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**MEETING WITH FRIENDS**

by

Kyle Manning

B.F.A., University of Maine at Farmington, 2014

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts (English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2020

Advisory Committee:

Gregory Howard, Associate Professor of English, Advisor

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## **MEETING WITH FRIENDS**

by Kyle Manning

Thesis Advisor: Gregory Howard

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(English)  
May/August/December 2018

*Meeting with Friends* might be a novel like any other: a translation of experience into words, little scenes pasted together from life that are rife with visible cracks, gaps, and overlaps. It is the kind of book that at some point wanted to be more—that you can tell has tried at some point to break free from its bounds; and it's true, even this author never had much faith in its ability to keep itself together. Mysteriously, upon no will or strength but its own, it managed through all the uncertainty and doubt and wonton experimentation of everyday living to not let itself be torn apart, to hold together just enough to end up as the little novel before you now.

There are a few things we can still say about this book for sure. It is interested in the young person named Olivia, and follows her across Portland, Maine. It is pulled forward by her anxious, exciting, horrible sense of what might be next, what one's near future might hold. And it wants to tell you that everything is going to be fine, though there will always be people who rightly feel that this is not true.

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## INTRODUCTION

During my last semester of undergraduate school, I studied both Henry and Williams James, the American brother-pragmatists, one a novelist and the other a philosopher. The latter penned the term “stream of consciousness,” and popularized the idea of an American “intellectual.” Reading them together convinced me, at the time, that the virtue—and indeed, the very point—of writing is that it portrays, in some way, the way consciousness works. I thought that my own writing should explore the fact, as Henry put it, that “relations stop no where.”

The following summer many things in my life came together: I returned to Maine after a two-month hike along the Appalachian Trail; I walked for my college graduation; I read *To The Lighthouse*; and I started writing this novel. The matter-of-factness of Woolf’s language, the sense of certainty which actually might corrode or slip or fall apart upon the very next dash or white space, provided for me an opening into how I might start my own experiment. I was only vaguely considering the literary tradition into which I was writing, but at some point I recalled *Mrs Dalloway*, and it all came together: I’ll observe a character from the moment they awake, I thought, and stick by their side the rest of the day. This seemed to perfectly channel Woolf’s concerns with time, on the one hand, and the Jameses’ concerns with consciousness on the other. I threw together some things that had been on my mind—visiting Portland, graduating college, going to Europe—into a scene, and started writing.

The first draft flowed out like a visceral stream of thought, which was constantly harking back to the questions that the Jameses seemed to pose: Shouldn’t we pay attention to each and every moment of a character’s life? Shouldn’t we respect the unending nature of time? I thought very little of how I was adapting Woolf’s cadence, her focus on the twists and turns of one’s thinking, or Henry James’s flowering descriptions and metaphorical language, in order to put my

thoughts into this form of a novel; I simply kept trying to answer those questions. I wrote deliberately long paragraphs and longer chapters, trying to stretch our attentions while also focusing them on minutiae of thought, which felt important to me for how they were largely ignored in novels, in favor of grander plots and larger characters.

Indeed Woolf's novels became more critical here, while James's seemed to be showing his age; I felt largely uninterested in his kind of grander narrative, in the forces that sweep a character from one place to another, and how they unfold with those forces—this all seemed old, unpoetic, *too much like a novel*. The way that *To The Lighthouse* makes an entire scene out of a single stroke of Lily Briscoe's paintbrush inspired me to give Olivia a camera and watch what would happen, while never feeling the need to incorporate Olivia's photography into any kind of plot. I wanted to simply watch people do things; I wanted the reader to look at how actions were important and interesting simply for themselves. I took Woolf's writing as a ticket to investigate the things I was interested in without the pressure of having to contextualize the information into story or plot.

While this brash writing experiment meant that my future drafts would need to think much longer about how to fit all of this into a more novel-like form, I am proud that I actually went through with it, in light of how it allowed me to freely explore issues in both writing and in life, and how easy it might have been to back away from those unknowns and revert to mimicking someone else's experiments. The most recent draft has indeed taken on the work of considering how the interests I presented in the original—the cadence of a single day, the little decisions we make going one place or another, the feeling of the sun on one's skin—could be conveyed to a reader who approaches this text with the expectations of a novel.

Indeed this has been my revision objective over the last year—to stop writing this piece solely as an experiment and start writing it like a novel. I took inspiration during this process

from several other novelists who I am in conversation with through craft, if nothing else. (I do not expect my readers to have knowledge about any one novel or novelist in particular—while readers of *Mrs Dalloway* will be more quickly oriented to the nature and scope of the plot than others.) Over the course of the year it happened that I revisited Henry James, this time reading his earlier and less forwardly experimental *The Portrait of a Lady*, which provided space for thinking about how my own narrator would discuss a female protagonist in the third person. James's treatment of Isabel Archer, while it is for the most part positioned in the present moment and does not have the advantage of future knowledge, also possesses a sense of the character's ultimate development, the conviction that this moment is merely at one point in a very long course. While any long Jamesian descriptions have since faded out of the novel's style, I was ultimately affected by James in a different way, which has led me to treating my characters with his level of respect and maturity.

Perhaps this revision's first monumental decision was to shorten the novel's chapters, in an effort to focus attention and keep up a more active pace through an otherwise inactive plot. I was thinking very much of how Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, conveys how each and every domestic dispute is purely catastrophic, while the next chapter simply moves on to the next event, having seemingly forgotten the last. This gives a strong sense of accumulating memory, as each chapter is obscured but can never be totally forgotten or erased. I admired how this conveyed the sense of memory as simultaneously forgiving and frustrating. Thinking of *Anna Karenina* allowed me to imagine how I might jump from one thing to the next, without making clear any reason as to where we were going other than that time was passing.

I also took support from the much more recent *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, which creates a sense of structure based solely on the novel's timeframe. This gave me confidence to create short chapters that focused on moments that in the original draft were merely details in a

much longer narrative. Rooney's novel takes place periodically, over just a few years of a much longer relationship. This timeframe is arbitrary insofar as other frameworks could have been chosen in order to tell a story of this relationship. By imposing the timeframe, however, Rooney is able to render certain events more or less significant to the reader, which ultimately forms an enticing experience for the reader to follow. I hope to do something similar with all the little events happening on a particular day; while the significance of a seemingly insignificant moment might be immediately revealed, we as readers should feel reassured by the fact that this story unfolds a single day because we know that the meaning of things never immediately materializes, at least on such a timeframe. Establishing this novel as taking place over the course of Olivia's day was at first a way for me to discover through writing what would actually become significant to this story; taking inspiration from Rooney, then, I allowed myself to embrace this framework and build it up into something that would convey messages to my reader as to what was actually important.

Discovering the novel's tone was then and is what continues to be the most difficult. I suspect that a seamless tone emerges from a more seamless level of self-awareness; as I become increasingly aware of what I've put down on the page, I am able to more fully put myself in my reader's shoes and get an idea of what tone is actually being portrayed to them. Because my initial writing experiment felt so serious to me, I found it difficult at first to find any humor or lightheartedness, until I had gotten farther away from that experiment. Finally sharing my work with others allowed me to see the humor in the situation: the fact that this novel is, for the most part, watching a twenty-three year-old decide where she should go out to breakfast.

Eventually I found inspiration from the English novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, who manages to deliver some of the greatest laugh-out-loud moments in literature while never breaking away from the scene or making the reader feel like they have to take a step back in

order to get the joke. Her novels seem to simply watch and record what happens—all of which turns out to be ridiculous, hilarious, and true. Keeping this tone in mind was the key for me in finding how to create a fun reading experience while, at the same time, also letting a reader derive meaning, significance, and humor for themselves. In search of this kind of tone, my novel suddenly didn't need so much description; we didn't need to linger, but could be content filling in certain gaps during the reading experience; and finally the scenes grew shorter. With so much rumination cut out of the narrative of Olivia's consciousness, there was suddenly more space for other kinds of writing: space for the pieces of a novel, more character and more action.

All this free-space gradually led to the need for making significant changes and additions to characters and their histories. Indeed, through an intuitive process of filling in gaps, the novel took on the theme of "Olivia's friends" rather naturally. While the initial story that staged the Jamesian experiment had always involved other characters who were Olivia's friends, it was this search for a particular tone of reading that led the writing to take up those friends as the foci of its narrative. The novel began to essentially track the thread of each of Olivia's friends, Emily, Maria, James, and Adrienne, not because I set out to make it do so, but because all along they were the threads weaving together the narrative of Olivia's life.

First, in order to fill in the 'gaps,' I needed to establish the last year of Olivia's life, which turned out to be significant because of how it had been a notable divergence from her previous life and that of her friends in Maine. In the process of giving this divergence value by conjuring up her memories of this last year, I ended up introducing memories of another friend, Maria, who was a significant part of the life she lived abroad. Maria, separate from everything about her life and friends here in Portland, creates a sense of what is different between here and there, and between past, present, and future. Olivia often idealizes this past year with Maria,

using it as a kind of excuse to push away the friendships that she's re-encountering here in the present.

Adrienne, the friend that Olivia happened to randomly encounter in town, then became the force that could push Olivia out of herself, out of seeing this day as a simple division of past and present. When Olivia is all but sure that her Portland friends can't live up to her expectations, she briefly puts hope in Adrienne, who strikes a mysterious balance between American and European sensibilities; Olivia hopes that they might spend the rest of the day together. In the end, she must accept that of course Adrienne has her own plans for the day, and that she must carry on alone. This leaves Olivia in a position in which she must either bear her self-induced loneliness, or accept her friends here and her role among them for what they are.

Once I identified that this could be Adrienne's real function, I was able to hone her character accordingly. In previous drafts her character was continually changing, indeed because I could not figure out what I really wanted her to do other than to show the random acquaintances Olivia would run into in town. In order to surprise, entice, and also frustrate Olivia, Adrienne had to be strong and forward while still mysteriously intimate; she had to have something of the attraction of Maria and Europe, while still being clearly and unabashedly from Portland. I think that her conversation with Olivia about Maria, on their walk towards the park, is an important moment for the reader's understanding of Olivia for how Adrienne is clearly putting her on the spot and exposing the fact that Olivia hasn't had much perspective on her relationships other than her own.

After realizing that I wanted to engage with how Olivia was using her memories of Europe to idealistic ends, I was then ready to see that there needed to be some storylines happening in Portland for Olivia to push back against. Before this there had been no "party" in the story—I made it up, as I was writing the last scene of this draft. The party creates a structure

of activity for this day that Olivia and others can either work for or against; there is always the question, “Am I going to the party, or not”. The structure of “James’s party”, finally, seemed to fit perfectly with James’s character, with the celebratory vibe of the summer’s day, and with the Woolfian tradition of the novel.

Ultimately I wanted Olivia to have at least a small moment of reconciliation with her friends in Portland, which came to fruition in the very last scene of the book. After Adrienne leaves her for the rest of the afternoon, Olivia spends some time pining for the companionship of Maria from afar; when she finally assesses her actual options, however, she has to settle with the fact that she still has Emily, who has always been ready to take her in back at the apartment. She resolves to head back to Emily’s apartment for the evening, and even manages to be so comfortable with it that she secretly hopes she might just forget about James’s party (and, therefore, the apparent source of her day’s stress). While the idea of heading back to Emily’s had been an option for Olivia in earlier drafts, I had always treated it as nothing more than one of her many possibilities. However, in developing James’s party as the force that Olivia works against, and Adrienne as that which pushes Olivia to self-reflect, I saw that Emily was the obvious choice as a safe middle ground for Olivia to engage with the present while making some compromises.

I don’t believe that all of this is yet portrayed in its entirety in the novel; indeed I have taken this time and space to figure it all out. But I do believe that what I’ve written here is true insofar as its essence is evident in the current draft. I intend on developing that essence into more self-contained forms and shifting the novel’s structures in order to adapt, while accepting that the structures themselves will have their way with these essences and shape them accordingly.

Ultimately, with writing this novel, I want to put the particular themes of this story between me and the reader in order to have a conversation, to share in our reactions to them, and

to ultimately develop our relationships with them together. My younger self would have never thought that writing this book would become a way of talking about such themes as friendship, loneliness, and the distances between us. Its original germ felt completely solitary, so involved as it was in questions about how we think about time and space; now, over time and with revision, I identify the original writing as a kind of reaction to the forces which friendships and their distances put on us. Newer drafts became a process of engaging with such themes, and bringing them to the fore. Perhaps we can view the original draft as having planted a single seed, which existed as a thing itself—and which, over time, reacted to the world happening around it and grew into something wholly different.

*She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There  
was a very straight path.*

*Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady*

*They walked on, without knowing in what direction.*

*Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice*

*August 15th, 2015*

*Portland, Maine*

## CHAPTER ONE

Before the day could really begin, Olivia needed to check her phone. Her eyes weren't open, but she could see the brightness of the sun. The time, given this kind of light, could really be quite late, and she was still lying there on Emily's couch.

James might have been waiting—which, Olivia consoled herself, was just fine, considering how agreements with James had always been a kind of casual. James had never been truly sad about missing anything, because he was the kind of person who simply moved on, to whatever inevitably came to take its place. She imagined him heading out to breakfast alone, having figured that something or other had happened to hold Olivia up. He would sit down at some diner off Congress and gulp down a pre-prandial glass of orange juice—which he *would* do, if only because he was James, because he knew this was America, that it was perfectly acceptable for him to do so. And he would run into a hundred other acquaintances as he idled there, before even looking at a menu, chatting away the Saturday morning.

Anyone else who was holding a party that evening might have spent the entire day in a state of anticipation, but Olivia knew that James was different. Of course he would have at some point to get the apartment ready, but for him that was just one very brief period of the day that would simply happen sooner or later, and not something he really needed to worry about doing. There was no possible way James would mind that Olivia had failed to text him, that she really didn't need any excuse. For him it meant only that they would meet up with each other, at some point, later on. Indeed the day was long, she reminded herself, and considered suggesting that they meet for brunch instead.

Olivia felt very little excitement to begin engaging with James's long-expected questions about her summer, her year, and her life. They had arranged this breakfast so that they could talk in private, before the party and the rest of the day got in the way; but now that she was here, she couldn't help but avoid James's individual attention, and longed to blend in with everyone who lived in Portland and were only coming for the simple sake of a weekend party. This had become a concern in her mind long before she had made the flight back from Europe; it had first occurred to her soon after she'd arrived at the job in France, as she'd mused about what returning home would eventually be like. It had been obvious, even then, that James would expect a kind of long-winded, elaborate debriefing of all that had happened.

Nevertheless, Olivia had to admit, she would have liked to get some breakfast, sooner rather than later.

She could perhaps remember that Emily, when they lived together, had woken up early even on Saturdays. Emily might very well have been waiting patiently, perhaps for the last several hours, sitting in her bedroom, just waiting for Olivia to get up. But it was the kind of distant memory that Olivia could easily imagine herself misremembering, and she had to consider that perhaps she could not remember at all. She couldn't think of any one memory in particular, no specific place and time of when she'd heard it; but it was as if she *had* had a memory, something telling her that Emily had always woken up early.

It was convincing enough, at least, for Olivia to tell herself that she should finally get up, that she should find her phone and check her messages. It was not only her friends who might have been waiting for her, but it was for her entire day here in Portland, all the time that she had between now and tomorrow morning—two of her valuable nights back in the States—before flying back to Le Mans at the end of next week.

Olivia did recall how she'd felt the night before, as Emily poured them each a drink, when she'd finally gotten in from the bus; when it had struck Olivia that going to James's party, making small talk about her last year overseas to a mixed crowd of old friends and strangers, was not exactly what she wanted to do here. It was as though she had, up until that point, been innocently imagining that this visit would be nothing but the bliss of summer nostalgia: chatting idly with friends on sunny porches, in city-parks, holding tall glasses of golden beer. During the stifling ride down on the bus from her parents in Brunswick, however, Olivia had begun to think what having to chat with random people about her life might be like. She'd thought of Emily's partner, Nathan, who had been asleep last night when she'd come in (even these days Olivia had to remind herself of his existence); she imagined the horrible awkwardness with which he would surely ask her questions about her summer travels, her year in France, her teaching English, and she felt what those questions and her silences would imply. "So, how was *teaching in Europe*?" he would ask—a loud, blunt, perhaps even annoyingly ironic tone, as though her time spent there naturally couldn't have been anything more than romantic. "*Drink lots of fancy coffee? Smoke any hand-rolled cigarettes?*" She understood the playfulness of such questions, of course; still, she resented that they made a joke of it, that they demanded her to play along.

She tried to remind herself that not everyone at the party would act like this; James, for one, absolutely admired the opportunity Olivia had taken to teach abroad—he had practically been the one to help her make the decision. But even people's admiration made things more complicated. It seemed that any American who uttered the phrase "living in France" had to in some way deal with this in their own way. Olivia could hardly imagine herself doing anything in Portland without feeling that there were questions about to be asked, people's minds filling with ideas merely at the sight of her being back.

She'd felt guilty, afterwards, for assuming that Nathan would behave so crudely. It seemed to be the situation itself, she considered then, that provoked such reactions between people who would otherwise get along; there was always something awkward, she felt, between people who had left and people who had stayed. She hoped that she and all her friends would be able to get past these moments, to actually enjoy her very short window of time here in town, a significant part of why she'd come back to the States in the first place. It felt rather idealistic, now, to think that visiting Portland would simply be a fun little jaunt, a re-living of older memories.

Finally, the unfortunate question had come to her: *Shouldn't I have just stayed home?* What felt like a hollow space and time had followed, in which Olivia wondered if she really should try—if it was really the best idea—to think of an answer.

## CHAPTER TWO

Yes, she did remember that moment of apparently endless concern; but that uncomfortable feeling had, at some point, subsided. The evening with Emily had turned out to be incredibly pleasant. When the two of them had finally gotten back to the apartment from the bus station, when they were both sitting in front of a mixed drink and faced with the question of how to address the last year of relative silence between them, Olivia had finally realized that Emily was in fact the kind of friend—or she had, perhaps, become the kind of friend—who could read a situation, and who could hold back. She saw that Emily wasn't italicizing Olivia's absence; while of course Olivia had been gone for so many crucial events—the relationships, the feelings, and all of the many moments—she seemed to actually acknowledge that Olivia, too, had continued on with life. It was quite unusual, in fact, how Emily could simply let her talk; never flooding her with questions, or taking up too much of the floor for herself. It allowed their conversation to drift naturally from one thing to the next, until suddenly it was late and they were both exhausted. Olivia could remember lying on the couch looking into darkness, thinking that a good talk had been exactly what she'd needed.

She considered that she usually left her phone on whatever surface happened to be an arms-distance away as she slept—just for these kinds of mornings, in fact, when she could not be bothered to remember where she had last put the thing. She reached out to Emily's coffee table, and felt nothing but smooth wood, felt that the phone was not there, and knocked her hand against some empty glasses. They were hers and Emily's glasses, she remembered, from last night, when she had decided herself that washing them could wait until morning. This had been a small issue just before they had broken up to get some sleep: Olivia had mentioned off-handedly that the glasses could wait, and had felt Emily's tight, momentary anxiety. Olivia immediately

reverted, but Emily had already gotten over it. She had waved her hand; her eyes had been almost closed with sleep, as she'd pulled herself off to bed.

Olivia couldn't tell to what extent Emily had actually been affected—whether or not it had hurt their rapport for this little visit, or if it would continue to quietly accumulate with other tensions. It had really been so long since they had been roommates; Olivia couldn't know what kind of roommate, or what kind of friend, Emily had become. She had to remind herself, with a slightly embarrassing regret, that they were no longer in college, that they were no longer sharing a place. She needed to consider that this was Emily's home entirely, the place in which she spent most of her days.

Olivia would wash the glasses immediately, she thought, once she finally arose, and it would be the real beginning of her morning at Emily's apartment. It was suddenly clear that she should have scheduled James for lunch from the beginning; she was, just by being here at Emily's, a part of Emily and Nathan's Saturday, and it would be the natural thing to spend it with them. Maybe they would make breakfast together, here at the apartment; Nathan would have a box of pancake mix, she figured, ready in the pantry. From afar it had been easy for Olivia to dream of an all-American morning with James, meeting him bright and early in the window of some downtown diner, sitting before a coffee and a breakfast sandwich. She hadn't thought of how she would have to leave Emily's, first.

This was how her friends who lived in Portland spent their weekends: going out to breakfast, spending time in town or on the couch, until Monday morning came back around. How different it was, Olivia thought, from how she had lived this past summer. Beginning at the farm in Spain where she'd met Maria, and then on to the hike of the Compostela, she had enjoyed finally not living for days off, but simply enjoying the day itself. She didn't quite know what she would change about her friends' lives now, but felt that it left something to be desired.

It was with a rough mixture of resignation and friendly solidarity that she felt herself resigning to a normal Saturday morning, sitting around tables, eating food, and waiting for tonight's party to come. It appeared that her only choice in the matter was where she would go for the next few hours, and who she would do it with.

Olivia stopped flailing her hand about the table, fearing she'd knock something over. She summoned the strength to finally prop up her head and look.

She pulled the blanket from her face and the sun came in, more strongly than she'd imagined. It reminded her that she had been sleeping in far too late, since being back these past few days; it made her worry that she would never be able to get back to normal. Of course she could have simply set the alarms on her phone; but Olivia had come to like being roused naturally, by the sun. As she had to use the phone for so many other things, especially while hiking—it was her map, forecaster, journal, telephone, computer—indeed she felt a little gratified when she could do something alone. Over the course of a month along the Compostela's trail, she and Maria had hardly needed to use their phones at all, and it had been glorious.

Even without a clock, however, the light pouring through Emily's window was too bright to question. It must have been late. Olivia felt like she should be concerned; her mother would be there to pick her up in roughly twenty-four hours, now, to take her back to Brunswick, where she'd tap out the last few days of her stay before her flight from Logan Airport to Charles de Galle. And later today, of course, there was still the party, so that there seemed to be a very small period indeed in which she could enjoy her freedom. Even before she had started hiking, over the weekends during the school year in Le Mans, Olivia had idealized the idea of waking before everyone else, of lounging about quietly in the rising morning light as things went from dark

blue to gold. If she had risen early enough this morning, she could have listened to the apartment as it broke from absolute silence; she could have been waiting and ready with a hot cup of tea when Emily finally emerged from her bedroom, surprised to see Olivia up so early. For today, at least, that pleasure was gone. With the sense that the clock was ticking until seven o'clock that evening, when she would for some reason find herself on James's couch making smalltalk, Olivia imagined the stretch of Portland downtown, and all of the things that might be waiting for her there to see.

She was, in short, relieved to get moving. In the course of searching for the phone—digging around blankets and pillows, shoving her hands down into unknown crevasses—Olivia was struck in particular by how, having removed her blankets, she was not at all cold this morning. She had been cold every single time she'd awoken that summer, whether it was merely to a brisk chill blowing in from the ocean, or to the kind of harsh mountain-coldness that made one temporarily forget, until the sun miraculously rose up in the sky, that it was in fact summertime. Each morning she had been forced, by that sheer coldness, to enact the quick routine of getting dressed, packing up her bag, and heating some water over their little stove. Olivia couldn't possibly complain now about the warmth and shelter of Emily's apartment—she recalled too well the days when it would rain, when all the world seemed dark, and she and Maria had huddled under the cover of tarps, warming their hands around the propane flame.

She felt a little at sea, nevertheless, without all those usual routines, and the very immediate and demanding reasons for doing them. It suddenly appeared a little more justifiable that she had been sleeping in, considering how different the demands of her environment had become. It made her look forward to how she would eventually leave the shelter of the

apartment, would finally stretch her legs out in the sun, heading downtown, feeling real warmth against her skin.

Eventually, as the search for the phone continued to come up empty, Olivia realized that it was possible the phone simply wasn't here, that she had perhaps forgotten it on the bus, at the station, or had dropped it somewhere along the way. She stopped turning up pillows, then, and stared off into the blankness of a wall. The possibility fell away, however, quickly enough, as Olivia considered that there were so many places the phone could be hidden in this apartment; but also as she reminded herself that the phone was just a phone, and she shouldn't have been so frightened by the idea of losing it. She could still have her day here in Portland, either way; she could still manage to meet up with James, explore the town, show up at his place later on. She vaguely imagined a future in which the phone remained lost, and Emily would have to use her own to keep in contact with Olivia's mother about when and where to pick her up.

In fact, as she thought of how she would have no way of getting in touch with James, Olivia was suddenly—and even a little pleasantly—relieved. She would not, then, be so accountable for missing breakfast, or even losing track of their plans entirely; it was so much easier not to be at fault, when one had simply lost their phone. She knew the party was at seven, and so that's when she would show up; but before then, she would be off the hook. It made the world comfortably, unbelievably simple—although this was followed, of course, by a quick sense of guilt, for Olivia had to consider that she might have been a terrible friend to James for feeling this way.

She *did* have fears, she admitted, of talking with people again, and with James in particular. Yes, she had finally gone abroad, had seen part of the world; she had gotten out and done the thing, something beyond college and short-lived vacations. This was, indeed, the way in

which it seemed others would view her, how they would take her brief sojourn back here in the States. No matter how much she reminded herself that James was in fact sympathetic, and that he would never mean her any discomfort—still, Olivia cringed at the generalizations; she wanted to speak out, loudly, against the simplifications. And at the same time they made her want to retreat into silence, to not meet up with any of them, and go back to living by herself at her parents' house, until the date on her plane ticket arrived and she could finally go back, and she wouldn't have to face anyone at all.

### CHAPTER THREE

As Olivia stood up to look elsewhere about the room, she felt the first pangs of morning hunger; it had been a rather long time since she'd eaten before getting on the bus. She wondered, now, if getting in touch with James would actually be quicker than waiting for Emily and Nathan to get up and moving. She thought of all the places in Portland they could go, from the diners to the little restaurants—which did seem to sway her decision, seeing as Emily had become rather a homebody since the latter half of college, while James cited the food as a central reason for his living in town.

She quickly fell back onto the couch, not because she had searched it completely, but because she was simply tired of thinking about it. Emily's apartment, she considered, was in Parkside, just up the hill from Deering Oaks Park; she considered what places to eat might be in the immediate vicinity, trying to remember where she had eaten before, what good memories she had. Congress Street, with its innumerable and various eateries, was of course but a short walk up the hill, though Olivia figured she didn't need anything particularly fancy or expensive.

When she found her phone, of course, she would look over her options. She thought that an excuse to stroll through the park would be lovely—the park in summertime, with the grass actually green and the duck pond glimmering. She suddenly recalled that she was remembering how her father would take them into the city, when she would beg and plead to go to The Holy Donut, which sat just across the street from the park. And when she was in high school, when she and her friends would make weekend sojourns into town, it had been her top, most insistent priority. She had almost forgotten that completely.

