

S O C I A L F I C T I O N S S E R I E S

Low-Fat Love

Patricia Leavy



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Low-Fat Love

SOCIAL FICTIONS SERIES

Volume 1

Series Editor

Patricia Leavy

Stonehill College

The Social Fictions series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

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DEDICATION

For Mark Robins, with love

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PREFACE

Low-Fat Love unfolds over three seasons as Prilly Greene and Janice Goldwyn, adversarial editors at a New York press, experience personal change relating to the men (and absence of women) in their lives. Ultimately, each woman is pushed to confront her own image of herself, exploring her insecurities, the stagnation in her life, her attraction to men who withhold their support and her reasons for having settled for low-fat love.

Prilly lives in between who she is and who she longs to be. Prilly falls for Pete Rice, an unemployed, ever-sexy and curiously charming aspiring graphic novelist. Prilly thinks she is finally experiencing the big life she always sought but feared was beyond her grasp because she was “in the middle” (not beautiful or ugly, not greatly talented or totally hopeless—someone who could work for it). Pete’s unconventional, free-spirited views on relationships unsettle Prilly, ultimately causing her to unravel over the course of their on-again-off-again love affair. Meanwhile, Janice, a workaholic, feminist in-name-only editor, overburdens Prilly, her underling, with busywork and undercuts Prilly’s professional identity. Janice’s regimented life is set on a new course when her alcoholic father becomes injured in a car accident and she is forced to face her own demons.

Along with Prilly and Janice, a cast of characters’ stories are interwoven throughout and eventually connected in the third and final section of the book. The offbeat characters include: Melville Wicket, Pete’s awkward friend who lives one beat outside of the moment; Jacob, Melville’s younger, pothead brother; Kyle Goldwyn, Janice’s 17 year old son who appears ordinary in every way but is actually quite extraordinary; and Tash, Kyle’s wild-child, flighty sexpot cousin who attends NYU and ends up dating Jacob. In the end, momentum builds as the characters struggle to escape the consequences of their decisions. Unexpected events cause changes in

the characters that appear minor—but that carry significant implications for their futures.

Low-Fat Love is underscored with a commentary about female identity-building and self-acceptance and how, too often, women become trapped in limited visions of themselves. Women’s media is used as a signpost throughout the book in order to make visible the context in which women come to think of themselves as well as the men and women in their lives. In this respect *Low-Fat Love* offers a critical commentary about popular culture and the social construction of femininity. Ultimately, the book explores women’s identity struggles in relation to the men in their lives and how women often develop myopic images of themselves as a part of “face-saving” strategies employed to cover up shame and a learned devaluation of self. *Low-Fat Love* suggests women seek new ways to see that are not dependent on male approval so that they will value themselves and reject degrading relationships. Moreover, as the main characters in the book learn, the most toxic relationship a woman may participate in is often with herself. So, too, the men in *Low-Fat Love* learn that one must find one’s voice or suffer the consequences.

Low-Fat Love is grounded in a decade of research and teaching about gender, relationships and popular culture, which informs the pop-feminist undertone of the book. Over the past decade, I have conducted numerous interviews with young women about their relationships, body image, sexual and gender identities. Additionally, I have taught many college courses on the sociology of gender, critical approaches to popular culture and human sexuality and intimacy. These courses have sparked wonderful discussions with my students about identity. All of these experiences and conversations informed the writing of this book. Moreover, my own personal experiences, although fictionalized, are interwoven into the words that follow (a practice qualitative researchers refer to as autoethnography). In these ways, *Low-Fat Love* emerges out of the arts-based research movement in the qualitative research community and seeks to fictionalize and chronicle the experiences of countless interviewees, students and friends, as well as my own experiences. In

this respect, the book represents an a/r/tographical rendering—a work in which I have merged my artist-researcher-teacher identities. As a novel, *Low-Fat Love* can be read purely for pleasure or used in a variety of courses in women's/gender studies, sociology, popular culture, media studies, communications, qualitative research and arts-based research. I hope the book resonates with readers and provides a springboard for self-reflection or discussion.

Patricia Leavy

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

“‘Casey bombed into town with her daily organizer.’ It’s the worst first line I’ve ever heard! I mean, you’re left with this organizer, just sitting there, for no reason. You never mention something so irrelevant right in the beginning. It’s awful. Nowadays everyone thinks they can write. There are no real writers anymore,” he said, flinging the manuscript on Prilly’s desk.

“Just real editors, right Stuart?”

“Ah, you’re just soft Prilly. You can’t coddle them. There’s no point.”

With a friendly roll of the eyes she agreed to the inevitable. “I know, I know,” she said shaking her head. “I’ll tell him we can’t go forward with publication.”

“Good. We’ve got to start streamlining our list. Bad writing that sells millions of copies is one thing, but unsuccessful bad writing is an embarrassment. And I don’t have to remind you that we can’t afford the drain.”

Prilly smiled, thinking his remark about unsuccessful bad writing was dead-on. “Got it. I’ll take care of it.”

Stuart left her small, drab office, inadvertently knocking a teetering stack of mail off the corner of her desk. The piles on her desk taunted her. She desperately desired to have everything organized and in its place, but she just couldn’t manage it for more than a couple of days at a time. She had seen an episode of Oprah where an expert said that clutter in one’s office or home meant clutter in one’s emotional and spiritual life. As she wondered whether that was true, she reread the beginning of the manuscript. Was it really such a bad opening line?

