Paige Michaels comes from the kind of wealth that few experience. The daughter of a notoriously successful banker who wielded great political power, she grew up in an extraordinary world peopled by the political leaders of tomorrow. Now one mistake rooted in her past is threatening to unravel her perfect life. After years as a stay-at-home mother living in New Jersey, Mollie Johnston convinces her husband, Paul, to move back to New York to fulfill her dream of living amid the bright lights. Mollie is uncomfortable in her own body and is always worried about how others perceive her and Paul. Once she sees how the other half lives, will she come to see herself and her marriage more clearly? Gwen McAndrews is the ultimate New York socialite and is the envy of those impressed by her grandeur, but is there more than meets the eye? In addition to Paige, Mollie, and Gwen, a cast of characters’ stories are interwoven into the text – parents, children, caretakers, childhood friends, old lovers, and spouses. American Circumstance is a novel about appearance versus reality – how our lives and relationships appear to others versus how they are experienced, and the complex ways that social class shapes identity, relationships, and the codes of friendship. American Circumstance also provides a window into the replication of wealth, power, and privilege. The novel can be used as supplemental reading in courses across the disciplines that deal with gender, social class, inequality, power, family systems, relational communication, intimate relationships, identity, American culture, narrative or creative writing. It can also be read in book clubs or entirely for pleasure.

“American Circumstance is wonderful! The characters and story invite you into a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar. Highly recommended!” – Carl Leggo, Ph.D., University of British Columbia

“American Circumstance kept me up! I wanted to see how the characters’ lives untangled. I loved how Leavy challenged my cultural assumptions. Students will have a lot to talk about as they discover the ‘sociology of everyday life’ embedded in the fiction.” – Laurel Richardson, Ph.D., The Ohio State University

“The characters were so compelling that I couldn’t stop reading ... a great beach read, or class text.” – U. Melissa Anyiwo, Ph.D., Curry College

“Leavy writes in an engaging way that helps you ask important questions about class issues in America. This story keeps you interested and wondering why women make the choices they do.” – Margaret A. Robbins, The Journal of Language & Literacy Education

“American Circumstance is one of my favorite texts to assign to my sociology students.” – Cheryl Llewellyn, Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Lowell

Patricia Leavy, Ph.D., is an award-winning independent sociologist and best-selling author.
American Circumstance
Social Fictions Series

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

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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American Circumstance

Anniversary Edition

Patricia Leavy

SENSE PUBLISHERS
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PRAISE FOR
AMERICAN CIRCUMSTANCE

“American Circumstance kept me up! I couldn’t put it down; I wanted to see how the characters’ lives untangled. I loved how Leavy challenged my cultural assumptions. This book would be a great teaching tool. Students will have a lot to talk about as they discover the ‘sociology of everyday life’ embedded in the fiction.”
– Laurel Richardson, Ph.D., The Ohio State University

“American Circumstance was hard to put down; once you start reading, you are drawn into the story in such a way that the world disappears and time seems to stand still. The characters were so compelling that I couldn’t look away, couldn’t stop reading; even a bathroom trip seemed like an incomprehensible interruption. I needed to know if Paige, Mollie, and Gwen would resolve their issues. The open nature of the ending forces the story to stay with you for a long time as you try to imagine where their lives will end up. Leavy leaves so much unsaid because life is more about impressions of people, sketches of what we choose to see, rather than perfectly drawn archetypes. I could absolutely see this novel in a plethora of courses aimed at understanding the complexities and limits of life in the modern world. It is contemporary literature at its best: accessible and incredibly well-written, with prose that welcomes a wide-ranging audience, short enough to consume quickly (attractive for students), but with enough depth to satisfy you. Its sociological issues are apparent yet not overwhelming. Its message encourages critical, deep thinking. Ultimately, American Circumstance is a novel that I have recommended not only to all of my friends as a great beach read, but also to my colleagues teaching Contemporary American Literature and Women’s and Gender Studies.”
– U. Melissa Anyiwo, Ph.D., Curry College

“This one is a real page-turner. Just when you think you know what’s going on, it turns out that events aren’t at all what they seem.”
– Eve Spangler, Ph.D., Boston College
“Leavy shows that the lines between fiction and scholarship are beginning to merge, and that an academic can write an effective fictional account to represent the data of her sociological findings. Leavy writes in an engaging way that helps the reader ask important questions about class issues in America. This story keeps the reader interested and wondering why women make the choices they do.”
– Margaret A. Robbins, The Journal of Language & Literacy Education

