

THE BOOK CLUB
FOR TROUBLESOME
WOMEN

A Novel



MARIE BOSTWICK



HARPER MUSE

The Book Club for Troublesome Women

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This book is dedicated to the Original Margaret, My Margaret, My Mother, who inspired this journey by her example and with these words: “I don’t know if I ever told you, but that book changed my life.”

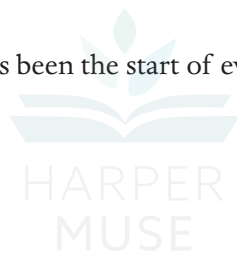


On February 19, 1963, a troublesome, imperfect, controversial woman named Betty Friedan published a troublesome, imperfect, controversial book titled *The Feminine Mystique*.

The book didn't solve the problem.

But it did put a name to it, shining a light that helped women who felt isolated and powerless find one another, and their voices.

That has been the start of every revolution.



CHAPTER I

Members of the Club

March 1963

On a Wednesday morning in March 1963, twenty-five miles and yet a world away from the nation's capital and the rumblings of change that were beginning to be felt there, in a northern Virginia suburb called Concordia, so new that the roots of the association-approved saplings were still struggling to take root, and so meticulously planned that when the first wave of residents moved in the year before, the shops, library, and church opened on the very same day, as if God smote the ground and a fully formed suburb had erupted from the crack, Margaret Ryan stood in a sunny kitchen with appliances and matching Formica countertops of egg-yolk yellow, trying to decide what to serve the three women who would be coming to the first meeting of her new book club.

Beth Ryan, eleven years old and the eldest of Margaret's three children, peered over her mother's shoulder, shaking her head at the small mountain of recipes Margaret had torn from her extensive collection of women's magazines.

"Why so many? Why not bake oatmeal cookies and be done with it like any normal mother?" Beth snatched a recipe clipping from the stack. "Anchovy and cream cheese canapés? If that's dinner, I'm eating at Melanie's."

Every family has its smart-ass. Beth was theirs.

With her strawberry-blond hair and enviably long lashes, Beth was the image of her father. But her cheek was pure Margaret, and a payback, Margaret was sure, for the sins of her youth. When her own mother was still alive, she had cursed Margaret countless times, saying, “When you grow up, I hope you have a daughter that’s as fresh as you are. *Then* you’ll know.”

Now she did know, and it wasn’t so bad. Margaret liked that her daughter knew her own mind and wasn’t afraid to speak it. It was an underappreciated quality in women, one that often faded with age.

At age seventeen, Margaret had promised herself that she would grow up to be nothing like her mother. After a promising start, the fruit of her early efforts had shriveled. Now, at age thirty-three, Margaret sometimes wondered if every woman was destined to become her mother eventually. Recently, however, things had started to shift.

And not just for Margaret.

As with any seismic occurrence, the impact would be felt more keenly by some than others, and responses to it would vary widely. Some would embrace the change. Some would decry it. Some would avert their eyes and pretend nothing had happened. It didn’t come all at once, of course. Meaningful change rarely does. There would be more rumblings, more waves, more altercations in decades to come. But in the fullness of time, no one could deny that landscapes and lives had been irrevocably transformed.

Nevertheless, Margaret didn’t fully appreciate that yet. Neither did she understand that the impulses she’d given in to over the last three months and the secrets she kept—including the rented seafoam-green typewriter she’d hidden in the far reaches of the linen closet—would alter her family, her future, and her sense of self. Today she was just excited about the book club, thrilled to be the point of connection for the other three women who had agreed to take part, some more reluctantly than others, and determined to make their first meeting memorable.

Without the assistance of an alarm, Margaret's eyes had flown open promptly at five that morning. Walt hadn't come home from the VFW until well after midnight, so there was little chance of disturbing him, but she slipped quietly from bed and tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom anyway. Why risk endangering her good spirits with some pointless confrontation?

Half an hour later, she emerged with her chestnut hair curled and sprayed into a shoulder-length flip, wearing lipstick, heels, and a black watch tartan jumper over a cream-colored blouse, as polished and pulled together as any magazine model. Coming downstairs for breakfast, the kids had hovered on the kitchen threshold, confused to see her looking so smart so early in the day.

"Is it Sunday?" six-year-old Susan whispered to Beth, who shook her head but didn't budge from the doorway. Bobby, eight years old but already the tallest in his class and perpetually famished, broke the spell. "Mom? Can we have waffles? And bacon?"

"Waffles are for Saturdays," Margaret said, chewing her lip as she scanned an ingredient list for turkey and mushroom roll-ups. "Have some cereal. There was a new kind at the market."

Bobby trotted to the cupboard and let out a whoop.

"Cap'n Crunch! That's the one from the TV! You are the best mom ever!"

He threw his arms around her waist. Margaret patted his back. He was so easy to please.

"Slice some banana on top," she said. Despite the cereal company's claims about vitamins, feeding her brood a sugarcoated breakfast with a cartoon captain spokesman didn't make her *feel* like the best mom ever. Tomorrow she'd make scrambled eggs.

"Suzy," she said, noticing the child had missed a button on her cardigan, "come here."

Susan, who most closely resembled Margaret in looks, hopped up from the banquette. She stood perfectly still when Margaret knelt to rebutton her sweater, examining her mother's face.

"How come you're so dressed up? Are you going to the doc-

tor?”

“My book club is tonight, remember? It’s our first meeting, so I’m excited.”

“You don’t look excited. You look nervous.”

“Well . . .” Margaret picked a pill off Susan’s cardigan. “It’s always a little scary, isn’t it? Getting to know new people, letting them get to know you? So, yes. I am a little nervous. But also excited.”

“Like I felt on the first day at our new school?”

“Something like that. Go finish your breakfast.”

Beth tilted her chin toward a bright red book lying next to the coffee percolator Walt and Margaret had received as a premium for opening a new checking account.

“Is that what you’re reading?”

“Uh-huh.” Deciding that Beth had a point about anchovies, Margaret moved the canapé recipe to the reject pile. “It came out just last month.”

Beth picked up the book, lips moving silently as she sounded out the title.

“What does *mystique* mean?”

Margaret hesitated. Their bookstore order had been delayed, so she’d only had time to read the first few chapters. Even so, the declarations she encountered there were electric, jolting a shrouded, dormant part of her brain to life with ideas that seemed utterly fresh but also uncannily familiar. Reading about the strange stirrings and unnamed problem, knowing she wasn’t the only one who had wondered why “having it all” somehow wasn’t enough, had left Margaret awash with relief and an unexpected sense of vindication, akin to the moment she’d first spotted Charlotte Gustafson in the drugstore—a complete stranger who still barely qualified as an acquaintance—and somehow known they were in sympathy.

Charlotte had called the book groundbreaking. Margaret agreed. Would the others feel the same? As if they’d been unburdened of a shameful secret? Reprieved from a long, lonely, and

unjust exile?

“Mom? Mystique?”

“It’s . . . a kind of aura, a sense of mystery or power, a sort of magical reputation attached to a person or group. But I don’t think that’s really what the author meant here. I think she’s saying a mystique can be a lie, or even a kind of diversion.”

“Sounds boring.” Beth tossed the book aside. “Who’s in the club?”

“So far, it’s just me, Viv, Bitsy, and Mrs. Gustafson.”

“Mrs. Gustafson? The new neighbor? People say she’s an oddball.”

“You shouldn’t be listening to what people say. Or repeating it,” Margaret said. “Anyway, Charlotte’s not an oddball. She’s just different, artistic, a freethinker. Heaven knows we could use a few more of *those* in Concordia.”

Beth frowned. “What’s wrong with Concordia? I like it here.”

“Nothing,” Margaret said, smoothing her daughter’s hair. “I like it too. It’s just that sometimes the people here can be a bit . . .”

Margaret searched for a word to sum up the conflicting emotions she felt regarding their new home, but her lifelong facility with language, which she’d honed to an even sharper edge over the previous three months, failed her. How could she explain her love-hate relationship with Concordia to her little girl when she didn’t really understand it herself?

* * *

Later that same morning, thirty-nine-year-old Charlotte Gustafson put a Newport between her lips, leaving a fire-engine-red imprint on the filter. She tilted her chin and exhaled, watching the smoke drift to the ceiling of Dr. Earnest Barry’s office.

His practice was located on the ground floor of a three-story redbrick townhouse in Alexandria, Virginia. Charlotte had to drive forty minutes each way for her twice-weekly appointments because there weren’t any psychiatrists in Concordia and she’d

been referred to Barry's practice by her old doctor in New York. She didn't mind. Alexandria wasn't Manhattan, but it had a few good antique shops, a decent shoe store, and a certain charm. Dr. Barry, who had a pompous attitude and an excess of nose hair, was considerably less charming. But anything to escape the mundaneness of suburbia.

