

## Chapter 6.

Dear Dad,

Sam's best friend came by with balloons right before we drove out of New York. I had to look away when they hugged each other, overcome, suddenly, with sadness. There's something so heavy about two seven year old girls saying goodbye.

"You'll see her in a few weeks," I said in Sam's ear, but I was lying. I have no plans to come back to the city.

While we loaded the car, a model wearing silver shorts strolled by with a pig on a leash. The pig was hobbling, and it looked like it was in distress. I thought about calling the NYPD Animal Cruelty Squad to file a complaint, but I wanted to get out of New York early enough to beat the traffic. I regretted it, though, the entire drive up to the Catskills, I couldn't stop thinking about the pig, about the way the pig looked at me, its brown eyes blinking and plaintive, when it limped by.

Hours later, Sam woke up to the sound of tires crunching over gravel.

"Is this our new house?"

She flung open the car door and ran into a tangled patch of long grass. The air was fuzzy with starlight and streaked with fireflies, yolky smears of orange and yellow.

"Why is it so late?" Max tumbled out of the car and grabbed her little sister's hand. Her hair was a bird's nest in the back, and for a moment I was too distracted by the tangles to take in the beauty of the night sky. I was too busy wondering how long it would take to comb Max's knots out, wondering if there was a comb in the glove compartment, wondering if her fine hair came from my side or Tom's. Then I wondered what Tom was doing and I was furious with him all over again. For being the reason we had to leave the city, for destroying our family, for everything.

"I had to drive super slow down the last stretch of highway," I said. "There was a lot of traffic."

I didn't tell them the traffic was really an accident along 87. That I listened to a podcast on parenting watching a firefighter pull a little boy from the backseat of a blackened van. I didn't tell them the firefighter vomited after he carried the boy to safety, that there were two other bodies lying on the side of the bent road, that as traffic started moving the boy was sitting alone in an ambulance, his eyes wide and empty.

We stood at the threshold of our new house, a wooden bungalow set back from the road, beneath a grove of shady trees. A dragonfly landed on Max's arm, fluttered its wings, and flew away. I had the thought, as I sometimes did, that it had taken us many lifetimes to find each other here, my children and I, in these human bodies beneath this one moon, that maybe the role of mother I'd been assigned during my short stay on earth was the wrong one, meant for a stronger, more solid woman, moored to a straighter path. I grabbed my kids' hands and let a prayer pass through my mind: Please help me protect my daughters. Please keep them safe.

"I'm sorry it took so long, girls," I said. "But we're home now."

\*

This morning I woke up to Sam chasing a firefly. It was still dark in the house, and for a second she looked like a ghost. Maybe in the city I would have gone back to sleep, but the sounds of sunrise were unsettling. First there was a howling coyote, then then a screaming bird, followed by a tiny meow. A few minutes later I was standing outside watching the girls run

through the yard in search of the meow, their nightgowns blousy and back-lit by the rising sun. The pinkening sky was bruised, and all I wanted was to go back to bed.

“Mommy you said no phone.”

“Sweetheart, I’m googling what makes a fireflies belly light up.”

But I’m not googling what makes a fireflies belly light up. I’m looking for Tom on Raya under my fake profile, which I’m not supposed to be doing according to my somatic therapist, because every time I catfish Tom I give away my power, and giving away my power spikes my cortisol and gives me migraines. In my fake profile I am a twenty-six year old massage therapist from Sedona. I found the picture on a Russian modeling website. Long brown hair, Louboutins, lots of yoga poses. I like golden retrievers and acai bowls and sunsets and plant medicine. I don’t have a name.

My real profile — with my actual name and photos — was set up for me by a friend after the divorce. Raya is a douchey, invite-only dating app for actors and models and people whose jobs require taking selfies on yachts. I was invited to join back when I was still running the bridal business, back when I had a lot of press and a big Instagram following. Lucky for me, the Raya team doesn’t know that I know longer sell wedding dresses, that I shut the account down years ago and my job is now incredibly uncool. I teach creative writing to adults.

