house, even if she and her mother had shared it with him for ten years. And now she would never have to enter the house again, not even for the closing, whenever that happened.

She had flown up from New Orleans two days ago, met with the lawyers, found a real estate agent, endured the walk-through, taken copious notes on her phone. When the agent was not actively disparaging the house, she crowed about how executing the punch list would cost less than \$5,000 and yield more than \$30,000 at sale. Less her commission, of course.

Amber had almost cried out, "I don't have \$5,000."

Then she remembered: She did. Or would, when Rod's estate was settled, almost a million dollars, an unfathomable amount of money in some ways, yet also *too* fathomable. Amber wasn't stupid. She was only thirty-eight, so a million dollars, amortized—was that even the right word?—over a lifetime was, at best, maybe \$20,000 a year. Or, if she invested the \$1 million and it yielded 3 percent every year, that would be \$30,000. Nothing to sneeze at, but it wouldn't keep you in unlimited Kleenex either.

It was enraging, now that she thought about it, how little a million dollars meant. People on reality shows, the competitive ones, were forever saying the prize money would change their lives, but now Amber had won the prize without even trying and she couldn't see how her life would be different. She grossed almost \$25,000 a year from her Etsy shop, augmenting those earnings with her gallery job and shifts at the Upperline. Maybe she could quit the Upperline now, but she wasn't sure she wanted to. The goose had laid the golden egg, yet she was more dissatisfied than she had been before she knew such eggs existed. Would she finally go to Paris, that long-ago dream? No, she had come to terms years ago with the fact that Paris was never meant to be.

Still—*a million dollars*. How had Rod saved a million dollars, above and beyond the equity in his house, which also would be Amber's? Her mother would be furious if she knew her second husband had been able to put away that much money, given how modestly they had lived. But Veronica "Rona" Deluca had died ten years ago, bequeathing her daughter nothing but a vague suggestion that Amber was responsible for the cancer that ravaged her, if only because it was connected to her reproductive system. "This is what I get for having a kid," was one of the last things Rona ever said to Amber, in one of their monthly phone calls.

If it hadn't been for Rod, Amber wouldn't have even bothered to come home for Rona's funeral. That had been her last trip to Baltimore, in and out as quickly as possible.

"Do we really need to replace the venetian blinds?" Amber asked the agent as they sped away from the house in her cherry-red Lexus. Regester was one of the few east-west streets in this part of Towson that had no speed bumps, no traffic-calming curves. That was all you needed to know about Regester Avenue: Feel free to run over its kids.

"Honey"—she was almost a decade younger than Amber, yet treated her with a breezily patronizing air as infuriating as it was comic—"those blinds are the *worst*. They have to be at least twenty years old."

Older. They were there when I was in junior high school. But she didn't bother to say that. She typed into her Notes app: **Blinds must be changed.**

"And the garden figurines, the geese—what should I do with them?"

“Take them straight to the dump. No one wants that stuff.”

Amber knew the real estate agent was right, but she almost winced on Rod’s behalf. Even as a child, she had understood that Rod had too much stuff in his front yard, that people who talked about THAT house on Regester were not complimenting it. But the yard had made Rod happy, and young children loved it. In some ways, Rod’s front yard was the first gallery of Amber’s life. She had yet to meet anyone, whether in a gallery or a museum, who doted on their installations the way Rod had fussed over his yard.

Maybe she could sell the geese on Etsy. If only there were a Depop for yard art. Depop loved a good narrative.

The real estate agent turned right on York Road, heading north. “Are you from here?” Amber asked.

“Moved down after college,” she said.

That would be a no. Amber disliked people who didn’t answer yes-or-no questions with a yes or a no. “It’s just that, to get to the airport, I would have taken York south—oh my god, stop, please stop.”

“What?”

“Pull into this little strip center. I need to see something.”

“Sure.” Said with an eye roll of a tone, two drawn-out syllables ending on a sigh.

This particular strip center, built in a faux Tudor style that Amber thought of as fairytale quaint, had been the nexus of Amber’s teenage years, bookended by a hardware store and a duckpin bowling alley. In between had been a toy store and a copying store. (Because people in the ’90s had needed places to make copies. Funny to remember what a big deal it used to be, making copies.) And a Baskin-Robbins, where Amber had worked during high school.

