

The Wedding



People

Alison
Espach

A NOVEL

THE
WEDDING
PEOPLE

a novel

ALISON ESPACH



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To all the strangers who made a dreary moment magical

It was awful, he cried, awful, awful!
Still, the sun was hot. Still, one got over things.
Still, life had a way of adding day to day.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *MRS. DALLOWAY*

TUESDAY

The Opening Reception

The hotel looks exactly as Phoebe hoped. It sits on the edge of the cliff like an old and stately dog, patiently waiting for her arrival. She can't see the ocean behind it, but she knows it's there, the same way she could pull into her driveway and feel her husband in his office typing his manuscript.

Love was an invisible wire, connecting them always.

Phoebe steps out of the cab. A man in burgundy approaches with such seriousness, the moment feels as if it has been choreographed long ago. It makes her certain that what she is doing is right.

"Good evening," the man says. "Welcome to the Cornwall Inn. May I take your luggage?"

"I don't have any luggage," Phoebe says.

When she left St. Louis, it felt important to leave everything behind—the husband, the house, the luggage. It was time to move on, which she knew because that was what they had all agreed to last year at the end of the divorce hearing. Phoebe was so stunned by the finality of their conversation, by the way her husband said, "Okay, take care now," like he was the mailman wishing her well. She could not bring herself to do a single thing after except climb in bed and drink gin and tonics and listen to the sound of the refrigerator making ice. Not that there was anywhere to go. This was mid-lockdown, when she only left the house for gin and toilet paper and taught her virtual classes in the same black blouse every day because what else were people supposed to wear? By the time lockdown was over, she couldn't remember.

But now Phoebe stands before a nineteenth-century Newport hotel in an emerald silk dress, the only item in her closet she can honestly say she still loves, probably because it was the one thing she had never worn. She and her husband never did anything fancy enough for it. They were professors. They were easygoing. Relaxed. So comfortable by the fire with the little cat on their laps. They liked regular things, whatever was on tap, whatever was on TV, whatever was in the fridge, whatever shirt looked the most normal, because wasn't that the point of clothing? To prove that you were normal? To prove that every day, no matter what, you were a person who could put on a shirt?

But that morning, before she got on the plane, Phoebe woke and knew she was no longer normal. Yet she made toast. Took a shower. Dried her hair. Gathered her lecture notes for her second day of the fall semester. Opened her closet and looked at all the clothes she once bought simply because they looked like shirts a professor should wear to work. Rows of solid-colored blouses, the female versions of things her husband wore. She pulled out a gray one, held it up in front of the mirror, but could not bring herself to put it on. Could not go to work and stand at the office printer and hold her face in a steady expression of interest while her colleague talked at length about the surprising importance of cheese in medieval theology.

Instead, she slipped on the emerald dress. The gold heels from her wedding. The thick pearls her husband had lain across her eyes like a blindfold on their wedding night. She got on a plane, drank an impressively good gin and tonic, and it was so nice and cool down her throat she hardly felt her blisters exiting the plane.

"Right this way, ma'am," the man in burgundy says.

Phoebe gives the man twenty dollars, and he seems surprised to be tipped for doing nothing, but to Phoebe it is not nothing. It's been a long time since a man has stood up immediately upon seeing her get out of a car. Years since her husband emerged from his office to greet her when she got home. It is nice to be stood for, to feel like her arrival is an important event. To hear her heels click as she walks up the old brick entranceway. She always wanted to make this sound, to feel grand and dignified when walking into a lecture hall, but her university was made of carpet.

She goes up the stairs, passes the big black lanterns and the granite lions guarding the doors. She walks through the curtains into the lobby, and this feels right, too. Like stepping back in time to an older world that probably was not better, but at least was heavily draped in velvet.

Then she sees the check-in line.

It's so long—the kind of line she expected to see at the airport, and not at a Victorian mansion overlooking the ocean. Yet there the line is, stretching all the way through the lobby and past the historic oak staircase. The people in it look wrong, too—wearing windbreakers and jeans and sneakers. The normal shirts Phoebe used to wear. They look comically ordinary next to the velvet drapes and the gilt-framed portraits of bearded men lining the walls. They look like solid, modern people, tethered to the earth by their titanium-strength suitcases. Some are talking on their phones. Some are reading off their phones, like they're prepared to be in this line forever and maybe they are. Maybe they don't have families anymore, either. It's tempting for Phoebe to think like this now—to believe that everybody is as alone as she is.