Charlotte took another drag and crossed her feet, clad in Italian leather pumps the same shade of sapphire as her sheath dress and matching swing coat, trying to get more comfortable.

"Charlotte, I've asked you before not to smoke."

"Dr. Gould always let me smoke."

"Dr. Gould doesn't have asthma." He held out an ashtray. Charlotte took a quick puff and stubbed out the cigarette butt. The doctor picked up his pen. "Did you dream this week?"

"I told you before, I don't dream."

"Everyone dreams."

"Fine," she said, clutching the fingers that should have been holding her cigarette into a fist. "I don't *remember* any dreams."

"All right. Let's move on. What was your week? Anything new?"

"Same old, same old." She shrugged. "The mutual loathing Howard and I feel for one another continues unabated. My father still prefers him to me, treats my husband like the son he never had and me like a titian-haired, addlebrained idiot. Denise won't take her nose out of her books to speak to me, or anyone else, and is still set on going to Oxford after graduation. I don't blame her for wanting to escape, but why England? It rains incessantly, there's no central heat, and the men have terrible teeth. Why not go someplace hip, with good weather and good-looking people? Why not escape to Rome? Or even Los Angeles?"

Charlotte craned her neck to the side, as if actually expecting a response. The doctor made a note on his pad. Charlotte sighed, wishing she'd worn her watch so she'd know how long it would be until the end of the session and her next cigarette.

"I suppose Junior is doing fine at the military academy, but

he hasn't written in weeks, so who knows? Laura and Andrew are still sweet, but at twelve and eleven, you'd expect that. Of course I was an early bloomer, but I don't think most people start despising their parents until they hit their teens, do you? Let's see . . . What else is new?" She drummed her fingernails against the brown leather of the therapy couch, which was really more of a chaise.

"Oh yes! Another gallery turned me down. This time the owner phoned *personally* to say he found my paintings amateurish and derivative. Good of him to make the effort, don't you think? But that's about it. Nothing new to report.

"Oh, wait," she said, and snapped her fingers. "There is *one* thing. I joined a women's book club."

"A book club?" Barry scooted forward in his burgundy wing-back chair. "Well, that's excellent, Charlotte. Do you know these women?"

"Just one, Margaret Ryan. She showed up at the door unannounced with a plate of cookies and invited me to join."

"Making connections with other housewives can be very therapeutic and help you adjust to your role. Do you think you can become friends with this woman?"

"We'll see," Charlotte said, squishing her lips together. "She may be too nice. Her taste in literature is *much* too nice. I only agreed to join because she let me pick the book."

"And what book is that?"

Had Dr. Barry been able to read Charlotte as well as he thought he could—something she was determined to prevent him from ever, *ever* doing—he would have seen the bow of her lips and known it was the smile of a woman who took pleasure in baiting hooks and seeing the barbs swallowed whole.

"*The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan," Charlotte said sweetly. "Have you read it?"

Barry's bristly white brows became a disapproving line. "I've heard about it, and that's quite enough. Therapeutically speaking, Charlotte, I don't think—"

“Oh, but you *must*,” she interrupted, rolling onto her side and fixing him with her emerald-green eyes. “I found chapter five, ‘The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud,’ *particularly* enlightening. I’m sure you would too. Would you like to borrow my copy?”

“No, thank you,” Barry said stiffly, and scribbled another note on his pad.

Charlotte’s purse was sitting next to the couch. She reached inside for her cigarettes.

“Sorry,” she said when he shot her a look. “It’s beyond my control. Oral fixation. You understand.” She pushed herself to a sitting position and lit up. “I believe our time is up for today. But I think we’ve made real progress, don’t you?” She stood. “Oh, one more thing? I’m going to need a new prescription. The one Dr. Gould wrote for me is about to expire. Doesn’t have to be today though. I can get it at my next appointment.

“See you then,” she chirped, giving a little wave as she headed to the door.



The late afternoon sun was shining in Rock Creek Park, turning the newly unfurled leaves of the trees that lined the horse trail an even brighter shade of green.

As the end of the bridle path came into sight, Bitsy Cobb—whose hair, worn in a pageboy held back from her face with a narrow red velvet ribbon, was as black and shiny as the coat of her mount—loosened the reins, letting Delilah canter for the final hundred yards. Though the same age as her twenty-three-year-old rider, the horse moved well.

“You’ve still got it, don’t you, girl?” Bitsy said as they approached the stable and Delilah slowed to a walk.

The horse, spotting a well-dressed woman of middle years standing near a fence, perked up her ears and picked up her pace, jogging toward the woman, who murmured affectionately when Delilah stopped in front of her.

“Beautiful girl,” the woman said, pulling half an apple from the pocket of her well-cut tweed jacket and offering it to the horse. “You’re aging better than I am, aren’t you?”

Bitsy climbed down from the saddle.

“Mrs. Graham, have you been waiting? I’m sorry. I didn’t know you’d planned to ride.”

“No time today, I’m afraid. Two dozen editors, plus wives and girlfriends, are coming for dinner. Tomorrow it’s freshman congressmen—Democrats *and* Republicans. I’m putting the summer slipcovers on early in case blood is drawn,” she said, then laughed.

Katherine Graham was an heiress, the wife of Phil Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post* newspaper, and one of Washington, DC’s, most influential hostesses. Though Bitsy had only been working at the stables for a few weeks, she’d found Mrs. Graham to be unpretentious and kind.

“I just dropped by to say hello to my girl,” Katherine said, stroking Delilah’s neck as the horse munched the apple. “She was a wedding gift from my father, did I tell you? I was far more excited about Delilah than I was about those eighteen place settings of Limoges, believe me.” Mrs. Graham smiled. “Thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Bitsy said in a soft Kentucky drawl. “Sometimes I can’t believe how lucky I am, getting *paid* to ride horses. Honestly, I’d do it for free. Don’t tell my boss though.”

“It’ll be our secret. But you do a lot more than just ride the horses. You curry, water, and feed them too, among other less savory jobs.” Mrs. Graham shifted her gaze to a nearby manure shovel. “And always with unflagging dedication, I’ve noticed.”

Unaccustomed to much praise, Bitsy felt her cheeks go warm. “Well, I grew up with horses. My daddy was barn manager at Prescott Farms for thirty years before he passed.”

“In Lexington? You don’t say. They’ve produced some fine thoroughbreds, quarter horses too. Delilah’s grandfather came from Prescott Farms. You should be proud.”

Bitsy beamed. “Yes, ma’am. I am. Ever since I was this high,” she said, flattening her palm just above her knee, “I’d tag along behind Daddy, helping in the barn. Mother wanted me to be a lady, but the only thing I cared about was horses and books.”

Delilah nudged her shoulder, and Mrs. Graham stroked the animal’s nose. “I thought as much. I didn’t suppose that as the wife of a successful equine vet, you took this job for the money.”

“Well, he’s still building his practice,” Bitsy said. “But yes, we’re comfortable. We bought a house in Concordia. It’s nice, but different from Lexington. I’m the youngest woman in the neighborhood and the only one without children, so I don’t quite fit in. King is older than I am and anxious to start a family—I am too, naturally—but no luck so far.

“Anyway . . . ,” she murmured, fearing she’d shared too much and remembering Mrs. Graham had things to do. But instead of making an exit, Katherine nodded.

“It’s a lot of pressure, isn’t it? You know, nearly three years passed before Phil and I had our first child. My mother called every single day to ask what was taking so long.”

Bitsy gasped. “Mine too! She doesn’t even say hello now, just, ‘Well?’ It’s unnerving!”

When their shared laughter faded, Mrs. Graham patted Bitsy’s arm. “Things have a way of working out when and how they’re meant to. You’ll see. As far as the women in your neighborhood, don’t turn yourself inside out trying to make everyone love you. Instead, be on the lookout for two or three like-minded souls who’ll take you as you are and stand by you no matter what. Acquaintances abound, but true friendships are rare and worth waiting for.”

“I just joined a book club,” Bitsy offered. “Maybe I’ll find friends there. We’re reading *The Feminine Mystique*. It’s interesting.”

“And controversial.” Mrs. Graham nodded appreciatively. “I like these women already.”

“Me too. So far.”

“Give it time,” Katherine said, then glanced at her wristwatch.

“Speaking of which . . .”

Bitsy led Delilah toward the stable, and Mrs. Graham walked to her waiting sedan. After turning on the ignition, she pulled the car up alongside the fence and rolled down the window.