Today, under my real profile, I’m sexting a famous movie director who says he wanted to fuck me up the ass. The director lives in La. He is an impish, disheveled epicurean who loves surfing and black coffee and Basquiat. *Yes you can come in my mouth after you fuck me*, I write, wondering how long until I can ask about his first movie, which I actually really loved and wrote a paper about in my freshman film class, but he literally just said: *I want to penetrate you behind a tree*.

“What does it say?”

“Give me a minute.”

What makes a fireflies belly light up is luciferin, the way it mixes with light due to a chemical reaction between a compound in the insect’s abdomens and the air. I learned this in seventh grade science. But the girls don’t care about biology. They want a story. They want magic. So I told them the glow comes from a tiny lightsaber attached to their tails, that all the fireflies are playing one big bug game of Capture The Flag. I don’t tell them fireflies only live for a few weeks. That their population is slowly declining due to pesticides and pollution. They don’t need to know how cruel mother nature can be, that there always comes a time when she stops being the source, the sustenance. Everything will fade, including the light, everything will die.

\*

The meow came from a kitten. The girls named the kitten Lucy and she is queen of the animal kingdom and she will guard the frogs and the fireflies and the deer and when the coyote hears her call he will understand that his reign has ended and there is a new Guardian Of The Land. The girls love Lucy. They want her to come live with us so they can take care of her forever. They promise to feed her and clean her litter box and allow her to burrow in their stuffies. *I beg of you Mommy*, they say, laughing and bowing at my feet. *Mommy, I beg of you, Lucy is all we will ever ask for*.

“What are you doing?” Max, her grubby face covered in mud, holds the cat out like a sack. Both of them are squinting, their noses scrunched against the sun.

“I’m writing a letter to my dad.”

“The one who died when I was five?”

“Yes — that one.”

“I wish I remembered him,” Sam says, holding a squirming worm.

“So do I,” I say. “But memory is really weird. You were only two at his funeral.”

“He taught me to swim,” says Max.

The director has sent me a selfie — a picture of his face, from the side. Five o’clock shadow, bluish rings under his eyes. He’s got a darkness to him — more edge than the profile photos. Heavy mouth, chaotic eyes. It’s five AM in LA; he’s probably just back from a bender, bored in his living room, barking at his smart TV. Reminds me of the Pascal quote. *All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.*

“Why are you writing a letter to your dad if he’s dead?”

Sam and Max are now building an elaborate labyrinth for the cat, a winding path made of rocks and sticks and mint leaves that leads toward our pond. The sun beats down on their shoulders and it occurs to me that they’re not wearing sunscreen. Do gas stations sell sunscreen? I should go get sunscreen at the gas station. The thought enters my mind, then exits.

“Mom! Why are you writing a letter to your dad if he’s dead?” Sometimes I find my daughters incredibly annoying.

“Because,” I say.

“Because why.” Max peers over my shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse of the phone. Her hair is hot against my neck, bristly and bushy, and I feel claustrophobic and the opposite of free.

“Personal space, please,” I say, but she doesn’t move.

Why am I writing this letter, Dad? Because I don’t know if the gas station sells sunscreen. Because I’m scared to erase your last voice mail. Because the words *believe* and *love* share the same root.

I add: “I am writing my dad a letter for the same reason you’re building the thing for the cat.”

The answer has satisfied her and she goes back to padding the dirt with her palms.

“You should get out of the sun soon,” says Max. “Your head is going to start hurting.”

“Thank you sweetheart. I’m fine.”

The migraines started when Tom left. I do pills, shots, Botox, bloodwork, acupuncture, all of it. X-Rays, MRIs, CT’s. Every doctor says the same thing. The migraines are caused by stress. Once my stress levels become manageable, so will the migraines.

“These weeds smell like mint, Mommy,” says Sam.

“It is mint,” I say. “My dad used to grow it in our backyard.”

The previous owners left the garden sloping and crowded, a tangle of wild blighted greens desperate for hydration. Yellow flowers and purple flowers and bulges of beetroot beneath the dirt, unkempt and overgrown, buzzing with bees and butterflies. There is mint everywhere, growing out of cracks in the driveway and the stone wall.

