



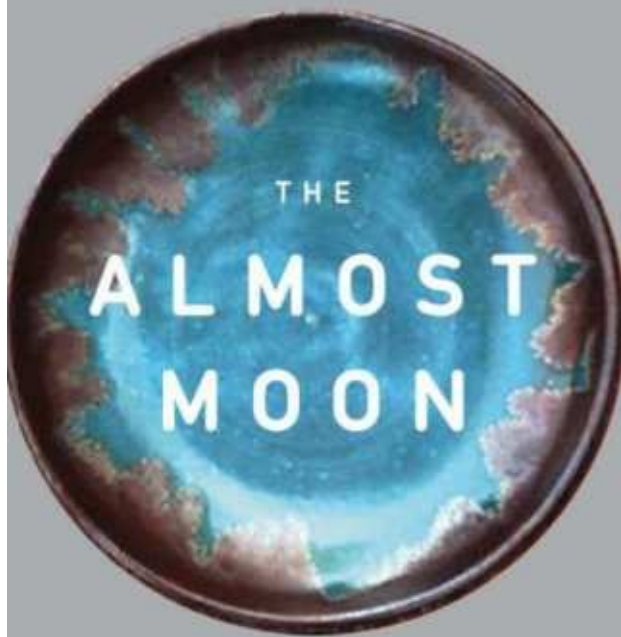
THE
ALMOST
MOON

a novel

Alice Sebold

By the author of THE LOVELY BONES

FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE LOVELY BONES



ALICE SEBOLD

M O O N

A N O V E L

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ALSO BY ALICE SEBOLD

The Lovely Bones

Lucky

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When all is said and done, killing my mother came easily. Dementia, as it descends, has a way of revealing the core of the person affected by it. My mother's core was rotten like the brackish water at the bottom of a weeks-old vase of flowers. She had been beautiful when my father met her and still capable of love when I became their late-in-life child, but by the time she gazed up at me that day, none of this mattered.

If I hadn't picked up my ringing phone, Mrs. Castle, my mother's unlucky neighbor, would have continued down the list of emergency numbers posted on my mother's almond-colored fridge. But within the hour, I found myself rushing over to the house where I was born.

It was a cool October morning. When I arrived, my mother was sitting upright in her wing chair, wrapped in a mohair shawl, and mumbling to herself. Mrs. Castle said my mother hadn't recognized her that morning when she'd brought the paper to the door.

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"She tried to slam the door on me," Mrs. Castle said. "She screamed like I was scalding her. It was the most pitiful thing imaginable."

My mother sat, a totemic presence, in the flocked red-and-white wing chair in which she'd spent the more than two decades since my father's death. She'd aged slowly in that chair, retiring first to read books and work her needlepoint, and then, when her eyes began to fail, to watch public television from dawn until she fell asleep in front of it after her evening meal. In the last year or two, she would sit in the chair and not even bother to turn on the television. Often she placed the twisted skeins of yarn that my older daughter, Emily, still sent each Christmas, in the center of her lap. She petted them the way some old women might pet cats.

I thanked Mrs. Castle and assured her I would handle everything.

"You know it's time," she said, turning toward me on the front stoop. "She's been in the house alone a awfully long while."

"I know," I said, and shut the door.

Mrs. Castle walked down the steps of my mother's front porch with three empty dishes of various sizes she had found in the kitchen and that she claimed to be hers. I didn't doubt it. My mother's neighbors were a godsend. When I was young, my mother had railed against the Greek Orthodox church down the road, calling its parishioners, for no reason that made sense,

"those stupid Holy-Rolling Poles." But it was this congregation that had often called upon its ranks to make sure the cranky old woman who had lived forever in the run-down house got fed and clothed. If occasionally she got robbed, well, it was precarious to be a woman living alone.

"People are living in my walls," she had said to me more than once, but it was only when I found a condom lying beside my childhood bed that I'd put two and two together. Manny, a boy 14]

who occasionally repaired things for my mother, was bringing girls into her upstairs rooms. I had talked to Mrs. Castle and hired a locksmith. It was not my fault my mother refused to move.

"Mother," I said, calling the name only I, as her sole child, had the right to call her. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Bitch," she said.

The thing about dementia is that sometimes you feel like the afflicted person has a trip wire to the truth, as if they can see beneath the skin you hide in.

"Mother, it's Helen," I said.

"I know who you are!" she barked at me.

Her hands clasped the curved ends of the armrests, and I could see how hard she pressed, her anger flaring up and out at me like involuntary claws.

"That's good," I said.

I stood there a moment longer, until it felt like an established fact. She was my mother and I was her daughter. I thought we could go forward from this into our usual unpleasant encounter.

I walked over to the windows and began to draw up the metal blinds by the increasingly threadbare cloth tape that bound them. Outside, the yard of my childhood was so overgrown it was difficult to make out the original shapes of the bushes and trees, those places I had played with other children until my mother's behavior began to garner a reputation outside our house.

"She steals," my mother said.

My back was to her. I was looking at a vine that had crawled into the huge fir tree in the corner of the yard and consumed the shed where my father had once done carpentry. He had always been happiest inside that space. On my darkest days, I had come to imagine him there, laboriously sanding the round wooden globes that had replaced all his other projects.

