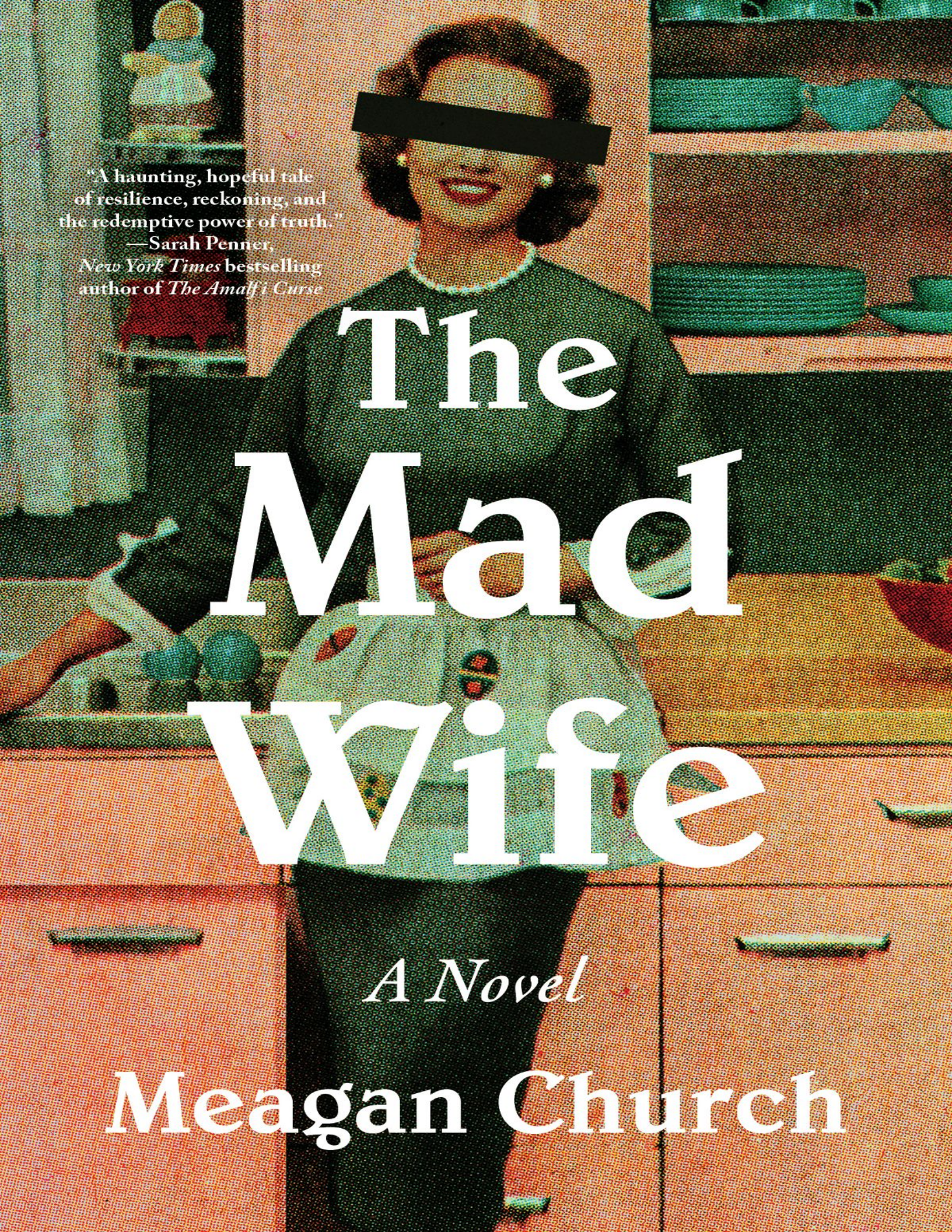


A woman with short dark hair, wearing a dark green long-sleeved top and a light blue skirt with a floral pattern, stands in a kitchen. Her face is obscured by a solid black rectangular bar. The kitchen features wooden cabinets, a countertop with various items, and shelves in the background holding dishes and a small doll.