Today, only the hardware store remained. The duckpin bowling alley was a restaurant. The Baskin-Robbins, where she had leaned into so many cartons of ice cream, feeling the cold on her cheeks and the burn of boys’ gazes on her exposed cleavage, was a florist. The copying store was all poke bowls and acai smoothies, and the toy store was—*vacant*.

Vacant. Available. A blank canvas for someone with an imagination.

She got out of the agent’s car and peered into the toy store, which, for all she knew, had led many lives over the past two decades. Think of how many lives Amber had managed in the same time span. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. Felon, Student, Saleswoman, Gallerina, Waitress. The toy store’s most recent incarnation appeared to have been some kind of clothing outlet. There were racks and hangers, nothing more. A plain white rectangle of a space, it could be virtually anything.

“How much would a property like this rent for?” Amber asked. “By the square foot?”

“I wouldn’t know,” the agent said. “I don’t do commercial.”

Amber took note of the number on the for lease sign, capturing it on her phone. Her flight was in three hours, and she had checked out of the hotel. But Rod’s house was hers; the furniture was still in place. (“Arrange to sell furniture and stage house” was also in her Notes app.) She could sleep there tonight if necessary and, according to Southwest.com, switch her flight to the next day for only an additional \$30.

“You know what,” she told the agent, “I realize there’s one more thing I need to do before I leave town. I’ll grab my bag from your trunk, if you don’t mind, and then Uber to the airport later. I’ll be in touch about getting the house ready for market.”

“No rush,” the agent said. “By the time we get through the punch list, it will be November, practically the worst time of the year to put a house on the market.”

“Yes, well, I’m sorry my stepfather didn’t think about that when he was dying.”

The woman was immune to insults. It was downright admirable, this impenetrable ego that did not allow for the possibility that she could ever be the butt of a joke. How Amber

longed for a skin that thick. She had always been self-conscious, even before she had anything to be self-conscious about. “Okay, I’ll be in touch. I know a handyman who can do most of the things we discussed. I’ll get the estimates and forward them to you.”

There was a Starbucks on the west side of York Road. Amber crossed over, rolling her suitcase behind her, and called the leasing agent listed on the sign. He was enthusiastic about her interest, but couldn’t meet her for at least another two hours. That was fine by Amber. She got out her laptop and researched what she could about galleries in Baltimore, folk art in particular. She called Miss Margaret back in New Orleans, wanting a sounding board, although her mind was already made up.

“You’d really stay up there?” Miss Margaret asked. “After all this time? And all that happened? I thought you wanted nothing to do with that town. You were all over sighing and complaining about going back for even two days.”

“I think I can improve the house, get more money for it, if I’m willing to be a DIY’er.”

“While you’re losing money every month trying to run a *gallery*.”

It was funny to Amber how Miss Margaret made *gallery* sound like an epithet, given that she had owned a successful one for twenty years.

“You know it’s something I’ve always wanted to try, and it makes more sense to do it here. Too much competition down there.”

“So should I be rooting for you to have a big success and never come home, or should I be counting on you going broke, like every other hobbyist who ever tried her hand at this, and coming back with your tail between your legs?”

“I’m *not* a hobbyist,” Amber said. “Don’t be cruel, Miss Margaret. You know what I have in storage, my contacts, my instincts, my eye, my *talent*. I could run an amazing gallery.”

“Look, I’m going to miss you, that’s all. I don’t like many people. I can’t afford to lose one of the few I actually enjoy talking to, especially when she’s my best employee.”

“I’ll miss you, too. And New Orleans. I’ll miss New Orleans something fierce. But it’s, well, a sign, this space being available in *that* shopping center. I need to know if I could be just, well, me again. Me and nothing more than me.”

Who would she be if she moved back here? How would she be known? She had to find out.

“It’s a sign the way the sirens calling to Ulysses were a sign. You can’t go home again, Amber. You, of all people—I’m surprised you want to.”

“I am, too.”

She stared out the window at York Road, changed and yet not as changed as she would have expected. Twenty years was nothing; twenty years was an eternity. She pressed a button on her phone and whispered to it, almost conspiratorially, “Siri, please google Joe Simpson Baltimore Towson High School.”

Siri boomed back, always so proud of herself: “I found this on the web!” Alumni news, a profile from the *Baltimore Business Journal*, but nothing in the first page of results from 1997. Why should there be? Joe Simpson might have been a jerk, ditching what he believed to be a merely queasy Amber on prom night to pursue his ex-girlfriend, but that wasn’t something people remembered twenty years later, was it?

