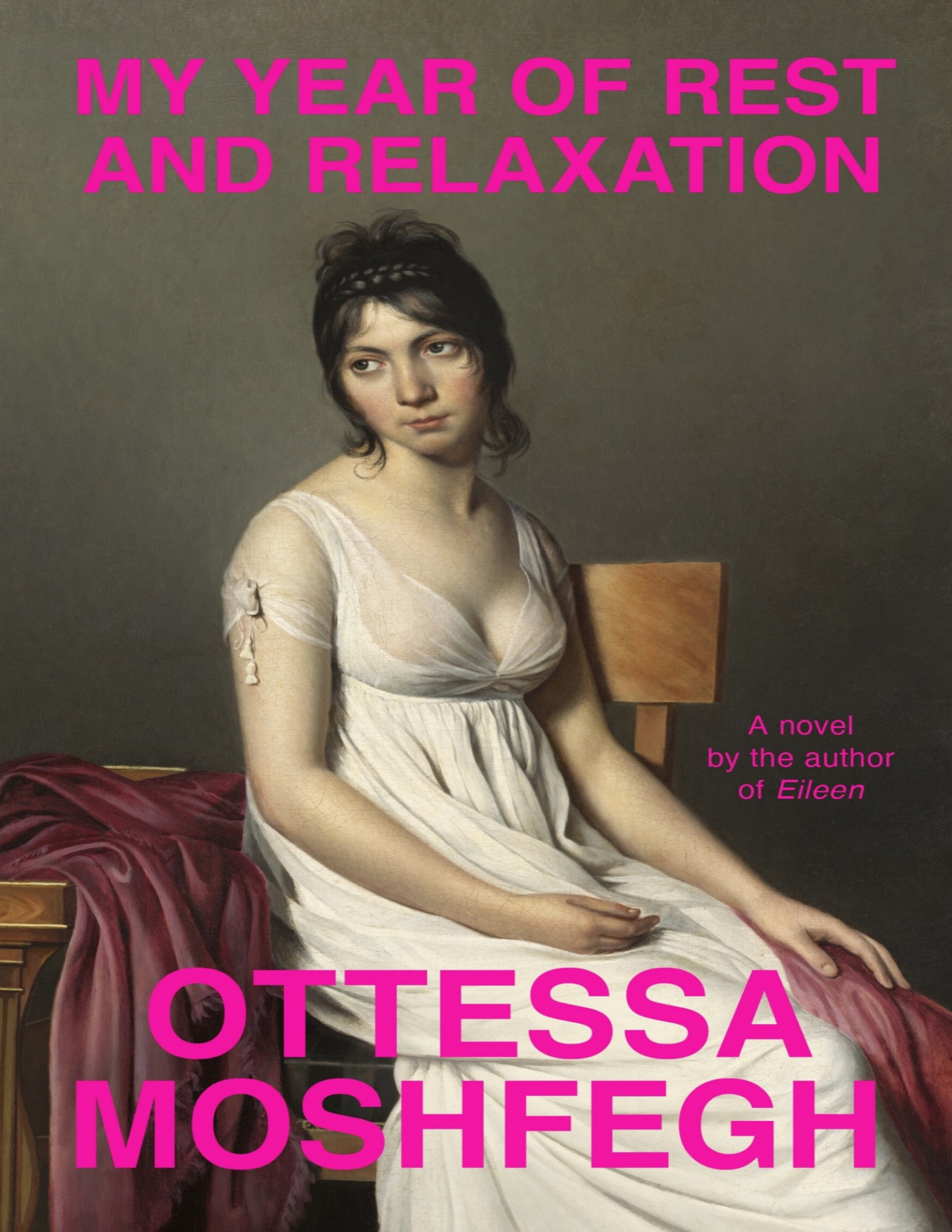


# MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION



A novel  
by the author  
of *Eileen*

# OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

ALSO BY OTTESSA MOSHFEGH

*Homesick for Another World*

*Eileen*

*McGlue*

MY YEAR  
OF REST  
AND  
RELAXATION

• • •

*Ottessa Moshfegh*

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Version\_1

*For Luke.*

*My one. My only.*

If you're smart or rich or lucky  
Maybe you'll beat the laws of man  
But the inner laws of spirit  
And the outer laws of nature  
No man can  
No, no man can . . .

