

Prologue

She wondered, Is it possible, maybe even normal, to spend twenty years of your life with someone, to love that person more than you love yourself sometimes and then sometimes to truly hate him, so much that you think about taking your new cast-iron grill pan and bringing it down on the top of his head? Or maybe these thoughts were just a result of one of her random yet tempestuous perimenopausal moments. Or the fact that the piece-of-crap air conditioner she'd been begging him to replace for two summers was no competition for a kitchen where there were three pans on the stove and a pork roast in the oven.

The heat didn't seem to bother him as he sat directly in front of the unit with a copy of the Times in his hands, his feet on the hassock, a glass of merlot on the table beside him. He'd offered to help; it was true. But in that kind of non-offer way he had: "Do you need some help?" (without looking up from the sports section), not "What can I do?" (as he rolled up his sleeves) or "You sit down a minute; let me mince the garlic" (as he poured her a glass of wine). Those were what she considered true offers of help. She wanted him to insist. Especially since she knew that she could never sit reading with a glass of wine while he slaved away at some annoying task like cooking for friends (friends of his, by the way), regardless of whether he'd rebuffed her offers of help or not.

She glanced at the clock and felt her stress level rise. Just an hour before their guests arrived and she hadn't even showered. She released a sigh and banged a pot down in the sink, which caused her husband to look up from his paper.

"Everything all right?" Allen asked, rising.

"No," she said sullenly. "It's hot in here and I need to take a shower."

"Okay," he said, coming over to her and taking the slotted spoon from her hand. He wrapped his arms around her waist and smiled that devilish smile he had, the one that always made her smile, too, no matter how angry she was.

"Take it easy," he said, kissing her neck. She leaned back from him a second, playing mad and hard to get, but soon enough she melted.

"If you need help, why don't you ask for it?" he whispered in her ear, raising erogenous goose bumps on her neck.

"You should just know," she said, still pouting.

"You're right," he said into the space between her throat and her collarbone. "I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Well," she said, suddenly feeling silly, "I guess it's mostly done."

He pulled away from her, took a glass from the cabinet, and poured her some wine. "How about this, then? You go take a shower and I'll get a head start on the cleaning, take care of some of these pans."

She took the glass from his hand, gave him a kiss on the mouth. After twenty years, she still loved the taste of him (when she wasn't imagining clocking him with a grill pan). She looked around their West Village apartment, most of which could be seen from the space over the bar that separated the kitchen from the dining and living area. It was small and cramped but filled with

the chic clutter of objects and books and photographs they'd collected over their life together. The couch and matching love seat were old and worn, but good quality and as comfortable as an embrace. The cocktail table was an old door from an antique shop in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Their television, like the window air-conditioning unit, was a dinosaur that badly needed replacing. Their bedroom was so small that there was barely room for their queen-size bed and two bedside tables piled high with books. They could afford something better, something much bigger . . . maybe in Brooklyn or out in Hoboken. But they were Manhattanites to the bone and couldn't bear to be separated from the city by a bridge or a tunnel. Maybe it was silly, but between that and the fact that the rent was just six hundred dollars a month (as it had been since 1970), because the apartment had been grandfathered to Allen by his brother when his brother had moved to a lovely carriage house in Park Slope, they'd just stayed on there. The children they'd hoped for had never come; they'd never had a reason to expand. Only recently had things become uncomfortable for them.

The new landlord knew he could be getting about two or three thousand dollars a month for their apartment, so he was very slow to fix things that broke, hoping to force them out. And in an old apartment in an old building something was always broken, a fuse was always blown, something was always leaking.

They'd talked more about moving recently, but prices in the city were so outrageous. They'd lived a life where experience and travel had always mattered more to them than a status apartment or a flat-screen television. And though they'd done well, she as a crime reporter for various city newspapers and finally, now, at the Times, and he as a commercial photographer, choices had to be made along the way. Live well, travel well, and save for

retirement, while doing without where the apartment was concerned. It had never been a difficult trade. They'd seen the world and were still explorers at heart. In their early fifties they were in good shape to retire in the next ten years, though they'd never owned any property.