The girls don’t notice how messy everything is. They love living out of a suitcase. Hiking boots and nightgowns in the day, nightgowns and headlamps at night. They have no idea the house is a fire hazard. There’s no carbon monoxide detectors and no outlet covers. Rusty nails stick up from the floorboards. Last night I saw a mouse nibbling a live wire. I almost called Tom to come help us.

“How’s the country?” he asked.

“Fine. The girls want to Facetime you.”

I actually called to see if he could set up our smoke detectors, but I could tell he was on a date, and I'd rather die in a fire than have another woman hear me sound needy.

Bedtime is the worst. I keep ruminating over how this was the wrong decision. I don't know anyone here. I don't even know where the nearest hospital is. It was boiling hot in the house last night; the smell of marigolds was so strong I shut all the windows. Marigolds remind me of the hospital, of the calendula cream I rubbed into your limp hands the last week of your life. I couldn't stop thinking about the field beyond our garden and the mountain beyond the field and the whole world the girls they will one day disappear into and leave me alone. This thought came to me then: *I am not here in spite of death — I am here because of it.*

\*

I'm thinking about rivers, Dad. I'm thinking of late-night bonfires, blue moon ice cream and swimming in the sandbar. I'm thinking of the bike rides we took down Blue Star Highway at the Lake Michigan cabin, dried pine needles crunching under our bike tires, the sun raw and blazing.

When I was nineteen, we took a canoeing trip down the Missouri river to follow the same trail as Lewis and Clark. I don't know why you asked me to join you. Perhaps you realized I'd soon be living in New York, that this was our last chance to spend quality time together. All I knew is that a canoe trip was your kind of vacation which meant it was not my kind of vacation. I didn't even know the Missouri River was in Montana until we were on the plane.

"I know college has been tough," you said. "But you're at the halfway point." The stewardess handed you a bag of peanuts.

"Yep." After a semester of straight C's and D's. I was on academic probation.

"You've got a good brain," you said. "You should use it more often." You fumbled with the peanut bag for a while. "Can you open this? I've got these bandaids." There were two on your fingers.

"Did you cut yourself?"

"Never mind." You took a Swiss Army Knife from your pocket and sliced open the top of the bag. "See how handy this is, Ruthie? Do you still have the one I got for your birthday?"

"I think so."

"Junior year will be easier now that you have a tutor," pouring the peanuts in your palm. "You'll see."

You'd sent me to a specialist to see if I had a learning disability. She was a silver-haired woman named Sherry who worked out of her ground floor apartment, a darkened railroad with sunken couches and blood-colored curtains covered in cat fur. The testing process took two days. Sherry played fairy tales over a boom box while showing me flash cards of aliens to test my auditory processing. She cooked fish chowder and talked to her sister on the cordless phone while I took my tests. I remember struggling to stay awake while Sherry read the names of aliens over and over, the smell of warm canned clams wafting in from the kitchen.

Sherry wrote up a ten page report saying I had auditory processing problems. She didn't know I couldn't concentrate because I was snorting Adderall in her bathroom.

I brought my college roommate to Montana. I can't remember why now. She was my best friend, but I didn't like her. I just needed her next to me most of the time, the same way I needed the drugs. We'd walk around campus high in the middle of the night, blood dripping onto our sneakers, quoting William Blake and looking for angels in the trees.

“Let me show you the J-Stroke,” you called back over the rushing water, an hour after we climbed into our canoes. You shared a boat with the guide Brad. He was a retired history teacher with a bulbous, blotchy nose and beige shorts.

“We’re fine, Dad,” I called over the rushing water.

“You’re going around in circles,” Brad yelled, chuckling.

“We know how to steer a canoe,” my roommate snapped.

But we didn’t know how to steer a canoe. My roommate was from L.A. She’d grown up on the ocean. We floated for almost an hour, a family of puzzled elk staring at us from the water’s edge, and when we caught up with you, she laid her paddle across her lap and took off her shirt. Her nipples, dark and hard, stretched up against her flimsy red lace bra. I could see you struggle not to stare.

“They thought this would lead them straight to the Pacific,” I heard Brad tell you. “They rode this river for two years. Almost twenty-five hundred miles..”

“It’s like flying from New York to L.A.,” you said. Brad did not reply. I don’t think he’d ever flown from New York to L.A.