"Who steals?"

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"That bitch."

I knew she was talking about Mrs. Castle. The woman who daily made sure my mother had woken up. Who brought her the Philadelphia Inquirer and not infrequently cut flowers from her own yard and placed them in plastic iced-tea pitchers that wouldn't shatter if my mother knocked them over.

"That's not true," I told her. "Mrs. Castle is a lovely woman who takes good care of you."

"What happened to my blue Pigeon Forge bowl?"

I knew the bowl and realized I had not seen it for weeks. In my youth it had always held what I thought of as imprisoned food—

walnuts and Brazil nuts and filberts that my father would crack and dig out with a tiny fork.

"I gave it to her, Mother," I lied.

"You what?"

"She's been so wonderful and I knew she liked it, and so I just gave it to her one day when you were napping."

Help doesn't come free, I felt like telling her. These people owe you nothing.

My mother looked at me. It was a horrible bottomless look.

She pouted first, her lower lip jutting out and then quivering.

She was going to cry. I left the room and walked to the kitchen.

Whenever I came, I found good reason to spend many of the hours I was supposed to be with my mother in every room of the house but the one in which she sat. I heard the low moan begin that I'd been hearing all my life. It was a moan the notes of which were orchestrated to elicit pity. My father had always been the one to run to her. After his death, it fell to me. For more than twenty years, with greater or lesser diligence, I had been attending to her, rushing over when she called saying her heart would burst, or taking her on increasing rounds of doctors' visits as she aged.

Late in the afternoon of that day, I was in the screened-in back I 61

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porch, sweeping out the straw mat. I had left the door open a crack so that I could hear her. Then into the cloud of dust that surrounded me came the unmistakable odor of shit. My mother had needed to go to the bathroom but couldn't get up.

I dropped the broom and ran to my mother. She had not, as I may have momentarily hoped, died and suffered the resultant loosening of bowels. Dead in her own home as she might have wished. Instead, she sat in her chair, having soiled herself.

"Number two!" she said. This time, the smile was different than the smile of Bitch. Bitch had had life to it. This smile was alien to me. It held neither fear nor malice.

Often, when I recounted to my youngest, Sarah, the events of a given day, she told me that no matter how much she loved me, she wasn't going to strip and diaper me when I grew old. "I'll hire someone," she said. "I've never heard a better incentive for hitting the big time than avoiding that."

The smell had filled the room within seconds. I walked back to the porch twice to take in huge drafts of dusty air and could think of nothing else but presenting my mother in the way she would have wanted to be seen. I knew I was going to have to call the ambulance. I knew, as I had for some time, that my mother was heading out of this life, but I did not want her arriving at the hospital caked in shit. I should say I knew she would not want that, and so what had mattered most to her throughout her life—appearances—became what mattered most to me.

I took a final breath out on the porch and walked back to her.

No longer smiling, she was agitated in the extreme.

"Mom," I said, certain as I said it that she did not recognize the name or the daughter who said it, "I'm going to help you clean up, and then we're going to make some calls." You'll never make a call again, I thought, and I didn't mean it cruelly. Why is it that pragmatics are so often interpreted this way? Shit is shit and truth is truth. Done.

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I knelt down in front of her and looked up into her face. I hated her more than I'd ever hated anyone. Still, I reached up, as if I were finally allowed to touch a precious thing, and ran my fingers down her long silver braid. "Mom," I whispered. I said it because I knew it would be still in the air. No reverberations, no response.

But the wetness was making her unhappy. Like a snail trapped in sunlight, say—anxious to get away from an element that caused pain. I went from kneeling to half bending over. I placed my shoulders against her shoulders, careful not to put any weight on her. I leaned in like a football player on a tackle and then lifted up. She was both lighter and heavier than I'd expected.

I got her to standing with ease, but once she was upright, she collapsed in my arms. It was all I could do not to drop her, bringing both of us to the ground. As I adapted to the balance of holding her full weight, I could not help but think of my father, how year after year he carried the burden of her, apologized to the neighbors, dried her copious tears, and how this body had folded into his over and over again like so much batter until the two of them became one.

I felt like weeping myself then. We were near the end of us and of the secrets of the house. I was forty-nine and my mother was eighty-eight. My father had been dead for almost the entire lifetime of my younger child—a few months after she'd turned four. Sarah could never know the full measure of his sweetness, or play in the workshop among his thrice-glued carpentry. I thought of the mutant rocking horses rotting in the shed, and my arms, with my mother in them, weakened dangerously. How the house and my life had changed after his death.

I dragged my mother, with her trying, I could feel, to help, over to the staircase leading up to her bath. I questioned my sanity.

How, I wondered, did I think this feat was possible? She had to weigh at least a hundred pounds, and despite my midlife fit-

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ness regime, I had never lifted more than sixty. It was not going to work. I collapsed onto the stairs, with my mother soiled and damp on top of me.

I panted on the carpeted steps but did not give up. I was determined to clean my mother and to dress her in fresh clothes before I called the ambulance. As we lay there and her weight grew familiar, like the strange feeling of being pinned by a dozing lover, I thought of the alternatives. I could bring her to the bathroom in the back and try to wash her from the sink. There was also the kitchen. But where would I prop her up? How to hold her and wash her at the same time, not to mention the mess of water all over the floor and the potential for slipping and cracking both our skulls.

