

The Dog

In the second week of her vacation, the general boredom Anna was experiencing had transformed itself into a kind of reckless impulsivity, and so the idea of a new face in the hotel bar was enough to compel her to sit there, on the patio that overlooked the pool and the bay, watching the new face eat. He was about her age, thirty-nine, and his dog, a well-trained German shorthair pointer, was sitting next to him, staring at his feet. The man was eating a plate of fish tacos and drinking sparkling water; she was drinking beer and, although she had already settled up her tab, she called the waiter over and started a new one.

“Another Peroni?” the waiter said.

He’d put a faint emphasis on the word *another*, but she didn’t flinch.

“Yes,” she said.

She still had two weeks left of her “retreat,” and already she was dreading the inevitable comment that she would hear when she returned home: *Oh my god*, people would say, *it was so great of Ben to let you do that!*

Nobody would lead with *You look so tan!* Or, perhaps, *How did the writing go?* Or, even, the judgmental but well-intentioned, *You must have missed the kids so much*, nor the slightly worse, *The kids must have missed you so much*. No, everyone, and she meant *everyone*, would lead with praise for her husband, Ben. *Oh my god*, she could already hear her friend Flora saying, *Ben is a saint!*

The waiter returned with another beer. Anna’s third. He had served her, over the course of the past seven days, approximately twenty-five beers, and he had judged her for each one.

“Shall I reopen the tab?” he said. She gave him a thumbs-up while she drank from the fresh bottle, then gestured for him to take the empty one away.

The man with the dog wore a blue watch cap and several days’ worth of stubble on his face, as if he’d just come off of the docks in Maine. But they were not in Maine, they were in Clearwater Beach, and the only docks she knew of in the area were the small sponge

docks run by the Greeks in Tarpon Springs. The wind was up and it was cool by the water—the locals called it cold—and she imagined that the hat felt amazing, a soft layer of warmth blocking the salty wind.

She found herself wanting his hat, to cover her face with it, breathe in the scent of his head, and then place it upon her own. And this is where her lust began.

He wore old jeans and a white v-neck, as if he'd been working at some sort of manual labor all day. She drank her beer and watched as the waiter brought him a side of grilled chicken, which he fed to the dog. The dog ate the chicken with a wiggled gratitude and then curled up again at the man's dirty Red Wing boots.

Had the dog not been so well-trained, so quiet and obedient and completely trusting of the man, she would not have spoken to the man at all—he was handsome in an almost dangerous way, the kind of man who could tell lies without consequence. But when she saw him again the next night at dinner (minus the hat now, as warmth had returned to the shore), she decided to say hello. He was sitting at a high-top table at the very edge of the patio. It was a Friday, nearing sunset, and the bar was crowded with locals just off work and tourists just arrived for the weekend.

"What an amazing dog," she said. "May I pet?"

"Of course," he said and smiled at her. She squatted down to pet the dog and felt the man's eyes on her breasts, which were not well covered by the sundress.

Even the most handsome of men, she thought, were helplessly predictable.

She noticed that the dog had on a harness that signaled him as a working dog. "Do not pet me," it said.

She stood up and apologized.

"It's okay. He's off duty."

"Well, thanks," she said. "I guess I'll try and find a table before the sunset rush."

She looked around the crowded patio of the bar, knowing there were no tables left and knowing her decision had just been made.

"You're welcome to join me," he said, and so she did, awkwardly shaking his hand as she sat down. She told him her name, Anna, and he told her his: Dmitri.

"Dmitri?" she said, completely surprised.

"Dmitri," he replied. "But my friends call me Tree."

"Greek?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

She nodded. "I thought so."

Over dinner they explained themselves as parents often do when traveling alone in beautiful places. It's as if, in order to build any sort of camaraderie, two parents must first convince each other that they know how undeserving they are of the solitude and paradise before them. She told her story first—the hotel and spa belonged to an old grad school friend, Teddy, who'd married into a wealthy family of hotel owners. Teddy, and his husband Mark, had insisted that Lila take some time to finish the novel she'd been writing since finishing graduate school ten years ago.

"Summer is a slow season," Mark had said.

"We will even cover all your meals and drinks," Teddy said.

"Oh my god," Lila said. "I could bring the kids. Maybe I could find a sitter a few hours a day."

"If you bring the children," Teddy said. "The deal is off."