“Bitsy?” she called out. “When your mother phones, tell her that not only is it possible to love horses and books and still be a lady, but Katherine Graham says it’s practically *required!*”

* * *

After laying the teasing comb on the counter and giving her blond bouffant a final coat of hairspray, forty-one-year-old Vivian Buschetti cranked up the volume of the bathroom radio, hoping the sound of Eydie Gormé blaming it on the bossa nova would drown out the noise of her six children, whose argument over the television set was reaching a fever pitch.

Knowing she had only moments before the kids would start pounding on the bathroom door and demanding justice, Viv applied her eyeliner and pulled a black nylon and lace slip over her head, tugging to clear her full bosom and generous curves. There was a knock.

She turned down the radio. “Do not make me come down there,” she warned through the locked door. “If I do, *nobody* is watching *anything* for a week. Vince? Andrea? You hear me?”

“Loud and clear. But it’s not Vince. Or Andrea.”

Viv smiled and blotted her pink lipstick with a tissue. “Who is it?”

“The man of your dreams. But don’t tell your husband. I hear he gets crazy jealous.”

Viv opened the door. After eighteen years of marriage, the sight of tall, dark, and handsome Anthony Buschetti in his crisply pressed naval uniform, with his melting-chocolate eyes and teasing smile, still made her a little weak in the knees.

“You’re an idiot,” she said, shaking her head.

“*You* are a bombshell.” Tony’s eyes traveled over her body. “Va-

va-voom!” He stepped across the threshold and locked the door behind them, backing her up against the countertop and nuzzling her neck.

“Stop, honey,” Viv giggled. “We can’t. The kids.”

“They’re fine. I told them to go outside and wait for the pizza delivery guy.”

“You ordered pizza?”

“Uh-huh.” Tony’s lips moved from her neck to her décolletage. “So you can get ready for your hen party without having to worry about making dinner. Ain’t I a prince of a guy?”

“Yes. But it’s a book club, not a hen party. And I still need to get ready, Tony. Really.”

“Seriously?” he asked, lifting his head and groaning in response to her nod. “Well . . . okay. But try to come home early. Because you look amazing, absolutely irresistible.”

She turned to the mirror to fix her lipstick. Tony sat on the counter and watched her.

Viv sighed. “I don’t feel irresistible. I feel bloated, cranky, and tired. If I didn’t know it would hurt Margaret’s feelings, I’d skip tonight. I only agreed to join because she was so excited about it and because that stupid doctor made me so mad,” Viv said, her irritation rising. “The nerve of that man! Refusing to write me a prescription for the pill unless *you* show up to sign off on it. As if I’m a child instead of a grown woman. And as if an officer assigned to the Pentagon has time for his wife’s doctor appointments!” She stabbed the air with an eyebrow pencil. “If he wasn’t the only gynecologist in Concordia—”

“I know,” Tony said. “But let it go. I’m taking Tuesday off. We’ll see the doc, get the prescription, and that’ll be that. Play your cards right, and I might take you to lunch after.”

“You know something, Anthony Buschetti? You really are a prince of a guy.”

Tony spread out his hands. “What do I keep telling you?”

Their kiss was interrupted when their eldest, seventeen-year-old Vince, rapped on the door to say the pizza had arrived. “Be

right down,” Tony called, then peered into Viv’s face. “You really are tired, aren’t you? Maybe we should rethink the idea of you going back to work.”

“No!” Viv smacked her eyebrow pencil down on the counter. “We always said I’d get back into nursing once the kids were in school. It’d only be part-time. With Vince starting college next year, we need the money. And I need . . .”

“You need what?”

Tony pulled her close, resting his hands on the swell of her hips. Viv pressed her lips together, trying to compose herself. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse.

“I need to feel important again. I was a good nurse, Tony.”

“Best on base. Best in the whole damned European theater,” he said. “The CO threatened to bust me a rank for taking you away from it. You *are* important, Viv. You’re the glue that holds this family together.” He traced a finger on her cheek. “You know that, right?”

Viv bobbed her head. She did know. Viv loved being a mother and was proud that they’d raised six terrific, respectful, clean-cut, all-American kids—Vince, Andrea, Mike, Nick, Mark, and little Jenny. Not a delinquent in the bunch. But now she wanted more.

Viv had never been much of a reader, and that book Margaret had talked her into reading for the club was so boring it practically put her to sleep. But one part—an interview with a housewife who reported realizing one day she’d already hit all the expected milestones of the feminine achievement and had nothing new to look forward to—sounded a deep chord within her.

Tony tucked a blond strand that had somehow escaped the hairspray behind her ear.

“You know what? I think you need a break. On Saturday I’ll make pancakes for the kids so you can sleep, then drop them at a matinee and come back to join you. How’s that sound?”

“You, me, and the house to ourselves for two whole hours? Like heaven.”

“Good. It’s a date.”

Tony went downstairs to pay for the pizza, leaving the bathroom door slightly ajar. Viv opened a package of pantyhose she'd ordered from Sears, her first. She perched on the toilet seat to don them, amazed at how light they felt compared to a girdle. Would they hold her in as well? Probably not. But who cared? Margaret said she ought to give them a try, and she was right. They were so comfortable!

Viv got to her feet to pull them up. The sound of happy, hungry children digging into boxes of pizza wafted through the air, along with a powerful smell of greasy pepperoni that assaulted Viv's nose, and then her stomach, making her gag. She spun toward the toilet, doubled over, vomited twice, then sank to her knees, overcome by an old, all-too-familiar weakness.

"No, no, no," she murmured, her voice choked and rasping. "Not again. Not now!"

"Viv?" Tony's voice boomed from below. "You coming? We saved you some pepperoni."

Pepperoni. Even the word sickened her. She screwed her eyes shut and swallowed bile.

"That's okay," she called. "Let the kids have it. I'm not hungry."

She went to the sink, pulled a flowered paper Dixie Cup from the wall dispenser, and rinsed out her mouth. A minute later, Tony appeared in the doorway.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course," Viv said, screwing the top on the toothpaste tube. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You said you weren't hungry."

"So? I'm running late, that's all. Don't wait up."

She turned sideways, trying to squeeze past. Tony put a hand out to stop her, frowning.

"Yeah, but honey—you love pizza."

"Tony," she laughed, "could you possibly be any *more* Italian? Just because a person isn't hungry doesn't mean something's wrong. I'm saving my appetite for the book club, that's all. I bet

you anything that Margaret's been cooking since dawn, trying to make things special. Remember what happened at Christmas? I know she tried to laugh it off, but I think that whole thing with Walt really hurt her feelings. She's been acting funny ever since, like she's keeping a secret or something."

Viv dropped her gaze, speaking more to herself than to her husband.

"Margaret is my closest friend in Concordia, my only friend. I just can't stand to see her disappointed again."



Consequential Christmas

Late December 1962

Walt said she was going overboard. Maybe she was. But it was their first Christmas in the new house, and she wanted to make it memorable. Was that so terrible?

“It’s a day like all the rest of them, Maggie,” Walt reminded her when she brought home kits to make needlepoint Christmas stockings for all three kids. “Don’t you think it might be a mistake, getting yourself worked up like this?”

His concerns were not unfounded.

The things Margaret set her heart on almost never came to pass. And if they did, they turned out to be less satisfying or meaningful or lasting than she’d imagined. Just less. Building up expectations was almost always a prescription for being let down, and never more so than at Christmas.

But it didn’t *have* to be that way.

Christmas of 1945, the celebration of which her mother had postponed until January 11, 1946, the day Dad mustered out of the military, lived in Margaret’s memory as a perfect day, a singular happiness. Had she been forced to choose one day to live over and over, that would have been it.

They didn’t have two nickels to rub together. Mom had been laid off from her job at National Cash Register, which had retooled to make fuses, gunsights, and airplane parts during the war.

But everybody was strapped in those days; the postwar economic boom didn't really get rolling until the 1950s. Sugar was still being rationed in '46, but had it been otherwise, they wouldn't have had money to buy it or much of anything else. There were a few presents, the kind that prove it really is the thought that counts, but nothing expensive. Her gift from Dad—a wooden bird whistle he'd carved from the branch of a German linden tree—still sat on Margaret's dressing table. And even after all this time, the scent of freshly cut spruce still summoned memories of the fresh garlands and Christmas wreaths her mother had twisted together by hand on that one perfect day.

How that Christmas *felt*, how they felt about one another, was what mattered most. For four uncertain, troubled years, everybody had done their job and their share, pulling in the same direction even when they were apart, and had come out on the other side, united in purpose and together again, a family.

It didn't last, of course. How could it?

When Margaret sat down to brush her hair at night, her fingers would light upon the touchstone of her father's gift. Looking into the mirror, she'd see the earnest eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl who was certain she could recapture the moment once more and hold on to it forever if only she worked enough, did enough, *was* enough.

