



**SAME AS  
IT AS  
EVER  
WAS**

a novel

**CLAIRE  
LOMBARDO**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Most Fun We Ever Had*



ALSO BY CLAIRE LOMBARDO

*The Most Fun We Ever Had*

SAME AS  
IT EVER  
WAS



Claire Lombardo

DOUBLEDAY · New York



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Claire Lombardo

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

[www.doubleday.com](http://www.doubleday.com)

DOUBLEDAY and the portrayal of an anchor with a dolphin are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Cover painting by Rachel Campbell © Rachel Campbell All rights reserved 2023 / Bridgeman Images

Cover design by Kelly Blair

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lombardo, Claire, [date] author.

Title: Same as it ever was : a novel / Claire Lombardo.

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023036860 | ISBN 9780385549554 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780385549561 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Domestic fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3612.O453 s26 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230830

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023036860>

Ebook ISBN 9780385549561

ep\_prh\_7.0\_147271455\_c0\_r0

# Contents

Dedication

## Part I: Lost in the Supermarket

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

## Part II: Via Chicago

Chapter 25

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

### [Part III: World of Fools](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

## Chapter 59

*Acknowledgments*

*A Note About the Author*

\_147271455\_

*For Molly*



PART I



# Lost in the Supermarket

It happens in the way that most important things end up having happened for her: accidentally, and because she does something she is not supposed to do. And it happens in the fashion of many happenstantial occurrences, the result of completely plausible decision making, a little diversion from the norm that will, in hindsight, seem almost *too* coincidental: a slight veer and suddenly everything's free-falling, the universe gleefully seizing that seldom chosen Other Option, running, arms outstretched, like a deranged person trying to clear the aisles in a grocery store, which is, as a matter of fact, where she is, the gourmet place two towns over, picking up some last-minute items for a dinner party for her husband, who is turning sixty today.

This one is a small act of misbehavior by any standards, an innocuous Other Option as far as they go: choosing a grocery store that is not her usual grocery store because her usual grocery store is out of crabmeat.

Afterward she will remember having the thought—leaving the first grocery empty-handed—that such a benign change to her routine could lead to something disastrous, something that's not supposed to happen. This is how Mark—scientific, marvelously anxious—has always looked at the world, as a series of choices made or not and the intricate mathematical repercussions thereof. Julia's own brain didn't start working this way until she'd known him for a substantial period of time; prior to that she'd always been content with the notion that making one decision closed the door on another, that there was no grand order to the universe, that nothing *really* mattered that much one way or another; this glaring difference in character is perhaps what accounts for the fact that Mark dutifully pursued a graduate degree in engineering while Julia neglected to collect her English and Rhetoric diploma from Kansas State.

Now, though, they've been together for nearly three decades and so she did consider—just a fleeting thought—that so cavalierly altering routine could result in some kind of dark fallout, but at the time she'd been envisioning something cinematically terrible, something she wouldn't have encountered had she just forgone the crab instead of driving fifteen minutes west, a cruel run-in with a freight train or a land mine, not with an eighty-year-old woman assessing a tower of kumquats.

Julia doesn't recognize her at first. She doesn't consciously notice her, in fact, nor does she stop; she's headed industriously past the organic produce to seafood, contemplating a drive-by to dry goods to see if they have anything interesting in stock; sometimes the stores in the farther-out suburbs have a more robust inventory. She's considering taking a spin around the whole store, checking out what else they have that hasn't been subject to the frenzied consumption of the usual suspects at her usual grocery, when it hits her; the woman's face registers in her brain belatedly, clad in the convincing disguise—that invisible blanket—of age.

Hers has not been a life lived under the threat of too many ghosts; there's only a small handful of people whom she has truly hoped to never encounter again, and Helen Russo happens to be one of them. So why does she find herself taking a step closer to the endcap of the dry goods aisle, getting out of the flow of traffic so she can turn to look back? It's been over eighteen years, which is somewhat astonishing both given the fact that they used to see each other at least once a week *and* given the smallness of her world, a world in which something as small as altering one's grocery plans can be considered a major decision.