“American Circumstance is an essential component in my university teaching. Leavy weaves the social issues of gender, social class and norms into her story telling and with it her grasp of our individual and collective circumstances. She infuses life into core concepts of sociology. Our semester culminates with a skype interview with Leavy, which further excites and provokes student involvement. A must for Arts & Sciences, Humanities and Integrated Learning Courses.”
– Mari Dias, Ph.D., Johnson & Wales University

“Semester after semester, my students look forward to reading American Circumstance. The novel demonstrates the ways in which sociological thinking takes place in the lived experiences of others. Students greatly enjoy learning how our social location matters, from micro-level interactions to large-scale societal issues, as they follow their favorite characters through the story. Students confront and analyze difficult concepts including sexual assault, structural inequality, and heteronormativity, all within one extraordinary novel.”
– Lauren Sardi, Ph.D., Quinnipiac University

“American Circumstance is wonderful! The characters and story invite you into a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar. While many urgent social issues are raised for thoughtful consideration, the heart of the novel pulses with the experiences and emotions of three women who, while marked by many differences, all share a commitment to living hopefully in love. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole novel, from the first inviting words to the exquisitely poignant conclusion. Highly recommended!!”
– Carl Leggo, Ph.D., University of British Columbia
“American Circumstance is one of my favorite texts to assign to my sociology students. They not only enjoy reading it, but they also leave the classroom with a better understanding of core sociological concepts, including intersectionality, identity, relationships, and power. My students gain a better understanding of how wealth operates at both the micro and macro levels and how class privilege intersects with gender, race, and nationality. American Circumstance is always a hit with my students and enhances our classroom experience!”
– Cheryl Llewellyn, Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Lowell

“American Circumstance had me hooked from page one. Leavy creates a compelling, enthralling world that beautifully illustrates what real love and partnership truly is while challenging our assumptions and pushing us to look at our own relationships. Expertly crafted and engagingly drawn. Pick this book up!”
– Amy Leigh Mercree, Relationship Expert and author of The Spiritual Girl’s Guide to Dating: Your Enlightened Path to Love, Sex, & Soul Mates

“American Circumstance has a chick lit feel, but rather than following the tired chick lit formula, Leavy subverts the genre with characters that are multidimensional and events that are true-to-life. Paige, the central character, leads what seems to be a charmed life of wealth and privilege, but those characteristics do not define her. Leavy untangles the American circumstance in ways that are relatable and breathes depth into her characters. American Circumstance is grounded in both sociology and feminism and is a pleasure to read.”
– Jessica Smartt Gullion, Ph.D., Texas Woman’s University
“I used *American Circumstance* in my mid-sized, upper division course on American Society and Inequalities. The book was an incredible supplement to the traditional textbook and students really enjoyed it. They read it quickly and were thoroughly engaged by it. They were able to understand complex sociological concepts by relating to the characters. I even had the students write their own fictional piece in which they developed a new character to add to the book. Leavy’s novel not only kept them interested, but it got my creative juices flowing and made for a much more exciting class.”

– Amanda Kennedy, Ph.D., Curry College
dedicated to the people I grew up with and in loving memory of Christina ‘Miki’ Taylor
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Paige Michaels comes from the kind of wealth that few experience. The daughter of a notoriously successful banker who wielded great political power, she grew up in an extraordinary world peopled by the political leaders of tomorrow. A distant relationship with her mother, the ultimate hostess, also plays a significant role in her identity. Now a wife, mother, and full-time supporter of an international women’s organization, her life appears charmed. But one mistake rooted in her past is threatening to unravel her perfect life.

Paige’s story intersects with the narratives of two of her friends. After years as a stay-at-home mother living in New Jersey, Mollie Johnston convinces her husband, Paul, to move back to New York to fulfill her dream of living amid the bright lights. Mollie is uncomfortable in her own body and is always worried about how others perceive her and Paul. Once she sees how the other half lives, will she come to see herself and her marriage more clearly? Gwen McAndrews is the ultimate New York socialite and is the envy of those impressed by her grandeur, but is there more than meets the eye? In addition to Paige, Mollie, and Gwen, a cast of characters’ stories are interwoven into the text – parents, children, caretakers, childhood friends, old lovers, and spouses – showing how they all shape each other’s stories.

While written in a fun, chick-lit style, American Circumstance is a subversive novel about appearance versus reality – how our lives and relationships appear to others versus how they are experienced. There can be a disjuncture between how a relationship looks from the outside versus how it is actually experienced. The novel also explores the complex ways in which social class shapes identity and relationships, including the codes that guide our interactions with others. What do we say and not say to each other? The themes of appearance versus reality and social class are interlinked in the pages that follow, as they are in life. American Circumstance provides a window into the replication of wealth, power, and privilege. There
is also a strong generational narrative about how family influences identity, as well as a narrative about the power of friendship.