*

That night when Prilly entered her apartment she immediately kicked off her comfort heels and slipped on her at-home uniform: Old Navy black pajama pants and worn out Ugg boots. She poured a glass of Beaujolais and lay on the couch. Remote in hand, she flipped

between her usual stations and landed on “Access Hollywood.” They were featuring a story about Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. She always bought tabloids when they were on the cover. Although she despised the idea that they were mostly adored for their good looks, she too was fascinated. Sometimes she would fantasize about what Angelina’s life was like. Of all the celebrities, Angelina seemed to have it all. She was ridiculously gorgeous, the kind of beauty that doesn’t seem to go out of style, or to age. She had lived a wild life, and now she had a massive multicultural family (that she probably never had to take care of with all her nannies, assistants and so forth), a fabulous partner who undoubtedly worshipped her, and an amazing career. Somehow she had managed to be both an artist and a commercial success, or at least she could reasonably claim to be both. People admired her. People like Prilly. As Prilly watched the story she felt a familiar storm cloud of envy, longing, and self-loathing.

“Access Hollywood” was just the prelude to whatever “movie of the week” she could find. Tonight she was watching a Lifetime movie about a woman who worked as a newspaper reporter and, while reporting on a local crime, became the next target of a psychopath. As she picked up each forkful of the vegetable stir fry she made during the commercials, she couldn’t help but think that in some ways the reporter was lucky. At least her life was exciting.

Prilly lived in between who she was and who she wanted to be. She had moved to Manhattan from Boston in search of a *big life*. She had always felt she was meant to have a *big life*. To date, she had barely had a small life. Although she was an atheist, like many other atheists she blamed God for all her problems (at least when she wasn’t blaming her parents). She thought it all came down to looks, to genetics. She was convinced that beautiful people have a much greater shot at a big life. Ugly people have no shot. People somewhere in the middle, which is where she was firmly located, had to work hard for it, but it *was* possible. So ever since Prilly was about seven years old and she figured out that she was regular looking at best, she blamed God and her parents for her lot in life. As a teenager

she admired the beautiful, popular girls. To her, they had been graced with the best gift of all, the gift of possibility. When you were beautiful, all you had to do was add on to that to get what you want, to be who you want to be. When you weren't beautiful, you spent your life making up for it, filling in what was lacking. Compensating. At times Prilly even envied the ugly girls. If you were ugly and knew it, there was no hope of a big life and so ultimately that would be very freeing. You could focus on being content with your life as it was. Ugly girls didn't have to waste time or money with makeup, hair care, exercise, beauty treatments and fashion. What was the point? No one fabulous would ever get close enough to reject them, so they must be free from disappointment too, she thought -- at least once they accepted their situation. The ones who had it the worst were those in the middle; the girls who, with enough work could be considered pretty, but never beautiful. Those girls had it the worst because they could taste the big life, they could see it close enough to want it, to reach for it. Prilly was in the middle.

*

Pete Rice had just picked up the latest Neil Gaiman book and planned to spend the next several hours reading it while drinking dark roast coffee. He loved the smell of coffee brewing. It was his favorite smell.

As Pete waited for the coffee to brew, he replayed the scene of Rachel storming out of his apartment the night before. He decided not to call her; he didn't care. He had a theory about women. If they loved you, you could control them. But if they loved you too much, disaster. He had had disasters. (There was Alice who showed up to a party at his friend's house, plastered, shouting that he had an STD. He didn't. Then there was the catalogue model, Georgia, who slashed his vintage T-shirt collection and trashed his apartment. This, of course, brings to mind Sophie, who upon catching him in bed with Georgia, used his dirty clothes to make a bonfire on the fire escape outside of his apartment. Worst of all was Sadie who would stake out his usual haunts—a local teahouse, a sandwich shop, a pub—waiting to see him arm-and-arm with another woman which would

cause her to scream publicly as if the world was burning and only she could see it. Interestingly, this would cause the woman currently with Pete, in her guiltiest of thoughts, to want him all the more.)

Pete's days depended primarily on three factors: whether or not he was screwing someone steadily (steadily for him being a long series of intense relationships that lasted about two months each), whether or not he had been out all night (he had a penchant for dance clubs, though at 38 he was nearly two decades older than everyone else there), and whether or not he was working (although he resisted any kind of long-term commitment or "career" that would interfere with his art, he did take very occasional part-time jobs ranging from telemarketing to working in a one-hour photo shop, which also never lasted for more than two months). He also vacillated between feeling invincible (he had an "unknown genius" complex, one that was imprinted with the arrogance of a guy who was better looking than behaved) and feeling utterly depressed. That day Pete had expected to be alone.

His studio apartment consisted of one small room that served as his bedroom and workspace, a kitchenette with a cut-out wall that looked into the bedroom, and a small hallway that led to the bathroom and front door. The main room had two large windows, one of which led out to a small fire escape that he used as a teeny tiny porch. Sometimes he grew pot out there, but it was usually stolen by his neighbors.

He used an old queen size mattress and box spring, but no bed frame, so his bed was low down on the floor. Gaiman book in hand, he propped up two pillows against the white stucco wall and sat down wearing his black and white checkered boxers and an old David Bowie T-shirt. He placed his oversized "I Love NY" mug on the cinderblock to the right of his bed, and opened the book. He always read the dedication first. He felt you could learn everything about the soul of an author by reading the dedication page and, thus, the soul of the book. Books without dedications always disappointed him. Just as he flipped to the first page there was a knock on his front door.

