

# One



## *Levon*

*The fat lady across the street died. At home, on Sunday.*

The one in the green house with the aluminum siding. Susan, my mom, told me in an email. She saw it in the local paper, the *Ithaca Journal*, at work, on Tuesday.

At first Susan wasn't sure if it was the thin woman or the fat woman. There was also a really short fat guy who lived there. You hardly ever saw any of them. The shades were always drawn, and they never used the front door. Except every once in a while an ambulance would pull up at night and they'd take the fat guy out on a stretcher, with an oxygen mask on his face.

If anything, we thought he'd be the first to go. They all seemed to be in their sixties or seventies, and they never seemed to go out except to get in this gray Chevrolet Impala, maybe to go grocery shopping or to the doctor. Once in a while one of the women would come out to the front

porch to get the mail. Or the skinny woman or the fat woman would take the trash out to the strip of grass between the sidewalk and street, where the city had planted trees, on the side street from the back, because their house was on the corner.

Sometimes, if you passed them and they happened to be on the porch or taking the trash out or getting in the car, they'd nod or say hello, and I'd nod or say hello back. You never saw anybody visit, anybody stop in to have a cup of coffee or a beer or whatever people do when they visit each other. That was it. In fifteen or twenty years.

Well, seventeen years, because that's how old I was. But Susan was forty-three, and we'd lived across the street from them for all that time. And I don't think I ever said a word to the fat man, because I almost never saw him except when the ambulance was taking him away—always at night, and always out the front door on a stretcher, down the steps, the red light on top flashing and twirling, and the oxygen mask on his face. And I'd think, Maybe this is his last ride.

A few times I saw him standing in the driveway at the back of the house, on the side street, wearing a white shirt and dark pants, looking very neat, but strange because he was one of those people who was pretty much as wide as he was tall. He had a square face and black hair that was neatly combed back off his forehead.

The fat woman was not that wide, and had a round face and reddish hair, and none of them looked like each other, and Susan said none of them, as far as she knew, were related.

The fat lady who died was Dakota Goddell, the man was Harold W. Smithie, and the thin woman was Martha Nelson.

The name Dakota surprised me. She looked like a Mary or an Alice or a Kathy or Norma. The obituary in the *Journal* said she was sixty-two, had died at home after a brief illness, and had “enjoyed living in the country and worked on farms prior to relocating to Ithaca in 1986. She loved animals and had owned many dogs. Dakota was a friendly person who never disagreed with anyone. She was always happy and never shirked a task. Survivors include friends and companions Harold W. Smithie and Martha Nelson.” That was all.

I tried to remember what I had been doing Sunday night. I’m sure I was home because I don’t go out much. They must have called the police or an ambulance or something to take the body away, but I didn’t notice, didn’t know, didn’t have any idea that the fat lady, that Dakota Goddell, who had lived across the street for so many years, had died.

And so often over the years, four or five or six times, I had watched from the curtains at the front door as they took

Mr. Smithie down the steps on a stretcher, with an oxygen mask on his face, and every time I had thought, This is it. He won't be back. This is the last time.

I always thought of the closed curtains, and what life must be like for them, and where they came from, and what they did all day.

And that's how this whole thing began—with Meg, my teacher, counselor, adviser, shrink at this special school I went to, who said I had to write a senior project to graduate. And how I met Sam, who was new to the town and the school, and had just spent most of a year in mental hospitals.

This was an English/writing seminar. We were to write a few pages each week about our lives, past and present. What we were doing and thinking, what our pasts had been like. We'd spend all of senior year on this. I would show nobody what I wrote except for Meg and Sam. Sam and I would read each other's versions and make comments and suggestions. The idea was to come to a deeper understanding of both ourselves and our pasts. And Meg would contact other people for us to solicit stories about us, and other students' versions of senior year, but she would limit telling anyone about the specifics or scope of the project, and they would be sworn to secrecy. She'd talk to former teachers, shrinks, roommates, fellow students, parents,

anyone whose name she could come up with from our files. Meg would withhold outside input from us till the end of the year. The whole thing was pretty funny because I'd never met Samantha, who preferred to be called Sam. Just heard a little about her from Meg.

We were both supposed to be gifted, and we were both on meds, and we were both avoidant, or maybe somewhere on the broad spectrum of Asperger's, or depressed or ADD or something else the psychiatrists pulled out of the DSM-5, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Because everything needs a label, right? Everything fits into a neat little box? Then we can understand it and treat it, usually with drugs? Especially human beings? Their histories and souls?