That was why, two days before Christmas, when driving home from the poultry farm with a special-order turkey stowed in the passenger side footwell and spotting a stand of spruce trees fifty yards from the road, Margaret had slammed on the brakes, bailed out of the station wagon, and climbed over a barbed wire fence to cut some branches. Her sweater snagged on the fence and her shoes were coated with mud, but the car being filled with evergreens was worth it. Christmas was going to be magical. A holiday they would always remember.

Turning right onto Laurel Lane, Margaret spotted their house, a center hall Colonial with white siding, forest-green shutters, and two scrawny birch trees in the front yard. She would have

preferred blue shutters and flowering dogwood trees, but Concordia had covenants for everything, which meant no blue shutters and no dogwoods, nothing that wasn't preapproved in the master plan.

Still, in so many ways, it was a dream neighborhood and a dream home.

Margaret loved her house. After a decade of run-down rentals with water-stained ceilings, what she most loved was the *newness* of it—the fact that she'd been the first one ever to put a bottle of milk in the refrigerator, and that the wall-to-wall carpet gave off a faint chemical scent, like Pine-Sol and motor oil, when she ran the vacuum.

When crossing the threshold for the very first time, footsteps echoing through bare rooms that smelled of paint, Margaret had been filled with a bright, breathless anticipation. She envisioned the house that *could* be, how the naked living room would look furnished with new sofas and chairs, imagined sparkling conversation with interesting friends taking place around a teak dining table she'd seen in a magazine. Mentally she had already papered walls and accessorized rooms, creating a warm, welcoming, and stylish home.

It wouldn't happen overnight, but that was all right. She could be patient.

She worked with what she had—painting bedrooms herself and placing potted plants by the windows. She built shelves from cinderblocks and boards, filled them with borrowed library books and shopworn volumes purchased from the discount table in Babcock's Best Books, as well as one pristine copy of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* that she bought on her first visit to the bookstore, the same week they moved in. It was a splurge, but Margaret couldn't resist. Buying that book felt like making a down payment on the life she hoped to have.

But now, nearly a year after the move, those hopes were frustratingly unrealized.

Every time Margaret hinted about replacing the secondhand

furniture they'd inherited from his parents, Walt shook his head. "Buying the house wiped out our savings. We shouldn't undertake any unnecessary expenditures until we build it up again."

She knew he wasn't wrong. And it wasn't as if they were the only family in Concordia who had emptied their bank account to buy a house they couldn't afford to furnish. But she and Walt hadn't always had such different ideas about what was and wasn't necessary.

They met during her freshman year at Ohio State. Margaret and Walt were enrolled in a class titled Great American Novels, along with seventy-plus former servicemen.

When the war ended, men like Margaret's father, who was thirty-one when he was drafted and had been working at the factory for years before Pearl Harbor, went back to their old jobs. Younger veterans had a harder time finding work. Thanks to the GI Bill, ex-soldiers flooded college campuses to earn degrees in lucrative fields they hoped would support a family.

They were an impatient generation. War had interrupted their lives, so they were anxious to make up for lost time and eager to tick off the courses required for graduation, including a mandatory two-hundred-level literature class. They were good men, hardworking and focused, but most of them didn't give a fig about great American novels, or *any* novels.

Walter Ryan was the exception.

He had questions, *so* many questions. His hand was always the first to go up, so often that other soldiers-turned-students would groan at the sight of Walt's waving arm. He had observations too. Some were more insightful than others, and not all of them related to the material at hand. Sometimes tried the professor's patience. No one could doubt that Walt was curious about literature, and life in general.

But Margaret didn't really notice him until she walked into the cafeteria one day and spotted him alone at a table, surrounded by books and about fifty packets of saltines, which were free for the taking from the condiment table. He opened the packets one

by one, dipping the crackers into a shallow paper cup of tomato ketchup, munching as he pored over a copy of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

He must have felt her eyes on him because he lifted his head.

"Sorry," Margaret said, feeling the color rise in her cheeks when his slate-blue eyes met hers. "Didn't mean to disturb you. I can see you're cramming."

"Cramming?" He blinked, then closed the book. "Oh no. This is just for fun."

"You're not an anthropology major?"

"Was. Then I switched to philosophy, but only for a semester. After that it was political science. At the moment, I'm undeclared, but I'm thinking about English literature. Or maybe European history. I can't decide. Do you want to sit down?"

Margaret wasn't sure. He was such an odd young man but better-looking than she'd realized at first glance.

In an era when tall, dark, and handsome was considered the ideal, Walt was middling of height and slender of frame, muscular but lithe, and had fair skin and reddish-blond hair. He *was* handsome, she decided—when he smiled, he reminded her of the actor Van Johnson, his face lit up with a kind of joyous, boy-next-door charisma—and undeniably intriguing.

Margaret set down her cafeteria tray and took a seat. Walt brushed cracker crumbs from the table, as if trying to make things more presentable.

"What's your major?" he asked.

"I haven't declared yet, but probably English. Not sure what I'll do with it. Teach, I suppose, unless I happen to—"

Margaret took a quick drink of milk to mask her near fumble, grateful she'd stopped herself from saying that teaching would be her fallback position if she didn't meet her husband before graduation. Even if she'd been interested in him, which she absolutely wasn't, a girl didn't want to look too eager. Margaret put down her milk carton.

"What year are you?"

“Sophomore. I should be a junior. But . . .”

“You keep changing majors,” Margaret said, laughing and finishing his sentence for him. “But you’ll decide eventually, won’t you? I mean, you can’t just be a student forever.”

“No, you’re right,” he said, ducking his head in a way that made Margaret wish she hadn’t laughed. “I’ll have to graduate and go to work eventually, but when will I ever have another opportunity like this? The chance to think and study and explore ideas and . . . well, live. Really live.”

There it was again, that earnest, boy-next-door sincerity and enthusiasm. But Walt Ryan was a boy who had already seen a lot.

“I joined up in forty-three,” he told her. “Two days after my seventeenth birthday, me and a bunch of my friends from high school. The recruiting officer knew we weren’t old enough but was willing to look the other way. A lot of us didn’t make it back. Some that did won’t ever be the same. Guess I won’t be either, if I think about it. I was never much of a student—valedictorians don’t lie about their age to join the army, you know? But now, I just . . .”

He spread arms hands to encompass the books piled around him like the walls of a fortress, while smiling and turning his head from side to side, as if greeting old friends.

“Well, I just want to read everything and learn everything and do everything. Don’t know if I’m doing it for myself or the guys who never got to. I only know things are different for me now. Doesn’t make sense, I guess. But there it is.”

Walt shrugged, dunked a cracker into the pool of ketchup, and took a quick bite, as if suddenly afraid he’d said too much. But Margaret understood. The war had changed a lot of people. And there were worse things than returning from combat with a hunger for life and knowledge. Margaret held out half of her ham sandwich.

“Here.”

“You sure?” he asked, accepting the sandwich when she said she was. “Thanks.”

Most everybody at Ohio State was on a budget, and Walt wasn't the only student to take advantage of the free crackers and condiments. But Margaret had never seen anybody make a meal of them and supposed he must be well and truly broke. She nodded toward the empty cracker wrappers.

"Saving up for a guitar," he said. "If I only eat one meal a day, I'll have enough by the end of the term."

"You play the guitar?"

"Not yet," he said, grinning as he wolfed down a bite of the sandwich. "But I will."

She married him two years later, when she was twenty and he was twenty-five.

The guitar was still with them, stashed in a corner of the garage. But Walt never played it or read for pleasure anymore, and the curious and handsome young man who smiled easily and talked too much was gone. She was grateful for the man he'd become, of course, and the life he'd made possible for them. If not for Walt's cautious self-discipline, they'd still be renters.

But sometimes she missed the boy—the odd, hungry, indecisive, far-too-impulsive boy.

* * *

Margaret swung open the station wagon's rear gate and began pulling out branches just as Viv, whose blue, split-level ranch house stood kitty-corner, was carrying out the trash.

"What is all this?" Viv asked, coming to stand beside her after jogging across the street.

"I'm making garland!"

"How much? You've got enough greenery to decorate the whole neighborhood."

"I'm just going to wrap the banisters. It always takes more than you think."

"Maggie, I don't know where you get the energy."

"Don't be too impressed," Margaret said, piling more boughs

into her arms. “Not yet anyway. I’ll have to get a wiggle on to finish before the kids get home from school. Hey, can I borrow your punch bowl? *Ladies’ Home Journal* had an eggnog recipe I want to try.”

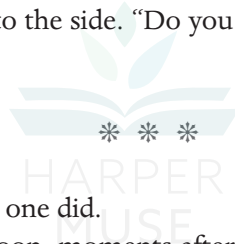
Viv ran ahead to open Margaret’s door and stepped aside so she could pass.

