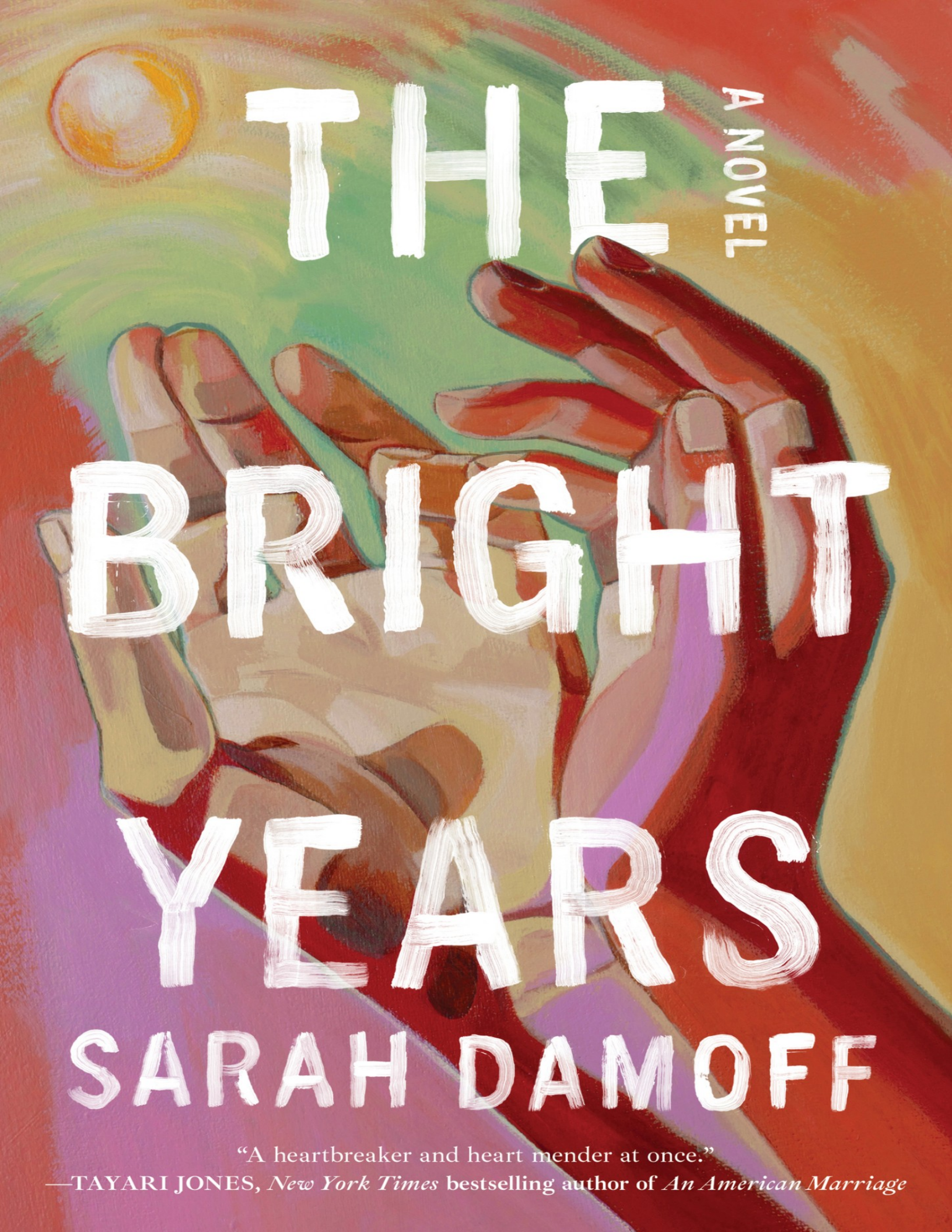




THE

A NOVEL

BRIGHT

YEARS

SARAH DAMOFF

“A heartbreaker and heart mender at once.”

—TAYARI JONES, *New York Times* bestselling author of *An American Marriage*

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THE BRIGHT YEARS

A Novel

Sarah Damoff

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*For
daughters and sons
parents of all kinds
and
the discomforted*

Sorrow eats time. Be patient. Time eats sorrow.