American Circumstance also explores the intersections between gender and class and how they shape identity and relationships in complicated ways. This is a wholly “American” story set in the Northeast. However, through Paige’s work with WIN, an international organization devoted to helping women living in conflict and high-risk zones, we see that problems are all relative, as are the ways that race, class, and gender influence our stories. (WIN is a fictitious organization inspired by the real organization Women for Women International. If you are interested in helping women in conflict zones, please visit www.womenforwomen.org). American Circumstance also touches on sexual violence. If you or someone you know needs help, please visit RAINN (the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, www.rainn.org).

In order to push on the bounds of the appearance versus reality theme, I conceptualized the novel as if it were an impressionist painting. An impressionist painting can look very different from afar than it does close up, just as our lives and relationships can. A literary style developed from the theory of impressionism; this approach to writing is based on associations, repetition, and symbolism. In an effort to capture the impressionistic style, I have employed particular writing strategies. Language is repeated in different contexts and is shown to have a multiplicity of meanings, and details are included to evoke associations which may later be troubled. The novel is divided into three parts, with the first (and longest) covering moments over an expanse of four decades. The second part unfolds over a period of a few months, and the final part transpires over just a few days. A narrator’s viewpoint dominates the beginning of the novel, providing a distant view, and the interiority of characters is increasingly presented as we reach the book’s conclusion, providing a closer perspective. In this regard, the novel explores how others see the characters, how we as readers see them, and how they see themselves. As our perspective changes and the characters and their circumstances are revealed, we are invited to consider what is truly important in their lives and hopefully in our own. This mirrors the practice of painting one scene
at different angles, times of day, or seasons, a method common in impressionist painting.

Art, such as paintings and films, is also used as a series of signposts throughout the novel, mirroring, illuminating, and troubling the characters’ experiences and perceptions. So called “high art” is featured to parallel the class issues and biases in the narrative.

While entirely fictional, American Circumstance is grounded in autoethnographic observations (contextualized personal experiences) and more than a decade of teaching and sociological research about gender, class, race, identity, and relationships, including interview research with women about their identities and relationships. Fiction can be used to stimulate reflection and discussion about topics that are often challenging, such as social class. Sociology is concerned with the relationship between our individual lives and the larger contexts in which we live our lives. I used this perspective to weave a narrative about how social class and gender influence our experiences, even the seemingly mundane, such as the way we interact with each other, often slipping into patterned or coded ways of communicating. In doing so, I hope readers will be able to make connections between our societal environments and our individual lives.

For me, American Circumstance fully merges my artist-researcher-teacher identities. During the writing process I felt it was the book I was always meant to write. The novel can be used as supplemental reading in courses across the disciplines that deal with gender, social class, power, family systems, relational communication, intimate relationships, and/or identity, or it can be read entirely for pleasure.

Patricia Leavy
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power has no allegiance,
it waves the flag of the winning party,
money takes bets,
chooses sides,
but love—
    love is loyal
PART ONE
CHAPTER 1

Paige went down to the lobby to check the mail for the third time that morning. She had already checked both before and after her daily run, although she knew it was too early. Always rational, she justified this irrational behavior by lamenting that Saturday deliveries were unpredictable, and since the wait from Saturday to Monday was the worst, she might as well check and possibly calm herself. As she turned the tiny key and lifted the metal latch, she wondered how much longer she could endure this. Still nothing. As she passed through the lobby again, she waved at the doorman, Frank, and scurried back into her elevator, eager to return to the warmth of her home. Although already into April, the last blizzard had blanketed New York with a coldness that had yet to pass. Her slim frame couldn’t let go of the chill. She rubbed her hands together, wondering if her trembling was from the cold, anxiety, or guilt. What kind of mother am I? played over and over in her mind.

Not wanting to keep her friend Gwen waiting, she dashed up to the third floor of the penthouse, slipped on her boots, and darted into her bathroom, removing a hair tie from a drawer. She took her brush and pulled her long, dark auburn hair tightly into a high ponytail, making certain to smooth any flyaway strands. As she looked in the large bathroom mirror, perfecting her hair, she wondered where she had disappeared to. Uncharacteristically, she indulged for a moment, searching the reflection for someone familiar. Remembering she was meeting Gwen, she shook her head and lunged back into her routine. She grabbed her workout bag and scoured her walk-in closet for her handbag until she remembered leaving it by the front door, to save time. She hurried downstairs, threw the handbag into her workout bag, and put on her Burberry coat, cinching the belt tightly as if to confirm that she was in fact there. In an effort to hide, she grabbed a pair of oversized black Chanel sunglasses from her mail table, slipped them on, and left.