My mother began to snore. Her head tilted back over my shoulder so that I could see her ancient mottled face and neck.

I looked at her cheekbones, as sharp as they had always been—

almost painful now in her cadaverous flesh. Who will love me? I thought, and then banished this question by looking out at the birch leaves in the fading sunlight. I had been there all day. I hadn't even called to cancel at Westmore. I saw the empty space on the platform in Life Drawing 101 and the students, at their easels, staring at my absence, the useless charcoal in their hands.

I knew that if I did not move, my mother might sleep for hours, and darkness would come. I pictured my friend Natalie looking for me in the halls of the art building, vainly querying the students in class. Natalie would call my house—perhaps drive over alone or with Hamish, her son. The doorbell would ring in the empty house, and then Natalie would imagine that something must have happened to me or to Sarah or to Emily.

I lifted my arms up under my mother's arms and raised them slightly off the carpeted stairs. First one and then the other, like manipulating a life-size doll. To have controlled her as easily as that, impossible. I had to get through this without calling my

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daughters. This was something to be done on my own. I twisted out from under her, and she moaned like a collapsing bag of air.

I sat by her body on the stairs. The house had a weight and a force that I knew could crush me. I had to get out of there, and I thought, suddenly, of the bathtub among the rocking horses in the shed.

I left my mother dozing and turned and ran up the stairs, darting into her cluttered bedroom for blankets, and the pink powder room for towels. In the mirror over the sink, I checked myself. My eyes seemed smaller and even bluer than they had been, as if the intensity of the situation affected color and its perception. For years now I'd kept my hair so short that I could almost see my scalp. When I'd walked into my mother's house, she'd taken one glance and said, "Don't tell me you have cancer too."

Everyone has cancer these days." I explained that my haircut made life easier, from exercise to gardening to work. It was the ambiguity that got to me—would she have cared if I had had cancer or would it have just been competition for her? Her intonation pointed toward the latter, but it was hard to believe this of one's own mother.

I stood at the top of the stairs with the blankets and towels. I kept at bay my realization that she would never see these rooms again and that now they would become, for me, empty shells littered with possessions. I noticed the hush in the upstairs hallway and looked at the pictures on the walls, pictures that would soon be gone. I imagined the dark squares they would leave behind them where no sun had reached for years, and the echoes that would resound from the curtainless storm windows and the thick plaster-and-brick walls. I began to sing. I sang nonsense.

Cat-food commercials and childhood songs, the latter a habit that had been handed down from my mother, a way to stave off the onset of nerves. The need for noise overwhelmed me, but as I headed down the stairs, I grew quiet again. I saw that my

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mother had slumped down and lay on the floor, her body on the old wine-red Persian rug.

"No, Mother, no," I said, realizing as I did so that it was more useless than talking to a dog. A dog cocked her head. A dog gave you a soulful look. My mother was a passed-out bag of bones who reeked of shit.

"Why like this?" I asked. I stood over her body with my arms full of blankets and towels, and I began to weep. I whispered a prayer that no one would knock on the door, that Mrs. Castle would not think to check on us, though right about now Manny the handyboy might help me tote and haul.

I placed the towels on the bottom stair and took my grandfather's red-and-black Hudson Bay blanket, spreading it out on the floor beside her. It extended into the dining room. Then, so the wool would not scratch, I put a white Mexican wedding blanket down on top of that. I was not thinking sanely; I was wrapping fish or making spring rolls; I was thinking, Super Giant Mother Burrito.

I bent down, taking air in and neutralizing my spine—thank you, Stella, at World Gym—and put my arms up under my mother's armpits.

Her eyes snapped open.

"What on earth are you doing?"

I blinked. With our faces reversed to each other, I felt she could suck my eyes into her mouth. The rest of me, like the tail of a lizard or the end of a flat noodle, would swoop in and be gone in mere seconds. I kept my arms tense. Would she ever be powerless?

"Daniel!" she brayed. "Daniel!"

"Dad's not here, Mom," I said.

She looked up at me, her face dimmed and then reignited again, like a match flaring in the dark.

"I want that bowl," she said. "Now!"

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To be that close to her. To be holding on to her and to see her brain open up like that, its scrambled insides, it was all I could do to keep to my task. As she spoke about things—Emily, the

"pretty baby" (Emily had just turned thirty and had babies of her own); the kudzu near her father's cabin that had to be cut back with a scythe (the cabin was on land that was at the base of the Smokies and long out of our lives); and the stealing, conniving, not-to-be-trusted neighbors—I placed her body in the blankets and made an open-ended package with her talking head sticking out. Then I rested the towels on top of her chest and breathed slowly, counting to ten before I spoke.

"We are going on a sleigh ride," I said to her. And in my fists, I balled up the two free ends of the blanket, partially lifting her body off the floor. I heaved her over the carpet of the dining room, in through the kitchen, and out the side door.

"Toot! Toot!" she said. "Toot! Toot!" And then she grew silent and stared at the outside like a child in front of flickering Christmas lights. I wanted to ask her, When was the last time you went into your backyard? When was the last time you smelled a flower or trimmed a shrub or just sat in the rusted white iron lawn chair?

