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Study for Obedience

Sarah Bernstein

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The Coming Bad Days

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Sarah Bernstein

Alfred A. Knopf Canada

PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF CANADA

 Published in 2023 by Alfred A. Knopf Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.
First published in the United Kingdom by Granta Books in 2023.
Distributed in Canada and the United States of America by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

www.penguinrandomhouse.ca

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Epigraph on this page by Ingeborg Bachmann from *Malina,* translated by Philip Boehm, published by Penguin Books, London, in 2019; epigraph on this page by Paula Rego from an exhibition of her work (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/17/art.art).

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Study for obedience : a novel / Sarah Bernstein.
Names: Bernstein, Sarah (Literature teacher), author.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230168965 | Canadiana (ebook) 2023016904X | ISBN 9781039009066 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781039009073 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8603.E7622 S78 2023 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

Cover image: ‘Tapuit’, 2004, Henk Helmantel

Photo: Art Revisited, Tolbert NL

Cover design by Anna Green

a_prh_6.0_144726570_co_ro

For my pops, Nat Bernstein, who taught me to love the sound of the words.

1940–2022

‘I can turn the tables and do as I want. I can make women stronger. I can make them obedient and murderous at the same time.’

PAULA REGO

‘Language is punishment. It must encompass all things and in it all things must again transpire according to guilt and the degree of guilt.’

INGEBORG BACHMANN

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1

A BEGINNING A BEGINNING AGAIN

It was the year the sow eradicated her piglets. It was a swift and menacing time. One of the local dogs was having a phantom pregnancy. Things were leaving one place and showing up in another. It was springtime when I arrived in the country, an east wind blowing, an uncanny wind as it turned out. Certain things began to arise. The pigs came later though not much, and even if I had only recently arrived, had no livestock-caretaking responsibilities, had only been in to look, safely on one side of the electric fence, I knew they were right to hold me responsible. But all that as I said came later.

Where to begin. I can it is true shed light on my actions only, and even then it is a weak and intermittent one. I was the youngest child, the youngest of many – more than I care to remember – whom I tended from my earliest infancy, before, indeed, I had the power of speech myself and although my motor skills were by then scarcely developed, these, my many siblings, were put in my charge. I attended to their every desire, smoothed away the slightest discomfort with perfect obedience, with the highest degree of devotion, so that over time their desires became mine, so that I came to anticipate wants not yet articulated, perhaps not even yet imagined, providing my siblings with the greatest possible succour, filling them up only so they could demand more, always more, demands to which I acceded with alacrity and discreet haste, ministering the complex curative draughts prescribed to them by various doctors, serving their meals and snacks, their cigarettes and aperitifs, their nightcaps and bedside glasses of milk. Of our parents I will say nothing, not yet, no. I continued to spend the long years

since childhood cultivating solitude, pursuing silence to its ever-receding horizon, a pursuit that demanded a particular quality of attention, a self-forgetfulness on my part that would enable me to bring to bear the most painstaking, the most careful consideration to the other, to treat the other as the worthiest object of contemplation. In this process, I would become reduced, diminished, ultimately I would become clarified, even cease to exist. I would be good. I would be all that had ever been asked of me.

Better perhaps to begin again.

There was the house, standing at the end of a long dirt track and in a stand of trees, on a hill above a small, sparsely inhabited town. A creek marked the property boundary to one side, and at night the sound of its fretful flow came through my bedroom window. Looking down the long drive, one could see dense forest, a small town deep in the valley, and beyond, the mountains, higher than any I had seen before. The plot of land and the house which sat upon it belonged to my brother, my eldest brother. Why he ended up in this remote northern country, the country, it transpired, of our family's ancestors, an obscure though reviled people who had been dogged across borders and put into pits, had doubtless to do, at least in part, with his sense of history, oriented as it was towards progress, turned towards the future, ever in search of efficiencies. From a practical point of view – and pragmatism was naturally of the utmost importance to my brother – he was also engaged in some perfectly reasonable, if slightly perverse, business dealings, for he was, or at least had been, a businessman involved in the successful selling and trading, importing and exporting, of a variety of goods and services, the specifics of which to this day remain a mystery to me.

