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VERY
COLD
PEOPLE

a novel

Sarah Manguso

Author of *300 Arguments*

HOGARTH



Very Cold People

A NOVEL

Sarah Manguso



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My parents didn't belong in Waitsfield, but they moved there anyway. My mother answered the first knock at the door of the new house, expecting a casserole. *We'd painted the house Evening Fog*, she told me, *but the woman from across the street wanted to know why we'd painted it purple like Italians*. Some people wore their difference honestly, but my parents were liars, illegitimate Waitsfielders, their off-whiteness discovered only after the paint had dried. By the time I was born, the house had faded to the color of dirty snow.

The oldest houses in Waitsfield were older than the town and bore plaques to mark their age. Generations of families had been born and died in them, and the town's six graveyards were populated mostly by children. Over the centuries the slate stones had eroded and sunk in the dirt, and they looked like gray, crooked teeth inscribed with little lambs and angels.

On the way to school I walked past a three-hundred-year-old mustard-yellow saltbox that my mother admired for its leaded glass windows and historically correct paint color. It probably had all the right antique fixtures inside, big

sooty hearths and Indian shutters, visible proof of connection to the first, best people.

My mother referred to western Massachusetts as *out west*, and I was mostly ignorant of the geography beyond our neighborhood. Three-quarters of the town stayed unknown to me, and that mystery drummed up a sense of scale. To this day I couldn't tell you how to get to the Lodge School, where the rich kids went. It was just there, somewhere, in those ten square miles, not for me to find.

I often asked my mother to drive us down to the part of town where every house had a plaque. It looked like a movie set. I knew a girl whose house had been used in a television ad for a clothing store. The ad was shot in the spring, and the crew had sprayed the lawn and the windowsills with sticky fake snow.

At home, my mother cut out wedding announcements from the *Courier*, the only paper in town. Maybe the groom was a Cabot, and the bride was an Emerson, and they sat on the boards of libraries and museums. My mother didn't know these people, but she liked the way they looked on our refrigerator.

She also liked to study an old typeset record of the town's census, turning the well-handled pages as one would a beloved picture book, but there were no pictures, just lists of names and addresses. She cross-referenced the addresses with real estate listings in the *Courier* each week. Sometimes she took me to look at the big old houses. I never saw any people, just the houses, big Georgian colonials with widow's walks and little gabled windows like third eyes opening.

I liked the estates, too, especially on Pond Road, which my mother told me was the most expensive street in town. Pond was a dead end, so it took some

persuading to get my mother to drive the length of it and turn the car around, but when I reminded her that we'd never seen another soul walking or even driving around there, she could be tempted. Those houses weren't old. They were just enormous and ornate, with statuary and foreign-made cars. A couple of them were always under construction and hidden under blue tarps.

I recognized the difference between the houses that were the oldest and those that were merely the most expensive. I liked the old houses, and I swooned over the girls and boys at school with names like Verity and Cornelius. I knew that I could never build the kind of relationship with money that the people in those stately, drafty, oldest houses enjoyed. I didn't even bother trying to infiltrate them. I worshipped them from a distance.

—

In our house the old paint on the windowsill had its own sweet smell, different from the wall paint. I felt all around the window sash to find a draft, but there was none. The cold was just everywhere. After the monthly mortgage payment, my parents had almost nothing left over, and we had to be careful.

For one thing, the bathtub had to be filled to the height of my hand, and no higher. I pressed my fingertips into the bottom of the tub, not knowing where my hand ended and my wrist began.

One summer I found a green garden hose on the ground next to a neighbor's house. The hose had been left on. I tried to calculate the amount of water that had been wasted. *What are we gonna do?* I asked the other kids. They didn't answer. Adrenaline spilled into my blood. Water poured into the muddy ground.

An old Irish cable-knit cardigan with leather buttons hung in the downstairs coat closet, which smelled of hot farts and smoke. If anyone ever needed a sweater, they could go and put on the *warming sweater*, which was its name, as if other sweaters were merely decorative.

My mother kept the house just cold enough for me to need to wear the warming sweater over my regular sweater, and she cut just enough plastic wrap to cover the diameter of a dish.

I sat on the carpeted floor with my back against the radiator. It slowly bruised me, and if the heat came on, it turned my skin red in columns. A sheet of rigid plastic leaned between the radiator and the wall. It was meant to reflect heat back into the room.