Louise Erdrich, *LaRose*

1958

HE'S COLORING A NIGHT SKY on the underbelly of the kitchen table. His parents are too busy fighting to notice. It always starts with his father's thirst. Next comes the television set. His mother turns up the volume so the antics of Wally and Beaver or Lucy and Ricky will drown out the yelling.

A pound cake sits on the oak table above him. The sugary smell teases the boy. He forced down his peas, but now he might not even get a slice.

Behind his parents' bedroom door, there's a thump. What sounds like a loud clap. A crash. His mother, her voice muffled, says something about upsetting the landlord.

With a chunky white crayon, the boy adds a star to his sky. He bites his lip and narrows his eyes, neck craned upward to study his work. Now the challenge is how to make clouds show up. He decides to try purple over the black of night. Doesn't work. He adds a faint white outline along the wood grain, tracing the purple. Better. He smiles proudly.

His mother's navy pumps cross the yellow linoleum. He watches her apron swoosh and braces for his father to follow with his grass-stained socks and loudness. But the only sounds are his mother's steps, cabinets opening and closing, and June Cleaver asking Wally where he's going.

The boy watches his mother's busy calves. Then, suddenly, her red-streaked face appears. She grips the table above her head, squatting down into the shadow of the boy's world. He holds his breath. He knows good and well that he shouldn't be drawing on furniture, but the blank wood was pleading for color.

"Play a game with me, dear?"

He frowns.

She touches his face softly with her thumb and whispers, “You know how silly your father is. He’s playing a little hide-and-seek game with the Oldsmobile key. Help me find it?”

“Hide-and-seek?”

“When we find it, we can take a drive.”

His eyes widen. “With you driving?”

“Hey now.” She manages a playful smile. “I can drive.” With the offering of this smile—the corners of her lips raised, frown lines softened, a peek of teeth—the desire to protect awakens within the boy, the force of helpless love that children have for their mothers. So he emerges from his oak shelter. And even though he finds her game dull, he does not complain.

After they’ve looked unsuccessfully inside every cabinet and drawer, the boy eyes the cake. His mother exhales and leans over the tile counter, her palms pressing hard into it, chin tucked into her neck. The boy’s eyes dart between mother and cake. Then she stands up straight, lifts her chin, smooths her apron, and says, “Okay.”

He waits, mouth watering.

She says, “If we can’t take a drive, how about a little walk?”

His nose scrunches as he looks away from the cake and out the window. “It’s dark.”

She squats again, placing her hands on her son’s shoulders. Up close, she smells like Palmolive. Her skin under each eye is purple like his clouds. She’s his Palmolive sky.

She hesitates, but only for a second. “Walking will do. Go find the new coat we got from that yard sale.” She stands and moves something from a drawer into her handbag.

“But it isn’t cold.” The truth is that he doesn’t like his “new” coat. It smells like dog and cigarettes.

Down their dark hallway, the flush of a toilet. His mother whispers, “Shoes. Now.”

He glances at the hallway, the cake, his crayons on the linoleum, and, wiggling his shoes on, he follows his mother out the back door.

He needs help with his shoelaces, but she says to hurry and leads him through their neighbor’s side yard. Her apron is still around her waist, dotted with hot sauce and oil. A bush rustles. The boy shivers and realizes his mother was right—it is cold.

As they trudge a trail through wet grass, he chastises her. “You said don’t go in the Thompsons’ yard without their permission.”

“I have permission.”

The boy doesn't think this is true.

Trying not to trip on his laces, he realizes his bladder is full. He reaches down to hold himself as they walk and walk. Even by moonlight, he can see a bruise on his mother's face. It looks like a green-yellow flame. She chooses a path away from the road.

Eventually, her voice flat, she says, “Your father just needed—”

“I hate him.” This startles the child as much as it does his mother. He would never have dared to even think that at home, but there's something about the still air. Something about the effort it takes to move deeper into the night, like moving into a swamp. He feels smaller, angrier, and much more afraid. Reckless. A fresh wildness growls low inside him. He's young, but he's old enough to have watched his father hurt his mother again and again.