She is unsure, as well, what moves her back to where she came from, but Helen's not in produce anymore, has progressed to the bulk section, where she is weighing out a bag of pine nuts. According to their accompanying sign, they are \$16.75 for a half pound, and she remembers becoming aware of such extravagances during the afternoons she spent at the Russos' house, the heaviness of the cutlery, the paintings that looked suspiciously like originals, the bottles of wine she'd look up when she got home and find to have cost \$58.

She is here procuring the ingredients for celebratory crab cakes, one of her husband's favorites. The thought of Mark sets off a momentary swirling of wooziness. She's carrying around an empty basket and, feeling somewhat ridiculous, she tosses in a purple orb of cabbage. In some ways Helen looks predictably much older than she remembers; in others—her optimistic ponytail, the glint of the big blue beads around her neck—she hasn't changed at all. Julia takes a few steps, then a few more. Normally she is the queen of evasion, treats her trips to the grocery like sniper missions, seeing how many faces she can avoid having to interact with; this does not mesh with whatever gregarious phantom has overtaken her body now, impelling her close enough to see the pair of drugstore cheaters propped on top of the woman's head.

"Helen?"

When Helen turns to face her, there's a curious vacancy in her gaze; her eyes trail slowly up and down. Julia thinks to consider how she looks; she runs a hand through her hair. She worries, momentarily, that she'll be mistaken for some kind of miscreant; she's wearing what Alma calls her *clown pants* and one of Mark's old button-downs; she likes to think the combination has miraculously resulted in something extemporaneously stylish, but it's likelier taken her in the opposite direction. It can be hard to tell, in the suburbs, whether an eccentrically clad woman carrying around a single organic cabbage is nomadic or expensively disheveled. She begins to consider how much she herself has changed since last they met, and the volume of those changes hits her forcefully and all at once; she is, upon reflection, more changed than not. She becomes nervily aware of her pulse pumping in her ears. It's entirely within the realm of possibility that Helen won't even *recognize* her—that old worry, so familiar to her, that you haven't meant to someone as much as they meant to you—but then Helen speaks.

"It couldn't be."

The heartbeat sound recedes, overwhelmed by the surrounding bustle, a woman arguing with the butcher, a man talking into an invisible earpiece, a child in a down vest singing shrilly about a baby shark. Helen's voice is remarkably unchanged; Julia is transported, not unpleasantly, to afternoons in the Russos' backyard, Helen—older, then, still, than Julia is now—imparting her parental platitudes, her pithy one-liners, her candid confessions, all with the confidence and ease

of a person who actually enjoyed her life, astonishing to Julia at the time because she herself did not.

“I—thought that was you,” she says stupidly.

“Don’t tell me I haven’t aged a day,” Helen says, “or I’ll have you assassinated.”

Nervous, she laughs. “No, you look—”

“Because I have to say, you look *quite* a bit older, so I must look aeons older.”

It’s more surprising than insulting—and, to be fair, she *is* quite a bit older—but still she feels herself flush. “I think *aeons* is pushing it.”

Now Helen laughs. “Well, you recognized me. That’s saying something.”

“You look terrific,” she says, almost shyly.

“I remember you being a bad liar,” Helen says. “Even your *grocery* cart isn’t entirely convincing.”

They both look down to regard the cabbage. “Just getting started,” she breathes.

“How are you?” Helen asks. “Give me the rundown. The bullet points.”

“Oh, I—” She’s not sure what to say. It occurs to her that the last time she saw Helen was before Alma was in the picture, but it seems a strange thing to announce to a near stranger: *I gave birth! Seventeen years ago!* In fact, the plot points of her life over the last two decades are myriad; so much *bloomed* from that time, toxic and otherwise, tiny green shoots sprouting from ravaged land. A new job, another baby, a doubled-down commitment to her marriage, and then, after that, the way things relaxed into routine: the accrual of acquaintances and the maturation of her children and the adoption of a tiny black terrier mix named Suzanne, the embroidery of daily existence, fabric softener and presidential elections, the dogged forward march of time. The brightly colored billiard balls of her days—kinetic and pressing, constantly cracking against one another, rerouting and requiring her intervention—suddenly seem trivial. She hasn’t seen Helen in eighteen years; it’s difficult to account for anything.