Throughout her college years she had indeed become a little resentful of such indulgences—perhaps even a little resentful of others, including her past self, for giving in to them. Now, such a close walk away to such an old and untouched memory, with a free schedule

and her stomach more than willing, Olivia felt completely open; she *could* go to the Donut, eat a sweet breakfast alone, and look out across the street into the park. It suddenly appeared like the perfect bit of nostalgia to start off the day.

Quite randomly, as she was staring into the glare outside Emily's window, it occurred to Olivia that a million things could have swiped her phone off the table and onto the floor.

She recalled a moment that had faded with sleep, which was now returning: the phone hitting the floor, at some point during their conversation, and making the sound of sliding against a hard floor. Of course she *would* have been so clumsy and inattentive, after one of Emily's drinks, as to not care that she'd dropped it, to just keep talking and figure that she'd find the phone later on.

Still a bit suspicious of the memory, Olivia bent herself down to look underneath the couch. As her ponytail brushed against the hardwood, she saw it, upside-down, abandoned there in the shadow. It was strange that the memory had even been real—as though it was somehow ridiculous or funny that the phone had simply been there all along, exactly where she had dropped it, waiting for her to solve the puzzle of her own memory. It gave her the impression that one was always in the process of trying to remember something.

She settled herself into her spot on the couch, looking down at the phone clutched up to her chest. The screen read 10:03.

Ten-oh-three. It was nearly ridiculous, now, that Olivia had still not made a decision as to whether or not Emily had slept in on weekends, when they had roomed together. She knew, however, that if she was awake in her room at that moment (beside Nathan, of course, who might still be asleep), and if Emily was indeed waiting to hear evidence that Olivia herself was awake

before she finally came out, then Olivia might as well start making some noise, in order to clear things up and get things moving.

Emily, of course, would merely tell Olivia to not worry herself, that she was only trying to give her some space; it was the kind of thing Emily would do for any guest, and which she seemed to hold as an important part of putting them up for the night. This must have come from her mother, Olivia thought; the coastal-Maine housewife, who she'd met several times during occasional visits to the Pelletier family home in Freeport. She had been the overbearing college-mom who had sent her and Emily new curtains every year for their dorm room, along with boxes and boxes of snacks. The longer Olivia lived with her, the more and more Emily reflected her mother and her mother's life, as together they grew into dorm rooms, followed by their apartments.

Olivia had thought many times that Emily was like a coastal housewife only without the house, the husband, and the money. She was something similar but also new and in formation, just like this rising Portland neighborhood, Olivia now realized. It seemed to snap into perspective, here in Emily's own apartment. The living room was, indeed, both spotless and purposefully curated; the window curtains were new, not the same ones her mother had bought them in college, and matched the furniture on which Olivia was sitting.

These impressions made it seem like Emily needed to calm down, to stop worrying over the colors and knick-knacks and decorative glassware that Olivia could see was tactfully arranged about the room. Olivia knew enough, however, to tell that she needed to check these thoughts. She needed to remember that this was Emily's apartment, Emily's life—and that she did not necessarily have any say in it. While she had the instinct to tell Emily exactly what was on her mind, she had to recognize that doing so might have just been an aspect of the dynamic they used to have as roommates; she couldn't have even been sure that Emily would have wanted

the same intimate, intrusive dynamic they'd once had. She was, after all, just visiting, staying on the couch for a night or two.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Just before she was about to get up and make an inordinately loud yawn for Emily to hear, she saw on the phone an unread message from James. She opened it immediately and, faster than it would have taken her to actually read the words of the text, Olivia gathered that James was merely letting her know that he was awake and ready to meet, whenever she was ready herself. She tossed the phone aside, just as quickly, and looked back out the window and into the sun.

It was only a small relief: James had indeed not been worried over her lack of response, and her sleeping-in had had little, if any, effect. She might have even been anxiously awaiting James himself, had she woken up any earlier. It seemed that nothing she had done had any real effect, so there was nothing really to be relieved about. She felt at ease, however, in continuing to not treat their meeting so seriously—she felt no real need or desire to answer him immediately, and took the opportunity to continue this comforting sense of idleness here on Emily’s couch, for just a little while longer.

She really *did* want to see James again, eventually, Olivia thought. She wanted to go out, to spend time in Portland, seamlessly meeting up with friends and having a good time, without the weight of weighing options and differences and who might be present, and when. She had come here because she had had such warm memories of Portland and her friends who lived here, and it seemed to be a part of life to try and make more. What seemed to now be in Olivia’s way here was the idea of harshly leaving Emily’s apartment so soon after arriving; she was now aware of the abruptness and usedness that might imprint on Emily and herself. Emily had bothered to pick her up from the station; she had offered her house for as long as she needed it. And she was, in the end, one of her best friends, despite that Olivia was always planning on just using her place as a base in town. She owed Emily something more than that, she knew; at the

very least, she thought, she owed her the time it would take to see each other and say some things out loud.

She would have time, she knew, to meet James eventually, regardless of how long she spent here. There might be a little less time in town, then, a little less time alone, exploring, walking the streets—but she had to admit, they shouldn't have been her priority. For now, here, there were things she could do, while she waited for Emily.

She finally began to collect the glasses, clicking and clacking them together to make a little noise; and, in the process, banged her shin into the table, and almost groaned in pain. She figured that the noise of it should have awoken Emily for sure. It didn't occur to her until a moment later, as she limped into the kitchen, that this might have been untactful—that Emily really would have preferred Olivia to not bother, that she was actually bothering Emily by trying to stay out of her way.

She kept the faucet at a low roar, as she ran the glasses underneath. At some point, she felt, she would not have bothered so much to think about these kinds of things with Emily. They had been the kind of friends to simply do what was on her mind, totally unchecked, and afterwards Emily would help her to check it; but now, of course, in a totally different apartment, she had to consider that that way of their relationship might now be in the past.

Olivia was rather struck by her first real impression of the kitchen. She had only seen it through the doorway the night before, chatting across the casement to Emily as she mixed their drinks; and then it had been indistinct, hardly aglow from the yellow oven-light. She had imagined that during the day the kitchen would be very like Emily herself: organized by a certain style rather than by use, the color scheme contrasting in some way that of the curtains and furniture in the living room, and decorated by the novelties that Emily curated from thrift stores.

Those imaginations had not prepared Olivia for that which she actually walked into. The kitchen struck her as both familiar and not; she recognized it as a whole, in the way that one recalls a previous room simply by the furniture and decorations that have been moved from one previous. There were the curtains, of course; the small, purple, perhaps too worn-out rug in front of the sink; and then the off-white dishware, bowls rimmed with blue, plates rimmed with yellow—and the mugs, of course, rimmed with black. It was the used set Emily had been so proud of finding, which she had purchased herself, without Olivia, for their first apartment. It had gone unsaid that Emily would take those dishes with her, when the time came. Even the showcase of teas and hot chocolates against the wall on the counter might have been a picture taken straight from their old place.

This was all juxtaposed, simultaneously, with that which Olivia had yet to acquaint herself: a new blender next to the appliances; colorful towels hanging from a rack; the sink itself, which had two basins rather than just one. Even as it was all fit into the contours of a new kitchen, it was just enough of their old dorms and apartments to taunt her. She put the clean glasses onto the dishrack to dry, which she finally noted to be the very one that she and Emily had, at some point, bought together from the thrift-store back at Bates.

Emily had wanted to try out living in Portland, had wanted to try it out with Nathan. Not to mention the fact that everyone else, from school *and* home, seemed to also be moving to the city—James, of course, among so many others. While it might have felt strange now to think of Emily as a city-person, Olivia couldn't deny that it had always seemed to be the plan that, after graduation, they would all move somewhere a bit more grand. Olivia herself had wanted to, in their words at the time, “escape” from Maine. While abroad, she had been sure that her friends back home were thinking of her in similar ways, thinking that she had left to live her own life, to find something better, or simply to do something else.

This all sounded rather short-sighted now, like it had all been missing the point. *We've got something good going here*, Emily had told Olivia, last night, as they caught each other up. It took Olivia by surprise, now, to think of how genuine Emily had been while saying it; that they had, she and Nathan, really found a good life in Portland. It was like a suggestion that Olivia could have stayed, that she might have found something here, herself, had she not so quickly flown away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Olivia came back into the living room, imagining that it could be picked up before Emily came out; she felt the need to put this time to use. First, she went to open the curtains, maneuvering around a large television that she figured to be Nathan's—not only by the video games that were stacked in the cabinet below, but also because Emily had never herself owned a television, had either never wanted one or never felt the need to buy it. The massive appliance stuck out, then, amidst Emily's other things. Olivia noted that it might have been the only thing to suggest that Nathan lived here, too.

Then she was looking down, from four floors, onto Emily's neighborhood street. It was August—it was greens amongst other greens. She didn't remember the street name, for she had never a reason to spend so much time in Parkside; though it was only, she guessed, a ten minute walk from Congress. Her thoughts then seemed to wander up the road, to meet up with Congress Street, and to browse for activities and spontaneous interests. She could have left right at that moment, Olivia thought, and arrive at the wide window-front of the Donut in a matter of minutes, be sitting down on one of the leather couches, reading a book, maybe even readying her old camera for a few pictures of the summer's day. The weather was perfect; by the looks of the outdoors, there was absolutely nothing to hold someone back.

She thought about how, when Emily finally joined her, she might lounge with her on the couch in silence, with a book in her hands that she'd make no motion to actually read. There was a feeling of wonder Olivia felt when she watched Emily killing time. She could maintain a kind of agreed-upon silence that allowed everyone in the room to peacefully live their lives, together but separate. She really *liked* those parts of Emily, and wanted to see them again. Olivia tried to consider that this might be better than the excitement of the city itself; indeed that had been the excitement of James, of always feeling like there was something more beyond. She had felt

finally at peace when she could enjoy Emily's kind of morning, being alright with sitting home, doing things for nothing else but oneself.

She began to absent-mindedly fold up the blankets on the couch. She took the corners and held them out, seeing through the holes in its thick stitch. It was strange to think she and Emily might have been living rather similar lives all along, though on two different parts of the globe—that they might have both been folding up blankets in their respective living rooms; that this moment might be a coincidence of their different lives happening alongside each other, because of the rather haphazard decisions Olivia had made to leave. She laid the mass of quilt down on an arm of the couch, figuring that was as good a spot as any, knowing that she was only setting it down so that Emily could come along later and move it to its proper place.

A shuffling came from the bedroom, more distinct than any sound she'd heard so far that morning.

Finally it occurred to Olivia that this would be the best time to use the bathroom, now before she would run the risk of taking it from someone else, and went to grab a change of clothes from her backpack. After that, she considered, there was always the kitchen table to set, some mugs and little plates to put out for breakfast. She pictured Emily and Nathan getting dressed and brushing teeth as she did these things in the kitchen. Indeed, she didn't feel like such a stranger that she shouldn't take the responsibility of getting their breakfast ready. The list of things she could do, then, suddenly grew pleasantly long.

The change of clothes she had packed, however, now appeared to be rather boring, as she carried them towards the bathroom door down the hall. It was just her usual pair of hiking cut-offs, along with the old blue tank top that happened to be both comfortable and fitting; it was simply what she would have needed for a day of activity, walking around Portland, to feel nimble and ready to move. And yet, it was just this feeling that made the clothes feel unexciting,

for they had been chosen through well-worn practicality and habit; and despite how useful they might prove to be Olivia for the moment did not care. She could imagine herself actually looking nice today, walking down Congress in a sundress—something white or a light yellow, she thought, that would contrast the dark of her hair. She pictured how she would see herself, in the reflection of a downtown window-front.

She continued on to the bathroom, all the same, because this was her only change of clothes. She would have to borrow anything else from Emily. Which was, of course, a possibility; Emily would give her reign of the closet, and be happy to sit by and provide commentary as she tried on one dress after another. Olivia, however, balked at the idea, for how that would surely hold her up here at the apartment for even longer.

Before she could enter the bathroom, however, a rather loud sound came from the bedroom, just down the hall. She paused, not wanting to be taking up the bathroom if one of them happened to be coming out to use it. For a moment, then, as the bedroom door was being pulled inward, Olivia saw herself standing there, right in the hallway, with bed-hair and a bundle of clothes in her arms, as though she were waiting for them to awaken. She quickly hoped that it wasn't Nathan. Emily would just giggle at her, without bothering to ask any further.

She acted casual, as Emily emerged from the bedroom.

## CHAPTER SIX

Through her wonderfully frizzy and frazzled hair, Emily returned Olivia's smile. Apparently they were sharing the simple pleasure of having slept, of both being free and awake; there was something worth smiling about, Olivia felt, as they were together here in the morning, while the rest of the world still seemed to be asleep. Indeed she felt no need to explain why she was there in the hallway; she had simply been doing what she needed to do to get ready. As such, Emily began moving to carry about her own usual morning, as she came down the hallway towards Olivia.

"Good morning," Emily said, in a kind of morning song, as she made her way into the kitchen. Her voice was so much more in tune than Olivia's own, which came out deep and abrupt and which, after so many hours not speaking, sounded a bit crudely unfiltered.

For a moment Olivia thought she might be coming in for a hug—which, while surprising, she suddenly felt would be welcome. But Emily was just passing by, and no longer returned her gaze. Olivia was slightly, momentarily disappointed; but had to remember that there were only, perhaps, one or two people in her entire life who she had known to do such a thing as a morning embrace. To take it upon themselves each and every day to act so deeply, just for the sake of keeping up with a touch of warmth—this made her think of how she'd come to know Maria, who she'd first met while waking up early to pull weeds on a small volunteer farm, at which Olivia had rather randomly found herself as a start to her first European summer.

Living together in the volunteer loft of the farm's barnhouse, her daily routine alongside Maria had begun to portray a life nothing short of surreal, otherworldly, magical; Maria was the kind of person whose generous affection seemed to naturally overcome normal boundaries, though without frustration or violation—the kind of person who seemed unreal when you finally returned to your old friends, remembering what 'normal' behavior once was. Their time together,

which had then turned into their long hike along the Compostela, now seemed to have been a part of some fantasy they'd tried to write themselves, in which the rest of Olivia's life, from her job in Le Mans to her friends and relations back home, had only been merely backstory. Normal people in her life could never seem so exceptional.

And while it seemed that people in her normal life could never be so exceptional, Olivia would not have been surprised, she thought then, if Emily had indeed grown to be that kind of gem. Seeing her here and now—more comfortable, more settled, older—she *could* picture her becoming the kind of friend who gave you a morning hug, because she knew what was best for a friend. Even now, as Olivia awkwardly followed her back into the kitchen, Emily gave off a glow of morning energy which before had never been apparent.

“Use the shower, if you'd like,” she offered then, after just enough silence had passed. “There are towels in the cupboard, just inside the door.” She seemed to make assumptions and decisions with ease; she'd gathered exactly what Olivia had been in the process of doing and—perhaps it *was* just like a good hostess—had adapted to letting her continue to do it.

Olivia finally considered the idea of a shower. Contrary to how she'd felt the entire week home with her parents, she suddenly got a little thrill to think of it—of the heat and the pressure. She thought of how she could use Emily's expensive soaps, how she wouldn't care how much hot water she used or how long she took. And, of course, she eventually needed to get changed—and yet, Olivia stayed put, keeping Emily company as she finally washed out their glasses in the sink. It was that once-in-a-while experience of standing around an early kitchen with an old friend, doing absolutely nothing, because nothing was ready to be done. It seemed like a rare thing, like it could not last long, because soon other people would awake and there would actually be things to do; so that Olivia went on doing nothing, just standing there, leaning against

the doorframe, because she couldn't know when it would end. "I'm all set for now, thanks," Olivia said in return, putting off any showering to later.

She resolved to putter around the kitchen tile, as Emily ran a glass under the faucet. Olivia was rather regretful, thinking of how she had planned to immediately leave—that she had not considered how it might have been nice to spend the morning there with Emily. She couldn't think of anything to talk about just now, but it seemed one of them would find something to say eventually.

And even if they didn't, then they would be alright with that, too—and in the meantime Olivia would just keep on dancing around the linoleum as Emily fiddled about the kitchen. Before long, however, Olivia heard some other, louder noises coming from the bedroom, and immediately pictured Nathan's rather large form in the bedroom doorway, taking up all the space he could. Though he couldn't have been *that* loud, she thought, it did seem obvious that it was Nathan was rummaging around the bedroom room, in comparison to Emily's general daintiness. Olivia had stopped pacing, like she was just waiting for those sounds to get closer and closer, until finally the doorknob would jolt open.

Olivia quickly decided—without really considering what it might imply, what it might say—that she would have rather not been in the room when Nathan finally entered. She began to make her way, again, for the bathroom. She had stayed out here for her and Emily; it would not have been productive for anyone, it seemed, for her to become a third wheel when he arrived.

"I'll be right back," Olivia said, over her shoulder; and heard an unassuming "Okay" over the run of the faucet. She felt that Nathan was about to burst through the bedroom door at any moment. She reached the bathroom door and, with the sense of avoiding a whole situation, she slammed its old heavy knob into place.

Nathan wasn't *such* an obtrusive person, Olivia had to admit—she immediately felt bad for having practically run away from him, but stood by her conclusion that she might as well have done her bathroom-things now, while he and Emily shared the first few moments of the morning together. Olivia assumed that moment would naturally be awkward for her to witness. Indeed it seemed inevitable that Nathan would contrast, rather harshly, everything around him, because his manner *was* obtrusive—not just because of his tallness and obscure shape, but his tactless maneuvers, his carelessness of all people and objects that were more fragile, and less hulk-like, than he. He was actually rather funny to picture: to think of him pounding around the apartment, unknowingly shaking the very walls, as Olivia sat there comfortably on Emily's cushioned toilet.

Emily's bathroom was nothing short of beautiful—not merely well-cleaned and pristinely kept, but even her colors were coordinated. Every little decision seemed important, giving it a sense of art. The nightlight was still on, so that part of the deep blue walls was aglow; the air was magnificently scented (the electric candles must have been subtle and expensive, rather than the cheap and obvious); and Emily's towels, stacked according to color in the open wall-cupboards, was like a picture of housekeeping. The room as a whole struck Olivia as a kind of perfection that only another person's home could have, and which felt so elusive by one's own attempts. Not only had her own bathroom in Le Mans been totally frustratingly white, small, and altogether half-hearted, but she had thought almost not at all about bathrooms, these last few months, besides the need to use one. It seemed she was simply surprised that such a personal, immaculate little room existed at all.

It made Olivia positively *long* for that shower. She could, of course, have easily peeked her head out the door and said “You know, I'd love to take a shower”—and Emily would have

laughed at how quickly she had changed her mind. Olivia had spent entire weeks, since she had started at the volunteer farm at the beginning of the summer, without really showering; there'd been nothing but a solar-heated bucket of water to shower with at the farm, and she'd spent the rest on the trail, only occasionally splitting a single hostel room with Maria. And she had never really cared, because that had suddenly been the life she was living; she didn't think much further about it. Indeed there had been other thrills to be had, whether that was the invigorating chill of an early morning walk, or finally spreading out in the warm sun after a cold night. But here, in the static apartment, having yet to even feel the sun on her skin, she thought of a warm shower—a powerful hot stream against bare muscles—as exactly what she wanted.

When Olivia got up from the toilet, however, she simply began to get dressed, putting on the clothes she'd packed. She didn't really need a shower, she thought, just as she didn't really need a dress. It wasn't really essential to why she had come—and besides, of course, a shower would have meant putting up more of a fuss, taking up more time. This was the reason Olivia comfortably settled on, in the end: She missed getting up and simply beginning to walk, only needing to address the most practical concerns. The less fuss she put up, the more quickly she could get outside, to take in the day for which she had come.

She rushed to finish up, wrapping her hair into a ponytail. Indeed, now that she was dressed, she already felt more prepared for what was to come. She glanced at herself in the mirror, quickly, before she pushed herself out the door.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Emily was still standing before the sink, though she was no longer cleaning. Nathan stood a few feet behind her, in gym shorts, leaning against the edge of the circular little kitchen table, gulping from a glass of water. The degree by which the morning had progressed in Olivia's absence was evident, like it was a surprise that people *were* in fact moving. Neither Emily or Nathan reacted to her appearance, but seemed to carry on with the morning as usual. Emily was looking around at the floor, perhaps at nothing in particular, while Nathan kept on lifting up his glass to drink.

When he finally dropped it down on the table, in the same breath he threw out the words: “G'morning, Olivia!”

Nathan had a loud and jarringly-even way of saying everything. His glass practically slammed against the table, though he apparently didn't mean it to. He might have been considered enthusiastic, if only Olivia hadn't come to know Nathan over the last year of college. While she had assumed that over time her first impression of him as large and awkward and slightly overbearing would eventually change, it had not; it had only become more solid, more deeply confirmed. Olivia realized that she had been quietly hoping that the past year might have changed something, because it was all too clear, in front of him now, that he had not.

Again, it was a little funny—she was, indeed, smirking to herself, as she looked over to him and answered, “Good morning, Nathan.”

And then he continued to gulp. Olivia wondered if she would have to be the one to break the tranquility of the morning, to ask about breakfast or whether or not they wanted to go out. Now that all three of them were there, it seemed like they were all just waiting for what was supposed to come next. She supposed that this was, perhaps, what Emily and Nathan did on a

weekend morning—perhaps they enjoyed standing around for a good long time—so that she hesitated to suggest they do anything else.

Olivia began to do her stretches, just beyond the casement of the kitchen. She pushed out her legs, raised her arms in salutation, and filled up her lungs. If that was their morning routine, she thought, then this was hers. Stretching, Olivia had come to think, was one way to feel some invigoration while also keeping, for the most part, to one's self. She imagined that Nathan would only be mildly amused by it, while Emily might even be interested enough to join in herself. At the very least it would fill the time, until perhaps one of them decided that they should make breakfast.

Nathan laughed, looking at her from the kitchen. "Having a good stretch?"

It caused Emily to look over, and smile. "Ooh, that looks nice," she said. She stretched out her arms a bit herself, as though she'd caught the bug.

Nathan just stood there and watched, sipping more of his water. As Olivia pulled the upper half of her body down towards the floor, she could still see his lower half at the corner of her eye. It made Olivia wonder if he had routines for himself, or if he really was attached to Emily at the hip; but then considered that Nathan simply wanted to continue feeling included, to not have to slink off and spend the morning away from them.

"I try to do it every morning," Olivia said, to both of them, and no one in particular. "Most times I forget."

Emily groaned aloud, and all three of them laughed. Eventually she and Emily pulled themselves upright, their faces flushed, smiling about how good it felt.

A moment passed as the subject of stretching seemed to fade away. Nathan spoke up then—perhaps, Olivia thought, because he had felt uninvited. “How have you been, Olivia?” he asked. “How was the big trip?”

It was certainly a big and broad question, but Olivia was pleasantly surprised at his asking it. He seemed to actually want to spend a moment of his morning here talking with her; indeed, she had been imagining Nathan as the kind of guy who would have backed away from hanging out with his girlfriend and her friend immediately. She put her hands on her hips, and studied the floor, as she answered. “Oh, it was alright, you know,” she said, finding herself unprepared, searching for something substantial. “I had a lot of fun, most of the time. It was good.” She paused before saying any more meaningless platitudes. It was difficult to think of what would actually be interesting for them both to hear.

“It was — it was like anything else in life. Where there are highs and there are lows, ya know.”

She was conscious of being a bit condescending, and resigned to stop while she was ahead, while both of them were still nodding along. And besides, Olivia thought, Nathan only expected the vaguest of answers, which was why he had asked the vaguest of questions. He would not really want to stand there all morning and listen to her particular stories from France or Spain.

“That’s great,” Nathan said. “Good for you.”

All three of them were just standing there nodding, waiting either for Olivia to continue, or Nathan to ask another question. Olivia made one more stretch down to her toes, as though she hadn’t quite finished. She suddenly wondered if she was coming off as overly brief or untalkative, which could have been chalked up to its being morning, or her busride yesterday, or the jetlag which she had already gotten over.

Nathan made a little noise, and spoke as he was already making his way out the kitchen. “Gonna use the bathroom,” he said. Emily returned to looking around the kitchen, as though more dirty dishes might have sprung up while they were talking. Olivia listened to the heavy falls of Nathan’s feet, until there was the clack of the bathroom door.

Suddenly, then, Emily happened to look over to Olivia, who had been absently staring in her direction. They made eye contact. Emily gave her the faintest of smiles, like a subtle hint. Olivia didn’t know exactly of what, but was comforted by the idea that Emily was hinting at something at all. It told her that all of this was just a normal Saturday—that she was OK, that she had done nothing wrong. It meant that she could do whatever she liked, and Emily would probably just look at her and smile.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

She might have taken Nathan's absence as an indication that she and Emily could speak, like last night, unbound. It was indeed a little exciting to think that she could ask Emily about any aspect of her life, and that she herself would say anything, if only Emily came to ask. Olivia felt guilty, however, for thinking that she and Emily could not enjoy themselves (at least, not in the way she wanted) just because Nathan was in the house. He was just so obviously *there*; one couldn't help but be almost distracted by his looming presence, his noise, the way he seemed to always be hesitantly waiting for someone around him to act first. Olivia was relieved, she realized then, that he was temporarily out of the room.

Emily, however, had turned away, searching for something in the cupboards. It would have to be herself, Olivia thought, to start up a conversation. This seemed to be a duty of guests, who had nothing else to do but watch their hosts do everything else.

But of course the bathroom door was only the illusion of a barrier; the door itself was quite thin, she thought, and Nathan would be out in only a moment. And, after all, Olivia couldn't actually think of anything more intimate to ask Emily—anything more than how she'd been and how she was doing. It was like there were questions, somewhere, that Olivia would have wanted to ask, and that she simply couldn't in front of Nathan, but that she could not seem to find.

Olivia was now taking advantage of the empty sink, leaning against its ledge as she watched Emily, who was now scooping out coffee grounds from a bright red tin. There was a glass coffee press set on the counter before her.

Emily, Olivia thought, never made the coffee. Olivia suddenly wanted to cite the number of times in her memory in which Emily had put up a fuss to stop at this or that coffee shop because she, for whatever reason, had not made coffee for herself. It was never that Emily didn't

know how or was not capable of learning; it seemed she simply never wanted to. She didn't make the coffee.

That she was in fact making the coffee right now seemed to indicate that something had happened, that she had been forced to start doing it herself. Olivia made herself take a step back from her own sense of surprise, so that she would not come off as condescending. "When did this happen?" she asked.

"What?" Emily said, as though she hadn't heard.

She nodded towards the press. "The coffee. I mean, when did you start actually making coffee?"

She laughed, taking it in the good humour that Olivia had intended. She began to tell the exact story that Olivia might have anticipated, of how she and Nathan had finally picked one up at the Goodwill when they'd moved into the apartment, having decided to stop spending so much money out. Both their places of work provided coffee, she explained, so that they only had to bother with this thing on the weekends.