Grief was coming heavily now. Something about being outside, being in the fresh air, away from the acrid scent of her and the mothball smell of the closed-up house. My mother lay in her blanketed cocoon on the small raised side porch, which thankfully was at least partially shielded from the next-door neighbors by vine-covered latticework.

I went down the three stairs to the cinder-block path and walked around to the back of the porch, where as a child I had sat and kicked my legs over the edge and where now my mother lay as if on a shipping-and-receiving shelf. I was sweating, but I knew by the slant of the sun at my back that it would be less than an hour before light slipped below the houses that surrounded

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my mother's and left us alone in the last long night we would spend together.

I touched her treasured braid again. Some years ago her hair had passed out of its wiry stage and become soft. It had always been her crowning glory. Her brief life as a lingerie model before she met my father was one I'd envied growing up. Whatever else she was, she had been the most beautiful mother in the neighborhood, and watching her had taught me everything I knew about physical beauty. It was a bitter truth—my discovery—

that daughters were not made in cookie-cutter patterns from the genes of their mothers alone. Random

accidents of ancestry could blunt a nose or tip a forehead until beauty's delicate tracery gave way to an ordinary Jane.

Outside, with the air rushing over her, the fecal scent dissipated and I could think realistically again. I would not make it to the shed. What had I thought? The damage of dragging her down the three steps of trying to heave her off the porch. And what would I fill the ancient bathtub with? Cold water from the backyard hose? The bathtub would be dirty and full of old lumber and broken bits of refuse that I would have to clean out. The last time I'd been in the shed, I'd noticed that my father's tool board, with all the ghost shapes of tools, had fallen off the wall and pitched forward against the tub. What had I been thinking?

"This is it, Mom," I said. "This is as far as we go."

She did not smile or say "bitch" or wail some final lament. I like to think, when I think about it, that by that time she was busy taking in the scent of her garden, feeling the late-afternoon sun on her face and that somehow in the moments that had elapsed since she'd last spoken, she'd forgotten she'd ever had a child and that, for so many years now, she'd had to pretend she loved it.

I wish I could say that as my mother lay on the side porch and the wind began to pick up more and more so that the crows

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clinging on to the tops of the trees took flight, that she made it easy on me. That she pointedly listed all the sins she had committed during her long life.

She was eighty-eight. The lines on her face were now the cross-hatchings of fine old porcelain. Her eyes were closed.

Her breathing ragged. I looked at the tops of the empty trees.

There is no excuse to give, I know, so here is what I did: I took the towels with which I had meant to bathe her, and not thinking that near the latticework or by the back fence there might stand a witness, smashed these downy towels into my mother's face. Once begun, I did not stop. She struggled, her blue-veined hands, with the rings she feared would be stolen if she ever took them off, grabbed at my arms. First her diamonds and then her rubies briefly flickered in the light. I pushed down harder. The towels shifted, and I saw her eyes. I held the towels for a long time, staring right at her, until I felt the tip of her nose snap and saw the muscles of her body go suddenly slack and knew that she had died.

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My clues to my mother's life before me were not many. It took me a while to notice that almost all of them—the Steuben glass paperweights, the sterling silver picture frames, the Tiffany rattles that were sent a dozen strong before she miscarried her first, then second, child—were chipped or dented, cracked or blackened in various ways. Almost all of them had been or would be thrown either at a wall or at my father, who ducked with a reflexive agility that reminded me of Gene Kelly tripping up and down the sodden curbs in *Singin' in the Rain*.

My father's grace had developed in proportion to my mother's violence, and I knew that in absorbing and deflecting it in the way he did, he also saved her from seeing herself as she had become.

Instead she saw the same reflections of herself that I pored over when I snuck downstairs after dark. Her precious still photography.

* * *

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When my father met her, my mother was fresh from Knoxville, Tennessee, and made her living as a showroom model of underwear and support garments. She preferred to say, "I modeled slips." And these were the photos that we had so many of.

Framed black and whites of my mother in better times, wearing black slips or white slips. "That one was eggshell," she might say from the corner of the living room, not having said anything to anyone all afternoon. I knew she was referring to a specific slip in a specific picture, and sensing this, I would choose the white slip I thought could be eggshell. If I got it wrong, the moment would burst—as fragile as a blow bubble glistening in the yard—and she would slump back into the chair. But if I chose right, and I would come to memorize them over time—there was the bone, the ecru, the nude, and my favorite, the rose-petal pink—I would bring the framed photograph to her. Hanging on to the thin cord of her smile, I pulled myself into the past with her, making myself small and still on the ottoman until she told me the story of the photography session or the man involved or the gifts that she had received as partial payment.

The rose-petal pink was my father.

"He was not even the photographer," she would say. "He was a junior water inspector in a borrowed suit with a pocket square, but I didn't know that then."

These were the years of my earliest childhood, when my mother was still powerful, before she collected what she considered the unforgivable flaws of age. Two years short of her fiftieth birthday, she began covering all her mirrors with heavy cloths, and when, as a teenager, I suggested we remove the mirrors completely, she objected. They remained there as she grew infirm.

Her shadowy, silent indictments.

