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ONE

THE THING ABOUT LOS ANGELES IS THAT IT'S awful and I hate it, but when I'm there, nowhere else exists, and I can't imagine leaving. It's a difficult place to be old or sick or fat or poor or without a strong social media presence. It's not an easy place to be young, either.

After college graduation, I postpone my return from Boston by one week, then two, cat sitting for a professor. It's the second week that drives my mother over the edge. She calls, she emails, she accuses me of loving the professor's cat more than her. She says don't I know how hard she has been working, how lonely and depressed she has been, how she has been counting down the days until my return.

I get sick upon arrival, aching limbs at baggage claim blooming into a fever by the following day. Garden-variety virus, but it hits my mother's sweet spot. "You're run-down, poor baby. I'll take care of you," she says.

My father sends a "welcome home" text. *Hope to see you for dinner soon*, he writes. He doesn't ask where I'll be living or if I'd like to stay with him. I suspect he doesn't want the infringement on his space, his freedom.

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It's strange being back in my mother's house. She has just finished renovating, and it barely looks familiar, though somehow items from long ago—CD players, pants from GapKids—

have resurfaced in the new version of my old bedroom. The sight of them is unsettling.

My parents divorced when I was ten, during the summer before fifth grade. They were civil, but it was terrible. My mother suggested we go on a diet together. "It'll be fun," she told me. "You'll look great for the start of the school year." She said she knew I had been overeating because I could tell she was unhappy in her marriage. This was news to me. She taught me all about calories and the places they hide. I dipped carrots in Dijon mustard while my friends at day camp traded Skittles and M&M's, candy coatings melting in a rainbow smear on their palms.

My weeks were split between my parents. My father kept the house in the Hollywood Hills, and my mother moved to an apartment in Santa Monica, across the street from the beach. There was an infinity pool on the roof and towels were provided. She called it Heartbreak Hotel.

A few nights a week, I would ride my scooter to the Third Street Promenade with my mother and younger brother. While my brother browsed the toy store, I punished myself in the basement fitting rooms of GapKids, trying on jeans two sizes too small and watching my stomach pucker as I did up the button. I practiced sitting casually on the bench in the fitting room, as if I were on a playground bench at recess. I made believe I was talking about normal things with my classmates and kept an eye on my stomach in the mirror.

My mother moved several times over the next five years, a real tour du West LA, before landing back in Santa Monica, two miles east of Heartbreak Hotel. When I think back on those years, I remember a choking sensation. My father's silence, my mother's

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longing, my brother's rage. My bottomless hunger. My psychiatrist kept increasing dosages, switching medications. Trial and error, she said. I would stare at the tapestry behind her head and say, week after week, "I want to stop falling asleep in class."

The day my mother moved into this house was also the day I got drunk for the first time. Early evening, a bottle of Grey Goose on the kitchen counter, carton of orange juice next to it. I helped myself. "If you drink that screwdriver, you can't drive," my mother said. I said I didn't care, and I drank that one and then another and another until the floor tilted. I was fifteen. I couldn't drive at night on a learner's permit anyway.

My parents were both from New England, high-achieving youngest children of long-suffering Jewish immigrant mothers. A perfect match on paper. My mother moved to Los Angeles for my father, a literary historian who moved for his research, wooed by a trove of archives acquired by USC. My mother often said that my father was the only person who would willingly relinquish tenure at Harvard. It took me a long time to understand the double-edged slice of that comment.

My mother never liked Los Angeles, but she also never left. She stayed for my brother and me, so that our lives would be stable and we could have a close, or closer, relationship with our father. She made do with what she believed to be a pale imitation of the career she imagined having in Boston, where her star was on the rise and her expertise—as a lawyer and legal activist doing groundbreaking work on victims' rights and rape laws—was more highly valued.

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Until I went to college, I didn't know where my mother ended and I began, a lack of differentiation more common in toddlers than teenagers. It was a problem my mother didn't recognize as

such, which was of course part of the problem. Her life's purpose was to sacrifice and provide for me, and mine was to make her feel sufficiently loved in return. What could possibly go wrong?