Autumn brought with it the slap-clatter of crows, fire smells, leafy sweet-rot. New corduroys, cold air, brown paper grocery bags folded over schoolbooks. Writing on the first pages of notebooks, *September 7. September 8. September 9*, never sure how my handwriting should look.

We had two sugar maples in the backyard, and my mother liked them best because their leaves turned bright red, the furthest possible from their original green. One of the maples got sick, and she hired a man to cut it down. She said that the man had come and started cutting, and that she'd stopped watching him, and that when he came back to the house to get paid, she looked again and saw that he'd cut down both maples. Dead and gone. She would mourn those red trees the rest of her life.

When I walked home from school, I picked up leaves that were gold-specked crimson, green-edged vermilion, purple-black. I picked everything up, pebbles and matchbooks and little things people dropped. In December, I picked up evergreen branches and taped them to my bedroom door and made decorations, a little Christmas garland just for me.

One day my mother emptied my jacket pockets and found two half-used matchbooks and screamed at me. I could have started a fire. But I wouldn't have wasted a match to start a mere fire. I'd found what someone else had thought was trash, so I took it.

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On winter mornings the light spread like a watery broth over the landscape.

My father drove a used silver sports car whose turn signals didn't work. Even in the winter, he stuck his arm out the window and signaled left or right as if he were pedaling a bicycle.

He started the car and let the motor run while I got into the passenger seat and wrapped the twisted black seatbelt around my lap. He scraped the windshields and the side windows with a beveled piece of clear plastic. I liked the sound of it, like a giant filing his nails. The bits of scraped-off ice looked like fluff; the air was too cold to melt it.

When my father got into the car with me he closed all the vents and turned up the heat to defrost the windshield. The car had spent all night drinking in the cold, and the cold in the car was worse than the cold outside.

After I said goodbye to my father and got out of the car in front of school, instead of continuing around the circular driveway, my father drove his little roadster down the hill and into the schoolyard. The little boys hooted and cheered. I watched my father pull the car back fast and do a three-point turn in the yard and then zoom back up the hill and down the driveway and into the street.

If enough snow fell, we had to navigate block-long ridges of snow between the roads and the sidewalks. Sometimes people walked in each other's tracks, and the one passable route froze into the snow in thigh-high holes.

One winter my mother backed her car into a pile of snow at the end of the driveway and couldn't drive it out. I called my friend and told her I couldn't visit her after all. She asked, slowly and gently, *Couldn't your mom ask a neighbor to help push it?*

But my parents never spoke to the neighbors; we might as well have lived miles from the nearest soul. It was too hard to explain why I couldn't break that silence, so I told my friend that no one else on our street was home.

On days that snow was forecast, we set our clock radios early to WBZ. If the snow started falling at just the right time and at the right rate, the plows wouldn't be able to clear the streets in time.

Public and parochial schools were announced in alphabetical order by district. *Abington. Acton. Andover.* When the announcer got to the *Ms* I'd start listening hard, maybe close my eyes, because there was only one chance per half hour to hear it. Somewhere, someone was scraping at the snow with a metal shovel. *Uxbridge. Waitsfield. Wayland.* And then he'd keep going, as if Waitsfield meant nothing to him. *Wenham. Weston. Weymouth.* When he got to Woburn, that meant he was almost done.

If it was cold, the snow accumulated like dust. If it was warm, then the flakes melted together and fell in clumps. Sometimes school was canceled for snow that wound up melting by noon.

One inch of rain equals ten inches of snow, we all knew, but that had to be approximate, since there were so many different combinations of snow and ground.

I remember the metallic smell of it in the air before it fell. The pale blue of it on a clear morning. The soft *fuh* of it falling. The powder of the coldest days, too cold to melt, squeaking at the boot. White wet snow squeaking against my teeth, melting clear in the heat of my mouth.

Snowfalls have unique bouquets. Snow isn't just frozen water; it carries a remnant of the sky. A blue hailstone tastes different from a white one because they've taken on air at different altitudes.

We ate icicles not because they tasted good but because they were a primal thing that could not be bought. To eat one was to dare someone to tell you it wasn't clean, that there was dirt in it, which we all knew; everyone eats a peck of dirt in their life.

Marry a man who loves you more than you love him, said my great-grandmother to my grandmother, who obeyed.