“Same old,” she says in lieu of all this. “Just—kids, work, et cetera.” Her former self would be astonished to see her now, a woman with standing fellow-mom coffee dates and a special Nordstrom credit card and a relative sense of peace.

“*Kids*,” Helen says. “Plural?” This was, she recalls, what being with Helen was like, constantly seeing your same old life from brand-new angles, finding dull spots that needed buffing or shiny ones you hadn’t noticed: two children! A marvel! Helen lifts her eyebrows theatrically, and then her face opens in recognition. “That’s right; the last time I saw you things were—percolating, were they not?”

She’d wondered if Helen would remember. Suddenly she’s standing, once again, in the library on that horrible afternoon, seeing the woman for what she thought would be the last time.

“They were,” she says. “They—did. A daughter.”

“Goodness, I suppose that’s what happens when you don’t see someone for a hundred years, isn’t it? And how’s your son? He must be— He was—gosh, the tiniest little thing, wasn’t he?”

“Less tiny,” she says. “Twenty-four.” Ben used to sit at their feet under the table, playing with the vintage trains Helen’s husband, Pete, unearthed for him from the basement. She clears her throat. “And you? How are you? How’s Pete?”

“Dead,” Helen says easily, not missing a beat. “The latter, not the former, though I appear to be, as we have established, not far from it.”

“Oh, God.” Her sadness is immediate, and surprisingly close to the surface: Pete Russo waving down at her from the roof of their house, Pete Russo letting Ben make bongo drums out of his paint buckets. “Helen, I’m so—”

“I haven’t seen you in ages,” Helen says. “It’s inevitable not everyone would survive.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I am too,” Helen says, and for a second some of her hard-edged jollity slips away, leaving in its wake something tender and abandoned.

“How are you doing?”

“Oh, fine,” she says. “It’s been a long time. It’ll be—Lord, five years, come August.”

“I don’t...”

“Julia.” Helen smiles at her. “It’s fine. Let’s move on. How about yours?”

“My—?”

“Husband?”

“Oh.” The reason she’s here, having this unbelievable conversation, instead of home already, awash in the safe boring miasma of party preparation, where the universe surely intended her to be. How is she supposed to account for Mark, Mark whose life was very nearly ruined because of her initial run-in with Helen Russo, Mark who has not, thank God, died in the last eighteen years? “He’s—well. He’s actually— It’s his birthday; that’s why I’m—here.” She lifts her basket inanely.

“Of course,” Helen says after a beat. “The anniversarial cabbage.”

She laughs on a delay.

Helen is studying her again, a new expression on her face, equally unreadable. “I should let you get back to it. It really is lovely to see you, though. You look happy.”

“Do I?” She doesn’t mean to ask.

Helen smiles. “You do.”

Now would be an opportune time to tell Helen that she too looks happy; now would also be a perfectly normal opportunity for either one of them to make some effortful remark about *getting together* or *catching up*.

“Enjoy,” Julia says ludicrously, gesturing to Helen’s cart, which features—she notices now—its own somewhat comical sparsity, four key limes and the little parcel of nuts.

“Uh-huh,” Helen says. She touches Julia’s arm, and Julia is glad for her long sleeves, covering her goose bumps. “You do the same.”

She does not recall collecting her groceries, waiting in the express line, putting them on the conveyor belt.

“Did you remember your reusable bags?” the cashier asks her with accusation.

“I remembered them in spirit,” she says, but the cashier doesn’t laugh.



She doesn't feel herself fully exhale until she gets into the car. The crabmeat and the cabbage—she felt bad for it, couldn't bring herself to return it to its pyramid—cheerfully ride shotgun beside her. All of her most critical moments with Helen occurred over the course of a few months, but Julia's brain compresses them now, everything happening neatly in the span of a minute, crying in the car to languidly drinking wine on Helen's deck to the last time she saw her at the library, all of it in sixty seconds. She feels dizzy, opens her sunroof and inhales deeply.

On the drive here, she'd been responsibly—if not sort of wearily—listening to public radio, but when she gets out of the parking lot she turns on one of her daughter's playlists. Classic rock is back in, so every other song on the list is something she knows, Bowie and the Stones punctuated by bands with novelistic names, You Will See Our Smiling Faces on the Nine Train and Reckon with Your Racist Grandfather or Slight Right for the Sanitary Landfill; she always gets the names wrong and it drives her daughter crazy. She admits she doesn't *get* much of the contemporary music Alma favors, but she has taught herself—constantly, desperately scrambling for her daughter to love her—to appreciate it, and she turns it up even louder, pushes down the window button so she can get some air.

