The Snowbirds

A Novel

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Chapter One

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The day after Grant went missing, I was still convinced that it was only a matter of time before he walked through the front door—chagrined, maybe a little dirty, certainly contrite. Others weren't so sure. When he didn't return from his hike, a pop-up command center topped by a satellite dish was set up in Indian Canyons faster than I could say REI. The park was buzzing with helicopters, drones, thermal sensors they called FLIRs, and rescuers in orange gear.

It felt as though half the population of Palm Springs was out searching the mountains, from the tribe's rangers to volunteers with the Mounted Police—I couldn't keep track of all the agencies or who did what.

What a spectacle, all for one man!

Yesterday, Grant had been planning to leave before sunrise for a New Year's Day hike to Cedar Springs with Hobie, his hiking buddy, and our neighbor. He was gone when I woke up. I'd expected him home by lunch, but the minutes ticked by, and then night fell. As our dinner grew cold and my texts and calls were met with eerie silence, I became increasingly concerned. Then again, I'd had a bad feeling all day. Things were not good between us.

When I saw Hobie in the courtyard of our condo complex that night, I knew something was wrong. All day, I'd assumed they were together. But when Grant wasn't waiting outside by the Jeep in the morning, Hobie figured he was still sleeping off a New Year's Eve hangover. Hobie immediately insisted we call the ranger for help. Good midwesterner that I am, I didn't want to trouble anyone, and I thought there was some kind of twenty-four-hour rule that applied to missing persons. But Hobie didn't rattle easily, and his concern set off my own alarm bells.

Still, I assumed that the ranger, Brady, would think I was overreacting. Instead, after taking down some preliminary information about Grant's age, fitness level, and what he was wearing, Brady asked why I hadn't called sooner. "At this point, I'm afraid he's going to have to spend the night up there," he said. "I can't create an incident within an incident by sending people out in the dark."

At the crack of dawn, Hobie drove me to Indian Canyons to meet with Brady. I was expecting to retrieve Grant as though he were a lost dog picked up by animal control. That's when I discovered that the vast thirty-one-thousand-acre hiking area and ancestral home of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, a major Palm Springs tourist destination with sixty trails that lead into the San Jacinto Mountains, was now closed to visitors. Hobie whistled, impressed. "Well, look at that. The entire canyon has been evacuated."

I cringed, worried I'd created all this missing-person hubbub for nothing.

Brady was studying a Google Earth map on a giant screen. "Did you find the vehicle?" Hobie asked.

Brady shook his head no. "We sent some guys up to Morris Ranch Road again. Nothing there, nothing here."

They followed the long red line running along the map with a circle in the middle to represent Cedar Springs, Grant's supposed destination. I learned he could have gotten there from above by driving about forty-five minutes to the higher elevations, parking at the top of the trail near Pinyon Pines, and making his way down the Jo Pond Trail. His other option was to park where we stood in Indian Canyons and walk up the West Fork Trail from below. On a map, it looked easy.

Brady pushed his readers down his nose and gazed at me over the lenses. "Without knowing where the car is, he could be anywhere. The first thing we do is look for shoe prints outside the vehicle. Then we create a radius to determine how far he could have gone. Without it, we don't even know where to start."

"What about his phone?" I asked.

"Not much reception where he is," Brady said. "Could be dead. Could be stolen. Maybe he left it in the car? Thieves can jailbreak or use activation unlock tools. We can ping it, but we need permission to get his info from his carrier. Could take some time. We'll need your authorization, too. Did you bring what I'd asked?"

I handed him a small bag with Grant's prescriptions.

"Xarelto," Brady said, looking at the label with concern. "He's on blood thinners?"

"Is that a problem?"

"I sure hope not, but could be. If he falls or gets cut, he could keep bleeding. On the other hand, if he hasn't taken a pill for a few days, he could throw a clot, especially up in the high altitude." Brady handed back the bottle of pills. "I'm sure he's fine."

I could tell that Brady had no such certainty.

The tribe charged a fee to use their trails, and Brady, while sympathetic, wasn't too happy that their daily operations would be disrupted to search for another lost weekend warrior. He said that when they found Grant (I took comfort in the fact that he said *when*, not *if*), he would be banned from the reservation for life.

I'd brought some photos so they could get a better sense of his appearance, prints that I'd made at Walgreens the night before. The picture of Grant on the top of the pile already seemed dated because he was no longer the pale, beardless, out-of-shape fiftysomething who'd left Wisconsin with me last fall. I'd taken the photo the day after we arrived in Palm Springs and explored the downtown for the first time. It was impossible to miss the giant twenty-six-foot-tall fiberglass statue of Marilyn Monroe from *The Seven Year Itch*, just off Palm Canyon Drive. The first thing visitors to the Palm Springs Art Museum see when they exit is Marilyn's bulbous rear as she's famously trying to hold down her billowing skirt as the wind shoots up from the imagined sidewalk vent. I watched some guys in baseball caps stand between the statue's shapely legs and look up at her panties. Whoever had approved the statue hadn't considered how uncomfortable it would make a woman like me feel to watch grown men openly point up at a female crotch.

"Perverts," I muttered, fully intending for the men to hear me, in the same way I intended neighbors with pesticide flags on their lawns back home to hear me say, "Poison," as I walked past.

Grant's interpretation of the *Forever Marilyn* statue was louder, less passive-aggressive, and more intellectual than emotional. "This isn't art. This is selfie trash begging to go viral. You know what this is, Kimmy?" He always had to sound like the professor he was. "It's 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' beyond Walter Benjamin's wildest dreams. Talk about the decay of an aura. If we tried to put this eyesore on a college campus, can you even imagine the outrage it would spark? Tell me, why is it okay here, smack-dab in the middle of a small, supposedly 'progressive' city?"

He didn't notice that while he was gesticulating, I'd covertly taken that photo to send to our daughters. I knew they'd appreciate the odd juxtaposition of the mountains, palm trees, and Marilyn Monroe in the background, and sweaty Grant spouting off in the foreground in his New Balance sneakers, his windbreaker tied around his waist.