And when that lady, my great-grandmother, got old, her children put her into a women's Orthodox Jewish nursing home. One day her eldest son visited and said he had something to tell her. And she said, *Oh—is it Abe?* It was. Her beloved husband had died. She had somehow known.

That was my family's great love story.

My earliest American ancestors got here at the end of the nineteenth century, not even a hundred years before I was born. It barely even counted as history. Real history was about Cabots and Lowells and Pilgrims and Indians.

After my mother's great-grandparents arrived from the old country, they were tailors in Boston, and their storefront had their name on it in gold. They had eleven children, and the youngest, my great-grandfather, ran the business into the ground. His sons grew up poor, but their cousins didn't.

My mother said that my great-grandfather had had a lot of *lady friends*, and that was where the money had gone.

Still, my mother approved of these cousins and aunts and uncles I'd never met. Her uncle Roger, especially. He was an important man. And rich.

My mother hated Uncle Roger's wife, her aunt Rose. Why? *She had an operation on her stomach, and when Nana and I walked into her hospital room, she said to the people there, "And these are my poor relations."*

My mother clung to that story. She wasn't classy like Aunt Rose or Uncle Roger, but she wasn't poor enough to be called poor. I carefully remembered all the names and how sophisticated all of them were, in descending order.

Whenever we got together with the family, my mother claimed afterward that Aunt Rose had been mean to her. Uncle Roger was a big-headed Italian who had converted. My father was Italian, too, but he wasn't officially Jewish. He'd been prepared to convert, but he and my mother had had to take the class at the local temple together, and when he had outscored her on the test, my mother had said she didn't want to take the class anymore.

My mother's family all had wiry black hair and long, European noses. I envied their clannish sameness. I met my father's mother a few times, but I never knew anyone else on that side of the family because, my mother said, they didn't like Jews.

When I asked my mother why she hated her mother-in-law, my mother looked away and said, *She invited us over, and then a priest shows up.* Knowing nothing about Jewish history other than that Christians hated Jews, my mother cherished the injury of this priestly visit.

Shalom means peace, and we love it so. We all say shalom for goodbye and hello. Everyone else at Sunday school had a Hebrew name, but I didn't know if I had one, so I said mine was just Ruth, my regular name, which is a Hebrew name, so it sounded as if I knew what I was talking about. I named all my dolls Ruth, too. Naming them something else would have made my mother tease me. One day I asked one of my dolls what her real name was, and she said *Leona*.

Aunt Rose told me that her sister, my mother's mother, hadn't wanted to hold her babies and was sent to a home to get better, and that when she came back, she was never the same. And Aunt Rose told me that when he was little, her husband, Roger, had caught scarlet fever and had been sent to a sanatorium, and that his parents couldn't visit him.

We were once drying dishes at the sink after Rosh Hashanah, and there were others in the room, putting away wineglasses and silverware, stealing bits of cake from a plate. Aunt Rose was only half focused on me, on the chore, on her husband's mouth full of cake, on the way my mother had turned on the tap (too low). I thought of all the questions I wanted to ask Aunt Rose—what had happened to my grandmother? To Roger? To my mother? And what would happen to me?

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One year my father handed my mother a dozen roses and said, *Happy birthday to the most unselfish person I have ever known.* It sounded like a sneer, but he often sounded that way, which anyone could tell if they called the house and got the answering machine. When it picked up, the cassette clicked on and then you'd hear my father saying, *You have reached—two three five—three one five five! No one is available—to take your call! Please leave—a message!* On the recording he sounded spitting mad. He probably

was. He hated using machines. He was furious when they made him feel stupid.

My father wore a fake Rolex that ran about four hours before it stopped. *Get yourself a better watch!* my mother railed at him, and he said, with perfect hatred pinching at his eyes, *Better than a Rolex?*

Creditors called all day and into the evening. I had to pick up the phone and say that I was home alone.

My mother wrote *housewife* as her occupation when she filled out forms, but she spent a few hours a week sitting at the dining room table with photography trade magazines. She held a red grease pencil in her hand and turned the shiny pages, occasionally circling something or writing a number. When the crayon got too worn down, she pulled a little string and then unwrapped a long spiral of cream-colored paper, all around the pencil, down and around to its tip, and when the last bit of the paper pulled away, she had a spiral paper coil and a nice fat red crayon.