He walked to the door and shouted, “Who is it?”
“Melville.”

Pete opened the door. Neither said a word, and Pete just walked back down his narrow hallway to his bedroom while pulling at a wedgie. Melville locked the door and followed. Pete plopped down on his mattress and picked up his coffee. Melville pulled out the rolling computer chair tucked under the desk opposite the bed. He turned it to face Pete and sat down. Then he stood up and took off his jacket and sat down again, placing the orange garment across his lap.

“So what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing, I was downtown visiting my cousin so I thought I’d stop in. I thought maybe we could get some coffee or something. What are you doing?”

“Nothing. I got the new Gaiman book and I was just going to start it.”

“I could have gotten you a deal on that. I hope you didn’t pay full price, not for the hardcover. I know a store where you can get hard covers half off, even new ones. If you get ’em used you can get them for a few bucks. Hard covers are a rip off anyway.”

As Melville was talking, slowly as ever, Pete wished that he would shut up. He was the cheapest person he had ever met. He had holes in his sweaters and had sported the same worn out ugly orange windbreaker for the whole time Pete had known him— more than a decade. Pete hated going out to eat with him because Melville would refuse to tip appropriately. He would leave spare change, usually about a 4% tip at the most. Pete was cheap too, but only privately. In public he intentionally gave the impression of being generous but in private, he would often screw friends who loaned him money, haggle with the landlord over the rent if there was any minor repair needed in the apartment (real or imagined), and while he always had money for expensive restaurants, liquor, books, art supplies and all things entertainment, he never seemed to have money for anything else. For example, he had no health, dental or life insurance. Nor did he have any property (beyond the books and odds and ends in his tiny rented apartment). He routinely bought an overpriced cappuccino

from the café down the street, only to drink a sip and then put it to the side where he would forget about it, but he couldn't manage to pay his utilities on time and consistently ended up paying late fees and even reinstallation charges. As the flaws in others are always much more apparent than those in ourselves, Pete was oblivious. He wished that Melville wasn't so cheap or at least that he'd have the sense to shut up about it. The truth was, he was embarrassed to be friends with Melville. Pete prided himself on chasing the muse, being in tune with the zeitgeist, and living in the moment. To Pete, Melville was the embodiment of all that he disdained. Pete decided that Melville lived one beat outside the moment. That was why he was so slow relaying the simplest of information and why, at the age of 36, Pete suspected he may still be a virgin. Yet despite his harsh evaluation of Melville, he remained the only reliable presence in Pete's life.

Totally ignoring Melville's inane hardcover commentary, Pete shot back with, "Yeah, ok, let's go grab a bite. I need to shower. You can make yourself some coffee if you want. I'm out of filters but there's paper toweling there. Flip through that book, or look in that folder over there," he said, pointing to a pile of papers on the desk behind Melville. "I've expanded the carnival part of the story and I'd like to know what you think. No one's read it yet. You're in for a treat."

"I'll be out in a jiff," Pete hollered as he walked into the bathroom, coffee mug in hand.

Forty-five minutes later they were sitting down in a diner three blocks away. Pete was an inconsistent regular. He would go through spurts of eating there nearly every day, sometimes more than once a day, and other times he wouldn't go for months at a time. Just as any given waitress was getting to know him, he'd take a hiatus and she'd forget him by the time he returned. When the waitress came to take their order, Pete couldn't help but notice how unusual looking she was. He had a knack for noticing atypical faces, and this face intrigued him. It was fairly old but probably appeared older than its biological age. It had very long features and a strong nose. After

further examination he determined that the nose was in fact so ugly that he actually found it quite wonderful. He expected an interesting accent to match the face, but when she said, “What’ll it be?” it was with the same New York accent he had come to tire of in the last five of the fifteen years he had been in the States.

“I’ll have two eggs over easy with wheat toast. I’d like marmalade on the side, not jam. And coffee, with cream.”

“And you?” she asked looking at Melville who was still staring directly into the oversized plastic laminated menu.

“Um, what does the special egg sandwich come with?”

“Homefries.”

“Does it come with a drink?”

“No, just homefries.”

“Um, ok, I’ll have that.”

“Something to drink?”

“Just water.”

Pete, growing tired of these uncomfortable exchanges, had occupied himself by doodling in the small notepad he always carried with him. By the time Melville looked up from his menu, Pete was in another world.

“So I read the new pages.”

“Yeah, and?” Pete asked both eager to hear the response and annoyed that he had to coax it out of him.

“They’re good but you’re missing some commas in a couple of places. I can show you where.” (Melville had been an English major in college, until he dropped out sophomore year.)

“Commas? Fucking commas? This is your insight? I don’t give a fuck about commas! I hate fucking commas. Do you have anything useful to contribute or are you just taking up space?”

Although hurt by Pete’s patronizing rant, Melville ignored it as he was accustomed to doing. Wanting to show Pete he had more to offer, that he wasn’t just “taking up space,” he quickly retorted, “Well I don’t get where you are going with the main character. The writing is good but there’s nowhere to take it.”

“Ha! You should stick to commas,” Pete said through hearty laughter.

Melville shrugged, looking down. Although Pete had never noticed, Melville never looked him in the eyes. Never. He normally looked down and sometimes to the side.

“You’ll get it when it’s all there. That’s your problem, you need it all spelled out. Can’t feeeel where it’s headin’. But don’t worry, it’ll all be there and you’ll get it.”