Brady frowned when he looked at that photo of Grant. It was not a good choice because it confirmed what I suspected the officer was already thinking—that he was just another stupid tourist.

"Let's get a better sense of the man we're looking for, okay, Mrs. Duffy?"

I am usually quick to correct anyone who assumes I share Grant's last name. Even though we've been together for almost thirty years and have grown daughters, we never tied the knot, at first because he was still married, and the prenup I'd signed with my first husband, Basil, had specified that my alimony would end if I were to remarry within a decade. When Grant's divorce was official and my alimony ran out, we thought about getting hitched, but never did. Weddings are expensive, and I didn't think we needed a piece of paper to show the world what we meant to each other.

Lately, Grant wanted to make our union more official, but our arrangement worked for me—especially the separate-but-together routine we'd established when we spent most of our time living in different places. It provoked so much commentary from friends and family that it felt brave, even, to remain together but unmarried for so long. When people accused me of being commitment-phobic, I'd point out that we'd outlasted most of our friends. How many of them, if they were in our shoes, would make the decision to marry each other at this stage of life after all these years?

I liked to think we were like Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell, who insisted that *not* being married meant that every single day involved making a choice to be together.

I did not explain this to Brady because it wasn't anyone's business but our own, and I worried that if he found out I was Grant's mere "partner," I could be cut out of the whole search.

Brady asked a series of routine questions that ranged from easy to hard, the way wine is listed on a menu from lightest to boldest.

"How would you describe his appearance?"

"Oh, he's very appealing." I've always liked the way Grant looks.

"How tall is he?"

"Average height, about five-ten, although he'd tell you he's six feet. He's in much better shape now than in that photo. He was even starting to get a six-pack. His cheeks are always flushed, and he's very fair. He has to be careful here in the sun, although I suppose everyone does. His hair is more salt than pepper now, although I think of it as brown. He still has a lot of it."

Grant had a child's fear of getting his hair cut, so I learned how to use shears ages ago, but I did a terrible job because I didn't know how to work with his cowlicks and waves. Our new friends in Palm Springs, Thomas and Raul, aka the Husbands, were aghast and took matters into their own hands. They insisted on giving Grant an edible and took him to a barbershop called Daddy's, where they played Destiny's Child on blast and a man named Strap gave him a fade, leaving a shock of hair tumbling over his forehead. It was the best cut he'd ever had, and it made me sad for all the years I'd missed out on seeing this more clean-cut and angular version of him. Thank God he let Strap shape the full-on ZZ Top beard he'd started growing as soon as we'd arrived in Palm Springs.

I tried to describe it to Brady. "His hair came in silver by his mouth, like fangs. I told him that he looked like one of those shih tzus with different-colored muzzles." I've always been nervous around authority figures, and I was beginning to feel more worried about Grant. I overtalk when I'm nervous. I say stupid things I regret. "We used to have a shih tzu. His name was Milky."

"Eye color?"

"Milky's? His eyes were brown."

Brady didn't laugh. Instead, he shot me a look that said, *Don't you understand that this is serious?* The thing was, I did, but even though Grant was relatively new to hiking, he was obsessed enough for me to believe he knew what he was doing. He subscribed to a California topographical site and routinely pored over the Google Earth images Brady, Hobie, and the other volunteers were now studying.

"Is he nearsighted? Farsighted?"

"He's incredibly nearsighted, particularly in one eye." His glasses were often crooked, weighed down.

"Right or left side? This can help us figure out which direction he might have gone."

"Right," I said. "Oh, and his eyes are hazel, like our daughter March's. Dort's are blue like mine. The girls are twins, but it's easy to tell them apart."

Everyone, including Brady, looked as though they'd misheard me when I said our daughters' names aloud. When I was pregnant and we learned we were having twin girls, we couldn't agree on what to name them. Grant's mother had gotten pregnant in high school and was given no choice by her Catholic parents but to marry Grant's alcoholic father. She named him after the Serenity Prayer, so that every time she said it aloud, she would be reminded: "God *grant* me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." When I asked my mother why she'd picked the name Kim for me, she shrugged and said, "Because it's easy to spell."

Grant suggested we each pick a name and keep it to ourselves until we filled out the birth certificates. One child would be a Hastings, the other a Duffy. I picked the name March because that was the name of painter Milton Avery's daughter, an artist herself. It was important to me to choose a name that was artsy and "different," and I thought March Avery was the coolest name I'd ever heard. I was certain Grant would love March Hastings, and he did.

Then it was his turn. Grant was bursting with excitement, overjoyed to be a father despite the obstacles we'd faced with my complicated and unexpected pregnancy. He lit up. With tears in his eyes he said, "Dorothy. Dorothy Duffy, Double D."

"Oh, honey. No." I wanted to clean out my ears.

"It's unique. Nobody names their kid Dorothy anymore."

"There's a reason for that."

"It's a family name."

Grant hadn't followed a trend in his life, and he was a sucker for tradition. He had a library of first-edition yellowed books that smelled like damp sawdust, and he refused to replace the cool-looking 1950s O'Keefe and Merritt oven that came with our house, even though it cooked unevenly and only two of the six burners still worked. He was incredibly uncomfortable with technology, and he often waxed nostalgic for times, and people, gone by. He once told me that he fell for me because he thought I was old-fashioned. He thought this meant that I was capable and unfussy, low-maintenance, and I've spent the last thirty years letting him believe this.

"We can call her Dort, like my nana," Grant said. "She wanted the name passed down. She asked on her deathbed."

I'd met the elder Dort shortly after Grant and I had gotten serious. Her name invoked the odor of the mothballs that had permeated her Victorian home in Virginia. She wore a hairnet when she cooked, and she once gave me a bag filled with her old nylons cut into pieces so I could use them to tie my tomato bushes to the cage. To me, the name sounded like *dork*, and *wort.* I thought it was ugly and strange, and I was convinced that our child would be teased relentlessly. But who was I to put up a fight? We had an agreement, after all, and I'd never felt more scared and vulnerable.