Upon arrival at the health club she made a beeline to the locker room, whizzing past an unfamiliar woman. She kept her head down, but the woman called after her. “Paige? Paige Michaels, is that you?”
Paige turned around, too flustered to recognize her at first. The woman was beaming with an out-of-place friendliness. Her round face and dark blonde curls seemed familiar but the fullness of her face suggested she was overweight and not pumped up with Botox, so Paige couldn’t quite place her.

“It’s me, Mollie Johnston! Well, Mollie Cooper back then but now…”

As recognition set in, Paige interrupted. “Oh, oh hi Mollie,” she said, catching her breath and slowly backtracking toward the jolly woman.

“Well you’re practically incognito aren’t you?” Mollie remarked with a bright smile.

Paige took off her sunglasses and leaned in to peck Mollie on the cheek. “I’m so sorry. I’m running late for my squash game… Wow. It has been ages,” Paige continued, finally in control of her breathing.

“Since college. Well you look just wonderful, put together as ever. Still just perfect. Perfect Paige, just as always. I’m jealous!” she said as she gave Paige the once-over. “I’ve been on the waitlist for this place for ages. I’m so glad to see a friendly face,” Mollie continued.

“It’s nice to see you too,” Paige replied in a concerted effort to appear friendly. She could see that Mollie meant well but she wasn’t in the mood to smile through awkwardly worded compliments. “So, you live in the city now?” she continued out of courtesy.

“Yes, just about fifteen blocks from here. My husband, you remember Paul?” Paige smiled ever so slightly in confirmation, and Mollie continued, “Paul’s at a big firm in Midtown and the boys started college last year, one is at Bates and the other at Colby, so I have a lot more time to myself – we have twin boys, gosh did I even tell you that?” Without waiting for a reply, Mollie continued, “Anyway, you can see why I was so desperate for a space to open here! So, what about you? Don’t tell me, you’re blissfully happy with Spencer, of course. What about kids, do you have any kids?”

“Mollie, I don’t mean to be rude but I’m terribly late for my match. It’s wonderful seeing you. Let’s catch up another time,” Paige said, already backing away.
“Oh gosh, I didn’t mean to hold you up,” Mollie replied in a jovial tone. Paige was already walking away but put her hand up in a backward wave as Mollie hollered, “Great seeing you!”

With her back to Mollie and several yards away, Paige nodded, one perfect loose curl of her ponytail bouncing up and down as she continued walking.

After changing into her all-whites and restocking her locker with a stack of freshly pressed clothes, she met Gwen, who was already warming up on the court. As Paige opened the glass door, the always-glamorous Gwen turned around and said, “I can’t believe I finally beat you here. It only took three years. Do you want to warm up?”

“I was cornered in the locker room. Let’s go, your serve.”

***

After showering and getting dressed, Paige sat in front of the locker room makeup mirror and tightened her ponytail. Gwen, seated next to her, complained about the fine lines fanning out from her eyes.

“I mean honestly Paige, they’re getting worse,” she said as she brushed at them with her fingers, as if to rub them away. “I don’t know how this happened so quickly. It’s dreadful. I use that serum religiously and for hundreds for a tiny little tube, god you’d think I’d look better than this. If that stuff doesn’t work, it’s hopeless.”

Paige applied her sheer, pink lip gloss while Gwen continued, “I think I should get a consultation. I mean if I’m going to do something, better to do it before it interferes with summer travel. Sometimes you can’t have any sun exposure for ages and we’re heading to Capri. And you know recovery is always longer than they say. What do you think?” she asked, laughing as she turned her head and tightly pulled the skin near her eyes.

Paige smiled and waved her lip gloss wand at her. “Don’t be silly, you look fabulous. I can hardly see a thing. If you start now, you know what will happen. You’ll have to keep going and eventually you’ll look like Barbara, the poor dear.”

Before Gwen could respond, a shadow dimmed the bright makeup mirror lights and they realized they were not alone.
“Oh, hi Mollie,” Paige said, turning on her stool. “Mollie, this is my friend Gwen McAndrews.” As the women smiled at each other, Paige continued, “Mollie and I went to Columbia together. She just joined the club.”

“Oh, how nice,” Gwen said. “Have you lived in the city long?”
“We recently moved back, my husband and boys and I. We were living in New Jersey. In East Brunswick, do you know it?” Mollie rambled.

