

A Novel

Emma Cline

Switzzy



The
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Prize
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Longlisted



Bestselling
author of
The Guest

BY EMMA CLINE

The Girls

Daddy

The Guest

Switzzy

A NOVEL

SWITZY

EMMA CLINE



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[*About the Author*](#)

IT WAS ALWAYS NIGHTTIME there. Or in his memory he had only ever been there at night, the cobblestone streets and the strangely empty sidewalks, the black vastness of the lake as seen from the back seat of a town car. It was a city that existed in a perpetual hush, a chilly dark. As if the place had been built for these kinds of shadowed errands.

There would be snow on the ground. The middle of February. The flat, sad month. Like a house when no one is home.

The steady hum of the plane's engine carried them along. The window shades were all closed. A flat-screen showed news without sound. David played solitaire on his phone. The green meadow of the background pulsed against the black and red and white cards.

Click. Click. Click. Drag. Click.

The cards flipped all at once, scrolling across the screen. Chaos that resolved itself into order and then back into chaos, in need of order, future order.

He put his phone down.

Cody was still asleep. His head hung slack, mouth open, though he seemed comfortable enough, his arms folded peaceably across his chest. Self-contained, unobtrusive. He'd worked for David for—his brain wandered. For years. How much time had David and the boy spent together, if you added up the hours?

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

The quick brown fox—

They were somewhere nearing Greenland. It was not his plane. Of course it wasn't his plane. This plane that was brand-new. A tax loophole David had been familiar with—bonus depreciation. One-hundred-percent write-off for “business equipment.” In some realms, business equipment meant planes. Millions, just x-ed off the ledger. But whatever equipment had to be put into use by December 31 of the calendar year—Stearns had just made the cutoff. Wheels up before New Year's Eve. This year the exemption had dropped to whatever percent. Next year, even less. In a few years, the exemption would cease to exist, or more likely, it would morph into some other sneaky form, open for exploitation, but that was out past the limits of his purview.

The plane was large, bigger than Stearns's last one. A full bedroom, a galley kitchen. Polished doors that separated the rooms, doors that slid silently and obligingly out of sight. The windows were larger, stamped out more of the night sky.

The flight attendant was somewhere in her thirties. Young but not enough to be vulgar. Low ponytail, low heels. David had known, when she first said her name, that it would instantly become vapor. And so it had.

She had made up little passenger kits for the overnight flight. Hand wipes and squat water bottles and Chapstick and miniature tubes of face lotion and a sachet of hydrating powder that made your water more...wet?

He unscrewed his water bottle and tipped in the sachet of powder, or however much powder he could manage to get inside. He screwed the cap back on, shook the bottle. He took a slug. Assessed whether this water tasted particularly wet.

Hard to say.

David had a small leather notebook that fit pretty well in a jacket pocket. An overly fussy leather-worked cover, Liberty or whatever, lined pages and a gold-leaf edge. He kept notes to himself here. In blocky handwriting. It wasn't his handwriting. But it had to be, because he had watched himself write, watched his hand move the pen across the page.

ROSE CHAIR APPLE

Hall of the Mtn King

REBECCA, MARYLEBONE—Geoffrey. *Rainer*, 9.

Invisible spheres

As a kid, he'd learned cursive on lined practice paper. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The swooping tails of the *g*'s and the *q*'s, the queerly looped *z*—he'd filled page after page. Miss Shapiro had gone to each student, met them in their private child world. Used her own hand to press theirs into place. It was about learning to hold the pencil right. The minor ache of his fingers taking up an unfamiliar position. Awkward, at first, and then it had become natural.

Miss Shapiro, who must have been barely in her twenties.

Now he seemed to clutch at his pen with a clumsy hand, the letters shaky and juvenile, awkward again. Miss Shapiro, where are you?

THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT MUST have been watching, discreetly, to see when Cody woke up. At the first signs of stirring, she started to prepare dinner service.

Around she came to unfold the table, reconfigure the big leather seats into their dining arrangement. Click, click, she locked the seats into their new place. She spread a white tablecloth. Laid out the salt and pepper shakers, a pair of silver mid-century blobs. They were heavy in the hand, pleasingly so. The dishware, the flatware—the choosing of these items had taken up a not-insignificant part of Stearns’s mental energy. Multiple calls to David, discussing these decisions. Curious to think of now. These concerns.