"THE WOLF THAT LIVES IN LINDSEY,"

JONI MITCHELL



## *Contents*

[Also by Ottessa Moshfegh](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[About the Author](#)

## *One*

WHENEVER I WOKE UP, night or day, I'd shuffle through the bright marble foyer of my building and go up the block and around the corner where there was a bodega that never closed. I'd get two large coffees with cream and six sugars each, chug the first one in the elevator on the way back up to my apartment, then sip the second one slowly while I watched movies and ate animal crackers and took trazodone and Ambien and Nembutal until I fell asleep again. I lost track of time in this way. Days passed. Weeks. A few months went by. When I thought of it, I ordered delivery from the Thai restaurant across the street, or a tuna salad platter from the diner on First Avenue. I'd wake up to find voice messages on my cell phone from salons or spas confirming appointments I'd booked in my sleep. I always called back to cancel, which I hated doing because I hated talking to people.

Early on in this phase, I had my dirty laundry picked up and clean laundry delivered once a week. It was a comfort to me to hear the torn plastic bags rustle in the draft from the living room windows. I liked catching whiffs of the fresh laundry smell while I dozed off on the sofa. But after a while, it was too much trouble to gather up all the dirty clothes and stuff them in the laundry bag. And the sound of my own washer and dryer interfered with my sleep. So I just threw away my dirty underpants. All the old pairs reminded me of Trevor, anyway. For a while, tacky lingerie from Victoria's Secret kept showing up in the mail—frilly fuchsia and lime green thongs and teddies and baby-doll nightgowns, each sealed in a clear plastic Baggie. I stuffed the little Baggies into the closet and went commando. An occasional package from Barneys or Saks provided me with men's pajamas and other things I couldn't remember ordering—cashmere socks, graphic T-shirts, designer jeans.

I took a shower once a week at most. I stopped tweezing, stopped bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing my hair. No moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving. I left the apartment infrequently. I had all my bills on automatic payment plans. I'd already paid a year of property taxes on my apartment and on my dead parents' old house upstate. Rent money from the tenants in that house showed up in my checking account by direct deposit every month. Unemployment was rolling in as long as I made the weekly call into the automated service and pressed "1" for "yes" when the robot asked if I'd made a sincere effort to find a job. That was enough to cover the copayments on all my prescriptions, and whatever I picked up at the bodega. Plus, I had investments. My dead father's financial advisor kept track of all that and sent me quarterly statements that I never read. I had plenty of money in my savings account, too—enough to live on for a few years as long as I didn't do anything spectacular. On top of all this, I had a high credit limit on my Visa card. I wasn't worried about money.

I had started "hibernating" as best I could in mid-June of 2000. I was twenty-four years old. I watched summer die and autumn turn cold and gray through a broken slat in the blinds. My muscles withered. The sheets on my bed yellowed, although I usually fell asleep in front of the television on the sofa, which was from Pottery Barn and striped blue and white and sagging and covered in coffee and sweat stains.

I didn't do much in my waking hours besides watch movies. I couldn't stand to watch regular television. Especially at the beginning, TV aroused too much in me, and I'd get compulsive about the remote, clicking around, scoffing at everything and agitating myself. I couldn't handle it. The only news I could read were the sensational headlines on the local daily papers at the bodega. I'd quickly glance at them as I paid for my coffees. Bush versus Gore for president. Somebody important died, a child was kidnapped, a senator stole money, a famous athlete cheated on his pregnant wife. Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that

didn't concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried.