Growing up, I assumed I would become a lawyer, like her, or go into politics, become an advocate for issues affecting women. A public feminist, broadly conceived. But a Capitol Hill internship the summer after freshman year—when Democrat dreams of single-payer health care were shattered—disillusioned me about politics and I realized I didn't actually want to be a lawyer.

I spent much of college trying to develop my own interests and a fundamental sense of self. The only thing that didn't feel like a hand-me-down was my love of words, my belief in the power of storytelling. Before benzos and SSRIs, I had books and TV. I was never a movie person. I preferred ongoing narratives, parallel realities to dip into alongside my own. Different stories for different moods, like vitamins to address certain deficiencies. I became an English major. I read a lot of novels.

I liked Cambridge, the unfashionable bookish atmosphere, the red bricks and history. I considered academia. As a trial run, I took a graduate seminar on intertextuality, which involved endless discussions about "the literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces" and "'textasy' as the 'release' of the subject in a sexual or textual 'coming.'"

I spoke exclusively in fragments, stringing together phrases I barely understood. The professor was invariably pleased with my insights. She complimented my analytical clarity. So much performative nonsense, and to what end? All to spend a decade picking at the carcasses of my favorite books and competing for underpaid jobs in places I don't want to live? I might as well work in television.

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I grew up in the shadow of Hollywood, both figuratively and literally, the sign itself visible from the rooftop playground of my elementary school. I hid behind the role of Smart Girl, smug with intellectual superiority. I was meant for Harvard, not Hollywood.

But Harvard was its own Hollywood, I learned, just with different jargon and celebrities.

So, really, why not television?

It's the golden age. Everyone's talking about the quality of the writing, the power to catalyze social change, even. Prestige dramas are the new social novel, my thesis adviser assures me. *The Wire* is *Middlemarch*. Why write academic books about increasingly esoteric subjects for an audience of approximately twelve when I could be a part of this creative renaissance? It's what I want—what I've always wanted. I ran in the other direction out of insecurity, not disinterest.

And so, though I am daunted by the prospect, I move back to LA.

That I get sick upon return is, in its way, a blessing. It helps me skip past the claustrophobia and panic that typically smother me upon arrival, a cling wrap that I have to claw my way through. Or maybe, I think, as I roll over in bed and wave my arms in search of a cool patch of sheet, mood softened by an Ambien-NyQuil haze, maybe I've grown.

As soon as my fever breaks and my head clears, I start job hunting. For what job, I'm not sure. I meet with everyone I know and everyone they know, shuttling from sleepy production company offices in the valley to crowded backlot bungalows to try-hard offices in Hollywood where I struggle to sit in a dignified position on the

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neon foam amoebas that someone deemed a step up from regular old chairs. I feel guilty about using connections, but there's no apparent alternative. This is a town full of people with connections.

Most of the people I meet are producers. Few have produced anything of late.

Somebody advises me, early on, that when the assistant offers water, I should always accept. My car fills up with plastic bottles, rolling on the floor of the back seat. I have coffees, many coffees. I nod and smile until my cheeks hurt.

A writer whose daughter went to my elementary school and with whom my parents are friendly asks if I've thought about working in development. "That's where the power is," she says. "Hollywood needs more smart executives. If you want to make change in a big, noticeable way, really impact how women are portrayed on television and what stories get told, you need power."

She tells me about a meeting she had that ended with her saying yes, she would be delighted to work on a network drama called *Marsipan* (logline: "Decades after humankind has conquered the red planet, a diverse group of colonists form Mars's first 'Reduced-Gravity Bake-Off'").

I learn that development is the department in charge of coming up with new shows—television's editorial department, so to speak. It's a job with a real career path, a ladder of executive positions to climb. It sounds like something I could be good at, something I might enjoy.