She stops walking and sinks into tall grass and bluebonnet buds. She tucks thick hair behind her ear and says, “I don't.” She's looking past him, her eyes sweeping across their surroundings and back again.

“Huh?”

She sighs, her breath like milk and her eyes like water. “I love your father,” she says, “very much.” She takes a shaky breath. “But”—she reaches for her son's small hands as muscles gather and tighten around her bottom lip—“I love you most, Ryan.”

As she begins to cry, he imagines that the dark clouds beneath her eyes are raining. His heart wobbles. He wets himself. He realizes they aren't going home, not even for dry pants. He wonders what will happen to the cake. To his night sky. And to them.

Part One

LILLIAN

1979

THE LIBRARY TABLE IS UNSTEADY on its feet, shifting its weight from one cold metal leg to another. I should be preparing a work presentation, but I can't stop turning pages in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It was left on the table where I always sit.

Early 1900s Brooklyn is quite different from 1970s Fort Worth. Still, Francie is strikingly relatable, admiring her parents without seeing fault and saving pennies without seeing poverty. I'm too interested in the gradual opening of her eyes to pay much attention to my notecards that will hopefully move me from bank teller to public relations manager at my branch.

I glance around the sleepy Saturday library and plump my inky mess of hair. It's past time for a new perm. I look back down. One more chapter, then I'll work on my presentation.

Three chapters later, a whisper. "Lillian?"

I look up at a man I don't know; Johnny and Katie look up at me from chapter eleven.

"Yes?"

"Ryan." He touches fingertips to his chest. "I've come to your bank a couple of times." Ah. We have nameplates at work.

"Oh, um, hi."

"I thought that was you."

It's an odd thing to say to your bank teller.

Ryan has dark, shaggy hair, paint flecks on his fingers, and beard scruff down his neck. A gap between his two front teeth. His eyes are a sinking dark; I can hardly see the pupil for the iris, like a tree in a night wood. His clothes are plain, his build unthreatening but not weak. He's like an understated book cover, which is the type I'm inclined to open.

I give an internal kick to Morning Lillian, who thought it would be silly to wear makeup to the library on a Saturday. I don't even have a barrette for my hair. But at least Morning Lillian had the good sense to throw on this flattering green blouse at the last minute. I smooth the front of it.

Aside from confirming that I am indeed Lillian From The Bank, Ryan doesn't seem to have more to say. Though he doesn't take a step away, either.

"Need a spot?" I gesture to the three open chairs. In the distance, a child whines for *Madeleine* instead of *Frog and Toad*.

"Thanks." He scoots a chair back and settles in with paperwork. I put *Brooklyn* aside and focus on my presentation notes. I have a decent shot at this promotion if I prepare well. I pretend not to notice Ryan's glances.

He whispers again, "So what're you working on?"

Before I can answer, he shakes his head. "Sorry. We don't know each other. What I mean to say is that"—he clears his throat—"I would like to get to know you." Pinpricks of pink dot his cheeks like salt.

A few people are reading near us, their *shush* glares like spider eyes in starlight. A woman flashes a frown at us from behind her paperback because a whisper can sound like a foghorn when you're in the dazed silence of a story's pages. I study Ryan, decide to finish my presentation tomorrow, and nod toward the people trying to read. "Getting to know me is worth more than begrudged library whispers."

Ryan reddens, and I chase my nerve-racking display of confidence with more of it. I gather my work and stand up. Give him a half smile and a *Let's get out of here* head tilt. He meets my eyes as understanding fills his own. Not even trying to mask his widening smile, he follows suit and collects his own scatter of papers. Then he fumbles to trail me out of the Fort Worth Public Library and into the shock of sun.

The hole-in-the-wall Greek restaurant across the street is an obvious choice. My stomach is embarrassingly noisy from missing lunch. We order gyros, no more whispering.

Sauce drips onto Ryan's shirt, but he doesn't seem bothered. I learn why he's been frequenting my branch: he's trying to secure a loan to open an art gallery downtown. He

claims he noticed me as soon as he walked into the bank. I laugh it off, but he's so sincere that my warming cheeks betray me.