It struck Olivia as cute, this way in which they seemed to have their routines. Olivia felt responsible for either continuing with this line of conversation, or drawing up another. She watched as Emily waited for the water in her kettle to boil. It occurred to her, then, that perhaps Nathan was the one to normally make the coffee, and that Emily was merely doing it in his absence. It was so much easier to imagine Nathan there, bothering himself with the type of grounds and proper steeping times. Of course Emily would feel obligated to get it made, to have something to offer Olivia; she would have decided not to wait for him to return from the bathroom and to simply do it herself.

This seemed to be either too trivial, or too intrusive, of a detail for Olivia to actually ask about. She watched as the water flowed out of the kettle, steaming and bubbling as it mixed with the grounds.

Olivia finally took a seat in one of the kitchen table's rickety chairs. It *was* what guests did, after all, she figured; they waited, in chairs, for things to be made. She was greeted by the sun as she sat down, as its light came more and more slanted through the kitchen window. It was suddenly the right thing to have done, sitting down at the table, peacefully watching Emily manoeuvring through her kitchen, enacting the coffee. They both seemed completely aware of what the other was doing, and were without a single objection; even Nathan was complicit in this pleasant feeling, as he was off in the bathroom, doing whatever. The assumption seemed to be that the three of them would sit down soon, once the coffee was ready. They would discuss breakfast, or what they were going to do that day; it wouldn't really matter.

It was then, Olivia knew, that she would have to make a decision, as to what she was finally going to do about the next couple of hours; as to if and when she was going to meet James. The forgiveability of her having ignored him, Olivia knew, was growing increasingly more difficult to depend on. She was almost certainly going to keep putting it off, however, for at least a little while longer. She didn't want to take out her phone now, as she was spending this time with Emily; and as long as she was enjoying doing absolutely nothing, feeling the sun come in through the window, she knew that she should take advantage of it.

Olivia finally recognized that this *was* their table—the one Emily had inherited from her family, her grandmother perhaps, and kept in all of her and Olivia's apartments throughout their years at school. It was the tablecloth, rather, that was new, which had thrown her off; there were little yellow ducklings embroidered about the cloth's edge, following each other in single-file. Of

course, Emily and Nathan would not have bought a brand new table; of course Nathan would not have had one before, having lived only out of bedrooms and dorm rooms. It was adorable, she thought, looking at the cartoonish ducklings, old and yet hardly used; one of Emily's finds from the thrift store, Olivia was sure.

Emily was the first one to actually notice that a phone was vibrating—that it was not just a random sound coming through the indistinct walls of an apartment building. She turned from the counter, without looking at Olivia exactly; her ear was cocked upwards. “Is that you?” she asked.

It was indeed her, though the sound and frequency of the ring was so completely familiar to Olivia that she had merely assumed that it was someone else. But then, from the way Emily looked slightly confused, she realized that it must have been a foreign ring; and then finally recognized that it was her own. The phone was still on the living room couch, right where she'd left it. She knew she should have immediately jumped from the table, to get it before it finished the ring—but it was all too easy to stay seated, to simply tell herself that she'd deal with it later.

Emily, however, looked over to her with real concern for Olivia and the fate of this call. This seemed, to Olivia, to be rather ridiculous.

“You're not gonna get it?” Emily asked.

It made her feel suddenly guilty, not because the call might have been important, but because Emily seemed to think that ignoring it was somehow wrong. “No,” she shrugged, trying to act confident. “Don't worry about it—I'll go look at it in a bit.”

Emily seemed to drop the subject, and went back to finishing up the coffee. Olivia was left to wonder whether or not she should have answered the phone. If it had been James, then he was probably calling out of concern for her more than anything else; indeed she was certain that talking to him right now was simply not such an urgent matter. She did not have a way, of

course, to convey all of this to Emily, as she didn't want to bother Emily with hearing out the entire story. She sighed, as the moment merely slipped away, and she continued to sit absently at the table, staring out the window.

## CHAPTER NINE

For a while, there, she considered asking Emily what she really wanted to *do* this morning—but the incident with the phone seemed to have thrown them off track. Olivia couldn't tell how best to navigate them towards straightness, and she kept on thinking about how she might mess up. It suddenly appeared to be a naive question: Emily, like anyone who actually lived in their own home and was merely going about with their own life on a Saturday, did not really think in such specific terms as what they “wanted to do” today—she'd simply gotten out of bed, made her way into the kitchen, and maybe had a thought or two about making the coffee. Perhaps she was thinking, here and there, about how best to care for Olivia's being there.

Finally the aroma of coffee had come out—Emily had poured the water into the press, and the smell had apparently bloomed from the grounds and overtaken the entire room. It was the first moment that morning in which Olivia had to seriously consider whether she would accept a mug of the stuff or not, as the smell had suddenly made it real—up until that point she had remained confident that she'd be able to turn it down, as usual. Olivia had happily gone without caffeine since the beginning of that summer, since her arrival at the farm, where she and Maria had drunk rooibos and teas made from wild flowers. She liked the idea of usurping coffee's role by depending on good old natural movement to awaken herself—getting right to her chores, feeding the animals and weeding the garden, or (after they had left for Compostela) beginning the day's walk on the trail.

It had been such a liberating feeling, no longer relying on coffee as a kind of aid, that she had thought she might go forever without it. And as she made her way back to the normal world, flying back home and spending this last week with her parents, she had been successful in maintaining the caffeine-free lifestyle, and had intended on continuing to figure out how it might be done.

The smell was woody, maybe even a bit chocolate-y, Olivia thought. It wasn't just a smell but a feeling, as well, because of the memories and associations it evoked; it suggested calm moments throughout college in a downtown coffee shop, taking turns at speaking with either James or Emily—at different times, of course, and with quite different feelings. With James it had always been in spring; they were always in sunlight, and he might have given her a smile to say that everything *was* going well now, wasn't it? With Emily, on the other hand, they would probably have been in winter, trapped indoors by the snow, with their hands huddled around thick mugs, and with thick novels set on the table before them. It evoked a kind of desire, reliving such memories. Olivia longed for the simplicity in which they seemed to dwell.

Emily had brought three different mugs over to the table, but slid one in particular over to Olivia.

“I remember you always liked that one,” she said.

Olivia hadn't recognized it, but indeed, there it was: a simple beige mug, with an old blue rim which had almost faded away. She smiled, first at Emily, and then down to the mug itself. She had liked it, she remembered now, because it had reminded her of local diners; of Sunday mornings, her parents drinking unsuspectingly from their own old mugs, which she now figured must have been handed down from their parents. It was certainly not the mug Olivia would have chosen today, if Emily had asked; she might have even avoided this one for that very same sense of perceived nostalgia. She wanted to believe that she could be interested, rather, in what was new and foreign; and in order to do so, she figured that one had to always be moving on from the past. Perhaps she would have asked for the strangest mug in Emily's cabinet, the one that her younger self—her college-self, that is—might not have thought to consider.

But she *did* appreciate Emily's remembering, the way that this little detail had appeared to her, and that she had thought it would make Olivia happy. "Thanks, Emily," Olivia said.

She could have still asked for tea, but there was Emily coming over with the press, and she didn't say a word. Olivia was enjoying the look of her simple diner-like mug there on the table, bathing in sunlight from the kitchen window. She enjoyed watching as Emily filled it with thick, black coffee. And it felt like a small, modest comfort to think of it as *her* own mug, despite that it would always be here, with Emily—as though the mug transcended ownership, though they both knew that Emily simply wanted Olivia to feel that she was accepted.

It was a relief to not care about the coffee. Olivia didn't feel a particular need to immediately begin drinking, but was rather content watching the steam swirl out of the mug. She fingered the stem of the handle, turning it back and forth.

She watched as Emily went to the sink, and began to wash out the press under a hot, strong stream of water. Indeed she hadn't accounted for Emily herself, when she'd imagined how she would spend her time in Portland; the time they were spending together seemed to have become its own thing, that could continue and keep going, while before she hadn't been moved to imagine *how* she and Emily would spend their time together, but had merely assumed that it would happen. They could even have longer, Olivia thought then, if she only tried—they could spend even more of the day together. Emily put the press in the dishrack, and began to dry off her hands.

"Come sit," Olivia told her. She didn't want to disrupt the flow of her chores, if that was indeed what was comforting for her; and yet she longed to see her friend relax, and—she had to admit—to know that Emily was in some way enjoying Olivia's presence in her home that

morning. “Yep,” Emily chirped, and kind of skipped away from the sink, coming over to settle into the seat across from her.

They seemed to be waiting for Nathan to return from the bathroom; in the meantime they chatted about the quality of the coffee, though Olivia had yet to taste it. They mentioned the beauty of such a summer morning, and their conversation faded away as they both looked out the window. Olivia was wondering what time it really was, because it suddenly appeared to not be quite “morning,” anymore.

Olivia felt that once Nathan opened the bathroom door again, all of this would fly away. There would be a cause to get things moving, to carry on with the morning; while for now they were free because they were in limbo, and could act purely out of either will or fancy. She tried to think of how to take advantage of it, how to make both her and Emily take notice of this moment in a concrete way, but could think of nothing else, besides continuing to stare together out the kitchen window.

She finally took a sip of her coffee, for it seemed all that was there to be done. The taste was horribly strong. She knew it wasn’t actually horrible—perhaps Emily thought it was rather good—but after so many months of abstinence, Olivia’s senses could only be overwhelmed. The taste was like the deep, oaky interior of expensive coffee shops, the feeling of drinking out of a disposable paper cup. It was not a very nice feeling, and Olivia suddenly felt defeated, and a little alone. Like it had made her aware of the fact that she didn’t quite know her own way, that she was frightfully unsure of where she would go from here.

## CHAPTER TEN

Nathan came, with all his weight, back into the kitchen. Exactly as Olivia had expected, everything came back to life; all three of them seemed to suddenly be present in the room. Emily straightened in her seat, and Olivia's own hand dropped from her chin, as she brought her gaze back down to the mug in front of her. Nathan took up the last, unclaimed mug from the table. "Mmm, coffee coffee coffee," he said, to no one in particular.

After a long moment of silently sipping, Olivia finally considered that perhaps it was her duty to start the conversation. Emily had continued to take long, deep breaths; Nathan was progressively draining his cup. It was hard to go on believing that their mornings were normally so uncomfortably quiet; Olivia had to guess that it was something concerning herself, as though something about her had made them put on this ceremony. She could only hope that, normally, they had a bit more fun.

And, in the end, rather than forcing them through yet another subject of polite conversation, Olivia took a deep and exaggerated breath, stretched her arms upwards, and flung back her head while giving a loud, comical groan. She strived to imitate a dog's just waking up.

The joke landed even better than she'd hoped: both Emily and Nathan positively erupted into laughter, and her own chest popped like a balloon into fits and coughs. It had been a risk, Olivia thought; for she could imagine how someone might think it had been tactless, even a bit rude, towards anyone who might have actually been enjoying the calm silence of the morning. But Olivia knew that she succeeded as she watched Emily laughing, for it was as though something had gotten off her chest, and was now relieved. So they had all been a bit uncomfortable, Olivia thought.

"How are *you*, this morning?" Emily finally asked, as their giggling petered out.

They carried on making casual morning chat; now, however, it no longer had the feeling of being forced, but rather like they were merely getting ready for the day, talking everything through. They eventually grazed over the subject of James's party, which Olivia figured Emily already knew about and had decided not to attend; she knew nothing for sure, however, and had a mind to gently goad Emily in the right direction, if she could.

Emily, thankfully, was the one to bring it up. "You're headed to James's, later?" she asked, taking up her mug for a sip.

Simply by the way she asked it, Olivia could immediately tell that Emily had heard about the party, had divined it to be Olivia's ostensible reason for coming to Portland on this day in particular, and had all the while considered it to be an event which she herself was not interested. Indeed this much had not changed: Emily and Nathan didn't really go to parties.

"Yep," Olivia said, trying to stay positive, as though everything was still open and no one was left out. "That's the plan. You wanna come? I'm sure James would like to see you, and there'd be other people there that we know..."

Emily was nodding along, like she'd already considered the idea. Yes, Olivia thought, she had certainly received an invitation. The crowd was simply too small in Portland.

"Ye-yeah... We were thinking about it, but now that we're seeing you here, and if you're probably going to stay tonight, too, there's not much reason for us to go. And we told Madi we might want to hang out tonight, and she never really knew James, so."

Olivia had the sense that they had both known what the other had been going to say, and that they had just needed to say it. There had been the vaguest idea that Emily could have been persuaded—that they could have one night like they were back in college, everyone meeting at the same party (which would have changed everything, everything about today). It had been a

hope against hope, but Olivia felt it to be what she *needed*, as both Emily and James's mutual old friend, to hope for. Just as she had planned, however, she would continue with the day alone.

That moment passed by easily enough; they were both happy to wait through a short, necessary silence before moving on. Olivia even got around to asking Nathan for an update on his life. She wasn't exactly sure what she was really asking for, though he got her meaning, and took it up quickly enough. He kept it pleasantly short, making clear that his last job had grown dull, giving an appropriately vague list of reasons why, and that he was searching for another. It left Olivia feeling good about having asked, and guiltless for having asked no further.

"Would you like any breakfast?" Emily asked, when a space for the question had opened. Indeed a meal was the logical next step for the three of them; Olivia remembered her phone, how James had probably sent a modest, gentle text asking about their meeting. "We do usually take a while to get things started," Emily clarified.

Olivia nearly spoke up, then, as her stomach sounded absolutely ready; she was on the verge of throwing out a casual "whatever" and consigning herself, as she would normally, to eating anything her host would put in front of her, and worrying later on about whether or not she would purchase any food in town. But it sounded, then, like having breakfast might actually be an inconvenience here: Emily and Nathan liked to take their time, apparently, to wait until they were good and hungry; or, perhaps, they never made a collective issue of breakfast at all. Olivia had always been mystified and a little disappointed when she learned about people who "couldn't eat" before noon—she was decidedly not the kind of person who could merely put it off. In light of how she could easily find her own food in town—and how she practically had plans to do so—she decided that she rightfully shouldn't impose on Emily's usual pace. "Oh, no," she said, waving a hand. "I'm fine with just coffee, for now."

Her stomach had, in fact, been settled by thick hot stuff, so that she was really rather content with the idea of holding off, at least for a little while. The caffeine, meanwhile, also seemed to be playing around to some interesting effects; the muscles of her abdomen tightened, in the way they might during a workout, or when walking up a steep hill. It made her content to be merely sitting there enjoying the feeling, as though it was a bit of a relief. They all carried on with the conversation, discussing the quality of last night's sleep, and the hassles of being in the States without a car—of being back *with her parents*, and in Brunswick, without a car. At some point they noticed the color of the Portland brick, which they could see out the kitchen window; it was, Emily affirmed, a very particular color in this angle of sunlight. You could see more of the earthy kind of orange, Nathan suggested, rather than the reds or browns. It pleasantly reminded Olivia of pictures that Maria had shown her of the houses in Granada, where she had once lived; the clay roofs, their white facades. She considered telling Emily and Nathan about this, as they were all saying whatever was on their minds; though, in the end, she decided to keep it to herself. She wasn't sure that she could really relate a distant picture of a place she'd never been to the scene that was out their window; and, even further, she didn't quite know how to put the feeling of looking at those pictures into words. She kept imagining them, Maria's tanned hands holding them out to her, while at the table Olivia fell into a dreamy silence.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You gonna stop at the Market, in town?” Emily was asking.

Olivia cocked her head. “Market? Which one?”

She was conscious of being a little embarrassed for not knowing intuitively. She tried to remember which markets were in Portland on Saturday, but of course she had never had a reason to remember their particular names and dates.

“At the Square. Across from the library.”

Olivia was suddenly able to picture it, the brick-laden Square covered in the white tents and fold-out tables of different vendors, and knew that she had at some point seen it herself, though she couldn't have remembered a specific occasion. It was, indeed, the kind of thing that Olivia looked for when aimlessly browsing a warm city: an event, a gathering, and assembly of people out of (what seemed to be) nowhere. It was one reason why she did such things, why she thought of walking through town as an activity in itself.

However, now that she was fathoming the idea of going to see the market Emily was referring to at Monument Square, Olivia couldn't help but feel that she knew rather *too* well its nature and potential to really be excited about it. She pictured herself tramping down Congress Street, her hands holding the straps of her pack; and, as she passed by Monument Square, she would vaguely look over to the tables of goods. She felt confident that her time, and her money, would be better spent elsewhere, in those places she might have yet to discover.

“Yeah, probably,” she answered, politely, as though she was giving due consideration to Emily's suggestion. “I'll probably be wandering down that way anyway, so.” They both shrugged, and looked back down to the table between them.

It must have been nearly eleven. The morning had gotten off, Olivia thought, at last; she was satisfied with herself for having stayed, for having determined that it would be a good thing to stay. Now she could go into town with a sense of positive confidence, knowing that she had done her best to appreciate Emily and her apartment, while moving on to whatever downtown might bring.

Olivia even had the sense that the three of them—as Emily had been laughing at every joke, and Nathan even seemed to be listening and contributing to conversation—had had a bright and happy morning together. She had apparently assumed that she was sure to be too antsy about getting on with the day to be alright with simply chatting around a table; and that, even if she enjoyed the time she spent with Emily, it would certainly be in spite of Nathan. But in the end it had come together; Olivia felt that she had finally found proof that she could hang out with just the two of them. It made her feel like something of a good friend.

“Ohh-kay,” Olivia exhaled, looking at the dregs in her mug. “I guess I’ll actually go check my phone, now.” Emily and Nathan began to stir as well, signalled by her departure.

She hadn’t intended this to be the final note of their morning together, but that was how it seemed to be happening; Nathan threw back whatever might have been left in his mug, as though to be sure he hadn’t missed any of it. “Thank you so much for the coffee, Emily,” Olivia made sure to say, as she went to deposit the mug in the sink.

Her body was almost buzzing, now, completely awake, prepared, not even a hint of fatigue from the night before. And while she *was* thankful for Emily’s having made her coffee, Olivia was also wondering if she would be thankful in the end, if she would not regret her having finally caved; if she wouldn’t feel a little disappointed or even lost for having violated her conviction. But she couldn’t be bothered to think about this very long, for how good she was feeling right now. With a light prance, she made her way back to the living room.

She came back to the living room couch, and took up the phone. There seemed to be a whole story behind her losing it, finding it, and leaving it there again; but perhaps it was the kind of story that was simply too mundane to bother ever sharing. Perhaps it was just a kind of random memory, then, which would wait to reemerge at quite random little moments.

There had been a call from James, the call that both she and Emily had heard. He had also sent a follow-up message, Olivia saw, which was short and simple, stating that he “would be ready to head out soon.” It was gentle, as she’d expected, simply putting the ball in her court, and giving her the assurance that she could take her time to manage it. She pictured James as he would be getting the apartment ready for tonight’s party, running errands, making food, fielding calls; so that she didn’t feel particularly bad for leaving him in the dark, for how vague and superfluous his day already was destined to be. While Olivia had always been a little frustrated by James’s almost maddeningly flexibility—the way that plans always seemed to exist with a certain amount of give and take in terms of the time, space, and nearly everything else—she now felt like she was finally acting appropriately with him, meeting him on his level, by acting like there was no one time or place that the two of them ‘had’ to meet in particular.

She indeed recognized that she was still feeling a sense of freedom by not making a decision about James in particular; she was enjoying the idea that she could go to The Holy Donut, or not; that she might eat with James, or not. She was also aware, however, that seeing James might actually be the best thing for her to do, for how it was in fact what she had planned to do and was one of the most concrete reasons she had had for coming. It was certainly possible that they would have a lovely time sitting around some Portland diner, gabbing about Olivia’s teaching position in France and then about her travels through Spain. They would gossip about the party, who would be there, what would be served, what might happen. It might actually be

easy, like just letting some things go. James was, in the end, a good friend; he had always been able to ask questions with respect, and to put Olivia at ease throughout a conversation.

She wrote that she'd be leaving Emily's "in a few," and suggested that they meet at the Holy Donut by the park. Her tentative plan solidified as she wrote it down: yes, she would go to the Donut, whether James could make it there or not; they would catch each other sooner or later. She simply didn't have to wait for him, in light of how they could always catch each other later on. She nearly forgot about him completely, as she dropped the phone back into her pack.

The idea of it, of getting moving under a bright sun rediscovering an old place, was like a lure, quickening Olivia's trajectory towards the door. She buzzed around her backpack, getting it ready to leave.

Emily would want something of a goodbye, of course, in the case that Olivia didn't end up returning that night; besides this, however, Olivia was almost ready to go. She was not on a hike, she reminded herself—she did not have to carry her life on her back, and it really wouldn't matter much should she forget a thing or two behind at Emily's place. She didn't even have to think about what she was wearing on her feet: Olivia slipped into a pair of old flip-flops, which she had found lying about her parents' house. One didn't need anything, walking around a city, in fine summer weather, more than a few dollars, perhaps. All of a sudden, she was very nearly out the door.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Nathan had wandered into the living room, while she was getting ready near the door, and occupied himself on the couch. She saw that he was firing up a video game on the television, holding a controller in his lap. Olivia wondered what Emily might be getting up to now; what her routine might be, on a weekend morning. It could have been so many different tasks or occupations, but right then she imagined Emily watering plants, going from pot to pot and room to room with a jar full of water.

She was wondering, as she began to look around for Emily, how she might say goodbye to them in a way that did not commit, one way or the other, to whether or not she would return that evening. She really didn't want to provide an answer to that question just yet—and pictured herself throwing up her shoulders, giving them a good wave, and jumping out the door. Of course she would want to give Emily a proper farewell—though Olivia had the urge to simply get this over with, and they would probably see each other again later.

Nathan's game was coming, sonorously and extravagantly, onto the screen as Olivia passed by. The effects were rather crisp and attractive—it actually made her stop and stare for the moment. She could tell by just a few images that it was a kind of brand new and expensive game, which would strike her as nothing less than cutting-edge, seeing as she hadn't really experienced a video game at length since the days of after-school Nintendo with her little brother. Indeed it now reminded her of her brother; of after-school snacks, of shouting at a bunch of pixelated cartoons on a screen.

She had in fact seen Nathan puttering around every now and then on an old Playstation, which he had kept in Emily's room for something to do, though she had never really watched

him play. It had always seemed to be his private universe, to which other people—especially people like her, his girlfriend’s roommate—would never have reason to access.

It was with the sense of saving herself from deep distraction that Olivia slipped back into the kitchen. Emily was there, still at the table, now with a massive paperback propped against a basket of fruit. The mugs, Olivia saw, had been washed, the coffee press already dried and put away—the kitchen as pristine as when Olivia had first awoken.

Emily didn’t look up, right away, when she entered. She looked wonderfully content sitting there—not overly comfortable or happy, not any one thing in particular; but, with her hand tentatively posed to turn a page of her book, like she had learned to embrace the life that she had. It seemed to Olivia that she was fulfilling the dream of a weekend morning, reading some classic at the kitchen table, because she did not have to do anything else until it was time for lunch. It was *Anna Karenina*, Olivia saw on the cover, as she walked up to the table.

She finally felt the very real feeling of not wanting to say goodbye. Emily finally looked up from the page, with a smile at the ready. It was like she already knew what was going on, that Nathan was playing his game and Olivia was about ready to leave, while she was merely watching it all happen. Olivia smiled in return, and her eyes drifted back downward. Of course it was *Anna Karenina*; it was Maria’s favorite—Olivia had been hearing about it all summer, so much that this coincidence didn’t even come as a surprise. After Maria had sat her down at the farm to watch an old VHS copy of the film adaptation, she had continued to mention the book as a kind of example or touchstone throughout many of their walks and talks. Olivia had hardly retained any of it, but when she looked down then at Emily’s book, she heard the name ‘Anna’ being whispered in her ear; followed shortly after by Maria’s endearing attempt to pronounce the name ‘Vronsky.’

She made an effort to look back up to Emily, as to finally get this over with. Her hands were at her hips, her legs spread wide. *I'm ready*, this seemed to tell her. They both smirked, acknowledging that this was Olivia hesitating to step out on her own. It was suddenly very hard to be excited about facing the city alone, about feeling that she was doing the right thing. She suddenly felt a bit disparaged, now that they were staring down what seemed to be her lack of confidence.

“What’s up?” Emily finally said, goading Olivia on, while she was gentle enough to stop short of kicking her out the door. Nothing felt like it would be the right thing to say, so that Olivia just smiled a little wider, and looked back and forth into Emily’s gaze.

Aware that she might have been putting quite a damper on Emily’s contentedness, Olivia shook her hair out of her eyes, shaking herself awake. She spontaneously held up her hand towards Emily, palm faced out. “High five?”

Emily was confused for a moment, but caught on quickly enough. She laughed as they nearly locked elbows and clapped each others’ hands. Olivia wondered, for a moment, if their hands would stay together, entwining each others’ fingers, but they did not. “I’m headed out,” she said, with an air of definition and decision, if only for the sake of sounding confident for Emily’s sake. She liked the idea that Emily, throughout the course of this day, would think that Olivia was confidently enjoying her day in Portland, making her way through the markets, the parks, the museums, doing what she enjoyed and had come here to do. Emily nodded and went on with her calm smile. “Enjoy your book,” Olivia said, finally turning away.

Olivia *was* the kind of friend to ask for a high-five, she mused about herself, as she walked back through the living room. Of course she would hesitate to ask for a friendly hug, or a peck on the cheek; she had certainly never been the kind to offer herself up very much, or feel

comfortable with the idea of asking for a physical relationship with a friend. At some point she had come to think of this as an unfortunately cold part of herself, though she wouldn't have been able to say why she had accepted that, or at what point it had begun to seem permanent.

She suddenly found herself standing idly behind the couch, transfixed by the bright and exciting motion on Nathan's screen.

He'd noticed her apparent interest, though he was already looking back to the screen. "Wanna try it out?" he asked, gesturing to the controller.

For a moment Olivia actually considered it, asking herself if that was actually what she wanted to do, until she suddenly remembered what she had been doing. "No, thank you, Nathan," she said, as kindly as she could. She felt a little bad, after seeing that Nathan had seemed to be excited by the idea of sharing his game with her.

"Oh well," he sighed. She finally opened the door, feeling like she was leaving this place, in which one could read novels and play games in peace, behind her.

As Olivia walked out into the hall, however—as she felt her legs, finally moving with purpose and towards something distant—she had already begun to feel a reminder of why she was doing what she was doing. Her legs and body seemed to take over her attention, pulling it out of the weeds, returning to something far easier and straightforward. It was like a reminder that she loved doing things like this—the risk of taking on the adventure, of deliberately leaving security. She wanted to take on things that were so uncontainable—so large, expansive, expanding—that no one could really blame her for being curious.