Production companies have development departments, as do studios and networks. If she were me, the writer says, she'd want to be at a network. At a production company or a studio, you're closer to the material, but you're still a seller, you have no control

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over what ends up on air. But at a network, you're in the buyer's seat; you hold the keys to the castle.

Development. The idea takes root, the appeal obvious. I have an answer now, to the question of what I want to do.

MY BIGGEST BREAK comes in July in the form of a meeting, arranged by my mother, with her old friend Robert Baum, the longtime chairman of XBC. XBC is the youngest of the big broadcast networks, known for edgier programming than the older stalwarts. In advance of the meeting, I watch as many XBC shows as I can. I worry too much about what to wear. I read interviews with Robert, who is in his early seventies and comes across as charismatic and good humored. It's often noted that he is the kind of boss who inspires great loyalty from his employees. He has been at the network for over twenty years and shepherded many of the biggest early-aughts hits to prime-time success, ambitious, character-driven shows that seemed risky at the time, better suited to cable. Now, after long runs, nearly all those shows are off-air, and, like the other broadcast networks, XBC is struggling to compete with digital and streaming services and cord-cutting millennials who don't watch live TV. Robert's a member of the old guard, but he's not considered out of touch. He knows he's part of a changing landscape, and he's ready to change with it. Most important, my mother says, is the loyalty aspect: it shows he's a good boss, that his top executives have been at the network so long.

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Robert's office is perched on the top floor of the executive building on XBC's affiliated studio lot. I have been on a studio lot before, though only a few times, and I feel self-conscious and scrambled

by the protocol. The building's lobby is all white and polished marble and well-dressed people moving with purpose. Next to me in the elevator: a woman so thin, she looks flattened. Flawless blowdry, icy-blue blazer, and a familiar face. Veronica Ross, I realize. President of XBC, a regular feature in various "Women Who Are Changing Hollywood" roundups. I've read about her. Have fantasized, tentatively, about becoming her. She does not make eye contact with me or appear to register my presence in any way. I look down at my feet, the toes pinched and aching in my mother's heels, which are too tight even though we theoretically wear the same size. ("So they're a little tight; are you planning to run a marathon?" my mother said after condemning all the shoes in my closet.)

Veronica strides ahead of me down the hall, into the waiting room outside Robert's office, where two assistants sit at side-by-side desks.

"Morning, Veronica," one of the assistants says. Veronica barely stops to nod.

I take a seat on the couch across from the assistants and pretend to check my email, to have somewhere to direct my eyes. *Relax. Try to relax. You probably don't look as dumpy or desperate as you feel.*

Twenty minutes later, Veronica strides out, and shortly thereafter, one of the assistants tells me to go on in.

The office itself is huge. An imposing desk, two leather couches, and a handful of tastefully upholstered armchairs. A well-curated coffee table featuring carefully fanned copies of *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, a signed football in a case, and two glass bottles in the shape of handguns, filled with golden liquid.

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"Tequila," Robert says. "The only kind of guns I'm allowed to have in here."

He is shorter than I was expecting, based on his online headshots. What my mother would call a Jewish five-eight. Meaning five-six. His voice is what strikes me most. Deep, booming, and Boston accented. He sounds like my mother in a way few people in LA do. I remember my mother telling me that the first time she heard Robert speak, she went up to him and said, "Are you by chance from Salem?"

"How did you know?" he had asked.

"You sound just like my father, and he was from Salem," my mother said.

Now, as I sit across from Robert and give him a little spiel about myself, he interrupts me. "You sound just like your mother," he says. "It's wild."

"Thanks," I say.

"Do you get that a lot?" he asks.

"I do."

I don't think the two of us sound that much alike, but there must be things I don't notice. Inflections. Intonations. Also, I don't really know what my own voice sounds like.

"I love your mother," he says.

"Join the club!" I say, shifting my legs in a futile attempt to dislodge the underwear that has migrated uncomfortably from ass cheek to crack. "And I love XBC," I add. "I admire the way you built the brand and pushed the limits of what broadcast can do." I couldn't sound more like an anonymous cover letter if I tried.