But they're not alone. They stand in pairs of two or three, some with linked arms, some with single hands resting on a back. They're happy, which Phoebe knows because every so often one of them announces how happy they are.

"Jim!" an old man says, opening up his arms like a bear. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Hey, Grandpa Jim," a younger man says back, because it seems practically everyone in line is named Jim. The Jims exchange violent hugs and hellos. "Where's Uncle Jim? Already on the course?"

Even the young woman working the front desk seems happy—so dedicated to looking each guest deeply in the eye, asking them why they're here, even though they all say the same thing, and so she replies with the same thing: "Oh, you're here for the wedding! How wonderful." She sounds genuinely excited about the wedding and maybe she is. Maybe she's still so young that she believes everybody else's wedding is somehow about her. That's how Phoebe always felt when she was young, worrying about what dress to wear for a month, even though she sat in the outer orbit of every wedding she attended.

Phoebe gets in line. She stands behind two young women carrying matching green dresses on their arms. One still wears her cheetah-print airplane neck pillow. The other has a bun so high the messy red tendrils dangle over her forehead as she flips through a *People* magazine. They are engaged in whispery debate over whose flight here was worse and how old is this hotel really and why are people so obsessed with Kylie Jenner now? Are we supposed to care that she's hotter than Kim Kardashian?

"Is she?" Neck Pillow asks. "I've actually always thought they were both ugly in some way."

"I think that's true about all people, though," High Bun says. "All people have one thing that makes them ugly. Even people who are like, professionally hot. It's like the golden rule or something."

“I think you mean cardinal rule.”

“Maybe.” High Bun says that even though she understands she’s baseline attractive, something that has taken her five years of therapy to admit, she knows that her gums show too much when she smiles.

“I’ve never noticed that,” Neck Pillow says.

“That’s because I don’t smile all the way.”

“This entire time I’ve known you, you haven’t been fully smiling?”

“Not since high school.”

The line moves forward, and Phoebe looks up at the coffered ceiling, which is so high, she starts to wonder how they clean it.

Another “Oh! You’re here for the wedding!” and Phoebe begins to realize just how many wedding people there are in the lobby. It’s unsettling, like in that movie *The Birds* her husband loved so much. Once she spots a few, she sees them everywhere. Wedding people lounging on the mauve velvet bench. Wedding people leaning on the built-in bookcase. Wedding people pulling luggage so futuristic it looks like it could survive a trip to the moon. The men in burgundy pile it all into high, sturdy towers of suitcases, right next to a large white sign that says WELCOME TO THE WEDDING OF LILA AND GARY.

“Your rule is definitely not true about Lila, though,” Neck Pillow says. “I mean, I seriously can’t think of one way she’s ugly.”

“That’s true,” High Bun says.

“Remember when she was chosen to be the bride in our fashion show senior year?”

“Oh yeah. Sometimes I forget about that.”

“How can you forget about that? I think about how weird it was once a week.”

“You mean because our guidance counselor insisted on walking down the aisle with her?”

“I mean more like, some people are just born to be brides.”

“I actually think our guidance counselor is coming to the wedding.”

“That’s weird. But good. Then I’ll actually know someone at this wedding,” Neck Pillow says.

“I know. I pretty much don’t know anyone anymore,” High Bun says.

“I know, ever since the pandemic, I’m like, okay, I guess I just have no friends now.”

“Right? The only person I know now is basically my mom.”

They laugh and then trade war stories of their terrible flights here and Phoebe does her best to ignore them, to keep her eyes focused on the magnificence of the lobby. But it’s hard. Wedding people are much louder than regular people.

She closes her eyes. Her feet begin to ache, and she wonders for the first time since she left home if she should have brought a pair of sensible shoes. She has so many lined up in her closet, being navy, doing nothing.

“So what do you know about the groom?” Neck Pillow whispers.

High Bun only knows what Lila briefly told her over the phone and what she learned from stalking him on the internet.

“Gary is actually kind of boring to stalk,” High Bun says, then whispers something about him being a Gen X doctor with a receding hairline so minor, it seems like there’s a good chance he’ll die with most of his hair. “How did you *not* stalk him after Lila asked you to be a bridesmaid?”

