

## I.

I WORE red capris on the plane. After I'd resolved to go to you, I couldn't imagine wearing anything else. The red made me feel bold, like a matador. I hadn't been able to sleep the night before, and it was still dark when I'd risen from bed and stuffed my suitcase with summer clothing. Despite my fevered state, I'd had the presence of mind to fill my backpack with old photographs, graphite and ink, and the best of my drawings.

The airplane seat beside me was unoccupied, so I was able to spread the drawings out on my lap. All at once you were there with me, resplendent on the sofa in your starry dress, the fiery wave of hair over your shoulder. Your eyes were the green of a forgotten lake, your sweet mouth quirked and curved. My own form in the drawing was a blunt shape beside you. Next to the sofa was the table lamp with its base of intertwined brass snakes. The potted orchid with its protruding tongue. The print of cardinals on the wall, and the painting of tents in the desert. And the energy, the love,

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coiling invisibly between us. I felt it all again. That moment was forever captive, mine.

Electricity prickled my fingertips as I looked at the drawings, and I wanted to run in the airplane aisles. Instead, I folded the papers away and emptied a bullet of bourbon into my Coke. My heart accelerated, an engine primed for action. I'd been waiting for this feeling to come, this gorgeous surge, and was proud of myself for channeling it so constructively, for boarding this plane. When this ecstatic state arrived, when I flew inside my skin like this, it was worth all the dark days, every periodic ugly lurch.

I paged through the issue of *Dwell* that I'd bought at the airport. Looking at beautiful rooms always settled me. Deeply, I breathed the recycled air of the cabin. I'd flown before, as a child, but had been cushioned by dumb trust. Now I understood that the plane could drop through the sky. I knew that every new moment contained this possibility, though it seemed remote through my exalted haze. I felt the exhilaration of a deity, with power over the future and past, capable of creating new worlds at will.

Slowly, the view outside my window transformed from a flat midwestern checkerboard to an exotic topography of pink and red mountains. This, then, was the West. The vast emptiness was startling. There were no roads. Nothing circumscribed the strata of rock. Only primeval scrub grass. Probably snakes and coyotes. Rodents in their burrows. All at once, the mountains genuflected and flattened. One last

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shallow range, then humankind. Roads spidered into the valley. Arteries of freeways and branching capillaries led to the cell of each house and its adjacent pool of blue. And finally—like a drop from the edge of the earth—the ocean. I'd never seen it before. I'd never been this far from my own house, from my bedroom and my box of magazine clippings. As the altitude of the aircraft decreased, I felt the thrilling intimacy that I'd never enter that house again.

It had been just five weeks since I learned about the reunion. My mother had come home one evening more addled than usual. Her jacket, the same drab brown parka she'd been wearing for a decade, had missed the coat hook and dropped to the floor. She looked to me at the stove where I was frying chicken and making green bean casserole. I was the one who cooked, even though my father was home all day. After the layoffs, the men in town had become suddenly idle—machinists, inspectors, production engineers reduced to building deer stands, drinking Schlitz—and years later they were still idle.

"How was your day?" I ventured, whisking milk and eggs in a bowl.

"The usual." A long pause. There was something skittish about her eyes. "I saw Leslie Lomax in the office. She came in for a mammo."

"Oh."

"Do you remember Liz Lomax, in your class?"

"Sure."

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“Well, Leslie told me that Liz is going to your ten-year high school reunion. It’s on Wednesday. Did you know that? The night before Thanksgiving.”

I looked at the pot on the stove in front of me. “Is that right.”

“Leslie asked if you’re planning to go. It sounds like a lot of people from your class are going.” She paused. “Maybe Elise Van Dijk will be there.”

My heart released a roll of blood.

“I hope you’ll consider it, Abby,” she said. “It would be good for you to get out.”

I kept whisking. Finally my pigeon instinct took over, and I nodded my head. “Thanks for letting me know.”