Our daughters had arrived early and with a great deal of crash-cart and ventilator drama. The NICU nurse called them *pollitos,* little chickens. The doctor explained we'd face tremendous risks if we wanted to have more children.

"At least you had twins," everyone said, as though we were begging for consolation.

We'd talked about risking it again, or adopting, but as the girls grew more capable and independent and our days filled with activities and obligations, we put away the plastic toys and donated the car seat and stroller, and Grant agreed to a vasectomy. With our lives taking place mostly in separate cities at that point, it didn't make sense to grow our family.

If only it were possible to pinpoint the exact moment when we'd moved beyond the luxury of being able to make a decision, when our uncertainty about raising more children calcified into gratitude or regret for choices we'd never actually made.

Once I was finally better, I told myself that the name wasn't important; all that truly mattered was that we were out of the woods. Still, I couldn't help but think that Grant and I were like two dented cereal boxes: we'd come from broken families, and we'd both been briefly married before we'd met. My pregnancy, only weeks into our relationship, had forced us together. As a new family, already we were weird.

But Dort made the name her own. She was squat and strong, the star of a Roller Derby team (they called her Dortorrhea). She accused her sister of being "basic," even though, with her long blond hair and obsession with makeup tutorials, March played competitive chess and graduated at the top of her class. Both girls did well in school—it didn't hurt that Grant challenged them with brainteasers and logic puzzles as soon as they could talk. When they were eight years old and wanted bikes, Grant bought bike kits and made them build them in the garage. They attended youth science and language institutes at the college because they were free for faculty kids. March was fluent in Spanish and French; Dort spoke Russian and Arabic and was studying for the foreign service exam.

I'd been missing the girls terribly. And now I missed Grant terribly, too, which seemed especially ironic because lately I'd been imagining what life would be like without him.

Brady tapped the photo.

"Oh," I said, as though I'd just remembered an important detail. "Grant has the most amazing eyelashes—the eyelashes of a child."

I wasn't yet afraid he was in real trouble, or, rather, I hadn't allowed myself to think it. What upset me was the argument we'd had the night before he left. I didn't want to mention this to Brady, who scratched his boot against the dirt like a horse anticipating bad weather. "Can you tell me what your husband was wearing?"

There it was, that word again: *husband.* "Sure, I can tell you exactly. A navy beanie, his navy sun hoodie, and a Montbell ultralight down jacket, also navy. And expensive."

Grant had never cared much about his wardrobe until he joined the "ultralight revolution." At first, when his shorts and pants had been torn up by rocks and cacti, he covered the holes with duct tape. After Hobie gave him a hard time, he joined a Facebook group of hiking gearheads and settled on a two-hundred-dollar pair of pants that were made out of a fabric called biomass balanced polyamide and had pre-bent knees, adjustable hems, reflectors, steel stirrups, and lots of pockets and zippers; they were his prize possession, along with his two-ounce backpack made of material called Cuban cloth. I often teased him about knowing how much his clothes and pack weighed right down to the ounce, but now I took comfort in the knowledge that he wasn't bogged down. His fancy pants with space-age fabric were keeping him warm and dry, and his gear was keeping him safe.

"Tell me, does he have any distinguishing moles, birthmarks?"

I pushed up my sleeve and showed him the tattoo on the inside of my wrist. "We all have the same one." The family tattoo had been Grant's idea, when he was looking for a way to celebrate March and Dort's eighteenth birthdays. "Grant's is on his upper arm, right here. Dort's is on her thigh, just above her knee, and March—well, she started crying because she thought it hurt too much. She's such a baby. She only has the waves."

The pier represented the memorable times our family had shared at Camp Jamboree, which my father had owned and run, and where I'd spent all my summers growing up. Grant felt it symbolized access, but also safety and security. "A pier is how you get out of the water when you're in trouble," he'd explained, "and how you get in when you want to swim. You tie your boats to it. You can rest on it. A pier, like family, is always there for you."

What could be more incongruous than a pier in the desert? The reminder of Grant's deep love for me, for the girls, brought me close to losing it for the first time since he'd disappeared. I hate crying, especially in front of other people.

Instead, I forced myself to serve up a false, cheery smile, in the hopes that I could charm Brady into working harder on our behalf (now that I was older, I had to work harder to charm a man). When my mother was briefly hospitalized after her stroke, I'd taped photos of her to the walls so that the nurses would know she was more than a patient, she was a person. Similarly, I wanted Brady to know that the lost hiker wasn't just some tourist, he was the man I knew right down to the sound of his sneezes and the shape of his pinkie toenails. He doted on Dort and March—and he would have doted on me, too, if I'd been the type of person to allow it.

Grant usually checked in with me a thousand times a day, a habit I sometimes found irritating because every text felt like a call for attention. He would tell me that the line at the post office was long or share a photo that had popped up on his phone in our family group chat of Milky with a Frisbee in his mouth. His texts on the trail were much less frequent and usually included photos of what he was looking at.

"I told Grant that he shouldn't go hiking that far away on his own," Hobie said.

"Grant never listens. You know how academics are." Did Hobie? I decided to clarify. "They always think they're too smart to get into trouble. Too smart for everything, actually."

Brady asked, "Is it possible he met up with someone?"

“I doubt it. He was into solo hiking.”

Hobie gave me a look of pity. “He’s asking if you think Grant has a sidepiece.”

“Oh no,” I said, defensive.

“Suspicion of foul play?” Brady asked.

Hobie laughed. “No way,” he answered for me. “Not that guy.”

“Hobie”—Brady was irritated that he always chimed in—“can you make yourself scarce?”

“Why does everyone always want me to make myself scarce? Fine.” He sprinted to the trailer.

Brady got back to business. “Alcohol problems?”

“No. Grant only drinks occasionally. Both of his parents struggled with alcohol and drugs, and his dad died when he drove his car into a tree. He swore he’d never—”

“I don’t need his family history.”

I saw Brady’s eyes linger on my naked ring finger. “Trouble in your marriage?”

