

Prologue

When my mother was a young woman a man used to follow her to work every morning and masturbate, in step behind her.

My mother had only a fifth-grade education and a dowry of medium-grade linen dish towels, but she was beautiful. It's still the first way I think of to describe her. Her hair was the color of the chocolates you get in the Tirolean Alps and she always wore it the same way—short curls piled high. Her skin was not olive like her family's but something all its own, the light rose of inexpensive gold. Her eyes were sarcastic, flirtatious, brown.

She worked as the main cashier at a fruit and vegetable stand in the center of Bologna. This was on the Via San Felice, a long thoroughfare in the fashion district. There were many shoe stores, goldsmiths, perfumeries, tobacconists, and clothing stores for women who did not work. My mother would pass these boutiques on the way to her job. She would look into the windows at the fine leather of the boots and the burnished necklaces.

But before she came into this commercial zone she would have a quiet walk from her apartment, down

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little carless streets and alleys, past the locksmith and the goat butcher, through lonely porticoes filled with the high scent of urine and the dark scent of old water pooling in stone. It was through these streets that the man followed her.

Where had he first seen her? I imagine it was at the fruit stand. This beautiful woman surrounded by a cornucopia of fresh produce—plump figs, hills of horse chestnuts, sunny peaches, bright white heads of fennel, green cauliflower, tomatoes on the vine and still dusty from the ground, pyramids of deep purple eggplant, small but glorious strawberries, glistening cherries, wine grapes, persimmons—plus a random selection of grains and breads, *taralli*, *friselle*, baguettes, some copper pots for sale, bars of cooking chocolate.

He was in his sixties, large-nosed and balding, with a white pepper growth across his sunken cheeks. He wore a newsboy cap like all the other old men who walked the streets with their canes on their daily *camminata*.

One day he must have followed her home because on a clear morning in May my mother walked out the heavy door of her apartment building from darkness into sudden light—in Italy nearly every apartment house has dark hallways, the lights dimmed and timed to cut costs, the sun blocked by the thick, cool stone walls—and there was this old man she had never seen, waiting for her.

He smiled and she smiled back. Then she began her walk to work, carrying an inexpensive handbag and wearing a calf-length skirt. Her legs, even in her old age,



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were absurdly feminine. I can imagine being inside this man's head and seeing my mother's legs and following them. One inheritance of living under the male gaze for centuries is that heterosexual women often look at other women the way a man would.

She could sense his presence behind her for many blocks, past the olive seller and the purveyor of ports and sherries. But he didn't merely follow. At a certain corner, when she turned, she caught a movement out of the side of her eye. The stone streets were naked at that hour, in the toothache of dawn, and she turned to see he had his penis, long, thin, and erect, out of his pants, and that he was rapidly exercising it, up and down, with his eyes on her in such a steady manner that it seemed possible that what was happening below his waist was managed by an entirely different brain.

She was frightened then, but years after the fact the fear of that first morning was bleached into sardonic amusement. For the months that followed, he would appear outside her apartment several mornings a week, and eventually he began to accompany her from the stand back to her home as well. At the height of their relationship, he was coming twice a day behind her.

My mother is dead now, so I can't ask her why she allowed it, day after day. I asked my older brother, instead, why she didn't do something, tell someone.

It was Italy, the 1960s. The police officers would have said, *Ma lascialo perdere, e un povero vecchio. E una meraviglia che ha il cazzo duro a sua età.*







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Leave it alone, he's a poor old man. It's a miracle he can get it up at his age.

My mother let this man masturbate to her body, her face, on her walk to work and on her walk back. She was not the type of woman to take pleasure in this. But I can't know for sure. My mother never spoke about what she wanted. About what turned her on or off. Sometimes it seemed that she didn't have any desires of her own. That her sexuality was merely a trail in the woods, the unmarked kind that is made by boots trampling tall grass. And the boots belonged to my father.



My father loved women in a way that used to be considered charming. He was a doctor who called the nurses *sugar* if he liked them and *sweetheart* if he did not. Above all, he loved my mother. His attraction to her was evident in a way that still makes me uncomfortable to recall.