"So you want to polish brass on the *Titanic*, do you?" he says.

"I hear it's the fastest ship afloat."

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He laughs, and I feel a quick flash of relief. "If anyone avoids the iceberg, it'll be us," he says. "But only time will tell."

"I have time."

"Let me guess. You watch more cable than broadcast, right? That's your profile. More shows every year full of young people getting naked and doing drugs, and that's fine, some of them are very good, but all the fear-mongering articles fawning over premium cable and asking, 'Is broadcast dead?' Nobody mentions the numbers! Cable, you're in the hundred thousands. And that's a hit. Us? Millions. Not a competition! You want viewers? We've got viewers."

"Where's that story?" I ask.

"You're telling me! These cable honchos, they think it's edgy to show people shtupping on screen. You know what's edgy? Being provocative without cheap tricks. That's what we're about. I don't want fluffy schlock or another *CSI* set in god knows where because they're running out of good cities."

"I love *Justice Served*," I tell Robert. It's XBC's cop show, one of Robert's biggest successes. For a show about violent crime, it's strangely soothing to watch, in large part due to the formulaic structure of the episodes. You know the first suspect is a red herring and that there will be a big twist forty minutes in. Final scenes are always in the courtroom—justice is not necessarily served, because that would be too predictable, but things work out often enough to sustain hope. I'm not the only one who likes this show—it's hugely popular, into its sixteenth season now. The chemistry between the two detectives, Newman and Coffey, is what keeps it going. It's been will-they-or-won't-they for years, but they haven't so far, and there's something commendable in that. Blake Peterson's rugged, short-fused Detective Newman is the more popular of the two, but I've always liked Coffey best. The actress who plays her is muscu-

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lar in both body and attitude. Alluring because of how much on-screen space she takes up, not how little. She's nearly the same size as Blake Peterson. I get his appeal, I guess. I wouldn't *not* fuck him. But I feel no desire to talk to him, no sense of an interesting person behind the part. Then again, I've always had the tendency to ascribe more dimension to women and to objectify men. Problematic, sure, but in this male-dominated hellscape of a world, what's so wrong with a little overcorrection?

This I don't say to Robert Baum, of course. I'm no fool. I tell him only how much I like the show and congratulate him on its recently celebrated milestone: fifteen years on air.

"The little show that could," he says. "Newman and Coffey are keeping XBC alive."

I tell Robert about my interest in development and, god help me, about how my undergraduate thesis on representations of gender-based oppression in the works of George Eliot furthered my belief in the social and political power of fictional narratives.

"Over my head," Robert says, with a laugh. "I was always a Hemingway fan myself."

I smile and nod, glance over at the tequila guns on the coffee table. Figures. "He's good too," I say. I've never liked Hemingway. All the tortured masculinity and bitch-goddess women, though yes, fine, the man could write a great sentence.

Robert goes on to explain that he isn't kept apprised of all the comings and goings on the assistant level, but he knows there is fairly frequent turnover, and I sound like I have the drive that it takes to succeed. His cheeks pinken as he leans over to pick up the phone on a side table. "Can you leave word from me for Diane in HR?" he says, presumably to one of the assistants beyond the door.

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He returns the receiver to its cradle and presses a button on the wall. The door to the waiting room swings open, which I take as my cue to depart. I stand. "You're a good one, I can tell," he says, remaining seated. "And if we don't snap you up, someone else will."

The buoyancy lasts for a few days, until I go in for an HR meeting, which is in a different building with different parking and entrance instructions, so I arrive feeling just as frazzled as I did the first time. I meet with two women in HR, neither of whom are as encouraging as Robert. They both remind me that I am underqualified; they usually require agency experience. The first woman, Diane, an EVP with a large office, though not nearly as large as Robert's, asks how I feel about doing personal tasks.

"I'd prefer to do professional ones?" I answer.

She nods, thinking.

Afterward, a lower-level executive with a smaller office and only one guest chair asks if I have experience booking travel and making reservations.