“I’ve been off the internet,” Neck Pillow says. “My therapist demanded it.”

“For two years?”

“They’ve been engaged that long?”

“He proposed just before the pandemic.”

They inch forward in line again.

“God—Look at this wallpaper!”

Neck Pillow hopes that her room faces the ocean. “Staring at the ocean makes you five percent happier. I read a study.”

Finally, they are quiet. In their silence, Phoebe is grateful. She can think again. She closes her eyes and pretends she’s looking at her husband across the kitchen, admiring his laugh. Phoebe always loved his laugh, the way it sounded from afar. Like a foghorn in the distance, reminding her of where to go. But then one of the Jims yells, “Here comes the bride!”

“Jim!” the bride says.

The bride steps out of the elevator and into the lobby wearing a glittering sash that says BRIDE so there is no confusion. Not that there could be any confusion. She is clearly the bride; she walks like the bride and smiles like the bride and twirls bride-ishly when she approaches High Bun and Neck Pillow in line, because the bride gets to do things like this for two or three days. She is a momentary celebrity, the reason everybody has paid thousands of dollars to come here.

“I’m so happy to see you!” the bride cries. She opens her arms for a hug, gift bags hanging from her wrists like bracelets made of woven seagrass.

Neck Pillow and High Bun were right. Phoebe can’t identify one thing that is ugly about the bride, which might be the one thing that’s ugly about her. She looks exactly how she is supposed to look—somehow both willowy and petite in her white summer dress, with no trace of any undergarment beneath. Her blond hair is arranged in such a romantic and complicated tangle of braids, Phoebe wonders how many tutorials she watched on Instagram.

“You look beautiful,” High Bun says.

“Thank you, thank you,” the bride says. “How were your flights?”

“Uneventful,” Neck Pillow lies.

They do not mention the surprise flock of seagulls or the emergency landing because the bride is here. It is their job for the entire wedding to lie to the bride, to have loved their journeys here, to be thrilled by the prospect of a Newport wedding after two years of doing practically nothing.

“When do we meet Gary?” High Bun asks.

“He’ll be at the reception later, obviously.”

“I mean, obviously,” Neck Pillow says, and they laugh.

The bride hands out the seagrass bags (with “emergency supplies”) and the women gasp as they pull out full-sized bottles of liquor. All different kinds, the bride explains. Things she picked up when she and Gary were traveling in Europe last month.

Scotch. Rioja. Vodka.

“Oh, how fancy,” High Bun says.

The bride smiles, proud of herself. Proud to be the kind of woman who thinks of other, less fortunate women while traveling Europe with her doctor fiancé. Proud that she returned a woman who knows what to drink and not to drink.

“Here you go,” the bride says to Phoebe with such intimacy it makes Phoebe feel like she is a long-lost cousin from childhood. Like maybe once upon a time, they played checkers together in their grandfather’s dodgy basement or something. She hands Phoebe one of the bags, then gives her a really strong hug, as if she has been practicing bridal hugs the way Phoebe’s husband used to practice professorial handshakes before interviews. “Just a little something to say thank you for coming all this way. We know it wasn’t easy to get here!”

It was actually very easy for Phoebe to get here. She didn’t stop the mail or line up a kid in the neighborhood to water the garden or get Bob to cover her classes like she always did before vacations. She didn’t even clean up the crumbs from her toast on the counter. She just put on the dress and walked out of the house and left in a way she’s never left anything before.

“Oh, I…” Phoebe begins to say.

“I know, I know what you’re thinking,” the bride says. “Who the hell drinks chocolate wine?”

The bride is good. A very good bride. It’s startling to be spoken to like this after two years of intense isolation, of saying, “What is literature?” to a sea of black boxes on her computer, and none of the boxes knew, or none of the boxes cared, or none of the boxes were even listening. “What is literature?” Phoebe asked, again and again, until not even she knew the answer.

And now to be given a hug and a bag of chocolate wine for no reason. To be looked in the eye by a beautiful stranger after so many years of her husband not looking her in the eye. It makes Phoebe want to cry. It makes her wish she were here for the wedding.

“But it’s better than you think,” the bride says. “Germans love it, apparently.”

The bride smiles and Phoebe sees a bit of food stuck between her two front teeth. There it is: the one thing that makes the bride ugly today.

“Next?” the front desk woman calls.