They used to wear the outfits. The girls. The flight attendants. One of his first real business trips—those Austrian Air hostesses in red, head to toe. Their stockings were red, their little caps. There were little fabric curtains on each window with the names of the cultural capitals of Europe printed in script. Mouthfuls of Champagne. A little burp, David smiling at the red nurses. Smiling at the folding tray that marked his universe. He said nurse but he knew they weren’t nurses, no. They were air hostesses, but those outfits—they had a nurse feel. Which meant they would care for you. So you could relax, all was well.

A glass of white wine for Cody. A slightly prissy sight, Cody lifting the stem to his mouth. David had three fingers of Scotch. Alcohol was to be avoided. That had been the initial wisdom. He had complied, at the beginning—fear, it turned out, was fairly motivating. David gagged a little on the supplement regimen, piously declined his evening Scotch. Then the futility was clear, and he was ashamed by his own efforts, that he had ever believed they might help.

And really, even his brief sobriety had seemed flimsy. Subject to the usual human waffling, that murky internal dialogue with which all manner of

things were explained away. A lifelong Punch-and-Judy act—how one version of David pretended to himself that, yes, it was decided, no drink that night. Which, after the private gauntlet, usually meant, yes, yes, actually a drink tonight. Knowing he would have the desired thing, but first there's just this little play we are doing in which no, no, he would not.

Frowny face, smiley face.

—

THE LIAISON IN ZURICH was a woman named Gould, Anna Gould—he called her Ghoul. The process had taken months. Months and months.

Ghoul had messaged again.

Ghoul needed a second assessment from another specialist.

Ghoul needed another round of paperwork completed before she could send along next steps.

All the bureaucracy that had to be navigated, as in any other transaction.

It was a business exchange, ultimately—that had been a comfort.

Ghoul required the boring, expected items. Passport, birth certificate.

Did David Hastings exist? Yes, he did. Born in North Linden Hospital at 3:02 in the morning, deep in an eastern winter.

Could David Hastings travel to Zurich? Did he have the proper documents?

Yes, here was his younger face that stared out from his passport photo. A younger face, blithe, a David Hastings who did not know what would befall this current face. Though as he understood it, it had been happening already, that many years ago, proteins circling and gumming up the brain, plaque crackling along his neurons. So this younger David already contained the information of his own senescence. As everyone did, he guessed.

This younger David did not care.

The passport meant that this older David could pass through borders and cross oceans.

A stopover in London, then he would arrive in Zurich at the appointed time.

—

ANOTHER SCOTCH. HEAVY GLASS, fumes that warmed his mouth.

He'd been there last on a business trip. Had only ever been there on business. The reason he had gone most places.

There had been a constant drizzle, he remembered. Being outdoors was like moving through a cold breath. The outlines of the lake, a darkness that was even darker—the drizzle was so fine and uniform that it didn't appear to disturb the lake's surface.

A restaurant meal with Stearns under art, some kind of significant art.

It had always been winter, on those trips, and it was winter now. So there was a version of summer he'd never see: a crag of mountains, some glassine Alpine lake, Edelweiss, and so on.

Hills Are Alive—what he called the song as a kid. They got the cast recording and even his father seemed to soften when his mother put the album on after dinner. The Von Trapps were special—it was there in the songs. Clean and bright, the man sang. The man's voice had tenderness inside of it.

Blossom of snow, may you bloom and grow forever—that's the part that twinged in David.

Forever—a timeline he had not really considered before.

Seeing the movie as an adult surprised him: he hadn't remembered all the peril. Only the greenness and the sunshine and the voices that sang in clear

glass tones.

Hills are alive. What else will disappear—things only he knows. The surface of a pond that cut up and refracted the sunlight. The quick brown fox, the lazy dog.

The wife collecting the stems of cut flowers from the kitchen counter, scraps left over from her arranging, the air prickly with the wet plant matter.

Flowers, the light. What else was there, really?

The phenomenal world, which didn't mean good, did it? Just meant things as they happened.