She used to consider herself something of an expert, somewhat *cool*; she and Mark used to go to shows almost every weekend and she could recite the entire Pavement discography in order either of release or personal preference and she'd inured Ben to the same, by osmosis, playing her CDs much louder than she is now while she was driving him to preschool or on one of their daily madcap ventures around town, and this, of course, makes her think of Helen again, and the ghost of Helen's touch on her arm, the unbelievability of the fact that she'd just approached the woman in the first place, but also of Helen back then, in the succulents room at the botanic garden, Helen sensing her desperation—the hollow-eyed, socially inept young mom in a Jesus and Mary Chain T-shirt she'd been—and plucking her out of the crowd.

The playlist gives way to “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” and she cranks it, too loud—the man beside her, stopped at the light, is staring openly—but she turns it up a couple of notches more, merging onto the Eisenhower, glad for the excuse to move fast.

---

Mark is nowhere to be found when she gets home, which is fortuitous because the second she enters the kitchen she experiences a strange, sudden shakiness, a wobble at the edges of her vision that forces her to sit down hard on one of the stools at the island. She feels Suzanne's small forepaws pressing against her shins, the dog straining up on her hind legs to inspect her, affronted that Julia has not engaged in the usual homecoming fanfare. Suzanne treats Julia's every reappearance—whether she has been gone five minutes or five hours—like a sweepstakes, eyes wild and body vibrating with excitement. Suzanne is the most obsessed with Julia that anyone has ever been, more obsessed with Julia than Julia has ever been with another living being, including her children. It is flattering—if at times unnerving—to be loved this much.

“It's okay, tiny lady,” she says to the dog. “I'm just a little out of sorts.”

“That is not remotely what happened, but fine,” Alma is saying to someone when she comes into the room, then: “Mom?”

She opens her eyes, lifts her head. Her vision clears; her daughter is resplendent and terrifying, Amazonian, with her dark unruly hair and her discerning green eyes. She has an empty mixing bowl tucked against her rib cage and a crushed La Croix can in either hand.

“Hi, Ollie.”

The dog whines, and Julia leans down and lifts her up.

“Don’t cry,” she says into Suzanne’s fur.

“You shouldn’t police her emotions,” Alma says, but then, frowning, asks, “Are you okay?” It’s a rare display of interpersonal concern as far as Alma goes, and Julia wishes for a second that she *weren’t* okay, that she could call upon her daughter for some kind of nontraumatic assistance, splinter removal or a dislocated shoulder, something that would require close bodily contact with this person she’s borne, so long as Alma is—such a rarity from her narcissistic lioness—offering.

As it is, there isn’t a way to navigate deftly. To allude to something physiological will make her daughter (who doesn’t particularly enjoy her parents’ live presence but also doesn’t want them *dead*) suspicious and to tell the truth—that she’d been steeling herself for an encounter with her husband following an encounter with the woman who’d almost ended their marriage—is obviously out of the question.

“Fine,” she says, and Suzanne wriggles, goes flying off Julia’s lap: the dog, like a cat, like her daughter, has a specific set of boundaries, desires constant attention but on very rigid terms. “Fine, fine, fine.”

She straightens her spine, rises from the stool and starts moving again; there are never not things that need doing in the kitchen, particularly when Alma has friends over, spills to be mopped or dishes dried or refuse—two denuded apple cores, the purple rind of an expensive wine-cured goat cheese—that will not make its own way to the trash can.

Mercifully, Alma accepts this, ready, with that unbridled teenage confidence, for the focus to return rightfully and exclusively to her.

“They called to reschedule my dentist appointment,” she says. “Dr. Gallagher had a death in the family.”

“Oh, that’s—”

“Which is actually good because we’re doing an AP Euro study group this week at the library—I mean good that it got canceled, not good that someone died—so I was wondering too if maybe I can use the car, so you won’t have to come pick me up super late every night?”