I came to stay in the house upon his request and initially for a period of six months, leaving the country of our birth for this cold and faraway place where my brother had made his life, had at any rate made his money, of which there was, as I would come to see with my very own eyes, a great deal. I saw no reason to object – I had always wanted to live in the countryside, had often driven through the rural areas surrounding my natal city in the autumn to see the leaves in colour, to experience the fresh air, so different from the turgid air downtown, well known to be the primary cause of the high rates of infant mortality, not that I had children myself, no, no, nevertheless, the air quality and its deleterious effects on public health were of concern to me as much as they might have been to any other ordinary citizen. Moreover, as my brother pointed out, it was not as though I had any

specific obligations or ties that could not be broken with ease. I allowed this. Here is how it was. I had so to speak thrown in the towel. My contemporaries had long surpassed me, had, whether by treachery or superior skill, secured their places in life and in their chosen professions. It was said that it was a terrible thing to realise a lifelong dream, and yet still I wondered why they could not let blood a bit. They bloated with success. There was so much time and nothing to be done. I had only a little bit of will. I was not in on the great joke. For a time I pursued a career as a journalist but eventually left the news agency at which I had been employed, not even in disgrace, my time there had run its course, there was nothing at all to mark my going. My efforts over the years to obtain a continuous contract of employment had been in vain, the process had been explained to me as a bureaucratic and not at all a personal one, and yet when I responded in kind, that is to say by invoking the usual bureaucratic processes and fully within my rights making a request according to the general data protection regulation guidelines under the suspicion something fishy was going on, the application was treated as a personal affront and it was made clear to me that I was not helping myself. In truth, I never had helped myself. I left quietly. No one was sorry to see me go. The job I held just prior to my departure to my brother's home, in the country of our forebears, and which I would continue remotely from the same was as an audio typist for a legal firm, a job at which I excelled, typing quickly and accurately, knowing my work. Nevertheless, I sensed I was unwelcome in the office, which was lined with the usual legal appurtenances, binders and diplomas, leather and wood. I knew that my halting displays of personhood, my miserable insistence on continuing to appear in the office day after day, could only be disheartening to the jurists and paralegals whose voices I typed into a word processor swiftly, precisely, with devotion and even with love, and so they received my leaving announcement with unconcealed joy, throwing a farewell party in my honour, staging a kind of feast and donating lavish gifts. It did not take long for me to set my affairs in order, a matter of weeks, three months at the outside, and, the journey having passed without incident, here I was. The country air would be good

for me, I felt, and the seclusion, when my brother did not need me I might take advantage of the various woodland paths maintained by local voluntary groups. I would be quiet.

At the time of my arrival, my brother was not yet ailing. Truly he was in the very pink of health, the prime of his life; having recently freed himself from his wife and teenage children and their perennial demands, he was, he said, at last free to pursue his business ventures in peace. His investments had begun to pay off and, in the absence of his family, from whom he had, it transpired, long felt estranged, and since he spent a great deal of time away from his home, he found himself needing someone to look after the house, he told me one afternoon over the telephone. And who better than I, who from childhood had proven myself the most efficient, most doting manager of my siblings' household affairs? When I did not respond immediately, he assured me that the house, although storied and ancient, although once belonging to the distinguished leaders of the historic crusade against our forebears, nevertheless had all the modern conveniences. These he enumerated, as though he were the agent of some new, dubious hotel: high-speed Internet, a variety of on-demand streaming services, a soaking tub, a rainfall shower, a memory foam mattress, hand-woven linens, a convection oven, a six-slice toaster, an ice machine, and so on and so forth. As my brother's claims about the furnishings of his home proceeded by this logic of declension, it occurred to me as it had perhaps occurred to him that he knew very little about me and, what's more, that this concerned him, the idea that he no longer knew what might please me. For instance, as he said the word 'mattress', his voice became suddenly panicked, as if he feared he had made the most irremediable blunder, that this mention of the mattress would be unacceptable, perhaps even offensive, to me. I was troubled by this sign of discontinuity in my brother's total authority, it was clear to me that the business with his wife must have come as a blow to him, what little I knew of men suggested that they were constitutionally incapable of being alone, terrified of not being admired, and seemed to regard ageing and its effects as a personal failing. Yes, yes, I said. Of course I would come. Of course! I said,

nearly shouting into the phone. When had I ever denied him, my eldest brother, or any of the succession of other siblings whose whereabouts were just then unknown to me, when had I ever denied any of them the smallest request? Of course I would come. Naturally, he said, recovering himself, he would arrange and pay for my journey, he would pick me up himself at the airport in his car, a new model he had only just acquired, and drive me back to the house. And he did do these things, he never reneged on promises or went back on his word, no matter how rashly given, no matter how intoxicated or coerced he had been at the moment of avowal, although it's true in any case he gave his word freely and often, to friends and strangers alike, to business partners as well as adversaries, as far as my brother was concerned a thing, once said, was as good as done and that was all there was to it. When I exited the automatic doors of the airport, the navigation of which had taken me some time since the sensors did not at first register my movement, however exaggerated, so I had to wait until another recently deplaned passenger passed through the doors himself to exit, my brother's car was already idling at the kerb. Through the window, he gestured to me to get in, and I did.