With that the waitress brought breakfast. Melville ate swiftly, looking down at his food the entire time. Pete spent a few minutes dunking the corner of his toast into his egg yolks before eating.

At the end of the meal there was some typical squabbling about the bill. Melville left his usual 4% tip. Anyone else would have just thrown some extra money down but Pete, being secretly cheap himself, guilted Melville into putting down a couple of dollars. Pete either didn’t realize or care that when Melville gave in it was just to get Pete to shut up. He couldn’t stand the sound of his voice. Although Melville envied him, particularly with women, he also found Pete laborious. Walking out, Pete noticed a flyer in the entrance of the diner. It announced a book reading by Jeanette Winterson that Saturday afternoon at a local book store. He ripped down the flyer and said, “We should go to this. It would be good for you to hear a real writer. No one uses metaphor quite like Winterson. She’s good.”

Not acknowledging the condemnation, Melville simply replied, “Yeah, ok.”

*

On the train Melville Wicket sat still and silent. Only weeks before he had moved into his younger brother Jacob’s apartment in Brooklyn, which he shared with a manic depressive named Jeremy.

Melville was a telemarketer for a medical insurance company. He only worked 28 hours a week so his employer could get away without paying him benefits, like medical insurance. With hardly enough income to live, Melville had been staying in a small basement room in a rooming house for the past three years. He paid

month-to-month. Some residents had week-to-week deals. The room was half above ground and half below. There were two small rectangular windows high on the right wall, nearly touching the ceiling, with rusty iron bars. Underneath there was a small refrigerator, the kind you would expect to find in a college dorm room, a microwave, and an electric Crock-Pot that violated building codes. Across from the windows there was a twin size bed with old off white sheets, one flattened pillow, and a worn out queen sized down comforter with a few holes. Sometimes when Melville woke up in the morning, there would be feathers in his hair. In his mind he called them chicken feathers. To the left of the bed was a small unfinished wood desk and brown leather chair. On the desk, a stack of library books, a few pieces of old mail, notebooks and pens, an old word processor from 1995, and a small alarm clock with a CD player. On the floor beneath, stacks of CDs. To the right, a tall halogen lamp. There was a shared bathroom in the hallway. Melville was allotted one shelf in the medicine cabinet for his personal items, which he used, although he didn't feel good about it.

Melville would have stayed there forever, but he was asked to leave at the end of the previous month. One of the female residents complained to the Super that Melville had been peeping on her while she was in the bathroom. She claimed that she saw him through the slit of the barely-opened door, a door she claimed to have closed, that he must have pushed ever so slightly open. Two years earlier another woman had made a similar complaint. Melville had denied it, in his usual quiet manner. The Super took pity on him and let him stay, but now with a second complaint, he was out. When he told Pete what happened Pete said, "Spying, you were spying on the girls? Ha!" Melville insisted he hadn't done it, and Pete rolled his eyes but didn't say anything else. He always assumed that Melville was guilty but not because he was a pervert, just because he was shy, and awkward, and terribly lonely.

Jacob hadn't wanted Melville to move in with him, but what could he do, the guy was basically homeless, and he *was* his brother. Besides, he could get money for rent and utilities, leaving more

money for pot and the occasional celebratory mushroom. Jacob was 24 and worked in what he called a “vintage music store” in the Village, near Washington Square Park. It was a store that sold rare vinyl and also used CDs, dealing largely in trade. Melville wondered how in the age of Ebay and Itunes a store like that could stay in business. When he once asked Jacob about it, Jacob told him to “shut the fuck up.” Melville never mentioned it again. Melville didn’t know what Jeremy did for a living. Most days he would be in his room all day, sleeping, Melville assumed. But every Tuesday he was up and out of the house by 8:00 am and didn’t return until after 6:00 pm. Melville didn’t ask questions.

After spending the morning with Pete, Melville returned to his apartment at 3:00 pm. He went straight into his small bedroom. In actuality it was a two bedroom apartment, with a small living room and kitchenette combo room, and one tiny bathroom with a stall shower. The apartment also had a very small sunroom that Jacob turned into a makeshift bedroom for his brother. With no room for a bed, Melville slept on a small couch. The room was very drafty, and Melville was worried about winter. He thought about it all the time. On that day, as most, he entered his room, took off his sneakers, and put on a Puccini CD. He lay on his couch with his jacket still on, listening.

*

Prilly’s search for a big life hadn’t amounted to much. She was in her office from 8:00 am until 6:30 pm every weekday. By the time she got back to her apartment, it was time for “Access Hollywood” and a healthy dinner, followed by a bad junk food binge with a side of guilt and a movie about women who steal other women’s babies or who murder their young repairmen lovers. Although she had been in New York for several years, she hadn’t managed to make more than a couple of friends. And she didn’t really like them. Much like the fat girl in high school whom she befriended, this, for now, was the best she could do. The single women at work routinely went to local bars together, and, although they always invited her, she never once went. She didn’t feel comfortable and thought it would be awful.

After a while she also noticed that they didn't so much invite her, but rather state, "We're heading to Maxwells." She assumed she was welcome to join them; else why would they bother to announce where they were going. But she wasn't sure.