“Homemade garland? Homemade eggnog? Tell me you baked a gingerbread house, and I’ll slash my wrists with a rusty frosting palette. How are the rest of us supposed to compete?”

Margaret frowned and turned sideways, squeezing through the doorway.

“It’s not a competition. I just want things to be nice. For the kids. And Walt.”

“No, I get it. I feel the same way. But sometimes I wonder . . .” Viv tilted her head to the side. “Do you think anybody really notices?”



As it turned out, no one did.

Later that afternoon, moments after the kids got home from school to start the Christmas vacation, Suzy vomited onto the freshly waxed parquet floor. All three of them came down with the flu. Margaret spent the holiday bouncing between their bedrooms, bringing crackers and ginger ale, buckets and mops, and words of comfort. There’d been no time to cook Christmas dinner, which was probably just as well. In her rush and enthusiasm to make the garlands, she’d left the turkey sitting in the station wagon for hours. The bird might have been all right, but it wasn’t worth taking the chance, so she tossed it into a pot, boiled the bejeebers out of it, and made soup.

After the kids fell asleep on Christmas Day, Margaret and Walt ate the soup with some of the corn bread she’d planned to use for stuffing, then sat down on the sagging sofa they’d inherited from his parents, careful to avoid the sprung coil in the center, to

exchange gifts.

Margaret gave Walt a new cigarette lighter and a set of gold-plated cuff links. She could have used her weekly household allowance to buy them, but that felt like cheating, as if Walt would have been paying for his own present. Instead, she traded in her hoard of S&H Green Stamps, the underground currency of American housewives. Every purchase at a participating store or filling station earned stamps that could be pasted into booklets and traded in for all manner of merchandise—dishes, toys, appliances, sporting goods, and even furniture.

“Weren’t you saving for lamps?” Walt asked, slipping the links through his cuffs.

Yes. One more book would have done it.

“The lamps can wait,” she said, proud of her small sacrifice.

“Well, these are great.” He raised his wrist to admire his gift. “Makes me a little embarrassed about my present though. Didn’t have time to wrap it. Hope you don’t mind.”

When Walt pulled the envelope from his jacket, Margaret felt a thrum of excitement. Because what else could it be besides money, or maybe a check, to buy furniture? What *else* would one put in a plain white envelope at Christmas? She worked her finger under the flap, then pulled out a postcard printed with the image of a delighted-looking woman wearing heels and a polka-dot housedress, and effusive red script that said: “A Gift! For YOU!”

“I know how you love your magazines,” Walt said. “I spotted this one in the dentist’s waiting room and thought you might like it.” He shifted his weight to one side and pulled an issue of *A Woman’s Place* out from under the sofa cushion, where he’d hidden it. “This’ll hold you over till the subscription starts. It’s only been read a few times.”

As Walt talked—seemingly oblivious to her disappointment—the empty, vacuous sensation that spread through her upon opening the envelope balled into a hard, heavy, and palpable ire, a stone she could not help but throw.

“You shouldn’t have,” Margaret said.

“The dentist won’t care. He’s got plenty more.” Walt slid a Pall Mall from a pack stored in his shirt pocket. “Anyway, you’re welcome. It’ll be like getting a present every month.”

He flipped open his lighter and positioned the cigarette tip in the flame. Margaret stared at him, resentment growing as she counted the seconds it took him to feel the smoldering heat of her gaze, finally look at her, and see how badly he’d blown it.

He thought she was being ridiculous and ungrateful and small. Very small.

“When I was growing up, Christmas was for kids. In forty years, my parents *never* exchanged gifts! Why can’t you give me a little credit? At least I got you *something*! And you like magazines!”

Yes, but that wasn’t the point. His gift seemed like an afterthought. Was she an afterthought too? Had he not been stuck in the dentist’s waiting room, would he have gotten her anything at all?

Walt stormed off to sleep in the den with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s to keep him company. Margaret climbed the stairs and slammed the bedroom door, feeling furious but also foolish.

And yes, small. Lonely and small and less. Just less.

* * *

The day after Christmas, Walt went to work early, mumbling something about “last hired, first fired.” Margaret phoned the pediatrician, then went to Mayer’s Drugstore to pick up a prescription.

Barb Fredericks was coming out as she was going in. “Grab a magazine,” Barb advised, knotting her scarf under her chin. “Must be twenty people in line for the pharmacy. Half the town is down with the crud.”

Barb was new to Concordia—everybody was. Yet she seemed to know everyone in town, and their business.

“Clark, Wilkerson, Trowbridge,” she said, ticking the names of infected families off on gloved fingers. “Bitsy and King are

okay, but you'd expect that, wouldn't you? No kids, no germs. Oh, guess what? I saw a moving van parked in front of that new Nottingham model. Think I'll pop over later, invite her to the coffee klatch. Well, I should scoot. Happy New Year!"

After wishing her the same, Margaret entered the drugstore, walking to the center aisle and sighing at the length of the line. She didn't like leaving the kids alone for very long, but there was no help for it.

Margaret took her place at the end of the queue behind a bare-headed woman with a mass of reddish curls who was smoking a cigarette and wearing an exquisite mink coat that fell to her ankles. Fur coats were a status symbol, the sign of a man's success and a woman's too. They measured her ability to support his career so well that he could afford such luxuries, and please him so thoroughly that he wanted to spoil her—at least that's what the ads said. A few of her friends had minks, but none as fine as this, and they'd never have worn one to run errands, not even on a cold day in December. Margaret moved close enough to feel the silky luxury of the woman's pelt as it briefly brushed her forearm. It was so soft!

Oblivious to Margaret's presence, the woman let out an impatient sound, somewhere between a growl and a sigh, and reached for a copy of the *Atlantic Monthly*. For a moment, Margaret considered plucking the same issue from the rack and sparking a conversation. But Margaret got the feeling this wasn't the sort of woman who was in the habit of chatting with strangers.

She chose a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post* instead, flipping past ads for Longines watches (The World's Most Honored!), Famous Artist Schools (boasting a faculty who "DREW their way from Rags to Riches"), and a purportedly in-depth study of the American woman. Margaret started reading a profile of Eleanor Courter, a housewife who, in many ways, could have been her doppelgänger.

Eleanor was thirty-four to Margaret's thirty-three, and also had three children. Eleanor, too, lived in a middle-class suburb

near Washington, DC, but Maryland instead of Virginia. They shared similar attitudes toward religion; Eleanor said faith was important to her, and Margaret felt the same. Walt slept in on Sundays, but Margaret and the children went to church every week. Eleanor Courter was blond and Margaret brunette, but both had athletic, slightly boyish figures, blue eyes, and snub noses sprinkled with freckles.

That was where the similarities ended.

Eleanor was happy and fulfilled, satisfied with days spent cleaning, cooking, and driving kids to scouts, declaring herself to feel useful and “proud of her role.” According to the *Saturday Evening Post*, she wasn’t alone. In a survey of eighteen hundred married women, thirty-nine percent reported themselves as being “fairly happy” in their marriages. Fifty-seven percent said they were “extremely happy.” Adding up the figures and realizing she was part of a very small minority, Margaret felt a hole open up inside her.

What was wrong with her?

There had to be something, didn’t there? Some flaw in her character, biology, or background? If ninety-six percent of women in the survey were contented and fulfilled and *normal*, it could only mean she was—

Feeling a catch in her throat, Margaret blinked quickly and reshelved the magazine, then grabbed the one next to it, which happened to be *A Woman’s Place*. The copy Walt brought home from the dentist’s office was months out of date. This latest issue sported a glossy photo of Mrs. Rose Kennedy, the president’s mother, wearing pearls and a beatific smile. Margaret had to admit it looked like an interesting magazine. But until she started reading, she could never have guessed how interesting.

Between a recipe for hula chicken and the interview with Mrs. Kennedy, Margaret saw an announcement for an essay contest with a top prize of one hundred dollars.

One hundred dollars? Just for writing an essay?

Though she’d barely picked up a pen in years, Margaret had done quite a lot of writing in college. More than one of her

professors had complimented her work, said she had talent. A hundred-dollar prize would attract countless entries, but the third-place prize—a pair of brass lamps that were just as nice, if not nicer, than the set she'd been saving her stamps for . . . That might be possible, mightn't it?

“Don't you think it might be a mistake, getting yourself worked up like this?”

Just as Margaret was about to agree, the echo of Walt's voice in her mind was interrupted by another voice, very sharp and very real, a voice that eschewed caution and authority.

“What do you mean? I've been taking it for years.”

Margaret looked up, surprised to find herself at the front of the line. The woman in the mink was standing at the counter, impatiently puffing a cigarette and talking to Mr. Mayer in a New York accent that sounded more uptown than down.