While I never had occasion to wonder about my father's desire, something in the force of it, in the force of all male desire, captivated me. Men did not merely want. Men *needed*. The man who followed my mother to and from work every day *needed* to do so. Presidents forfeit glory for blow jobs. Everything a man takes a lifetime to build he may gamble for a moment. I have never entirely subscribed to the theory that powerful men have such outsize egos that they cannot suppose they will ever be caught; rather, I think that the desire is so strong in the instant that everything else—family, home, career—melts down into a little liquid cooler and thinner than semen. Into nothing.



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As I began to write this book, a book about human desire, I thought I'd be drawn to the stories of men. Their yearnings. The way they could overturn an empire for a girl on bended knee. So I began by talking to men: to a philosopher in Los Angeles, a schoolteacher in New Jersey, a politician in Washington, D.C. I was indeed drawn to their stories the way one is drawn to order the same entrée from a Chinese restaurant menu again and again.

The philosopher's story, which began as the story of a good-looking man whose less beautiful wife did not want to sleep with him, with all the attendant miserly agonies of dwindling passion and love, turned into the story of a man who wanted to sleep with the tattooed masseuse he saw for his back pain. She says she wants to run away with me to Big Sur, he texted early one bright morning. The next time we met I sat across from him at a coffee shop as he described the hips of the masseuse. His passion didn't seem dignified in the wake of what he had lost in his marriage; rather, it seemed perfunctory.

The men's stories began to bleed together. In some cases, there was prolonged courting; sometimes the courting was closer to grooming; but mostly, the stories ended in the stammering pulses of orgasm. And whereas the man's throttle died in the closing salvo of the orgasm, I found that the woman's was often just beginning. There was complexity and beauty and violence, even, in the way the women experienced the same event. In these ways and more, it was the female parts of an interlude that, in





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my eyes, came to stand for the whole of what longing in America looks like.

Of course, female desire can be just as bullish as male desire, and when desire was propulsive, when it was looking for an end it could control, my interest waned. But the stories wherein desire was something that could not be controlled, when the object of desire dictated the narrative, that was where I found the most magnificence, the most pain. It resembled pedaling a bicycle backward, the agony and futility and, finally, the entry into another world altogether.

To find these stories, I drove across the country six times. I loosely plotted my stops. Mostly I would land somewhere like Medora, North Dakota. I would order toast and coffee and read the local paper. I found Maggie this way. A young woman being called *whore* and *fat cunt* by women even younger than herself. There had been an alleged relationship with her married high school teacher. The fascinating thing, in her account, was the absence of intercourse. As she related it, he'd performed oral sex on her and didn't let her unzip his jeans. But he'd placed manila-yellow Post-it notes in her favorite book, *Twilight*. Next to passages about an enduring bond between two star-crossed lovers, he'd drawn parallels to their own relationship. What moved this young woman, what made her feel exalted, was the sheer number of the notes and how detailed they were. She could hardly believe that the teacher she so deeply admired had read the whole book, let alone taken the time to write such insightful commentary, as





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though he were conducting an advanced placement class on vampire lovers. He had, too, she recounted, sprayed the pages with his cologne, knowing she loved the way he smelled. To receive such notes, to experience such a relationship, and then to have it abruptly end: I could easily imagine the gaping hole that would leave.

I came across Maggie's story when things were going from bad to worse. She struck me as a woman whose sexuality and sexual experiences were being denied in a horrific way. I will be telling the narrative as seen through her eyes; meanwhile a version of this story was put before a jury who saw it very differently. Part of her narrative poses for the reader the all-too-familiar question of when and why and by whom women's stories are believed—and when and why and by whom they are not.

Throughout history, men have broken women's hearts in a particular way. They love them or half-love them and then grow weary and spend weeks and months extricating themselves soundlessly, pulling their tails back into their doorways, drying themselves off, and never calling again. Meanwhile, women wait. The more in love they are and the fewer options they have, the longer they wait, hoping that he will return with a smashed phone, with a smashed face, and say, I'm sorry, I was buried alive and the only thing I thought of was you, and feared that you would think I'd forsaken you when the truth is only that I lost your number, it was stolen from me by the men who buried me alive, and I've spent three years looking in phone books





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and now I have found you. I didn't disappear, everything I felt didn't just leave. You were right to know that would be cruel, unconscionable, impossible. Marry me.

