



The
First Eight
Chapters

 St. Martin's Press

THE
GIRLS
AT
17 SWANN
STREET

a novel

YARA ZGHEIB

THE ...
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: STREET

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

*To you who in these pages found your reading glasses, sweatshirt,
earrings, favorite book or flavor of ice cream, freckles, perfume,
signature crêpe recipe, nose twitch, stutter, or missing sock.*

*Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.*

*Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.*

Give me your hand.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

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• 1

I call it the Van Gogh room. Just a different color scheme. Hazy peach blanket, hazy peach walls. Pastel-green carpet on a cherrywood floor. White blinds and shutters, the window and closet creak. Everything is pale and faded, a little like me.

I look around and think, *This is where it starts*. In Bedroom 5, on the east side of a pink house on 17 Swann Street. As good, as bad a setting as any, I suppose, for a story like this. Plain and mildly inviting, dubiously clean. At least there is a window; I can see the driveway, the edge of the street, bits of garden and sky.

Four hangers, four towels, four shelves. I have not packed much, I do not need more. I have, however, packed my makeup kit, a red one my mother used to own. Not that I need it; I will not be going anywhere for a long time. No work shift to check into on Monday morning, no plans for the weekend. But I will look nice, I have to. I set the kit on the white shelf and dab blush on my cheeks.

Deodorant, coconut lotion. My apple and jasmine perfume. A spritz behind each ear, two more. I will not smell like a hospital bed.

Four magnets on a whiteboard. Oh, I will need much more. For the time being, I spread my thick stack of photographs in a rainbow on the floor. I contemplate all the faces I have loved in my life and put up my favorite four.

My mother and father. *Maman et Papa*, on the faded day they eloped. She in her borrowed white dress and white shoes, he in his father's suit.

A picture of Sophie, Camil, and me on a picnic by a stream. It must have been autumn; the sky above us was cloudy. Camil must have been five or six; Leopold in his lap was still a puppy.

Matthias, gorgeous Matthias squinting at the sun and my lens. The first picture I took of him, that first morning in Paris. A quietly happy day.

Last, Matthias and me, mouths covered in chocolate, hands holding messy half-eaten crêpes. Our official wedding photo, posed for proudly outside the Métro three years ago.

The kaleidoscope goes by the bed, the slippers and a box underneath. Blinds up, night-light on.

I have moved into Bedroom 5, 17 Swann Street.

My name is Anna. I am a dancer, a constant daydreamer. I like sparkling wine in the late afternoon, ripe and juicy strawberries in June. Quiet mornings make me happy, dusk makes me blue. Like Whistler, I like gray and foggy cities. I see purple in gray and foggy days. I believe in the rich taste of real vanilla ice cream, melting stickily from a cone. I believe in love. I am madly in love, I am madly loved.

I have books to read, places to see, babies to make, birthday cakes to taste. I even have unused birthday wishes to spare.

So what am I doing here?

I am twenty-six years old. My body feels sixty-two. So does my brain. Both are tired, irritable, in pain. My hair was once wild-lion thick, morning blond. It is now a nondescript, mousy beige that falls in wisps around my face and out in my hands. My eyes, green like my mother's, are sunk so deep in their

sockets that no makeup will fill the craters. I do have lovely eyelashes. I always liked those. They curl up at the edges like those of a doll I used to own.

My collarbones, ribs, kneecaps, and streamer-like thin blue veins peek through paper-thin skin. My skin, largest organ of my body and its first line of defense, has been more decorative than functional lately. In fact, not even that; it is cracked and taut, constantly bruised and cold. Today it smells of baby oil. For the occasion, I used lavender.

I have a flat stomach. I once had lips and breasts, but those shrank months ago. Along with my thighs, my liver, my behind. I lost my sense of humor, too.

I do not laugh very often anymore. Very little is funny. When I do, it sounds different. So does my voice on the telephone. Apparently. Not that I can tell the difference: I do not have many people to call.