She did take one stab at Internet dating. The Internet appealed to her for two main reasons. First, no one had to know about it. So if it didn't work out she wouldn't have to explain it to anyone. Second, she could screen the men on the basis of income, education, looks and interests. She wanted a man who earned more money than she did, not because she had any intention of becoming dependent on a man, but because it would be hard to have a big life in Manhattan without more money, and a lot of it. She also really wanted to get out of her mounting credit card debt which weighed on her, particularly on the nights she drank a lot. She hoped to meet someone interested in the arts, who could take her to the best shows. Although she wanted to be with a good looking man, which she felt made a so-so looking woman seem much more attractive, she didn't want to be with a man that was too good looking. Men like that always eventually left average women. It was hard to fool them into thinking you were prettier than you actually were. If she managed to get a decent man and turn it into a steady thing, she didn't want to have to do it all over again someday. She also feared being a part of a couple that made other women look and wonder: "What is he doing with her?" The Internet dating ended up costing her \$199.00, a weekend's worth of screening time, one terrible evening, and an untold sum of shame. She had made a date with Henry. He seemed promising. He was an accountant who owned his own apartment and claimed to see every foreign film that came out. They were to meet at a Spanish tapas restaurant a few blocks from where she worked for a drink and quick bite. She thought about the date incessantly for five days. She got a manicure, bikini wax and bought two new outfits (neither of which she wore; she decided one was weird and the other looked too "datey"). The night they were supposed to meet she got to the restaurant, stood outside for a minute panicking, walked around the block, and then decided that

if he had seen her walk around the block he would already think she was a freak. She went home, drank nearly a bottle of wine, and watched four hours of a nine hour “Murder She Wrote” marathon on the Hallmark channel. Henry sent her an email the next morning asking what had happened and if she was ok. She never responded and took her profile off of Match.com immediately. She felt guilty for months, thinking of Henry often.

Without many friends to go out with, and no real effort at dating, her life had become fairly lonely. She decided to invest energy into her weekend routine. Convinced that if you lead an interesting life you will meet interesting people, Prilly made being interesting her full-time weekend occupation. For her, there was nothing more interesting than the arts. Had she been braver, she might have been some sort of artist, or at least a journalist. She took to surrounding herself with the products of others’ bliss. The monotony of the work week was soon juxtaposed to weekends of ballet, theater, concerts, gallery openings, craft markets, spoken word performances, independent films, museums and poetry readings. It was exhausting.

*

“Well I wanted to tell you in person. I know it’s difficult but please don’t take it personally. We’re a mid-sized press and we need to be very careful about what books to publish, particularly for our trade market. Usually we don’t even consider unsolicited works.”

“But you’ve sold fifteen thousand copies of my last book. That should count for something. That’s why I came to you first. I just don’t understand this. Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Yes, I understand how you must feel,” Prilly responded in a hushed tone, “but that was an introductory geography textbook, it was an academic printing with a built-in audience we could market too. If you talk with Marcy I’m sure she can explain it to you. The trade market is very different and we publish very few new fiction authors each year. I’m sorry but we can’t go with this and I don’t want to waste your time. I encourage you to submit it elsewhere.”

After a moment of silence in which Prilly could hear her own breath Charles matter-of-factly said, “Well I’m very disappointed. Very disappointed.”

With that the large, pear-shaped man got up, outstretched his arm over Prilly’s desk for a sweaty handshake, and left.

Prilly felt awful. Normally she would just send rejection emails or letters. She never had to see the person she was rejecting, but because Charles was already published with the house, Stuart had suggested she do it in person next time Charles stopped by to see Marcy, the geography editor.

Just before Prilly could regroup from that experience, Janice popped her head in her door, left ajar by Charles. Just the sight of Janice made Prilly crave Advil.

Janice was a long-time acquisitions editor with the press and Prilly had been her assistant for nine months before being promoted to editor. It was the longest nine months of her life. At first she thought she was incredibly lucky. She was told that there were very few women in publishing who had made it to Janice’s level, with her list of accomplishments. After ten years of working in their geography division Janice was given a new list to build, history, a market the press had never ventured into before. With a degree in history Janice had purportedly been thrilled. She had introduced herself to Prilly as a feminist. She boldly said, “Prilly, this is a male dominated industry. It’s not easy. But it can be done and we have to support each other.” She also prided herself on including women’s history and Black history in her line, books she swore other editors would pass by.

Prilly soon found out that feminism was more of a conceptual with Janice. She really enjoyed talking about supporting “women’s issues” but she didn’t support *actual women*. In fact, over time Prilly learned that Janice was particularly harsh on the women she worked with out of some irrational fear that they would become more successful than her, and what’s worse, that they wouldn’t have to work as hard to do it. Janice had to work for everything she had, and unlike the “anorexic bitches” she went to college with, she scraped

for everything she got, including her education. As a result Janice only liked women beneath her, those that she could easily manipulate and therefore control.

Janice had liked Prilly well enough at first but, when she realized that Prilly wouldn't be content being an assistant forever, she began to grow weary. This weariness led to a quiet resentment. During those days Prilly would often find herself working outrageously long hours that mostly consisted of doing secretarial work for Janice, which was not in Prilly's job description. Assigning these kinds of tasks helped Janice on two levels. First, it made it clear to Prilly and anyone else paying attention that she was in charge, she was Prilly's boss. Second, and even more importantly, it prevented Prilly from doing the kind of work that the publishers would notice, the kind of work that would get Prilly promoted. What Janice failed to recognize was that the publishers had always intended Prilly for an editorial position. They just made her an assistant first so the others wouldn't complain that there was too much rank jumping. When Prilly was promoted she immediately went to Janice, hoping to avoid future unpleasantness, and said, "Thank you so much. Without your mentorship this never would have happened." To this Janice replied in her usual quiet and monotone voice, "Well, actually I did put in a good word for you too. I had to push for this. I had to make this happen. But you deserve it." Prilly thanked her although she knew it wasn't true. In fact she suspected that Janice secretly gave her mediocre performance reviews so that she would remain her assistant indefinitely. Ever since, Janice went out of her way to be nice to Prilly, so much so that it alarmed her. But once in a while, Janice found a way to say something cutting, under the guise of being helpful, like the knock about having to convince the bosses to promote her. It was no wonder that the mere sight of Janice at her door caused a sharp pain in her spine.