But in the photos of the rose-petal-pink slip, she was still worthy of her own love, and it was this love for herself that I tried to take warmth from. What I knew, I think, without wanting to

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admit it, was that the photos were like the historical documents of our town. They proved that long ago, there had been a more hopeful time. Her smile was easy then, not forced, and the fear that could turn to bitterness had not tainted her eyes.

"He was the photographer's friend," she said. "He was having a big day in the city, and the suit was part of his friend's lie."

I knew not to ask, "What lie, Mom?" Because that took her to a bad place where her marriage was just the long, arduous playing out of an afternoon con between schoolboy friends. Instead I asked, "Who was the shoot for? "

"The original John Wanamaker's," she said. Her face glowed like an old-fashioned streetlamp lit from the inside. Everything else in the room disappeared as if into a dark fog. I did not realize then that there was no place in these memories for the company of a child.

As my mother drifted into the past, where she was happiest, I appointed myself the past's faithful guardian. If her feet looked cold, I covered them. If the light left the room too dark, I quietly crept over and turned on a bookshelf lamp that would cast only a small circle of light—not too big—just enough to keep her voice from becoming a scary shapeless echo in the dark.

Outside, in the street in front of our house, the workmen who had been hired to install the stained-glass windows in the new Greek Orthodox church—green because for some reason this color of glass was cheaper than most—might walk by and make a noise too loud to ignore. When this happened, I would meet the drowsy blank stare that came over my mother with ushering words meant to slip her back to the dream-past.

"Five girls showed up, not eight," I'd say.

Or "His last name, Knightly, was irresistible."

When I look back, I think how silly I must have sounded, parroting the phrases of my mother's lovesick girlhood, but what was most precious about our house back then was that no matter

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how wrongheaded everything might be, inside it, we could distill ourselves to being a normal man, woman, and child. No one had to see my father put on an apron and do overtime work after he got home, or watch me cajole my mother, trying to get her to eat.

"I didn't know he wasn't in the fashion industry until after he'd kissed me," she'd say.

"But what about the kiss?"

It was always here that she teetered. The kiss and the weeks immediately following it must have been wonderful, but she could not forgive my father once he'd brought her to Phoenixville.

"New York City," she'd say, looking down dejectedly between her splayed feet on the floor. "I never even got there."

It was my mother's disappointments that were enumerated in our household and that I saw before me every day as if they were posted on our fridge—a static list that my presence could not assuage.

I must have petted my mother's head for a long time. Eventually I saw the blue light of a television glow across the street. When my parents had first moved to Phoenixville, this neighborhood had been a thriving one, full of young families. Now the squat 1940s houses on quarter-acre lots were often rented out to couples down on their luck. My mother said you could tell who the renters were because they let the houses rot, but in my mind it was these very people that kept the street from turning into a place where the isolated elderly were slowly dying.

As darkness descended, so did the cold. I looked down at the length of my mother's body, wrapped in double blankets, and knew she would never feel the uncertainties that come with the fluctuation of air or light again.

"Over now," I said to her. "It's over."

And for the first time, the air was empty around me. For the

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first time, it was not full of hatchets and blame or unworthiness-as-oxygen.

As I breathed in this blank-space world—where my mother ended at the border of her own flesh—I heard the phone ring in the kitchen. I slipped off the back of the porch and walked back past the latticework. On the next-door neighbor's empty porch, I could see the local tomcat grooming himself. Growing up, Sarah called such cats "orange marmalades." I saw the old metal lid cocked at an angle on top of the neighbor's neatly tucked and rolled paper trash bag and made a mental note to take my mother's trash out. My whole life, she would instruct me about the proper way to fold a bag. "Paper bags, wax bags, are like your sheets. Hospital corners improve them."

The phone rang again and again. I walked up the three wooden steps to the door. My mother's feet extended out over the top stair. She had insisted that the answering machines I brought her did not work. "She's afraid of them," Natalie said. "My father thinks the ATM will eat his arm."

I smelled something as I shoved my mother's body just far enough aside to squeeze back into the house. It was the smell of lighter fluid and charcoal mingling in the air. By this time the ring of the phone was a hammer pounding from inside my skull, or a voice calling me from outside a nightmare.

The first thing I saw when I entered the kitchen was the stepstool chair beneath the wall-mounted phone. The red vinyl was cracked and taped thirty-five years ago, more than a decade after it served as my first high chair. Seeing it in the kitchen was like seeing a lion left standing, ignored. It leaped out

at me, roaring with the voice of the phone above it, propelling me back to my father placing me there
I saw the slash of my young father's smile and my mother's wobbly wrist bringing peaches and
bananas—

all pureed by hand—up to my lips. How hard she had tried and how she must have hated it from the
start.

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I grabbed the phone as if it were a life raft.

"Hello?"

"Do you need help?"

The voice was old, feeble, but I was no less startled than if it had been coming from just outside the
door.

"What?"

"You've been out on that porch a long time."

I would recall this later as the first moment where I began to be frightened, where I realized that by
the standards of the outside world, what I'd done knew no justification.

"Mrs. Leverton?"

"Are you two all right, Helen? Is Clair in need?"

"My mother's fine," I said.

"I can call my grandson," she said. "He'll be glad to help."

"My mother wanted to go into the yard," I said.