Maggie was, by her account, ruined by her teacher's alleged crime, but she had something that the women who are left rarely have. A certain power, dictated by her age and her former lover's occupation. Maggie's power, she believed, was ordained by the law of the land. Ultimately, however, it wasn't.

Some women wait because if they don't, there's a threat of evanescence. He is the only one, in the moment, whom she believes she will ever desire. The problem can be economic. Revolutions take a long time to reach places where people share more *Country Living* recipes than articles about ending female subjugation.

Lina, a housewife in Indiana who hadn't been kissed in years, waited to leave her husband because she didn't have the money to exist apart from him. The spousal support laws in Indiana were not a reality that was available to her. Then she waited for another man to leave his wife. Then she waited some more.

The way the wind blows in our country can make us question who we are in our own lives. Often the type of waiting women do is to make sure other women approve, so that they may also approve of themselves.

Sloane, a poised restaurant owner, lets her husband watch her fuck other men. Occasionally there are two couples on a bed, but mostly it's him watching her, on video or in person, with another man. Sloane is beautiful. While





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her husband watches her fuck other men, a coveted stretch of ocean froths outside the bedroom window. Down the road, Cotswold sheep the color of oatmeal roam. A friend of mine who thought ménage à trois squalid and nearly despicable in the context of a group of swingers I met in Cleveland found Sloane's story illuminating, raw, relatable. And it's relatability that moves us to empathize.

I think about the fact that I come from a mother who let a man masturbate to her daily, and I think about all the things I have allowed to be done to me, not quite so egregious, perhaps, but not so different in the grand scheme. Then I think about how much I have wanted from men. How much of that wanting was what I wanted from myself, from other women, even; how much of what I thought I wanted from a lover came from what I needed from my own mother. Because it's women, in many of the stories I've heard, who have greater hold over other women than men have. We can make each other feel dowdy, whorish, unclean, unloved, not beautiful. In the end, it all comes down to fear. Men can frighten us, other women can frighten us, and sometimes we worry so much about what frightens us that we wait to have an orgasm until we are alone. We pretend to want things we don't want so nobody can see us not getting what we need.

Men did not frighten my mother. Poverty did. She told me another story; though I don't recall the precise circumstances of the telling, I know she didn't sit me down. The story wasn't dispensed over water crackers and rosé.



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More likely it was Marlboros at the kitchen table, zero windows open, the dog blinking through the smoke at our knees. She would have been Windexing the glass table.

The story was about a cruel man she was seeing right before she met my father. My mother had a number of words that intrigued and scared me. *Cruel* was among them.

She grew up very poor, peeing in pots, dotting her freckles with the urine because it was said to diminish the pigment. There was a single room for her, two sisters, and their parents. Rainwater came through the ceiling and dripped onto her face as she slept. She spent nearly two years in a sanatorium with tuberculosis. Nobody visited her, because no one could afford to make the trip. Her father was an alcoholic who worked in the vineyards. A baby brother died before his first birthday.

She eventually got out, made it to the city, but just before she did, in the maw of February, her mother fell ill. Stomach cancer. She was admitted to the local hospital, from which there was no coming back. One night there was a snowstorm, sleet smashing against cobblestones, and my mother was with this cruel man when she got word that her mother was dying and would be gone by morning. The cruel man was driving my mother to the hospital through the storm when they got into a terrible fight. My mother didn't provide details but said it ended with her on the gravel shoulder, in the heavy snow and darkening night. She watched the taillights disappear, no other cars on the frozen road. She didn't get to be with her mother at the end.



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To this day I'm not sure what *cruel* meant, in that context. I don't know if the man beat my mother, if he sexually assaulted her. I've always assumed that cruelty, in her world, involved some sexual threat. In my most gothic imaginings, I picture him trying to get laid the night that her mother was dying. I picture him trying to take a bite out of her side. But it was the fear of poverty and not the cruel man that stayed with her. That she could not call a taxi to get to the hospital. That she lacked agency. Lacked her own means.