It takes a moment for Phoebe to realize it’s her turn. She sees High Bun and Neck Pillow already walking into the elevator. She takes the bag, thanks the bride, and walks toward the front desk.

“You must be here for the wedding, too?” the woman asks. Her name is Pauline.

“No,” Phoebe admits. “I’m not.”

“Oh,” Pauline says. She sounds disappointed. Confused, actually. Her eyes flicker to the bride in the distance. “I thought everybody here was here for the wedding.”

“I am definitely not here for the wedding. But I made a reservation this morning.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Pauline says, typing as she speaks. “I just think that someone here has made a very big mistake. It might have even been me! You’ll have to excuse us, we’re a little understaffed since Covid.”

Phoebe nods. “Labor shortage.”

“Exactly,” Pauline says. “Okay, what’s your name?”

“Phoebe Stone.”

This is true. This is her name, the name she has come to think of as hers. Yet it feels like she’s lying when she says it now, because it’s her husband’s family’s name. Whenever she hears herself say it, it somehow pushes her outside of her body. It makes her see herself from up above like a bird, the way the wedding people must see her, and she’s sure from up there, they can spot the one thing that is ugly about her, too: her hair. Something should be done about that hair. She

completely forgot to comb it this morning.

“Here you are,” Pauline says. She is so focused now on giving quality service she does not even look up when one of the wedding people walks through the doors and slips on the floor behind Phoebe.

“Uncle Jim! Oh my God! Are you okay?” the bride shouts.

Uncle Jim is not okay. He is on the floor, yelling something about his ankle, and also the floor, which is a terrible floor, he says, not to mention, total bullshit. The men in burgundy gather around him and start apologizing to him about the floor, which yes, yes, they agree is the worst floor, even though Phoebe can see it’s some kind of Italian marble.

“There it is,” Pauline says. Pauline is a hero. “You’re in the Roaring Twenties.”

“Is each room a decade?” Phoebe asks. She pictures each room having its own hairstyle. Its own war. Its own set of stock market triumphs and failures. Its own definition of feminism.

“You know, I don’t actually know what all the themes are!” Pauline says. “I’m new. They seem kind of random to me. But that’s a *great* question.”

She opens the drawer, searches for the right key.

“It’s our penthouse suite,” she says. “The only one with a proper view of the ocean.”

It feels practiced, as if Pauline whispers something to each guest to make them feel special. *It’s our only room with a desk from the Vanderbilts’ family home. It’s our only room with an infinite supply of toilet paper.*

“Wonderful,” Phoebe says.

“So what brings you to the Cornwall Inn?”

Even though she knew this question was coming, Phoebe is startled by it. When she imagined herself here, she didn’t imagine herself having to speak to anybody. She is, simply, out of practice.

“This is my happy place,” Phoebe blurts out. It’s not the entire truth, but it’s not a lie.

“Oh, so you’ve stayed with us before?” Pauline asks.

“No,” Phoebe says.

Two years ago, Phoebe saw the hotel advertised in some magazine, the kind she only ever read while waiting in the fertility clinic. She looked at the pictures of the Victorian canopy bed, overlooking the ocean, and she thought, Who actually plans their vacations by looking through a travel magazine? She felt angry at these people, not that she knew anybody who did things like that. Yet days later, when her therapist asked her to close her eyes and describe her happy place, she pictured herself on that canopy bed because she could only imagine herself happy in a place she had never been, a bed she had never slept in.

“Well, this is a happy place, indeed,” Pauline says.

Phoebe picks up the key. It’s already been too much conversation. Too much pretending to be normal, and she is not paying eight hundred dollars just to stay here and pretend to be normal. She could have easily done that at home. She feels herself grow weary, but Pauline has so many more questions. Would she like to add a spa package? Would she like to book a visit with their in-house tarot reader? Would she like a normal pillow or a coconut pillow?

“What’s a coconut pillow?” Phoebe asks.

“A pillow,” Pauline says, “with coconut in it.”

“Are pillows better that way?” she asks. “With coconut inside them?”

That's what her husband would have asked. A bad habit of hers, a product of being married for a decade—always imagining what her husband might say. Even when he's not around. Especially when he's not around. Phoebe didn't think she'd end up being a woman like this. But if the last few years have taught her anything, it's that you really can't ever know who you are going to become.

"Pillows are much better that way," Pauline says. "Trust me. We'll have one sent right up."