From where I stood, I could see through the small window over the kitchen sink and across the
backyard. I remember my mother arduously training a vine to grow so that it masked a view of our
house from the Levertons' upstairs bedroom. "That man will stare right into your private places," my
mother would say, hanging her front half out my bedroom window, which was directly over the
kitchen, threading the vines and risking life and limb to make sure Mr. Leverton never caught a peek.
Both the vine and Mr. Leverton were long dead now.

"Is Clair still out there?" Mrs. Leverton asked. "It's awfully cold."

This gave me an idea.

"She's waving at you," I said.

"The Blameless One," my mother had called her. "Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth and stupid as the day is long."

But there was silence on the other end.

"Helen," Mrs. Leverton said slowly, "are you sure you're all right?"

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"Excuse me?"

"Your mother would never wave at me. We both know that."

Not so stupid, apparently.

"But that's pleasant of you to say."

I had to get my mother's body in. It was as simple as that.

"Can't you see her?" I risked.

"I'm in my kitchen now," Mrs. Leverton said. "It's five o'clock, and I always start making supper at five o'clock."

Mrs. Leverton was the champ. At ninety-six, she was the oldest fully functioning member of the neighborhood. My mother had been nothing in comparison to her. When it got down to it, the final competition among women seemed just as inane and graceless as all those in between. Who grew breasts first, who scored the popular boy, who married well, who had the better home. In my mother's and Mrs. Leverton's life, it came down to who would be the oldest when she died. I felt like saying, Congratulations, Mrs. Leverton, you've won!

"You amaze me, Mrs. Leverton," I said.

"Thank you, Helen." Is it possible to hear preening?

"I will encourage my mother to come in," I said. "But she does what she likes."

"Yes. I know," she said. She had always been careful with her words. "Stop by anytime and give Clair my best." Her best, I did not point out, was as improbable as my mother's wave.

I hung the phone back on the upright cradle. Like my mother, Mrs. Leverton probably still insisted that phones were most efficient when they were connected by cords. I knew that she had been weakening in the previous year, but she had informed my mother that she still did exercises daily and quizzed herself on state capitals and ex-presidents.

"Unbelievable," I said to myself, and I heard the damp echo of it bounce off the green-and-gold linoleum. I wanted to rush out and tell my mother about the phone call, but when I looked her

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way through the screen door, I saw the marmalade tom standing on her chest and playing, like a kitten, with the ribbon of her braid.

Inside me, the child who had protected her mother ran to the screen door to shoo the marmalade tom from the porch, and yet, as I watched the huge scarred cat that my mother had taken to calling "Bad Boy" fall on her chest with his full weight and bat her braid with the ribbon attached to it with his front paws, I found myself unable to move.

Finally, after all these years, my mother's life was snuffed out, and I had been the one to do it—in the same way I might snuff out the guttering wick of an all but extinguished candle. Within a few minutes, as she struggled for breath, my lifelong dream had come true.

The marmalade tom played with the ribbon in her hair until he freed it, and it went sailing up into the air and landed on her face. It was then, the red ribbon on her cheek, the cat claw reaching out to grab it, that I shoved my fist in my mouth to cover my scream.

T H R E E

I sat on the floor of the kitchen. My mother's body lay positioned outside the door. I felt like turning on the bug light above her but didn't. Look upon this, I imagined saying to the neighbors.

This is where it all ends up.

But I didn't really believe that. I believed, as my mother always had, that there was them and there was us. "Them" were the happy, normal people, and "us" were the totally fucked.

I remembered throwing water in her face when I was sixteen.

I remembered not talking to her and seeing her dismantled, as she had never been, by trying to learn the language of apology.

Watching her do that—admit that she was wrong—was one of the most helpless moments in my life. I had wanted to save her with a rush of talk about high-school chemistry and my recently failed algebra exam. To fill the silent moments while she toed the edges of the carpet with her foot as I sat in my bedroom chair and restrained myself.

Suddenly I spied, through the thick hedge that bordered my Alice Sebold

mother's yard, Carl Fletcher coming outside with a plate of steak.

As his own screen door banged and he plodded down the three wooden stairs to his lawn, a beer in one hand, a portable radio tuned to WIP sports in the other, I pictured a circle of tiki torches and throbbing white people in loincloths raising the remains of my mother high on a special catalog-ordered all-weather funeral pyre.

"I like the man next door," my mother had said when Carl Fletcher moved in six years ago. "He's pathetic, which means he keeps to himself."

Now he was on the other side of the latticework, in a yard that had been empty only moments before.

If Hilda Castle had called one day later, Sarah would have been visiting for the weekend, and she would have helped me carry my mother up the stairs to the bath. But more likely, Sarah would have made phone calls. The simple phone calls that any sane person would have made. I could not imagine my youngest standing above her soiled grandmother in the wing chair and saying, "Mother, let's kill her. That's the only choice."

On my hands and knees, I crawled over to the screen door and looked out over my mother's body and through the hedge into the adjacent backyard. Mr. Donnellson, who had lived in the house until his family put him in hospice care, had asked my mother to marry him a dozen years ago. "There's no one left," he said. "Let's be companions, Clair."