Ryan waits tables at Matteo's Italian Café and moonlights as a starving artist. It's a dinner restaurant though, so he actually works there at night and sunlights as an artist. The walls at Matteo's are covered in Ryan's murals too. His ultimate dream, he says, is a gallery. I ask why.

"Why what?"

"Why a gallery?"

"Well, why a bank?"

"I didn't take out a loan and open the bank."

"Touché. I still want to know though."

I consider. "I like the bank. It's stable. I have good coworkers and make enough money for things like books and meat and gifts for friends." I've learned how big of a dream it is to have a small life. That the cost of ambition is high. "Now tell me about your gallery. And your art."

"A gallery is something I've dreamed of since I first went to one as a kid. I thought it was a museum until I saw someone take home this enormous painting of mountains. I just wanted to give people that. The ability to take home mountains."

"And you paint too?"

He nods. "The already realized dream."

"How so?"

"I already paint." He shrugs. "So, that's it. And take photographs."

I'm skeptical. "Isn't it every artist's dream to have big commissions and exhibits at fancy galleries?"

"Not this artist. Industry pressure changes the art. I'd rather paint what I want and open a gallery where other artists can do the same." He pauses. "I don't need recognition. I just want something stable where I can make enough money for things like books and meat and gifts for friends." He smiles; I laugh.

"So the café isn't cutting it?"

"Matteo is a friend. Working at a restaurant is unpredictable, though. One night your Alfredo-stained pockets overflow with tips, and the next they're empty and you get a meatball thrown at you."

I nearly spit out my food, covering my laugh with a napkin.

He studies me. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

He traces the rim of his glass. "Dreams?"

My hand moves instinctively toward my stomach like I have something to protect. "My dream is..." I pretend to consider. "More pita and hummus." I sit taller, looking around for a waiter.

Ryan raises bushy, unsatisfied eyebrows before dragging his eyes from me. He tracks down a waiter and makes my hummus dream come true.

When our red plastic food baskets are empty, we linger beneath the fluorescent lights. We talk about art and books, even grazing the outer edges of our childhoods. I can't remember the last time anybody listened to me like this. Nobody since Mama, I don't think.

We keep the table for hours.

Twilight and an increase in diners mark the shift from dead afternoon to the early dinner crowd. A tarnished bell announces each new patron. With the next chime, a lone man stands in the entrance beneath the polyester Greek flag and a sign that reads KOUZINA! A gray beard crawls up his face like vines. He could be sixty or forty; I can't say. He walks toward the counter, one foot landing heavier than the other, the smell of gin like a kite tail as he passes.

Ryan and I resume a conversation about the pieces Van Gogh painted while hospitalized. The line lengthens behind the bearded man as he counts nickel after nickel after nickel onto the counter. Ryan starts fidgeting but keeps talking about how art can heal. He grows increasingly distracted until he finally says, "Sorry, excuse me a minute." He stands and leaves the table. I grin, endeared. Poor guy didn't know how to excuse himself to pee.

While he's in the restroom, I sneak a compact from my purse for a quick face and hair check. Still no makeup and still need a perm. Still Dad's thin lips and Mama's big eyes and my dark circles. I sigh and snap it shut. When Ryan returns, he's less antsy, but it's becoming clear that we should give up our table soon. Neither of us is ready for that.

As he asks if I'd like dessert, we're interrupted. The man with the nickels and uneven gait is standing over our table. He leans down close to Ryan like he's going to whisper, but then he nearly rams a finger into Ryan's nose and says, quite loudly, "Thanks again! You're a good man!"

The man is already walking away with that heavy-footed saunter by the time I understand. He has a bag full of food while his pocket still rattles with change. Ryan's cheeks turn as red as raw lamb. He didn't leave the table for the restroom.

I sit back in my chair. I underestimated this man who not four hours ago materialized from between library shelves. He tries to brush past the exchange by recounting a time he and his mom went to a local Greek festival and ate themselves sick. I bite my lip as my intrigue deepens, and I tell him yes. I'd love some dessert.