For once, I didn’t have a lot I wanted to say. I let out a nervous laugh. “I guess you could say we’ve been having some issues.”

“Issues?”

I didn’t like sharing the most intimate details of my private life with anyone, aside from my best friend, Octavia, and Basil. This guy was a stranger, not a therapist. Knowing that Grant and I were at a “hinge point” in our relationship, as Octavia called it, wouldn’t help Brady find him. “Oh, you know, we don’t really agree about how or where we ought to live and what our life should be.”

Finally, I’d succeeded in amusing Brady, although it pained me to admit to our seemingly intractable problems.

“Was he unhappy at work?”

“He recently lost his job. The college where he taught closed, just like that.” I clapped my hands together for emphasis. After years of declining enrollment and financial mismanagement, the president of the small liberal arts college announced at graduation that the lights were being turned off in the ivory tower. Everyone knew it could happen. Like losing a loved one after a long illness, it wasn’t a surprise, but it was still a seismic emotional shock for Grant, who thought of his colleagues and students as family, and the campus as his home. His work had been his life.

"He was depressed?"

"I think *he'd* say he's been doleful. But being here has been good for him. He's seemed better the last few months. A lot better. He loves hiking. He's obsessed." I felt a shudder go through me when I realized what Brady was getting at. "You aren't trying to say Grant would—you don't think—?" Suicide was something I hadn't considered. "Grant wouldn't do that. Not ever."

I knew what Brady was thinking: *That's what they all say.*

The warden tucked her walkie-talkie in its holster and ambled over to where Brady and I stood.

"He'll be okay?" I asked, suddenly needing the assurance Brady seemed disinclined to offer.

She pointed out into the distance. The mountains, capped with snow, were reflected in her metallic sunglasses. It was an image I suspected was always there, no matter where she was looking.

"The farther back they go," she said, grouping Grant with all the other hikers who'd ever gone missing, "the more trouble they're in. Big, big trouble. It might be sunny and warm here, but you get as high as seven thousand feet and it's easy to lose a trail in the snow, or fall in an ice chute. There's hypothermia. Nights get very cold this time of year in the higher elevations. He's not exactly young." Grant would have hated to hear the warden say that. "He could have had a sudden cardiac event, a stroke. He could have slipped or crossed paths with drug traffickers. We see a lot of activity up there. Bobcats can be nasty. Mountain lions. Last week we found a young lady near Murray Peak, high out of her mind, naked as a jaybird. She thought she was dancing on the moon. She's lucky she's alive. Lots of kooks in the desert. You think it's bad now, just wait until Coachella."

The city of Palm Springs is tucked into the elbow of the San Jacinto range. From where I stood, the mountains appeared barren and rocky, dry and scabbed, like a scene from *The Flintstones.* I thought that it would be hard to get lost without dense foliage, but this is the steepest escarpment in the United States, rising to over ten thousand feet above sea level in just seven horizontal miles. As Hobie put it, the landscape "gets gnarly" the higher up you climb. As far as Grant was concerned, the gnarlier, the better.

Just then, some of the tribal members showed up on horseback, accompanied by an army of equestrian volunteers. This modern cavalry paused, and the ranger on the lead horse stopped briefly to consult with the warden. There was some pointing in the distance and discussion of trails, lots of stomping and whinnying, and then they were off. Despite the circumstances, I found it beautiful to watch the animals trot effortlessly from the Trading Post down into the crag of Palm Canyon and out into the rocky landscape. I thought of that Bukowski line Basil used to recite: *The days run away like wild horses over the hills.*

And there it was, the possibility now creeping into the corners of my consciousness, the voice I'd tried to hush because it was no less terrifying. Grant might be lost, as Brady and Hobie feared—or he might have run away. Again.

Had I manifested this situation? I was the one who'd felt restless, I was the one who'd pushed us to come here. Palm Springs had been my dream, not his. I rarely asked for much, and look what happened when I did.

It had seemed so simple: I just wanted to go somewhere warm for the winter.

Chapter Two

Madison, Wisconsin
August 25, 2022

My ex-husband, Basil, has a knack for reaching out in my most humdrum moments. While I'm scrubbing grout with a toothbrush or pulling mustard weed from the garden, he regales me with tales of his spontaneous trips to Paris to have matching suits made for him and his boyfriend, Greg, or of sitting at the chef's table in a Michelin-star restaurant. His texts are filled with photos of beaches, mountain chalets, cobblestone streets, dinner parties with celebrities, and late-night EDM shows, causing me to experience a sort of existential whiplash between what my life was like, and what it might be.

I'm not usually a jealous person. And I didn't want Basil's life—or, rather, I wasn't suited to it. I wouldn't know how to dress for awards shows and black-tie galas. I feel silly and self-conscious trying to put on airs. My idea of fun involves long bike rides around Madison lakes, planting vegetables, and going to dive bars with Octavia. After raising twin girls, I'm incredibly selfish about my sleep, and to this day I'll do just about anything to get to bed by ten at night.

Basil name-drops famous friends who don't impress me. All my life I swore I'd be different from my mother, Polly, but as I age, I find that I, too, don't get excited about money and status. She always had a flat expression on her face that seemed to say, *Thrill me, go ahead, just try.* Once, she saw a squirrel running up and down an old bur oak at

Camp Jamboree. She took a drag of her cigarette and said, in her usual droll manner, “He’s a heck of a squirrel, but he’s still a squirrel.”

But Basil’s dispatches from afar are constant reminders that my world is small compared to his. He’s never dustbusted Cheerios out of the back seat of the car or hosed down the inside of the recycling bin, and I have no idea what it’s like to play tennis with Bono or lie flat on an airplane.

That late-summer afternoon when Basil called, I could hardly make it to the kitchen to pour myself some kombucha. I was laid up on the couch in the den with my foot propped on a pillow, still swollen and raw from surgery. I wasn’t raised to feel sorry for myself. Basil liked to say that Polly had originated the phrase *pull up your big-girl panties.* But my pain meds were wearing off, and my left ankle and foot radiated with an electric ache where the skin had been cut open. The minute I heard Basil’s dear voice on the line, I couldn’t help it—I began to cry (again, I almost never cry) and started blubbering about my surgery.