“Two hundred pounds of gunpowder on board,” Brad said. “Jefferson was convinced there were still woolly mammoths in this area.” Both of you chuckled.

My rolled her shirt up into a ball and dropped into the belly of the boat, her angular face set against the rocks. The air smelled hot and mineral. Fiona Apple played on our portable speaker. *I’ve been a bad, bad girl.*

“They’re supposed to be very smart,” you said, pointing to a sleeping beaver on a nearby log.

“Supposedly each man ate about ten pounds of meat a day,” Brad said. “Beaver, elk, bison. At one point they started buying the Indians’ dogs and cooking them over the fire.”

“Native Americans,” my roommate muttered, her angular face set against the rocks.

“I used to have a dog named Scannon, you know,” you told Brad. You wiped your wet forehead with a blue hankie.

“I have a dog, too. Butterscotch.” Brad said. “Left her home with the wife.”

“No, I mean — Scannon. You know. Like Lewis’ dog. Newfoundland he brought with him.”

“Scannon?” Brad looked confused. “Lewis’ dog was named Seamen.”

“Is that right?” I could tell you were embarrassed. “I could swear the biography said her name was Scannon.”

“Seamen,” Brad repeated. “All those years teaching high school history.”

“Thomas Jefferson had six hundred slaves,” my roommate called out. She looked skyward, as if searching for an eagle or a hawk, then sighed again, and blotted at her breastbone with her balled up shirt. Her right forearm was covered in scar tissue from the time her car flipped over on the 405.

“Different time.” Brad took a gulp from this water bottle.

“Not really,” said my roommate. A wildfire haze clouded the air with smoke, earthy and acrid. “But yeah, beavers. Bison. Dogs.”

“Speaking of beavers,” you said, palming two aspirin and popping them in your mouth. “They almost lost Scannon — I mean, Seamen — after a near-deadly beaver attack. The beaver bit through an artery. Poor dog nearly bled to death.”

“They were up against some almighty forces,” said Brad. “The animal kingdom is no joke.”

“Thank goodness for Sacajawea,” you said. “This river was her backyard. I hear there's beautiful statue of her and Scanoon — I mean, Seaman — up in Oregon.”

“Sacajawea was their child sex slave,” my roommate yelled out, her head deep within the hull of the canoe. Fiona Apple played: *I've been careless with a delicate man*.

You and Brad rowed away, your paddles dipping in and out of the water, creating tiny dancing droplets on the river's pristine surface. The further you rowed, the more you picked up speed. Soon you looked tiny, just a boy in a boat, headed toward the sun. I thought about Scannon, how you brought her home in a box when I was a baby. How she got hit by a cab when a ball you threw rolled into the street. Her spine snapped on impact; the cab sped to the vet while she bled on your lap. You came home alone, your eyes red-rimmed and wet, still holding the ball.

My roommate didn't bring boots on the trip. I'd mailed her the packing list months before, but she claimed the Postal Service lost it. She arrived instead in beat-up Adidas, the soles worn and soft. I'd catch you staring at them in silent scorn. Her shoes were a direct affront to the reverence you had for the wilderness. In your books, the American West was the Donner Party. Tattered maps, risk and reward, annihilation and survival. In her books, the American West was Hollywood. Wine at The Whiskey Bar, threesomes on Sunset, brunch in Beverly Hills. She hiked just as far as we did, and just as fast, in those shitty sneakers, and she never stopped once, not even when stung by a wasp. We didn't even know the bite was infected until pus started trickling down her knee. She refused your offer of a band-aid and Betadine, which offended you personally. You believed pain was a virtue. Pain meant you were wounded. Being wounded made one weak, therefore worthy of love.

When I got a blister, I swear you smiled. My discomfort gave you meaning. It had been a long time since I needed you. I remember the tenderness with which you examined my foot. I remember you crouching over me, applying cream to my toe, wrapping it in a bandage. My foot propped up near your crotch. The tremor in your hands. I did not like your touch, your skin, your scent. A girl should never to smell her own father

On the fourth day you gave your spare boots away to a leathery, lonely looking guy in Birkenstocks at base camp. The two of you talked while the rest of us ate lunch. I heard you tell him about a recent dream. Something about Sisyphus, the sky, a soft bed. You were six foot six, always the tallest man in the room, but that day, biting into a bologna sandwich, arms wrapped around your knees, you looked little. Mountains towering, mocking above your frame.