"Yes?" I say.

HR sends my résumé to an executive at the affiliated studio who is hiring an assistant, and I have a good meeting with him, though the oligarchic power structure through which this studio and XBC are intertwined but somehow independent remains opaque to me. The executive gives me a script to write coverage on, and I spend a long, careful time on it. The job goes to someone else, a friend of his current assistant.

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There are more meetings that go nowhere, other leads I follow up on. Hours spent smiling and nodding and hearing people say,

"You sound great; you're so impressive." Another assistant job that I get close on, two rounds of interviews, but it goes to someone with more experience.

My mother calls Robert Baum again in September, ostensibly to talk about whether he might have legal business for her (no, not right now, but she's at the top of his list), but mostly to follow up on my behalf. He promises to check in on the situation, which sets off a chain of events leading to a call from Diane in HR, who offers me a floating temp position in the development department. It's only temporary, she explains, barely a step above an internship, but if I impress the executives, I'll have a better shot of landing a permanent assistant job when one opens than I would if I were an external candidate.

I accept immediately.

The weekend before I start work, my mother and I get our nails done together for the first time in years, and I allow her to convince me to put acrylic tips on my ravaged stubs so that I will look like an adult woman. My mother has worn acrylics for decades. Deep red, usually, though sometimes pink. When she is anxious or stressed, she tears them off. Throughout my childhood, there were nails everywhere: in purses, pockets, around the house. Sometimes, if it was just one or two nails, she would save them in her wallet and bring them to the salon for reattachment. I often accompanied her. Before the divorce, it was I Love Nails on Beverly. After, across town, Tracy's Nails on Montana.

"Me again," she would say, voice ringing over the front door bell's chime.

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"Full set?" they'd ask.

I began tearing off my nails around age ten, but these were my real nails, not fake tips. A brief satisfaction, though sometimes too much would come off, raw pink skin exposed. Sometimes blood and a throbbing that would linger. I stopped enjoying trips to the nail salon. But I accompanied my mother for a long time because I would go anywhere and everywhere with her.

I have not been to Tracy's Nails in years. "All grown up!" Tracy says to me. "You look so much like your mother."

"Prettier than I ever was," my mother says.

"The same!" Tracy says, passing her sister-in-law, who has been tasked with my hands, a basket of gel nail polish samples for me to consider. Plastic wheels of nails, more shades of red than anyone could possibly need.

"You know what my mother told me when she was born?" my mother tells Tracy. "She said, 'She looks just like you, but with much finer features.'"

"Well, that was Nana being a bitch," I say, relinquishing my hands to the sister-in-law.

"How old are you now?" Tracy asks me.

"Twenty-two."

"She just graduated from Harvard!" my mother adds, loud enough to prompt congratulations from the rest of the salon. The woman two stations to my right, who is wearing a sweatshirt that reads NAMASTAY IN BED and fur-lined Gucci slides, leans over to ask if I grew up here and what schools I went to. I answer, giving the names of my private elementary and secondary schools. She nods with obvious approval and I feel conflicting zaps of satisfaction and disgust. I glance down at her feet, the overflow of fur. It looks like she stepped on a couple of squirrels.

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These days, my elementary school has a lower acceptance rate than Harvard. When I, at two years old, was wait-listed alongside the son of one of the most famous actors in Hollywood, my mother went as far as calling the White House for a letter of recommendation. I felt out of step with my classmates, who brought in their parents' Academy Awards for show-and-tell.

"We're not like them; we're not from here," my mother would remind me. But I *was* from here.

Many of my classmates' parents weren't from LA either, this being a city people come to, not from. But my parents weren't here for *the industry*. Therein lay the difference.

I didn't enjoy elementary school. I wanted more rigorous academics. When presented with suggested research topics like *dinosaurs*, *ballet*, and *Shirley Temple*, I opted for *underrepresented suffragettes* instead. I gave a presentation on Eleanor Roosevelt, including extensive discussion of her sexuality and rumored relationship with Lorena Hickok. I asked to do my sixth-grade book report on *Lolita*. My poor teachers.