My father was an accountant, and he used his boss's old computer to type up reports for work. He couldn't figure out how to use the tab key, so he typed spaces between the characters and hoped they'd print as they appeared on the monitor, but they never did. Over and over, inserting and deleting individual spaces. The reports were a mess. I tried to show him how to draw a table, but he preferred staying mad.

Just drag the disk image onto the trash can, I called out, and he didn't believe me, thought it would cause the disk to disintegrate in the drive. *Get in here!* he screamed.

Mother and the fourteen fuckers! My father got artful in his rage. *Mother you fucking cunt!* My mother was more consistent. *Go shit in yuh hat!* she'd

scream. *But he doesn't wear a hat!* I'd sometimes whimper. Years ago, the first time I'd said it, they'd laughed.

My father never yelled at my mother, my mother said proudly. *He only yelled at us.* My mother was two years old when her sister was born.

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When we wanted to record a show, my mother looked in the newspaper's TV guide and noted how long the run time was, forty-eight minutes or twenty-two minutes, and programmed the VCR for exactly that long, not understanding that, with the ads, the shows ended on the hour or half hour. We never got to see the end. We all meekly accepted that this was the power the machine held over us.

In the tiny den, my parents and I sat and watched television. My father dabbed at his eyes sometimes, but my mother looked straight ahead, as if the television were just a rectangle of meaningless sparks. She might even ask if anyone was hungry, or sniff or sigh loudly, as if no one else were trying to listen to the show. My father seemed capable of being transported to Victorian London or outer space, but my mother was always just a woman sitting on an upholstered sofa in 1985. She was the protagonist of everything.

The three of us just about fit on the tiny sofa, though it was difficult because my father was always poking me in the side and my mother was always jiggling her feet, holding her hands between her thighs and twitching them, and making little sticky sounds with her mouth.

My mother got up from the sofa and sat in a wooden chair to the left of it, though I don't remember if the chair was always there; in memory it stands half in and half out of the doorway.

She sat in the chair and then slid herself down so her crotch pressed against the wooden edge of the seat. She gripped the arms of the chair and rubbed herself against the edge of it as if to scratch an itch. I held my breath. If I got up and left the room, I would be admitting that something was happening, in front of me, but if I stayed and ignored it, there was some small possibility that it wasn't happening, that it hadn't happened and never would. So I stayed.

And then my father looked at my mother. In that moment he seemed not to care that I could see his hatred on his face.

Meanwhile, I was reading all of the novels in the school library with the word *death* in the title. My mother taunted me about my *death books*, but I didn't stop reading them.

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My mother's clothes were size large or extra large, but she only wore those sizes *for the length*, she said, and I believed her.

She drove me to Calvert's to buy factory seconds for my school clothes. Knit polyester turtlenecks were twenty-nine cents apiece, and I got seven of them. One was white as paint. One had little red hearts on it in rows. Another was a toxic pink. One day in art class another girl proposed that we go around the table and say something that we didn't like about someone else at the table. She let someone else go first. Then, when it was her turn, she said, *I hate it when Ruthie wears that white shirt with that purple sweater.*

On the way home from Calvert's my mother pulled out and turned right into traffic, but either an approaching driver had sped up or she had forgotten to look left before turning. The other driver, a man, opened his window and

said, *You should learn to look where you're going*, and my mother said, *Okay*, and I felt sweaty. I wanted the man's car to catch fire so I could watch him burn. It was a long time before I understood why my mother knew instinctively to wilt under his accusatory heat.

One Saturday we were in the usual tavern for lunch; my parents loved bar food. My mother and I sat side by side on a vinyl-covered bench, and my mother spread her skirt out on both sides so it wouldn't crease. When she fluffed her skirt it lightly brushed my bare leg. One of her swollen feet, squeezed into its little shoe, rested next to mine like a cat curling up next to another cat. Yet these touches felt violent.

I had to slide away and stand up to crush the discomfort in my brain, and as I stood there shuddering, my mother looked at me with hateful joy. *Now everyone's looking at you*, she said. I looked around the room, and everyone was.

When my parents came home from their high school reunion, I asked them if everyone else had gone. I knew all their stories. I wanted to hear about the greaser who went with the cheap girls with teased hair. I wanted to hear about the boy who had asked my mother to the senior prom.

—He came up to where I was sitting and said hello, but I just looked down at the table and didn't say anything.—Why not?—Well, I couldn't talk to him, there, in front of everyone!

She thought that everyone had come to the reunion to watch her attend the reunion.