She thought about these things in the shower, felt good about them. Blessedly, the hot-water heater was working today. Ella and Rick, Allen's friends from college, would arrive carrying a hundred-dollar bottle of wine; Ella would be wearing something outrageously chic and expensive, Rick would talk about his new toy, whatever that happened to be. They weren't snobs; they were unpretentious and kind. But they were very wealthy and it came off them in waves, demanded noticing, begged comparisons. And when she wasn't feeling good about herself, it bothered her in a way it shouldn't. Allen wouldn't have understood; his mind didn't work that way. He enjoyed his friends' successes, their toys, their vacation homes, as much as he would if they'd been his own. He didn't believe in comparisons.

She thought about this as she rinsed the conditioner from her hair. Somewhere in the apartment or maybe above or below them, there was a loud knocking, loud enough to startle her. It could have been the hot-water heater, or something on another floor. She just prayed, prayed that it wasn't their guests arriving early. Or the landlord, wanting to finish the fight they'd had with him earlier about the terrible leak in the bathroom when the people above showered. Today they'd threatened to start putting their rent into escrow until he fixed it once and for all. The conversation had devolved into him reverting to his native tongue, something harsh and Eastern European, and screaming at them unintelligibly. They'd shut the door in his face and he'd stormed off, yelling all the way down the stairs.

“Those Eastern Europeans are a hot-blooded lot, aren’t they?” Allen had remarked, unperturbed.

“Maybe it’s time. Interest rates are low. We have the money for a sizable down payment. Jack has been telling us we have to invest in real assets to be truly comfortable in retirement,” she said, referring to their accountant.

“But the maintenance costs . . . And who’s to say prices don’t plummet in the next ten years.” He paused and shook his head. “We couldn’t afford to buy in the city.”

She shrugged. It was an old conversation that neither of them felt very passionate about. She’d let it go and headed off to the farmers’ market in Union Square for dinner ingredients. On the way back, she passed her landlord in the street and tried to smile. He marched right past her, yelling into his cellular phone in that guttural language.

She stepped out of the shower now and covered herself in a towel, wrapped her long red hair in another, and brushed her teeth. She could hear the stereo in the living room and thought it was louder than her husband usually liked it. But she didn’t hear voices and she was grateful for that—no early dinner guests, no screaming landlords. She felt better from the shower and smiled at herself in the mirror. She thought that she was still pretty, with her big green eyes and lightly freckled skin, which was still relatively young looking if you didn’t count the laugh lines around her mouth and eyes.

She hummed along with the radio, a catchy tune by one of those American Idol kids, and thought it was strange that Allen had chosen that on the radio and not popped in a Mozart or Chopin CD, which was more his taste. But he did try to be “hip” sometimes, especially when Rick was coming over. Because Rick was hip—or so he claimed. She didn’t want to tell either of them

that anyone who used the word hip probably wasn't. She and Ella always shared a secret smile when Rick and Allen tried to pretend they were up on recent trends.

There it was again, a knocking. This time, though, it was more of a heavy thud, and it seemed to come from the living room. She opened the bathroom door and called her husband's name. There was no answer, and the music seemed very loud now that the door was open and she was heading past the bedroom and toward the kitchen. Her heart started to flutter as she called his name again.

She saw something on the floor ahead of her. A glove? No, a hand. Her husband's hand on the floor. Everything seemed to slow down then. Her first thought was, Heart attack! as she came around the corner and found him lying there. She knelt down to him and he fluttered his eyes at her, tried to talk.

"Allen, it's okay, honey," she said, amazed at her own inner calm. Her voice sounded solid and sure. "I'll call an ambulance. Hang in there, baby. Don't worry."

It would be all right, she told herself with an odd stillness. Heart attacks were so survivable these days. He'd been taking his aspirin. She'd get him to sit up and take a dose while they waited for the ambulance.

But then she saw the blood pooling out from beneath him and the terror in his eyes. And then she saw the men standing by the door.

They were fully dressed in black. One of them held a gun, the other a terrible serrated blade red with blood. Both of them wore ski masks. They blocked her passage to the phone.

"What do you want?" she asked, her calm starting to retreat. "You can have anything you want." She looked around her apartment and realized they had nothing of any real value. Even

her wedding ring was just a simple band of gold. She had twenty dollars in her wallet; Allen probably had less than that. She felt a wet warmth against her feet and realized the blood pooling out from beneath her husband had reached her. His face was pale; his eyes were closed now.

“Don’t make a move,” one of the men said, she couldn’t tell which. The whole situation had taken on a foggy non-reality. Her mind struggled to keep up with what was happening. “Don’t say a word.”