After you died, I searched for photos of that trip, trying to put the pieces together. The tremors, the bandaids, the heavy breath on the hikes. Did you know yet you were sick? Did you sense your red blood cells splitting apart, suspended and agitated inside your bone marrow? Had the doctors already started pricking you with needles, draining your body of extra blood — or did that come later?

On the fifth day, we climbed the side of a silver, faceless cliff where we watched a bald headed vulture bury its head in the brains of a dead bear. Brad led us up a path littered with stones and bones and wild licorice and wild onions, telling us the tale of Meriwether Lewis' bipolar disorder and eventual suicide. My roommate rolled her eyes. She returned to the tent to read Lacan and called me in to join her. But I was scared of that tent. Scared of how high we got inside of it, scared of its sex smells.

“Your father doesn't understand you,” she said later that night, braiding my hair.

“I know.” But I didn't know. I didn't even know that was a thing, being understood.

“How about that whole boots thing? With the homeless guy. Kind of on the nose.”

“I don’t think that guy was homeless,” I said. “He was a day hiker. Had a summer house nearby.”

“He was a bum.”

“He drove a Volvo.”

“He’d probably lived in that car. It was so embarrassing. Rich guy gives his shoes to a hobo. Total Jesus complex.”

But up until that moment, I thought what you did was nice. I didn’t know you were really an asshole, the type of man we’d already learned about in a lecture hall. A character from a movie whose heart we’d eat in semiotics class. Stereotype and subvert, dissect and analyze, ruin, rip into shreds, shit some out and spit the rest.

“You’ll be famous one day,” she said. “You’ll forget about him.” The Fiona Apple CD played on repeat: *It’s a sad, sad world when a girl will break a boy just because she can*. I’d read in Rolling Stone been raped at the age of twelve. I’d read *Criminal* was her survival song, evidence of her transformation from victim to villain. But the video presented Fiona as the victim still, wounded and writhing, starved for food and love. She was everything I wanted to be. She was nothing.

My roommate pulled my underwear down which meant I’d have to eat her out, too. But I hated putting my mouth in her body; it was too wet, too wounded. I only wanted to lie back and close my eyes on the roller coaster. She was biting and cruel but being with her was better than writing a history paper. I didn’t even like her but once I said I love you just so she wouldn’t walk out of my dorm room. She was the prettiest girl on campus and dirty as a cloud. I can still feel those dirty orgasms today. Bucking, thrashing, hips banging against her beautiful face. In two summers she’d be found dead in a Porta Potty at Lilith Fair, a needle in her arm.

You were sitting alone by the dying fire when I left the tent to pee.

“Come.” You affixed a fresh bandaid over the old one.

“Jefferson was smart to send his men out here,” you said, staring into the mountain range. “He’d never been past Virginia.”

“Wow.”

“He was just a private school kid. Grew up with horses.” You skinned half an apple with the Swiss Army Knife and handed me a slice. “There was probably a part of him that wished he could make the journey himself. Indulge the life unlived. Become the shadow.”

“Have willy-nilly sex orgies with tribal women..”

“I wonder if he ever got bored at the White Horse. If Lewis’ letters made him jealous.”

“Dad, they all, like, literally had sex with five different Native American women in one night. They got STD’s and had to pour mercury on their genitals.”

“Where do you even get this stuff from?”

“My Herstory class. ‘Unsung Womyn Heroes of the American West’.”

“Mercury on their genitalia, huh?”

“Mercury on the ole genitalia.”

We both chuckled for a few seconds.

“You ever think about what it’d be like?” you asked. “To carry all that baggage? Be responsible for all those lives?”

“Not really.”

We chewed our apple slices in silence.

“You get my letters?”

“Yep.”

“Try writing back sometime. How about taking a regular American history class next year? Maybe the classics? And Econ?”