Alma had been a wildly clingy kid, but now she is a mostly autonomous and wholly inscrutable seventeen-year-old; she is mean and gorgeous and breathtakingly good at math; she has inside jokes with her friends about inexplicable things like Gary Shandling and avocado toast, paints microscopic cherries on her fingernails and endeavors highly involved baking ventures, filling their fridge with oblong bagels and six-layer cakes.

“I’m asking now because last time you told me I didn’t give you enough notice,” she says. She has recently begun speaking conversationally to Julia and Mark again after nearly two years

of brooding silence, and now it's near impossible to get her to stop. She regales them with breathless incomprehensible stories at the dinner table; she delivers lengthy recaps of midseason episodes of television shows they have never seen; she mounts elaborate and convincing defenses of things she wants them to give her, or give her permission to do. Conversing with her is a mechanical act requiring the constant ability to shift gears, to backpedal or follow inane segues or catapult from the real world to a fictional one without stopping to refuel. There's not a snowball's chance in hell that she won't be accepted next month to several of the seventeen exalted and appallingly expensive colleges to which she has applied, and because Julia would like the remainder of her tenure at home to elapse free of trauma, she responds to her daughter as she did when she was a napping baby, tiptoeing around her to avoid awakening unrest. The power dynamic in their household is not unlike that of a years-long hostage crisis.

"We'll see," she says, and then, before Alma can protest: "You have company?" She hears at least two voices coming from the living room and is fairly certain that one of them belongs to Margo Singh.

Alma drops the cans into the recycling bin. "Yup." Her daughter has declined to provide any helpful insight with respect to Margo and, more specifically, the ties that bind them; any efforts Julia has made to garner details on their relationship have been met with derision, the silent suggestion that her views of relationships are far too rigid.

"She's not my girlfriend," Alma said recently. "But she's also—not *not* my girlfriend. Nobody calls it that anymore, Mom."

Julia had refrained, then, from asking *nobody calls it what?* Alma's Privacy, in an ever-shifting order of priority among Alma's Grades and Alma's Burgeoning Political Opinions and Alma's Minute Existential Desires, is a popular topic of late. Plus Julia likes Margo; she wishes the girl made a little more noise when she walked—she has a tendency to appear mournfully from the shadows like a gravedigger—but she seems to have a good head on her shoulders, and she seems to be making Alma happy.

"Lovely," she says. "Where's Dad? Is your brother here yet?"

Alma makes a little how-should-I-know hum. She sets her bowl into the sink, then seems to sense Julia's gaze and reaches for the dish brush. "What are you cooking?"

"An assortment," she says absently, opening one cupboard and then the next, pulling out items at will and depositing them on the island. "Those little quiches. Cucumber salad. Crab cakes." She's assembling her tools, the celery, the bread crumbs; she had actually, prior to the afternoon's interruption, been looking forward to the preparation, labor-intensive enough to feel impressive but not so much as to preclude her also doing nineteen other things simultaneously. She knows better than to expect much help from her children.

Alma turns to face her, affronted. "God, Mom, really?" She's behaving as though she's just been shot, and Julia looks around, startled, for some newly introduced trauma, but everything seems the same, the bowl in her daughter's hands dripping dishwater onto the floor.

"What?" she asks, alarmed.

"I told you I'm off seafood," Alma says. "I told you that *weeks* ago."

She considers this. She wishes—horribly, a not uncommon desire when speaking to her daughter—that she could simply evaporate from this conversation. She feels, too, unbelievably tired, stymied by gravity; so much of motherhood has, for her, been this particular feeling, abject disbelief that she’s not only expected but obligated to do *one more thing*.

“Did you forget?”

“*Forget* is a strong word,” she says, and she extracts a bushel of cilantro from the door of the fridge. In fact she does remember; she’d just been hoping that the conversation on what Alma referred to as *incremental veganism*, like many conversations with teens, could be swept under the rug within a few days, replaced by something uniquely, inexplicably pressing.

She inhales slowly, deeply, through her nose, until she feels the air expand at the base of her throat. She halfheartedly attended prenatal yoga classes before Ben was born, unaware at the time that the breathing exercises therein would aid her not during childbirth but instead, two decades later, in violence prevention against her teenage daughter.

“Why are you *breathing* like that?”