"Hi Prilly. What was that about? Charles Pruitt looked pretty upset when he left. He used to be one of my authors you know."

Prilly relaxed a bit, hoping Janice was just nosing around for gossip as she was prone to do, and didn't in fact want anything from her beyond chitchat.

"Oh, that's right. He's one of Marcy's now. Same old, same old: he's an academic who thinks he can also be a novelist. I had to tell him that his manuscript isn't for us. He took it pretty hard but... what can you do, you know."

At this Janice shimmied her way into the doorway, allowing her back to gently tap the door closed as if unintentionally. "Oh great," Prilly thought, "There's more."

"Do you want to come in and sit down?" Prilly asked entirely out of obligation.

"Oh sure, just for a minute."

Prilly noticed how Janice always had a way of making things seem like they were someone else's idea, and like *she* was doing *you* a favor.

"Prilly, I wanted to run something by you."

"Sure, what's up?"

"I want to build a list of memoirs, focusing mostly on unknown female authors."

"That sounds great Janice, you should give Stuart a proposal."

"Well I did actually, and that's where you come in. Stuart said that memoirs would fall under your list, that they're sold as trade books and since we don't publish non-fiction trade, they'd have to be a part of our current trade list. He thought it would make sense for someone in your division to partner up with me."

"Hmmm."

"So I suggested that you and I work on it together. We could do it as a book series, instead of a line, at least as a sort of pilot test. If we solicit authors who have already drafted manuscripts we could premier at Trade Launch this Spring. You and I could serve as co-editors-in-chief for the series, with my name listed first. If it does well, we could eventually build a full line. I think this would be an excellent opportunity for you."

“Yeah, I bet you do,” Prilly thought to herself. She had learned long ago that Janice only cared about opportunities for herself. Anytime she framed something as an opportunity for someone else, Prilly thought that poor soul should run like the wind. In Prilly’s case, there was a part of her that actually liked Janice, despite all the obvious reasons not to. At times Prilly even thought that her fondness for Janice grew in direct proportion to Janice’s manipulative behavior. Although she was very different from Janice, deep down she knew that there was a part of them that was the same. A part of each of them that had been shafted and was clawing their way out the best way they knew how; it was just that Janice’s claws were sharper. She also wanted to believe in Janice’s tale of great feminist heroism in publishing, even though she knew it was a lie. If Janice would just be more forthright, Prilly could even be friends with her. She kept this thought to herself.

“Well it does sound interesting. Why don’t you give me your proposal and I’ll look over it and we can talk more. I’m really swamped as it is, but I’ll definitely look over what you have.”

“I’m telling you, this is a great opportunity for you. In fact, Stuart didn’t think you were up for it yet but with my convincing, he’s willing to give you a shot.”

“Well I appreciate that,” Prilly said, the way a child thanks their parents when they’re given socks for Christmas. “It sounds like a great opportunity but I’d like to look over the specifics and think about it.”

Janice couldn’t conceal her irritation as she fiddled with her pin-straight light brown hair, but she played along. “Ok, I’ll email you the proposal and Stu’s notes; we can talk about it early next week.”

“Ok, great, thanks Janice.”

And with that, Janice left her office, shutting the door behind her. Prilly took four Advil immediately.

*

The weekend couldn’t come fast enough for Prilly. She spent Friday night at home with half a bottle of red wine and Chinese takeout. (She always ate right out of the container with the

disposable chopsticks. She thought it was more sophisticated even though no one was there to see it, and even though she had no idea how to use chopsticks properly so food invariably dribbled on her couch. This also prevented her from ordering the veggie fried rice she liked, she couldn't possibly eat rice with chopsticks). Saturday she woke up late with a wine-MSG headache and took two Advil.

With no plans until Sunday (when she was meeting an old friend for a several times rescheduled lunch) she sipped her French roast while perusing one of her favorite New York websites, which listed things of interest. Jeanette Winterson was doing a book reading and signing at 4:00 pm. The bookstore was near the shoe repair store where she had left her silver shoes for heel reinforcement. Prilly liked to multitask plus she thought there were sure to be interesting people at the book reading.

CHAPTER 2

“Hang on a minute. Fuck, Melville’s banging on the damn door. No, we’re going to a book reading. I’m not even dressed so I better get movin. I’ll call you later. Hang in there. Bye.”

When Pete hung up the phone he stammered down his hallway and opened the door. He turned around and walked back to kitchenette without saying a word. Melville shut the door and followed.

“Christ, I was on the phone. Can’t you wait a minute?” Pete asked with a tone that made it clear he was not looking for an answer. “I’m making coffee, do you want some?”

“No thanks,” Melville said as he grabbed a comic book off of Pete’s desk and sat in the chair, flipping through its pages. Melville didn’t care for comic books; he thought they were juvenile and beneath him, but, like so many other thoughts, he kept this to himself.