Instead of talking to Siri, who would shout her words back to her, Amber typed her next query into Google: *Amber Glass, Joe Simpson, Prom Mom, Cad Dad*. Ah, here they were, the headlines and images she had fought so hard to erase from her memory and her life. But also: There was Joe in his tux, undeniably handsome. And, Amber had to admit to herself, undeniably miserable. Even before he knew how the evening would end, he wasn’t happy to be going to prom with her.

She sipped her coffee, which wasn’t as milky as she liked. If she took the space across

the street, she'd become a regular, and she'd playfully cajole the baristas into making her latte more of a café au lait. She imagined herself picking up a venti here in the mornings, then going into that restaurant after work, the one in the old duckpin alley. But she would not live in Rod's house, not for long. That was still going on the market. She'd rent a place, as she did in New Orleans. She could never see herself as a homeowner, if only because it made it difficult to leave somewhere fast. She had to be prepared to *go*, always.

Still, maybe this was Rod's true bequest to her; maybe he knew she needed just a touch of serendipity to return to Baltimore. Quiet, stoic Rod. He had married her mother when Amber was only six. Amber's father was long gone and out of touch, but her mother had forbidden Rod to be a father to Amber in any way—no adoption, no financial help of any kind, no surname, although Rona had happily become Veronica Deluca on all *her* official papers. What if she became Amber Deluca now? But no, she had to know what it would be like to be Amber Glass here, in the old neighborhood. Did people remember her, or did they just remember an event?

At least one person had to remember her.

Joe, Amber thought. Joe Simpson. For a few months in her junior year of high school, Amber had moved through the world as if she were living in a movie, an extremely specific kind of movie, where the most desirable boy in school realized that he was in love with his mousy little tutor. It had been a silly fantasy, but it had been powerful enough to block out reality—her thickening waist and expanding breasts, the disappearance of her period. *He loves me, he loves me, he loves me*, she had told herself in the weeks leading up to the prom. Yet he had never said those words, not even close. *I love him, I love him, I love him*. She had never said those words out loud, but she had expected that love to transform her, change her life.

Maybe it still could.

*

Joe tossed the ball for his serve, marveling as he often did at how much depended on the toss. The score was 40–0, and Joe was up 5–3, having broken Zach's serve in the last game. He could wrap this up with one good serve. He sent the ball scorching on an angle that kissed the corner of the box. Not an ace, but Zach barely got his racket on it, whiffing the ball into the net. Zach's backhand had fallen apart over the summer, and he now had legitimate yips. Joe hit to Zach's backhand whenever possible. It was a game. You were supposed to try to win.

Zach slumped on a bench and towed his face, trying to be a good sport about dropping two sets. "You're on fire lately."

Joe shrugged, took the compliment.

"I wonder how many more weeks we have outdoors," Zach continued. "I hate being in the bubble over the winter, having to drive over to Pikesville."

"I hate it, too," Joe said. "I don't like that pressurized air. But, thanks to climate change, we can probably play outside for another six to eight weeks. Almost to Thanksgiving."

"Are you here this year or going to see Meredith's parents?"

"We do her folks in the even years, my mom's in the odds, so thank god we're here."

"I thought your in-laws were okay, as in-laws go."

"They are. Even when they're irritating the hell out of me, I remind myself they raised Meredith, so they deserve some credit, if only for that. But I don't think any man ever stops feeling like a guest in his in-laws' home."

"When you have kids," Zach said, "you don't have to do that stupid do-si-do between households. Grandparents come to *you*."

“Yeah, I think I can handle visiting my in-laws on an every-other-year schedule, thank you very much.” Joe and Meredith had agreed even before they got engaged: no kids, ever. Everyone said they would change their minds, that they were too young to know what they wanted, but they had never wavered. Yet people with kids continued to lobby them, even as they began aging out of the possibility. Misery loved company.

“You want to grab a bite?”

“Sure. Meredith has her book club tonight. Where do you want to go?”

“I’m yearning for souvlaki or a gyro. You up for the Towson Diner?”

The question was probably innocent, but it felt like Joe’s serve, Zach aiming for a weak spot, payback for Joe winning. It wasn’t that he consciously avoided the Towson Diner, but it wasn’t his favorite place. The Towson Diner was a boy in a tux, living his last carefree hour.

“Sure,” he said. “Why not?”