I try to tell myself how little I know of him. How this could go south. How he could have a long disease or a short fuse. Or children. Former lovers with stories that would make me run for the hills. There's endless possibility for pain inside these potent wanting feelings. But while everyone's engrossed in appearances and money and themselves, here is a man who attends so little to those things that he actually sees the people around him. The tired stranger on his hunt for food. The bare-faced bank teller who usually keeps to herself. The woman who, after everything, still falls in love fast and hard. Who, with every bite of baklava sliding down her throat, is trying to convince her heart not to go hog wild.

When we stand to leave, he asks with another blush if he can see me again. I scarcely refrain from asking, *How soon is too soon?*

I carry a torn napkin home with Ryan's phone number like a firefly in my pocket. On the other half of the napkin is my number, held somewhere against his body.

At home, I pin his seven digits under the terra-cotta lamp beside my bed, leaving it where I can see what it says: *ryan brighton (from library)*. No capitals.

When I fall asleep, my dreams dilate with Ryan. The patient intensity of his forest-dark eyes and the paint-dotted hand that pulled my chair out for me. I gave up long ago on the myth of a good man. Yet here I am, ready to let *ryan brighton (from library)* try to prove me wrong.

1980

AFTER THE LIBRARY AND BAKLAVA, Ryan and I pass six months together like a morning stretch, that carefree inhale before the day picks up with its work and worries.

The afternoon that he takes me to meet his mother, I'm one long denim dress full of nerves.

Ryan opens the passenger door of his Mazda for me, and I touch my fingertip to some new dots of paint on the seat. Dry. I drop into the car. The last thing I need is paint on my rear end to meet Ms. Brighton. Or does she still go by Mrs.?

Starting the car, Ryan turns down the sudden blast of music and shifts into drive, his bomber jacket across his lap. His neck is shaved. Razor-burned, if I look closely, which I do.

"You're the first company Mom's hosting at her new house. Fair warning, her excitement will probably come out in being particular."

"Particular?"

"Taking your purse and serving snacks in only certain dishes and, 'Now dear, are you sure you want the tea bag instead of loose leaf?' That sort of thing."

"That sounds wonderful."

He clicks his tongue. "That's one word for it."

It's like fingernails scraping my skull when people complain about parents doing perfectly fine parental things. "I'm just sorry I don't have parents for you to meet."

His face blanches. "Shoot, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be embarrassed about my mom. I know how lucky I am. Really." He looks over at me and then back at the road.

We've been slow to climb each other's family trees, and I'm reminded of what a daunting climb it can be. Branches might snap.

I drop my gaze to my hands folded in my lap beside the tea Ryan suggested when I asked about a housewarming gift. No wine, he advised.

I fidget with the tea packaging. "What should I call her?"

"My mom?"

"Your first schoolteacher." Ryan shoots me a look, and I smile. "Yes, of course your mom."

"Elise?"

I make a face.

"Also, Mom was my first schoolteacher."

"What?" I knew she was a teacher, but for some reason didn't consider this.

"One of her earliest classes. First grade." His mouth ticks up in a half smile. "She'd give me the sternest look if I called her 'Mom' at school." He reaches over to hold my hand. "Anyway, call her Elise."

A first name might be fine if I were meeting a dad, but Ryan doesn't understand that mothers care more about this stuff. Especially single mothers of only children. And especially mothers of sons. I sigh. I should have chosen something nicer than this denim dress. We have just enough time to turn around so I can change clothes. I'll do my teal cotton dress from Kmart, with the collar and cap sleeves, that I should have put on in the first place. And I will call her Mrs. Brighton.

Before I can say any of this, Ryan takes an unexpected hard turn with, "If we have kids, I guess they'll essentially have only one grandparent."

I cough. We have never talked about kids. Or much about the future at all. We've kept both past and future at arm's length, a Frankenstein embrace of the present moment only. Ryan, though, does tend to say whatever pops into his head. So now I have a much bigger concern than whether Ms. or Mrs. Brighton will approve of my denim dress.

He frowns. "You okay?"