Gwen smiled although she found Mollie oddly chatty.

“Mollie is married to a wonderful man,” Paige interjected. “He was always so solid, so dependable. I’m sure he’s a terrific father.”

Mollie was overcome by the compliment, especially coming from Paige, who would never have given a guy like Paul the time of day in college. Mollie always assumed Paige looked at him as plain, common.

“Yes, Paul is wonderful. In fact, we moved back into the city because he knew how I missed it, and with the boys in college…” Mollie continued, beaming.

Before she could finish her thought, Gwen stood up and said, “We’re heading to La Rue for our post-game brunch. You should join us.” Gwen was an expert at spotting the money set, and she knew this pudgy, rosy-cheeked woman was not a part of it, but Paige knew her and wanted to be polite. Gwen was curious too, as Mollie seemed so obviously out of her element.

Paige had the best poker face of anyone Gwen had ever known. In fact, she used to tease Paige that she could be a spy for the CIA, but she did have one tell. When unpleasantly surprised, Paige reactively blinked her eyes. While Mollie never would have noticed, Gwen saw how her invitation caused this involuntary reaction in Paige and she became even more intrigued.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Mollie said in a way that made it clear she very much wanted to join the women.

“Nonsense,” Paige said, standing up and cinching the belt on her coat. “Please join us.”

Paige and Gwen flung their bags over their shoulders and the three women headed out.
“Hi, hon,” Paul said as Mollie entered their small apartment. “Was the health club all you imagined?” he asked as he turned the page of the newspaper he was reading. Mollie put her bag down by the door, locked the double lock, and walked into their galley kitchen. Paul remained seated at the round table in the small common room.

“Well, you won’t believe who I saw,” Mollie said as she drew a glass of water from the tap. “Paige Michaels.”

“Wow, that’s a blast from the past,” Paul said, folding down the corner of the newspaper to peer over at his wife. “How is she?”

“She’s wonderful. She hasn’t changed a bit,” Mollie said, stopping to sip her water. “She’s as gorgeous and put together as ever. She introduced me to one of her friends and they actually invited me to lunch. We went to this member’s only club, which was as chichi as you can imagine. They had to sign me in as their guest. All the food was so pretty it was hard to eat it. My plate looked like art. Of course they have “regular” orders and aren’t even handed menus; Paige gets two poached eggs with one slice of tomato and one slice of turkey bacon. Isn’t that weird? She goes to this amazing place every week and always orders the same thing, and it’s something so boring, and it isn’t even a normal size order. Her friend has a lobster Cobb salad. Have you ever even heard of such a thing? She said she had one in Maine on vacation and now the restaurant makes it especially for her. Amazing.”

“Uh huh, well that sounds nice,” Paul said, reading his paper again.

“You should have seen Paige, and Gwen, Paige’s friend Gwen…”

“Uh huh.”

“They…” Mollie searched for the words. “They look like they stepped off of a movie screen or magazine cover or something. Everything is just as it should be, down to their perfect hair. I mean perfect, not a stray strand anywhere. Gwen’s hair looks just like Marilyn Monroe. And the parties they go to – big galas at museums and opera houses. The mayor was at an event they attended last weekend and he sat at Paige’s table! Can you believe it?”
“Didn’t Paige always run with that kind of crowd? Her father was that famous banker slash fat cat, um, John Michaels, right?” Paul asked from behind his newspaper.

“Yeah, I guess. Anyway, maybe we’ll get invited to something like that,” Mollie said.

“Well I’m glad you’re happy and that you have some friends,” Paul said. He remembered Paige from college and found her boring. He didn’t see why Mollie admired her, but as always, he only wanted Mollie’s happiness. Paul had never known truly intense passion until he met her, and over the years, that feeling only grew. Despite her insecurities, Mollie was able to be free with him and her vulnerability was intoxicating. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for her. He had given up his comfortable suburban life for a dingy four-floor walk-up in which he and Mollie were practically on top of each other. He knew Molliie dreamed of being in the city, so he made the move even though he couldn’t afford to replicate their suburban life (nor could he afford any of the luxuries Mollie wanted, like the ultra-exclusive health club membership). But she was willing to skimp on everything else, even clipping coupons for groceries just to have two things: an apartment in Manhattan and a membership to that health club. He knew that Mollie wasn’t a social climber or even particularly interested in material things; she simply dreamt of a bigger life than she had lived. All of those years in New Jersey as a stay-at-home wife and mother, she had thought of the sparkling lights on the other side of the Hudson. For years she dreamt of the lives of the artists who lived there. As time passed, she thought about the women she went to college with, who were living lives she only saw on television. Once her sons were grown and away at college, she asked Paul to move into the city and, knowing all he needed for happiness was her, he didn’t hesitate to give in to her request.