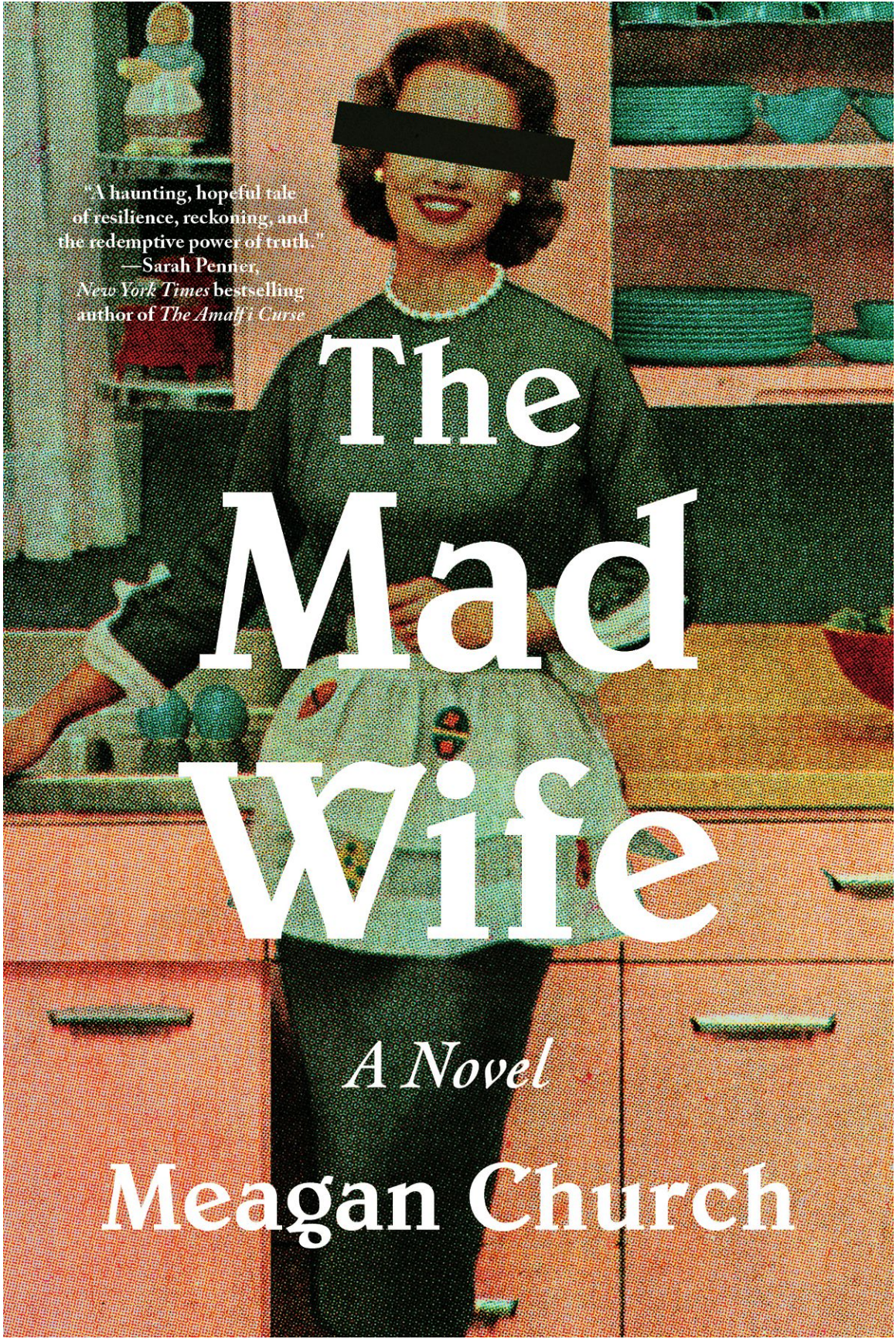
"A haunting, hopeful tale
of resilience, reckoning, and
the redemptive power of truth."

—Sarah Penner,
New York Times bestselling
author of *The Amalfi Curse*

The Mad Wife

A Novel

Meagan Church

A woman with short, dark, curly hair is standing in a kitchen. She is wearing a dark green long-sleeved top and a light blue apron with a colorful pattern. Her face is obscured by a solid black rectangular redaction. The kitchen has wooden cabinets and shelves with various items, including a small doll on a shelf to the left and stacks of plates on shelves to the right.