"You must be so proud," Tracy says to my mother.

"Of course. We had a lovely time at graduation. She gave one of the commencement speeches!"

Nothing to do but smile. *Lovely* is not the word for it.

A month before graduation, after I told her I'd been selected as a commencement speaker, my mother said she didn't think she could come. That the whole experience would be too painful for her, prompting traumatic memories of her own college graduation, which Nana didn't attend because my mother couldn't secure a ticket for Nana's new husband.

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"So you're telling me that your mother's failure to put you first

and attend your graduation hurt you in a lasting way, and as a result you're going to do the exact same thing to me?" I cried into the phone.

"No, no, no!" she cried back.

Both of us beside ourselves with frustration.

"I've always been there for you. Nana was never there for me."

"I know."

"My college graduation was different," my mother reminded me. "I had just been raped." She sat on the platform in her borrowed robe, struggling to find a comfortable position, ass still sore from the shots they gave her at the hospital. No mother in the audience to show her support.

My mother was raped in a Boston parking garage five days before her college graduation. This is something I've known for as long as I can remember. I knew about rape before I knew about sex. Before I fully understood the mechanics of it, at least. I didn't know this was unusual, either. There was a song called "It Wasn't Me" that came out when I was in fifth grade. I thought it was about a lousy rape-allegation defense: *She saw the marks on my shoulder (wasn't me). Heard the words that I told her (wasn't me). Heard the screams gettin' louder (wasn't me).* I shared my interpretation with my classmates, who went home with questions for their parents.

I grew up hearing my mother talk openly about rape—in speeches, on TV, on the radio, with friends. As a child, I didn't have any objective understanding of her prominence, but I did know that she was famous enough to be recognized in public fairly regularly. It was because of a book she published just before I was born called *Simple Rape*, which led to a regular column in a big

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newspaper, a weekend radio show, TV appearances, and lots of panels and lectures and advisory boards. She practiced law, too, but selectively, focusing on sexual assault and gender discrimination. Passion projects.

"What's a complicated rape?" I remember asking when I was eleven.

"Simple rape is the most complicated kind," my mother said. She explained that a simple rape is when the victim knows her attacker, and he doesn't beat or threaten her with a weapon. It's the most common form of rape. Comparatively few people are raped by an armed stranger, as my mother was. An armed stranger who also stole her purse. Because of this, the police believed her. If the rapist were someone she knew, a boyfriend or acquaintance, a man with a good reputation, they would have been more critical, she explained. Same goes with a jury.

How inspired I was by my mother's ability to turn her trauma into fuel. To transform an experience in which she was believed into a weapon to use on behalf of those who were not. Her own rapist was never caught. She went on to law school, then cofounded the first nonprofit legal center dedicated to victims' rights. Then, collecting all she'd learned from her experience as both victim and advocate, she wrote *Simple Rape*, an examination of the ways the law mistreats rape victims.

She came to my graduation in the end.

I made a reservation for dinner at a restaurant in Boston for my parents, brother, and me. New England seafood meets New American, somewhere well reviewed and recommended by a friend but, unbeknownst to me, located just a few blocks from the original

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location of my mother's victims' rights law center. A painful reminder of the world she left behind, the life she might have had. "How could you have chosen this restaurant?" she said. "How could you do this to me?"

How could I have known?

My brother, newly nineteen, radiated fury. He was on a confusing new diet of exclusively chicken and eggs. "Your brother can't have anything on this menu. Did you even think about him?" my mother said. "Of course not. You only think about yourself."

There were many tears, from everyone but my father, who refused to engage and made eye contact only with the branzino on his plate. We left before dessert. I was too drained to party hop with my friends. It was then that I decided to stay in Boston a little longer, to recuperate before returning to my mother once more.

"Doesn't that look better?" my mother says now, after the UV light machine dings and I remove my newly dried glossy-nailed hands. "Not too long, very natural."