***

When Paige arrived home, she again stopped at the mailbox, but it was still empty. She entered her triple-decker Park Avenue penthouse and walked into the kitchen where she was greeted by her housekeeper Gert, who offered to make her a post-workout smoothie. “No thanks,
Gert, but please bring a pot of coffee to my office. I am going to work. Also, please ask Chloe to come see me when she gets home.”

Paige locked herself in her office for the next several hours, working on the plans for a charity event she was hosting to raise money for breast cancer research. Although she was far more committed to her life’s work of global outreach for women in impoverished countries, she had taken up the cause of breast cancer a year earlier after her mother passed away from the disease. Although they had never been close, as no one could be close to Eleanor, Paige felt it was the right thing to do. The irony was not lost on her. Paige’s mother had been the ultimate hostess, which Paige looked down on as trivial when she was young. Now Paige, who put her double degree in art history and international studies in service of a life of charitable party planning, was finally hosting a gala in honor of her mother. Eleanor, whose wit was greater than Paige knew as a child, would have loved it.

Late afternoon, there was a knock on the office door.
“Yes,” Paige said softly, immersed in party details.
“Hey, Mom,” Chloe said as she entered the room.
“How was your match?” Paige asked as she turned to give Chloe her attention.
“We put up a good fight, but alas, it was not to be.”
Paige smiled. “Well, maybe next time. What else is going on?”
“I hung out with Chelsea for a while. She just broke up with some guy and needed girl time.”
“Oh, well that’s nice of you,” Paige said. “What are you doing tonight? Any plans or are you having dinner at home? Dad and I have an event but I can ask Gert to fix you something.”
“I’m going to a movie with Chris and then Chelsea asked me to crash at her place. Is that okay?”
“Sure. Have a good time but make sure you’re back in time for your fitting tomorrow. The seamstress is coming by at noon.”
“Fitting for what?” Chloe asked, puzzled.
“The dress for the gala, remember? I told you I picked up the champagne Stella McCartney you wanted, but it has to be fitted.”
“Oh, right. I’ll be back in time. Besides, it’s not for like ages.”
“Please don’t say ‘like.’ I’m trying to plan ahead and stay on top of things.”
“Okay,” Chloe said.
“Well, have a good time. And don’t let Chelsea eat too much junk – break-ups can really wreck a girl’s will.”
Chloe giggled, unable to imagine anything interfering with her mother’s willpower. As Chloe started to leave the room, Paige, now facing her computer, softly asked, “Oh Chloe, any word from Stanford yet?”
“Nope,” she said as she casually walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her.
Paige held her breath and shut her eyes for a moment before resuming her work.
As a girl, Paige’s life had always seemed terribly ordinary to her, but to anyone else looking in, it was anything but. Paige came from the kind of wealth that few could ever understand. It was the kind of wealth that had always been there and would always be there. No economic meltdown or new innovation threatened their security or lifestyle; it was as dependable as the sunrise. With this level of reliability and normalcy came the threat of entitlement. This was something she witnessed many times in the homes of her nearly equally as fortunate friends. However, Paige seemed to float above it and eventually her curiosity and compassion provided her the purpose in life that held entitlement at bay. She lived in this extraordinary world as if it were ordinary, and to her, it quite genuinely was.

Paige spent the school year in her family estate in Wellesley, Massachusetts. It had been in her family for generations. Everything about the estate screamed New England money and gave away her secretly extraordinary life to those invited into its sanctuary. The house was great fun to any child with even the slightest imagination. There were secret passageways, multiple stairway escapes from any spot in the house (often used to escape the nanny at bath time and bedtime), and walk-in closets that Paige played in for hours. She also loved the view from her bedroom windows onto the large weeping willows in the backyard. As a child, she thought they looked as soft as cotton candy and she still remembers with disappointment the day she reached up and touched a hanging leaf to discover it felt just the same as the leaves on all the other trees. That was her first taste of bittersweetness.

Although the house was fully staffed with housekeepers, nannies, a driver, and an on-call chef, Paige always refused to be driven to school. She claimed to prefer taking the school bus, so that she could ride along with the other children. She made this clear at the age of five.