The druggist pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Yes, but perhaps you shouldn't. There's been concern about addiction. Some studies suggest that meprobamate—”

“Oh, please.” The woman puffed, tilting her chin and blowing smoke upward. “Are you trying to impress me with your mastery of pseudo-Latin names made up by drug marketing teams? *Miltown*,” she said flatly. “Call it *Miltown*. Everybody else does. Everybody else *takes* it too—Lauren Bacall, Milton Berle, *Lucille Ball* for heaven's sake! If there was something wrong with it, you think they'd let Lucy take it? People love Lucy! They made a whole damn show about it. *Everybody* loves Lucy!”

“Well, everybody but me—I thought her character was an idiot,” the woman said, puffing, and tilting, and blowing again. “But that's beside the point. My doctor, Alvin Gould, prescribes *Miltown* all the time. He has an office on Fifth Avenue, a medical degree from Columbia, and privileges at New York Presbyterian. *That's* the man who wrote my prescription. Now. Are you going to fill it or not?”

Pushing the magnificent mink aside, the woman planted a fist on one hip and an elbow on the other, with her arm bent at an

angle and her cigarette clamped firmly between her fingers, striking a pose that said she was willing to stand there for as long as it took. The beleaguered druggist glanced toward the line, which was getting longer, then shoved a white paper bag across the counter. The woman tossed a few crumpled bills onto the counter and pivoted toward the door, clutching the paper sack in her hand.

“Keep the change.”

Margaret’s eyes followed as the woman flounced down the aisle, the scent of cigarette smoke and Chanel No. 5 hanging in the air as she passed. Approaching the exit, she stuck her arm straight in front of her, flattened her hand, and gave the door a mighty shove, as if intent on leaving a palm print on the glass to mark her departure.

“Mrs. Ryan? Mrs. Ryan, can I help you?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry.” Margaret stepped forward. “Bobby woke up with an ear infection. Dr. Babcock said he’d call in the prescription?”

“Yes, yes, I remember. Just give me a minute to find it.”

While the harried druggist searched the shelves, Margaret turned toward the front of the store and the door the woman had disappeared through. A sunbeam shone through the glass, illuminating a faint but visible handprint. Though they hadn’t exchanged a word, Margaret was certain she wasn’t part of the ninety-six percent either. But there was something admirable in the way she refused to be cowed, how she stood her ground till she got what she wanted. What must it feel like to be like that, a woman who wasn’t afraid to make demands or stir up trouble? Margaret found it hard to imagine herself doing something similar, but in the fleeting moment when she *did* imagine it, her pulse picked up and her skin tingled.

Mr. Mayer returned with the pills. Margaret fished money from her purse to pay for the prescription. The druggist nodded toward the magazine she’d abandoned on the counter.

“Are you taking that too?”



Fat, wet snowflakes were falling, drifting to the bare pavement and melting, or landing on the slushy piles shopkeepers had shoveled earlier. With the folded copy of *A Woman's Place* peeking from her purse, Margaret hurried through the town center, trotting past shops still decked out in holiday finery, while thinking about the woman in the drugstore. Though it would have been a shame to interrupt such a triumphant exit, she wished she'd stopped her as she swept past, asked her name, and confessed that she'd never loved Lucy either.

The wind picked up. Margaret shivered and clutched her coat closer around her body. An icy gust whistled down the alley. Margaret whipped her head to the left to avoid the blast. That's when she noticed the typewriter in the shop window and a placard shouting, "Sale!"

"What is it?" Margaret asked the salesman. "I've never seen a typewriter like it."

He grinned, rubbing his hands together. "*That* is an IBM Selectric, best electric typewriter on the market. It has a type ball instead of individual keys, which you can easily change out if you want a different font." He went on a little longer, explaining the machine's many advantages. Margaret was less interested in the details than one crucial question.

"How much?"

"Regular price is \$350, but the sale price is \$299."

That was more than their mortgage payment.

"Oh. I see. Thank you."

Margaret buttoned up her coat, hearing Walt's voice chiding her for, yet again, getting herself worked up over things that were unattainable. But as she approached the door, the image of the fur-clad woman who wouldn't take no for an answer popped into Margaret's mind. Margaret turned around.

"I don't suppose you have any other models on sale? Some-

thing more affordable?”

The salesman nodded. “Everybody wants electric now, so we’re phasing out some of the manual models. I can sell you a nice portable Royal for \$140. That includes the case.”

“Oh well. Thank you anyway.”

“You can rent by the month, you know. And after two years, it’s yours to keep.”

“How much?”

“Eight dollars a month.”

Margaret’s purse held seventeen dollars and change, earmarked for groceries and household expenses. It had to last until Walt replenished her allowance. Was it right to feed her family tuna casserole for the next week just to rent a typewriter and peck out an essay that would probably end up unread on a pile of entries from hundreds of other hopeful housewives? What would Walt say if he found out? Of course, if he never did . . .

“Can I take it home today?”

The salesman beamed. “I’ll carry it to your car.”

HARPER
MUSE

What the Neighbors Think

February 1963

When Margaret first saw the contest announcement, six weeks had felt like more than enough time to write one little essay. But the task turned out to be more challenging, and more invigorating, than she'd imagined. Handing the envelope with her entry to the postal clerk filled her with fluttering excitement and a sense of accomplishment she hadn't known in years.

Upon exiting the post office, she drove to the stationery store to return the typewriter.

"Are you sure?"

The clerk cocked an eyebrow in a way that made Margaret think he somehow knew she'd come to think of the machine as a friend, that she'd even given it a name—Sylvia—and that the *clackety-clack-clacking* of the keys and spritely *ding* of the return lever lifted her spirits like nothing else.

"Tell you what," he said, clapping his hands together, the same gesture he might have used to trap a fly midflight. "How about I drop the rent to seven dollars, and she's yours after twenty months? What do you say to that?"

Margaret couldn't say she wasn't tempted. But seven dollars was still seven dollars, and the contest was over. Why spend money she didn't have on something she'd never use again?

Margaret bit her lip. "I really shouldn't."
The clerk stared at her, waiting.
Margaret opened her purse.

* * *

During college Margaret had been the kind of student who made other students groan when they spotted her on the first day of class because they knew her presence would skew the curve and torpedo their chances for an easy A. Had she stayed on for her final year instead of marrying Walt, she would have graduated with high honors. Even so, the fact that she took to academic life so readily surprised no one more than Margaret herself.

She'd grown up in a modest neighborhood favored by blue-collar families who worked in Dayton's factories. Though she maintained a B+ average in high school, the idea of going to college never occurred to her, nor to most of the girls in her graduating class. Those with boyfriends scheduled summer and fall weddings. Those without planned to take jobs and live at home until they found a husband, Margaret among them.

Then, a week after Margaret graduated from high school, her mother died.

Instead of finding a job, Margaret spent the summer keeping house and caring for her younger siblings, stepping into her mother's shoes so her father could continue working. Things might have gone on like that had not her best friend, Ethel Chenault, phoned in late August, sobbing and furious, to report that she'd caught her fiancé, Cliff, necking in the back row of the movie theater with Cherry Schaffer, the town tramp.

"Cherry Schaffer! Can you believe it?"

Margaret could. Cliff was the type who winked at every passing skirt. But what can you do when your friends fall in love with the wrong people?

"I poured my Coke over his head and told him that was it—the wedding is off!"

“Oh, Ethel. I’m sorry.”

“Better I found out now rather than later, right?” Ethel sniffled, sounding less than convinced. “Anyway, I wanted to let you know before you bought the fabric for your bridesmaid’s dress.”

Too late. Margaret was stuck with four yards of peach chiffon she now had no use for.

“Is there anything I can do to help? When my dad gets home from work, maybe we can go do something fun to get your mind off things. Not the movies, obviously, but . . .”

Ethel sniffled again but also laughed, as Margaret had hoped she would.

“Thanks, but I’m packing. I can’t stick around Dayton after this. I just got off the phone with the admissions office at Ohio State. They said all I need to do is drive over and register for the fall semester, so Mom is driving me to Columbus. Why don’t you come too? It’ll be fun!”

“What? You mean to college? I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can! Why stick around here and marry a mechanic when there’s a campus full of eligible college men less than a hundred miles away? Come on, Maggie! Don’t you want to get away from here? See the world?”

Seeing the world was beyond the boundaries of Margaret’s imagination—she’d never traveled farther than Indianapolis. But yes, oh yes, she very much wanted to get away from Dayton, the house permeated with grief, and the small, ordinary future that was mapped out for her. All these years later, Margaret still felt guilty about deserting her post. But her father understood.

“Just come home weekends,” he said when he dropped her at the bus station in September. She promised she would but rarely did, and felt guilty about that too.