I’d planned to rewatch *Land of the Beings* after dinner, as I’d been doing all week, but instead I opened the memorabilia cabinet and took out our senior yearbook. I went straight to your page. The electric shock came before my brain even registered your face. All the years peeled back. There was nothing embarrassing or dated about your appearance: plain white scoop neck, undulating hair. You were glamorous, timeless. Beneath your photograph was a Bob Dylan lyric: “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” I’d been disdainful of this choice at the time. Now, I was struck by its precocity, and by the girl whose worldly-wise look suggested she knew exactly which way the wind was blowing for her, and had paused for just a moment to say good-bye.

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Inside the back cover was your inscription, painfully formal: *Abby, I'm sorry we're not close anymore, but I hope we will be again someday. My love always, Elise.*

I'd been having the loveseat dream more frequently. It had been coming, in some form or other, every week. In the dream, I tried to call you, but my fingers were too shaky to dial the digits of your phone number in the correct sequence. I tried several times before getting it right, before you finally answered, and I said, "I'm here, I'm coming." I rushed through narrow alleys of a foreign city, looping in circles of frustration before finally finding the building—a stone structure covered with ivy, like an English manor house—and climbing the carpeted stairs to the room where you waited. Then, at last, the door swung open. In the dream, we sat together on a loveseat holding hands. You wore a gown of jet beads. I wore a black-and-violet sheath split by a white stripe. We talked and laughed and basked in each other. The desperation fell away; the regret of our lost years fell away. The objects around us were glazed with phosphorescence. I awoke at the apex of love.

This dream was so detailed and intentional that, each time it happened, I was certain it was really you, Elise. I believed that you sometimes came to me this way. I had no way of proving it, but I was convinced that the two of us were sharing this dream. I was never able to recall the actual words we exchanged, but I awoke with the imagery in my mind: the

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sinuous base of the table lamp beside us, the potted orchid, the print of cardinals on the wall, the framed watercolor of tents in a desert.

I sat at my vanity table and tore a long sheet from the roll of drawing paper. I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them, and with the pencil I began to outline the scene. Your body and mine on the burgundy cushions, your river of red hair, the lamp and its lamplight.

My breathing deepened, my heart rate slowed, and I fell into a narcotic lull. It was as if the pencil were controlled by an external force, as if the scene were preordained. It meant that you were coming back for me, as I'd always known you would. We would be reunited. All these years at home in Michigan—dreaming, drawing, watching Perren films, working the register at Meijer, treading water—had been leading to this. I'd long nurtured the private suspicion that I was an outcast not because I was inferior, but because I was exceptional; that the fulfillment of my purpose awaited activation from the universe; that I just needed to wait. And now, as simple as a music box clicking open, it was time.

I never told you—not even later, in our most intimate moments—that I'd been seeking you out in the magazines for years, ever since high school. All that time, I'd hungered for proof of your existence in the world, some mention of you, some small notation in a movie review, or a thumbnail photograph. Just knowing that you were alive, that you were

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thriving, helped rinse the demons from my mind. I clipped the photographs and articles meticulously and stored them in a pink fabric box beneath my bed. That box was my most precious possession, the first thing I'd save in a fire.

After my register shift was over that Friday, I approached the magazine rack at the checkout aisle. The usual mass formed in my throat. This moment just before I allowed myself to look at the magazines was always excruciating. And then, all at once. The clot broke open in my throat, and I could breathe again. There you were, vamping in a backless red dress, hand on hip, hair gelled into pin curls. Sportive smile aimed over your shoulder, directly at me.

Lifting the issue of *People* from the rack, I had the urge to gather all the copies for myself. I detested the idea of their being taken by others, whose interest in you was superficial at best, spiteful at worst. I stared at you, and our eyes locked. I remembered the slumber parties—how we'd squeeze into the same sleeping bag when the other girls were asleep, so close that your hair cascaded over both our faces. Now, I stood in the checkout line with the magazine, like a regular customer, like a stranger. I wanted to tell the woman behind me, with her bald eagle T-shirt and cartful of pet food, that I knew this person in *People*.

*I know her. I knew her.*

Instead, I gripped the magazine and showed it to the checkout clerk, a skinny teenager with a snuffle. Rather than letting his hands soil it, I swept it over the scanner myself.