He had seen her getting her newspaper and shown up a few minutes later with a bouquet of mauve-colored tulips. "From bulbs his wife planted!" my mother repeatedly pointed out. I remember being charmed by his offer, so charmed I had been tempted to rush over to his house after he'd been spurned.

to see if, perhaps with only a shift in generation, his offer might hold.

When he died, my mother gloated in triumph. "I would have had to wipe up his drool for five years and then bury him," she

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said. On the day of his funeral, she had blamed her watery eyes on the onions she was cutting up with her ancient hand-sharpened paring knife.

Peter Donnellson's house had been sold as is by his three daughters, and my mother had braced herself for a teardown.

Despite what was obvious—that the area had been going downhill for years—she fretted over the emergence of a Phoenixville nouveau riche. She worried for the roots of her giant maple trees that extended over into Mr. Donnellson's yard. She worried for the noise and for what she imagined would be the sound of children screaming almost every hour of the day. She had me research soundproofing schemes and considered replacing the windows on that side of the house with cinder blocks. "That will fix their wagon," she said, and I went, as I often did, to fill the electric kettle with water and listen to its soothing hum.

But Carl Fletcher moved in alone and didn't change anything.

He had a job with the phone company and went to work out in the field early each morning. He came home at the same time every day but Friday. On the weekends he sat in his yard and drank beer. He had the paper with him and a book and always, always, the portable radio that he kept tuned to sports or talk.

Occasionally his daughter, Madeline, whom my mother called the "circus freak" because of her tattoos, would visit. My mother complained about the noise of her motorcycle and "all of that flesh spread out in the yard," but she had never spoken to Carl Fletcher, and he had never bothered to introduce himself. What I knew of my mother's neighbors at this point was all secondhand, distributed, along with frozen soups or potted jams, by Mrs. Castle when we crossed paths.

As Mr. Fletcher turned his steaks over, I could hear the sizzle of the fat dripping into the fire over the noise of the game.

From my kneeling position, one I refused to adopt anymore at Westmore—too hard on the knees—I crawled outside and

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knelt again at the edge of my mother's body. I thought of a man I'd read about who felt so devout he dragged a replica of Jesus's cross from one end of Berlin to the other, wearing only some sort of Gandhi-like diaper and traveling on his quickly bloodied knees.

The small scratch on my mother's cheek had congealed. Her eyes had purpled in halos around their sockets. I remembered turning her in bed and adjusting strips of sheepskin under her to stave off the inevitable bedsores during the lengthy convalescence that followed the surgery for her colon cancer.

Mr. Fletcher placed the steaks on a plate, took his meat and his radio, and went back inside. He was the sort of man who could be counted on, I realized, never to look up. I saw the coals still orange in his grill.

I would have had to yell "Fire!" for anyone but Mrs. Leverton or Mr. Forrest, who lived down the road to pay attention. In the years after the final death throes of Phoenixville Steel, the streets nearby had become increasingly desolate. Properties often sat vacant, and from the spare bedroom where my grandfather's guns had once been kept, I had watched the demolition of a beautiful Victorian two streets away. Once the conical roof fell in, there was nothing to see but ancient dust floating up and out above the house's less prosperous neighbors.

I had tried to get my mother to move into a retirement home, but she would not budge, and part of me admired her for it.

There was an ever-diminishing network of the originals now: Mrs. Leverton behind her, Mr. Forrest five houses down, and the long-suffering widow of Mr. Tolliver.

The one my mother had once considered her friend was Mr.

Forrest. He lived at the end of the circle and didn't have any family at all. He had a house the same size as my parents', and his rooms were filled with books. When I drove by his house,

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I often thought of the afternoons he and my mother had spent together, starting cocktails at five in anticipation of my father's joining them by six. I would answer the door, and Mr. Forrest would hand me a paper bag. Inside would be cured olives or fresh cheeses or French bread, and within thirty minutes of his arrival, I would tuck myself into a corner at the top of the stairs and listen to her laughter fill the house.

I leaned my body over my mother's, took the towel I had used to suffocate her, and covered her face with it. Then I made the sign of the cross. "You are so not Catholic!" Natalie said to me growing up, and I tried to imitate her. My cross remained a sort of flailing X marks the spot.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I whispered. "I'm so sorry."

I crawled back inside to retrieve the felt-covered brick that we had used forever to prop open the door. I thought of Manny, bringing in a month's supply of staples from the big-box store. I had been standing in the living room, and ever so briefly, when I turned to be introduced to him, his eyes had traveled to my chest.

Later, my mother admonished me for wearing such tight clothes.

"It's a turtleneck," I said.

She had burst out laughing. "I guess you're right. The boy's a perv," she said. I remember wondering where she'd learned the word, if it had been something Manny had taught her. I'd known that, sometimes, when he'd had nowhere to go, he would bring movies over to watch with her. My mother had seen *The Godfather* more times than I could count.

I stood and put my hands on either side of my lower back to arch backward in what Natalie called my "construction-worker stretch." I was aware that I would have to pace myself as I did while modeling. That what I had done and what I was about to do would take the kind of physical stamina that a thousand dance classes might not have prepared me for.

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I walked back onto the stoop and towered over her. If Mrs.