"A haunting, hopeful tale
of resilience, reckoning, and
the redemptive power of truth."

—Sarah Penner,
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The Mad Wife

A Novel

Meagan Church

Also by Meagan Church

The Last Carolina Girl

The Girls We Sent Away

The Mad Wife

A Novel

Meagan Church



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To Mom,

for your love and encouragement,

even in the shadow seasons of life

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A Note Before Beginning

Stories have a way of finding us at just the right—or sometimes the most fragile—moment. This one is steeped in history, woven with grief and longing, and tangled in the complexities of the human mind. It explores the weight of silence, the ache of the unseen, and the shadows that linger in the spaces between what is known and what is lost.

If you find the pages growing heavy, if the emotions press too hard against your heart, please know you have permission to set the book down. Step away, take a breath, and return only when you're ready. Stories will wait. May this one meet you in your time.

to become the *perfect housewife*

- ☐ Clean sink
- ☐ Clean counters
- ☐ Wipe appliances
- ☐ Sweep
- ☐ Scrub the linoleum until it shines like your fake smile

- ☐ Change sheets
- ☐ Wipe all surfaces
- ☐ Straighten closet
- ☐ Declutter
- ☐ Sweep
- ☐ Scream into a pillow

- ☐ Clean mirror and vanity
- ☐ Mop
- ☐ Clean toilet
- ☐ Avoid the shadows
- ☐ Clean shower and bath
- ☐ Sweep

- ☐ Wipe all surfaces
- ☐ Declutter
- ☐ Dust cobwebs
- ☐ Sweep

- ☐ Declutter entryway
- ☐ Water plants
- ☐ Clean out car
- ☐ Clean out purse
- ☐ Stop smelling colors

- ☐ Meal plan
- ☐ Straighten up pantry
- ☐ Grocery shop
- ☐ Spot-clean floors
- ☐ Clean fridge
- ☐ Quit tasting sounds

- [illegible]

“Masks are the order of the day—
and the least I can do is cultivate
the illusion that I am gay, serene,
not hallow and afraid.”

—Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*

Prologue

Remember.

Henry said it with such earnestness. His hand cupped mine, his fingers frigid, as was everything in that facility, the winter chill snaking through the cracks, crevices, and paper-thin window panes, finding every possible way to slither inside.

He leaned close to me, his face inches from my own, his eyes fixed on mine. I used to lose myself in those eyes, the irises so deep brown they bled into his pupils. I could smell his aftershave, the undertones of sandalwood, the hint of a musk that reminded me of how Daddy smelled on Sundays.

See? I can remember.

I remember Daddy, all those years ago, and Mama and Georgie—how he used to love to run. And how he couldn't help himself from giggling as he sprinted, when he still could.

I remember when Henry and I met at the university, our first date, the restaurant with the tablecloths, my back so sore from sitting up straight, and how he made me believe in the possibility of love at first sight when all I hoped for was someone to belong to.

I remember our babies, the first cries and the ones that would ring out at all hours of the night.

I remember silence, too.

Henry stood to leave, his hat in his hand, his eyes on the asbestos-tile floor. That place, and the circumstances that had brought us there, had stripped away any warmth we had once shared. He offered no kiss, nor embrace. I used to find comfort in his arms that he would wrap around me, pull me in to him, as I rested against his chest and listened to his heart flutter a melody meant just for me: *Lu-lu, Lu-lu, Lu-lu*.

But over time that tune had changed, and his voice now drummed my name.

Lulu, remember.

I do! I wanted to shout. But I knew better. I knew to be sweet, as Mama always said. I had forgotten for a moment, but it had come back to me. For now, I needed to stay quiet. Smile the smile. And save the screams for the hours when the others slept.

Part One

The Window

“She stared at her reflection
in the glossed shop windows
as if to make sure,
moment by moment,
that she continued to exist.”

~Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Chapter One

I suppose it was in the darkness of the morning before the sun peeked over the horizon that I first came to believe that a home has a soul. That's not something I would share with others, especially not Henry. He would probably give me that look he gave Wesley the time our son tasted the neighbor's dog food. But how else do you explain the house across the street? Unlike the rest of Twyckenham Court where the original owners still held the keys, that one couldn't keep the same family for much longer than a year.