She is right, they do look better like this. It's harder to type, though. The nails make contact with the keys before the pads of my fingers do, and it's a foreign and frustrating feeling. My mother assures me that I will get used to it. I'm not writing anything lengthy these days anyway, just cover letters and networking emails.

Now that I am back, now that she has, for the moment, what she wants—which is me, close to her—we are in a period of calm; we are even having fun. We go shoe shopping, get stoned, order sushi, and watch *Justice Served*. We are, together, indomitable. Pity the poor shmuck who tries to pull one over on us at the car dealership. The look on his face when we jab back. We know nothing about cars but everything about the sounds of sexist condescension.

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My mother takes it a little far, with vague threats of a lawsuit, and I feel a familiar blend of pride and panic—pride in her strength and panic at her potential for overkill, like the time she wrote a nationally syndicated column about IBM's poor customer service when her laptop died.

Maybe the problem was that I've never had an independent life in LA. The catch, the question to which I don't have an answer and so am trying not to ask: Is it a life of my own if I need her help to create it?

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TWO

IT IS HARDER TO GET ONTO A STUDIO LOT THAN INTO the halls of Congress. I know it's ridiculous, but it's still exciting. My name in the system, the gate lifting open. Development is in the same building as Robert's office, directly across from New York Street, which is a block full of building facades, complete with a fake diner and fake subway stop, dark green railing and bright red dot for the 1 train on the sign above it.

On my first day, I check in with the department coordinator, who is to be my supervisor. Her name is Allyn, and she seems surprised by my presence. "Oh!" she says when I show up at her desk. Her eyes perfectly lined but lips bare and chapped. She looks at me for so long, I begin to wonder if I forgot to say hello out loud. "Are you starting today?" she asks.

She rustles up an old laptop from a filing cabinet marked INTERNS and sends me off to an empty cubicle in the front bullpen, down the hall from her desk, with a printout of instructions for setting up my email. "These instructions probably won't work, but you should follow them so when you call the IT help desk later, you can say you tried everything."

I spend the next three hours trying and failing to set up my email. A welcome break when Allyn invites me to join her for lunch in the building cafeteria. Once we are seated, she tells me to turn around. In the booth behind us, Robert Baum drinks green Gatorade out of

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a wineglass. The cafeteria only has compostable plastic cups. "That's the chairman," Allyn says. "He brings his own glasses. Sometimes he likes to eat lunch down here, like he's one of the people."

It has been a few months since I met with Robert, and I don't know that he'll recognize me on sight. After all, think of how many people he meets on a daily basis. I am reluctant to reveal my connection, lest it change how Allyn treats me.

Over lackluster salads, Allyn gives me a brief rundown of the department, a flurry of names and titles. She speaks quickly and often begins in the middle of a thought, as if I know who or what she is talking about without her needing to explain. I appreciate the chattiness and the instant intimacy—Allyn is close to six feet tall and the kind of beautiful you might presume to be bitchy—but I also don't understand most of what she's saying, and I'm hard-pressed to figure out whether this is because I know so little about TV or because Allyn has omitted a critical part of a sentence or story. Allyn is twenty-seven, and she recently received a title bump from Assistant to Coordinator, which means she is responsible for "doing more grids and tracking, you know," though she still performs assistant duties as well. She keeps saying "you know" about things that I absolutely do not know.

She has been at the network for two years; before that, ICM, and before that, the University of Indiana, where all her siblings also went and in the vicinity of which her entire family lives. Her family was surprised by her decision to come out to LA, and she suspects they still think it's a temporary plan, that it's only a matter of time until she decides to move back home, marry some guy, ideally her high school boyfriend, who is the most boring person who ever lived, and start popping out babies.

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"Please tell me you were prom queen," I say.

"Only homecoming," she says. "It was stupid."

"All-American girl! Student body vice president?" I venture.

Her eyes widen, true surprise. "How did you guess?"