On the drive from the airport to his home, some two hours away, my brother admitted that his wife, in collusion with the children, had decamped to Lugano, where her people lived, without a word and so far as he could tell permanently and perhaps even in the dead of night. The match had been doomed from the start, my brother said as he drove through the rain, they had shared too much about themselves, knew too much about one another for mutual respect to be possible. What's more, he went on, at various times, in alternating turns, they had committed the most grievous sins against one another, culminating finally in each speaking aloud the terrible truth of the other's personality, truths they had long known about themselves and about one another, but about which they had come to a tacit agreement never to mention, never to discuss, never to give away the slightest hint that such knowledge existed. The wife, knowing the essential flaw in the husband's heart, must never speak of it; likewise, the awful and indisputable fact of the

wife's character, this too must never be spoken by the husband. No, my brother said, not ever. Such was the basis of the marital relation. I opened the passenger-side window and the wet spring air blew in. I watched the passing landscape, the pale, incipient green of something left too long in the dark, I watched the sodden black branches as they passed, and then, yes, came the smell of spring. I felt a thrill run through me.

I recalled my own aborted attempts at intimacy, with men, with women, and all that I had ever come away with was a sense of my essential interchangeability. People touched me, when they touched me, with a series of predetermined gestures in no way adapted to me, to my consciousness or sensations, limited though these were, insensible though I surely was. I had been so attentive to the particularities of their flesh, a smattering of freckles at the temple, bumps rising on the forearm, had cultivated this attention over time, painstakingly, aware of my inclination, congenital, towards vacancy, and yet this practice of contemplation never got me very far. My partners led me through the door, doing things to me they had done to others, doing things to me they could have done to anyone, anybody at all, and to put it plainly I was sure that, in each of their minds, with their eyes closed, they were with someone entirely other, not me – the tender kiss on the hairline, the holding of the back of the head, the grasping of the wrist, none of it was directed at me, all of it was for someone else, from before, some beloved, lost long ago. No, I thought, there was nothing I could say to my brother, no advice I could offer or consolation I could provide on the subject. All that was required, I felt, was one's silence. Not to speak, not to say. That's all.

And the children, my brother said, they too had always taken the part of their mother, he could see that now; from birth if not before they had sworn him off, found him ridiculous or else pathetic, a poor father and a sorry excuse for a man. If he was being honest, he had, he said, long felt these things about himself, and observing that his wife and children felt alike and expressed these feelings with such vehemence and at times, he had to admit, eloquence (for they were after all a family of readers), he was almost

comforted. Although it would perhaps come as a surprise to me, he said with a sidelong glance, since he had been the eldest child, the most treasured, he had suffered. Yes, from childhood onwards, through the teenage years, into adulthood and to this very day, he suffered, and although his suffering had never been suspected by friends or relatives, nor even for the most part by himself, he said, running one hand through his thick, wavy hair, still, he knew. He had suffered. It was his truth and he had to speak it, at whatever cost.

I sat in silence, recalibrating my approach to my brother, pondering his new-found self-awareness, it was clear to me he had, as it were, found himself, likely with the collusion of a psychiatric professional of some kind. His demands on me, previously involving the undertaking of specific tasks and labours, the fetching or taking away of various objects, had evolved to more subtle matters of the mind. I was well versed in this office, too; throughout my life, people frequently unburdened themselves to me, telling me their most harrowing stories, the most appalling secrets of their inner lives, the whole litany of crimes and violations they had committed against others, and they told it all on the slightest acquaintance, on some occasions within moments of meeting. I did not ask for these confessions, I did not welcome them, I merely sat in silence, receiving them from all sides. Inevitably and ere long the people who unfolded these revelations were overcome first with regret and subsequently by a swift and silent loathing of me, perfectly understandable in any situation, and especially in this case. They would come to hate me as they had always hated themselves, for possessing this knowledge, for receiving it in the first place, for not doing anything to stop them passing it on. The lifelong loathing they held in their hearts, lifting at last, would attach itself to me for no reason other than my proximity, a certain sympathetic aspect I had, an air perhaps of docility that encouraged them to make these unbearable confessions. I knew it all, what to expect, and yet never had managed to stop it, to prevent the coming disclosure. From a long way away, I could identify a certain disposition, a slight lean to the left or something in the shoulder, I saw the annihilating

confession approaching, and it fixed me in place, rendered me speechless. My brother, I knew, could not help but follow this same trajectory; by the set of his jaw as he drove the car and continued to speak, I knew the process was already well under way, and yet, like the others, he too went on speaking, as if compelled, for the duration of the car ride. I listened in silence. We drove at last through a small township and then beyond it, to my brother's house at the top of the hill.