“Surgery?” Basil’s voice rose with panic. “Tell me you aren’t sick, Kimmy.” I hadn’t told him about the operation—nobody knew except Grant and the girls because I hated for people to fuss and worry over me. I’d broken my ankle the previous winter and this second surgery was to have the pins removed. While they were at it, the doctor convinced me to also have the painful knob on my foot shaved down. I didn’t like to tell people about that part of the operation; I found the word *bunion* laden and ugly. It screamed middle age.

“I’m not sick, Basil. Calm down. God, you’re such a drama queen.”

“And I make a damn good living because of it, thank you very much.” Basil was a lyricist for musicals. The girls and I loved singing along to “Hey, Daddy Daddy” and “Stop! That Tickles!” Some of his songs have become anthems, and we knew all the words. Even without his own success, Basil had come from ridiculous money. His father, Vandyke, had manufactured jet bridges that connect airports to airplanes, and his mother, Melody, was from an old Detroit auto family and worked as a fashion stylist. The Underwoods lived in the home formerly owned by William Boyd, who portrayed Hopalong Cassidy, and were fixtures on the Los Angeles social register. If they hadn't sent Basil to the north woods of Wisconsin when he was fifteen in hopes the experience might make him more rugged (and less gay), our paths would never have crossed.

He paused, suddenly serious, and said, "Please don't ever scare me like that again. I'm so relieved you're okay."

"I did not say I'm okay! My foot hurts like hell. I'm pretty sure I'll never walk again."

"Are you asking me to feel sorry for you? That's new. You *must* be sick."

"It's really painful."

"Oh, my poor baby. But at least you're not *dying.* That is expressly forbidden. My friends are starting to drop lately. I swear I'm going to end up like Vincent Price in *The Last Man on Earth.* You know I can't live without you, Kimmer. You're the keel of my canoe." He'd been saying that since the first summer we'd met.

Basil continued, "So, tell me, what was the surgery, really: boob job? Butt lift? Tummy tuck?"

"Shut up. You know I'd never do any of that."

"There's no shame in going a little *Real Housewives,* my love. A squirt or twenty of Botox can work wonders, just look at me. My face looks like it's been pumped with liquid concrete. I've been thinking about pec implants."

"Don't you dare—"

"Okay, maybe phalloplasty if we're being honest, but whatever. Tell me, what in the hell happened to you?"

I proceeded to explain how, just before going under, I'd told the anesthesiologist that I loved him, and I offered a detailed description of my incisions, knowing Basil couldn't stand it. My mother was a nurse at camp during the summers and at the private Chicago high school I'd attended. I'd spent my childhood watching her tend to rich kids' torn-up knees, poison ivy, period cramps, and stomachaches, but Basil lived as though he didn't have a body, joking that his insides were filled with stuffing. His skin was always scrubbed to a high polish, and he never stank of body odor, smelling only of his signature cologne, Tom Ford's Black Orchid. I couldn't remember Basil ever even stinking up the bathroom.

"I hope our boy Grant is taking good care of you."

"He's not even here. Sasha found a baby raccoon in her living room just before her first open house. She needed him to help her catch it."

"What's Grant going to do with a wild animal, try to reason with it? He should be home with you, not with his ex-wife. And didn't you say she has a new boyfriend now? The German professor? Can't Ulrich handle the raccoon?"

"His name is Matthias. He's nice, actually, and they're moving to Europe. I told Grant it was fine to go."

"Of course you did, you idiot. It's okay to ask him to help you out every now and again, you know. You don't have to be so damn proud all the time."

Self-sufficiency was my religion. I never wanted anyone, including Grant, to feel obligated on my account. Grant knows this about me. Still, he had a history of disappearing when I needed him.

"My doctor said it'll be months before I'll be able to walk comfortably. And did I mention there's a pin in my big toe where they had to break it and put it back together again?"

"Stop! Heal fast and I love you and all that, but can we talk about Ibiza before I throw up? I'm on an oligarch's yacht right now. It could be seized at any moment. That buzzing you hear in the background? It's a chopper on the helipad delivering oysters flown in from Japan."

"How wasteful, all of it! The oysters, the yachts. Billionaires shouldn't exist."

"Okay, Karl Marx. You know, you're sounding more and more like Polly every day. Not just what you say, but how you say it."

When Polly got pregnant after a brief summer fling with Burl, who ran the camp, she thought she'd discovered how to have the best of both worlds—the child she'd always wanted, without the confines of marriage, an institution that she'd wanted no part of after observing her own parents' unhappy union. Burl was a confirmed bachelor twenty-three years her senior, who cherished his independence almost as much as she did. There was never a question that he'd move to Chicago, or that she'd move up north. They struck what they thought was the perfect compromise: Polly would continue working at the camp each summer so Burl could help raise me. The rest of the year, Polly and I would live in Chicago, and Burl would drive down for holidays, birthdays, and graduation ceremonies.

Basil continued carrying on about the yacht. "Speaking of waste, my friends just started popping bottles of Dom Pérignon and spraying it all over each other. At least I'm not part of that."

"You're only saying that because it's too messy."

"You're not wrong."

I'd known Basil since the day I stood outside the camp infirmary with Polly checking the heads of incoming campers for lice with Popsicle sticks (we never saw any nits, yet every summer there was still an outbreak). When a black Lincoln Versailles with a hired driver pulled up, Polly rolled her eyes and said, "Here comes the funeral procession." All the other campers had arrived with parents, but a tall, gangly, and shockingly pale teenager who looked like a young Art Garfunkel with a head of wiry white-blond hair stepped out of the car, alone. Time stood still when he smiled and waved at me as though we were already friends. I looked around to see if his greeting was intended for someone else. I was neither camper nor staff. "Neither" has always been my whole identity: neither married nor single, not fully a city dweller, not exactly rural. As the scholarship kid at wealthy Chicago Latin, I was virtually invisible.