"Uh, yeah." I clear my throat. "So, you want kids?"

His expression lightens, his smile pure. "With you, yes."

I should be giddy. Ryan should be with a woman who's thrilled to hear those words from him. *With you, yes*. But dread coils inside me, leaving no space for the children he imagines.

I say nothing.

He frowns again. "Don't you?"

"I just want to make a good impression on your mom." I smooth my dress and casually ask, "Should I have worn something nicer?"

My pivot doesn't go unnoticed. His brows furrow into a deep V, but he responds with stabbing sincerity. "You're perfect."

When his gaze sears me at a long red light, I swallow and say, "So tell me more about your dad." I know what I'm doing.

Ryan grinds his teeth, and I immediately want to kiss the spot beneath his ear to release the tension I invited into the car. But instead, I flip over his Beatles cassette and wait.

Here's the little I already know: Barton drank too much and it made his hands loose. Elise and Ryan left when Ryan was young, but she got back in touch and Barton became an erratic presence. He'd show up occasionally at their duplex and beg Elise to take him back, while Ryan would tuck into a corner, drawing and making wishes on his mother's crucifix. Elise usually refused Barton, but not always. She sometimes let him stay for a while, whether from strength or weakness.

Ryan decided to stay teetotal. Even when college friends would chug drinks and do body shots, he'd get a Shirley Temple topped with a cherry. I don't know how long it's been since he and Barton have seen each other. I don't know Barton's profession or if Ryan looks or laughs or chews like his father. I don't know if Barton's gotten sober or what happy memories they share. There must be *some*.

"Not much to tell. He's a drunk."

"I'm sure there's more to him than that."

"If there's more to him, then I don't know about it, Lillian!"

The angry pop of my name ricochets off the windshield and hits me between the eyes. This is the first time I've ever heard Ryan yell. I stare at him, feeling my pulse in my wrist.

He shakes his head as if waking up. "Sorry."

His edge is unfamiliar. I say, "I shouldn't have asked." I stop shy of saying, *Let's leave behind what we need to leave behind*. And I try not to think about my trip to Nashville.

He signals and pulls onto a side street. Puts the car in park and turns toward me, his eyes like dark fire. "I really am sorry. I am *not* a yeller." His frown creases so deeply that it goes all the way into the years before I knew him. An acorn plinks on the hood of the car

as he continues in a heady voice, “I love that you care about my family. In fact—” He chews his lip and says for the first time, “I love you.”

We’re stacking emotion on emotion like a block tower nearing collapse. Still, I know Ryan means what he’s saying, unlike some men. Dark tangles fall across his eyes, and my heart pirouettes like it’s been doing since the day we met. My fingers on his forearm, I say it back. And I mean it, too. For us, it was love at first whisper, first put-down-my-novel-for-you, first cheesy Ryan line: “I think gyro beautiful.” Yes, I’ve loved him for a while now.

I lean over and kiss him, my tongue finding the gap in his teeth, the seat belt tightening across my chest. *This*, I think, is us. Not our childhoods or parents or wounds.

I peel back and tilt my forehead into his. “Your mom’s expecting us.”

“We can be late.” He starts to unbutton my dress. “I’ll explain that we had to pull over and—”

I slap at his hand and re-button myself with a snort of a giggle. “You’ll explain no such thing.”

We’re fine. Better than fine. We love each other! And I’m ready to meet his mother.

He grins, shifts the car into drive, checks the mirror, and eases back onto the road.

I play with the back of his hair as he drives, both of us lost in thought as acorns crunch beneath the tires.

Elise opens the door of her gray-bricked ranch-style home, pulls me toward her, and makes a kissing sound beside my cheek. “So good to finally meet you.” She looks me in the eye with a shade of Ryan’s exact sincerity, still holding on to my arms. “Can I take your purse, dear?”

Ryan raises his eyebrows at me, smirking.

I ignore him. “Thank you, Ms. Brighton!” In addition to sounding overeager, I’ve apparently landed on calling her Ms.

“Oh, please call me Elise.” She takes my purse.