On her first day of kindergarten, her parents stood with her by the front door while her nanny, Agnes, ran to the kitchen to fetch her
lunchbox. Her mother, Eleanor, leaned down to straighten the white collar of her shirt and then ran her hands down the front of her skirt to flatten any creases, although it had already been pressed perfectly. She gave Paige a peck on the forehead and said, “Have a lovely day.” Then, her father, who made sure to be home for this momentous occasion, bent down and said, “Go get ‘em. And remember, Daddy loves you.” Agnes delivered Paige’s Wonder Woman lunchbox and said, “I will walk you to the car.”

“Oh no, I am going to take the bus, Aggie.”

Agnes looked stunned and glanced over at Paige’s parents. Her father chuckled. Eleanor, on the other hand, looked perturbed. She said, “Henry will take you to school dear; that’s his job. Now you don’t want to be late.”

Paige shook her head. “No. I am taking the bus. I want to ride the big yellow bus with the other children.”

Agitated, Eleanor opened her mouth to speak, but John laughed even louder and said, “Well that’s my girl, isn’t it?” He patted Paige on the head and directed Agnes to get his phone book. He turned his back to place a call, mumbling something Paige couldn’t understand. Eleanor stood as still as a statue until her husband turned around.

“It will be fine, Ellie,” he said, looking at his wife, whose face held expressionless dismay. “All right Paige. The school bus will pick you up and drop you off at the bottom of the drive. You best hurry, they’re making a special trip to come and get you.” He turned to Agnes and said, “Please see her safely on and off the bus.”

“Yes, sir,” Agnes replied.

“I don’t need Aggie to take me, Daddy. I can do it by myself,” Paige said, looking up at her father, in whose eyes she saw the whole world sparkling back at her.

“Aggie will see you on and off the bus. That’s the deal, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy.”

And with that began the ritual Paige continued through high school, much to the dismay of her mother who never again saw her off in the morning. By the age of six, Paige had convinced her father to let her walk up and down the path on her own. Although she adored Aggie and missed their chats, she relished the independence.
Riding with the other children had never been her true goal. Paige enjoyed meandering down the road, looking up, at times quite uncharacteristically tripping over her own feet. The private road leading to their sprawling seven-bedroom and ten-bath home was lined with pine trees so high that they covered the sky. Sometimes big black cars with tinted windows drove past. *Important men meeting Daddy,* she assumed. She paid them no mind and just walked, watching the trees trying to find the sky. For someone so remarkably regimented, it was the only time she really slowed down. This was the true reason she always insisted on taking the bus. It wasn’t until a child on the bus told her that the bus had changed its route to pick her up at the bottom of her private drive that Paige realized her father must have done something quite special to get the school bus there, particularly on that first morning. This thought made her smile, not because she liked the idea that her father could always get people to do very special things, but because when he did, it was usually for her.

Summers were split evenly between their beach-front homes in Kennebunkport, Maine and Chatham on Cape Cod. The magnificent estates with wrap-around porches overlooking the Atlantic were almost indiscernible from one another, except the porch in Kennebunkport was lined with white Adirondack chairs and the house in Chatham had dark green lounge chairs. The small things differed, and these were the details she noticed and remembered.

For example, the path to the beach in Maine was lined with green bushes covered in bright pink Rugosa roses that popped against the blue water and sky. In Cape Cod, the pathway, similarly long and winding, was marked with long, flowing grass on either side. The only difference in the beach experience itself was whether her view included Maine’s famous rocky coast or the Cape’s endangered sand dunes. Aggie took her to the beach every day weather permitted, so she got to know the views quite well. Like everything else in Paige’s life, there was a predictable routine. Paige always wore a brightly colored swimsuit with matching skirt and accessories. Her favorite was a bright aqua one-piece suit with a crisscross back, for which she had a matching hat and sunglasses. Aggie carried their chairs, an umbrella,
and a small cooler packed with sandwiches and bottled water. Paige carried two towels and a beach bag filled with books, sand toys, and ultra-strong sunscreen her mother insisted on. They sat together, collected shells, made castles, splashed around in the freezing water, and ate sandwiches (Paige loved peanut butter and jelly best of all, but her mother usually made Agnes pack turkey rollups).

Other than spending long days at the beach, Paige’s summers consisted of private tennis lessons (wearing whites only), daily sessions with a tutor (she was to learn French, although she didn’t know why), and lots of visits from family friends and her father’s business associates (which required her to sit politely and listen to adult conversation). Her parents often hosted large outdoor cookouts. She loved the way the staff hung white twinkling lights in the trees and transformed the backyard into someplace magical, with round tables draped in tulle and covered with flickering candles. With the strong scent of pine in the air, it felt like where the Sugar Plum Fairies might live. While her mother was always too busy socializing to talk to Paige, her father often pulled her to his side and rubbed the top of her head as he talked about business and politics to the hamburger-eating men that stood in a circle around him. No matter who was there, she was struck by how everyone seemed to hang on every word her father said. They seemed to enjoy being near him almost as much as she did. It wasn’t until she was nine that she realized her father wasn’t just a regular businessman.