2

A PROBLEM OF INHERITANCE

We made our way up the long drive beneath the stand of pines. I could see a dip where the creek ran down and away into the valley. It was a cloudy day, drizzling, the air suggesting ice. Spring thaw, a spell of danger lasting always longer than predicted, a promise unfolding and covering itself over once more, in frost, in a sudden snowfall. One had always to tread so carefully at the turn of the season, to keep one's wits. Who knew what might happen, what one might be capable of? The house appeared suddenly, dark against the dark of the trees, a series of blank windows that reflected only the weather back to itself. One house is much like any other, I told myself, fumbling with the seat belt, feeling my brother observing me. There was nothing particularly watchful about the place, the trees swaying mutely, the summit blind, the windows blind, a place of blind corners. Beside it all ran the creek, never the same, holding no memory. Nothing to be afraid of here, I thought, nothing lying in wait. My brother stood beside the car as I retrieved my suitcase from the boot, so composed he was, holding himself in such a dignified posture. He gazed up at the house, the old manor house, he went on to explain, which had been sold off by the gentry after the wars of the preceding century for any number of the usual reasons – death duties, dissolute relatives, the rising cost of fuel, the difficulty of finding adequate help to dust the mouldings, which were prolific, to oil the many long banisters or wax the vast wooden floors. Latterly, my brother said, the house's ownership had passed through the hands of a series of provincial upstarts, each more insolent than the last. During his own tenure he had endeavoured to restore the stately spirit of the place. It looked in other

words much as one might expect a faded small-town manor house to look; my brother was nothing if not conventional, he would not have wanted to stand out, nevertheless even I was impressed at how precisely he had achieved the intended aesthetic effect, as if there had been no rupture in the house's historical lineage, as though he were the natural inheritor of the house and its grounds, of its contents, of the social status and indeed bloodline these things suggested.

The bedroom assigned to me was in the east corner at the front of the house, with windows that looked out on two sides – one upon the creek, high and full from the recent thaw, the other upon the long drive that led down into the valley and from there into the town. My brother slept at the back of the house, in a dark room whose windows were shaded by trees. Each morning I was to wake him with his breakfast tray, I was to open the curtains to reveal the forest that was his by deed of law, I was to lay out his clothes. While he ate, I would run his bath and, while he bathed, I would sit by him and read aloud the daily news headlines, clockwise as they appeared on the front page of the local newspaper. My brother was a tall man, strong and fit at that time, with good eyesight and a high level of reading comprehension. But he liked nothing more than to be waited on, to be read to, tasks his wife and children had previously undertaken in a complicated rota designed by my brother that ensured whoever had begun reading to him the coverage on, say, the latest political scandal at the county seat would be able to continue their reading of this story as it unfolded, until either the coverage abated or the corruption was rooted out, whichever came first. My presence simplified things, since all the tasks previously divided between my brother's wife and children would be my responsibility alone – the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping, the laundering, the airing out, the closing down, the warming up, the cooling off, the chopping of wood, the cutting of grass, the uprooting of weeds and many other things besides. My brother dealt with the payment of bills and invoices. Such free time as I had, as for example on weekend afternoons (for my brother was not an unreasonable man) or on weeknights

after he retired to his bedroom, I spent roaming the surrounding countryside.

I thought we were getting along quite nicely when, only a few days after my arrival, my brother announced his intention to leave for a while, to go away, the legal complications related to his business were multiplying, he said, his clients were important, he was needed near at hand. It was true that since I had arrived, my brother had appeared nervous, not quite terrified but certainly not far from it, I could feel the tension in his back as I soaped it in the morning, a certain stiffness of posture when I dressed him, for I did like to dress him. I was disappointed at this news, so soon after our reunion, but comforted myself with the notion that his sudden departure meant I could roam more freely and at leisure, observing the frog life, which was prolific that spring, spawning in ponds and roadside puddles. I liked to sit under a tree by the creek and watch the creatures make their froggy way to the stiller pockets of water, both they and I watching out for the insects, newly emerged from pupae. Frogs had been a fixture of our childhood summers, my eldest brother often sent me out on excursions to capture a certain number of them, which he put to undisclosed use, even once a snapping turtle, an endeavour for which I employed a pair of tongs and a packet of frankfurters, lying on my belly on the dock every day for a week before I caught the creature, by which time my brother had moved on to some new project. I never knew what he did with the amphibian life I brought to him, and I did not ask, merely watched him as, with a shudder of pleasurable disgust, he peered over the edge of the red pail I was in the habit of using. On one particularly hot day, he placed two of the captive frogs side by side on the edge of the lake – one, much larger, my brother supposed to be a female, for reasons he would not reveal; the other, he said, clearly a juvenile male. My brother watched the frogs closely, with an anticipation I did not understand, until at all once, the larger frog turned and swallowed her companion whole. A single flipper flailed in her mouth. She swallowed again, and was still. I knew I must not weep, I must not scream, I must not run, though I wanted to do these things, yes, and to retch until my skin turned