“Maybe.” But I liked taking classes that didn’t feel like classes. Where we read handouts about pop culture and sat around on beanbags talking about media and movies: the difference between black and white, peace and war, Miramax and Merchant Ivory.

“And after graduation? Any thoughts?”

“Peace Corp, maybe.” My real plan, though, was for men to write songs about me. To drink pink wine and wear purple heart glasses and lay by the pool. My goal was to crawl inside Vogue magazine, press myself between its glossy pages and fall asleep forever, thin and frail as a flower.

“What was the name of the camp you went to? The acting camp? They teach you how to build a fire?” There was a fresh, fleshy smell in the air, musky and warm, woodsmoke mixed with decay. An old tree had fallen nearby, maybe, its soft belly swarming with bugs.

“I don’t remember the name of that camp,” I said. But I did remember the name. I just didn’t want to say it out loud. To mention my childhood seemed a personal insult to the woman I wanted to become, the famous Manhattan model with black eyeliner and a loft.

“Building a fire is an art. Let me teach you. Grab those sticks..” In the distance a coyote let out a stream of lyrical, jagged screams.

“I’m tired.”

“Systems stop working suddenly. Your heat might go out. When you live on your own.”

“What does that even mean, systems stop working?”

You sighed and clenched your wrists. “Do you remember when Scannon got into the trash one night and I lost my temper?” You stared into your hands, released your fingers, waggled them above your head. “I screamed my head off at that poor puppy. She cowered under the table all night, covering her eyes with her paws.”

“What are you doing with your hands? What’s up with all the bandaids?” An eagle, large and stealth, sank from the sky, then ascended again, a wriggling rattlesnake tucked into its velvety claws.

“I shouldn’t have been so hard on that dog,” you said.

It drizzled our last morning on the Missouri River. Brad made pancakes from a bag. The instant coffee was so weak it tasted like water. We packed up in silence, swarmed by gnats. Outside your fallen tent lay the scattered remains of the rattlesnake: ribs, skull, spine. The eagle watched us all from fifty feet above on a branch. I came across a patch of cacti as I dumped the last of my drugs into the dirt. Barbed plump prickly pear, fragrant pink flowers, thorns. You called for me; I wrapped my hand around the plant and squeezed. The starved, parched land drank the rain. My palms stung. The storm rolled in.

The girls have made Lucy a kingdom from the boxes and the bottles and the marshmallow bag and petals from long blue flowers. An intricate maze where she can roam and scratch and sleep. Lucy is their baby now; they are her mother. They saved her from the monsters lurking in the mountains. They’re so proud of what they’ve built. Max keeps coming over to show me. *Mom, here is where Lucy can dig for worms and here is where the fairies can sleep after she digs for worms and then the fireflies can visit her and they can all have a tea party on this rock... Mom, look at this, it’s a chest for her to put all her treasures in.* I try to remember what the mom blogs say to do when your kids show you



something they've made. Acknowledge the process, not the product. Something to do with perfectionism. Girls who grow up with eating disorders have moms who only focus on results.

"Looks like you worked really hard on it," I say, but she looks disappointed

"But Mommy — do you *like* it."

"It's incredible! It's an A +++ kingdom!"

But I'm angry with myself for taking the easy way out. I flash forward in time and picture Max downing a cup of Methadone, sobbing to a social worker: *my mother only cared about appearances. She wrung all the joy from my one wild and precious life.* I picture her bony, with cystic acne and scarred arms, and I get mad at Tom all over again. His dick is the reason our daughter's future is wrecked.

"Lucy is hungry again, Mommy." Max tugs on my arm. "She is counting on us. We need to feed her."

All of Tom's Raya pictures are ones I took of him when we were married. Tom in Mexico. Tom in Montana. Tom, laughing, blurry, in the big infinity mirror.

"Did you love me?" I asked the day we signed our divorce papers. "Even in the beginning?"

"Not the time to talk about this, Ruthie," Tom said, pen poised above the dotted line. "You made me feel good. I followed the feeling."

I message Tom from my fake profile: *You have no idea how badly I want you. Picture me on my knees, your cock between my lips.*

*First tell me your name,* Tom messages back.

*Call me Baby,* I write back.