“I just need to throw my clothes on. I’ll bring the coffee to go.”

“Ok,” Melville said as he started to read a random page in the middle of the comic book.

*

The bookstore was crowded and by the time Pete and Melville got there, fifteen minutes late (though Winterson hadn’t begun her reading yet), there weren’t any seats left. Melville was secretly annoyed that Pete, per usual, hadn’t been ready on time. They stood in the back, leaning against a wall. Pete, burnt out from a sleepless night, sipped his coffee steadily.

When Winterson appeared, everyone stood up and began clapping ferociously. She began by talking about her new work, from which she read several passages. She then took questions from the audience about her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and fan favorites like *Sexing the Cherry*. Prilly, sitting in the corner of the back row, hadn’t read any of Winterson’s books; although, she owned several. They were amidst the collection of “important artistic works” she thought everyone should own... and someday even read.

At the end of the question period, there was a book signing. The mob scurried to the front forming a swerving line through the store. Prilly detested standing in lines. Also, she hadn't brought any books with her and wasn't committed to buying the new book. She picked up her unmarked brown paper bag that contained her newly repaired shoes and turned to head out. The bag didn't have a handle and was thus cumbersome. She had to stick it under one of her arms and throw her handbag on her opposite shoulder. She fumbled a bit as she made her way past the rows of arranged chairs towards the door. Melville, still leaning against the wall with Pete, noticed her immediately. She was lovely, he thought. It was his irrepressible staring that made Pete aware of her. As Prilly walked by, Pete said, "You're not getting a book?"

"I'm sorry; did you say something to me?" Prilly asked, catching a glimpse of Pete for the first time. He had striking teal eyes framed with a few soft lines that made her think he had "really lived."

"I just asked if you were getting a book; everyone else seems to be."

"Oh," noticing how sexy his voice was. "The line is too long."

"My friend and I were going to go get a coffee, to talk about the reading. Would you like to join us?"

Stunned by the invitation from a tall, dark-haired man whose name she didn't yet know, Prilly stammered. Pete quickly responded, "It's ok, no worries, but if you're not busy come along."

With that, Pete walked in front of Prilly, opened the door, and let her pass through. He then stepped outside with Melville following. He turned to Prilly, who was now shocked by both the unexpected invitation and willingness with which this man would let her just leave. "Well, have a good evening," he said as he turned and started walking down the street.

Prilly watched as he and Melville went into a café only half a block down. She turned to walk in the other direction but as if in slow motion stopped mid-movement and turned back towards the café. She would hate herself if she didn't check this out. When she

walked into the café Pete was sitting on a long red velvet couch. He smiled and said, “Well, you changed your mind.”

“I thought I’d just come for a quick coffee.”

“Great.” With that he jumped up and got in line next to Melville, cutting in front of several people who didn’t seem to mind.

Prilly placed her brown bag on the couch and sat on a wooden chair opposite where Pete had been sitting. “What’ll ya have,” he hollered. “Oh, a cappuccino. A non-fat cappuccino please.”

Soon the two men joined Prilly. “Thank you,” she said as Pete handed her a drink. “My name is Pete, and this is Melville, my editor,” Pete said with a smirk as he plopped down on the couch.

“I’m Prilly. Prilly Greene.” Turning to Melville who was sitting in the chair to her right, she then said, “You’re an editor? Me too, that’s so funny. I’m at WISE. What house are you with?”

Pete started laughing and said, “The house of Jacob.”

Melville stuttered a bit and Prilly, not knowing what was so funny, turned to Pete. “Are you a writer?” she asked.

“Yes. Graphic novels mostly, but I do a little of everything.”

Prilly was disproportionately impressed by him considering they had just met. He was very sexy, too sexy for her really, but he seemed interested. She loved his British accent though she was embarrassed by her own trite thinking. He immediately reminded her of the lead singer from the ’80s band Ah Ha. She had always loved the video for their song “Take on Me” in which the singer is transformed into a cartoon illustration who falls in love with a plain-looking diner waitress. Every time she saw that video she wondered why they didn’t get a more glamorous woman to play the love-interest, but she cherished the video because it gave her hope. That was exactly how she felt with Pete.

After talking about the book reading for quite a while (although clearly a bit full of himself, Pete was well read and Prilly was enamored), they decided to go out for dinner. Prilly said that she wanted to stop at her apartment first to drop off the bag with her shoes. She actually wanted to freshen up and throw a toothbrush and some makeup in her pocketbook just in case she didn’t make it home

that night. Although she had no intention of sleeping with him, this was the most exciting thing that had happened to Prilly in a long time and she wanted to be prepared for spontaneity. Suddenly worried that she just invited two total strangers into her apartment, she felt a mix of trepidation and exhilaration as she clumsily turned the key in the lock. "I'll just be a couple of minutes, feel free to look at those books," she said pointing to her bookshelf as she darted into her bedroom. She returned ten minutes later with a larger handbag and without the brown paper bag that had become a source of gags on the way to her apartment. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"I'm going to go home. I forgot that I promised my brother I'd watch a movie with him tonight," Melville said. "He already rented it."

"Oh, ok," Prilly responded, not knowing if it was true or if Pete had asked him to make himself scarce so they could be alone. Though she was hoping the latter was true, that thought also made her stomach knot. She had never been with someone so good-looking before.

The three walked out together and Melville headed left while Pete and Prilly headed right.