"I'll have to talk to Ben," Lila said, and Mark and Teddy smiled and said, "We already did. He understands the urgency of your situation. He's giving you three weeks."

"Nice friends," Tree said, after she relayed the story. "Three weeks here? On the house?"

"I guess they thought I needed it," she said.

This amused Tree. "And what was the situation you mentioned?" he asked. "And, if you don't mind, I am particularly interested in the urgency of it."

She didn't want to explain how the winter had nearly killed her, how late January had found her walking into the freezing woods and wondering how many anxiety pills it would take for her to pass out and freeze to death without pain. The kids, six and eight, spent the whole day at school, and she used the time to go into the hopelessness and grief she was feeling. She'd set the timer on her phone each day for 2:30 p.m. and by 3:00 she would put her tears away and summon every drop of strength she could summon. By the time she saw their bus coming up the road each afternoon, she was shifting into her more familiar mode—*mom*—and found herself standing at the threshold and smiling. This was an act of Herculean will propelling her from dark to light all afternoon until she collapsed in bed at night and went back into herself and her gloom, which is what Ben called it, *your gloom*, though it was more than gloom.

"I was sick of my kids," she said, trying to laugh in a way that seemed spontaneous, as if the thought had just popped in her brain with jocular aplomb. "And my husband, if you want to know the truth—I was sick of him too."

The last sentence opened up like a window, and he went through it.

"Believe me," he said, holding out his left hand to show off his wedding ring. "You don't have to explain. Marriage is hard."

"Marriage is hard" was what people said when they were married and wanting to fuck other married people.

Next, they showed pictures of their kids to one another, sliding their phones toward one another, and that seemed to make the rest of the night okay. It was all on the table. The clarity of their love for their families. And under the table, she moved her hand to his leg.

There was something hot about the urgency of his response, and something sad about it too. She felt him thicken under the table and then he looked at his untouched steak and said, “I’ll get the check.”

He looked startled.

“We can give the steak to your dog,” she said, and the dog thumped his tail.

In the morning, he was asleep in her bed and the dog was asleep on the rug at the foot of the bed. She left the bedroom and went into the other half of the suite, where the vast desk stood in front of the window, soaked in sunlight. All of her notes and her books spread out, the laptop still open from the last work session. She had intended only a short dinner break, but, obviously, she’d never come back to the desk.

She called down for room service and when the clerk asked how many people were dining she said, “Two,” then quickly panicked. What if somehow Teddy and Mark noticed this on her bill? Would they judge her? She suspected that Teddy, at least, would be happy for her. He had no use for Ben after the affair.

Teddy would ask her, of course, how the sex had been. She hadn’t had the chance to ask herself that—but, now that she was thinking of it, wow!

It had been good!

This seemed an unexpected narrative!

She’d found some satisfaction in it!

She wondered if good sex carried less guilt than bad sex. No, she didn’t wonder that, not really. She was sure this was true.

The overflowing breakfast cart arrived, she signed for it, and then wheeled it next to the bed. She woke him up gently.

“You must think I am a terrible person,” he said.

“No,” she said. “What? You and I did something we probably shouldn’t have done. But I don’t regret it.”

“How can you respect me after that?” he said.

“Why would I stop respecting you after that?” she said.

“It really is my first affair,” he said.

“Mine too,” she said. This was a lie, but her past affairs were not his business. “Why don’t you eat something and then maybe I should get to work?”

“I feel sick,” he said. His eyes shimmered with forming tears.

“Sick?” she said. “Like you’re gonna puke?”

Anna hated puking—it was her Achilles’ heel as a parent. When the kids had stomach bugs, she almost always had a small breakdown when it was all over.

“So guilty,” he said. “I feel so guilty.”

She went to the bathroom and brought him a Xanax. She popped one herself.

“This will help,” she said. “Shut that shit down.”

“What shit?”

“Guilt,” she said.

Then she took off her robe and got back into bed and ate breakfast while he stared at the ceiling. He wasn’t hungry, he said, apologetically, and gave the dog his eggs. When the dog was done, he stood up and she took him in. He had a short, compact frame, fairly well-muscled, and a hairy chest. He had a belly that seemed new. He seemed to be sucking it in. She had loved the feel of his ass in her hands. Ben had a flat ass, lacking muscle or even a hint of hair. It was the ass of a boy or an old man, neither of which was sexy.