A year or so after my father died, when we could get through a day without crying, she asked me to show her how to use the internet. She'd never used a computer in her life. Typing one sentence took a painful few minutes.

Just tell me what you want, I said, at the end of a day spent in front of the screen. We were both frustrated.

I can't, she said. It's something I need to do alone.

What? I asked. I'd seen everything of hers, all her bills, notes, even the handwritten one she meant for me to find in the event of her sudden death.

I want to see about a man, she said quietly. A man I knew before your father.

I was stunned, and even hurt. I wanted my mother to be my father's widow for all time. I wanted the notion of my parents to remain intact, even after death, even at the cost of my mother's own happiness. I didn't want to know about my mother's desire.

This third man, the owner of a vast jewelry empire, loved her so much he'd gone to the church to try to stop





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my parents' wedding while it was under way. A long time ago, she'd given me a ruby-and-diamond necklace, something she seemed to be giving away to belie how much it was cherished. I told her she could try to figure the computer out herself, but before she could, she got sick.

I think about my mother's sexuality and how she occasionally used it. The little things, the way she made her face up before she left the house or opened the door. To me, it always seemed a strength or a weakness, but never its own pounding heart. How wrong I was.

Still, I wonder how a woman could have let a man masturbate behind her back for so many days. I wonder if she cried at night. Perhaps she even cried for the lonely old man. It's the nuances of desire that hold the truth of who we are at our rawest moments. I set out to register the heat and sting of female want so that men and other women might more easily comprehend before they condemn. Because it's the quotidian minutes of our lives that will go on forever, that will tell us who we were, who our neighbors and our mothers were, when we were too diligent in thinking they were nothing like us. This is the story of three women.



Maggie

You get ready that morning like someone preparing for war. Your war paint is makeup. A neutral, smoky eye. A heavy lash. Dark rose blush, and a nude lip. Your hair is loosely curled and huge.

You learned how to do hair and makeup, by yourself, in front of mirrors, with Linkin Park and Led Zeppelin in the background. You are one of those girls who innately understand contouring and accessorizing, who plant bobby pins to good and buried use.

You wear wedge boots, leggings, and a sheer kimono top. You want him to know he is not dealing with a child anymore. You are twenty-three.

Of course, you also want him to want you still, to lament what he lost. You want him to sit at the dinner table later, meditating on the smiling bone of your hip.

Six years ago, you were smaller, and he loved your little hands. Back then, his own hands fluttered inside you. A lot has changed. Your father is dead. In August, he slit his wrists in a nearby cemetery. You used to talk to him about your dad, about the problems with your parents. He knew how one would go to pick up the other from a



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bar. Both drunk, but one worse than the other. Now you feel he'd understand, how you are worried about rain pattering on the ground above your dad. Is he getting wet down there, and wondering why you have left him in the cold, bucketing dark? Doesn't death supersede the stuff that happens in a courtroom? Doesn't death supersede all this other bullshit, even the cops and the lawyers? Isn't it, somehow, somewhere, still just the two of you?

You drive to Cass County District Court with your brother David, sharing a few cigarettes on the way. Part of your perfume is clean shower smell girdled with smoke. He hated it when you smoked so you lied. You said it was your parents' smoke, getting trapped in your hair and in the fibers of your navy hoodies. At a Catholic retreat you vowed to quit for him. He deserved all of you, including the parts that you did not want to give.

You could have made it so that he didn't show up today. Even though he had a right, the lawyers said, to be in there. Anyway, a small part of you wanted him here. You might even say one of the reasons you went to the police was to get him to show you his face again. Because most people will agree—when a lover shuts down, refuses to meet you, doesn't want his Oral-B back, doesn't need his trail shoes, doesn't return an email, goes out to buy another pair of trail shoes, for example, because that's better than dealing with your mousetrap pain, it's as though someone is freezing your organs. It's so cold you can't breathe. For six years, he stayed away. But he will come today, and he will come also to the trial, so in a way, it can be said that



MAGGIE

one of the reasons you're doing this is because it means you'll see him about six more times. This is an outlandish notion only if you don't know how a person can destroy you by the simple act of disappearing.