Friendly, fun, and inoffensive. "Just a hunch," I say. I was student body vice president too, but of a different sort. At my all-girls high school, I was more respected than I was popular: people joined the extracurricular clubs I led but didn't invite me to the best parties. I didn't bother running for president; the field was too crowded, and I knew I would never win. In my campaign speech to the student body, I mentioned that I'd had a rough month, that my boyfriend had dumped me and started dating one of my best friends. The sharp intake of breath from five hundred female mouths. "But it's okay," I added. "I'm okay." I got a standing ovation then, right in the middle of the speech. It was my mother's idea to mention the breakup. I balked at first, concerned it was a cheap and desperate gambit. Also, the girl in question was in the audience. But my mother said it would work, and she was right.

"Where are you from?" Allyn asks.

"Here," I say.

"Here?" She looks around the room.

"Not this cafeteria. But a few miles east."

"Oh, wow," she says. "Almost nobody is actually from here, but the ones who are . . . You're lucky. It's an advantage. When I got here after college, I didn't know anything. I didn't even know all the things I didn't know, you know?"

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Allyn tells me she's hoping that after a year as a coordinator, she'll be able to make the jump to manager, which is the most junior executive position. She also tells me that the department

head's assistant is burned out and trying to find another job. Gregory, the department head, is super demanding and kind of a dick, she explains, but he's also one of the youngest department heads in town and on his way up. "It's a tough desk and a big jump up from being a temp, but if you can pull it off, you'll really impress people," she says.

"How do I do that?" I ask.

"Well, his assistant calls in sick all the time and honestly is so lazy these days, so you'll definitely get a chance to cover that desk. Just make sure you learn the basics first, on less scary desks, like calls and scheduling and expenses and stuff. That way, when you get to Gregory, all you have to do is not fuck up in a major way. Being an assistant isn't hard work, it's just a lot of it."

On our way out, we pass Robert, and he smiles in a general way at both of us. "A sight for sore eyes," he says. "How's it going?" This question, I think, is directed at me. Whether it means he knows who I am or vaguely recognizes me and feels that he should, I'm not sure.

"Great!" I say. "Day one!" Almost immediately embarrassed by the pathetic ring of my voice.

"Try the soup," he says, with a lift of his plastic spoon. A drop of orange liquid plops from spoon to table, landing dangerously close to his white button-downed stomach, which protrudes up against the table's edge. "Pumpkin bisque. It's delicious."

"Will do," I say as if I haven't already eaten and am not holding the remains of my lunch en route to the trash.

"He can be awkward," Allyn says when we are alone in the elevator, "but he means well, and he's very friendly."

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That afternoon, I spend a full hour troubleshooting my email

issues over the phone with the IT help desk. Given that I have literally no other work to do, the inefficiency of the technicians attempting to gain remote access to my laptop is more endearing than frustrating. By three p.m., my email is up and running. A message from HR is waiting in my inbox. I click it open and follow the link to a mandatory online training that turns out, inexplicably, to be an hour-long course about stairs: how to build them and how to use them. A question-and-answer section at the end of each unit. *Stairs have multiple components. Look at these stairs and identify the individual components. How can you ensure that you use stairs safely? What are the best practices for using stairs? Select all that apply.*

In the underground parking garage that evening, I walk up to the wrong silver Prius twice. It takes me too long to find the exit, stuck on P3 no matter which way I turn. I feel like I'm trapped in an Escher print. When I finally make it out and join the sea of cars inching westward on Pico, I call my mother. I tell her that nobody seemed to know what to do with me. That I felt strange and shy and had absolutely nothing to do.

"First days are always like that," she says. "You just have to be assertive. Did you see Robert?"

"I did, actually. At lunch." I tell her about the Gatorade in the wineglass and that he called us "a sight for sore eyes."

"And?"

"That's a weird thing to say, right? Isn't it a comment on our appearances?"

"He's seventy. It's an old-fashioned saying. I'm sure he didn't mean anything."

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"I suppose."

"Did it make you uncomfortable?"