Phoebe walks into the elevator and feels relief when the doors start to close. Finally, to be getting away from the wedding people. To be doing something for a change. To have a key to a place that is not her house.

"Hold the elevator!" a woman calls out.

Phoebe knows it's the bride before she sees her. She yells like she deserves this elevator. But nobody deserves anything. Not even the bride. Phoebe presses the button to close the doors, but the bride slides a hand between them. They don't bounce open like they're supposed to, maybe because the Cornwall was built in 1864. An old hotel has no mercy, not even for the bride.

"Fuck!" the bride shouts.

"Oh, God!" Phoebe says. She pries the doors back open, then stares at the bride's hand in disbelief. "You're bleeding."

The bride holds up the gash across the back of her knuckles like a child and takes the tissue Phoebe offers without saying thank you. Phoebe presses the button, and the doors close again. The women don't say anything as the bride politely bleeds into the tissue and they begin to ascend. Phoebe hears the bride try to steady her breath, watches the tissue darken.

"I'm really sorry," Phoebe says. "I didn't realize that would happen."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine," the bride struggles to say. She clears her throat. "So, are you in Gary's family?"

"No," Phoebe says.

"Are you in my family?"

"You don't know who's in your own family?" Phoebe asks. The question makes Phoebe want to laugh, and it's a strange feeling. The first time she has wanted to laugh in months. Years maybe. Because how does the bride not know her own family? Phoebe knew everybody in her family. She had no choice. It was so small. Just Phoebe and her father, tiny enough to fit inside his old fishing cabin.

"I have a very large family," the bride says, like it's a big problem.

"Well, I'm not in your family," Phoebe clarifies.

"But you have to be in one of our families."

"No," Phoebe says. "I'm not in any family."

It had been a crushing realization, one that started slowly after the divorce, and got stronger with each passing holiday, until she woke up this morning to such a quiet house, she finally understood what it meant to have no family. She understood it would always be like this—just her, in bed, alone. No longer even the sound of her cat, Harry, meowing at the door.

"But everybody is here for the wedding. I made sure of it." The bride eyes the gift bag in Phoebe's hands, confused. "This has to be some kind of mistake."

The bride says it as if Phoebe is the big nightmare she has always been dreading. Phoebe is something going wrong at a time when nothing is supposed to go wrong. Because every little

thing during a wedding has the power to feel like an omen—like the high winds through the park that flipped over the paper plates and sent a chill down Phoebe’s spine on her own wedding day. We should have gotten real plates, she thought, something with weight and substance.

“There’s no mistake,” Phoebe says.

This is Phoebe’s happy place. The place Phoebe has chosen out of all the possible places. How dare the bride make Phoebe feel like she’s not supposed to be here.

“But if you’re not here for the wedding, then what are you here for?” the bride asks in a much lower pitch, as if her real voice has finally emerged. Because now in this private space with a person not attending the wedding, the bride doesn’t have to be the bride. She can speak however she wants. And so can Phoebe. Phoebe is not High Bun or Neck Pillow. She is nobody, and the only good thing about being nobody is that she can now say whatever the fuck she wants. Even to the bride.

“I’m here to kill myself,” Phoebe says.

She says it without drama or emotion, as if it’s just a fact. Because that’s what it is. She waits for the truth of it to stun the bride into an awkward silence, but the bride only looks confused.

“Um, what did you just say?” the bride asks.

“I said, I’m here to kill myself,” Phoebe repeats, more firmly this time. It feels good to say it out loud. If she can’t say it aloud, then she probably won’t be able to do it. And she has to do it. She has decided. She has come all this way. She feels relief as the doors begin to open, but the bride presses the button to close them.

“No,” the bride says.

“No?” Phoebe asks.

“No. You definitely cannot kill yourself. This is my *wedding week*.”

“Your wedding is a *week*?”

“Well, like, six days, if you want to be technical about it.”

“That’s a ... long wedding.”

Phoebe’s wedding was a single night. She had tried not to make a big deal out of it. And why? It seems silly now, to have not celebrated something good when she had the chance. But Phoebe and her husband were a year out of graduate school, trained to live on a stipend with a cheap bottle of wine and a nice tree in the distance. And a wedding was such a spectacle, Phoebe thought. Every time she ordered flowers or sampled another piece of cake or told her friends how happy she was, she got this horrible feeling that she was bragging.