*

When Melville entered his apartment Jacob was sitting on the couch with three guys that Melville had seen there before but had never been introduced to. They were passing around a joint and listening to some god-awful reggae music. Melville walked over to the refrigerator and took out a small bottle of Orangina and a Tupperware with leftover macaroni with meat sauce that he had made a few days earlier. He popped the Tupperware into the microwave. The 90 second cooking time felt like forever as Melville awkwardly stood waiting for it to beep. "Hey, I thought you were hanging with Pete tonight. Did he ditch you?" Jacob hollered from the couch. Suddenly there were four sets of bloodshot eyes peering over at him. "He met a girl. Wanted to be alone with her. She's beautiful," Melville quietly said, embarrassed that in fact he had again been ditched. With that Jacob and his friends refocused on

their joint and Melville took his dinner into his room where he ate while listening to a Stravinsky CD and thinking of Prilly.

*

“‘Casey bombed into town with her daily organizer.’ Ha! That’s terrible,” Pete said as his voice became higher and his laughter morphed into a cackle.

“Really? You think so? It’s not Pulitzer material but I don’t think it’s so bad. You should have seen the guy. He looked, he looked like he was trying to pretend he wasn’t shattered. He’s already one of our authors; I felt really badly for him.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. It’s dreadful. That could be an example in a book about how *not* to write. Maybe you could use it for that,” Pete said, again punctuating his suggestion with laughter.

Pete was getting close to hurting her feelings, and he was definitely arrogant, but she let it slide and just said, “Yeah, I guess it’s pretty bad” (even though she still didn’t understand why).

After a two hour dinner sitting at the bar of a pub that Pete recommended (where they had gone Dutch), Prilly was in Pete’s apartment sharing a bottle of red wine they picked up on the way there (which Prilly had paid for because Pete suddenly became fascinated looking at plastic lighters when it was their turn at the register). Normally Prilly would have been put off by such a scruffy little apartment, but on that night she saw the simplicity differently. He was living like a real artist, she thought.

With only one chair in the apartment Pete invited her to sit on the bed. When she hesitated he said, “Don’t worry, you don’t have to sleep with me or anything,” followed by a short burst of laughter which she was beginning to realize was a regular part of his communication. “Oh, I know,” she said uncomfortably as she went to sit on the bed being careful not to spill her wine.

Wanting to quickly start up the conversation Prilly asked, “What have you written? You said something about graphic novels. I don’t know much about that genre but would I know your work?”

“Oh no. No, you wouldn’t know my work. I haven’t been ready to publish. Haven’t sent it out anywhere. But soon.”

As an editor Prilly didn't know what to make of this. She dealt with writers every day who were desperate to publish, who wanted it more than anything else. "When you say you're not ready to publish, do you mean that you haven't completed a work or are you one of those perfectionists who wants to get it all just so before you hand it over? Because you'd be amazed how useful copyeditors can be."

"Well I'll put it to you this way, if I were a gardener I would have the most beautiful, unusual flowers in the most unexpected and glorious colors. Everywhere the eye darted it would be unimaginable wonder. However, I wouldn't remember to water them and they would all die." He started laughing. "Besides, Melville does my copyediting."

"Ah," Prilly said, choosing to ignore the warning the universe might be sending her. She also chose not to ask how he earned a living (days later he would tell her that he lived mainly off of an inheritance from his parents who had both died young of lung cancer although neither were smokers). Instead of making her wonder about his work ethic it just made her feel sad for him.

They moved on to childhood tales (he had stories about eating candy floss on Autumn days; she had no idea what candy floss was but it sounded wonderful), his days in college (he was a philosophy major who dropped out during his third year because there was nothing more to learn from the professors), his subsequent adventures in London (where he befriended many drug addicted counter-culture artists) and eventually his move to New York (for "the energy"). She briefly told him about how much she loved her career, but mostly she just listened. After a few hours of talking, listening to new wave music that Prilly couldn't believe she had never heard before, and, flipping through folders of Pete's work that appeared as totally fragmented bits and pieces of rambling sprinkled with something magical, she realized it was past midnight.

"I should probably go."

"Don't be silly, spend the night. We can go out for breakfast in the morning. There's a wonderful little diner nearby with a fabulous

waitress; she has the most unusual face, you have to see it. Do you have plans tomorrow?"

Prilly did have tentative plans with her friend Yvonne, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to sleep with Pete yet, but she just said, "No, no plans."

"Settled. I have only the one bed so you'll have to sleep with me but don't worry, we can just sleep. I'll get you a T-shirt to wear."

Prilly went into the bathroom and put on the oversized Smiths T-shirt he had given her. She looked in the small, toothpaste splattered mirror above the sink and wondered what she was doing. She also thought about how glad she was that she had brought her toothbrush.

She timidly returned to the bed, and carefully crawled in. Pete smiled at her and said, "Good night," as he flipped off the light switch. She lay awake for hours pretending to sleep.

The next morning, she heard Pete wrestling around in bed. She slowly turned to him, conscious of her morning breath. He looked her in the eyes and softly said, "Good morning." Not wanting to breathe on him she looked down and whispered, "Good morning." She turned around, lying with her back to him. He put his hand on her shoulder and she moved closer to him. He slid his hand under her T-shirt and rubbed her breasts. Then he moved his hands down and gently pulled her panties off. He put his hand on her and started slowly motioning. He slid into her and they made love, never turning to each other, never kissing.