When I needed more pills, I ventured out to the Rite Aid three blocks away. That was always a painful passage. Walking up First Avenue, everything made me cringe. I was like a baby being born—the air hurt, the light hurt, the details of the world seemed garish and hostile. I relied on alcohol only on the days of these excursions—a shot of vodka before I went out and walked past all the little bistros and cafes and shops I'd frequented when I was out there, pretending to live a life. Otherwise I tried to limit myself to a one-block radius around my apartment.

The men who worked at the bodega were all young Egyptians. Besides my psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, my friend Reva, and the doormen at my building, the Egyptians were the only people I saw on a regular basis. They were relatively handsome, a few of them more than the others. They had square jaws and manly foreheads, bold, caterpillary eyebrows. And they all looked like they had eyeliner on. There must have been half a dozen of them—brothers or cousins, I assumed. Their style deterred me. They wore soccer jerseys and leather racing jackets and gold chains with crosses and played Z100 on the radio. They had absolutely no sense of humor. When I'd first moved to the neighborhood, they'd been flirty, even annoyingly so. But once I'd begun shuffling in with eye boogers and scum at the corners of my mouth at odd hours, they quit trying to win my affection.

"You have something," the man behind the counter said one morning, gesturing to his chin with long brown fingers. I just waved my hand. There was toothpaste crusted all over my face, I discovered later.

After a few months of sloppy, half-asleep patronage, the Egyptians started calling me "boss" and readily accepted my fifty cents when I asked for a loosie, which I did often. I could have gone to any number of places for coffee, but I liked the bodega. It was close, and the coffee was consistently bad, and I didn't have to confront anyone ordering a brioche bun or no-foam latte. No children with runny noses or Swedish au pairs. No sterilized

professionals, no people on dates. The bodega coffee was working-class coffee—coffee for doormen and deliverymen and handymen and busboys and housekeepers. The air in there was heavy with the perfume of cheap cleaning detergents and mildew. I could rely on the clouded freezer full of ice cream and popsicles and plastic cups of ice. The clear Plexiglas compartments above the counter were filled with gum and candy. Nothing ever changed: cigarettes in neat rows, rolls of scratch tickets, twelve different brands of bottled water, beer, sandwich bread, a case of meats and cheeses nobody ever bought, a tray of stale Portuguese rolls, a basket of plastic-wrapped fruit, a whole wall of magazines that I avoided. I didn't want to read more than newspaper headlines. I steered clear of anything that might pique my intellect or make me envious or anxious. I kept my head down.

Reva would show up at my apartment with a bottle of wine from time to time and insist on keeping me company. Her mother was dying of cancer. That, among many other things, made me not want to see her.

"You forgot I was coming over?" Reva would ask, pushing her way past me into the living room and flipping on the lights. "We talked last night, remember?"

I liked to call Reva just as the Ambien was kicking in, or the Solfoton, or whatever. According to her, I only ever wanted to talk about Harrison Ford or Whoopi Goldberg, which she said was fine. "Last night you recounted the entire plot of *Frantic*. And you did the scene where they're driving in the car, with the cocaine. You went on and on."

"Emmanuelle Seigner is amazing in that movie."

"That's exactly what you said last night."

I was both relieved and irritated when Reva showed up, the way you'd feel if someone interrupted you in the middle of suicide. Not that what I was doing was suicide. In fact, it was the opposite of suicide. My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought that it was going to save my life.

"Now get in the shower," Reva would say, heading into the kitchen. "I'll take out the trash."

I loved Reva, but I didn't like her anymore. We'd been friends since college, long enough that all we had left in common was our history together, a complex circuit of resentment, memory, jealousy, denial, and a few dresses I'd let Reva borrow, which she'd promised to dry clean and return but never did. She worked as an executive assistant for an insurance brokerage firm in Midtown. She was an only child, a gym rat, had a blotchy red birthmark on her neck in the shape of Florida, a gum-chewing habit that gave her TMJ and breath that reeked of cinnamon and green apple candy. She liked to come over to my place, clear a space for herself on the armchair, comment on the state of the apartment, say I looked like I'd lost more weight, and complain about work, all while refilling her wine glass after every sip.