“Would you like to stay a little longer,” she said, and let the sheet fall from her breasts. Replaying the night before had turned her on again.

“I better let Tasha out,” he said. He sounded spent and remorseful. “She had a lot of table scraps.”

Hearing this Tasha stood and walked excitedly to the door. She was fond of them both, man and dog, and understood that Tree was wracked with guilt. The shake in his voice was one of disbelief and pain. She felt bad for him, remembering the thick nauseous guilt of one’s first indiscretion.

“It gets easier,” she said.

“Marriage?” he said.

She had meant cheating, but she decided to agree. “Yes, marriage gets easier. It just takes work. And forgiveness.”

She didn’t want to see him cry, but he was close to crying, and because of this, once he was dressed, and his attractiveness became overshadowed by his deepening guilt—“It was great, but I can’t believe that happened,” he kept saying— Anna was happy to see him go, and happy for the dog too, and she attacked the basket of pastries when they left.

But she was also happy when he rang her room at four o’clock and asked if she was ready for a beer. Men only felt guilt for an hour or two; after that, their lust would return stronger than ever. These were things she knew and knowing them, voicing them inside her own head, made her feel older than she was. She had just finished Skyping with the kids. They’d had a snow day; a freak May ice storm had hit the Twin Cities.

She shut her laptop and said yes.

“I can’t believe this,” Tree said. “I can’t stop thinking of you.”

“It’s OK,” she said. “Just come over.”

Three days passed like that—she'd work all day, he'd call around four, they'd take a walk, have a drink, or two, or more, and then end up back in her bed at the hotel. They'd have sex several times each night and not fall asleep until well after midnight. She grew used to the smell of his sweat and slept with her face buried just under his arm, one hand fiddling with his chest hair. She slept well next to him, spent from their carnality, and he and the dog were always gone just after dawn, so they didn't interfere with her work. She didn't know where they went and on the third afternoon, when he arrived at the beach, she asked him.

It turned out that he was staying in town and not at the hotel as she had suspected.

"Tasha and I just walk down here for the sunsets, and to see some people," he said. He gestured to the beach as they walked along it.

"I don't think you're actually supposed to have this dog on the beach," she said.

"Tasha is a working dog. An emotional support animal," he said. "I train them for a living."

"So, wait. It's not your dog?"

"This one will be hard to give up," he said. "But no, technically, she's not. Tasha belongs to the organization I work for—but I've been such a mess lately, I've actually not worked with her the way I should be working with her."

"She's been emotionally supporting you?" she asked, meaning it as a joke, but he looked sober when he responded.

"Exactly," he said.

"What does she think of your affair?" she said.

He looked stricken when she said that. "Baby," she said to him, coming closer. "You need to forgive yourself. Adults do adult things sometime. Sometimes we are in survival mode. You're surviving."

He told her that perhaps his emotional wobbliness was related to the fact that he was cleaning out his dead father's home, which was up the road in Tarpon. He told her the plan had been that he'd go down for a week alone, get his father's things cleared out, get the pool up and running, and, in general, get the rather cluttered and unkempt place ready to sell. Then his wife and his kids would come down for spring break for one last Florida hurrah at Granddad's place. They would turn the house over to a realtor afterwards and hope the place sold quickly.

"It's paid off," he said, "so whatever we can get for it will be good."

"How's the market down here?" she asked, though she didn't care a bit about the market down here.

“Getting better,” he said. “When we sell the house, my wife and I plan to pay off our debt and hire a lawyer and get divorced.”

“Oh,” she said.

His eyes misted again.

“Well, it’s a common thing.”

“Are you happily married?” he asked.

“We don’t talk about divorce.”

“Do you think about it?”

“Well, sure,” she said. “Everyone does, sometimes.”

“Do they?” he said. He was trying not to cry.

“If you’re already planning on a divorce,” she asked, “why do you feel so guilty?”

“I had been trying to save my marriage,” he said.

“Maybe this will do it,” she said. “Sometimes an affair can do that.”

“I’ve never cheated on her in my life,” he said.

She didn’t have the energy to explain to him that she and Ben had an arrangement of sorts, something Ben had conjured up after he’d had an affair in Spain while she was stuck home with two toddlers. Back then, she had wanted to leave him but couldn’t imagine how she’d cope with the financial burden or the public humiliation of being dumped by her husband of twelve years. He had wanted her to forgive him; he wanted to stay married.