“Just—getting some oxygen,” she says. “To my brain.”

“You told me you’d think about our cutting out animal products as a family,” Alma says, with an affected measure in her voice that makes Julia want to push her down a well.

“Honey, if you don’t want to eat it, you don’t have to. Plenty of other options.”

“Are you *mocking* me?” Alma asks, and gestures to Julia’s hands, in which she is holding—unthinkingly, like a volleyball or a severed head—her decoy cabbage.

She wants to laugh, fights the impulse to laugh, feels tears spring to her eyes instead.

“Why are you making that *face*?” Alma asks.

Mark’s entrance is a merciful interruption. He’s sweaty, back from a run, wearing his Lycra shorts and, strapped around his waist, the collapsible water bottle that she recently likened to a colostomy bag. He too bends to pet Suzanne, greeting her like he hasn’t seen her in a decade; they have all, since her arrival into their family, rearranged themselves around Suzanne in this way, though it has been suggested that Julia has rearranged herself the most.

“What’s that bracelet?” asks Alma. “You look extra weird today.”

He lifts his wrist, encircled with a strip of molded purple plastic, the pedometer prototype they’re testing at his work that Julia’s been hearing about ad nauseam for months. “The commercial ones are historically inaccurate,” he says.

“Maybe,” Alma says, “but they don’t look like *that*.”

“Tough crowd in here,” Mark says, putting his arm around his daughter; she mewls some protest but lets him, even leans her head against him, sweat and all. Julia herself has not been in such close physical proximity to Alma in ages; she emits a powerful radiant energy that keeps her mother, though notably not her father, whom she likes a lot more, at bay.

Mark comes to kiss Julia, and Alma watches them, repulsed. They are a family whose clock is always slightly askew, affections misplaced and offenses outsized. But it’s better, she thinks—please, God, it must be better—than the complete absence thereof.

“Is this what we’re having for dinner?” Mark asks, palming the cabbage like a crystal ball, and Alma lets out a monstrous sigh before disappearing from the room. They both listen to the

dull thump of her socked footsteps stalking into the den.

“Improv,” she says. “For your birthday.”

Mark puts his hands on her shoulders. “What are you making?”

“Animal products.”

“Can I help?”

“Nope.” She makes her voice bright, turns to face him. “My gift to you.”

“Plus all this.” He indicates the spread before them on the counter, the firing squad of Malbecs along the sink, the groceries. She wonders if anyone else at the store had noticed her trundling up to Helen Russo, brazen in her clown pants. Mark has a hand at the nape of her neck, kneading gently. There must be some marital sixth sense that induces one party—unknowingly wronged—to suddenly behave with excess integrity, effectively increasing the guilt of the wrongdoer. It makes her nervous.

“Go shower,” she says, and swats him with a dish towel. “Make yourself presentable.”

She watches him leave the room, rakes a hand through her hair, tries to channel the energy she had an hour ago, her pre-Helen energy, focused on the task at hand. She’ll julienne the cabbage, turn it into a slaw. Sometimes she catches herself thinking thoughts like these—*I forgot to pay the lawn guy; Suzanne’s dog food delivery comes on Wednesday*—and she’s amazed by her own ridiculousness.

“Life is a struggle for us all,” she intones sometimes, to make Mark laugh, watching the asshole day trader next door yelling at his contractor, or a squirrel suspended upside down stealing seed from their cardinal feeder, but they’re no different, really; she has grown comfortable dwelling in her own ludicrous minutiae.

*Julienne the cabbage*, for fuck’s sake; it is a point of astonishment, really, how improbably lovely her life has become.