You're worried that you're going to want him. You wonder if his wife is worried. You picture her at home, disengaged from the children and watching the clock.

You park the car and smoke some more before going in. It's about three degrees outside but it's nice to smoke in the cold. Fargo sometimes feels like new beginnings. The silver trucks whooshing by on the highway. Trucks have defined destination points, coordinates that must hold up. Only trains you find to be more beautiful, freer. You inhale, and ice fills your lungs.

You get to the room first. Thank God. You and David and the prosecutor, Jon, and the co-prosecutor, Paul. You think of all these men by their first names and address them that way. They think you are overstepping your boundaries. They aren't actually representing you; they are representing the state of North Dakota. It's not as if the prosecutors have your back. They have your shadow, is more like it.

A court reporter walks in.

Then He walks in. With his lawyer, a somewhat sleek fuck named Hoy.

He sits across from you. He's wearing what he used to wear to school. A button-down shirt, a tie, and slacks. It's weird. Like, you were expecting him to be in a suit coat. Something more dressy and serious. This outfit makes him



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feel knowable again. You wonder if you have been wrong these last few years. You took his silence to mean indifference, but perhaps he has been wallowing in otherworldly dread, just like you. He had a third child, you heard, and in your mind you pictured swing sets and his wife rosy-faced and everybody gestating life while you sat shivering in ice baths of self-loathing. You grew heavier and your makeup grew heavier, more layers. But all that time he was dying, maybe. Missing you. Consigning himself, like a poet, to decades of brokenness. The swing set is rusted. The middle-class fence marks the boundaries of his prison. The wife is the warden. The children, well. They are the reason; it is for them that he chooses to remain unhappy, without you.

For the briefest of moments you want to reach across with your small hands that he loved—Does he still love them now? Where does the love of hands go when it dies?—and hold his face in them and say, Oh fuck I'm sorry for betraying you. I was terrifically hurt and angry, and you stole several years from my life. It wasn't regular, what you did, and now here I am. Look at me. I put this war paint on, but underneath I'm scarred and scared and horny and tired and love you. I've gained thirty pounds. I've been kicked out of school a few times. My father has just killed himself. I take all these medications, look in my bag, there's a shitload of them. I'm a girl with the pills of an old woman. I should be dating boys with weed breath but instead I fully personified my victim costume.



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I'm hanging by a fawn hanger at Party City. You never wrote back.

Almost, you almost reach for him, as much to say you're sorry as to beg him to take care of you. Nobody is taking care of you the way you know he can. Nobody is listening the way that he did. All those hours. Like a father and a husband and a teacher and your best friend.

His eyes come up off the table to meet yours. They are cold and black and dead. Little agates, gleaming and stern, and older than you remember. In fact, you don't remember these eyes at all. They used to be filled with love, lust. He used to suck your tongue into his mouth as if he wanted another tongue.

Now he hates you. It's clear. You brought him here, out of his cozy home with the three children and the wife who will follow him into sepulchers. You brought him out into the demon slush of January, into this dingy room, and you are forcing him to spend all his earnings and all his parents' savings on this slick and joyless attorney, and you are fixing to ruin his life. All that he has built. Every Fisher-Price learning desk he has switched to *On* in the airless expanse of seven a.m. He sold one home and bought another because of you.

In North Dakota right now, Aaron Knodel is Teacher of the Year; across the whole state he is deemed the absolute best in the business. And here you are, you vagabond freak, you spawn of alcoholics, you child of suicide, you girl who has been with older men before and gotten them



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into trouble, army men, upright men of America, and here you are again, you destructive tart, trying to take down the Teacher of the Year. He exhales at you pungently. Breath of eggs.

The other thing that is abundantly clear—you must stop caring. Immediately. If you don't, you might never get out of this room. You search for the end of your heart and, unbelievably, you find it. Your gratitude to yourself and to God is dizzying. How many days have you felt you were doing the right thing? Today is one. Maybe the only one.