This was why she was different, she thought: because she had left, because she had not come to Portland after graduation. It was why she was different now, because she was choosing

to spend her Saturday on the move, exploring Portland, planning and unplanning. She was already at the front door of the building. She could already see the beauty of the August sun.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Olivia liked the idea that one could bathe in the sun. She just stood there on Emily's porch for a moment, with her eyes closed. It was as though, by stepping into the ray of sunshine, one could be completely engulfed by it.

She probably did look rather odd, she thought, just standing there out front of the building—it wasn't quite what one did on the way to work, or to some errand in town. It was easy for her to imagine that people might be staring at her as they passed by. She wanted to believe that everyone should be able to stop every once in a while, for the simple sake of feeling the sun. Even breakfast, she thought, could always wait another minute or two; even though the coffee was wearing off, and she was again beginning to feel the pressure of an empty stomach.

She was, however, excited to continue moving—she had already felt the quickening of her legs, as she had come down the stairs, and part of her longed to keep that sensation going. Of course she would get more sun along the way, as it reached over tin roofs and broke through gaps in the Portland trees—though it would never be so good as right now, the very first moment of stepping into the day's warm light. This was simply a unique pleasure, she supposed, which one had to stop and notice and appreciate when it actually happened.

As she walked down the porch and towards the sidewalk, there was already the soothing and rhythmic pull of her thighs, up and down. Already the rest of the world seemed to be falling away. There was that weird sensation of exercise: blood flowing up and down from head to foot. It was all a reminder for Olivia of why she loved walking, why she insisted on going places on foot, above all else. It allowed for moments—on the way to a meal, perhaps, or on the way home from hanging out with friends—in which she could enjoy the simple and easy pleasure of her own two legs. There was even something nostalgic about carrying this slight weight on her back:

the sense that she was carrying the things she really needed, and which she would be able to finally set down, once she arrived.

Looking up the street, then, Olivia could almost see the light yellow of Maria's own backpack, blazing the trail ahead—Maria, during their weeks of hiking together, would usually take the lead, so that she never really needed to think about anything more than following her, her pack like a guiding light out ahead.

Indeed this was the feeling of being back on-trail, getting started on a twenty-something mile day. It was the kind of invigoration that Olivia would strive for, getting up in the morning, bearing through the cold, trying to focus on reaching the self-sustaining pleasure of walking. In these kinds of moments, when she was walking and there was nothing else, life seemed incredibly simple. She had had to uncover this pleasure—it had not always been so obvious; she couldn't even remember if she had really enjoyed walking very much, before this summer. She felt like she was gradually decoding a hidden universal truth: that walking was the most basic good. No one, she thought, took the time to say that out loud.

She *had* found others, it was true, who seemed to know this truth well. They were people who seemed to find value in merely getting up in the morning and feeling themselves move around; she had learned from these people, she thought, by taking their cues and following their leads. Olivia knew that she was thinking in particular, here, of Maria; of course it had been Maria who had actually shown her attention, who had consistently returned to her a sense of care. She had, however, found this inspiring mentality in many different people over this past year. It seemed they always existed somewhere, no matter how new or how lonely a place might have been at first; she'd found it in the farmers she and Maria had worked for in Spain, and in some of the hikers they'd met at shelters and wayshrines along the Compostela.

Some part of this quality had been what Olivia had always hoped to find in James—which was, perhaps, part of why she was continually somewhat disappointed in what James turned out to be. Olivia had first been drawn to him in college by a mysterious sense of what he might possess; but they had both been young, stifled, and longing for what was always on the far side of the hill. Now, it was no longer such a simple matter. James was, she had gradually discovered, his own enigma, becoming increasingly unsolvable: while he threw his dinner parties, and collected old furniture, and worked at an independent movie theater, James also apparently planned on never leaving the coast of Maine; he unabashedly idolized certain comic book superheroes; and he was happy never again speaking to his mother.

Thinking of James, Olivia wondered why she couldn't just call him right now and tell him to get in on this walk. It was making her feel so good, she couldn't imagine that it would do anything less for anyone else. Why *couldn't* they just do this all day long, she thought—do nothing else but walk from one end of Portland to the other? Why should they try so hard to do things that were less enjoyable? It would be all that she ever wanted to come here for; it would fulfill the most central, most important ideas which she had had.

It was annoyingly obvious that such a plan would never work; but it was still nice, then, imagining a world in which it did. She pictured herself walking beside both James and Emily, meandering amidst the bright greens of the park.

She knew it would only frustrate her to listen to an explanation as to why life couldn't be so simple. It was in fact James's voice that she heard: *Things are more complicated*, he would say, leaning back and releasing a long-drawn sigh. She felt the need to wonder why it had to be James's voice—he always seemed to be leaving so many things unsaid, as though he was always trying to make conversation less difficult—but she felt free to simply stop thinking about it. This walk was far too pleasant to feel bothered.

Olivia realized, now that she was here looking out at this grid of this Portland neighborhood, that part of what she liked about hiking was that it was a straight line. When one was finally on-trail, it might be miles before the next change—one's mind could turn off, you were simply walking forward. Here, it frustrated her that there were so many possibilities, to either find one's destination or to get lost. Her memory of the Parkside streets was vague at best; she could hardly picture her own location amidst the grid. Indeed she would have felt lost, if she hadn't known for a fact that Park Ave was simply to the left, downhill, from Emily's street; and that Congress Street was uphill, to the right. It was a relief to focus on that single turn she needed to make. She actively tried to let go of anything else.

Coming up on the end of Emily's street, she confirmed that she was indeed almost on State Street, which ran up and down the hill. She could head up to Congress, she considered, and easily find a cafe along its stretch, as to decrease the amount of time it would take for James to reach her. While she did, of course, still want an old fashioned doughnut for breakfast. For a moment, then, she was weighing it out in her mind. She hardly knew how to start—how to possibly assign one value over another.

Olivia did not decide, but simply continued making her way down Emily's street. She listened to the rhythm of her sandals, flipping and flopping against the sidewalk.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A screen door creaked open, somewhere nearby, and clacked shut. She felt as though she were overhearing the vague comings and goings of Parkside's weekend morning.

There were plenty of beautiful buildings in this neighborhood, she knew, but Olivia found herself looking at the shabby old house to her right, one of the many around here that had been converted into apartments. It might have actually been a rather new renovation, though it had been neglected; the ostensibly white panels had faded to splatters of grays and browns, while the semi-enclosed porch was overrun by vines and weeds. At least it was green, Olivia thought, and alive; she actually thought it was rather exciting, looking at the kind of artistic chaos which the overgrowth was making around the structure.

Just as she had thought to have left the house behind, she suddenly caught sight of a woman, on the far side of the house, sitting down on a small porch. She was just smoking, facing the street. Olivia was a bit startled, but didn't show it; she tried to keep her eyes to herself, and just keep looking down the street. Perhaps the woman was watching the things that went by, Olivia thought, such as Olivia herself. Perhaps she was noticing who was a regular part of the street, and who was not.

She could imagine, for a moment, that they were all in the same Saturday-morning boat: all of them coming and going from their apartments, running errands, going out for coffee, doing everything a little different from how it was done during the week. She almost felt like she had slipped into that sense of broken routine, as if she had in fact been a part of the week; she might have been just another young person, with a backpack stuffed with books and a laptop, headed out to some coffee shop. As the smoking woman watched her pass on, however, Olivia was suddenly conscious of how she might be faking it—she wasn't really a member of this place. Perhaps she knew enough, now, about living in cities, to seem like she was used to it.

Emily and Nathan, she thought, probably walked along this road every day of the week, whether to go to work, or on a run to the grocery store. She had to remind herself that Portland was indeed a city—that walking was of course an important part of the life here. All of them—even those who had moved here recently, after graduating—would know now what it was like to live on foot; they might even have come to love walking themselves, in their own ways. Perhaps Emily already loved her walk into town, because it would give her a moment of privacy, just before work. Perhaps it gave her time to look at the sky, to watch the weather rolling out over the water.

It was at least a little different, Olivia felt sure, from the kind of walking one did on a hike. While the sensation of itself might have been similar, she couldn't help but insist that there must have been a distinction. Walking about Portland one could enjoy the freedom of needing nothing more than a pair of flip-flops and a cell phone; walking for days across mountains, however, seemed to present very different kinds of pleasures. There had been days when Olivia could forget that she was walking for any reason at all. Pushing off the importance of the clock, keeping on for another mile or two simply because it didn't really make a difference—it had become the easiest, most inconsequential form of gratification. With nothing but her own word to tell her to stop, she would have liked to keep on going forever.

She wondered what it might have been like to simply keep on walking, past the park and past the Donut, forgetting breakfast and forgetting James. It made Olivia a little sad, then, to think that she would stop so soon. She tried to accept that things were different, in the city, while she dreamed of a trail that kept on going, well beyond what she could see.

She had already made the turn downhill, without a thought, onto State. She could have still turned around, she knew, and gone up to Congress and found something a bit closer to

James's apartment; but, in the end, Olivia was not surprised that her instincts had practically made the decision for her—that some part of her had already decided, before she'd even left Emily's, that she *was* going to go to the Donut. Walking out in the open air, free from the confines of the apartment, it was easier for her to embrace what she really wanted. James, after all, had never been the type to care for such nostalgia; though he ate plenty, and enjoyed impressing others by making rather eclectic appetizers, she had always suspected that he was in fact unattached to the actual sensation of tasting things. For the food itself—if the two of them were posed before a menu or the produce section of the grocery store—James apparently enjoyed saying that it was simply “*whatever you'd like,*” that his tastes were in fact unimportant. Indeed he would eat whatever was on his plate—and then, to Olivia's own admiration and jealousy—he could spend a whole hour at the same table reading his book, or simply looking out the window, watching the passersby, or chatting with the old man at the adjacent table.

That was all to say that James wouldn't care that Olivia insisted on getting her doughnut—and that he might very well insist upon it himself. She felt content, knowing that her decision was justified, as she kept on her way down the hill. Seeing the eruption of the park's foliage out ahead, and imagining how the sun would be hitting this side of the avenue, Olivia grew excited enough to forget about everything else.

The apartments up ahead were the color of pastels—yellow, blue, and a peachy red, all in a row, like crayons in their box. They were complemented by the bushes out front: lush green spheres filling the space that winter would have left bare. Portland really *was* beautiful in summer, she thought; how much of a transformation it was from the cold, the thaw, the muddy spring. *Look*, she would have said to Emily, and pointed her towards the apartments. *They're like crayons in a box, all there in a row. You might have never noticed them in winter, without the*

*bushes to make them really pop.* She had to wonder whether Emily would actually look and take notice, or if she would just smile and nod, for all the times she must have passed by these very same apartments, which she had long since stopped noticing. Perhaps for Olivia's sake, however, to share her excitement, Emily would have been moved to see things how she was seeing them, with fresher eyes.

Olivia was always catching these quick glimpses of Portland, in and out of its seasons; now, however, felt like the first time that she was looking at the city for its own sake, as though she had been unable to notice the inherent values when she was young. Though she had surely come into town during the summer when she was young, when she was still in high school, this seemed to be the first time she was getting an idea of what it was like to live in Portland in summer.

It still felt a bit like cheating, however, as Olivia knew very well how quickly this would all turn into October, and then into winter. Now she really was just a visitor—and so maybe she was no better than those who took advantage of Maine for a blissful summer's day, and who left long before ever needing to consider that it would soon be cold.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The hill flattened out, then, as she came up to Park Ave and the park itself across the street. She hung a quick left, towards the Donut, and finally came out of the shade into a slanted, midmorning kind of light.

It was an angle by which one knew it was still early, so different from the brightness of afternoon, or the shade of dusk. Even here, with the avenue's unavoidable hum and sense of clutter, that kind of light gave Olivia comfort. Time seemed to move slowly while passing through that yellowish glare, as Olivia could remember mornings spent walking through the woods, when the sun would first begin to break through the trees.

So many vehicles now came and went, vaguely passing her by. One of them, turning down a side street, had to stop short in order for Olivia to pass; she just kept on walking at the same pace, imagining how she must have looked as she self-confidently strode across the crosswalk. When she looked forward again, a man was coming in her direction—he might have been the first person she passed on this walk, though she was aware of not having really paid much attention—and she looked, uncontrollably, down to her feet. He appeared from here to be a tall light-skinned man, in black shorts and white shirt; but she would have to look up to say for sure. It confused, even frustrated her: that she could not simply keep on doing what she was doing, keep looking around, enjoy the view of the park, as the man walked by. She really couldn't have said that it had been a tall man in black shorts and white shirt at all. She thought about looking back to see for herself, after the figure had passed.

Olivia finally looked up from the pavement. She resolved, however, not to look back. That, she considered, would have been too strange; as though it might have been a breach of privacy, an unnecessarily curious act, to look back at the man just for the sake of looking at him. She kept searching the sidewalk ahead, where she knew the Donut would soon come into view.

The discomfort of living in such crowded places had, fortunately, lessened in general for Olivia over the past year, since she had come to live in Le Mans and had taken an interest in passing through other larger cities. She was still reminded of that discomfort, however, from time to time—it was the kind of nervous self-consciousness she'd had when she was young, when making her way alone for the first time in a crowded space. Olivia had not enjoyed places like Portland and Boston, before she had gone off to college. She had been so much more comfortable in these kinds of small Maine towns, in which you wave to the driver of a car as they passed you by.

It was at some point in college that she got the idea of how such discomforts were simply all in one's head and that, like anything else, it only needed a little willpower to overcome. It was true that when she had finally found herself in a real metropolis—New York or Paris, and then there had been Madrid and Barcelona—she had discovered a sense of smallness in big cities that was in fact a comfort. The unfathomable immensity of such a place seemed to actually open up possibilities rather than close them off, so that Olivia had felt no pressure on herself at all. She had continued to go out of her way to explore cities, to take determined strolls from one side of them to the other, out of the sense that she *could* be at home in a city, someday, and that she only needed to try.

As she continued to tramp down Park Ave, acting the pedestrian, Olivia tried to keep her head up and casually swing her arms as though this was her every Saturday. She kept her eyes on the horizon for the bright colors of those painted doughnuts, which it seemed she could remember rather clearly.

While this walking was still pleasant, she was now rather focused on its ending. The walk had proved to have its own ups and downs, she admitted, just like anything else. When the bright blue exterior of the Holy Donut finally came into view, Olivia noticed immediately that it was not the same exact shade of blue that she had been imagining; it was simply its own blue, neither more or less colorful than she'd thought. This wasn't really disappointing, though it did make Olivia wonder at how things always turned out a little different from memories.

She hadn't gone so far as to expect there'd be a rush of nostalgia, or even that she would be swept away by the taste of the doughnuts she had loved before, though she *did* realize, as she made her way across the final sidestreet and cut into the parking lot, that she was hoping for a sense of familiarity at least. It would just be *nice*, she thought, to look out on this day from a spot that was recognizable and comforting, to feel that nothing had really changed since she'd been gone—or, for that matter, that the changes could be dealt with. She could now feel at rest and take stock, which, it seemed rather obvious, she had been unable to do at Emily's apartment, where there had been so much history in the air to cut. She wanted a space in which to exist easily, unconsciously—like the back corner of a little coffee shop, for instance, where one could pay just a few dollars and incontestably have the next hour or two to oneself.

She came up to the front door of the Donut and paused. It seemed that this was the last place that she could wait for James, if that was what she was going to do. She could wait outside, give him a call, see how close he might be. She did like the idea of being out here in the sun, where she could look across the avenue and into the park; and she even sometimes found a kind of gratification in holding off a meal just a little bit longer. She could even take out the camera, she thought, to take a picture or two; the trees, rising up from across the street, already seemed to be as flat and perfect as a painting.

Wafts of ground coffee and toasted sesame came through the front door as it opened and then closed. As Olivia slung her pack onto the ground and dug through it to find her phone, she felt that the pinching of her stomach was really catching up with her, as though the walk had only held it at bay. It was easy to say that she really wasn't obligated to wait, for James hadn't responded, and might remain out of contact for some time. She considered that she could simply call James once she was inside and waiting in line; or she could even grab their food to go, and afterwards begin heading towards his apartment.

She remembered Maria, who would go through unheard of efforts just to share a meal with someone else. It wasn't that eating alone was simply unbearable—of course Maria was the kind of person who always seemed to have her own personal investment in the things she did, and seemed to do them with independence. Maria, if she were here, would indeed sit outside and wait, as though convinced that sharing the meal was the entirety of why they had come.

Of course it would have been great for her and James to eat together. They would catch up over the meal, and perhaps she would come to remember it fondly, as she looked back at the day spent in Portland. But, in any case, they would see each other soon.

Maybe, Olivia thought as she pushed open the front door of the Donut, James would arrive while she was eating, just as she had taken an overlarge bite. She would try to say "hello" with her mouth full, and they would both begin to laugh.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Everything dissolved, then, into a much more manageable form. There was the counter, and she was starving. The line was rather long, though Olivia was not bothered by waiting, as she knew that breakfast was now on its way.

The place was crowded. It was strange to suddenly think that one or two of these people might be someone she knew. The Donut had always been a popular spot for tourists, and it was just the kind of sunny day in August that visitors from across the state might be most willingly to come out; whether they might be old friends from the coast, or those she'd gotten to know in college, Olivia knew that it wouldn't have to be much of a coincidence to run into almost anyone from the state of Maine. It seemed indeed a bit surreal, as though she could leave for a very long time and still come back to these kinds of places of her past, where nothing seemed to change.

Most of them were probably just tourists from the south, Olivia thought, though she didn't really have a sense of who was local and who wasn't. To her left was a group of couches which she remembered had been the most enviable place to sit, when she was young. Today the couches were nearly full, with what seemed to be a single party of young families, along with the noisy suggestions of their children. On the other side of the shop, before a wide and bright window, was some more individualized seating, occupied by a few people working on laptops. Olivia thought that she would sit right next to the window, once she got her food. She hadn't recognized anyone, in the end.

The din of the register was constant, but could almost be forgotten once it became a part of the cacophony; Olivia was even comforted by the low roar of the families who crowded the couches, where children cried out, and were cajoled into quietness. It would be nice, she was

thinking, to eat here, amongst this crowd. She actually felt relieved to be in from the heat; while the sun had been comforting, it was undeniably intense, after a while. The idea had been tumbling around her head that she could instead go back into the park once she had the food; but now it felt like this place was a kind of opportunity that she shouldn't pass by.

She suddenly felt far more comfortable with the idea of getting on her phone and giving James a call. She could ogle at the familiar shelves and shelves of different doughnuts; she could take her time choosing which one she would get. Now that she was in line, everything seemed to have been decided, things were in motion; they only needed to catch themselves up.

As she listened to the phone ring and waited for James to pick up, her eyes finally fell on the arrangement of classic lemon-glaze doughnuts, which she had almost instinctively been looking for. There it was: the glimmering sugary glaze draped over a smooth, golden-brown ring. There were so many other choices—indeed it was part of the excitement of coming here, weighing the options, making one's own decision—but this was what Olivia thought about when she thought of this place, when she would talk about “the best doughnut she had ever had.” She had indeed raved about this place to people overseas, as one might a city museum or public monument; like it was a fixture of Portland that simply needed to be experienced. She had tried to give it the kind of importance of a European tradition, as though the doughnut might occupy a similar place in the American imagination.

Even if this one in particular turned out to not be so great, Olivia thought, then there would at least be the comfort that she'd tried, that she'd used this opportunity to see how things had changed. She glanced across the field of other fanciful varieties—the chocolate with glaze, the coffee-cake, the wild Maine blueberry; none of which struck her the wrong way—while she knew how she had already decided.

The ring had already rung too many times. They would—Olivia almost sighed—they would miss each other again. She put down the phone.

Before she finally reached the register, there was a long moment in which she found herself listening to the couple ahead of her, who were discussing some downtown bar they had heard about that served impressive cocktails. She also caught someone behind her who was ruminating loudly about the different kinds of doughnuts and coffee that they would love to try. It soothed Olivia to hear other people talk about how they wanted things. It soothed her to know that she was not alone, and made her feel a little better about the fact that she wanted things herself.

A young male voice behind her was mentioning that he was going to order one of the savory doughnuts, filled with cheese and sausage. This suddenly reminded Olivia that there were in fact savory options, and suddenly she was reconsidering her decision. Indeed she was very hungry, she thought; she might take a little more, something with some meat and cheese, to be satisfied. She lost, for a moment, the comfort provided by the nostalgia of the lemon-glaze, as she had to reconsider some of the many other possibilities.

She tried making some compromise, so that she could be at once practical and nostalgic. She could eat a savoury one now, perhaps, and order a sweet one to go; or she could simply forget the lemon-glaze completely, and accept that one eventually had to leave things behind.

As though her eyes had been flailing out for a lifeline, she caught sight then of the cooler full of drinks, off to the side of the shop. She imagined herself drinking from a thick pint of orange juice, washing down the sugary doughnut. Yes, she thought; *that* would be filling, and she wouldn't need to change her mind.

James would come in the door and see her in front of a half-eaten doughnut, chugging from a bottle of juice. She was smiling to herself, as she finally walked up to the person behind the register.

Olivia kept on smiling, despite herself, but tried to give her order as quickly and clearly as possible. The cashier was wonderfully local. She was older, and gave off a flippant kindness that only a local could.

Not a moment later the woman was handing Olivia a wax paper with the doughnut inside, and Olivia was rummaging for her money. It seemed strange that she was actually, finally, about to eat her doughnut for breakfast. She forked over a ten dollar bill, after rummaging for a moment through her pockets; it had been a decision, of course, to order all her food out while she was here in Portland, rather than packing sandwiches, perhaps, with little bags of trail mix. She had the sense that *this* was what she had come here for—to visit the places, to try the food, to feel the nostalgia—as they finished up the transaction. She gave the woman behind the register a wide smile, and moved on.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a bench against the sunny window on the quiet side of the shop, Olivia saw, and an empty space that appeared to be just for her. James always sat near windows, she remembered—while her other friends seemed to value privacy and gentle lighting, he never minded taking a hit for the sake of the view.

She sat down, next to the others down the bench who were also alone. For a moment, then, the scene felt to be rather lacking, for how she was not with anyone else—for how, perhaps if she had tried harder, she could have been eating here amongst the company of friends. Indeed, she had her doughnut; she reached into the wax paper bag, and set it out before her; she had her

bottle of orange juice. And she had her pack, of course, with her old camera and the book which she'd brought for just these kinds of moments.

Nevertheless, the feeling of potential loneliness was reason enough to pull out her phone, just in case. She would send James a message, Olivia thought, telling him to give her a call, so that she could finally settle down and enjoy her food once everything had been managed.

The doughnut in front of her, however, was just a bit too tempting. She took it up with one hand and took her first bite, as she managed the phone with the other. There was the soft, tart, sugary cake; and Olivia saw that she had missed a call from James. Her finger hovered over the screen, as she slowly finished chewing. Her other hand was sticky with sugar.

James must have just missed her call, earlier, and had then called her back. Olivia was somewhat charmed that James had bothered to call at all, rather than returning with a quick message. Of course, that was simply James's way; he was radically different from her other young friends, in the way that he would prefer to call someone and talk things out, rather than exchange a seemingly endless stream of texts. It had always given her the sense, for some reason, that he cared just a little more than others. He had, however—Olivia just realized, looking at her notifications—He had sent her a message, as well.

She had to tilt and angle the screen, in order to see it against the glare. She was still working on the same first bite, as though to make it last. "So," the message began, "can we move..."

Olivia looked up, swallowed her food, and took a sip of juice. There was no rush, it was clear; from those first words alone she confidently assumed that James wasn't coming, that something had come up, that their meeting for breakfast had been doomed from the start. Of course, she had been staying at Emily's, and he was getting ready for the party—what had they

been thinking, telling each other that they'd have the time and space to meet up beforehand?

While it was a bit of a relief, to know for sure that James was not depending on what she did and what she bothered to tell him, Olivia did feel, all the same, a little more alone, now, knowing that no one was really caring about her. She could carry on with exactly what she wanted her day in Portland to be—while it had been something of an inspiration to know that James might have been trying to get a hold of her, that what she did was still having an effect.

James's text went on to explain that he apparently had gotten a last-minute lead on a used couch, which would be perfect for the party tonight. He was currently hopping in a car with Matti—another college friend, who Olivia heard had apparently moved to Portland, as well—and going to seek it out. This “might take awhile,” he clarified, and “it might be easier to meet up later.” The party, Olivia thought, would not start until seven. She imagined he and Matti at the apartment through the afternoon, cooking and cleaning and sipping little aperitifs, as night fell and they waited for guests to come.

Olivia thought then of all that *time*—from now until around seven, all to herself, exploring and lounging and enjoying. It was almost too long, she thought; but perhaps that was part of the challenge. She could go over early and help set up, of course. But then it gave her a great sense of freedom to know that she did not have to, that she could do whatever she liked, and simply show up for the party, do what she had to do there, and then it would be over. She put the phone back down on the table. She took another bite of doughnut, and looked out the window to the view of Deering Oaks Park.

The cake of the doughnut was a bit heavier, a bit more dense, than she had wanted it to be. The lemon flavor was pleasant, not particularly tart. Of course she had, over the years, begun to imagine something far greater than the taste itself, those years accumulating like weight in

value. Now there were so many memories of herself describing that taste and texture to other people; and now in front of her was just a simple doughnut, hardly up to the task of comparing. She told herself she was not surprised. She washed down each bite with a sip from the pint of orange juice.

It had been so particularly *James* to leave things up to a roll of the dice—so much, Olivia thought, that she should have seen all of this coming. There was something bothersome in the way that he had not thought to give her a time and place beforehand, how he had seemed to deliberately lead them into a morning of confusion. She would have planned better, she thought; she could have set an alarm and let Emily know a specific time she had to leave.

This was nothing, in the end, that she and James hadn't covered before. He was practically proud of it, the way that he was perfectly comfortable with nearly organized chaos; and, Olivia had to admit, she had in some ways admired him for it. It wouldn't be a proper date with James if they didn't have to cobble their plans together, as they watched reality smash them apart.

She was just looking at the window, taking a good long period of time in between each bite. It was suddenly comforting to Olivia, then, thinking of how familiar this was, like the sense of living in a familiar story. Maybe she would shake her head over it later with Emily, when she would finally relate to her how the whole day went down. James was still the same old James—while her own perspective, however, felt a little different from that in college, perhaps a little bit more matured. Since having a normal job in Le Mans, having to coordinate plans with an actual job, she could not really admire James's chaos, while she still might have found it amusing.

The doughnut was practically finished, and Olivia was momentarily sated, so that she

began to wonder what was next. The din of the place *was* rather loud; it was probably not the best environment for reading her book, though her comrades down the bench appeared to be working diligently away, wearing their headphones and earphones. Then again, she considered, it might be a good time for a picture or two—imagining herself looking through the viewfinder of her mother’s old camera, taking shots of coffee mugs and millennial workers. Even the little meal she had set before her, with a morsel of doughnut set against the white square of a napkin, looked rather picturesque, now that she was looking at it the right way.