Ben had suggested an open marriage in therapy.

“But I’ve used my free pass,” he’d said, standing up and pacing about the room. “No lovers for me. But you can have affairs. You can take lovers whenever you want them. Just don’t leave me.”

“Lovers,” she said. “Lovers is a ridiculous word.”

Then he was sobbing in the therapist’s office and she was afraid he might puke. She’d burst into laughter. “No lovers for you? Just for me?”

But he’d not seem any humor in this and nodded gravely, as if he’d just admitted to some act of heroism.

“That’s really the arrangement you want?” she’d asked. “A one-sided open marriage?”

He’d insisted, through snot and tears, that, yes, it was.

“Okeedokee,” she’d said to the therapist, who seemed to have gone silent out of shock. “I think our work is done here.”

Since that day, he’d had, to her knowledge, no more affairs. And although she had no idea if he was serious about his proposal, she had, surprisingly, taken him up on his offer. She’d had six lovers since that day—their final session of therapy—and with each one, her revulsion with everything but the physical aspects of the male species grew deeper. She told Ben nothing of the affairs. Were they even affairs? Either he had been serious in the

therapist's office or he had been manipulative. Either way, she was in the right. Don't say shit you don't mean, she used to tell her kids. You'll get hurt.

One of the things she'd learned about men: the maudlin, newly separated men, the men in marital hell, like Tree, were the most energetic lovers in bed, but the most emotionally exhausting people in the world outside the bedroom. It was a trade-off. For every climax, there'd be a long valley. But the climaxes were worth it.

"Let's drink," she said. "You seem to need one."

"I've been drinking too much," he said. They all said that, the broken ones, before they undressed you again. It gave them something to blame.

In his ear, she whispered something filthy, something she had said to men before in similar moments. It always worked. He grinned. All his gloom blew off towards the sea. They went to her room and ordered a bucket of Coronas. The beers arrived just after they'd fucked, hard, coming loud and unhinged. They both blushed as the room service man wheeled in his cart as they tied their hotel-issued robes.

"I've been standing out there for ten minutes," he said grinning. "You didn't hear me?"

"No," Anna said, smiling. "We didn't."

Her robe was half open. She looked over at Tree. He liked it. They'd each had one beer before he opened her robe again, began kissing down her belly. He was a better lover than any man she'd had before. As he went down on her, she ranked them as best she could, until she couldn't think straight anymore.

They spent one last night together, and in the morning, she felt her first pangs of guilt. Why? Who had she hurt? Tree dressed and left at dawn, and she refused him a tearful goodbye.

"You can remember me," she said, "but don't make me a part of your reality."

"What do you mean?" he said, as he knelt down to clip the leash to his dog.

"This wasn't your real life," she said. "It didn't count. That's the way you endure it."

"Endure what?"

"All of it. The infidelity? The missing me? You insist it wasn't real."

"You think I'll miss you?" he said, breaking up into teary woe again. "Because I won't."

He let out a snotty laugh.

"Every time you masturbate alone in your bathroom while your wife is asleep," she said. "You'll miss me."

She was stealing lines from her first extramarital lover, recycling the things he had told her. He was a Division II college basketball coach she'd met at O'Hare Airport during a blizzard, two weeks after Ben had confessed his own infidelity.

“Just be happy we had so many great orgasms,” she said to Tree as he went to the door. “And if you want your marriage to work, Tree, I really hope it does.”

“I love you,” he said, and she nudged him out the door.

“I know,” she said. “This is the moment when all men fall in love.”

“Tonight,” he said. “One last night.”

“We’ll see,” she said. She gave the dog one last pet and then she shut the door.

The night before had a particular kind of urgency about it that had left the room a bit dank with the smell of sweat and salt. She’d not had housekeeping come in for the past few days—she didn’t want to interrupt her work—but that morning she showered, dressed in running clothes, and called down to the desk to request a cleaning and fresh linens.

The beach was not crowded yet and although she had planned to run, she walked, feeling heavy. She was not, she realized, feeling guilty about the affair she was having—why call it anything else—but because she realized that she did not miss her life back home. She missed her kids, yes, sometimes very desperately and viscerally, but she didn’t miss Ben with anything more than a faint fondness, and she didn’t miss their home, or their own dog, a mutt much less well-behaved than Tasha, or any of the routines that accumulated each week to construct her life. She didn’t miss her house, or her neighbors, or even any of her friends. She had no remorse over missing the baseball games and swim meets that were unfolding without her; she gave no fucks who’d won. The feeling thrilled her and terrified her.