I realize that my phone is not with me, then remember; they took it away. I am allowed to have it until ten A.M. and after dinner in the evenings. One of the many house rules I will have to learn while I am living here, however long that will be. How long will that be? I turn away from the thought . . .

. . . and hit a tidal wave of panic. I do not recognize the girl, or the reality I just described.

Clinical Intake and Assessment Form

Monday—May 23, 2016

Patient Identification Information

Name: Anna M. Roux, maiden name Aubry
Date of birth: November 13, 1989
Place of birth: Paris, France
Sex: Female
Age: 26

Emergency Contact Information

Name: Matthias Roux
Relationship: Spouse

General Background

Occupation:

I tell people I am a dancer. I have not danced in years, though. I work as a cashier in a supermarket, but my real occupation is anorexia.

Marital Status: Married.
Children: None.

Alcohol:

A glass of wine, once a week on a Friday night.

Recreational drugs:

No.

Caffeine:

How else do you think I function on only three hours of sleep?

Number of meals eaten on a normal weekday:

Define the words “normal” and “meal.” I keep a few apples in my bag in case I get too hungry.

Number of meals eaten on a normal weekend day:

Why would that be different? Well, I do sometimes make popcorn in the microwave. Single serving. Nonfat.

Regular exercise routine: Yes.

Naturally.

Frequency: Every day.

Please describe:

I run, build strength, and stretch for two hours, every morning before seven A.M.

What do you do to manage stress?

I run, build strength, and stretch for two hours every morning before seven A.M.

Mental Health

Basic problem or concern: Difficulty eating certain foods.
Difficulty eating, period. Loss of interest in food, loss of interest in general.

Significant changes or stressors in recent history: None

that I have any interest in disclosing here.

Previous mental health diagnoses:None.
I said I feel fine.

Feelings of sadness?

Check.

Hopelessness?

Check.

Anxiety?

Check check.

Please check any symptoms experienced in the past month:

Restricted food intake.

Check.

Compulsion to exercise.

Check.

Avoidance of certain foods.

Check.

Laxative abuse.

Check.

Binge.

Check.

A whole box of blackberries last week.

Self-induced vomiting.

Only with guilt. See above on blackberries.
Concerns about weight, body image, feeling fat.
Check. Check. Check.

Total weight lost over the past year:
Pass.

Lowest weight ever reached:
Pass again.

These questions are inappropriate.

Diagnosis

Anorexia nervosa. Restricting type.

The bedroom, the whole flat in fact, was an industrial cube. The sort of unit prized by cost-cutting developers and lower-income tenants. High ceiling and concrete walls left provocatively naked, lined with steel pipes. More loft than apartment unit, more studio really.

Light flowed in buckets through the one window that covered the only external wall. She walked up to it and looked down onto a little patch of green, across onto the next building, up onto the third floor and window parallel to theirs. The blinds were drawn. Did neighbours know their neighbours here? There was no “u” in the word “neighbors” here. She would have to remember that.

“Flat” was not the right word either, she reminded herself. Flats here were called apartments. She was in America now.

Apartment. America. She tried both words on for size, feeling them on her tongue as she rolled them around in her mouth. This apartment was bare but it was theirs, small but luxurious by Parisian standards.

In Paris they had been living in a cupboard of a room, sharing a wall, bathroom, little stove and fridge with a philosophy major, a psychologist, their lovers, and a computer technician who was never there but made outstanding pesto when he was. Bohemian life did not scare her; she had always loved and led it happily. But this was not bohemian, or Paris. This was the American Midwest.

She had landed last night. Matthias had been waiting at the airport with a red

rose. He had driven her here. Dinner, wine, sex, and this morning he had left for work . . .

. . . and had not said when he would return, Anna realized. She finished unpacking—apple and jasmine perfume, lotion, hairbrush, toothbrush next to his. Books by the bed. She had forgotten her slippers. Done. Eleven o'clock.

One more look around. The walls were not too bare. She would cover them with photographs of home. She would also buy groceries, candles, and some more wine. Would Matthias be home for lunch?