"People don't understand what it's like for me," she said. "They take it for granted that I'm always going to be cheerful. Meanwhile, these assholes think they can go around treating everyone below them like shit. And I'm supposed to giggle and look cute and send their faxes? Fuck them. Let them all go bald and burn in hell."

Reva was having an affair with her boss, Ken, a middle-aged man with a wife and child. She was open about her obsession with him, but she tried to hide that they were sexually involved. She once showed me a picture of him in a company brochure—tall, big shoulders, white button-down shirt, blue tie, face so nondescript, so boring, he may as well have been molded out of plastic. Reva had a thing for older men, as did I. Men our age, Reva said, were too corny, too affectionate, too needy. I could understand her disgust, but I'd never met a man like that. All the men I'd ever been with, young as well as old, had been detached and unfriendly.

"You're a cold fish, that's why," Reva explained. "Like attracts like."

As a friend, Reva was indeed corny and affectionate and needy, but she was also very secretive and occasionally very patronizing. She couldn't or simply *wouldn't* understand why I wanted to sleep all the time, and she was always rubbing my nose in her moral high ground and telling me to "face the music" about whatever bad habit I'd been stuck on at the time. The summer I started sleeping, Reva admonished me for "squandering my bikini body."

“Smoking *kills*.” “You should get out more.” “Are you getting enough protein in your diet?” Et cetera.

“I’m not a baby, Reva.”

“I’m just worried about you. Because I care. Because I *love* you,” she’d say.

Since we’d met junior year, Reva could never soberly admit to any desire that was remotely uncouth. But she wasn’t perfect. “She’s no white lily,” as my mother would have said. I’d known for years that Reva was bulimic. I knew she masturbated with an electric neck massager because she was too embarrassed to buy a proper vibrator from a sex shop. I knew she was deep in debt from college and years of maxed-out credit cards, and that she shoplifted testers from the beauty section of the health food store near her apartment on the Upper West Side. I’d seen the tester stickers on various items in the huge bag of makeup she carried around wherever she went. She was a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan, but I found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for me to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, “fitting in.” She made regular trips down to Chinatown for the latest knockoff designer handbags. She’d given me a Dooney & Bourke wallet for Christmas once. She got us matching fake Coach key rings.

Ironically, her desire to be classy had always been the *déclassé* thorn in her side. “Studied grace is not grace,” I once tried to explain. “Charm is not a hairstyle. You either have it or you don’t. The more you try to be fashionable, the tackier you’ll look.” Nothing hurt Reva more than effortless beauty, like mine. When we’d watched *Before Sunrise* on video one day, she’d said, “Did you know Julie Delpy’s a feminist? I wonder if that’s why she’s not skinnier. No way they’d cast her in this role if she were American. See how soft her arms are? Nobody here tolerates arm flab. Arm flab is a killer. It’s like the SAT’s. You don’t even exist if you’re below 1400.”

“Does it make you happy that Julie Delpy has arm flab?” I’d asked her.

“No,” she’d said after some consideration. “Happiness is not what I’d call it. More like *satisfaction*.”

Jealousy was one thing Reva didn't seem to feel the need to hide from me. Ever since we'd formed a friendship, if I told her that something good happened, she'd whine "No fair" often enough that it became a kind of catchphrase that she would toss off casually, her voice flat. It was an automatic response to my good grade, a new shade of lipstick, the last popsicle, my expensive haircut. "No fair." I'd make my fingers like a cross and hold them out between us, as though to protect me from her envy and wrath. I once asked her whether her jealousy had anything to do with her being Jewish, if she thought things came easier to me because I was a WASP.