Leverton was watching, back upstairs with her husband's binoculars, how would she account for what she saw? If she told her son, would he think that his mother was finally slipping? I smiled down at my mother. She would have loved that, loved that in reporting the way I handled her dead body, Mrs. Leverton might finally be knocked off her high horse and into the land of the elderly insane.

I nudged my mother's body with the edge of my jazz flats. Then there was nothing left but cursing and exertion.

"Fuck," I said repeatedly, regulating it like breathing, as I tightened my stomach to prepare for the lift. I grabbed my mother's body by the blankets, making sure to grip her up under her shoulders so she wouldn't slip. I kept cursing as I reentered the kitchen, dragging her after me. In one final tug, I got her whole body past the lip of the doorway and then lowered myself slowly down on the floor, with her between my legs. "In," I said, and kicked the brick out of the way. The door closed a little bit on its hinge, and then, with my foot, I helped it the rest of the way.

As the door clicked shut with that whispering mustache seal of black rubber along its bottom edge, I became aware of my mother's death rattle. The long, slow rasp releasing from her chest.

At my own house that morning, I had methodically dusted the clear-glass globes and painted wooden herons I'd strung from invisible thread over the bedroom window. Now, in my mind, the spread wings of these birds fluttered like a warning. I would be a different person when I saw them next.

I looked at the clock over the kitchen doorway. It was after six. Somehow more than an hour had passed since I'd spoken to Mrs. Leverton.

I stopped for a second, holding on to my mother's body, and imagined Emily and her husband, John, climbing the stairs with their children, John taking Jeanine, who, at four, was the heavier

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of the two, and Emily cradling the two-year-old Leo. I thought of the sometimes successful Christmas presents I'd sent over the years: the pink and blue PJs with boots were a hit; the hardknocking—marbles-on-string game was judged age-inappropriate.

I stood up with the thought of Leo in his crib to bolster me, but then came its companion memory of my mother, her arms outstretched to hold him, allowing him to fall.

After positioning her body closer to the stove, I turned to run the water in the sink as cold as it would come. Again and again I took water in my hands and brought it up to my face, never splashing, exactly, but pressing my cheeks into the shallow puddles that remained in my palms. On hot nights, my exhusband, Jake, had taken ice cubes and run them along my shoulder and back, curving them on my stomach and up to my nipples until goose bumps covered my limbs.

I unwrapped the blankets from my mother's body. First the red and rough Hudson Bay and then the softer white Mexican wedding cotton. I walked around her body, pulling each corner taut. The downy towel remained on her face.

Leo did not bounce, as my mother confessed she thought he might, but his fall was broken by the edge of a dining room chair.

Though he will have a scar on his forehead to mark the moment for the rest of his life, that chair may have saved him. Otherwise it would have been the much harder floor. My mother's face that day was surprised and hurt. Emily had blamed her, wrapped the bawling Leo in a blue fleece blanket, and called her horrible names. I stood between them and then followed Emily down the steep walkway to my car. I did not glance back to see if my mother was watching us from her door.

"Never again," Emily said. "I'm tired of making excuses for her."

"Of course," I said. "Yes," I said. "I know the way," I said, and got in the driver's side of my car. I drove more competently that

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day than I ever have, all the way to Paoli Hospital, going at top speed along winding roads.

I took my mother's skirt and flipped it up to reveal her calves and knees, her fleshy thighs. The scent of her earlier mishap flooded me.

"The legs go last," my mother said once. We sat in front of the television, watching Lucille Ball. Ball's hair, by then, was so red and false it looked more like Bozo's blood sample than Bozo's wig. She wore a specially tailored tuxedo jacket that created a largish hourglass shape and went down low in the back, but her legs, fishnet clad and decked out in high heels, went on and on.

I remembered calling home once from Wisconsin. Emily must have been almost four. My father answered the phone, and immediately I heard it.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

"Nothing to get upset about."

"You sound strange. What is it?"

"I fell," he said.

I could hear the grandfather clock in their living room—its deep choral chimes.

"Are you lying down?"

"I've got that old quilt on top of me, and your mother is doing her best. Here she is."

I heard the receiver being fumbled, and I entered the anxious no-man's-land over the wire while my mother came to get the phone.

"He's fine," she said immediately. "He's just drugged up."

"Can I talk to him again?"

"He's a horrid conversationalist right now," she said.

I asked my mother what exactly had happened.

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"He tripped on the stairs. Tony Forrest came over and took him to the doctor. It's his hip and those damn varicose veins.

Tony says Edna St. Vincent Millay killed herself that way."

"With varicose veins?"

"No, stairs. She fell down them."

"Can I speak to him?"

"You should call later in the week. He's resting now."

I felt the distance of miles then. I tried to picture my father under the memory quilt, sleeping, as my mother bustled about the house, making meals out of dry cereal flakes and canned corn.

I was sweating in the closed-up house but too afraid to open a window. Too afraid another death rattle might escape my mother's lungs and seep into the air and wake the women who, like my mother, live alone and feared such things. The nighttime intruder who comes and kills you. The dutiful daughter who suddenly finds her hand on top of a towel on top of your face, smashing that face in, something inside her hammering over and over again with a child's vendetta finally fulfilled.

I turned on the tap in the kitchen sink again. I waited for the water to heat. I saw the dishes from the

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