And once he said them, the words became true. *Why not?* The diner never did a thing to him. The hotel, either, come to think of it. Five years ago, he had arrived at a symposium at the Sheraton and been unable to get out of his car. But, as Meredith kept telling him, Joe had a legitimate form of PTSD, and he needed to confront it, one memory at a time. “No one remembers ‘Cad Dad’ but you,” she had said. “So let’s bury him once and for all.”

At the diner, Joe defaulted to his regular order as a bottomless pit of a high school boy: chocolate shake, Reuben, french fries, but with mayo on the side instead of ketchup, a preference he had acquired from Meredith.

It was fucking great. “This is fucking great,” he said to Zach.

“If you can’t eat like this after two sets of tennis, then what’s the point of the tennis?” Zach said, attacking his gyro. It looked good and Joe wanted to share, but that didn’t feel like something two men did. Spouses, yes. Women, sure. But not men.

They ate in happy silence, friends for more than thirty years. They kept their questions to generalities. *How’s work.* Amazing, they assured each other, and Joe knew he was speaking the truth and assumed Zach probably was, too. A personal injury lawyer never had to worry about drumming up business. Joe, meanwhile, had bought a Class C shopping center up in Cecil—try to say that three times fast—that he was planning to flip on his own in order to impress his boss, who also happened to be his uncle. *How’s Meredith, How’s Amanda.* Great, Joe said. Busy, Zach said. They talked a little bit about politics, speculating on next year’s presidential race, careful not to reveal which candidates they liked, not because they were inclined to disagree on politics, but because they understood some things were better left unspoken. They were men who voted with their wallets, and it was not clear, more than a year out from Election Day, who would best benefit their bottom line. They ordered beers, but only one apiece. “School night,” Zach said, and Joe replied: “Oh, we drank so much more on school nights.”

Was that even true? Joe had been a good kid, beneath his popular jock veneer. A little drinking, a little weed, but overall a good kid. Excellent grades, except for that one blip in fall of senior year, when everything fell apart and he had to work with a peer tutor, who happened to be Amber Glass. God, the randomness of life. Your high school girlfriend, who you think is the actual fucking love of your life, breaks up with you on the eve of the first day of senior year. You crater—cut classes, cut practice, walk around like you’re Kurt Cobain. The school recommends you use the peer tutoring program, and fate—was it fate?—assigns you to Amber Glass. Joe had never bought into his mother’s belief that Amber was an out-and-out schemer, but she’d definitely had an agenda.

But here he was at the Towson Diner, and it was fine. The high school reunion, two years ago, had been fine. No one cared, no one remembered. A boy had sat here once in a tux, tie untied, boutonniere long gone. Now that boy was a man, a man who had reclaimed

and rebuilt his life. A bad boy could become a good man, as Meredith had told him many times.

“The girl I went to prom with—” he began.

Zach looked wary. They talked about high school. They talked about life after high school. They never spoke about prom night.

“Yeah?”

“What was her name?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“Yeah, I’m just curious if you do.”

Zach looked into his beer glass as if it were a magic mirror in some fantasy film. “Something ... weird. Her name was weird.” A pause. “*She was weird.*” Said tentatively, as if he was worried Joe might disagree, or even take offense. Zach had *hated* Amber, and that was before everything went down.

“Ya think?”

The two old friends laughed and toasted. They had turned forty this year, which was supposed to be a dangerous age, but Joe didn’t feel like he was at midlife, so how could he have a midlife crisis? He tried to be grateful, consciously grateful, every day. He wasn’t perfect; he still made mistakes. He could do better and he would, he promised himself. *He would.* The main thing is, he always tried to do his best.

And Meredith deserved the lion’s share of the credit. God, the miracle of Meredith—if it hadn’t been for that nightmarish prom night, which had led to his decision to defer college for a year, then his abrupt change of heart to choose a small private school instead of a Big Ten university, he might never have met her. Twenty-one years in and he still felt a little anxious when he was away from her. She kept him steady; she was his rock. She would be buzzed tonight from all the book club wine, irritated by the women who had failed to read the book. She would be *frisky*.

“We’re lucky men, Zach,” he said, knowing it was true of him and hoping it was true for his friend, yippy backhand aside.