“A week is actually pretty standard now,” the bride says with a tone that makes Phoebe feel old. “And people are coming a long way to be here.”

But Phoebe doesn’t care.

“This is the most important week of my life,” the bride pleads.

“Same,” Phoebe says.

Phoebe presses for the doors to open, but the bride closes them again, and it makes Phoebe angry, the way she gets only when she’s stuck in traffic on the way to work. All those taillights ahead made her want to scream, and yet she never did, not even in the privacy of her own car. She was not a screamer. Not the kind of woman who ever made demands of the world, did not expect the streets to clear just because she was in a rush. She was not like the bride, who stands so entitled in her glittering sash like she’s the only bride to have ever existed. It makes Phoebe

want to rip off the sash, whip out her own wedding photo, show her that she had been a bride once, and brides can become anything. Even Phoebe.

But then the bloody tissue falls to the ground. As the bride picks it up, she lets out a half sob, then looks at Phoebe as though her entire life has already been ruined.

“Please don’t do this,” the bride begs, and it gives Phoebe that feeling again, as if she knows her, like the bride is asking from one cousin to another.

“I’ll be very quiet,” Phoebe promises. “I mean, I might put on some light jazz in the background, but you won’t hear it.”

“Are you joking? Is this a sick prank or something? Did Jim put you up to this?”

From her purse, Phoebe pulls out her ancient Discman and a CD titled *Sax for Lovers*. One of the only things she brought from home. From the first night of their honeymoon in the Ozarks. A small motel on the side of a canyon with a heart-shaped hot tub that made the whole room humid. Her husband found the CD in the stereo. Sax for Lovers, he read aloud, and they laughed and laughed. Well, put it on, lover, she said, and they danced until they undressed each other.

“Oh my God,” the bride says. “You’re serious. You’re going to do it here? In your room? When?”

“Tonight,” Phoebe says. “At sunset.”

She is going to smoke a cigarette on the balcony. She is going to order room service. Have a nice meal while looking out at the water. Eat an elaborate dessert. Listen to the CD. Take a bottle of her cat’s painkillers and fall asleep in the large king-sized canopy bed as the sun goes down. It is going to be quick, beautiful, and entirely bloodless, because Phoebe refuses to make the staff clean like her friend Mia cleaned after her husband Tom slit his wrists. That’s just selfish, Phoebe’s husband said when they heard, and Phoebe agreed, because Tom survived. Because it felt important for a husband and wife to agree on something like that. But also because Phoebe is a tidy person, afflicted by the belief that each book has its rightful place on the shelf and blood should always be inside our bodies, even after death, especially after death, and how awful for Mia, to have to kneel down and scrub her husband’s blood out of the grout.

“There will be no mess,” Phoebe promises.

“No,” the bride says firmly. “Absolutely not. This can’t happen. This can’t be real.”

But her wound is a red circle that keeps expanding. The bride looks at it and says, “How could you *do* this to me?”

Is Phoebe really doing anything to her, though? If it’s not Phoebe, something else will ruin it. That’s how weddings go. That’s how life goes. It’s always one thing after another. Time the bride learns.

“Believe it or not, this actually has nothing to do with you,” Phoebe says.

“Of course it does!” the bride says. “This is my wedding! I’ve been planning this my entire life!”

“I’ve been planning this my entire life.”

It’s not until Phoebe says it that she realizes it’s true. Not that she’s always wanted to end her life. But it’s been an idea, a self-destruct button Phoebe never forgot was there, even during her happiest moments. And where did this sadness come from? Did her father pass it on like a blood disease?

“Please,” the bride says. “Please don’t do this here.”

But she has to. This is the only place that feels right: a five-star hotel a thousand miles from home, full of rich strangers who won't be upset about her death and a staff so well trained that they will simply nod over her corpse and then quietly move her through the service elevator in the morning.

But here is the bride, already upset.

"Please," the bride says again, like a child, and it occurs to Phoebe that that is what she is. Twenty-six. Twenty-eight, maybe? A child the way she and her husband were children when they got married. The bride doesn't understand yet, what it means to be married. To share everything. To have one bank account. To pee with the door wide open while telling your husband a story about penguins at the zoo. And then one day, to wake up entirely alone. To look back at your whole life like it was just a dream and think, *What the fuck was that?*

"What about your husband?" the bride tries, noticing Phoebe's wedding ring. "Your children?"