"It's not because I'm Jewish," I remember her saying. This was right around graduation, when I'd made the dean's list despite having skipped more than half my classes senior year, and Reva had bombed the GRE. "It's because I'm fat." She really wasn't. She was very pretty, in fact.

"And I wish you'd take better care of yourself," she said one day visiting me in my half-awake state at my apartment. "I can't do it for you, you know. What do you like so much about Whoopi Goldberg? She's not even funny. You need to be watching movies that are going to cheer you up. Like *Austin Powers*. Or that one with Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant. You're like Winona Ryder from *Girl, Interrupted* all of a sudden. But you look more like Angelina Jolie. She's blond in that."

This was how she expressed her concern for my well-being. She also didn't like the fact that I was "on drugs."

"You really shouldn't mix alcohol with all your medications," she said, finishing the wine. I let Reva have all the wine. In college, she'd called hitting the bars "going to therapy." She could suck a whiskey sour down in one sip. She popped Advil between drinks. She said it kept her tolerance up. She would probably qualify as an alcoholic. But she was right about me. I *was* "on drugs." I took upwards of a dozen pills a day. But it was all very regulated, I thought. It was all totally aboveboard. I just wanted to sleep all the time. I had a plan.

"I'm not a junkie or something," I said defensively. "I'm taking some time off. This is my year of rest and relaxation."



“Lucky you,” Reva said. “I wouldn’t mind taking time off from work to loaf around, watch movies, and snooze all day, but I’m not complaining. I just don’t have that luxury.” Once she was drunk, she’d put her feet up on the coffee table, scooching my dirty clothes and unopened mail to the floor, and she’d go on and on about Ken and catch me up on the latest episode of their soap opera drama, *Office Romance*. She’d brag about all the fun things she was going to do over the weekend, complain that she’d gone off her most recent diet and had to do overtime at the gym to make up for it. And eventually, she’d cry about her mother. “I just can’t talk to her like I used to. I feel so sad. I feel so abandoned. I feel very, very alone.”

“We’re all alone, Reva,” I told her. It was true: I was, she was. This was the maximum comfort I could offer.

“I know I have to prepare for the worst with my mom. The prognosis isn’t good. And I don’t even think I’m getting the full story about her cancer. It just makes me feel so desperate. I wish there was someone to hold me, you know? Is that pathetic?”

“You’re needy,” I said. “Sounds frustrating.”

“And then there’s Ken. I just can’t stand it. I’d rather kill myself than be all alone,” she said.

“At least you have options.”

If I was up for it, we’d order salads from the Thai place and watch movies on pay-per-view. I preferred my VHS tapes, but Reva always wanted to see whatever movie was “new” and “hot” and “supposed to be good.” She took it as a source of pride that she had a superior knowledge of pop culture during this period. She knew all the latest celebrity gossip, followed the newest fashion trends. I didn’t give a shit about that stuff. Reva, however, studied *Cosmo* and watched *Sex and the City*. She was competitive about beauty and “life wisdom.” Her envy was very self-righteous. Compared to me, she was “underprivileged.” And according to her terms, she was right: I looked like a model, had money I hadn’t earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was “cultured.” Reva, on the other hand, came from Long

Island, was an 8 out of 10 but called herself “a New York three,” and had majored in economics. “The Asian nerd major,” she named it.

Reva’s apartment across town was a third-floor walk-up that smelled like sweaty gym clothes and French fries and Lysol and Tommy Girl perfume. Although she’d given me a spare set of keys to the place when she moved in, I’d been over only twice in five years. She preferred coming to my apartment. I think she enjoyed being recognized by my doorman, taking the fancy elevator with the gold buttons, watching me squander my luxuries. I don’t know what it was about Reva. I couldn’t get rid of her. She worshipped me, but she also hated me. She saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes. I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness, and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted—no husband, no children, no fabulous career. So when I started sleeping all the time, I think Reva took some satisfaction in watching me crumble into the ineffectual slob she hoped I was becoming. I wasn’t interested in competing with her, but I resented her on principle, and so we did argue. I imagine this is what having a sister is like, someone who loves you enough to point out all your flaws. Even on weekends, if she’d stayed over late, she’d refuse to sleep over. I wouldn’t have wanted her to anyway, but she always made a fuss about it, as though she had responsibilities I would never understand.