Tree’s family would arrive the next day—they were driving down from Michigan—and, if she chose to see him again, once more, it would, necessarily, be their last night together. Anna was relieved. She’d have one week for focused work—seriously, she would work eighteen hours a day and finish this book—before going home. She’d loved her time with Tree—the sex and the secrecy and the sweetness of it all had been just what the doctor ordered, if the doctor was a bit mad and had a belief in self-destructive cleanses—but she wanted to get back to work. She owed her kids that much. Besides, maybe she could sell the book if she’d finished it. She had a literary agent who’d taken her on a decade ago and was waiting for a novel to sell. And selling the book, even for a modest amount, might be enough to set her free. She would finish the book, sell the book, file for a divorce while publishing the book, and turn her life into one she would miss. Next time she traveled, she would have a life she missed, she would feel homesick, she would tell small crowds at bookstores about this trip, looking fetching in outfits she did not yet own.

She would become the kind of woman who said things like, “I miss sleeping in my own bed.”

But she did not miss sleeping in her bed, not at all, and so when Tree called her that night, even though she was working, she dropped everything when he said that he and Tasha had pulled up to the hotel.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” he said. “Our last night.”

They drove to his boyhood home after dark, pulling into the garage of the ’70s-style ranch house.

“The neighbors all know me. They all know my wife,” he explained. “We come down twice a year and stay here. I mean we did. My dad died suddenly. He was in good shape. Only sixty-four.”

“I don’t mind parking in the garage,” he said.

They swam in the backyard pool with the lights off, completely naked. It had been years since she last skinny-dipped—that had happened at a party at a lake in Iowa years ago, in graduate school, when she and Ben were still in perfect shape and the thought of being nude in front of dozens of peers seemed somehow, if not appropriate, then at least acceptable.

She remembered Ben wanting to sneak off somewhere to fuck, but she resisted. She was having too much fun at the party, if she recalled correctly. Not a good sign, she thought—if you have a chance to sneak off and fuck someone on a beautiful summer night lit with fireflies and a waning moon and you don’t want to do it, well—don’t marry him!

She thought of this as she watched Tree press himself out of the pool, his thick shoulders flexing. He sat at the edge of the pool and she swam over to him, began kissing his thighs.

After he came, they dried off, dressed, and he showed her around the house.

“The Salvation Army was here today and took everything. We just have the beds left, really, for the visit, and the kitchen table. I saved some throw pillows we can sit on when we watch television.”

“You want to watch television?” she said.

“I meant when my wife and kids arrive,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

He showed her his childhood bedroom, which contained a double bed, some taped-up boxes, and a suitcase. Tasha was asleep on the bed.

“I shouldn’t let her up there,” he said. “I’m doing a bad job with this one.”

“The dog? She seems great. Or did you mean me?”

“I’m doing a bad job with you too,” he said. “This should never have happened.”

She put a finger to his lips.

“You wanna fuck me in your boyhood bedroom?” she said.

He recoiled. The fucker literally recoiled. The blow job she’d given him by the pool had made him come too hard and now he was still in that twitchy postcoital phase she hated in men.

“Why don’t you just take me back to the hotel?” she said.

“Well,” he said. “I do have a lot to do before the kids get here. And I should get to the store. Get some groceries. Laundry detergent. That sort of thing.”

“You’ll want to wash your dick too,” she said. “Scrub off my juices.”

“Jesus, why do you have to be so fucking vulgar all the time?”

“What’s your address?” she asked. “I’ll just call an Uber.”

If Ben ever caught her being unfaithful, she would always have the arrangement to fall back on as her defense. “In therapy,” she’d say calmly, “this is exactly what you said I should do.”

And he would have to admit what she always knew: “I didn’t mean it,” he’d say.

“You didn’t think I would do it,” she’d say back. “It was manipulative.”

“Six lovers?” he’d say, in disbelief. The tears would come. Men and tears. Jesus, men. Stop crying when you’re caught.

“Six lovers in three years?” she’d say. “That’s not a lot for an open marriage.”