Phoebe is done explaining herself. She hands her one last tissue.

"Consider it a wedding gift," Phoebe says. "I hope you two will be very happy."

The doors open. The top floor. Phoebe is finally here. But of course, it doesn't really matter where she is. She can be on the top floor, by the ocean, or in the small bedroom of her house. There is no such thing as a happy place. Because when you are happy, everywhere is a happy place. And when you are sad, everywhere is a sad place. When they went on those terrible vacations in the Ozarks, they were so happy, they laughed at nearly everything. And the towels were so shitty and short, but it was fine, because they revealed her husband's athletic legs up to the thigh. You're scandalizing me, she said.

"Lila!" High Bun shouts from the end of the hall.

There is no escaping for either of them. The bride flattens out her dress, prepares herself to be the bride again, but then spots a red dot on her hem.

"Is that blood?" she asks Phoebe.

The dress is ruined. They both know it. They are two women who have bled on their underwear for the majority of their lives, and they know there is no unruining it. But the bride takes a deep breath as High Bun and Neck Pillow approach, holds out her arms wide to greet them all over again. Phoebe wonders how many times tonight the bride will have to do this.

"We're on the same floor!" High Bun says, while Neck Pillow eyes the gash on Lila's hand but says nothing. They are good bridesmaids, refusing to point out the things that make the bride ugly.

"What room are you in?" Lila asks.

"The Gloucester," High Bun says. "Is that how you pronounce it?"

"I think you're supposed to say Gloster," Neck Pillow says.

Phoebe begins walking down the hall, leaving the bride fully caught in the web of her wedding, the one she spun for herself as a small girl, dreaming of this moment.

And will High Bun and Neck Pillow remember her tomorrow morning after her body is removed? Will they think, Is the dead woman that one we saw you with in the elevator? Or will they only remember seeing the bride?

The hall gets darker as she goes, lit up by only one perfectly placed copper sconce. Phoebe walks by an alcove with an ice machine that reminds her of other hotels, lesser hotels, the kind

she would stay at in her old life when she used to go to conferences and give talks on the marriage plots of the nineteenth century. There is a vending machine, too, but it's hidden behind a tall gold-leaf wall, like some kind of agreement among rich people. This is a nice hotel. If you want to do something you shouldn't, please do it in private.

Inside the room, Phoebe locks the door. She is satisfied by the sharp, metallic sound. She is alone again. She leans her back against the door, and before she admires the ocean view or the golden tassels on the lamps, she looks down to realize she is still holding the gift bag. She takes out the German chocolate wine. A small bottle of something called Everybody Water. A candle hand-poured by the maid of honor, whoever she is. A pack of cookies that look as much like Oreos as they legally can. I will never have another Oreo, Phoebe thinks. And it's these small things she can't accept. The never drinking wine again. The never again feeling her husband's finger down her spine. The body always wanting to be a body.

She opens the German chocolate wine and takes a sip. The bride is right. It's better than you'd think.

“At the Cornwall, we can go sailing on an America’s Cup winner,” Phoebe said to her husband, Matt.

“We can rent a vintage car and drive it around like dumb bastards,” Matt said.

This was January two years ago. They were in bed, searching the internet, trying to plan their most indulgent vacation ever—a thing Phoebe and Matt decided they needed after their final visit to the fertility clinic. The embryos had been bad, it had all been a waste, and Phoebe had miscarried—though the doctor would never say it like that. He said, “It was a nonviable pregnancy,” and “I’d suggest not doing a sixth cycle at this point,” and the whole drive home, Phoebe couldn’t stop feeling like her body had nothing to do with her. Her body was just some piece of land, like the overharvested soybean fields along the highway. Phoebe drank whiskey for the first time in months, and Matt stared at the moon through the window until he said, “Let’s go somewhere fun for spring break.”

That’s when Phoebe remembered the Victorian hotel from the magazine. She found the Cornwall Inn online.

“Look, we can sit in the hot tub while staring at the ocean,” Phoebe said.

“We can slurp oysters and somehow laugh at the same exact time,” he added, and it felt good to make this list of new things they suddenly wanted together.