The two days he had spent sick in bed at summer camp, feverish in his sweat-damp sleeping bag, back when they were no thicker than a bedsheet.

Hello Mudduh, hello Fadduh—don't leave him, don't drive away.

Friday Night Frolics, the boys preening in lipstick borrowed from the head of camp's wife.

The camp director lit the candles which stood for:

Courage

Honesty

Responsibility

At night, they lowered the flag. Evening formation.

The mawkish words that often looped, as of late:

Each careful step along the byway.

The itinerary was on his phone, and there was also a single sheet, printed out and folded in half, inside the notebook. Of course, Cody was the real keeper of the schedule, but it was one of these little feints they made at normalcy. They let David hold the itinerary, as you'd let a kid flap around in his father's necktie.

As a game, David tried to recall the contents of the itinerary without looking.

Well, go ahead, David. Give it a shot.

His brain jumbled and stuttered and spit out—nothing.

Game over, try again.

He unfolded the itinerary. And yes, of course they wouldn't go straight to Zurich.

London, first.

Rebecca.

After the flight attendant cleared their plates, she served coffee and tea. She brought out a plate of black-and-white cookies.

Courtesy of Mr. Stearns, she said.

David considered them. The pause went on too long.

Nate 'n Al's, Cody supplied. Your favorite.

Okay.

David crumbled a cookie into smaller pieces on his saucer. Cody seemed to have said something else, his face expectant.

These lags—they were both used to them by now.

David smiled a half smile, ate one of the cookie shards.

Black-and-white cookies—one of the things you wished tasted as good as they looked.

On an empty leather seat, there was a silver cardboard box tied with a wine-colored ribbon. Cody untied the bow to lift the lid—a plastic tray inside, with rows of dried figs, half-dipped in chocolate, each nestled in its own hollow.

Want one?

David didn't respond.

Yeah, I guess they don't look so good, Cody said.

Cody replaced the lid, retied the bow.

The engines whirred. Just as they had been whirring for the past stretch of hours. The racket was so loud, when you paid attention, so seemingly inescapable, but the brain got used to it. Tuned it out, somehow. As he had tuned out the noise of the engines so far, and would tune them out again.

Starting right about—right about now.

David had discovered, this late in his life, a new kind of privacy. Here, at age seventysomething. An interior chamber where he could make himself safe, calm, tucked away. He amused himself there. He kept himself company—for none of them could follow. They recited words and sentences from an old way of life, mannered and rote, and he could sometimes dial in.

Then back to the inner world.

The attendant cleared the dishes, took away the linens. She reached across David to fold the dining table into its slot. Cody murmured something. She nodded. Then the cabin lights were dimmed.

Now the sun goes away, now it's time to close your eyes. Because—because I said so.

The back bedroom had been neatly prepared for sleep, the recessed lighting turned low. The world, back here, was the dove-gray carpeting and the dove-gray blanket folded on the white duvet, polished tortoiseshell panels. On the door, an ivory bathrobe waited on a hanger with its ghost arms entwined.

—

AS HE STARTED TO arrange himself in the bedsheets, there was a soft knock on the door. It slid open a few polite inches.

Cody.

I have Trazodone, he said, or Ambien?

Such medications were also to be avoided, back when it had mattered.

How about Klonopin, David said.

Cody stood while David swallowed the doled-out pill, drank the water that was the extra-wet water.

Want any moon chocolates?

This meant the melatonin that came in little royal-blue cardboard boxes with a moon on the front, balls of chocolate in a blue candy shell.

David grunted, which meant no moon chocolates.

Sleep well, Cody said, the door sliding closed again.

—

BLACKNESS. A FEW HOURS. No dreams.

—

HE WOKE WITH THE usual start. Stared at the curved ceiling.

Where was he—the question hovered without urgency.

In and out, his brain went, like a radio tuning. Fuzz, intensifying fuzz. Then a signal edged in. Adjust, adjust—hello. Tune in, Tokyo.

The engines droned. So then he knew.

This was pretty close to being dead, wasn't it—hurtling along in this plane, making a high arc over the Earth, crossing time zones, eating up the hours. Lying here on his back, under the immaculate white sheets, his arms at his sides.