Ryan’s *told you so* eyebrows lift so high that his forehead practically disappears. I elbow him after Elise walks ahead of us, and we repress snickers.

She's wearing jeans and a pink blouse with lips to match. Her shoulder-length, graying hair is freshly curled, but her feet are slippered, which leaves me reassured about my denim dress choice.

The house is immaculate, with only a few unpacked boxes remaining in a back room. Ryan was spot-on about her particularities during our visit. Tea in this cup, not that one. Turn on that light, not this one.

What I wasn't prepared for is how close she and Ryan are. It makes sense. She lost everything and then gave all her reserves to her son. He, in the way of a child, did the same for her. All of a sudden, my six months with him are a drop in the bucket. Now that we're here in his mother's house, I hardly know him at all. Women reflexively size up the mothers of their men, with some small smugness for knowing their sons in ways they never will. But mothers, I realize at this moment, have this. All the years. The man as a boy. My hand pulls toward my stomach.

Elise asks proudly, "Has my son told you he's a brilliant artist?"

Ryan rolls his eyes as I smile up at him. "Something like that." Elise and I both know he's too modest to make such a claim, despite its truth.

She points toward a canvas hanging on the living room wall between a crucifix and brass sconce. "That's a Ryan Brighton original right there."

I turn to see a painting of a mother and young son. I blow the steaming surface of my (loose leaf) tea and ask, "Is it—"

Elise nods. "That's us. From an old photo that's always been a favorite. Ryan painted it for my fiftieth birthday."

I brush Ryan's arm approvingly as I walk over to get a closer look. His talent and devotion are evident. In the painting, he's wearing red overalls, hugging his mom. I've seen him in action enough to know how he must've labored over the selection of colors, come back day after day, worked until each shadow was just so. How he must've thought about it even when he stepped away, problem-solving angles and details even as he scrubbed reds and blues and browns off his hands with turpentine. I look from the two of them in oil paint to the two of them in the flesh, and I'm struck again by the length of it, being someone's child.

Examining the boy in the portrait, I smile. "What a sweet little guy."

"Wasn't he?" Elise beams.

“Uh, ladies?” Ryan interjects. “As much as I love the attention”—he vigorously shakes his head to demonstrate that he does *not* love the attention—“should I start dinner?”

Elise laughs with her head tilted back. She’s beautiful, the headwaters of the man I love. She gestures to the backyard. “Grill’s ready when we are.”

The screen door slamming behind us, we migrate to the patio. Ryan mumbles that he needs to fix that hinge. Then, as he grills, I hear all about his playing baseball, winning art awards, and going camping in weather so cold that Elise had “a serious spike in blood pressure” worrying about frostbite. I shiver.

Elise offers me a sweater and doesn’t wait for my response. As Ryan goes inside to get a spatula, she puts a hand to his arm and instructs, “Hall closet. My thick cream sweater.”

Ryan retrieves the sweater, and I shrug myself into it as the sunset coats us in an orange film of relaxed contentment. Two floodlights click on while night enters placidly as if to say, *No hurry*. Tiny bugs flock from nowhere and bump against the light.

Reclining at her wrought-iron table with burgers and grilled squash, I answer questions about my recent promotion and then hear about Elise’s favorite and least favorite students over the years, her neighbor with the four cats, and the rhubarb pie recipe she’s perfected, which Ryan and I confirm by practically licking our dessert plates clean.

When we hug goodbye, Elise makes the kissing noise by my cheek again and says, “Don’t be strangers.”

I sense the precarious dance behind her words, the loss that comes with a son falling in love, her decreasing necessity, the fear of his drift.

Halfway out the door, I turn, remembering. I slip out of her sweater, which has the distinct and comforting smell of a woman of a certain age. Like nutmeg, but gentler. I wonder if my mother’s sweaters would have smelled this way. I thank Elise again and follow Ryan to the car.

What if I want to be strangers? What if I’m not ready for family or *only one grandparent* or—

“IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou.” As Ryan opens the Mazda door for me, he whispers this in quick succession like beads falling from a necklace. Before I can respond, he closes the door behind me and all but skips around to the driver’s side.