Things hadn't been lovely back then, far from it, those foggy, cotton-swaddled days before she'd met Helen Russo, days so interminably long and paralytically monotonous that she couldn't distinguish one from another. Twenty years ago, one house ago. They'd moved from the city to the middlebrow part of a highbrow suburb, enrolled Ben at Serenity Smiles, which, she thought, sounded like the name of a not particularly expensive stripper, or a high-end rehab facility, though it was in fact—or as well—one of the most exclusive preschools in the area. She refused to call their town by its given name, had begun, irritating Mark to no end, referring to it as *Pinecone Junction. The Suburbs*, mecca for successful adults with incomprehensible job titles and their disillusioned stay-at-home spouses, oak trees and opulence and artfully disguised despair. They stretched on for miles, the street signs and the artisanally preserved cobblestone roads, station wagons and all-terrain strollers, acres of dense manicured foliage, palatable lawn signs, self-conscious displays of affinity for particular tradesmen, self-conscious showings of tepid political affiliation, plaques commemorating nothing at all, and you weren't even allowed to *drive* normally; not infrequently she'd find herself on a street with a speed limit of 15 mph, like something out of olden times. Everyone liked to think their suburb was the best suburb, but really they were all the same, slight variations in proximity to the lake or degree of amorphous "diversity" or "historical significance" but ultimately a wash. Their street was called *Superior*, but her amusement about this, after a few months, had worn thin, along with almost everything else.

What had happened? Who knew. The world started falling apart, or she and Mark forgot how to talk to each other, or perhaps it was just her temperature dropping, settling back to where it was comfortable. They'd left the city around the time Ben started walking, and he was now fully and confidently mobile, if not especially graceful, and also miraculously fluent in both English and a bit of Spanish, which they taught on Wednesdays at Serenity Smiles; Julia, meanwhile, felt static, like she'd been embalmed. She wasn't sleeping; her internal monologue had taken on a caffeinated, nervy quality, the unpunctuated warbling of a crackpot, and she was aware—in her rare interactions with fellow adults—that her external monologue might be exhibiting some of the same mania.

She'd begun to notice that when she wasn't waiting for something to happen—something pedestrian, like Ben waking up from a nap, or sometimes something implausibly awful, like an asteroid falling from the sky—she felt entirely unmoored, brooding, usually while staring pensively into the middle distance like a disenfranchised Victorian nursemaid.

She didn't hear Mark enter the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” Like he’d found her tangled in barbed wire. It was his favorite question to ask her of late, always with an ingratiating softness to his voice.

She straightened. “I thought I saw something stuck in the garbage disposal.”

Mark shuddered a little. He had a visceral antipathy for any kind of mysterious food product, things rotten or globular or simply unidentified. He touched her shoulder lightly as he passed en route to the coffeepot, did not ask any follow-up questions regarding the disposal, the potential for dark mystery therein.

“I wish this week could just skip right to Friday,” he said, seemingly unaware of both the childishness and the banality of this statement, stirring sugar into his coffee. “I woke up already overwhelmed. Doesn’t that seem like a bad sign?”

Julia, on the rare occasions she slept, frequently awakened preemptively dreading whatever was to come and retroactively dreading what had already elapsed, but because Mark was wearing a tie and had a master’s degree, and because Julia’s woes were frequently foregrounded in dealings with Duplo architecture and coerced carrot consumption, Mark was more vocally allowed to rue his responsibilities; that was just the way the world worked. She had long since stopped trying to envision his days out of both boredom and jealousy.

How *dull* their life had become, zero to platitudes in ten seconds flat; surely this put them in the running for some kind of sleepy Olympic victory. *Remember our honeymoon in Greece*, she did not say. *Remember when we had sex standing up in an alley in Corfu while a rat watched; remember when we had sex in the bathroom of a Frank’s Nursery & Crafts; remember when we had sex in a—*

“Jules?”

“Mm.” She blinked, was met once again with his furrowed concern. “Yes, definitely a bad sign.”

The furrow deepened; apparently she had missed some intervening remark. “I asked what you were doing today,” he said.

“The same thing I do every day,” she said. “Oh the wonders that await.”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “I ran into Erica when I was cutting the grass the other day; she mentioned she’d like to get her son together with Ben. Why don’t you call her?”

“Who’s Erica?”

“The woman who lives a few blocks down, the one who goes jogging with the toddler in the little cart behind—”

She wrinkled her nose. “The one with the face?”

“Julia, come on.”

She stared at him, this man who wanted to fix everything. The solutions to his own problems tended to be less complicated than hers; they always had been. She was so lonely it had started to feel like a corporeal affliction.

“What would I do with her?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he mused, his back to her, poking around in the fridge. “Mom things.”

It instantly enraged her. “What do you mean, *mom things*?”

“I just mean—you could go for a walk. Or maybe like a book club?”