That sprawling ranch with the large picture window and shutters without a purpose was the same as all the others on the street, a flipped floor plan of our own, but otherwise a replica. If I had been the one to choose our house, I probably would've picked that one, mainly because of the sycamores out back. They weren't large, sprawling oaks like I preferred, but I would've taken any trees as opposed to the barren yard that the builders left us. Of course, Henry didn't ask me what I wanted. He never had to. He surprised me. And I smiled as a good wife should. As I always did.

The FOR SALE sign had gone up a week ago, just before Christmas. The Donahues had been there for more than a year. We thought they might be the ones to stay. I had hoped so. In those twelve months, Emily had become my closest friend, so close, in fact, that she had given me a key so I could let myself in to borrow sugar even if she was out on an errand. But it was only a

matter of time before the house shook them loose and sent them packing, no matter how much I begged her to reconsider.

Each family offered a different reason for leaving: to be closer to relatives, a job relocation, a job loss, as was the case with the Donahues. Maybe that house was restless, anxious, like a mouse caught in a cat's shadow, and never let people feel at home. I sometimes wondered the same about our own house when I'd turn on the light over the kitchen sink and it would flicker before settling on. Even after five years of living there, I knew to expect the flutter before the light glowed steadily, but that didn't stop the shiver from tickling up my spine.

I thought about our house as I fixed Henry's eggs—over medium, with just enough yolk to dip his toast in—a task I had perfected over the last couple thousand days. But who's counting? This home had been full of firsts for us beginning the day Henry carried me across the threshold. Then there was the afternoon nearly four years ago when we brought Wesley home, followed by his first diaper blowout, the first time he slept through the night (that was a good one), when he took his first steps, said “Mama” between babbles and drool.

There were the other firsts, too, like when he had a fever and I didn't sleep for two days; when he closed his finger in the slider door; when I locked myself in our closet and cried when all he wanted was to be held, but all I needed was a moment to myself without being touched. *Babies are blessings*, they say. But what often goes unsaid is that blessings aren't always what we expect. And sometimes when we focus on the light they bring, we miss the shadows that lurk behind.

Lost in recollection, I nearly overcooked the eggs. “Are you okay?” Henry asked as he wrapped his arms around me and kissed my neck. His aftershave was so strong it caught in my throat. I typically liked the smell, but that morning my stomach soured.

I coughed and forced out, “Fine,” not wanting to say more as Henry ate his breakfast, fixed his tie, and breezed out the door to the office.

Finally, I was alone. But not really.

With our annual New Year’s Eve party the next evening, I had a lot to do in preparation. The list unspooled in my brain: vacuum the carpets and the drapes, mop the linoleum, a quick dusting to make sure the furniture shone. And then there was the food. But I couldn’t shake the cobwebs from my mind enough to focus on any of that quite yet. So, in the hour between when Henry left for work and Wesley woke up, I counted stamps, the kind I got each time I shopped. Gas, grocery, clothing, even aspirin purchases rewarded my loyalty with those S&H Green Stamps. Tearing, licking, and sticking them into the redemption booklets had become one of my favorite pastimes, especially when I needed a moment to get lost in a rhythm.

So far, those stamps had earned us a lamp for the living room (three-and-a-quarter books), a framed painting for the front hall (two books), a tricycle for Wesley (two-and-a-half books), the Longines wristwatch Henry wore every day to work (nineteen books), and a cookbook for myself that was apparently supposed to bring me joy (two books). Rumor had it that a woman a couple of towns over had saved up enough to take her entire family to Weeki Wachee Springs to see the mermaids. Talk about patience! I considered that for a moment, but something else always caught my eye as I flipped through the merchandise catalog.

Perhaps I was trying to put some soul into our house with the items I earned. Or at least remove the spirit that had infected it before we moved in. Mrs. Mayfield—yes, my mother-in-law insisted I call her that—had taken it upon herself to furnish our home, from the living and dining rooms to the very bedroom where her son and I slept. Apparently, she felt that if she helped us with the down payment, then she also got a say in how to decorate. I had spent the last few years purging her haughty pieces in an attempt to