And her deferred revenge would be complete. He could choose if he wanted to stay with her—a woman who took lovers on the side—or not.

Her first affair, the man at O’Hare, had happened because she was so angry. Her second affair, with a man ten years younger who worked in the supplement section at Whole Foods, she’d pursued simply because the sex of the first affair had been surprisingly good. The third affair was an ill-advised, whiskey-propelled one-nighter with an old college friend in town to give a poetry reading. The fourth man she’d met online on an app meant for singles and she’d fucked him in his car. The fifth affair had gone on too long, six weeks, and was with a stay-at-home dad who didn’t want to have actual sexual intercourse with her; he often ejaculated on her feet while going down on her and somehow considered that less than cheating.

Tree was the sixth. Her favorite.

Back at the hotel, in her final week of the absurdly named “retreat,” she missed him every day as she worked, felt his absence every sunset, and wished they’d parted on better terms. But she was a realist and knew the only way to work through any regrets and guilt was to finish the stupid book, so she worked almost around the clock, taking Adderall she’d bummed, a few months back, from a pepped-up woman in her book club.

Five days after she’d stormed off in an Uber, she finished a draft of the novel and it was shitty. She said it was done but it wasn’t done. She only wanted it to be done. She posted on Facebook so her husband and friends could see a screenshot of the title page and the simple comment, “Finished!”

The next morning, she was eating breakfast at a strip mall diner a few blocks from the beach. She’d gone out for a run, but had ended up at the diner ordering steak and eggs and a short stack of chocolate chip pancakes. Her phone had died, and she looked around for something to read while she breakfasted. All she could find was a real estate magazine, so

she flipped through the listings as she ate, and each house seemed laced with a potential new life that she wanted more than the one she was living.

When she paid her bill, she returned the real estate magazine to the small cardboard rack, and then she noticed and pocketed a stack of business cards for a real estate agent, Lila Burke. If you didn't scrutinize that tiny picture all that much, Lila Burke, it turned out, looked a little like her.

Later, she had the Uber driver drop her off a block away from the house. She was dressed in the closest thing she had to business attire—a black sundress and wedge sandals—and her dark curly hair was pulled back. She was wearing a pair of weak reading glasses from CVS, which she thought made her look a lot more like Ms. Burke's business card photo.

She rang the doorbell.

The woman who answered didn't look at all like Anna had imagined her to look. Anna had pictured someone short and cute, with a pixie haircut dyed blonde. But the woman was tall and lithe, darker than she imagined, and prettier too. In perfect shape, which was hard not to notice, given that she answered the door in a tiny bikini.

"Can I help you," she said.

Tree appeared behind her, wearing pajama pants and no shirt. She felt an ache flare up somewhere below her belly. Over the shoulders of Tree and his wife, she could see through the living room, to the lanai, to the pool, where children were hurling themselves into the water.

"Hi," Anna said. "My name is Lila Burke."

She handed each of them a business card. Tasha came prancing out of a back room happily, and Anna bent down to pet her. The dog was delighted to see her again.

"What do you want?" Tree said. He looked terrified.

"I'm usually not this forward," she said, "but I heard about your father. I live around the corner. He was a nice man."

"Thank you," Tree said. "But, we're not..."

"I was wondering," Anna said, "if you'd be willing to sell your house to me? As is. Save you the trouble of listing it. I own some rental properties in the area and I would, I mean, if that's what you want, I would love to buy it from you."

"Well," Tree said. "We're not sure if we want to sell it, exactly."

"What?" his wife said. His wife looked at Anna for a moment, then down at the dog, who was leaning against Anna's legs. "We do want to sell it, babe. The sooner the better."

That word stopped her. Babe? Was this a pet name used out of habit or actual endearment?

“Would you mind if I had a look around, and then I can make you an offer?” Anna said. “I’ll be as fair as I can be.”

“Well,” Tree said, “it’s kind of an intrusion.”

But his wife waved that away, physically putting her hand on Tree’s belly. “I’m sorry,” she said to Anna. “This is hard for him. He grew up here.”

She extended her hand. “I’m Leslie.”

“Hi Leslie,” Anna said. “You’re so beautiful.”

This made Leslie uneasy.

“Tree?” she said, “why don’t you show her around? I’m gonna go check on the kids.”

“Actually,” Tree said, “they wanted me to come play with them. I was just about to head outside. Can you do it?”