Waiting for herself to either take out the camera or not, Olivia felt heat from the sun magnified through the window; and then the breeze from the door, as it opened now and then. It was such pleasant stimulation, reminding her that she *could* just sit here for a while, doing nothing, if she could let it happen. She tried to think about how she might describe this lemon-glaze doughnut in the future, to Emily or James or whoever asked; but now the idea felt forced and tired. She didn’t really want to think about anything. The sun and wind were naturally pleasant, gently reminding her of their presence.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Olivia began to look about. There was no rush, of course—the camera could certainly wait; there would be so much time for photo-taking. Now she watched the people coming and going through the door; and then she looked to the other side of the shop, to the young families and their collective brunch. She wondered how she appeared to these people, having entered the place alone, tramping along with an oversized backpack and wearing a pair of old flip-flops. Naturally she would be just another single young person in Portland, she thought, somehow trying to take advantage of a Saturday.

There were several of that same type here—the others besides her on the bench, for instance, who were looking, completely focused, into their laptops. They all seemed to be occupying their time quite productively: every inch of the bench in front of them was covered in practical means, with their laptops and notebooks and coffee and water bottles. The two nearest Olivia had the exact same kind of computer, sleek and new-looking. They were the very picture of young people at work, spending their Saturday morning in a Portland coffee shop. One of them wore pink headphones, a wire reaching down over their lap; and another held an absurdly strict posture, their head faced down into a kind of textbook.

The sight of their work-ethic was practically urging Olivia forward herself. She reached over to her pack to finally pull out her camera, if only because it was something towards which she could put a productive energy. Of course these people were probably doing their work for school, or their online jobs, while Olivia herself had finished school, and really didn't have any other kind of pressure to do work until the third of September, when she simply needed to show up at the elementary school in Le Mans and help teach. This meant, Olivia thought as she lifted her mother's old camera and wrapped its strap about her neck, that she was going through this effort with the camera for a far different reason than one could simply point their finger to. It was

for her own sense of enrichment, or her own place in the world, or simply for the world itself—she couldn't have said precisely which. She'd been determined to finally pick up the camera, once she had gotten back to the States, since over the last year she had gotten the idea that it would be more interesting to document her travels in some way; and it was such open moments, in the course of a day in the city, that she had imagined herself using it.

Her movements with it felt unsure and reserved, removing the lens cap and quite randomly adjusting the focus. She still thought of it as her mother's camera; indeed she had hardly even looked at it since digging it out of her closet, the first night back in Brunswick. She felt overly conscious of the thing's value, feeling like the slightest mistake with it would be irreversible—because, perhaps, of how much more valuable it felt than any present her parents had ever given her, after so many years of mere trinkets and toys, which despite their cost had been hard-pressed to mean much of anything. The camera, however, had not been given to her with the sense of just another present; in fact it had felt distinctly necessary, as her mother had passed it on to her, as though it was a particular tool which, it had appeared, Olivia was actually in a position to use. She had begun to imagine that she would carry this around for a very long time, that she would care for it and make it last, and never reduce it to just another device bouncing around in her pack. While she would certainly use it to document her own travels and develop herself as a “photographer,” she also liked to think that it would be a personal and nostalgic process for her, as she developed her relationship with the camera itself.

While she was trying to get to know all of its functions—the dial at the corner of the screen was as foreign to her as a decoder ring—she was also trying not to appear like an over-privileged child, playing around with an expensive toy there in the coffee shop. Of course everyone dealt with cameras in one way or another, probably just snapping pictures with their

phones; in comparison to a DSLR, however, a phone seemed more like an imitation, an attempt to replicate the real thing and the real equipment. Turning it on, looking through the viewfinder, Olivia considered that photography was either surprisingly simple or frightfully complicated.

In the last week she had taken it for exactly one short walk around Brunswick, snapping pictures of the little shops, the lamp posts, trees, bicycles. Her thoughts had been filled with the pictures she would soon take in Europe, of the parks and cobbled walkways that she could remember and was beginning to know well. Here in the Donut Olivia found herself scanning through those first pictures she'd taken of the Brunswick downtown, and felt surprised to remark at how indiscriminate they appeared now, these random images of this and that. One might not have known where in the world they had been taken.

A wave of laughter broke from across the shop, from the crowd of couches. All the people over there appeared to act in sync, picking up their coffees all at the same time in the wake of some joke, taking sips, setting them back down. Olivia wondered if the others beside her, hard at work down the bench, were at all distracted. Having come to a coffee shop in the first place, however, was like making an agreement that you were not to be alone, that everyone was going to deal with one another.

It was in fact quite a scene, Olivia reflected, looking about the shop, the camera in her hands—each corner of the shop forming its own separate part of it. Each group spent their time in their own separate way, while they were ultimately together in having all come here to the Donut to do it. She felt like an observer, there with her camera, looking on from the side.

She turned the little dial, setting it to what she figured to be the standard for a casual picture. Eventually, she imagined, these specific actions would become familiar, if indeed she kept on working with the camera. She had had hobbies, of course; she had had pursuits—though

nothing that approached, or even wanted to approach, something like a profession, like photography, an entire field of study and interest. It was a lot more intimidating to think of this as trying to actually become a photographer, so that Olivia continued, as she swung the lens of the camera at her vantage near the window from one side of the Donut to the other, to act as though she were merely fiddling around with a few pictures.

In the end, she thought, there was only one way to really get started on something. Olivia settled the camera on the space in front of her, placing her used napkin in the frame, against the background of the bench's polished wood. She turned and adjusted the lens, putting it into focus. There were so many ways, Olivia thought, so many angles and perspectives from which one could picture a thing like this. Simplicity, for now, appeared to be the best point to start. She looked down from her normal height, and placed the napkin square in the frame.

Soon two of the people beside her on the bench were shutting their computers, gradually packing up to leave. Her opportunity to take a photo of them, all these young people quietly at work, seemed now to have passed. Olivia had been hesitating, and now was wishing that she had simply done it. The picture might have become something to look back on, she had thought, allowing her to remember this scene, the time she came by herself to the Donut, and spent time among these people. They were about to leave—perhaps they were classmates, meeting up here to inspire each other to work—slinging laptop cases over their shoulders. She wondered if she would ever remember this period of time, watching these little scenes unfold, or if this would never solidify into memory at all. Perhaps she would never need, or would never be inspired, to remember it. And if she took a picture now, of the empty bench beside her, would it remind her how they'd been there? Or would she remember it as just some empty seats of the Holy Donut?

Then they were gone, the glass door jingling as it closed. She would probably seem just as cold and dismissive, she thought, when she herself went to leave.

She suddenly cared less for what people might think of her pointing around a camera. Indeed it really did seem to be the truth that people here didn't actually notice what everyone else was doing. Olivia began to look around rather confidently, panning for shots, no longer hesitating to actually rest her gaze and really look at something intently.

The two young women, talking quietly at one of the small tables, might make a classic coffee shop-picture, Olivia thought—perhaps it would even be indicative of Portland life in particular. As she put them in the frame, however, it suddenly reminded her of the classic photo of two old men playing chess in Central Park, in black and white. Suddenly her own picture appeared horribly cliché; she turned away, determined to find another, perhaps less naive, picture to take.

Upon having that thought, however, there was another voice in Olivia's head, it seemed, gently explaining to her that this was not a very good reason at all not to take a picture. There had been many friends to tell her things of this sort, but right now she thought of Maria's warm tone, how she would wait and give Olivia a moment to sit with whatever self-degrading comment she'd just made. "I think you should take the picture," Maria might say, rather simply, after a moment's pause, in which Olivia would have already realized and taken Maria's point.

While it would have certainly felt too ridiculous for Olivia to look back to the two women just for the sake of taking the picture, the way in which she seemed to be merely obeying Maria's suggestion made it feel in some way acceptable. She took a quick shot of them and then looked away. But she had indeed gotten the point: as she continued to point the camera around, she made a conscious effort to push down her finger whenever there was the slightest inclination, her confidence gradually increasing. When she felt the impulse to pause or look away, she took it

as an indication to push forward. She wondered if this wasn't the entire secret to Maria herself: that she was strong enough to know when she was holding back.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

When she found herself again looking out the wide window, the outdoors suddenly appeared attractive. She would be heading out soon, of course; and yet, looking around the Donut after seeing the openness of the avenue and the surreal largeness of the park's trees, she now felt closed in, restricted in what she was allowed to do and see.

She was suddenly fed up with pictures of coffee mugs and the backs of heads; there was the whole city, she thought, on a beautiful summer's day. There were other people here who must have stayed at their tables for hours; it was true that she could have stayed much longer, if she wished, reading a book or simply lounging on her phone. It was possible that she could have a very pleasant time, if she decided to do so.

But the strength of the light, the simple reality that what she saw outside was not a picture but an existing world, was enough of a real and present feeling for Olivia to tell herself that she could rest and read soon enough. She popped the cap back onto the lens, clicked the power off, and began to quickly pack up, with the sense of needing to be elsewhere.

She wondered, as she rocketed out the door of the Donut and onto Park Ave, whether Emily and Nathan had finally gotten around to having breakfast, or if they were exactly where she'd left them, still in silence, and in separate rooms. Or perhaps Nathan was just mixing the pancake batter, heating up the pan, spooning it out onto the griddle. She wondered if she could have possibly waited so long, had she decided to stay with them the entire morning; though it was difficult now to imagine, with her stomach jiggling around as she walked full of food and juice. Her time here alone had been nice, Olivia concluded. She had had her nostalgic little breakfast; she had finally started working with the camera. She was finally on her way into town.

Her eye was caught, in a way, by the sight of Deering Oaks across the street; she couldn't quite take her eyes off the towering trees, which threw their colossal shade backward, onto the grass of the park—or rather, Olivia thought, the sun was so angled that their shadow was behind them. It felt wrong to not give the park, so grand and green, her attention—though she had to look away every few seconds, to make sure she was still walking straight.

She'd always made a point of strolling through the park whenever she was in town. For now, at least, her trajectory was clear: she would make her way up to Congress, to take in the shops, and the landmarks, and the architecture, which was all bound to be bustling at this time on a Saturday. Perhaps, she thought, later on, once she'd gotten her fill of downtown, she might find herself wandering back here to the park.

She had not made a decision in particular about where she was actually headed—and indeed it was a sense of openness, of complete freedom, that she found so great about such times. She practically avoided making any such decision; she was positively revelling in the lack of not having to do anything in particular. Her stomach was heavy, and her legs moved along slowly. The path was set for the length of Congress Street, and the many places that would entail. Everything after that was too far off to see.

Again there were the pastel apartment buildings lining the way up State Street. Seeing them now made Olivia think that there must be a great many pictures to be taken of this street, as she remembered the formidable red-brick facade that had struck her on the way out of Emily's. She pictured the photos she could take of it—so many different perspectives, all dripping with a sense of the history and pastimes of New England. It would have required her to stop, of course, to slightly change gears from the kind of languishing stroll she was now experiencing, though she knew she was more than capable of doing so. They would, at the very least, be something to

show, when she would arrive rather anticlimactically at James's apartment. Perhaps James would appreciate it, she thought, for the way that she had taken an interest.

This was a real Portland neighborhood, she thought, looking up from the sidewalk to the apartments made out of townhouses. The hill was beginning its gradual incline. She wouldn't find such a sense of reality up there, on Congress, among all the storefronts and shop-facades. Olivia was simultaneously comforted and stricken with guilt at the idea of not stopping, of simply making her way up the hill in peace.

As the street had begun to incline she had needed to exert an actual force down into her steps, which indeed narrowed her vision and straightened her purpose. It wasn't really such a big hill, of course, and not even very steep; but it could still be short and sweet, and Olivia might find herself at the top, standing on Congress Street, with a wonderful sense of having been rejuvenated.

These kinds of little jaunts might actually be best, Olivia thought, to keep one feeling good. Over the summer, trekking such long miles on mountainous terrain, she had wondered how she would ever return to normal life, in which one might be deprived from walking for hours at a time. She and Maria, high on their own energies, had commiserated with one another in terror: How would they possibly return to living in all those cities? It seemed, at the time, unreal that they'd ever lived that way to begin with, and impossible that they could ever do so again. Now Olivia felt that she might be uncovering a deeper truth: one could find a balance, perhaps, by making more sporadic removals from place to place, constantly getting up and settling down. It suddenly felt obvious that, seeing as so many people lived in cities, some of them at least must have found ways to feel good.

Her thoughts were eventually lost in the warmth which seemed to flow throughout her body, emanating from the tightness in her abdomen. She pleasantly imagined that her stomach was dispersing its fullness, flooding her limbs with nutrients and energy.

She began to pass many people, on her way up the hill; these must have been the characters of Parkside, she thought, of whom she'd heard stories. When Emily had been in the process of moving, people often warned her about the reputation or general danger of the neighborhood. Of course Olivia couldn't tell anything much about them from here, other than that they appeared civil enough, and not dangerous in any apparent way. When the pavement transitioned to a kind of cracked, reddish brick, Olivia snapped out of her thoughts and looked up.

To her left was the immense brick structure, which had been visible from Emily's street. It reminded her of an abbey, she realized now—on one corner it ascended to a bell-tower, and the rest of the building was squarely uniform in a way that reminded one of a large dormitory. Olivia knew that traditional abbeys and churches would look far less modern — even more “medieval,” she thought — than this; but, aware of some gap in her understanding of New England history, she vaguely imagined that it might have been a kind of homage to the old style, while still serving a very real abbey-like purpose.

It was the kind of thing that made Portland beautiful, she thought, as the bell tower passed overhead. Standing here amongst the rows of what were now apartment buildings, the church slapped of a time when these were actual houses, when the city was something more like what they all thought of as traditionally New England. It was an undeniable benefit of living here, in a place with such concrete and present history. She wondered if people here really

thought about these things, simply living their lives. Olivia felt, as she passed by the church, like she was enjoying its air of exuded history.

The summit of the hill was near; hardly two more blocks left, and only the oldest of homes remained, with their thick stone walls. Up ahead she saw a young worker in white kitchen garb taking out the trash, behind what must have been one of the restaurants up ahead. It was like a sign that she had finally made it to Congress Street.

At the intersection of Congress and State, the air opened up and all the sun came through—not in the slanted rays of morning or late afternoon, but in a bright wide blanket that illuminated the intersection, which made the oppression of a summer's day much more apparent. It was truly the light of noontime, as it appeared to beat straight down, equivocally and without relent on all things that could not find shade. Coupled with the reflections of car windows and glimmering chrome, Olivia was reminded of the impression of beach-towns, of days which made entire towns lethargic, and caused everyone to take cover. It was the kind of light that made you think you needed something to drink; you simply needed to find some shade.

As she squinted her eyes around Congress, however, and saw the brick city through a hazy lens, she thought rather of visiting Boston in August. She had gone there over a summer vacation, in college, to visit friends. And while those friends were all gone now (perhaps some of them were actually still there; but they had been some of the many friends that had come and gone over those four years), the picture was still clear and strong in her mind, of the sunny green Common crowded with people; the feeling of sipping lemonade in the grass, looking up at the gilded peak of the State House. The memory was still warm and relevant, despite so much time. It gave her comfort that she was finally back in a New England city, even as her eyes were practically closed then, blinded by the sun.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

It was not quite the sense of having arrived, as she finally stepped onto Congress and immediately headed east towards downtown, that Olivia was experiencing. (There were some interesting things to the west, of course; a few bookstores and a very good bakery, at least. But first she wanted to get right to the heart of the town: the museum, the library, Monument Square.) Rather, it was the sense that she was finally catching up to everyone else. It was noon, and the day was already in full swing; while she had missed the whole Saturday morning rush, she was now jumping right in, as the general idea was looking towards lunch. It appeared that the morning had been, like any summer day, hectic and crowded: restaurants bustled to be open and ready for the rush, while others were in transition from breakfast. Little crowds of tourists and tight packs of locals made their way to or from somewhere else. Somehow, as always, everyone was managing the transition into the afternoon.

Looking down that street was overwhelming at first: there were so many places she could go, so many that she would recognize and find anew. The storefronts and landmarks and small city parks were all there at once, and she didn't know where to start. It was all she could do then to simply keep looking forward and imagine them all, somewhere out ahead of her; it was satisfying enough to be excited, whether or not she was noticing anything in particular. She didn't need to take out the camera, or do anything but watch and see. She glided slowly down the sunny side of the street.

A flagrant sign, however, flashed out from the rest: a brilliant red banner that covered the part of a facade which, as she could recall, had been nothing before but aging stone. It was a grand-opening of some restaurant, which explained why Olivia was taken by surprise; a new Chinese-American place, apparently, with all the flair of Chinatown, yet with a slight self-reference indicated by the choice of color and script. Strangely—uncomfortably—it was the first

thing that Olivia actually found herself looking at and studying, here on Congress; she couldn't remember what had once occupied that space, or if there had been anything at all, for it must have been the first time she had reason to wonder what went on in some of these old stone buildings. It was more like a distraction than anything else—the kind of place that suddenly sprang up, as if out of nowhere, and in all likelihood would either blend eventually into the cityscape or disappear just as abruptly.

It put her off, she finally admitted, that her first encounter with something new was not potentially pleasing. She would probably never go to some Chinese place on Congress, just as she had apparently never gone to whatever had been there before. It seemed she had to accept that this was in fact how a city changed: little by little, behind closed doors and then right under your nose. While she had indeed been excited to encounter changes the city had made, she now had to admit that she'd hoped for them to be more exciting, or at least more of interest, to her.

Might Emily have noticed that a new place had opened on Congress? Had it perhaps been a part of their dinner conversation, or the kind of thing they might discuss at parties—or was it the kind of thing that an actual resident would never bother to notice, as tentative and malleable as a city tended to be? Of course Olivia might have merely been in the right position to notice every new little thing, as she was only getting the impression of this one day. This suddenly made her feel very much like a visitor, only capable of drawing conclusions from one very rapid look. She resolved to be much more careful, then, as she continued down the street.

A single restaurant would be just one new detail she'd happened to notice. A year, it turned out, was rather a long time—there were so many things that could have changed. Olivia looked towards the telephone poles and community posterboards, to get a sense of what was going on. There was one flyer in particular that continued to appear and catch her eye; it was a

colorful advertisement for Portland Pride, which stood out against so much black and white. Nevertheless, she didn't actually read the flyer. The fact of Pride's happening hung in the air around her, like a flair of local color; while she knew she would not be there to see it. Olivia made a mental note to chat with someone later about the flyers, and ask what Pride was like.

But of course this was still Congress; that much at least hadn't changed. It comforted her to remember that although the city was inevitably different, soon enough she would still come across those landmarks that would echo effortlessly in her memory. All the classic Congress facades: the museum, the State Theater, and the library, and in the end the monument at the heart of the Square; they would come soon enough. It would even be easy to head down to the waterfront, where she could float in and out of the little tourist shops of the Old Port. This sense of potential provided a whip to Olivia's step, and she was moving excitedly forward.

Until, just about to cross the street, Olivia ground to a halt—she had been seized by the idea that she was about to walk into oncoming traffic. After worriedly shaking her ahead both ways down the street, she confirmed that the cars which she'd only narrowly glimpsed were indeed stopped at a red light. Her chest loosened, and she quickly finished scampering across the street.

For a moment, there, she had almost acted like the casual city-goer, simply assuming that the street would give her the right of way. She felt a bit foolish for how she had even tried, which in the end had put her even more out of place; and then she was resentful for having wanted to be that kind of person at all, feeling like she'd been lured by their casual and determined attitude.

No matter how many cities she had come to browse over this last year, Olivia was in fact still not used to being a city-person; she was still not used to commuting through the bustle of traffic. The city where she taught in France was considered small (students even refused to use the word *city*); she normally got away with navigating it by tram. She did spend weekends and

vacations in Nantes, in Toulouse, in Barcelona; she did have thoughts of spending the rest of her twenties in cities. Olivia was annoyed, quite frankly, that she was still looking as though she'd just appeared out of the bush of rural Maine.

She carried on with an unnaturally correct posture, and a face as though nothing had happened. Instinctively she was pushing her legs harder, moving with a little more force.

It was a pleasant surprise to suddenly recognize an old bluish sign up ahead, which seemed like a reassurance that this was in fact a city she'd once known. It was the small, hand-painted placard of a classic diner her father had always taken her to, whenever they had come to town. Now that she thought of it, the diner might have been the oldest of her Portland-memories; while it might have dropped completely out of her consideration over the years of college (during which she and her friends had been preoccupied with establishments serving alcohol), it was comforting to realize this diner must have been here all along.

Through the window Olivia saw a mixed crowd, both young and old; every inch of table space was, as ever, crowded with plates and arms. She couldn't have guessed the last time she'd been inside, but knew she'd gone with friends at some point over the last few years.

The blue of the sign, of course, was not quite the color of blue that she could remember: the letters were more cramped together; the sign was generally smaller than it once seemed to be. It was not quite ocean-blue, but more what might be called Maine-blue: the kind of blue you found in tourist shops, painted on knick-knacks. Olivia didn't mean to blame or accuse in any way with this distinction—she took their romanticization of Maine's coast as the simple reality that any business around here had to adapt itself to. It was, however, a reality that newer and younger venues of Portland were actively trying to escape; indeed she thought of this diner as a vestige. And yet it was in light of the diner's age and sense of the past that she looked warmly

upon it now; these old joints packed with regulars, together with families on vacation, all in front of the same completely identifiable plates of food. After that single glance, Olivia didn't even have to look anymore; she knew what she would find, and was comforted to imagine it there, privately, in her mind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

If she was merely a visitor, then, the least she could do was make something out of it. She had an opportunity here, just walking down the street, on her own time; she could end up having taken quite a few pictures on this trip, and some of them maybe decent. It would be very easy to *not* do, she knew; it was always easy for one to keep on not doing something—afraid, perhaps, of the effort doing it might involve. But it might turn out to not be difficult at all, she considered, to simply reach over her shoulder and pull out the camera. It would be, at least, one step forward.

It actually felt rather appropriate for a visitor to do, as she stepped aside on the wide Congress sidewalk to root through her bag. Visitors, indeed, took pictures; they abruptly stepped out of line, and got in people's way. But it was also young people, aspiring people, hopeful people who carried about these elegant black things in their efforts toward—art, or evidence, or memory; part of the interest was that Olivia didn't know for sure. With this sense of not knowing *quite* what she was really doing, she made herself comfortable with the camera in her hands, stepping back into the flow of the sidewalk, and felt mysteriously excited.

The way in which she was doing all of this alone—how she was very particularly not texting people, trying to meet up to arrange lunch or coffee dates—made Olivia wonder at herself, as though she might be doing something wrong. She *could* text someone, of course, asking them to meet up; she could carry on privately browsing and casually taking photos in between meetings, which would perhaps bolster her up with a sense of structure. There was

Adrienne and her crowd, she considered, who James had met one way or another—Adrienne was caring, and might in fact be a pleasant companion on a summer's day. There was even Madi, an old college friend of hers and Emily's, who she knew worked across the bay, and might still have her old phone number.

And while it felt good to consider these people, Olivia knew that she was really enjoying the freedom to consider anything. When she actually considered pulling out her phone to enact one of these ideas, she was stopped by the sense that her freedom would then be compromised, that suddenly the world—the remainder of her day here in the city—would become uncomfortably narrow, restricted to only what she could do with that person.

As Olivia paused to look about through the lens of the viewfinder, she was in her mind comparing herself to Emily, as she'd been that morning, reading contently at her kitchen table. It felt admirable, learning how to make something of one's time alone.

The street was crowded—it had happened all of sudden. A line of vibrant people were walking confidently towards her, all in an uproar of laughter and banter. They were older than her, but they were still young; they wore collared shirts with high-topped leather shoes, or sundresses paired with hats and purses. They certainly made money, and were probably on their way to or from some reputable restaurant along Congress. A few of them had to break open the line so that Olivia could pass. It gave her the sense that she was witnessing quite a moment—the kind of rare instance in adult-life when everything mysteriously aligns. Maybe, Olivia thought, that was one of those moments; maybe each one of them was trying so hard to maintain that moment as a group that they actually tried to ignore the reality of a sidewalk, which would normally tell them to surrender.

It was perhaps a more realistic part of Olivia that told herself this was probably not the case, that it was in fact her striving to witness something special, and worthy of a photo. They might only be tourists, glued together at their hips in light of their commitment to make this trip together. She looked back at them after they'd passed, as their masculine laughter continued to boom from afar, wondering if it would make a good picture. She quickly decided that it would be horribly cliché, a line of well-dressed friends walking into the distance; and she turned the camera back towards the facades of Congress.

She was still walking along at a slow pace, looking for the right photo, and had the time to notice the brushing of her pack's loose straps against her legs. Normally those straps would be fully secured—and the pack itself, for that matter, would be much heavier and feel much more full. She was so used to her long hikes, it seemed, that all of this felt only like a little break; as though tomorrow she would load back up, strap on her boots, and hit the trail again. She was indeed relieved that she wasn't; she had not only been physically exhausted after so many weeks, but emotionally empty. The simple thought of not hiking anymore was a relief; however, of course, this left the question of what was ahead of her now. On the trail it was easy to know what to expect, what to look forward to; it usually wasn't even a real question. It was the rest of life, Olivia thought then, that was far more difficult to predict.

It reminded her that she might run into someone, here. This was a small enough city. In Le Mans, taking Sunday walks in parks and gardens full of families she didn't know, Olivia had repeatedly fantasized a life in which she could wander a city and know and talk to people as casually as though it was a small town. Surely there were people she knew who went to this market, so that it was only a matter of coincidence as to whether or not their paths would cross.

She wondered if they would do anything more than wave to her casually—if they might acknowledge the rarity of her being here.

It was the clearest thing, as she had begun to feel a bit aimless, to set her course directly for the Square. There Olivia was sure she'd find more than enough opportunities for a few good photos; there was the statue, first of all, along with the many storefronts, the contents of their windows, the architecture of their buildings. If there was indeed a market that day, then all the better—she could imagine the people, all the colors and things there for her to capture. For now she was content just to sail along, no longer frustrating herself with trying to mine the street for what she could get, but rather experiencing it—enjoying it—more simply.

Ahead, however, Olivia noticed a pristine space of sidewalk bare of pedestrians, between a trash can and a lamppost, that seemed to just be waiting to be used. It seemed like the perfect place to look out across the street and up at the opposing facades. Olivia went for it immediately. While she still wouldn't have wanted to be bogged down by the need to find a photo, she couldn't pass it up if one so clearly fell into her lap.

She imagined that this was herself being spontaneous; she seemed to be taking control of time itself, as she felt the next few minutes to be suddenly changing—the look of them, the value of them, their sense of what was important.