*

Meredith surveyed the dining room table. Platters of cheese and meats, homemade pimento cheese (her mother’s recipe), crudités, fruit. Inevitably, there would be women on keto or Whole30, but they could eat the vegetables and the meats, maybe the hummus? She was unclear on all the rules of the various diets. Meredith had never dieted in her life. Oh, she watched what she ate and exercised rigorously, but she had been spared the body obsession that plagued almost every other woman she knew, perhaps because her body had failed her so fundamentally when she was young. A near-fatal illness at age eleven has a way of changing one’s perspective.

She refused to “theme” her refreshments to the book, a practice she found frivolous and, in the case of tonight’s book, *Beloved*, potentially offensive. Meredith had resisted book clubs for a long time, and she had joined this one only because she had been assured by her best friend, Wendy, of its seriousness: Discussions were substantive, and no one ever failed to do the reading.

Wendy Asher was a sweetheart, but if she thought these halting discussions that boiled down to thumbs-up, thumbs-down were substantive, well, in the parlance of Meredith’s hometown: *Bless her heart.* There were always at least two members who tried to fake their way through it, relying on Wikipedia or film versions, while others seemed intent on talking about anything except the book. The one promise that the club had kept was selecting books that had won major awards. The choice of *Beloved* had been prompted by

Toni Morrison's death at summer's end. The selection had been Meredith's, but she did not have high hopes for an elevated conversation.

Why do you continue to go, Joe had asked once, if you dislike it so much? Meredith wished she knew. She had been like this all her life. Dutiful to a fault. Kind, prone to caring for others, but seldom without this inner caustic voice salting her compassion. Only Joe was spared her harsh judgments, which was how she had known Joe was the one for her, her actual soulmate. From almost the moment they had met, she had recognized that he brought out her best nature. Not only the need to care for him—that was instinctive, she cared for everyone, beginning with her parents—but also a profound and singular passion. *This is my person*, she told herself, lying in Joe's dorm bed the first time they had sex, *and I am his*. They were only nineteen, she had no right to be right—and yet she was.

Meredith was seldom wrong. Which came in handy on tests, but it was more burdensome in life than others might suspect. She saw how the evening would unfold. Sweet Wendy, mindful of her assurances that this was a serious book club, would try to keep the more frivolous members on topic. Darla would drink too much, topping off her glass after every three sips. (As the daughter of high-functioning alcoholics, Meredith could never stop keeping tabs on those who drank too much.)

Anne would worry about reverse racism, which she saw everywhere, and which she refused to acknowledge wasn't really a thing. "Why can she say this, when I can't say—" Brynn wouldn't have read the book. She almost never did, and she didn't even try to fake it. How strange, Meredith thought, to join a club and fail to do the one thing the club was about. She supposed some women simply needed a reason to get out of the house. The club had been formed when the members' children were young; perhaps the women had been too sheepish to call it what it really was: the Drink-and-Complain-About-Your-Husbands Club.

Within two hours, all her prophecies had come true. Meredith sat, nursing her glass of wine. *Beloved*, for all its technical virtuosity, had left Meredith cold. She just didn't have much to say about motherhood. She had learned not to reveal that childlessness was her choice. When the topic came up, she said: "It just wasn't in the cards," which was true, yet allowed people to assume there had been fertility issues, especially if they knew about her childhood cancer. Some people were pushy enough to pursue the topic. "What about adoption, or surrogacy, or—" and Meredith would repeat: "It just wasn't in the cards." Once, at a party, Zach's wife, Amanda, got sloppy drunk and said, "You were smart, not ruining that body of yours for kids, but then, given that you're a plastic surgeon, I guess it wouldn't have been a big deal to get everything fixed. Hey, does your practice do vaginal rejuvenation?"

Meredith almost wanted to congratulate Amanda for managing to misunderstand her on every possible level. She had even been tempted, for once in her life, to tell the truth to someone other than Joe: *I decided never to have kids because I ruined my parents' marriage. There's a reason that two of the best liver specialists in New Orleans ended up having drinking problems, and it was me, their daughter.*

Hostages to fortune, it is said of children. Meredith would add: Hostages to happiness. She could afford to love only one person completely. That person was Joe.

Wendy offered to stay to clean up, which was really an offer to gossip, but Meredith hugged her and gently pushed her toward the door. She could clean up faster on her own. Within thirty minutes, both dishwashers were humming, and she headed upstairs. Joe, who had come in through the garage entrance while the women were gathered in the living room, was upstairs in their bed, freshly showered. He was better-looking at forty than he had been at nineteen, but then—so was Meredith. Heads turned when they walked into rooms. Maybe it was because they had devoted their lives to their devotion, never taking

each other for granted. Their love kept them shiny.