The tension between them was a hateful one. Anna now knew the marriage she had come to observe was dying. Tree had been telling the truth. The terms of endearment and gestures of affection were meaningless—sad, old habits.

They walked through the house, which Anna had seen, but which she pretended to be seeing for the first time. Leslie stayed in the bikini, full and spilling out of the top, the bottoms creeping up her amazing ass. She was taller than Tree. The dog stayed at Anna’s side, tail wagging, looking for more pets.

“He likes you,” Leslie said.

“What a well-trained dog,” Anna said.

“That’s what my husband does for a living,” Leslie said. “Trains working dogs.”

Anna told her that was fascinating.

When the tour was done, Anna said, “I mean, you have a very nice family here. Maybe you want to move to Florida yourself someday? Tree’s father used to talk about you all, fondly.”

“You knew Daniel?” Leslie said.

“A little. He sometimes sat out in the driveway at night and I would walk by with my dog. He was a chatter. I think he was lonely.”

“That’s so funny,” Leslie said. “You could barely get him to say two sentences on the phone. I always thought he was a quiet man.”

“In his own way,” Anna said. “Maybe after he had a few beers in him. Sometimes he stopped and we’d have beers. Near the end.”

“Whoa,” Leslie said.

“What?”

“We didn’t know he was drinking again?” Leslie said. “But that might explain the suddenness of the heart attack. He wasn’t supposed to drink.”

“I’m sorry. I’m intruding. You’re obviously not ready to sell,” Anna said.

“Oh, no, we are,” Leslie said. Then she lowered her voice. She touched Anna’s elbow and leaned in. Anna looked down at her cleavage then into her green eyes. “We’re going through a divorce, Tree and I. We never told his father. We haven’t told the kids yet either. But a quick sale would be a godsend.”

“Would it?” Anna said. “Oh, I’m glad. I thought maybe I had overstepped my boundaries here.”

Leslie’s eyes were drowning then and Anna reached over and touched her shoulder awkwardly. Soon, they were hugging and Leslie was really crying.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said. “This is a terrible part of my job. Buying houses when a family is still grieving. I should go. It’s too soon.”

“Nonsense,” Leslie said. They both looked out the window at Tree swimming with two boys, both of them around the age of ten, Anna guessed.

“I’m a mess,” Leslie said. “I’m so sorry.”

Anna looked at the kids and gestured out the window.

“Twins?” Anna said.

Leslie nodded. “I’ve been a stay-at-home mom for a decade. I’m exhausted.”

“Well, look,” Anna said. “Let me let you get back to family time.”

“He’s a cheater,” Leslie said. “That’s why—I can tell you’re wondering why would a nice family like this fall apart. Well? Well, he’s a cheater. He’s had seven affairs that I know about—seven!—and I am sure there’s more. I know there’s more.”

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, trying not to flinch.

“It’s ridiculous how much I still love him,” Leslie said. “I still let him fuck me. Why? Why would I do that?”

“I’m sure this is hard,” Anna said. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

Leslie stood up straight, her posture going from slump-shouldered sobbing to tall, together. A model’s gait returned and she smiled. “You’re sweet,” she said.

“No,” Anna said. “I’m not.”

“Look, we’re very interested in selling,” Leslie said. “I’ll have Tree call you, tomorrow? He’ll handle this. I’m sure we can work out a price. I’ll talk with him tonight. I think he’s having trouble saying goodbye?”

“It’s a lovely house,” Anna said. “It’d be hard to say goodbye.”

Leslie laughed. “I mean to me! But yes, to the house too!”

“He wants you to forgive him?” Anna said.

“He swears he’s changed,” Leslie said. “How do you know though? How can you tell with men?”

“With anyone, really,” Anna said.

Anna took her last business card from the pocket of her sundress and asked for a pen.

She watched Leslie prance about looking for one, and then she wrote down her own cell number on the card.

“That’s my personal cell phone,” Anna said. “Have Tree call me there, would you? Whenever he’s ready, I’d like to talk with him.”

“Of course,” Leslie said and walked her to the door.

Before she left, Anna squatted down and let the dog lick her face as she scratched his head. “I hope I see you again,” she said to the dog, but not to Leslie, and then she left, walking several blocks before taking out her phone and sending out a signal into the world, a ping a working stranger would see and know she needed a ride.