She seemed to pick up right where she left off, as she stepped aside the foot traffic and brought her mother's old DSLR back to her eye, as though she'd never made the consideration to stop. Perhaps photographers, Olivia thought then, were people who never really stopped looking for photographs. This left the question open, of whether or not Olivia might be becoming one of those people herself; but she knew it was best not to get too far ahead of herself, to continue simply taking pictures.

Her first shot—a car passing before a Starbucks—was only to get things going. Without even looking Olivia sensed that the angle was all wrong; she had hardly enough vantage here to see anything more than the broadside of whatever vehicle happened to be in front of her. Her first instinct was to move on, to continue down the sidewalk pointing the lens around, until something finally stuck—until the contents of her frame inexplicably aligned. She lingered, however, there between the trash can and the lamppost, in an effort to get all that she could from the spot—and suddenly she was looking at something across the street that appeared already to be a picture.

It was a police vehicle parked in an alley, looking out to the street, beside the old red brick of a Congress storefront. There was an interesting edge in the way it was parked: not carefully but at an angle, with one side dipping into the depression of a sewer grating. Then, looking wider, the old building against which the police vehicle was parked abruptly became a Subway as it reached the street. Olivia immediately pictured several shots she might take. Everything seemed to be posed just so, as though the position of each—the police car, the alleyway, the Subway—really did hint at some larger story.

She had to edge a little closer to the edge of the pavement, zoom her frame in slightly, and wait for some cars to pass. She began with a shot of the vehicle alone, capturing a bit of graffiti and the end of an old fire escape in the background. She took another step left, took another shot, and then rotated the frame onto its side, just as she'd always seen photographers do. She couldn't quite tell if she really needed a vertical shot, with all that space above and below the car; but figured that she could think more about that later. Then she zoomed out, to get the smallest hint of the neon Subway at the front of the building, and took nearly the same series of photos. One of those shots, she suspected, would be the truly good one. The presence of the Subway seemed to put the police car into some kind of interesting context.

It *did* feel like she had gotten lucky. While these pictures might not come out as anything profound, at least it was some visible progress—progress not only on paper but that she'd actively felt, and felt *good* about. Practically it didn't matter whether the pictures became anything at all; so many things in life, it was beginning to become clear, seemed to always become less dazzling and more flawed over time. She was encouraged, not about the pictures themselves, but by the discovery that a significant part of photography might in fact be one's ability to get their camera to the right place and time. No matter how in the end she'd had to simply point and click; the fact was she'd gotten there, with the camera in hand, and had gotten the picture. Indeed, Olivia knew she had achieved something.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

It was not often summer when Olivia came to Portland. Since she stopped coming as a child with her family, Portland had become a thing to do on a weekend of the school year, coming down with some friends to catch a certain show or shop at a particular kind of store. It was strange, then, to loll slowly down this street; to gape through the windows and stop whenever you pleased; rather than to frantically rush down it, hardly opening your eyes and wondering at why the cold should sting so badly. And then it was strange to see the sidewalk crowded with tables, as though this was not Portland but instead a cobbled avenue in some European city, lined with terraces. When she had finally gotten used to living in Le Mans—when she suddenly found herself taking a daily afternoon coffee at the cafe across from her grade school, doing nothing *but* drinking coffee and soaking up the sun—she had wondered why people in America did not eat and drink outside more often. She had figured it would do nothing but make life more pleasant.

Now, she had to wonder if these outdoor patios were new on Congress, if they had perhaps come with Portland's increasing trendiness; or if they had in fact been here all along, without her ever noticing. Figuring this out was actually quite important—it would change her perception of entire cities and peoples. Olivia was perfectly aware, however, that she might not find out the answer any time soon. She kept her thoughts to herself, walking slowly down the street, with the camera hanging about her neck.

The door of the next place was wide open: a line snaked out of it and spread out along the sidewalk. This, too, was strange: to see the door of this bagel joint so haphazardly propped open; a chalkboard, listing today's specials, displayed outside. She had known that this place was certainly popular for their bagels (Montreal or New York-style, she had never cared to

remember), but had never seen that popularity so first-hand, pouring out into the street. In summer, Olivia thought, this really was a different kind of city. It seemed she had never really known the city in its entirety. There might have been a whole list of reasons, unbeknownst to her, as to why she would actually enjoy living here.

Of course, Olivia thought, Portland had *always* been a city—had always been full of people, changing along with their desires and plans and impulses. The only thing that had really changed—that had ever really changed—was herself. Olivia felt like a child, finally becoming conscious. Outwardly she seemed to still be simply looking, toying with the lens-cap of her camera.

Eventually she resolved to try for a picture. She wanted to stay here, just to hang around and watch this and that, but there was nothing else she could casually do here in front of the bagel shop unless she was going to get in line. First she pointed her view down the sidewalk, imagining a vanishing point at the center of the frame; she hesitated to focus on anything more specific, aware of the stares of the people in line and on the other side of the windows. This very general shot of the populated sidewalk, however, appeared rather boring. Of course there was something interesting in this scene, but this picture wasn't finding it.

Studying this line of customers stretching out of the shop, Olivia considered that this was the kind of scene that just a few years ago, as a college student, she would have resented. She would have called it ridiculous and pointless; a complete waste of time. She now felt how she, herself, had been ridiculously dramatic. They were just individual people, who had found themselves on line. She knew that she needed to find something more particular for a better picture.

Just to her left was a young-ish family at an outdoor table, perhaps waiting for their food. They immediately struck Olivia as ‘a scene,’ possibly her next set of photos. They were all those particular ages: the pre-teen daughter and the slightly younger son; a mother and father in their early forties. At a glance they didn’t appear rich, but just like the kind of Massachusetts family that needed a weekend getaway. Olivia figured that they were not from Maine only because their skin was not white. (She had only a shade of darkness from her Indian father, and still she had been the darkest person in grade school.)

She had the sense that this might be her last attempt, which came to her as a relief—she was tired, she finally recognized, of looking for pictures. The market at the Square would be waiting when she was done. Hopefully she could make something good of this last attempt—and without carelessly rushing, now that she had foreseen the end.

She came to a stop not far from the family’s table, looking down and fiddling with the camera, trying to appear inconspicuously. The man, the father, had been the center of her attention, as he was tall and a little wide. The rest of the family seemed to only sit across from him; he wore a baseball cap, and a simple gray shirt—Olivia imagined a Patriots logo printed across his chest. She was vaguely reminded of her own family, but there was no direct comparison. She was trying to capture a rather basic story; something about families, fathers, and New England summers. It seemed that it could come out as a very interesting photo, though she couldn’t tell what the effect would be exactly. At the very least, it would be a photo of a family at table, right out on the street.

She finally looked directly over to them, preparing to bring the camera up to her eye; but paused, then, before she could really be accused of doing anything. It was like there was a wall, in between Olivia and the picture she would take. The wall was the consequences of her taking the picture of some random stranger; it was the world in which the family looked over to her,

disgust or fright in their eyes, and told her to go away. She could not even bring herself to imagine what she would take the picture of, exactly, how the picture might look—as the wall was blocking her view of it.

Olivia realized this was uncomfortable; it wasn't what she wanted this day in Portland to be. She quickly decided that any picture, or practice she might get in taking it, wouldn't be worth this kind of very real repercussion—a kind that might actually affect other people, that might inflict an ill-will. She disguised her gaze by suddenly looking about, as though she'd actually been searching for something else; and then she promptly continued down the street, as though she'd realized that she needed to be somewhere else.

She found herself looking up at a low-rising facade. Portland didn't have many buildings with more than four stories. They were still tall, insofar as Olivia felt very short looking up at one now; but it still seemed a little naive for her to take a picture that focused on their height. There were surely other aspects of the buildings worth highlighting, she figured, as she tried for a different angle.

The moment with the family had passed suddenly. In that moment Olivia would have said she was done, that she was going to finally put the camera away and head down to the market; but as soon as she'd arrived at the next block, safely away from the possibility of the family's gaze, she seemed to be reminded of the rest of the city—of how many other pictures there were that could be taken. A single moment, especially in the city, was easily left behind.

Heading down to a newer spot, she gazed down a side street, and her attention was caught. The street was empty, a stark contrast to the flair of Congress; but there was a sign for some old used shop, lonesomely hanging over the sidewalk. It was small, unique, and modest—as though it was made for just those particular people who would bother to intently look down a

barren side street. The little sign read “Used Games, Music, Movies, & Others.” Olivia was strangely curious to find out what any of that meant exactly.

She had stopped at the street’s mouth. Her feet wavered in the direction of the shop, stepping aside from Congress’s foot traffic. She snapped a picture of the alley from there, the inconspicuous shop hidden in the corner. It already felt interestingly different to make this unexpected stop, to consider changing her course; and in an effort to follow that interest, Olivia moved forward.

Of course she didn’t actually plan on buying anything there; she had brought to Portland nothing but her daypack for the very reason of travelling light, because all she would be taking back on the plane was exactly the two bags she’d brought with her. But there was always this kind of exception made for the sake of used shops: first, the understanding that you were really only there to browse; and then, the possibility that you might just find exactly the thing you wanted and didn’t know you’d been looking for. While Olivia didn’t hope she would find anything, the chance of finding something perfect was of course too hard to ignore.

But, browsing the place’s modest little window—which was nothing less than a retro entertainment showcase: VHS tapes, cassette players, old video game consoles and cartridges—explained to her in a gentle way that, if she was in fact looking for something, she was not going to find it here. The place *was* clearly meant for a certain nostalgic type of her generation; she was vaguely reminded, looking through the window, of popping video tapes with her little brother into the mouth of their miniature television. Olivia had come to think of herself, however, as one who could travel and move lightly; she did not need or want to accumulate unnecessary weight, especially the kind that seemed to have no use in the present. She took a quick picture of the storefront, and began to meander away, enjoying the free space of the empty street.

It was enough, she thought as she moved further and further away from the window, to uncover little bursts of nostalgia like that, here and there. It was yet another reason to go and look at things, to remain curious and keep one's eyes open. Olivia felt rejuvenated, as she stepped back towards Congress; as though her mind had cleared for a moment, taking a break to change gears, and now felt so much more ready to take on her real task. She began making her way directly for the market at Washington Square, with even a skip to her step that she hadn't felt since she'd left the apartment that morning.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

Perhaps, Olivia thought, she would simply call these pictures “Saturday Morning”—just enough to give some context. She might look back on them one day, suddenly remembering that morning she had spent in Portland. As she went forward down the street, closing in on the openness of the Square and the bustle of the market, it comforted her to think of those photos, of how she would play around with them later on her computer, when all of this was over and she was back in Le Mans.

Olivia realized she was still calling it *morning*—this was the first moment that seemed to clearly tell her that it was clearly not. The market was crowded; streams of people flowed across Congress; it was most definitely after noon.

It seemed to have been a long time since she had left Emily’s, though hardly a few hours had actually passed. For a moment Olivia wondered whether this was a good thing or not; usually it was an indication, when the hours went slowly, that you were looking ahead to something that wasn’t really there.

Now, however, it was more like the hours didn’t matter at all. The market would end soon; and then seven o’clock, or whenever she’d meet up with James, would eventually roll around; but the expanse of hours between now and then meant that these concerns were for later. Until Olivia finally had to concern herself with someone else’s plans, she could continue to drift through the afternoon, without anything becoming encumbered by thoughts of time.

Olivia did not enter the fray immediately, out of what was almost an instinct. She kept to the opposite side of the street, as though to continue down Congress and pass the market by. There wasn’t anything in particular that she wanted to see at the market; and again, she was not

invested in purchasing anything. She just wanted to see it, first; the feeling of doing nothing more than studying it, of observing and therefore *realizing* its happening, rather than just having been there to do some shopping. Indeed this was more like going to the museum; Olivia circumambulated the Square as though making a tour of an open gallery.

She was taller than most people, so that she could see everything from slightly above; the peaks of the farmers' and sellers' tents appeared like a miniature village peeking over the square. Outside of the crowd, she bore witness to behind the market's curtain: workers, ranging from pre-teens to veterans, unpacked things from loading vehicles, which came in every form from minivans to massive box-like trucks. Looking through the cracks, she saw tables covered with goods, and glimpsed a colorful tapestry borne up around an artist's tent, for shade as well as display.

From this distance the crowd appeared to be self-sustaining: as people constantly left, others were constantly coming in. It was humbling to realize that this is the way it must have been happening since early morning, since before she had even been conscious; and these same people working, for hours on end. This seemed to ask the question of whether Olivia felt herself to be a lazy person or not; but, as she continued to walk along—looking ahead of herself, rather than at the market—it seemed obvious that she was merely leading a very different life, though certainly less strenuous. She thought of her job teaching back in Le Mans; she wondered if she would ever again find herself doing physical work for her wage: lifting up boxes, standing for hours on end, selling a table covered with produce.

Music came suddenly from somewhere across the crowd; it was muddled and indistinct, giving Olivia the sense that it was reaching her through a field of obstacles. It must have been from the far side of the market, away from Congress Street. Somewhere, she hoped, the music

might be clear and lovely to hear. It was the first thing that had really convinced her to finally cross the street and wade into the crowd.

She resolved to put away the camera before doing so. While there might always be a good picture to take—here, in this place so active and momentary, especially—she could tell that the dense bustle ahead of her would be best experienced unencumbered, with her hands and eyes completely present. She thought, as she tucked it back into its bag, that this might be the way to strike a balance: to go into some things completely unattached.

Olivia was excited to browse for some kind of snack, which she knew a weekend market to have in abundance; she thought of tables piled with baked goods, and wondered what kind and what flavor would strike her fancy now. In just the same way that hunger and cravings always materialize suddenly, almost unpredictably, Olivia realized that it should have been clear to her all along that she would end up at the market browsing for something good. She seemed to have been lurking about the market as though it was only a possibility, while it now felt like a priority—now that she no longer felt the weight of orange juice sitting in her stomach.

Just as she had crossed the street and was heading in among the stands of produce, however, she was caught by a store-front window, at the edge of the Square, of a little coffee shop to which she'd never been. It appeared like the perfect photo of downtown: an old Portland brick, the door made of cracking wood painted over in a new vibrant layer of green, and the name of the place, stencilled in the old style, on the glass. The place was unique but not so overdone as to make uniqueness unbelievable; there was the chance, at least, for the picture to be something new and hopeful, rather than old and tired. Needless to say, Olivia wanted to take it. She wondered if she had acted too quickly; if she should have kept the camera out at all times, despite any particulars of a situation.

But there was not much space, she noticed, in front of the windows for a shot to be taken—the tables, the tents, the crowd were all in the way. She might have been able to squeeze something in at close-up, or only get a fraction of the storefront amidst all this bustle; but she had to wonder if doing so would be too much of an inconvenience to everyone else. She imagined herself jostling through a crowd of people and things, all doing their jobs or buying their groceries, just for the sake of a picture, and even the idea made her feel a little embarrassed.

Quickly enough the constant flow of the crowd moved her along, and the possibility of the photo gradually faded. She hadn't the time or the space to blame herself or anyone else before she was already passing by the next table, and the little cafe was totally out of view. Things seemed to so easily come and go. It felt merely realistic for Olivia to go along with the crowd.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The crowd did seem to follow a kind of vague flow, starting here at produce and moving forward, then making a *u*-turn back up the adjacent aisle. Everyone went along, more or less, with this pattern; Olivia supposed that one could, however, have deviated from it with no material consequence. It wasn't *really* a line, of course. The matter was that Olivia was intent on inspecting each and every table, so that she could make an informed decision about her treat.

The question now seemed to be what *kind* of treat did she want; there were extensive choices of baked goods, along with a few options for something more savoury, such as wood-fired pizza, or a slice of local jerky. The truth was that Olivia hadn't been envisioning anything, though she was trying nevertheless to shake out of her head an inspiration, like the nostalgia she'd had with the doughnut, that would point her in a particular direction. In the meantime she did what everyone else was doing, what one simply did at farmers' markets: she browsed.

Markets had become a lonely Sunday activity for her in Le Mans, as she'd buy a sugary crepe and stare up at the cathedral that overshadowed the sea of vendors' tables. But having seen Emily that morning made Olivia think of how they had used markets in college: a way to walk off a hangover on a Saturday morning, before forcing themselves to the library to do some homework. They would browse the options, with coffees from the corner store in hand, and then finally choose the cheapest little treat; usually a couple cookies, or a blueberry muffin split between the two of them. Olivia felt a little older now, a little less concerned with the few dollars she might spend, and a little more attached to the sentiment of simply enjoying herself here at the Portland market.

There were in fact so many different things to browse: all these tables of fruits and vegetables, cheeses and meats, homemade ornaments and artwork. Olivia believed that she could

find some really interesting things here—not for the idea of purchasing them, of course, but rather for having come here to see them, for having actually discovered these things out in the world. Seeing so many tables she began to suspect that this market might just outshine itself, to become a highlight of her trip; the kind of thing that she would mention later, as she chatted with James, or when she would write an email to Maria.

Her gaze fell upon an overflowing pile of tomatoes, drawn in by their vibrant roundness. For that moment Olivia forgot what she was doing exactly; her body was ushered along with the crowd, and she lost track of why she was even looking. Some of the tomatoes were bursting with little spots of yellow, which seemed like they might be even more sweetly delicious. She had the idea to buy a kilo, to have some for snacking and save the rest for salad or a sauce. When Olivia remembered that she would not, of course, be cooking dinner, that she was not in Le Mans, she withdrew, and had to keep on looking across the table of little red bulbs.

She had the feeling like she might be wasting space here, taking the place of someone who might actually want or need to buy tomatoes. She knew that she was there for a reason, but she wouldn't have been able to defend that to someone else. But really it was too crowded for anyone to even notice her presence, let alone question it; even the workers behind the tables were too occupied with serving actual customers to notice her standing there. Olivia supposed, then, that there must have been many others like her: people who didn't exactly belong and who did nothing but look around, shuffling in between everyone else who was actually doing all the buying and selling.

A pair of hands suddenly reached over the tomatoes from above, grabbing a handful, and Olivia looked up to see the face of a man who was working the stand.

He was young, Olivia thought, as farmers go; somewhat older than herself, with those kind of well-used lines on his hands and face. She was struck when she looked up and realized he was smiling at her. “Help you with anything?” he asked. Yes, his voice had something raspy in it, which Olivia could only associate with age.

She smiled and vigorously shook her head. “No,” she said simply. She didn’t want to keep him; she was surprised that he had bothered to say anything at all, with so many other customers around, stuffing veggies into bags and calling out for certain amounts.

But then, after he was about to glide away with his hands full of tomatoes, Olivia followed up: “Just browsing, ya know.” She felt a little late to the punch, but he looked back to her casually, giving her a smile and a little nod. “Just let me know,” he said, projecting his voice over the crowd as he turned away and went towards the other side of the tent.

Olivia continued to smile as she shuffled along with the line, reaching the lines of rhubarb and other greens. It felt like a real smile; she was suddenly enthusiastic, enjoying a simple kind of positivity through the interaction. As she noticed the others working alongside the young man, she felt suddenly interested by their dynamic: they were a family, it seemed, who either employed some young farmhands or just had an extraordinary number of children. Olivia judged the youngest to be around fifteen, a high school-looking girl who was bagging at the register, next to the oldest member of the party, who Olivia assumed to be the mother, ringing up costs. She found herself wondering if the young man was a brother and son, or just someone living around Portland who helped work the farm.

Olivia suspected that he might approach her again and ask her if she had decided what she’d like, but he never did. She still felt a bit awkward about just being there and not buying anything, and felt pressure to consider some small token purchase; but there was a part of her that did not care about that at all, that only wanted to talk to the farmers a little more, to even buy

something for the sake of buying something from them. She inspected the jars of maple syrup arranged next to the register, checked their price, and took that as the moment to innocently walk away.

The family of farmers faded away among so many other things. Olivia wanted to find something special, something made up, something she could only find at the Portland market. Of course she could have bought one of those tomatoes, to sink her teeth into as she browsed, and would have probably enjoyed it; but she knew there were so many other things here that she might find. For the moment she wasn't exactly hungry; she could hold onto hope, as there was still the whole other aisle of tables to inspect.

She no longer cared to move on with the slow flow of others, maneuvering quickly through and around lines and crowds, as though she knew exactly what she wanted and was intent on finding it. She brushed through shirtsleeves and bare shoulders, and was invigorated by her sudden quickness, her mind pleasantly sharpened by the search.

However, as she then reached one end of the market—an end that faced the openness of the Square, from which the music was playing at its southern end—and was about to ascend back up the other side, she found a rather calm table there, separated from the business of the crowd, covered with arrangements of flowers. An unsuspecting old woman, staring off at nothing in particular, sat at the table's far end. Olivia felt no particular pressure to browse the flowers or not, which indeed seemed to be exactly why she went on looking at them, distracting herself with the insides of rosebuds and the stems of tulips. She enjoyed a moment of relief there, removed from both the design of the market and her own searching.

She spent that time thinking about how she'd never been specifically interested in flowers. It seemed to be the kind of hobby that people seemed to delve into as they got older, just

as Emily had started collecting them over the course of college, accumulating little pots around their dorm room. While Olivia could stand here and appreciate them for their beauty, she didn't know what else to say about them. Maria even knew the names of those that grew naturally around her home, as she'd casually recited the names of budding flowers as they'd walked the Spanish Compostela. These kinds of moments made Olivia wonder if and when she would ever curate an interest in them herself; and she repeatedly pushed off doing so as long as she didn't have her own home. And then in Le Mans, with a one bedroom apartment, she couldn't imagine that anyone would ever see them, as they would simply dry out on the windowsill or the breakfast table.

The table in front of her, with its curated arrangements, made Olivia think of mothers browsing them in front of the supermarket, though Olivia's mother never bothered with plants herself. She looked into the eye of wonderful violet, its spread from yellow to purple. It actually felt peaceful to stand here—despite the music coming from afar, the ruckus of the rest of the market behind her—for how there was no line, and she could simply stare at a single flower. Perhaps, she thought then, she and her mother *should* get into flowers, together; they would spend time talking about them, giving them as gifts for Christmas and birthdays.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

She saw that any one flower was simply too expensive for a casual purchase, but continued, nevertheless, alongside the arrangements and enjoyed the collage of color and shapes that they made. The woman at the end of the table never once looked her way, and Olivia was comfortable simply gliding off into the openness of Washington Square, listening to the music, watching people come randomly to and fro across the cobblestone.

For that moment, as in the midst of the Square she felt unattached to any destination in particular, she had the time and space to imagine that all she really wanted was to sit down on a bench, slightly removed from the bustle of the city, and look down at her book. She would read a line or two, get distracted by some phrase shouted in the street, and then return to where she left off. Now that she had done her browsing, the walk through downtown, this perfect city-moment on the bench appeared to be achievable. She wasn't even really hungry, she thought; she could easily sit down for a half hour before finding her snack.

Before she could mount a search for the bench, however, Olivia found herself naturally drawn by the music coming from across the Square at the south end, where a little crowd was now forming around it. Rather than just being louder now, the music was more importantly growing more and more clear; and this made for a great feeling, as she gradually got closer, as the music went from a distant background track to a three-dimensional live event, the music literally coming together. Amidst the little crowd she saw a few standing musicians, their apparatus of microphones and amplifiers. It was a free show, a live band playing in the Square; she thought that she was very lucky, though she did consider that this was perhaps a normal thing, for Portland in summer.

She paused outside the circle of onlookers, wondering where she might plop herself down to watch a bit of the show. To her left was the monument of the Square—drawing one's eye up to the sword, to its head, and then back down—where a group of very young people hung around its grassy base, listening to the music from their remove. She felt a little distracted by the teens, as she continued to stand there; the corner of her eye seemed to catch their random, aimless activity.

She found herself assuming the kinds of jokes and comments they were making to one another, thinking about what kinds of people they might be. Indeed she wondered if they might not be commenting on her, who was just standing there alone, wearing flip flops and a gigantic backpack. Of course, Olivia thought, teenagers would take any excuse to seem like they were doing something other than actually paying attention to the music.

While she didn't want to ridicule them for simply being a bunch of teenagers, she felt it necessary for herself to move forward and find a place in the crowd as a way of distinguishing herself from them. She was not (or, perhaps, she was no longer) someone who would be afraid of getting involved. And it felt natural, as she found her way to some tree cover to one side of the band, where other people and couples and families—all older than herself, she felt—were openly and even earnestly listening to the music.

The band was a four-piece, well-practiced and put together, like they were used to it; they were playing what Olivia could only assume would be called jazz. It was a classic guitar, bass, and drum combo—all older men, in painfully dark clothing—joined by a lively saxophone player in a bright white shirt. The sax player was on leave for the moment, as the bass smoothed things down with a riff, so that he took the time to dance around the people who sat at the front of the crowd, throwing around hands and wide smiles. Olivia laughed at his antics and was, she knew, more interested in him than the layer of music playing behind. Nevertheless she had advanced no

further than standing at the back of the crowd, hesitant to break through it and cause any kind of disturbance. She wasn't tired and had no need to sit, though she knew that she couldn't just stand there forever.

The sax player came up for his cue. As he contorted his face and blew through the mouthpiece, Olivia stared at the opening of the golden horn, as though she would see the sound itself belting into the air.

Jazz was the kind of music which Olivia had of course listened to, but never intently; she would not, that is, have ever thought to be captivated by that genre in itself. Now the music being played before her, no matter what it might be called, was endlessly drawing her in—she felt as though she could stare at the intricacy of the saxophone, or the vibration of a single bass string, for minutes on end and still feel this kind of exhilarating fascination. At brief moments Olivia would look around at the rest of the crowd, studying their reactions, wondering if this was hitting anyone else in the same way. She saw women smiling, faces looking absently forward; children periodically cried out, against the sound.

For her it was enough to simply listen to these instruments be played, to watch the musicians enacting their practice and livelihood; and it seemed to be enough for others here, too. She spent time wondering about the sax player: was that saxophone the third or fifth or eleventh one he's ever owned; did he do this on the weekends only; had he started playing in the third grade, when the school orchestra began taking sign-ups? Perhaps there were people here, on the other hand, who were very used to live music; perhaps bands played around Portland all of the time. Those people would not be entranced, of course, and might be considering the trio critically, wondering about the specific piece they were playing, or the brand of equipment they were using. Olivia herself was enjoying, however, the presumption that for most of them here,

this was new and special. It was like they were all suddenly capturing an enjoyable bit of life together.