Surely not. But she would make sure dinner was ready when he did. They would have a feast, then go out to explore this new city. Till then . . .

She hummed notes at random and walked toward the fridge. A quarter of the pizza Matthias had ordered the night before remained. He had left the crusts on the side; he knew Anna liked them. There was also a piece of cheese, some yogurt, a few fruits. She took the yogurt and some strawberries.

Where would she eat them, though? They had no furniture yet beyond the coffee table and the bed. Coffee table then. She would just sit on the floor.

She boiled water and stirred in instant coffee. One sip. Disaster. Enough. That was not coffee. She poured it into the sink and decided she would have tea.

They did not have tea. Eleven oh five. The yogurt was the fruity kind, with syrup. She put it back in the fridge and ate the strawberries. Eleven oh six. It would soon be time for lunch anyway. She reached for the phone, then put it down; it was late afternoon in Paris and everyone was surely busy now.

Perhaps she would go for a run before lunch. Matthias just might be back then.

He was not. She showered and slowly went through her lotion routine, dried her

hair, put on a blue dress, reached for a red makeup kit: face cream, mascara, peach blush. Pink lipstick applied. Twelve twenty-eight.

Fridge. Pizza, crust, cheese, yogurt, and fruit. She should buy groceries for the evening. She could make crêpes and a salad. Cheese and mushrooms. They would have the fruit for dessert.

Twelve twenty-nine. She would go before lunch.

One thirty in the afternoon and she finally had everything she needed. The store she had spotted on her run had not been as close as she had thought. Her voice had croaked mildly at the cash register; she was using it for the first time that day. A while later, the eggs, milk, flour, ricotta, and lettuce, mushrooms, tomatoes were in the fridge. Done.

Concrete walls. She took the phone and put it down. Opened and closed the fridge. She took two of Matthias's leftover crusts, ripped them into little bits, and slowly chewed the first, looking out the large window, exhaling the anxiety away.

Nine full minutes later it was done. She hated eating alone. At 1:41 she took the blue dress off and hung it neatly with the rest of her clothes. All she owned had moved from one suitcase to twenty hangers and a shelf in cube 315 of many more in the building on 45 Furstenberg Street. She climbed back into bed.

Matthias would be back soon anyway and then she would make the crêpes.

I do not suffer from anorexia, I have anorexia. The two states are not the same. I know my anorexia, I understand it better than the world around me.

The world around me is obese, half of it. The other half is emaciated. Values are hollow, but meals are dense with high fructose corn syrup. Standards come in doubles, so do portions. The world is overcrowded but lonely. My anorexia keeps me company, comforts me. I can control it, so I choose it.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fifth Edition) defines anorexia nervosa as a brain disease, a mental disorder with severe metabolic effects on the entire body. Characteristics:

1. *Restriction of food, self-induced starvation with the purpose of losing weight.*
2. *An intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat.*
3. *A distorted perception of body weight or shape with a strong influence on mental well-being,*

as well as

a lack of awareness of the severity of the condition.

I run for eighty minutes each day, build strength for another twenty, keep my caloric intake below eight hundred calories, a thousand when I binge. I

weigh myself every morning and cry at the number on the scale. I cry in front of mirrors, too: I see fat everywhere.

Everyone around me thinks I have a problem. Everyone around me is scared. I do not have a problem. I just have to lose a little bit of weight. I am scared, too, but not of gaining weight. I am terrified of life. Of a sad and unfair world. I do not suffer from a sick brain. I suffer from a sick heart.

Cardiac arrhythmia. Irregular heartbeat. Like falling in love, or a heart attack.

Cardiomyopathy. Loss of heart muscle mass. Yes, but only the excess.

I do not need dispensable tissue, dispensable fat or organs. But my body is greedy; it wants more potassium, sodium, magnesium. Energy.

My body does not know what it needs. I make that decision for it. In protest, my heart pumps less blood. *Bradycardia.* Slow heartbeat. My blood pressure drops.