I never thought I was very special until that moment I met Basil. I don't see him often, but we talk all the time and he knows me better than anyone else. Grant feels threatened by our intimacy, though there's no lingering physical attraction between us. In fact, I had never really desired Basil, even when we were briefly married, a commitment we rushed into because Burl was dying, and he'd always wanted to see us together—and because we were stupid, scared, and young. The world felt so big and dangerous after college, but at least we had each other.

I was convinced our tepid sex life was all my fault. I tried to come up with ways to seduce him, putting porn on the television and dancing around in baby-doll lingerie like a clueless idiot. I shouldn't have been surprised when, a few days before our first wedding anniversary, he tearfully confessed that he'd given a stranger a blow job in an airport bathroom and that all his life he'd been living a lie.

Over the last few months I'd been lamenting to Basil that I couldn't go anywhere exciting for my work sabbatical, a benefit that Go Green, my employer, had introduced for full-time staff as a way to make up for the low pay at the nonprofit. On his sabbatical, Vic, the charismatic and infuriating executive director, had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Wendy, the lobbyist who always had the best gossip about the misdeeds of state legislators, spent her time birding in Greenland. When my turn came up, I, too, wanted to go somewhere exotic. I thought about traveling with Dort in Eastern Europe, but Dort brushed me off. She said she traveled by couch surfing, and besides, she was too busy with her band.

What I'd really wanted was to sleep in a hammock in the Yucatán or trek the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia, but my mobility was limited thanks to the first ankle operation, and I had a hard time seeing myself alone in an unfathomable environment. I'd never done anything so adventurous before or spent that long apart from Grant.

As my time off approached, life changed dramatically. Grant lost his mother, then his job. Sasha seemed to be moving on. Grant hated flying, and I knew that he wouldn't want to go exploring with me. How could I leave him when he was so despondent? Resigned to another long winter in Madison, I decided to undergo the painful but necessary surgery I could no longer put off.

"But this is *your* time, Kimmer," Basil had said. "Six months! You need to go far, far away. Let that tiger out of the cage." He disapproved of my feelings of resignation over my sabbatical. He knew how much I loved Madison, but also how much I hated winter and yearned to go somewhere warm. For years I'd complained about changing out the storm windows, replacing filters on the furnace, ice dams, salting sidewalks, and bouts of despair. Then, last February, I was carrying groceries into the house and slipped on black ice in our driveway. The pain was almost worse than childbirth.

After breaking my ankle, I didn't just hate winter; I was terrified of it.

Grant was happy to have me around. "Think of it as a staybatical," he said. He was quick to point out the irony of me being the one with a sabbatical when he'd worked in academia his entire adult life, making it, like everything else, about him.

"Is it ironic? Really?" I asked. "Madison must be the sabbatical capital of the world." Half the houses in our college town were rented by the semester through sabbaticalhomes.com. I tried to focus on the bright side, reminding myself in my daily gratitude practice that I was fortunate to have an opportunity to have some downtime to reconnect with Grant and find myself—whatever that meant. It was unsettling to feel so unsure in middle age—more unsure of life than I'd ever felt. I'd always thought this was a time when I'd stop struggling and striving and finally just . . . be. Instead, I was at loose ends. I was agitating personally and professionally, while Grant compared himself to Orpheus, looking back in hopes of seeing the life we used to have.

With Grant home, I was suddenly desperate to escape our house—and him. I wasn't used to spending time together except on weekends and in the summer. I began to think of him as an intruder who tracked dirt in when he didn't take his shoes off after he walked through the door, who dragged the tines of his fork against his teeth when he ate, and who left toothpaste spittle in the sink.

I knew I couldn't relax because to be home was its own kind of work. Grant didn't know the names of our plumber and electrician; he wouldn't snake the drain or check to make sure we had a new battery in the thermostat. He delayed fixing things, never seeing the house as a thing that needed to be taken care of. He bought expensive tools and we owned a too-big toolbox, but I was the one who learned to use them, who got bids and negotiated with contractors. I was the one who had to deal with the damage when we had an ice dam after Grant insisted that we didn't need to hire someone to rake the roof after a blizzard. I dealt with the insurance company and the workers when it came time to remove and repair the flooded drywall.

If our house were a city, I would be the mayor and the city workers, and Grant would be a visitor on vacation. It represented different activity-to-rest ratios for us. This was part of the reason I wanted to get away from our home, because everywhere I looked, I saw something broken or neglected that I knew Grant, whose life was of the mind, wouldn't see—and certainly wouldn't recognize as a problem.

When he did help—and in fairness, he'd do anything I asked (but I had to ask!)—he'd expect me to fall all over myself thanking him for caulking the toilet or changing out a storm window. I couldn't really complain. He wasn't great at houses, and, honestly, neither was I. We fought off entropy as best we could, but we fell into a different rhythm from our neighbors, who seemed as if they were born with an instinct for knowing when to trim rosebushes, plant tomatoes, and aerate their lawns.

"As it happens," Basil said, "Greg and I have decided to go off the grid. We rented a house on the island of Bonaire."

"Bonaire?"

"In the Dutch Antilles. I've been commissioned to write some songs for a musical about climate change based on Finnish mythology, my greatest challenge yet, my chef d'oeuvre. Greg wants to kitesurf and hunt for lionfish while I pray my heart out for inspiration. We're about to find out which one of us can go the longest without Bellinis."

Greg was Basil's lover, and I was irrationally jealous of him. I wanted to think of Basil as mine and only mine—he's the kind of warm, charismatic person who makes everyone feel that way.

This was the kind of exotic sabbatical *I* was supposed to have, and the life of creative purpose I'd always dreamed of. Never in all the years I'd known Basil had I felt more envious of him than I did in that moment—for the first time ever, I wondered if he was being cruel. Why would he rub in his fabulous trip when I was at a low point? I looked at my mangled foot and wondered if I'd ever go anywhere again when I couldn't even walk to the mailbox.