One year, they were invited to a Fourth of July clam bake at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port. Paige was excited when they pulled up to the security gate and her father showed his ID. The guard said, “Of course Mr. Michaels, you’re expected.” Everyone knows Daddy, she thought. At the clam bake, she watched him huddled in a corner with Ted Kennedy and two other men she had seen on television.

That August they were invited to an end-of-summer cookout at the Bush residence on Walker’s Point, a private peninsula jutting out from Kennebunkport. When she asked her mother who the Bushes were, Eleanor replied, “Remember the Kennedys? Well one day the Bushes will be the Kennedys, but in red ties dear.”
“How do you know they’ll be like that, Mom?”
“Because Daddy and his friends said so.”

Well-known politicians had been in and out of their doors for as long as she could remember, but now at an age where she understood more about politics, the events of the summer struck her. It wasn’t until the Bush cookout that Paige realized her father was an important man. He was somehow beyond the politics of any one party and yet needed by them all. After the cookout, she went into her mother’s powder room as she sat in front of her vanity removing her jewelry.

Paige asked, “How come we were invited to the cookout?”

“Because your father is friends with the family,” she said, never making eye contact.

“But how is Daddy friends with them?”

“Through business,” Eleanor replied, now removing her eye makeup.

“What exactly does Daddy do?” Paige asked.

“He’s a businessman, you know that.”

“But what does he make?”

Eleanor smiled and turned to Paige, “He makes money, sweetheart.”

“Well I know he makes money. But how does he make money? Does he make anything else?”

Eleanor turned to Paige and smirked, which was the closest she ever came to smiling. “Power. Daddy makes money by making power.”

“How do you make power?” she asked, confused.

“You go to clam bakes at the Kennedy’s and cookouts at the Bush’s. Now run off to bed.”

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Paige’s life continued without deviation for years, during which she learned the values of discipline and control from her mother and charity from her father. Although she always knew she was a “Daddy’s girl,” she greatly admired her mother’s dignity and elegance. Eleanor was always in complete control, never uttering an unintended word or raising her voice. Her days were organized like
folders in a filing cabinet, punctuated with her daily exercise routine and strictly regimented diet which, no doubt, were responsible for her never-changing slim figure. Not only was she always dressed impeccably for every situation, but she quite literally looked perfect, making those around her seem like flawed mortals. Once when Paige was eleven, she and her mother accompanied her father on a business trip to Chicago. It was the only time her mother didn’t bring Agnes to watch her. Instead, Eleanor took Paige to The Art Institute of Chicago. She led her to the post-impressionist room and they stood in front of Georges Seurat’s *Seated Woman with a Parasol*. Eleanor put her hand on Paige’s shoulder and said, “This is my favorite painting. What do you think?”

Paige wanted to say the right thing so she thought carefully for a moment and then replied, “I love it.” There was a silence and Paige looked more closely at the painting. Then, she looked at her mother and said, “She’s very graceful, and yet she’s sitting up straight and strong. I wonder what she’s looking for… I think she reminds me of you, Mom.”

Eleanor’s eyes brightened, she squeezed Paige’s shoulder, and they continued their tour of the museum.

To Paige, Eleanor epitomized the values of discipline and grace. Paige worked hard to emulate her.

By the time she was thirteen, she woke up every morning by 6 a.m. to go for a three-mile run. She loved the way running allowed her to clear her mind and just go. Running, coupled with her strict no-frills diet, gave her a washboard body. She excelled in school, consistently earning perfect GPAs, and she filled every moment of her afternoons with homework, track and tennis, and piano and ballet lessons. Fascinated with art, she wanted to take pottery classes but her mother wouldn’t allow her to – the clay was too messy, she said. Reliably occupied, organized, and controlled, Paige simply accepted her mother’s decision and carried on. Paige believed every spare minute should be filled and so she continually added “acceptable” activities and interests to her already-impressive repertoire. As she got older her father tried to teach her the importance of giving
back. During her junior year in high school she began tutoring the “underprivileged” kids who were bussed into her private school on scholarships. It was this simple addition to her schedule that caused her life to change, and for the first time, for Paige to knowingly experience something extraordinary.