The rest of my body follows suit, falling quietly, like rain, like snow. My ovaries, my liver, my kidneys go next. Then my brain goes to sleep.

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Anna? Should I pause the movie? You are missing the good parts.

Anna?

Anna, are you all right in there? Open the door please.

Anna, open the door! Anna!

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Matthias found me on the floor, legs like cotton, mouth numb. I could feel the bathroom tiles, freezing, painful against my back, but I was also falling through them. I could not grasp the wisps of words I needed to tell him that I was fine. I could not grasp his shirt; my hands were clumsy. My thoughts were clumsy, too.

I could not move my hands, I could not move. Matthias carried me from the bathroom into the bedroom.

For a few minutes neither of us said anything. The movie was on pause too. I wanted to press Play, end the ugly intermission. Matthias had other plans.

We need to talk, Anna.

What about?

What happened in there?

I fell in the bathroom, Matthias,

I sliced.

I am fine now. I just stood up too fast.

Muscles tense, defenses up, circling the ring. He could feel the edge in my voice. He circled, too, carefully.

What about yesterday, during your shift? And last week, when you hurt your shoulder?

I was tired! I slipped!

We need to talk, Anna.

We are talking!

We need to stop lying then.

Matthias was a few years older than I was, thirty-one in a couple of months. He looked older just then. Our voices had been rising, but he said that last sentence very quietly.

Another lull while he chose his words. I did not, would not, help him.

I think you need treatment. I've been a coward. I should have spoken a long time ago. I just kept convincing myself you were fine—

I told you: I am fine!

My claws were out, a cat trapped in a corner.

I know things have been difficult since Christmas, but I have this under control! I've been eating normally—

You've lost so much weight—

How would you know, Matthias? You're never here!

I had gone on the offensive, he had left me no choice. My back was to the wall and I needed air. But the shriller I got, the calmer he did.

You're right. I am not. I'm sorry.

I do not need you to be sorry, or worry about me! I can take care of myself!

I told you: I am fine—

And I believed you, because I wanted to.

I cannot anymore, Anna.

I do not remember much of the three years that led up to that moment. Just that they felt long and cold, and I felt underwater in them. The two days that followed, however, flashed by to Matthias and me getting in the car and driving up an empty Highway 44 to an address on Swann Street. It took us just under forty-five minutes. Really, it took us much longer; three years and twenty-two pounds to reach that Intake and Assessment appointment.

It was Thursday night and freezing, but the Christmas displays were worth it, Anna decided as she wrapped her plush white scarf tighter around her neck. Digging her gloves deeper into her coat, she walked down the Grands Boulevards, window to window, drummer boys and nutcrackers, twinkling lights and whimsical trains.

She bumped into him, or he into her. Either way,

Oh, je suis désolée!

But he smiled. She smiled. What a coincidence, he was also walking that way. They walked together, to the end of the display. Then they kept walking and talking.

They walked through ample sidewalk and conversation. Then it was cold, so they went inside. They had two glasses of Bordeaux, each. They shared a basket of fries.

His name was Matthias and he said she was beautiful. They kissed. Then,

Shall we get some ice cream?

Ice cream? It was freezing! Was he mad?

It cannot make us any colder.

Good point.

On one condition, though:

I want it in a cone.

Un cornet pour mademoiselle!

She giggled and they bundled up and linked arms and walked out into the cold again.

They walked across the bridge, past the colorful cafés where tourists were gladly being swindled. Left onto a side street, all the way down, to a well-hidden little kiosk.

The queue outside it was a good sign, and that there were no tourists in it. He had two scoops: chocolate and something pink. She had her vanilla and her cone. They ate as they walked and shivered and stopped to kiss stickily.

Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?

It was the easiest yes in history.

No, actually, it was not. That came later, one year later in the same place.

Lips and fingers sticky, he asked:

Would you like to marry me?

They were married in the first week of January, the coldest wedding in history.