But she had loved college, especially the fact that she was surrounded by strangers; no one, apart from Ethel—who was impregnated by an engineering major in the spring semester and dropped out to get married—knew anything about her or her family. She loved her classes too, signed up for the toughest

courses she could talk her way into, and worked hard, giving her full concentration to topics that were weighty and wonderfully impersonal. Her moral analysis of *Mansfield Park*, arguably Jane Austen's least readable novel, was heavy lifting, and her A was well deserved. But did the musings of a nineteen-year-old girl on a 139-year-old novel matter in the here and now?

Not at bit. Well, apart from the grade.

Collecting top grades was something else Margaret loved about college, revealing a competitive streak she'd never known she had, which had reemerged the moment she handed the clerk at the stationery store eight dollars for the first month's typewriter rental.

She hadn't told anyone about the essay contest—not even Viv, whom she normally shared everything with—furiously tapping out drafts while the kids were in school and Walt was at the office. The rules stipulated that submissions must be typed double-spaced, no more than twelve hundred words in length, and titled “A Holiday to Remember.” The Christmas debacle gave her plenty of material to work with.

Her writing muscles had atrophied considerably since college, but day after day she kept at it. She went through half a ream of paper over a period of weeks before producing a draft that shone a bright light on her feelings about Christmases past and present, linking them in ways that surprised even herself. It was a fine piece of writing, poignant and honest, infused with longing for things just out of reach. But once her subscription started showing up and Margaret began studying the magazine's content more intently, she realized that poignant honesty wouldn't make the editorial cut at *A Woman's Place*.

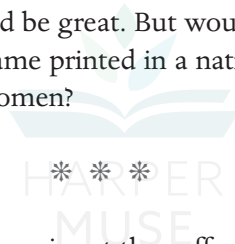
She started all over again, leaning harder into humor, setting the tone with a few paragraphs about the hopes and heroic efforts she'd put into creating a magical holiday that quickly went off the rails, something she thought most women could relate to.

The middle section was a mostly accurate depiction of how things unfolded, including the part about leaving the turkey in

the car and turning potentially poisonous poultry into soup. In hindsight, it really was pretty funny. Then she took a turn from comedy to romance, altering the ending to make it sweeter, because who wants to read a Christmas story about harsh words and a husband sleeping in the den?

Instead, she gave it a sort of “Gift of the Magi” twist, in which she sacrificed her precious cache of Green Stamps to get Walt a new bag for his golf clubs, and Walt sold his clubs to buy Margaret lamps *and* a maple dresser, ending the piece with a kiss in front of a crackling fire that just happened to coincide with the ringing of distant church bells and a gentle fall of snow.

Margaret felt better about this version. Not because the writing was better than her earlier attempt. She knew it wasn’t. But she wanted to do more than write well; she wanted to *win*. Of course the money would be great. But wouldn’t it be something to see her words and name printed in a national magazine? One read by thousands of women?



Margaret was the last to arrive at the coffee klatch. If she hadn’t known that Barb would have called later, sweetly but persistently probing for an explanation, she might have skipped this week. It wasn’t that she disliked Barb, or any of the neighborhood women. When she first moved to Concordia, she’d been grateful to meet women she had so much in common with and who, like her, were eager to launch new friendships. Lately, however, she’d begun to think they might have too much in common. All they ever talked about was kids, husbands, recipes. And Margaret was as guilty as any of them.

What had happened to her? She used to be an interesting person.

The front door had been left ajar. Margaret entered a wide foyer papered with navy-blue toile. Danish modern was all the rage, but Barb’s taste leaned to Virginia Colonial, lots of flo-

rals and dark wood. Margaret hung her jacket on a hall tree and headed toward the crowded, overheated living room. It smelled of burned coffee, stale cigarettes, and Shalimar.

"There you are!" Barb said, raising the coffeepot in a sort of salute as Margaret entered. "We were starting to wonder what happened."

"Sorry. There was a line at the post office."

"That's all right. Sit down, let me get you some coffee. Ellen, Dorothy, Iris," she said, addressing the three women seated on the sofa, "scoot down to make room for Margaret."

Margaret had been disappointed to discover it was Iris Rasmussen, and not the intriguing woman from the drugstore, who had moved into the Concordia Nottingham right after Christmas. Two months later, she was still disappointed. Iris was too anxious to be liked, almost obsequious in her attempts to gain approval and make friends. But, in a way, weren't they all?

Viv, the only woman Margaret truly counted as a friend, was the lone exception. Perhaps because she was a military wife and had herself served during the war, Viv had a plainspoken quality that Margaret appreciated. "An ounce of pretension is worth a pound of manure," she often said. And who could argue with that? Next-door neighbors were kind of a lottery; you got who you got. When it came to Viv, Margaret felt like she'd won the jackpot.

Viv was sitting in one of two crimson wingback chairs that flanked Barb's fireplace, pinching a smoldering cigarette between her fingers and balancing a plate of cookies on her knees. The second chair was vacant, but that was where Barb always sat.

Bitsy Cobb, so nicknamed because she'd been a petite child before an adolescent growth spurt shot her up to a willowy five feet nine, sat near the window in a velvet barrel chair that was too small for her frame. Bitsy was the youngest and quietest member of the group, so Margaret knew her even less well than the others. But it occurred to her that Bitsy always sat with limbs pulled in tight, as if she wanted to take up as little space as possible. Mar-

garet walked to the crimson-and-cream plaid sofa. Iris stubbed her Pall Mall out in the ashtray and shifted to make space for her.

“Are you comfortable?” Iris asked. “I can scooch down a little more.”

“I’m fine. Plenty of room.”

Barb handed Margaret a cup, then gestured toward a three-tiered tray of cookies on the coffee table, saying she should help herself.

“Let’s get you caught up. Iris’s dining room table is backordered. Tom told Dorothy that he wants his mother to move in with them. And Ellen’s baby *still* isn’t sleeping through the night.” Barb clucked sympathetically. “Seriously, Ellen, try feeding her some rice cereal at bedtime. It worked on all three of mine.”

“I will,” Ellen said, yawning. “If the pediatrician doesn’t approve, then *he* can come over and do the three o’clock feeding.”

Barb carried her cup to the wingback chair and took a seat. “Viv volunteered to head up the cookie sale for Andrea’s Girl Scout troop and says we all have to buy at least four boxes.”

“I’m not kidding,” Viv said, holding up a handful of forms when the women laughed. “Nobody leaves without placing an order.”

Margaret grinned and took a lemon bar from the tray. Viv leaned forward to tap cigarette ash into the ashtray and gave her a wink.

“Your turn, Margaret.” Barb paused to take a sip of coffee. “Anything new?”

Half of Margaret’s brain was jumping up and down like a six-year-old with a secret, shouting, *Yes, yes, yes! I wrote an essay for a contest! If I win, then thousands and thousands of people will read it!* The older and wiser half of her held her tongue.

“Not really. I tried a new meat loaf recipe—you replace half the hamburger with ground lamb.” She shrugged. “Walt didn’t like it.”

“Give it to me later, will you? Jim loves lamb.” Barb turned her eyes toward the chair near the window. “Bitsy? How was the

tennis tournament? Did you make it to the finals?"

"Oh . . . um. I didn't go after all."

Barb tsked. "Don't tell me: King decided that tennis is too much for you?"

Kingsley Cobb, nicknamed King and nineteen years Bitsy's senior, was an equine veterinarian building clientele among Virginia's horsey set. Bitsy had met him in Lexington and married him only weeks after her father's death. King, perhaps understandably considering his age, was anxious to start a family. During a recent equestrian weekend in Loudoun County, he had forbidden Bitsy to gallop, illogically afraid that it might keep her from conceiving.

"Bitsy," Barb said in a flat, authoritative tone, "you're young and healthy. A little tennis won't stand in the way of your getting pregnant. King should know that, being a medical man."

Bitsy, looking adorable in a Mary Quant dress with big white daisies on a black background, fiddled with her hem. "No, I know. I mean, he does. But that's not—"

"Men. Always overthinking," Viv interrupted, waving her cigarette in Bitsy's direction. "You and King just need to buy a cheap bottle of Chianti, put on some Sinatra, and let nature take its course. Works every time, whether you want it to. After six kids, I should know."

Ellen shook her head. "Not always, Viv. Stan and I tried for three years before Debbie came along. Honey and cinnamon," she said confidentially, leaning toward Bitsy. "Two tablespoons right before bed. That did the trick for us."

"And don't get up right away," Iris advised. "Hold your knees to your chest for thirty minutes after. I read that somewhere," she said when Viv shot her a look. "Can't hurt to try."

Like Viv, Margaret thought Bitsy and King just needed to calm down, but she didn't say so. Instead, she turned her gaze toward the willowy figure in the too-small chair, who was twisting her napkin between her palms with the same motion one would use to wring a chicken's neck. Couldn't everyone see how embarrassing this was for her?