She felt she could just stand there until the end of the show, or at least for a few more songs until she felt ready to leave and find her snack. It was exciting to think that she had only found herself there as a result of aimless wandering, as she was floating from one thing to the next; again she seemed to be purely lucky. But then she *had* made a decision, Olivia remembered, to exit the market, to put off the snack for a little longer in lieu of what she might find. This gave her a tiny spark of pride. It made her feel spontaneous, interesting. She imagined that her memory of this moment, of enjoying herself in the Square, might actually be what she came to look back on warmly, while suffering over the eight-hour flight to France next week—this moment could become a good memory. Yet there was still time left here in Portland, she considered; those memories could easily change.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

Someone was suddenly approaching from Olivia's side. She didn't look immediately, considering that the person could merely be walking around her. There was only a moment left to think, after she realized this was no mistake, for then the person was already upon her. Olivia tried to fathom all the reasons someone might have for coming up to her in a crowd; she thought of nothing precisely, but in the end was left with a bad feeling, as though most of those reasons couldn't be nice ones. She actually wondered if it wasn't something about her being there, standing off at the back of the crowd—as though this person was coming to tell her to just make a decision, to either stay or go.

Whoever they were, they wore a dress; sunflower-yellow flashed into Olivia's line of sight. She had dark hair, and sandal straps over her feet. Olivia was completely sure, then, that this was someone she knew.

She realized that it was Adrienne, a Portland local who she'd met through James, who had a beautiful apartment, and was always wonderfully dressed—though Olivia's first thought was, rather, that Adrienne's hair was very different. It was cut incredibly short now, kept fair and flat, where before it had been unruly and wild, and part of how Olivia had always pictured her. It made Adrienne, who had always been noticeably and significantly older, seem somewhat younger. Elegant new bangs hung down her forehead—just above the wide eyes that were now looking straight at Olivia.

She felt quite taken off guard: the music was being abruptly pushed aside, and she struggled to recall how to be polite, and make small talk. Adrienne greeted her with a wide smile, and almost immediately reached out her arms for a hug. Olivia had hardly recognized her by the

time Adrienne was reaching around her for an embrace. “Hey,” Adrienne said, calmly and not loud, as they were already close enough to speak under the layer of music.

“Hi, Adrienne,” Olivia said, her voice rising in surprise. Her hands grazed against Adrienne’s bare back as they hugged, which she imagined was perfectly bronzed, from these weekends spent lounging around Portland parks, or on the little balconies of their apartments.

Adrienne was habitually a quiet person, and was content to continue just looking at her with a smile on her face. Olivia took it upon herself to ask what was up, what was going on, how she had found herself at the Square. They had not spoken in a while, having only kept up with each other’s photos on Instagram; but Adrienne had always been so totally accepting, so easily warm, that Olivia realized she had always imagined that they were still friends. She was suddenly recalling the sense of welcome she’d had visiting Adrienne’s apartment, and the easiness of chatting with her on a walk through town with James. It was easy, then, to continue talking with her, to break into conversation without ado.

“Just out and about, enjoying the weekend,” Adrienne explained. She was American but had a lovely lilt to her speech, which made being with her feel unfamiliar with the state of Maine. She referred to herself as “we,” and indeed Olivia finally noticed Tee-Jay, her sometimes partner, sitting back on one of the benches of the Square, watching the music. She couldn’t believe how she hadn’t noticed him, at least, as she’d browsed the Square—Tee-Jay was truly a bear of man (in the best way, Olivia considered), about six and half feet tall with a dome of hair that made him seem even larger. She suddenly broke into laughter, as she waved over to him, at the whole scene here, which seemed to be getting larger and more full of details.

As Adrienne filled her in on recent goings-on, Olivia allowed her mind to wander for the moment, as she couldn’t quite feel the need to ground herself in every last happening of recent

Portland life. She wondered if meeting them here hadn't changed everything about the time that remained in the day; if she was about to attach herself to Adrienne's plans, and would eventually look back on this as the moment at which her afternoon and evening finally took its course.

Adrienne cut herself off and touched Olivia's shoulder, guiding her back to her and Tee-Jay's bench. Perhaps Olivia had appeared to be too obviously absent, but she was sure that Adrienne had understood the situation and had found a solution. She led the way, in the same way she'd always had, of appearing simply confident in what she wanted to do. Indeed Olivia was glad to have moved their conversation away from standing at the crowd's edge; it felt right when they finally sat down, the three of them, together on the bench. The music was present, but not too loud; their conversation could become the main event in front of them.

"Sup Olivia," Tee-Jay said, characteristically sliding down his dark shades and leaning his head forward. "Been a while! I've seen your pictures."

Olivia kept thinking about how she had always liked Tee-Jay very much—she might have even been charmed in this moment, the way he leaned over Adrienne to look straight at her, the smoothness with which he knew to navigate his unforgettably large form and deep voice. She was aggressively smiling as she answered the question, and asked what he was up to on a beautiful Saturday.

"Oh, not much, not much...." He looked around the Square, back to the music, up at the sky. There was something in the way that Tee Jay could fill a conversation simply by nodding and making a face. In fact he was profoundly deliberate, Olivia felt, as they sat there not saying anything, yet still sharing in the moment.

He spoke up again and broke the silence. "Glad to be back?" He'd have been able to look above everyone else if he sat up straight, which he didn't.

“Yes,” Olivia answered, confidently. It was perhaps the first time she had been able to do so; she was relieved that the question had not been more specific. She thought nothing about her last few days at home, only casting her mind over what had happened since she’d arrived in town. “I’ve really been taking advantage of it — of, like, Portland *in August*.”

Adrienne and Tee-Jay nodded together. “It is wonderful,” said Adrienne. The way she said it reminded Olivia that she was not originally from the city. Somewhere else in New England, she remembered, but still something of a newcomer here.

Adrienne looked decidedly over to Olivia. “What are you thinking about, for the rest of the day?”

“Well,” she began, hesitating because she was far more interested in asking about *their* plans for the evening. She thought of James’s party, sensing that it was perhaps already implied by Adrienne’s question. “I have a few ideas for the next few hours—but nothing solid until later, with James’s party. You guys are coming, right? I’m just trying to take it easy, and go with whatever.”

Both Adrienne and Tee-Jay nodded along, but didn’t not answer immediately. They let a kind of silence follow, in which they seemed to want to abandon conversation and revert back to the musicians. “Good,” Adrienne finally returned, positively, as though no time had passed. “Good for you. Sounds like the perfect day back in town.”

The jazz players were dragging along a certain riff, slowly bringing the song to a close. Olivia felt disappointed, as though she’d been hoping for more of a response from them; perhaps she was hoping that they were planning a kind of festive summer evening on the balcony of their apartment, to which they would invite Olivia over and share drinks, to listen to Patti Smith over the record player, until it was finally time to head over to James. It was suddenly very attractive, she thought—the idea of having some way to kill some of the time before the evening.

However, Adrienne had apparently just been leaving a bit of room for their thoughts to breathe. “We *are* thinking about heading over to James’s, at some point. It’d be nice to know you’ll be there,” she laughed. “We have dinner plans, but we’ll be there later.”

She continued nodding for a moment before answering, as though to match Adrienne’s pace. “I’d love to see you there,” Olivia said eventually. She felt very sincere. While Olivia continued to wonder whether or not they might bring her in on their evening plans, inviting her to dinner or drink at their apartment on the other side of town, she felt that this moment right now was about their coming to the party—which she was, indeed, happy about, and which she did not want to ruin by unnaturally imposing herself on their plans. She simply nodded along, like she had nothing else on her mind but the music around them.

Olivia imagined how they might arrive at the modest facade of James’s apartment, and smiled. Adrienne and Tee Jay often struck her as having just come from a London fashion show: Adrienne in her evening wear, a black outfit with black sunglasses, besides Tee-Jay’s flagrant colored jackets and colossal sneakers. It was almost ridiculous to imagine them stepping up to a little apartment get-together in Parkside, in the light of a streetlamp.

Adrienne and Tee-Jay were something of an entertaining mystery; the idea of meeting up with them at the party was suddenly something to actually look forward to. They were not like their friends from college, or the other new friends James had made here through work. Olivia wanted to laugh, imagining how the three of them might look together: in James’s kitchen, perhaps, sipping odd combinations of mixed drinks and telling the last year’s stories. She would seem completely out of place next to them, in her hiking shorts and t-shirt, but it was actually funny because it was really all three of them who were out of place amongst James’s other casual Portland friends.

It was a great comfort to Olivia, to think that she might have them there for the evening, that they might even spend their time together up until that point. Ultimately it gave her a far different, and far more fresh, idea of how the rest of the day might actually happen.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

Their conversation gave way to merely watching the band, as the set came to a close. Olivia was perhaps waiting for Adrienne and Tee-Jay to say something else or ask another question, as her eyes began to wander. She found herself looking at a man and woman eating lunch: they were pulling food out of a single brown paper bag, purchased somewhere nearby. As though she was interested to see what was inside, she kept watching. There were two different sandwiches; they both realized they had taken the other's sandwich, and then traded hands.

It made Olivia hungry. When the woman opened her mouth to shove in her sandwich, she finally looked away—it was a little too intrusive, she thought, to actually watch someone put a piece of food into their mouth. She wondered about excusing herself from the bench to go pick up something to eat, but she stayed put. She felt that she had committed herself to something here, watching the band with Adrienne and Tee-Jay, and did not want to spoil it.

She had fun watching people in the crowd. Some of the tourists and older folk seemed to believe that it would be impolite to the band to check their phones, for they looked down at them as if they had something to hide, holding them low and covering the screens with their hands. They would then look quickly back up to the band, as though someone was watching.

The bassline caught her ear, thumping away, steady and reliable underneath the more raucous guitar. She had tried to play the bass herself in high school; of course she had been attracted by the idea of a rock band, while she was also drawn to the subtlety of the bass, the way it did not draw attention and yet gave depth to the band's sound. Suddenly she wondered if her odd memories of dabbling with that cheap black bass guitar were actually the reason why she was noticing the jazz band's bassline right now, why she was noticing it in particular; it seemed impossible to tell which had come first.

The band brought their set to a roiling finish, just in time so that they didn't seem to be dragging things out. Now all the players, not just the sax, bounced around before the applauding crowd, throwing around smiles and curt little bows.

When everything finished and the crowd was dispersing like a web across the Square, the three of them idled around their bench for a few minutes. Adrienne stretched her arms and legs; while Tee Jay threw around glances from above his shades, before finally looking back down to his phone. As yet they had given no indication of their immediate plans: whether they had somewhere to be, or would go on browsing about the Portland afternoon.

From the shade of some trees, Olivia was looking out to the sunny center of Monument Square, wondering if the warmth would ever feel as good as it had the moment she'd emerged from Emily's apartment. Tee-Jay threw off-handed comments in her direction, calling her "Liv" and never really requiring for her to make a response. There seemed to be two roads before her: to continue about her afternoon alone, or to work with Adrienne and Tee-Jay to see if they could make something together. She was intrigued by the idea—had indeed been remembering more and more how much she really enjoyed both of them, how easy they were to be with at times such as this—but was equally as attracted by the simplicity of keeping to herself.

Eventually she needed to free herself from the decision, and resolved to gently probe the possibilities. "What are you guys up to, now?" she asked. Adrienne and Tee-Jay both seemed to come down from orbit, as though they'd been waiting for someone else to reign them in from their private worlds.

"I have got to go run some errands, before we go pick up some things for dinner some," Tee Jay muttered, looking down at a colossal silver watch, which surprised Olivia not at all. His mention of "dinner" made Olivia dream of their wonderfully decorated little kitchen, which she

visited for dinner parties with James, the table filling with foods she never heard of. “But I got time.”

“How bout a snack?” Adrienne almost shouted, whirling her head back to Olivia, as though she was releasing some pent-up energy from sitting still for so long. Tee Jay appeared nonplussed, but Adrienne continued to beam.

A snack, Olivia immediately agreed, sounded perfect. Her concerns and possibilities were suddenly pointless, and Olivia felt a bouncy kind of joy as the two of them walked side by side back up to the Market stands. Adrienne, however, was the one really leading the way, as though she knew exactly what stand they should go to first. Tee Jay brought up the rear, explaining that he had “scarfed down a big-boy taco” before the show, and was happy enough to join them for the ride.

She was relieved by moving again, by the idea of having some food, and by the way in which someone else—and Adrienne, of all people—had been the one to make the suggestion and put it into motion. Though it had been a simple move for Adrienne to push them forward, Olivia was incredibly thankful to her for it. It then struck Olivia that she had been getting overborne by her own concerns, and so took solace in Adrienne’s presence beside her, as they began the real search.

She tried to go about finding the right snack in her usual way: that is, by scouting first for the cheapest options, followed by choosing the most appealing amongst them. She considered that Adrienne, however, might work somehow differently; Olivia didn’t want to assume that Adrienne would naturally gravitate towards the more expensive goods, but she always did have a kind of higher-quality about her that would naturally seek out a delicacy, or at least something special or unique.

“What are you thinking about?” Olivia asked, leaning into Adrienne’s ear. “I’d love to get something really *good*, but I’ve already spent money on food today.”

Adrienne didn’t immediately say anything; she had donned a pair of massive black sunglasses—they were beautiful too, of course—and was continuing to scan the tables. This made Olivia wonder if it hadn’t been rather obtuse of her to make a thing of prices; it was the kind of thing she would only usually share with intimate friends, with whom she didn’t really check her own speech. She considered it would be best for the comment to fade away into the crowd.

Suddenly Adrienne spoke up, as though she had been distracted. “Oh, it’s only a few bucks,” she said, as she drew them closer to a particular baker’s stand. “Don’t worry—I’ll get us something.” She patted her purse, the tiny leather pouch at her side, looking enviously through the crowd that stood between them and the table of baked goods. There was the sudden whiff of caramelized sugar.

“Are you sure?” Olivia asked, not yet matching Adrienne’s eagerness so that she wouldn’t seem too forward, and because she indeed felt guilty for having said anything. “Really, I’ll just have a bite then, it’s no—”

“Oh shush. It’s my treat. Your welcome-home present. Let’s get something *good*.” Adrienne waved Olivia closer, as though their talk was only getting in the way of what they could be enjoying. Olivia was still a bit ashamed, feeling that she’d trapped Adrienne into paying her way; and yet Adrienne was so willing, so comfortingly generous, that soon enough she couldn’t help giving in to her excitement, and felt rather giddy as her eyes brushed across the croissants and brioche, the scones and cinnamon buns. Tee Jay, over all this time, hung back in the crowd, an island to himself, looking under his shades at his phone.

Olivia had come to love dearly the feeling of looking with a friend over an assortment of good food. When she and Adrienne finally found a gap in the crowd, they squeezed up to the table and began surveying one thing after another together. This had really come into fruition for her in Europe, where the very definition of a friendly afternoon seemed to be a visit to the *patisserie*—she immediately recalled an afternoon with Maria, having stopped in a little church-town along the Compostela, staring through the window of the town’s lone shop. They seemed to share entire life stories there, in a span of mere seconds, pointing to one favorite after another. Olivia didn’t know whether or not Adrienne had ever spent time in Europe, but thought of her as worldly, and was not surprised to find that she knew her baked goods better than most—Adrienne pointed out what Olivia thought of as the *chausson aux pommes*, praising this one’s golden-brown shell. Olivia was aware that she was feeling more comforted in this moment than she had since she’d arrived back in Maine. Oddly, this was the closest she had come to feeling like she was home.

She recalled how Maria had split a raspberry tart they’d bought at the shop, right down the middle, with her pocket knife. The raspberry at the center was pressed down, and then burst open, as the knife descended into the yellow custard.

Adrienne brought them to another end of the table, where they found the muffins and sweetbreads. Olivia was immediately keen on those with blueberry, as they could see the fresh juices seeping into the cake; indeed it was a delicacy she couldn’t have in France or Spain, and about which she felt a very Mainer sense of pride. She was about to point out the attractiveness of the blueberry muffin, when Adrienne suddenly took in her breath, and practically brought a hand up to her mouth. “Look at the poppy seed-loaf,” she said, pointing it out, and taking a moment for them to marvel at it.

It was indeed a beautiful, shining, swirling piece of pastry—calling it a ‘loaf’ seemed almost too basic, too lay for its level of intricacy and craftsmanship. It had an air of the old world, but not Western, not in the way that drew eyes through a pastry-shop window; but in the way of comforts in the dead of winter, surrounded by dark snow-covered pines. Olivia liked it the more and more they stood there admiring it. It was one of the most expensive things on the table, and Adrienne clearly didn’t care; or, she had perhaps been drawn in by the flagrant price. “Oh my gosh,” Olivia blurted. “It’s beautiful.”

As they stood in line for their purchase (*a kolache*, the vendor had called it, as she had bent down and swooped the thing into a paper bag, with a enlightening enthusiasm that made Olivia only more nostalgic for her Sunday-markets in France), she absently watched the give and take between the buyers and sellers. Behind them in line an older woman pointed out the chocolate-dipped macaroons to a friend, and they discussed whether or not so-and-so would enjoy them. The macaroons, Olivia had noticed, were one of the most expensive of things, being that they were so small; she felt a nostalgia, however, for the taste of chocolate covered-coconut, and had been longing to pop one onto her tongue. The woman who had pointed them out then hailed the vendor, across the table—an even older woman who appeared like she had just come from the bakery itself, wearing a white apron and hairnet—and said that she would take four of the macaroons. The baker shook out a bag and began to pop the little things inside, using her gloved hand.

The two friends continued to point and conspire over what else they should get. Olivia imagined how they must be shopping for a gathering of family and friends, how they would arrive with an assortment of treats; it seemed blissful to her—the idea of saying *I’d like four of this and five of that*, and not immediately worrying about the expense that was incurring. It

reminded her of spending time with Emily's Freeport family, when Emily's parents would take them out for dinner or set out an elaborate spread of appetizers on the patio table. It was complicated, she thought: a kind of feeling that was viscerally satisfying, while also a little bit strange.

When she looked back to Adrienne, handing over a twenty to the vendor, she wondered disappointingly if she were not being immature, behaving like a young adult and depending upon her elders. Perhaps that was part of the strangeness she'd felt with Emily's family: the sense that she should be paying her own way, but wasn't.

Adrienne remained bright, however, and continued to gratefully wait and accept her change with no sign of resentment or remorse. She was simply treating, Olivia reminded herself, and they were simply friends, sharing in the treat. She put the concern away, perhaps to consider later on, in other situations. She was glad to follow Adrienne, who was putting away her change, as they rolled back up to Tee Jay and began to think about where they might relax and enjoy the bounty.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Olivia proposed that they head down to the park. It would be a lovely walk; they could sit around in the grass when they finally arrived; and they could all munch on the kolache along the way.

It would be yet another pleasing coincidence of events, she thought, as it seemed that all day long she had been looking forward to a drowsy patch of grass in Deering Oaks. And eventually they would begin discussing their plans for the evening, and—Olivia didn't want to admit it outright, but she was indeed thinking of it—perhaps Adrienne and Tee Jay would invite her over for dinner. It would be a satisfying kind of proof that one's plans naturally came together in one way or another. She did think, for a short moment, about texting others about going to the park,—Emily, and even James, because his schedule was always changing—imagining a kind of afternoon picnic, munching on goodies from the Market, and lounging on blankets brought from the backs of apartment couches.

“I've got to get some things done, before tonight,” Tee Jay said, absently looking up and down from his phone. She almost asked what it was he had to do, wondering whether or not it had to do with getting ready for the evening. Adrienne, however, looked at her through those massive, rounded shades.

“The park sounds perfect,” she told Olivia. Then she held up the paper bag, and dug her fingers through the top. “Let’s get a load-a this guy, first. Want a bite for the road, Teej?”

Tee Jay shook his head, and began to make his way. “*But,*” he said, looking over his shoulder and over to Olivia. She was aware of herself smiling. “I’ll see you later, though?” Tee Jay said as he walked away. “We’ll have to party. You can tell me aaaall about all those pictures of Spain and Italy and... whatnot.”

She almost spoke up, then, to ask if they’d be available for some kind of dinner. Tee Jay was already turning away, however, and she needed to say something. “You got it, Teej,” she called out. She was conscious of trying to sound cool. “I’ll see you later.”

Adrienne was already sinking her teeth into a morsel of kolache. Somehow Olivia could tell that her eyes, hidden behind her dark shades, were scrunched shut in taste and delight.

Olivia loved how Adrienne hadn’t asked her to take the first bite, how she was comfortable enough to simply begin to dig in. From the evenings on which James had taken her over to Adrienne’s smartly decorated apartment, she had known that Adrienne knew her way around food, and clearly cared something for quality and vigor in their meals. Now, however, she was treated to Adrienne in the daylight, away from the dinner table; Olivia was relieved to see that she was not merely normal, but was in fact less abashed and more open to simple pleasures than ‘normal’ people were considered to be.

It was nearly an impulse, seeing Adrienne standing there so perfectly in the sun—her yellow dress, a stylish haircut, and the bit of pastry held between her fingers—that she reached for the camera. She tried to move quickly, as to get the natural shot: swung her bag around on one shoulder, unclipped the flap, and pulled out the DSLR while simultaneously removing the

lens cap. Doing this made Olivia feel *ready*, giving her a sense of gratification, like she was really prepared to take advantage of the moment.

She took a few steps back, because she was imagining a shot from the legs up, getting the most of Adrienne, while keeping close enough to still get the detail of her chewing.

When Adrienne finally noticed what Olivia was doing, she didn't do anything to ruin or even change the picture, though she did give a little chuckle of acknowledgement. Just as Olivia had expected, or hoped, Adrienne remained casual, while on some level assuming an aspect of performance: she looked away and dawdled her feet back and forth, as though Olivia and her camera had simply never been there. She kept herself in full view for the camera; the thin sundress blown against her waist, and then her legs, her tanned skin—Olivia was suddenly amazed by the confidence with which Adrienne could hold herself so casually for exposition, and not shy away. Olivia hadn't really considered, as it turned out, that taking such a picture was indeed to cast this kind of exposition. After only a shot or two she lowered the camera, and came back up to Adrienne, with the sense of having realized some unfortunate implications of her actions.

Adrienne was, of course, unfazed, and gave a smile as she offered Olivia the opening of the pastry bag. "Got it?" she asked. Olivia nodded serenely, and tried to excite herself again by taking a bit of the kolache. If Adrienne had been aware of that sense of exposition, Olivia thought, she was old enough and mature enough to either embrace it or outwardly ignore it.

Olivia took advantage of Adrienne's nonchalance, seeming to have already forgotten their little photoshoot, as she took a morsel of kolache for herself. She would have liked to be more like that—unfazed, or at least inscrutable, in the face of things. There was a great moment, then, as the two of them handed the pastry back and forth, slowly making their way up Congress Street.

Walking and munching and enjoying the silence with Adrienne, Olivia passed out of one feeling and into another. At some point she had the sense that *this* was what she had been missing, earlier today but also generally in her recent life: the kind of companionship that allowed you to also appreciate, strangely enough, the comfort of being alone. They continued to trade the bag of pastry back and forth, and it had the feeling of sharing a bottle together with a friend.

She thought about how she always vividly remembered her younger brother, sitting at the kitchen table of their childhood home, saying that poppy seed was “unexpectedly the greatest addition to a baked good,” as he stuffed a poppy seed bagel into his mouth. Indeed right now Olivia could not explain what made this kolache taste so good, though she could tell the poppy seed was there, and that it was making a difference. Over the years, as she had run across the poppy seed subject, she had found herself remembering what her brother had said—though the memory didn’t age, and she went on hearing it in his squeaky ten-year-old voice—and agreeing with him, maintaining his truism amongst her friends. She thought about relating all of this to Adrienne, but then didn’t. The nostalgia was pleasant enough, kept to herself. After all, they didn’t really need a joke or a funny story to keep on enjoying the walk together.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

Olivia had stopped snacking, firstly because she wanted to save some enjoyment for the park, and second—and more convincingly—because she was once again satisfied by the sensation of walking. There was again a tightness in her legs and abs, which was a pleasure to feel for itself; and in the meantime her eyes were able to absently wander, taking in the sights of Congress, until finally they turned down the hill on State.

Adrienne seemed to take this change of scenery to break their silence. “So, do you enjoy being home?” she asked.

It sounded like there was some suspicion about it, as though Adrienne had caught an air that had given Olivia away. “Yes...I’ve *enjoyed* it,” she said, speaking as though enjoyment was only a technicality, rather than something to actually be enjoyed. “You know, home is home. I like to see my parents every once in a while, and it was nice to come back after so long. And Portland is great—I *love* Portland. I *am* really glad I came.”

Olivia took a moment to choose her next words. She did not feel the hesitancy that she might have felt talking to a family member, or even a normal friend; she suddenly had the sense that she could be clear with Adrienne, because she could take it. Adrienne looked over, to offer a way forward. “But... you like living over there?”

She would have liked to say ‘yes’ and be done with it, but she knew it was not so simple. “I do like it. I’ve loved it, at times—France can be great, and travelling over the summer was some of the most fun I’d ever had.” She was ready to go off on all the things she had experienced since the school year had ended in June, how she had met Maria on the farm, and lived with her from stop to stop along the Compostela; but she also felt like she was moving rapidly towards her real point.

“And there are hard parts about living there, too, of course. For one, I was incredibly lonely, like the whole first semester. Even knowing the language of a place, it can be really hard to make friends.” Here, she thought again of herself browsing Le Mans on a Sunday, passing through the Market, encircling the Cathedral, aimlessly shuffling through the gardens of the old city. Adrienne didn’t nod or murmur in commiseration, but seemed to be putting things together, patiently listening.

“It’s just that it’s hard being back here, cause I don’t really have a place. Ya know—I’m either at my parents’ house or I’m here with my friends, who are all living their own lives now. Like I don’t plan on staying in Le Mans for more than another year, but I don’t really feel like this is my place, anymore.”

She wanted to keep on making additions and qualifications to everything she said, but there she sputtered out, as she had come to some kind of conclusion, and did not want to overwhelm Adrienne. She wanted to let Adrienne feel that she wasn’t being pressed to answer, but Olivia couldn’t help looking as though she was brooding over her thoughts. She looked down at first, and then glanced over all the apartment buildings passing by; then, as though she couldn’t find any one thing to interest her, she gazed aimlessly into the sky, over the greenish canopy of the neighborhood.

They were passing by the old church-like building on State, the one that Olivia had passed before and thought so much about. She recognized it, but made no further note of it than that. The two of them kept rather steadily along their course.

“And what’s your relationship with James like?” Adrienne asked after a moment, as though she had picked up something in how Olivia had spoken about him. “I imagined that was part of why you came.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s James, you know. I doubt it will change at all.” It felt ridiculous to consider him as influencing, in one way or another, the direction of her life; he was always just there, plodding along. “Like I want to see him, of course. He is a good friend. But I just know”—her voice sped up, as though she had remembered something that was in fact frustrating about herself and James—“that he’s going to do *that thing*—that thing that people do where they act as if going to Europe is like going to another universe. *Everything* will be because it’s Europe—no matter what story I tell him, that’s what he’ll bring it back to. Like, at the end of the day, it’s all just life—whether I was unhappy living in France or not, it doesn’t always have to be because of the fact that I’m in Europe.”

Adrienne serenely laughed and nodded her head. She was holding the pastry bag in front of herself with both hands, and she looked peaceful. “And what about other relationships? You must have met lots of people.”