I took a Polaroid of her one night and stuck it into the frame of the mirror in the living room. Reva thought it was a loving gesture, but the photo was really meant as a reminder of how little I enjoyed her company if I felt like calling her later while I was under the influence.

“I’ll lend you my confidence-boosting CD set,” she would say if I alluded to any concern or worry.

Reva was partial to self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women “how to live up to their full potential.” Every few weeks, she had a whole new paradigm for living, and I had to hear about it. “Get good at knowing when you’re tired,” she’d advised me once. “Too many women wear themselves thin these days.”

A lifestyle tip from *Get the Most Out of Your Day, Ladies* included the suggestion to preplan your outfits for the workweek on Sunday evenings.

“That way you won’t be second-guessing yourself in the morning.”

I really hated when she talked like that.

“And come out to Saints with me. It’s ladies’ night. Girls drink for free until eleven. You’ll feel so much better about yourself.” She was an expert at conflating canned advice with any excuse for drinking to oblivion.

“I’m not up for going out, Reva,” I said.

She looked down at her hands, fiddled with her rings, scratched her neck, then stared down at the floor.

“I miss you,” she said, her voice cracking a little. Maybe she thought those words would break through to my heart. I’d been taking Nembutals all day.

“We probably shouldn’t be friends,” I told her, stretching out on the sofa. “I’ve been thinking about it, and I see no reason to continue.”

Reva just sat there, kneading her hands against her thighs. After a minute or two of silence, she looked up at me and put a finger under her nose—something she did when she was about to start crying. It was like an Adolf Hitler impression. I pulled my sweater over my head and grit my teeth and tried not to laugh while she sputtered and whined and tried to compose herself.

“I’m your best friend,” she said plaintively. “You can’t shut me out. That would be very self-destructive.”

I pulled the sweater down to take a drag of my cigarette. She batted the smoke out of her face and fake coughed. Then she turned to me. She was trying to embolden herself by making eye contact with the enemy. I could see the fear in her eyes, as though she were staring into a black hole she might fall into.

“At least I’m making an effort to change and go after what I want,” she said. “Besides sleeping, what do *you* want out of life?”

I chose to ignore her sarcasm.

“I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent,” I told her.

“Do you really need talent?”

That might have been the smartest thing Reva ever said to me.

“Yes,” I replied.

She got up and ticktocked across the floor in her heels and shut the door softly behind her. I took a few Xanax and ate a few animal crackers and stared at the wrinkled seat of the empty armchair. I got up and put in *Tin Cup*, and watched it halfheartedly as I dozed on the sofa.

Reva called half an hour later and left a voice mail saying she’d already forgiven me for hurting her feelings, that she was worried about my health, that she loved me and wouldn’t abandon me, “no matter what.” My jaw unclenched listening to the message, as though I’d been gritting my teeth for days. Maybe I had been. Then I pictured her sniffing through Gristedes, picking out the food she’d eat and vomit up. Her loyalty was absurd. This was what kept us going.

“You’ll be fine,” I told Reva when she said her mother was starting a third round of chemo.

“Don’t be a spaz,” I said when her mother’s cancer spread to her brain.

• • •

I CAN'T POINT TO any one event that resulted in my decision to go into hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me. I started seeing Dr. Tuttle in January 2000. It started off very innocently: I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body. Dr. Tuttle confirmed that this was nothing unusual. She wasn’t a good doctor. I had found her name in the phone book.

“You’ve caught me at a good moment,” she said the first time I called. “I just finished rinsing the dishes. Where did you find my number?”