Knowing it would end any discussion of Bitsy's sex life, Margaret considered spilling the beans about the essay contest. But then Bitsy blurted out an announcement of her own.

"I got a job!"

The awkward pause that followed Bitsy's exclamation threatened to douse the spark of enthusiasm in her bourbon-brown eyes. Margaret was first to break the silence.

"That's great, Bitsy! Congratulations! What kind of job?"

Barb interrupted before Bitsy could answer.

"Why would you start working? Are things not going well with King's practice?"

Bitsy seemed a little confused by the question. "No, it's nothing like that. But since I don't have anything to do during the day, I might as well work."

"Oh well. That takes sense," Dorothy said. "I had a part-time job as a bank teller after Brian and I married. Of course I quit as soon as I got pregnant. But as long as you don't have kids to chase after, no reason not to bring in some extra money."

Iris bobbed her head. "I worked full-time at the phone company for a while. We wanted to get a little nest egg going before we started a family. It was *supposed* to be two years. That was the plan. But you know how that goes," she said, giggling. "Sarah made her appearance eighteen months to the day after the wedding."

"Where will you be working?" Ellen asked, lighting another cigarette. "Part- or full-time?"

"Part-time. At the Rock Creek Park stables. I'll be grooming and feeding the horses, cleaning out stalls, and even doing a little training."

Barb's frown was bewildered and disapproving. "You're taking a job as a *stable hand*?"

"Yes," Bitsy said. "The same work I did back in Kentucky when I was helping my dad. I've always been good with horses. In fact," she said, lifting her chin and locking eyes with Barb, "sometimes I prefer them to people."

Barb blushed. Margaret clamped her lips to keep from laughing. When Viv caught her gaze, she knew they were thinking the same thing. Bitsy had a spine! Who knew?

"I didn't mean anything by it," Barb said, recovering her composure. "I was just surprised, that's all. What does King have to say about all this?"

"He's all for it."

"Well, why wouldn't he be?" Viv said, dunking a piece of shortbread into her coffee. "Bitsy will be rubbing elbows with some of the richest folks in the area. If their horses need a vet, she'll know just who to recommend, right?"

"Exactly," Bitsy said.

"Smart plan," Margaret said, smiling at Bitsy before changing the subject. "Barb, we haven't heard from you yet. Anything new? Did Jim get that new Florida route?"

Barb's husband, Jim, was a pilot based out of the recently opened Dulles airport.

Barb sighed. "Still waiting. But I do have news. Someone moved into the new Oxford."

There were only twelve models of homes in Concordia, all named after English villages—York, Rye, Exeter, and the like—so the women knew exactly what house she meant. Oxfords were by far the largest available, even bigger than Barb's Cambridge model.

"Odd that they'd move in the middle of the school year," Ellen said, frowning. "Do they have kids? With that big place, I suppose they must. Six bedrooms, isn't it?"

"Well, if they don't," Viv said, lighting another cigarette, "I'd be glad to lend them a couple of my kids. Not a thing wrong with any of them that being an only child wouldn't cure. Will you invite her to join the coffee klatch?"

"Don't think so," Barb said primly. "I've *heard* things about her."

"Such as?" Margaret asked.

"Such as she's spent time in the loony bin. And I believe it too,

after seeing her.” Barb leaned in, scanning the eyes of her rapt audience before going on. “When I drove past, she was standing in the driveway, directing the movers, and wearing a full-length mink coat. Mink! In the middle of the day!”

Barb’s eyes went wide.

“I mean, honestly! Did you *ever*?”

* * *

Less than two hours later, Margaret was trotting down the street, holding a plate of warm cookies. What she’d meant to be snickerdoodles had turned into sugar cookies because, in her excitement to meet the new neighbor, she’d left out the cream of tartar.

It *had* to be the same woman! How many daytime-mink-wearing women could there be in Concordia?

There had been a moment, while she slipped cookies from the baking sheet, when the words *loony bin* echoed in Margaret’s mind. She knew for a fact the woman was taking Miltown, so Barb could be right about her purportedly shaky mental state. But she also might be passing on unfounded rumors. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

Besides, Margaret’s college psych professor had posited that nearly everyone suffered from some type of maladjustment, with women especially being susceptible to all sorts of neuroses and nervous disorders. It wasn’t something people talked about, but Margaret wouldn’t have been a bit surprised to find out that some of her friends took tranquilizers.

Like the woman had said, *everybody* was taking Miltown.

And why should wearing a fur during the day make someone a social pariah? Was it so terrible to be different, even eccentric? In Margaret’s book, that was a plus. She was tired of stale conversations, the company of generic women who made her feel like she had to swallow her opinions and camouflage her personality.

Turning the corner, Margaret saw a three-story house that looked almost baronial, with dark faux Tudor beams and mul-

lioned windows. She jogged up the sidewalk, smoothed a hand over her hair, and rang the bell. After a long delay, the door opened to reveal a tall woman with a head of unsprayed, red curls.

It *was* her.

The cigarette was still in her hand, but she was minus the fur, dressed in a black turtleneck that clung tightly to her large breasts, and black cigarette pants that made her slim hips look even slimmer. The look was a little bohemian for Concordia but not completely out of the ordinary. *Since Breakfast at Tiffany's* had come to the big screen, more than a few women were taking their fashion cues from Audrey Hepburn—but there was more to it than that.

Her whole outfit, and even her hair, was splattered with dozens of colors of paint, as if she'd been showered with confetti like the grand marshal in a ticker-tape parade. Even her feet, which were bare, were splattered with blobs of blue, orange, apricot, and ocher.

Margaret was more intrigued than ever. Was she an artist? Or had she taken on repainting the interior of every room in the house, each in a different color?

"Yes?" the woman said, breaking the silence and Margaret's wide-eyed stare.

"Oh . . . hi! I'm Margaret Ryan. I live down at the far end of Laurel, the white Stratford with the green shutters. I just wanted to drop by and welcome you to the neighborhood."

Margaret held out the plate. The woman stared at it for a few seconds, then looked Margaret up and down. She took a quick puff of her cigarette before accepting the offering and setting the plate down on a nearby box.

"I'm Charlotte Gustafson."

"Like the Brontë sister!" Margaret chirped, inexplicably delighted to know her name. "Welcome to Concordia, Charlotte. Do you have children?"

Charlotte narrowed her eyes and put her cigarette to her lips. "Two girls and two boys."

“Is that right? How old are—”

Charlotte blew out a column of smoke. “Thanks for the cookies. I’m sure the kids will love them. But if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got boxes to unpack.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Moving is such a nightmare, isn’t it? Once you’re settled, I hope you’ll join our weekly—”

Margaret had been about to say “coffee klatch” but interrupted herself before the words got out. Charlotte Gustafson didn’t seem like the coffee klatch sort.

“Our weekly . . . ?” Charlotte prompted, twirling her cigarette in the air.

Margaret chewed her lip.

“Book club!” she said at last. “I’ve decided to start a book club.”

“Have you now?”

Charlotte wrapped one arm across her body and propped her elbow up on her fist, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

“What’s the book?”

Margaret still set aside time to read, making it her goal to finish one new book every month. So this should have been an easy question. But something in Charlotte’s tone made Margaret’s brain seize up for an agonizingly long moment. Finally, a title popped into her head, and she blurted out the name of one of her all-time favorites.

“*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. It’s a wonderful book about a young girl coming of age in New York before the First World War. Have you read it?”

“Yes. Back in high school. *Everybody* read it in high school and loved it. But . . .” Charlotte shrugged. “That was a thousand years ago. What would be the point of reading it again?”

“Oh. Well, I just thought it might be—”

Charlotte lifted her hand. “Listen, Margaret. That’s your name, right? Margaret? Listen, Margaret. It was nice of you to drop by. But the thing is, I’ve never been much of a joiner, and I can’t see—”

She stopped short, gave Margaret a considering sort of look,

and sniffed.

“Hang on a second, would you? I’ll be right back.”

She was gone more than a second and even more than a minute, leaving Margaret with ample time to stand awkwardly on the stoop, shuffling her feet and feeling foolish. Finally, Charlotte returned, carrying a book with a red cover that she thrust into Margaret’s hands.

“*The Feminine Mystique*,” Margaret murmured, reading the title. “Is it good?”

“It is brilliant,” Charlotte declared. “Groundbreakingly, earth-shatteringly *brilliant*. At least so far. It was just released, so I’ve only read the first few chapters, but . . .” She waved her cigarette over her head, wreathing her curls in a coronet of smoke. “If your little book club wants to read something important, something like *this*, then okay. I might be interested.”

Charlotte took the book from Margaret’s hands and stepped back from the doorway.

“Otherwise, what’s the point?”

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