Olivia had been preparing for a longer discussion about James, but she was in fact glad to leave ranting about him behind. “Yeah, I made some amazing friends,” she said, much slower, now. There were indeed a sea of names she could bring out, but Olivia was thinking of Maria, how the thought of her had been practically walking alongside her ever since she’d come home. For a few days, after she’d left Maria on the bus to Paris, it had seemed that she’d simply moved on, that Maria would become merely the memory of a friend she’d met one summer. Since she’d found herself idling her at home, however, the idea of Maria had become a balm, or a sort of phantom companion. The thought of Maria living—that always so joyful, fulfilling sense of her living—had been like an encouraging reminder for Olivia, that things in this world could really be good.

She told Adrienne a little of this, though she found herself focusing not on Maria exactly but on the exciting nature of the things they had done: the trails through the mountains, long days

of hitch-hiking, camping in towns along the Atlantic coast. “She is such a happy person,” Olivia said, finally. “Like the kind you feel... like you don’t find in the normal world. Not just in Europe—there’s a lot of boring people there, too,” she laughed. “No. I felt like she just came out from underneath a Spanish farmhouse one day, and decided to take a hike.”

Adrienne was smiling, and did not falter before her next question. “Did you love Maria?”

Olivia actually looked over to Adrienne—they were just arriving at the intersection of Park Ave, facing its wide four lanes. “Well, she was my best friend, the course of the summer.” She ambled over to the streetpost and pressed the button for the crosswalk.

She wasn’t quite sure what Adrienne meant exactly. Olivia did not expect her to use ‘love’ in any strict sense, in either a romantic or friendly way; and indeed her question invited Olivia to make some interpretation.

They were waiting for the light to turn. “I guess I never really thought about it,” she finally answered.

Adrienne nodded her head, as though she were wondering about this, and slowly looked off. She was a hard person to read; Olivia couldn’t tell if she had been asking for more, had even been a bit disappointed in Olivia’s answer, or if this was simply the rate at which Adrienne made conversation. After a moment of silence, she determined to clarify herself. “Like I do love her, of course,” she said, gesturing with her hands to show that she was thinking. “*She* was so loving—she would give me a hug every morning, as we got breakfast ready. And...”

Olivia felt, however, that she might be going a bit too far—she didn’t know in what direction, but feared that it would be further than Adrienne had actually been asking her to go. She stopped trying to think so much, and reverted her focus to something that was a little easier to grasp. “And it’s hard to keep in touch with friends, you know? Like, after you stop living together in the same immediate space, it’s hard to find reasons to keep on talking. Maria has her

little small-town life down in Spain—she likes to travel, but it wouldn't be Maria if she wasn't totally content with it.”

“Mmm,” Adrienne hummed, as the crosswalk turned on and they began to make their way. Olivia felt strange for a moment, that she had practically changed the subject, but Adrienne seemed to accept and adapt to it. “She does sound like an amazing person.”

“Yeah,” Olivia agreed. She had the urge to list more of the things that made Maria such a good friend—she was now remembering a scene in which Maria had tried to teach her to sew, sitting about camp one late afternoon, as the sun fell and was particularly golden—but she stopped herself short. She could no longer tell how much Adrienne really wanted to hear about the particulars. As they walked across the street, they could see now that the park was busy; there were streams of people floating along the paths, and others gathered in clusters surrounding the duck pond.

Olivia stepped up on the sidewalk and paused, looking out over all of it. There was a sense of arrival, maybe even discovery. “Finally!” she cried, looking over to Adrienne for some friendly confirmation. She took in a deep lung-full, as though even the air here was different.

She was still hoping that Adrienne would ask another question, or in some way continue their conversation; Olivia didn't want it to end, but didn't know where to go with it herself. For the moment, then, she figured it was best to leave some space for Adrienne to speak up, if indeed something had been left unanswered.

Adrienne matched her gaze for a short moment, looking over the scene, still cradling the pastry bag in her arm. “Shall we,” she said, soon enough, gesturing them both towards the mouth of the footpath.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The park did indeed change something in the nature of the air. Everything suddenly revolved around it being the park—it was as though their private conversation had been interrupted by a third, more raucous personality, and it was now difficult to figure out how their conversation could ever return to the track it was on before. The park before them—bright and expansive, ringing with noise and shifting with figures in motion—suddenly demanded the amount of their attention.

They turned their heads about, noting this and that as they passed, as though they were browsing attractions at a festival: families crowded onto blankets; young people playing frisbee and stringing up tightropes between the trees; so many random others that filled in between. They absently drew each other's attention to things they found funny or cute or strange; they both seemed to be waiting for one of them to pick a spot to finally settle down. Olivia wanted to be picky—she dreamt of a patch half in shade, half in sun, right next to the water—but also wanted very much to simply take a seat.

Their walking was for the most part, however, made in either silence or near-silence. It seemed now to have been a mixture of both Olivia and the park that had resulted in their conversation having been cut off; she couldn't quite tell which was truly responsible. She felt guilty but didn't know quite what for, and didn't know how to bring it up to Adrienne. For all she knew, Adrienne simply wanted to enjoy the scenery, and had stopped asking questions accordingly. When they finally came upon a large patch of unoccupied grass—away from the pond, unfortunately, but not far from the flower beds, and in sight of a sprawling lonesome oak—they both looked over to one another and quickly agreed that this was the place.

As she set down her bag, Olivia remembered that she had had the idea to text Emily and James for them to possibly meet here together. She was no longer energized by the thought of it,

and rather felt a sense of obligation—it sounded like exactly the kind of thing one did, hanging out in the park on a Saturday. Now she wanted to forget everything; to slate her hunger with a bit of kolache, and innocuously drift off in the afternoon sun.

Adrienne set the crinkled bag in the space between them on the grass, offering it and perhaps waiting for Olivia to take it first. Eventually she did reach for it, and made a heavy sigh as she did, intentionally drawing Adrienne's attention. "I'm sorry if I rambled a little too much before," she said, filling the pauses with the sound of the bag. She tried to not come off as a damper, by tearing off a good bit of pastry and bringing it zealously into her mouth. "About my life and Maria and stuff... I felt like we were pretty centered on *me*, and I didn't really know how to get out of it."

"No," Adrienne said immediately, shaking her head. But then she was smiling and laughing, as Olivia was trying to look as genuine as possible with a mouthful of kolache. "No, no. I *wanted* to hear about that stuff. It was really interesting—you could tell it really meant something to you."

As they both looked at each other, Olivia wished that she hadn't taken such a massive bite. But Adrienne kept on smiling, as though the moment couldn't have happened any other way. "*I'm* sorry," Adrienne continued, as she took over the pastry bag for herself, "for maybe prodding a little too much. Perhaps that was my fault."

"No, it wasn't prodding, I just—I wasn't really prepared to reflect very much on the whole situation with Maria. I've been thinking about her a lot, but it's all so fresh, you know."

They seemed to be dancing around the moment at which Adrienne had asked about 'love,' and were tactfully dancing around it. "I understand," Adrienne said. "I wasn't meaning to suggest anything."

Adrienne paused a moment, looking vaguely off into the park, before giving what seemed to be her final piece. “Really it was meant to help you—it’s like a question you ask yourself, when you’re trying to get things straight.”

At that she returned to her own shred of kolache, and seemed to leave Olivia to her thoughts. Olivia considered how one might use that question on a regular basis, like a mantra—*Do you love this person?* Was Adrienne saying that if she did love Maria, then this meant that Olivia already knew what to really do with her life? Was she telling her that she needed to follow that sense of love, in order to keep on loving them, because love was, of course, the real goal? But perhaps that wasn’t at all what Adrienne meant by ‘love’—perhaps she allowed for the possibility that one could love a person from afar, through letters and pictures and thoughts. She wondered if that was what truly mature and fully realized people did, people like Adrienne or Maria; perhaps they loved people across the span of oceans and years. In which case, Adrienne wasn’t really poking at whether or not Olivia should stay in France, or keep on travelling, or move back to Portland, at all. Perhaps she was merely asking a question.

She would have liked very much for Adrienne to keep talking about this, and wished that she had not stopped herself so short. Quite simply, Olivia didn’t know what she really wanted to talk about, but seemed to be getting closer and closer to the right words; she imagined that if Adrienne was only a little more pushy of a person, then Olivia would have eventually been put beyond her comfort, and then they would have really gotten somewhere.

They kept passing the bag back and forth, and the rest of the conversation happened in an unspoken way between them. Olivia began to enjoy that moment very much in itself: they watched children fluttering about the duck pond, and felt themselves to be miles away, observing the joyful afternoon from afar. Eventually she decided to finally lick her fingers and recline back on the grass, using the bottom of her backpack as a pillow; she was determined to simply lie

down, to not eat or think for at least a little while, for the sake of being ready for what remained of the day.

As she was finally here, lying down in the sun of the park, it seemed like she had been waiting a very long time for this moment—beyond just today, beyond her plans for this trip in particular, which had only taken form a week ago, on her way home. She had often dreamt of lying down in Deering Oaks, whenever she was trying to relax in the park nearby her apartment in Le Mans. It hadn't been homesickness—Portland was not her home—but it had been something to refer back to. Now that she was finally here, she remembered a particular day, earlier that summer, on which she was also lying down and feeling this same kind of sun, in a town along the Atlantic coast, a very long way from here. She and Maria had just filled up on a picnic lunch; she was drifting off, feeling that there was nothing she needed to do besides get her rest, to keep on enjoying this warmth.

When Olivia opened her eyes and saw Adrienne on her feet, she knew immediately that she had fallen asleep, because it would have been strange for Adrienne to leave her without saying a single word. She wondered how long it had been.

“I didn't want to wake you,” Adrienne sighed. “You looked so peaceful.” Olivia hoped that it had been hours, so that she could head right over to James's place and get on with the evening; but she had never been one to nap for so long. “Where you headed?” she mumbled.

“I have to stop at the store on my way home, get some things for dinner.” There seemed to be a moment at which Adrienne would invite her to dinner, or not. Olivia realized, then, that she wouldn't. “I'll see you later though, right?”

Olivia gave a thumbs up at Adrienne's tall, blurry figure. “Sounds good,” she said.

They must have had standing dinner plans all along, she figured, to which she would not be invited. One might have imagined that they simply wanted down-time before heading to the party later on, but Olivia found this hard to believe, feeling that Adrienne and Tee Jay were the kinds of people who placed great importance on sharing meals and sharing time. She was becoming more and more sure that they would not invite her for dinner, that they simply had established plans.

She wondered if she should feel ashamed of not wanting to stand up and give a proper goodbye; the fact that she'd been napping, and that they'd see each other later, seemed too good of an excuse. "Alright," Adrienne breathed out with finality, taking one last look for any forgotten effects while she crumpled up the paper bag. "Keep napping. I'll see you later."

Olivia grinned at the image of herself there, sprawled out on the sunny grass, as Adrienne drifted quickly out of sight. She was left with the feeling, not of disappointment that she had been left out of something else, but that her own day was going well enough. She had had a pleasant run-in with Adrienne, and would now have a few hours to herself, before having to head over to the party. It would last a few hours; she would chat with this person and that; she would say goodbye, and sleep over at Emily's. Again her eyes were closed, though the world was still illuminated by the sun.

She wondered then, quite out of the blue, if Adrienne had actually eaten all the kolache in the bag, or if she was merely throwing it away. She liked to think that Adrienne was someone who could eat a whole pastry in the middle of the afternoon, and still be more than ready for dinner later on.

**CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

She wondered if now might finally be the time to get some reading done. The sun was so bright she could barely see the screen of her phone, and her eyes were still a bit tired from the nap; but sometimes, Olivia thought, reading was best in this kind of daze.

She grabbed the bendable green paperback from the front pocket of her pack, where she had been keeping it for quick access. It opened at the bookmark, where she had left off reading the day before, on the bus into town. She used the book itself to block out the sun, and eventually became used to the stark black and white of the page. It was a new chapter, where she'd left off; she could remember how she'd read only the first line:

*On Wednesday the group stayed in at the hostel, scarred as we were from the cold and wet of the day before.*

That had been the moment at which she finally closed the book, because the bus had just reached the Portland streets, and she wanted to spend the rest of the ride looking out the window. She continued to simply look at that line on the page—it wasn't really reading, in that she wasn't really following along with the book's train of thought. It was still quite a daze, looking up at the deep white paper, with the sun peeking out from behind.

A number of things were crossing Olivia's mind, to be done whenever she was finished with reading. First she thought of Emily, of how her day was going, and what she and Nathan had finally gotten up to; she was considering that it might be nice to send her a text message asking to that effect. She was ready to put the book down and get to typing it; however, she was determined to spend this moment with her book and not her phone.

Eventually she became bored with looking over the first line, once she'd gotten beyond just the memory of it. She finally remembered more of the story as she moved onto the next,

piecing things together, remembering the young speaker, who was biking his way across Asia and amassing a team of characters and cronies.

*Jiixin and I spoke over breakfast, and in the end concluded that we would be in this city for only a few days. We had to go out, if only for just a few hours; we would regret not braving the rain. The others didn't see...*

She had been picturing them wearing puffy, bright Northface jackets—but now they would be sitting at breakfast, naturally before all the layers of gear. She tried to imagine them in the thermals they probably wore underneath the jackets, while they drank coffee and ate buttered rolls. One of them she pictured wearing a skull cap.

Then there was the slightly more urgent matter of finding a bathroom—Olivia had been putting this off since before the nap, as though to hope that she would be able to hold it until a more convenient moment. But the pressure to go was rising, and she dwelt more and more on the fact that she didn't know whether or not there was a public place to go in Deering Oaks. This made a strong case to resign the reading and get to looking.

She didn't budge, however, still shading her face with the book. She was certainly no longer reading it, though she liked having it open, as though her thoughts were bouncing off those on the page. The book *had* interested her, in an on-and-off sort of way; while she had not admired anything particular about the characters, or the way in which the story had been told, she had been devoted to the subject itself—the world of biking, of biking across Asia, of these incredible oil-less year-long voyages that some people took. She kept reading it for the same reason she had picked it up: to search for information.

As she absently studied the page, she thought of how, after the bathroom, she'd walk around the park a bit, to kill some time. Soon enough it would be time to begin making her way across town, towards James; though she might just find something interesting along the way.

Once she'd recovered from a quick head-rush, she did her best to spot some kind of bathroom throughout the wide scene of the park. She clumsily threw the pack over her shoulder, and looked out into a sun-washed landscape. While she knew that it could be any color or kind of structure, her eyes were in fact peeled for that identifiable blue plastic, peaking out amongst the foliage.

As she began to meander the footpaths, she thought of sending a message to Emily. Now that she was finally on the move, however, it was not the best time to do it. But perhaps it could be the very first thing after she managed to find the bathroom, to plop down on some park bench and spend a good long moment typing out a message. It would be long, and would relate what she'd done today so far in addition to asking about things Emily had done herself. It was the least that she could do, Olivia thought, as a friend who was spending the night on her couch—to take the time to send a pleasant little text.

When Olivia spotted the rather thick grove of trees in front of the baseball field, she immediately thought that it would be a private enough spot for someone to go. She seriously considered it for a moment; this had simply been the way people along hiking trails lived, simply walking behind some trees with a shovel and little plastic bag full of toiletries. She asked herself Why not? What makes a city so different?

She was aware that she could come up with several good answers, but she enjoyed remaining resentful. She had enjoyed, while hiking, the freedom of going wherever one pleased, and now felt inconvenienced, as though it were completely unnecessary, by the need to search for a designated place. There was some leftover resentment, it seemed, from her time crossing through French train stations, where use of the bathroom had been charged. Olivia vaguely recalled some outhouses on the opposite side of the park and was charting her course across it.

Eventually, as she was tramping through the woods between the duck pond and the baseball field, Olivia did take out her phone—if only to quickly check, not intending to look at it for longer than a moment. She was still rather surprised to see she had a missed call from Emily.

Emily, of all people; it struck her as a cute coincidence. While Olivia of course believed in no kind of serendipity in their having almost simultaneously thought to reach out to one another, she did consider it as an indication that things flowed together, sometimes, rather than apart.

A call, however, did suggest a matter of urgency. Emily, along with most of her other friends who weren't James—or Maria, for that matter—did not really make calls; they nearly always sent texts, saving calls for family members, job interviews, and elderly landlords. Olivia had to consider, then, that there might even be a kind of emergency at the apartment. With a touch of guilt, she feared that Emily was calling to explain how she could no longer stay that night at the apartment, for one reason or another. Olivia instinctively pressed the call button on Emily's name.

Her walk slowed to a halt as she listened to the phone ring, as though she couldn't think and search for the bathroom at the same time. Her need to go had suddenly lessened.

It rang a few times before Emily finally answered. "Hey!" she said, casually. Olivia knew immediately, from her tone and the time she was taking to speak, that there could be no emergency. She resumed walking, a little more slowly, along the path.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Of course Emily only wanted to see what was up with Olivia—she'd thought it might be nice for both of them to catch up here in the afternoon, to see how things had gone, before evening and everything else began to happen and it would suddenly be too late. She and Nathan had been to the store, getting ingredients for dinner; perhaps they had narrowly missed Olivia on their way. "What have you been up to?" Emily asked. "Seen anything good downtown?"

Making a call was a small gesture, physically; but Olivia felt an inordinate amount of comfort from the fact that Emily had taken the time to do it, that she had cared enough to feel that a call was worth it. In response Olivia put on her best voice, trying to reciprocate some of that positivity. She described her encounter with Adrienne, their listening to the music, and finally their attainment of the kolache; while trying to impart a sense of having thoroughly enjoyed her time. She went into profound detail on the kolache, and asked Emily if she had ever heard of it before. "No," Emily answered. "But it sounds very Polish."

Olivia blatantly left out her visit to the Donut and her trials with taking pictures, because she could not immediately think of how to make those things sound exciting.

"It's been good," she said, rather abruptly, in what Olivia thought of as her "strong voice": that tone of confidence she put on to convey, by virtue of her confidence alone, that a situation was going perfectly well. For some reason she felt the need to assure her that she was having a good time, and that her coming here had been worth it. Emily embraced her confidence without question, commenting that it seemed to have been an exciting day so far.

She seemed to be enjoying their conversation for the same reasons that she enjoyed speaking with another person while on a hike: They could say anything, at any time, for any reason, and you never worried about whether it would land or not. Everything just kept on moving, no matter what. Olivia still needed the bathroom, but consciously ignored it; indeed, she

had spotted the brownish outhouses on the other side of the ball field, and would gradually make her way there. For now, however, she was intent on taking advantage of this moment, on the phone with Emily; it felt revelatory, for how Olivia had begun to assume she was simply not one who could enjoy one of these long, errant phone calls.

Emily mentioned that they were planning on staying in, having a slow evening. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but Madi said she’d come over,” she explained. “We’re gonna watch *Beauty and the Beast*. I was trying to think of a dinner that would go along with it, but I couldn’t think of anything.”

At first Olivia giggled at the idea of watching a Disney film on a Saturday night. It was such a contrast to the hopes she’d had for the evening, imagining her sitting around at table with Adrienne and Tee-Jay, listening to records and sipping wine; and yet, as she thought of actually hanging out with Emily and Madi again, as though they were back in college, casually making jokes in the midst of one of their living rooms, she was struck that it actually might be rather nice. It was an idea of simply settling down, of no longer worrying about what to do for the evening. Perhaps she would even—the idea sounded strange, strange that she was so at ease with considering it now—perhaps she would even show up late to the party, and leave rather early.

“No worries, if not,” Emily said. “I know you have other plans.”

“No, no—that actually sounds really nice,” she said. “Let me think about it. I don’t know exactly what’s going on yet.”

She remained aware that she still had commitments to James, and actually did want to see Adrienne and Tee-Jay again at the party; it gave her some comfort, however, to continue thinking of the evening as fluid, that it might end up surprising her. She was determined to keep in mind the idea of Emily and Madi, watching *Beauty and the Beast*, sipping cheap wine, and eating easy bowls of mac and cheese dinner.

While this seemed like a logical end to their discussion, they managed to keep the conversation going a few minutes longer, as Emily described how to get into the apartment if she needed to come in late, and Olivia proposed that, no matter what happened this evening, they go out for breakfast tomorrow morning before her mother arrived to take her back to Brunswick. “That sounds perfect,” Emily answered. They continued to gab, about which cafe nearby might have the best options for bagels.

As Olivia finally made her way towards one of the outhouses, she considered how she might look back fondly on that conversation in the future. Maybe she would remember herself roaming through the park, careless and happy, holding the phone to her ear and throwing her chin up in laughter. It seemed like one of those moments that could never really have been planned—and indeed Olivia was rather desperate as she finally ripped open the door of the outhouse, and cringed as she was forced to set down her back on the spoiled floor.

Coming out of there was like gaining freedom; Olivia struck out into the park as though to take as much fresh air into her nose as possible. She didn’t know where she was going, other than to roam about the park itself; she had no idea what she would do, exactly, for the next hour she still had before needing to head back downtown.

She knew very well that she could continue to kill time in the park, but having already napped and sat for a while with the book, she was hesitant to just do more of the same. She felt ready for things to get started; she suddenly wished for the evening to finally be here, to simply appear at James’s building, and to be excitedly ascending the steps. In her head she began to plot the route that she’d need to take through town.

But she had a whole hour, at least forty-five minutes to do whatever she liked. She felt a growing need to take advantage of this time; to do something good for herself, but that would

also utilize the fact that she was, for only this afternoon, in Portland on a beautiful afternoon. She thought of pulling out her camera, she tried to remember more places of nostalgia that she could visit; and she continued to stroll through the park, looking absently into the distance ahead.

Amongst the activity coming and going through the park, Olivia suddenly realized that something was happening just beside her, in the grass before the raised concrete stage: people had gathered around a kind of performance. Some music caught her ear, and the shaking of bells; a troupe of figures were wearing bright, flashy colors. Through the passersby who had gathered round, Olivia saw the figures begin to move and dance in rhythm.

It was such a burst of song and dance that she didn't seem to have a choice—rather than cross the bridge that would lead her to the other side of the park, she veered off the path and stood watching the performance from afar. The dancers wore long, elaborate dresses, all vaguely similar while varying in color and fine details; their sun-tanned arms and hands made circles in the air at different rates and times, while keeping a sense of synchronization. Olivia was either wondering whether or not she should stay, or she was simply taking advantage of how she had time to spend a minute here and there.

The gathering crowd began to settle in the grass, and Olivia watched as the dancers struck the ground and perfectly swirled into one another. She came closer and took her seat.

**CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

She found herself thinking about where she was, and where she had been. Emily's presence was still fresh in her mind, while the thought of Adrienne, their spending time together, and their intimate talk could now be seen from a distance. As she innocently watched the troupe of dancers unfold their routine, she had the sense of being invisible; she felt no pressure to either stay or to go, and so felt at liberty to think and feel whatever she would. Something about these memories of Adrienne kept her on her mind; it seemed she had to think about their friendship—how it had just come into contact, in a certain way, with all her other friendships and what they might mean.

There was a young woman towards the back of the troupe who was clearly less experienced than the others, though she maintained her enthusiasm, and did not let her missteps bring down the mood of the dance. The others were either older or much older, and every one of them moved with at least a certain amount of comfort; while there were a select few, towards the head of the troupe, who could move with the kind of grace that seemed to erase all evidence of practice. Olivia's eye kept returning to the young woman. She gave Olivia a sense of what was actually happening here; that this was just a regular group of people, naturally varying on all levels of experience.

Perhaps, Olivia wondered, the young woman had been taking weekend classes, after spotting a flyer in her local cafe; perhaps she had been convinced—or she had even excitedly volunteered—to jump into her first performance, and summer series here in the park. This first reminded Olivia vaguely of her and her friends taking karate lessons as children, nervously signing up for tournaments and meets; until it then made her think of trying to take pictures with her mother's camera, her desire to really get into something interesting. The young woman was at least admirable, showing off her skin and the way she could move—and hopefully, Olivia

thought, she even felt good right now, feeling the joy of moving about so freely. Olivia's picture-taking appeared rather boring, in comparison—the immediate thrill of the dance seemed to outshine it completely.

Her thoughts eventually drifted back to an image of Adrienne; it seemed that something about their interaction was important to figuring out her own self. She thought of the yellow dress, fluttering on its way over the Square, until Olivia finally managed to recognize her smile.

She finally realized that the yellow of Adrienne's dress had been reminding her, ever so vaguely, of Maria's yellow backpack, which she would follow, a few yards behind, on the way up or down a trail. Maria's yellow had grown progressively more dirty, of course, over the weeks without a washing; and yet, true to Maria's mystifying naturalness, the yellow had never grown ugly, but just a little more like something from the earth. Olivia had no idea what to do with this comparison, but just continued to think about it, about how both Maria and Adrienne wore the same color yellow, for entirely different reasons, and in entirely different ways.

Olivia was overcome, then, as she stared absently into the spectacle before her and thought about these things that reminded her of her friends, with the urge to actually spend her time with someone else, to even share some of these thoughts. Indeed it felt like she had spent enough time alone, and was ready to engage with the world again, in a way that was more real. Immediately she wondered if she couldn't go sit somewhere quiet and type out a long email to Maria on her phone, telling her about this and that thing she'd done here in Portland, how her life was going now; or, perhaps, she could send Adrienne a kind of follow-up message, thanking her for listening the way she had, for spending a piece of their afternoon together.

And then she thought about Emily, telling her that she and Madi would be watching *Beauty and the Beast*. It had suddenly been there before her for the last few minutes, just a little clouded by her hesitation, and perhaps her stubbornness to remain in control. She would simply

go back to Emily's, she thought. The next few hours would pass easily there in the apartment; she wouldn't worry about where to find dinner alone, and rather suddenly it would be time for her to hop over to James's party.

It was without a second thought that Olivia stood up and began walking away from the troupe. A dimmer sun was reaching through the trees. She continued to listen to the jingle of dresses with the music, as the sound faded into the rest of the park.

It made everything far more simple, the fact that she was simply heading back to Emily's, after spending the day out in town. She felt ready to settle down on Emily's couch and try to do exactly nothing. Perhaps nothing she had done that day had sounded truly great, as she'd described it in words to Emily; but she held on to the feeling that she had been surprised—that she had stumbled upon things that were different from what she had set out to find.

Olivia figured that she could take Deering Ave, this time, back into Parkside and up to Emily's place. It would take a little longer than State, she thought; but there was, of course, plenty of time. She could take the long way around. She might just see something new.

—Orono, February 2020  
—Le Mans, November 2015  
—New Jersey, August 2015  
Kyle Manning

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

KYLE MANNING is a native of northern New Jersey, and has lived for years in Maine. He started writing when he was young, because he could not imagine a better way to feel his way about the world. He returns to New Jersey to see his older brother, and travels to Illinois to spend time with his mother. Kyle is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2020.