Basil continued, "I was thinking, why don't you and Doc Duffy spend the winter in Palm Springs? It's not fancy. I bought it way back in the day as a sunny little pied-à-terre so I could have my own space when I visited my parents at the Ranch. Le Desert is a quaint and odd condo complex, a real island of misfit toys. I'm hardly ever there anymore, so you'll be doing me a favor to give it some use. You can walk down the street in January without killing yourself. It'll be a great place to recover. Hang out and relax, maybe even get struck by a creative thunderbolt yourself. Didn't you say you wanted to get back into your art? The light in the desert is amazing, like in the South of France."

The desert? This caught me off guard. For some reason, all these years I'd pictured Basil in Florida when he talked about Palm Springs, but I must have confused it with Palm Beach. It didn't matter. Both places were interchangeable in my mind: rich, indulgent, inaccessible.

Basil's reference to my "art" was jarring. I didn't consider myself a great painter or photographer by any stretch, although Basil had always taken me seriously. He loved my modest creations and was incredibly supportive of my efforts. As a girl, I spent all my time in the camp's craft cottage, where I made pinch pots, bracelets, and stamp paintings. In college at Saint Mary's of Notre Dame, my free time was spent at the studio working with paint, then eventually I moved into other media, especially photography. When Basil and I married and moved to Chicago, he gave me a fancy new DSLR Canon as a wedding gift. That camera was the nicest thing I'd ever owned. He encouraged me to sign up for classes at the Art Institute, and I did.

I found myself drawn to non-spaces. I photographed back alleys, shattered neon signs, and abandoned railroad tracks overgrown with weeds. I tried to fix my camera on the parts of the world that everyone else overlooked. I had an entire series on sofas left by the side of the road, and another with loose garbage that had blown where it didn't belong. I liked it when the photos came out looking as if someone had just left the scene or was about to enter it again.

I turned my eye to the everyday because it seemed wrong and indulgent to lust for beauty. Polly had tried to steer me clear of any pursuit that involved passion and emotion, and that's what art was all about. She'd imparted to me that sanity, evenness, and control were the three legs of the stool that could prevent me from coming apart. It was best not to hope to become great at art—best not to want for or aspire to greatness with anything, even romantic love. "If you wait for exactly what you want," Polly used to tell me, "you'll end up with nothing at all." No wonder I settled for a passionless first marriage to Basil.

After we split up, I quit taking classes and devoted myself instead to a series of jobs in the nonprofit sector. By the time I met Grant and moved with him to Madison, I thought of art as a fun little hobby, occasionally indulging myself with a new project when the mood struck.

When we were first hot and heavy, I took some candid photos of Grant standing naked at the kitchen counter spreading butter on a piece of toast. In another, he was bent over the dresser looking for matching socks. I was sheepish about sharing my work. When I did, Grant was complimentary, but asked, "Is that how you see me?" He liked to be thought of as more, not less, than he was. It was hard for me to explain that I found Grant at his sexiest in the small, intimate domestic "non-spaces" of our relationship.

I was especially drawn to Alice Neel's paintings of her lover pissing, and of herself as an old woman in the buff with sagging breasts and stomach rolls. That got me back into it for a while. My painting began to change when the girls were little, when I allowed some sentimentality to sneak into my work. I fancied myself a regular Mary Cassatt, capturing March and Dort when they were sleeping, zeroing in on their sweet, dimpled hands and flushed cheeks. "This is amazing," Grant said. "Kimmy, you've got an eye, you really do."

I don't like attention, and I don't want anyone to think I'm expecting praise. "They look like they have rosacea," I said.

"Take a compliment for once. Maybe their eyes are a bit . . . rheumy. But you've really captured their unique sparkle. That's very, very hard to do. It's okay for me to like your work, you know. It's okay for me to think you have talent."

Still, I didn't believe him. I thought about switching mediums. I found acrylics plasticky and inflexible, but I used them because they were cheap, and because oil was such a hassle to clean. Painting is a messy endeavor, and I was too exhausted from picking up after everyone else to create more disorder of my own. I didn't have a studio to work in, and as a solo parent during the week, I didn't have time. I lacked the confidence to think of myself as anything other than a lowly amateur. How could I justify spending a lot of money on high-quality materials or fancy camera lenses when we needed a new garage door to replace the broken one? Eventually, I threw my supplies into a box and let my tubes of paint petrify. I put the fancy Canon, and my aspirations, back on the shelf.

But when Grant lost his job, I felt caged with him in the house, so I dusted off the camera and started a new project I didn't even tell him about. Weekends, before my surgery, I headed to Middleton and started a series of time-lapse shots in the parking lot of a strip mall. I couldn't explain why, after all these years, I felt an almost urgent desire to circle back to my old aspirations and younger self.

I propped my tripod on a construction berm overlooking the sea of cars and used a remote-control timer every five minutes from dusk to dawn. Now, with all the downtime after my surgery, I was teaching myself to upload the photos into a video. The movement of people in and out of the sliding doors, the loading and unloading of carts, and the backing out and pulling in of minivans and trucks had a lonely sort of cadence. It was eerie and industrious, all that stuff moving in and out, all the people like ants gathering clips of grass and breadcrumbs to take to the colony while the sun rose and set behind them. I could play it forward and backward, speed it up or slow it down, and it hardly made a difference.

Then it hit me: Was that my life lately? Was I, too, just going through the motions?

The condo in Palm Springs struck me as a way out of that kind of routine. I loved the idea of a warm escape, a return to creativity, a glimpse of other ways of living, and a chance to develop into someone better, someone with more purpose and focus.

It wasn't just a winter away from home that Basil offered, it was a bridge to a new way of existing in the world.

When we ended our conversation, I strapped my foot into the ugly bunion boot the doctor had given me and hobbled to the kitchen to prepare some snacks for Octavia, who was coming by for a visit. I was daydreaming about Basil's offer when I tripped on the decorative runner and dislocated my shoulder on the way down. I lay there for several minutes as the pain washed over me. Thankfully, Octavia never knocked.