One of the men came at her quickly, and before she could even put up a fight, he’d grabbed her wrist and spun her around, placing a black shroud over her head and tightening it around her neck. In her deepest heart, she knew what this was about. She just couldn’t bring herself to believe it. Then there was a stunning pain at the base of her neck and a star shower before her eyes. Then there was nothing.

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I'm running but I can't run much farther. The pain in my side already has me limping; there's fire in my lungs. I can't hear his footfalls. But I know he's not far away. I know now that he's been right beside me all my life in one way or another. I'm the light; he's the shadow. We've coexisted without ever meeting. If I'd been a good girl, the girl I was raised to be, I never would have known him. But it's too late for regrets.

I'm on Hart Island in the Bronx, a place known as Potter's Field. It's the city cemetery for the unknown and indigent—a grim and frightening place. How we've all wound up here is a long story, but I know the story will end here—maybe just for some, maybe for all of us. A tall abandoned building that seems to sag upon itself looms ahead of me. It's a darker night than I have ever known, in more ways than one. The sliver of moon is hidden behind a thick cloud cover. It's hard to see but I watch as he disappears through a door that hangs crooked on its hinges. I follow.

"Ridley!" The call comes from behind me. But I don't answer. I just keep moving until I am standing at the entrance to the building. I hesitate there, looking at the crooked, sighing structure and wondering if it's not too late to turn around.

Then I see him, up ahead of me. I call out but he doesn't an-

swer me, just turns and slowly starts to move away. I follow. If I valued my life and my sanity, I'd let him get away and hope he did the same for me. We could go back to the way things have been. He dwelling in a world I never even knew existed, me going about my very ordinary life, writing magazine articles, seeing movies, having drinks with friends.

Fear and rage duke it out in my chest. Hatred has a taste and a texture; it burns like bile in my throat. For a moment, I hear the voice of someone I loved: *Ridley, you can release the hatred and walk away. It's nothing more than a single choice. We can both do it. We don't need all the answers to live our lives. It doesn't have to be like this.* A few minutes later, he was gone.

I know now that those words were lies. Hatred doesn't release. Walking away is not one of my choices. Maybe it never was. Maybe I've been in the path of this freight train all my life, lashed to the tracks, too weak, too foolish, too stubborn to even try to save myself.

As I enter the building, I think I might hear the rumble of boat engines. I feel a distant flutter of hope and wonder if help is coming. I hear my name again and look behind me to see a man who has become my only friend moving unsteadily toward me. He is injured and I know it will take him a while to reach me. I think for a second that I should go to him, help him. But inside I hear movement and the groaning of an unstable structure. My breathing comes shallow and quick. I step deeper inside.

"Stop running, you coward!" I yell into the huge darkness. My voice resonates in the deserted space. "Let me see your face."

My voice bounces off the surfaces around me again. I don't sound scared and heartbroken, but I am. I sound strong and sure. I take the gun from the waist of my jeans. The metal is warm from my skin. In my hand, it feels solid and righteous. This is the

second time in my life I've held a gun with the intent to use it. I don't like it any better than the first time, but I'm more confident now, know that I can fire if pressed.

He steps out from the shadows, seems to move silently, to glide like the ghost that he is. I take a step toward him and then stop, raise my gun. I still can't see his face. A milky light has started to shine through the gaping holes in the ceiling as the moon moves through a break in the cloud cover. Shapes emerge in the darkness. He starts moving toward me slowly. I stand my ground but the gun starts shaking in my hand.

"Ridley, don't do it. You'll never be able to live with it."

The voice comes from behind me and I spin around to see someone I didn't expect to see again.

"This is none of your business," I yell, and turn back to the man I've been chasing.

"Ridley, don't be stupid. Put that gun down." This voice behind me sounds desperate, cracks with emotion. "You know I can't let you kill him."

My heart rate responds to the fear in his voice. *What am I doing?* Adrenaline is making my mouth dry, the back of my neck tingle. I can't fire but I can't lower the gun, either. I have the urge to scream in my fear and anger, my frustration and confusion, but it all lodges in my throat.

When he's finally close enough to see, I gaze upon his face. And he's someone I don't recognize at all. I draw in a gasp as a wide, cruel smile spreads across his face. And then I get it. He is the man they say he is.

"Oh, God," I say, lowering my gun. "Oh, no."