They had croissants from the boulangerie downstairs for breakfast. She made

coffee on the little stove. They froze in the snow, he in his only suit, she in the creamy white dress she had bought. They stepped out of the mairie at noon holding hands, kissing, laughing at the words “husband” and “wife,” and just before ducking into the Métro, they had gooey crêpes for their wedding lunch.

There must have been signs that we were taking a detour from the happily-ever-after road.

I got an offer today,

Matthias said one afternoon.

An offer? For what?

I sipped my tea. Matthias's serious face had Nutella on it. I smiled.

A job offer. In the States!

More tea. His excited face. His *I want this* face. The States. Well . . .

Why not? Perhaps the timing was perfect. I would be removing my cast in a few weeks and needed a fresh start. My spot in the Opéra's corps de ballet—left stage, second swan from the wings—had been promptly and easily filled after the accident. The show had had to go on. No hard feelings.

I could dance in the States, had never been to the States.

Where is the offer?

Saint Louis,

like the name of the picturesque island where we had kissed on our first date. I imagined quaint little cafés and shops lining quaint little streets. *Saint Louis*. Perhaps it was a sign. Would they have good ice cream?

Well, I will not be eating ice cream. I said sternly to myself. I had not danced or run in months. I had to get back in shape. Till I was, I would diet, and follow Matthias, apparently, why not, to the States. I watched him lick Nutella off his fingers. I kissed what remained on his chin.

He left Paris first with the first of our suitcases. I packed the rest of our lives in the second. We had one-way tickets and a plan and each other. There was no way we could get lost.

There must have been signs, but we were distracted by the roller coaster of the adventure. Paperwork, looking for a couch for the apartment, ties and shirts for Matthias.

Looking for a ballet company I could join. It was small but we eventually found it.

And were told that their corps de ballet was full, *but thank you for applying.*

It's all right,

said Matthias.

We will keep looking.

It's all right,

I echoed. We did. There must have been signs, but we missed them, too busy, him working, me trying to.

I spent months getting myself back in shape and searching for other opportunities. The pickings were slim, or my bar was too high, or Saint Louis was not a ballet kind of town. I could not find another dance company, or the quaint cafés on quaint little streets.

I found other jobs and went to job interviews, but I was not qualified for those. I was a dancer applying to be a store manager, a bank teller. *What experience do you have?*

There were signs: foods I slowly stopped eating, dresses I slowly stopped putting on. They got too loose, and I have nowhere to wear them anyway.

Waiting for Matthias to come home from work so I would not have to eat alone. When he did:

Any luck today, Anna?

He eventually stopped asking.

Eventually, I also stopped searching. And dairy, and answering my phone. And wearing makeup, but at least I was not fat anymore.

Other signs: long days I made shorter with longer runs, longer showers, longer naps. Photos of us that looked less and less like me. But somehow, we did not see.

There was nothing mysterious about the road we took to 17 Swann Street. Hundreds of girls have taken it before me to this suburban house painted peach pink. With some variation: some drive or fly in, from out of town, out of country, out of state. The lucky ones are driven by family or friends. The unlucky, ambulances. Some come by way of restriction, pills, laxatives, and exercise. Some from the other direction by bingeing, purging comfort food.

Some run in, chasing love and acceptance, some fleeing depression, anxiety.
Puddles of murky emotions in potholes of boredom, loneliness, guilt.

There were signs. There are always signs for those who know to look for them.
They just never flash in red neon, warning, DANGER: RISK OF DEATH.

They begin a few miles from the Swann Street exit:

No thank you, I am not hungry.

*I do not like chocolate, or cheese. I am allergic to gluten, nuts, and dairy.
And I do not eat meat.*

I already had dinner. I am going for a run. No, do not wait up for me.

Then bones stick out. Hair and nails fall out. Everything hurts and it is cold.
Past the hundred-pound mark. Ninety-five pounds. Ninety-three. Ninety-one,
eighty-nine.

Eighty-eight.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175
Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-1-250-20244-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-20246-8 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales
Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at
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First Edition: February 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1