So he was already practicing.

He sat up a little against the pillows. He pressed a button under the ovoid window nearest to him. The window shade started to rise, revealing a segment of black outside. He let his fingers rest on the window—cold, true cold.

Just this panel of glass, then—what, some kind of acrylic? Probably an inch thick, all told, maybe less. Such a thin separation, really, between the warm domesticity of this bed, that robe, the comforts and ingenuities of the man-made world—and then, just a blip away, the void.

He pressed the button again and the shade descended, became again just a tan flatness.

—

DAVID CAME OUT OF the bedroom in his sweatpants and socked feet. His lips stuck to each other, so he had to lick them apart.

Cody was sitting up in his chair. Maybe he hadn't slept at all.

The news still played silently on the flat-screen.

Sleep well? the boy asked.

David nodded.

Not much longer. The boy looked at his phone. We'll land at London City. Heathrow?

They can't land these planes there. London City is the closest.

Heathrow is better, David said. Let's do that.

It's just not possible, Cody said. I did check.

Ask if we can divert to Heathrow.

We have our slot booked at London City.

David narrowed his eyes but didn't say more.

The ride in should be quick, Cody said. Pretty quick.

Silence.

David fumbled for his notebook in his jacket. Tapped it once when his hand found the outline—there it was. In its place.

—

A FINAL TRIP TO the bathroom before landing.

The toilet lid was a fat square of beige leather that lifted to reveal the silver basin.

Void pressure, not good.

Aim, poor.

Dot dot dash—he was basically pissing in Morse code.
A pretty feeble distress signal.

There was a faint spray of urine on the floor and bowl. From him? He wiped the seat down, somewhat, with a fistful of tissue. Watched the dark circle in the bottom of the toilet slot open, suck it all away with a roar. Out to the atmosphere, au revoir, his piss like a spritz of perfume in the night sky.

—

DAVID WANTED TO CHANGE into fresh clothes before landing. So why was there no change of clothes in his bag?

What's up? The boy could tell he was distressed.

I need to—David gestured at himself. I want a clean shirt. At least.

The boy got up: nothing in David's bag, nothing in Cody's bag, either. All David's clothes were folded away in the big suitcase, loaded in the belly of the plane.

You should have thought of this, David said. Why didn't anyone think of this?

He was annoyed at the boy. He was annoyed at Sylvia. The housekeeper who had not properly kept house. But actually David had been the one to pack; it was his fault there would be no fresh clothes.

He did not usually pack his own suitcase for trips. This time it had made sense. It would have been too complicated to explain to Sylvia the requirements of this particular voyage. Could he even explain them to himself?

He had stood in his closet, taken in the surroundings. It was like a private séance he conducted. The right clothes would reveal themselves. And Cody would check his work. But first, let David try.

The closet shelves were lit by hidden bars of light. The sweaters were folded, the shirts hung at obedient intervals. His shoes looked back at him blankly, plumped out with the wooden shoe forms. Barely touched by dust except for a few of the pairs on the higher shelves.

David stared down these clothes he would not wear again.

Unreal. That life had ever seemed to require so much costuming.

He had once cared quite a bit about his clothes.

That first set of shirts he'd ever had made for himself, back when he was in his twenties and freshly employed—the fabric too shiny, he never wore them. He had been talked into doing it, really. Everyone at the office went to the same tailor. Part of becoming a new person, a process that required its new skins.

He had gone to midtown to have his measurements taken. It wasn't a hotel room, but the apartment had the smooth, anonymous qualities of one, as if every object and piece of furniture had been bought at the same time. David was the final appointment of the day. After they were through, the tailor would head out of the city, take a car to Connecticut. To the home of an arms dealer he visited every time he came to the Eastern Seaboard. The tailor relayed this information, as he worked, in a neutral tone.

The measuring tape spanned David's shoulders. The tailor moved quickly and expertly. Brief points of pressure, a finger that held the tape at each end of David's waist.

Another appointment, later. This time for David's first suit. There was a folio that opened to hundreds of fabric samples. They looked at them together.

David knew he was meant to have opinions, exhibit some preference.

Why not the blue, the tailor said, after a long silence. See?

A very kind man.