"What the hell are you doing out of bed?" she said when she found me.

"I wanted to put out some snacks for your visit. But I fell before I could get to the kitchen." I winced from the pain.

"I don't need snacks. And besides, why couldn't Grant do it?"

"Because he's not here. As usual."

When Grant finally returned from Sasha's and met us at urgent care, Octavia read him the riot act for leaving me alone. "You really thought Kim would just sit in bed all day?" she said. "Do you even know her?"

"She said I could—"

"I don't care what she said! And did you even catch the raccoon?"

Grant grinned from ear to ear. "I came up with a great idea, actually. We cranked the stereo. Metal music. Then we started banging pots and pans together. He didn't like the noise and crawled back up the chimney—problem solved."

"There's your new career right there: pest control," Octavia said. She wasn't laughing.

After that, Grant was pretty good about taking care of me as my foot healed (fortunately, my shoulder popped back into place), although I still found myself not wanting to ask too much of him. He'd grab me a nearby hair tie and a glass of water that was hard for me to reach with my sling, but if I wanted a book from downstairs, I would wait another hour or two, wary of burdening him too much in that moment.

Before I had the chance to tell Grant about Basil's offer, a puffy gold envelope arrived in the mail. It reminded me of Willy Wonka's winning gold candy bars. My name was written out in Basil's loopy, old-school cursive that I recognized from the mixtapes he used to make for me. Inside were a few keys on a worn leather key chain, and a letter on monogrammed stationery. "The big one is for the gate, the small one is for Unit 1, the smallest is for the mailbox, and the one with the yellow tab is for the laundry room. PALM SPRINGS OR BUST, BABY!" Followed by a PS: "Don't burn the place down," a reference to how I'd accidentally started a small fire in our kitchen when I was making dinner for his parents on a rare visit by them to Chicago. Melody and Vandyke had eaten meals prepared by the finest chefs in the world, and there I was making my mother's famous deviled eggs and a shrimp scampi recipe I'd found in *Cooking Light.*

I was reminded that the Palm Springs condo came with a significant catch: Vandyke had passed away, and Basil had asked me to look in on Melody. My ex-mother-in-law used to scare me to death. But I'd do anything for Basil.

Grant felt so guilty about not being there when I'd fallen that he didn't have much choice but to agree to the plan when I ambushed him. We were really doing it.

When I worked up the courage to tell Octavia, she encapsulated everything I would miss at home. Our Thursday day-drinking club. Walks through Owen Nature Conservancy. Flirting with "hot apple guy" at the farmers' market. All the live bands we saw together at the Crystal Corner. Still, she approved of the trip because she herself had "itchy feet." "You have to change up your life every five years," she said. "Switch your job, your partner, whatever, or it gets stale. And, girl, you are long overdue."

What was holding us back? Our friends were starting to scatter like jacks, downsizing to condos, spending more time in second homes, relocating to be near their kids or grandchildren, or taking care of their ailing parents. The more I thought about Palm Springs, the more excited I became. But as our departure date approached, Grant tried to convince me that spending the winter away was not a good idea.

"Can't we just stay put? I never get to stay put."

"And I never get to go. I need a change." The word *change* felt razor-sharp. This was not a small change, like flipping the mattress.

"Honestly, Kimmy, I know it sounds great to you, but I just don't know what I'm going to do there." Then he began to enumerate, as he was prone to do because he was once told this was a sign of genius. "First, I don't golf. Second, I don't play tennis. Third, I burn easy. Fourth, I am not someone who enjoys indolence."

"Try?"

"We're going to experience a parasitic existence, sitting around gazing at our navels like we're part of the leisure class. Like Basil."

"Basil works hard. Come on, we're going to have *fun*," I said.

"Fun." To Grant this was a strange, foreign word that made him suspicious. "You know what Aristotle says about fun?"

"No, but you're about to tell me."

"He thinks there's a role for fun in our lives only insofar as it allows us to get back to finding purpose. 'Happiness is not found in amusement,' he says. You can't make amusement your point of life. It will only make you unhappy."

"We're not making it our point of life, Grant."

"People are starving. The planet is burning up."

"Us going to Palm Springs is not going to change that."

"What about our wedding?"

There it was, the knot in my stomach that formed every time he mentioned it. I adored Grant, I did, and we were basically married anyway—so why did this renewed talk of formalizing our vows make my eye twitch? Why had I begun to resent his socks tumbling out of the dryer and the whiskers he left on the sink after he shaved, or despair of the fact that he could spend an entire day in our crumbling house watching YouTube videos about how to repair Swiss watches when, everywhere I looked, I saw so much that actually *needed* repair? I wondered if my feelings for Grant were intertwined with my feelings about the house. Would leaving it help us to see each other more clearly?

I couldn't make sense of us in the house in Madison that felt more mine than his, and where we'd established our patterns of living. I liked the idea of seeing how we could function together in a more neutral space before committing to marriage. Was it possible to get a sense of your life from a different vantage, like adjusting the aperture on a camera lens to allow additional light to pass through?

I said, "We have a year to add you to my insurance before COBRA runs out. What's your rush? Besides, I told you I don't want a big wedding. We can plan something simple for when we get back."

"Don't you think we should go all out? Thirty years we've been together. If that's not something to celebrate, I don't know what is. Why do you want to keep kicking the can down the road?"

I wasn't prepared to answer that question. "Grant, either you join me in the desert for the winter, or I'll go by myself."

"You'd really go without me?" he asked, visibly hurt.

"Honey, I would." I was surprised and frightened by the sureness of my answer.

I was determined to enjoy my sabbatical. More than ever, I wanted to punch beyond the boundaries of my life, have fun, and realize my unmet potential.

"It's just better there," Basil had said about Palm Springs. Those words floated around my brain like an airplane banner message pulling across the sky. What if there was an unequivocally *better* place to be than where we were? A less conventional life to have lived, a more natural habitat, a whole different set of decisions I could have made when I'd had my future in front of me?

Was it too late to start over?

Was it?

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