Eventually, Matt fell asleep, but Phoebe’s body was still too uncomfortable to sleep. She was still bleeding. She stayed up looking at the hotel, analyzing the rooms and the excursions—there were so many possible excursions. They could paddleboard with seals. Go on a “water journey” at a nearby spa. Visit Edith Wharton’s house on the Cliff Walk. Do yoga by the ocean, not that she had ever done yoga. But she liked the thought of becoming a woman who casually did yoga by the sea.

She made a detailed spreadsheet of excursions, because she was a researcher by profession. Kept a long list of every book she ever read and her favorite lines from them. Wrote a dissertation tracking each time Jane Eyre went on a walk in Brontë’s novel. Became proficient in German one year, then Middle English the next. And after sex with her husband, she always wanted to think more deeply about it, like: What was the first use of the word *cunt* in the English language? And Matt would laugh and say, “Shakespeare, probably?” and Phoebe would continue: “I bet it was Chaucer.” And then they both looked it up to learn that two hundred years before Chaucer, there was a street in Oxfordshire called Gropecunt Lane.

She loved the way Matt indulged her. They were very similar—he was a researcher, too, though he would never call himself that. He was a philosopher. He read books on Friday nights and overanalyzed commercials with her, and engaged her in long debates about what they should call their private parts during sex, even if all they could agree on was that they would never call them private parts.

But when Phoebe showed him the spreadsheet the next morning, Matt said, “You made a spreadsheet of fun?” the same way he once said, “You made a spreadsheet of sex?” And yes. Phoebe was thirty-eight. They couldn’t afford to be casual anymore about trying to have a baby. But when the time came for sex, he looked at her across the bed like, Okay, are we on schedule?

and she looked at him like he was nothing at all, just the vase on the end table.

“You honestly expect me to believe that people go on vacations without making a spreadsheet of fun first?” Phoebe asked.

It was a joke, but he didn’t take it as one, so it didn’t feel like one. He just looked at her like he was deciding something about her. A short glance, but her husband did not need much to come to a conclusion. Her husband was a careful and astute reader of text. He once wrote a thirty-four-page article about a single word in Plato.

“I’m sure it’s great,” he said, and then kissed her goodbye.

Matt was not the most handsome man in the world, but he had been to her. And he seemed to get better-looking with age. The light gray taking over his brown hair, the smile that devastated her every time. Her husband could still go out into the world and have children without her—it was a thought she had every time he left the house for work. She wondered if he thought it, too.

“See you at dinner,” she said, and they went to teach at the same university in separate cars. She taught literature, while he taught philosophy. She ate a CLIF bar at her desk. She left for a meeting and passed Bob’s giant office, the consolation prize for having to be department chair. He was listening to a string quartet loud enough for her to hear. “’Ello,” he said, even though he was not British. She went upstairs, walked by her husband’s door, which was open, but not really, because he was with a student. A brunette. A girl. He always kept the door open if a girl was in his office, even when all he was doing was listening to her describe her relationship to the Bible.

“I never realized you could read it like it was just a book,” the girl said. “I never understood that actual human beings wrote the Bible. I thought God wrote it. Is that stupid?”

“That is not stupid,” Phoebe’s husband assured her.

Then Phoebe went to the Adjunct Lounge Committee meeting, made up entirely of men with monosyllabic nicknames that somehow passed as professional names. Jack. Jeff. Stan. Russ. Vince. Mike. Phoebe was the only woman and the only adjunct, brought in to answer questions about what a woman and an adjunct might want from this future office space.

“Phoebe?” Mike asked. “What do you think?”

It was a nonviable pregnancy.

“Do you think the chairs should have tablets or no tablets? Russ thinks the tablets look too industrial,” he said. “We want you to feel at home. But the tablets do eliminate the need for coffee tables.”

Successful men all over the world are always celebrated for their ability to eliminate something so they can make more room for something else. Like the three polyps Dr. Barr removed from her uterus to make room for her future children.

“I think the real coffee tables would be nice,” Phoebe said. And then they all went home—the men to their wives and Phoebe to her husband. But he was not there yet.

Getting a drink with some work people, he texted.

She poured herself some leftover wine and wondered who the work people were. She couldn’t ask, because she knew that would get classified as overbearing, and she tried so hard never to be overbearing, especially at this delicate stage of their marriage. She tried so hard not to give a shit about the ways she was losing her husband, but why? Of course, she gave a shit. He was her husband.