She undressed in front of him. He watched attentively, as if he had never seen her disrobe before. She let her hair out of its upsweep, unbuttoned her blouse, slid out of her jeans. She took her time, putting things where they belonged—clothes in the hamper, earrings in the velvet-lined jewelry drawer in the ridiculously oversized closet, really a dressing room, large enough for a small sofa, not that anyone ever lounged in it. The previous owners had stinted on nothing in the house's renovation, then had the bad luck to divorce right before the free fall of 2008 and been forced to unload it at a bargain price.

Meredith's movements were not overtly sexy, but she could tell Joe wanted her. The only bum note came when she took off her socks; one could actually hear, even over the buzz of CNBC, the way the fabric peeled away from her rough, battered feet, almost as if her soles were covered in Velcro. Meredith's feet were hideous, rough and dragon-like from her treadmill runs. After she and Joe made love, she would get up and vaseline them, put on sweat socks. After.

"Who are you tonight?" Joe asked, rubbing her shoulders.

"Who do you want me to be? What do you want me to do?"

He whispered a favorite scenario in her ear and she took charge, which they both enjoyed, and by the time they were finished, she fell asleep promptly, too tired to get up and put on her socks. Her rough feet scratched against the sheets, and she angled them in such a way as to ensure that they would not brush against Joe in the night.

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Joe grabbed his keys from the peg by the front door. Although the house had a three-car garage, he preferred to park under the porte cochere. Wasn't that the point of a porte cochere? Besides, the gate to their driveway was achingly slow; once he got to the top of the hill, he didn't want to wait for the garage door to open as well.

"I'm heading out," he said into the intercom next to the door, which allowed one to speak to the front gate and various rooms throughout the vast house. He felt like the school principal, making the daily announcements. "I'll order from the car. What was it you wanted—garlic soup and—"

"Soupe à l'ail, with a poached egg," Meredith croaked, blowing her nose. "And a baguette if they have it."

"Feed a fever, starve a cold, stuff a Meredith," he said, an old joke between them. Meredith became ravenous when ill. Ravenous and picky. She was always demanding and discerning about food, a trait that Joe found distressingly common in New Orleanians. He liked food, too, but he didn't need to *talk* about it all the time.

And when Meredith got sick—and she was prone to colds and flus, much to her disgust—only restaurant meals would do. She had heard about the garlic soup at this newish French restaurant on York Road, and when she came down with her usual fall head cold, nothing else would do.

"Carryout?" echoed the person who answered the phone. "We do not normally do *carryout*." Joe felt as if a *monsieur*—and an insult—were implicit.

"Do you have a bar?" Joe asked. Assured they did, he said: "I'll come in, I'll have a drink, order my food, and then ask for take-home containers. Is that cool?"

A beat. "Certainly," the supercilious voice on the phone said. "Whatever pleases you."

What would please me is not being lorded over by some dude who's answering the phone at a "French" restaurant on York Road. But Joe always tried to focus on solutions. Too many people got distracted by one-upmanship, the urge to be the alpha in any encounter, social or business. Joe wanted only to get out with what he wanted. Most of the time, that meant being nice, and, luckily, nice came naturally to him.

He hadn't realized that the bistro, which Meredith had heard about from one of her friends, was in the quaint faux Tudor shopping center that had been central to his childhood. How funny to think he had once played duckpins where he now sat nursing a Peroni. He had ordered the garlic soup and bread, then added a pot de crème on impulse. He would poach the egg for the soup himself, rather than gamble on it surviving the ten-minute trip back to Ruxton. He made a good poached egg.

He wished he had time to walk the streets of his old neighborhood while the food was prepared. Joe considered Stoneleigh the platonic ideal of a place to grow up. Big but not gross houses, lawns large enough for badminton and croquet, basketball hoops in driveways. He had tried to persuade Meredith to move there when they were ready to buy their first house, but it was too suburban for her tastes. "I like a little more grit," she said, pushing for Fells Point, convenient to Hopkins, where she was a resident at the time.

"But Stoneleigh has such a great school district," Joe had argued.

"Why do we have to worry about schools when we're not having kids?" Meredith countered.

"Resale value, baby. Resale."

They had compromised on a North Baltimore neighborhood known as Keswick. Like a