You thought you'd still want to fuck him. You'd stalked him online. It's not even stalking these days. You open your computer and ghouls pile up. You can't avoid obsequious write-ups in local papers. Or Facebook will advertise a link to the store where your former lover's gloves are from. The recent pictures you saw made you still tingle, and you smarted from bygone lust. But as you sit here now, there's nothing. His tight, petite mouth. His imperfect skin. His lips aren't sensual but dry and distracting. He looks sickly, as if he's been eating muffins and drinking AA coffee and Coca-Cola and sitting in a drafty basement scowling at the wall.

Good morning, says his lawyer, Hoy, who is a terror, with his mustachio of wiry, wizard hairs. He has made sure to announce to the press that his client had taken and passed a polygraph test, even though the prosecutor said it was unlikely to be admissible in court.



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You can see the judgment in Hoy's whiskers. He's the type that makes you feel like a poorly educated piece of shit with a car that won't start on winter mornings like this one.

He says, Would you please state your full name for the record.

The court reporter taps the keys, your brother David breathes with you in unity, you say your full name out loud. You say, Maggie May Wilken. You swish your long, thought-out hair.

The first round of questions is to loosen you up without your catching on. Hoy asks you about the time you spent with your sister Melia in Washington state, Melia and her husband, Dane, who is in the army—these are the relatives you also visited in Hawaii—but for now he is asking about when they lived in Washington. This was after Aaron. Because your life can be divided that way. Before Aaron and After Aaron. It can also be divided into before your dad's suicide and after it, but Aaron was the kickoff for everything if you want to be honest.

He asks about the dating site PlentyOfFish. You did meet a few guys there while you were in Washington. But this lawyer is acting as though you were selling your body for a Coors Light. You know that men like him have the power to make the laws you live by. Men who talk as though dating sites were Backpage ads. As though you are a girl who takes pictures of your face peeking out from between your own thighs.



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In reality you met a few guys from the site who were losers. It was sad and you didn't sleep with anybody or even enjoy free drinks. You feel embarrassed. This was before people were posting Instagrams for the purpose of arousing envy. This was the early and slow time of the new age. Hoy also asks about a site that he doesn't even know how to spell. You go, What's that, and he goes, I don't know, but have you ever been on it, and you go, No, I don't know what it is. And you are thinking, Neither do you, you prick. But his formality makes you afraid to contradict him. You bet his wife and children have learned to lie to him regularly, to escape the kind of needling criticism that can wreck a soul.

He asks about the fighting between you and your father. Your dear dead dad, under loam and rain. Back then you two fought a lot and you say so. Fighting over what, says Hoy, and you say, Anything. You are not holding back, no matter what it means, or what it allows them to think.

He asks about your siblings, about how they all left the family home early. You didn't know it then, that a discovery deposition is exactly that. They are building a case against you with your own words. Showing how hardscrabble you were. What a loose girl, maybe, you were. On all these dating sites, with all these siblings; your parents were copulating drunks who made all these kids and then let them scatter about the country, creating complications and surfing them like waves to new states. You don't live on the nice side of West Fargo, you live on the lesser side, unlike Mr. Knodel, North Dakota's



MAGGIE

Teacher of the Year, who lives in an attractive, neutral-colored house with a hose that coils up and grass nobody forgets to water.

You look at him, during this. And you think about back then. And you think, What if time had never gone forward? And you could be back there again. When everything was clean and everybody was alive. What if your hands and his hands were still friends. And Hoy says, You indicated that prior to your junior year, that you'd been close with Mr. Knodel before that.

You say, Correct.

How did that come about? says Hoy.

You think, hard, about the answer to this. You close your mind's eye. And just like that, there you are. Out of the black death of your present, and back in the considerable heaven of the past.

Maggie's destiny arrives one afternoon without a clarion call. It comes on cat feet, like everything else in the world that has the power to destroy you.

She had only heard about him. Some of the girls were talking about how hot he was. Slick dark hair with a little front wing, like it had been gelled into permanent salute. Charming, dark eyes. The kind of teacher who makes you want to come to school, even on cold North Dakota mornings. His name, in the hallways, had become the kind of name one whispers, because of how much excitement it conjured.

Mister Knodel.