Not that Meg did that, or even Susan, who was a neurobiologist. It was just kind of the way things went. When the boxes they put us in spilled over and fell off the shelves, everybody—honest to God—meant well, and they didn't want anyone, especially us kids, to get hurt. But it was really just about taking a complex kid, struggling to grow up, and giving him some labels so you had a set of symptoms you could treat and have a more orderly classroom. All of it was made up in the end.

I wouldn't even have considered doing the project, but I'd known Meg a long time, for all five years I'd been at the

school, and I trusted her as much as I trusted anybody, maybe even my mom. And she said that she thought that Sam was talented, really talented, and complicated, and vulnerable. Sam was reluctant but willing.

This would be a yearlong project, Meg said. Who knew? she said. It could be a book people might read someday.

Meg said, I told her you were one of the most interesting kids in the school. And by far the best-read.

She smiled. And I said you were a nice guy, and occasionally charming.

I said, Oh.

And between you and me, kiddo, she's one of the most interesting, brightest kids I've come across in ages. Extremely well-read. And potentially funny and charming, if—if you can draw her out.

She handed me a piece of paper that had the name Sam and her email address.

She has yours, Meg said, but I think you make the first play. Otherwise I doubt you'll hear from her.

The paper was a pink Post-it note with the name Sam printed clearly, and the initials sav, three numerals, a star, a pound sign, two parenthesis signs, with a question mark between the parens, @gmail.com.

I'd never seen such a strange email address.

This is her email? I asked Meg.

Exactly, she said.

## Two



## *Sam*

*So I got an email from this dude named Levon. Meg from the Clock School warned me about it. Said we were gonna do this senior project together. Well, not together exactly, but at the same time. Parallel projects writing our own autobiographies. It was English and writing, with maybe some psychology and personal history thrown in. He'd do his, I'd do mine, and we'd show each other what we were doing as we went along. Give each other feedback and such. Make suggestions. Advise and encourage.*

Meg didn't exactly say where she'd come into the picture. If we would be meeting with her too, and with each other. Me and Levon. Pronounced LEE-von.

School didn't start officially for a week, even though things at the Clock School seemed pretty loose. They sort of have classes but they sort of don't. They have a lot of teachers and staff, and a lot of rooms with couches and easy

chairs, and labs with computers, and a big room where kids build robots.

The school was on the second floor of this big old factory building where they used to make the Ithaca Calendar Clock, which was supposedly famous in the nineteenth century. Now it was completely overhauled. There was a music store on the first floor, and music teachers, and some offices for shrinks, and a massage therapist and a yoga studio. It was all very Ithaca. And it was in this normal, kind of leafy neighborhood called Fall Creek, where the houses were kind of close together, and the houses were set close to the street, but had cool backyards, and apparently a lot of writers and professors and musicians and artists lived in Fall Creek.

The school was a charter school, grades seven to twelve, but you had to be diagnosed with something from the DSM to go there, and you also had to be pretty good at school and want very small classes where you got a lot of teacher attention and support. Most of the students were faculty brats from Cornell or Ithaca College, and they just didn't fit in very well anywhere else. The school got state and federal money, and the staff and parents wrote and got grants, and the Clock School was ridiculously well funded.

I got this info from my parents, Nathan and Vera.



Anyway, back to Levon, which, by the way, was a curious name. Like he came from Arkansas, or the Old Testament. And had a long beard and wore suspenders. He sounded possibly okay, like we might do this thing by email.

When I met Meg, she showed me around the school, and we sat in her office, and she was wearing shorts and flip-flops and was carrying a few extra pounds, but she was wearing this nice lavender top, and a silver necklace with a red stone. She showed me around the mostly empty school, then to her office, which was down a long hall, then went right on the short part of an L.

It was somehow on the inside of the L, so there were no windows, just exposed red brick and beams, but shiny oak floors. There was a wall mostly of books, and a small desk in a corner, but it was big and more like a den. There was a couch, a coffee table, two big comfortable chairs, and everything looked clean and used.

And I loved the art on the walls. Two Paul Klees—*Fish Magic* and the ship with the red and yellow flags—plus a big copy of John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, which has always struck me as incomparably beautiful and incredibly sad—each of the four daughters, from the toddler in the foreground in full light to the other three, recede into the background, then into darkness and obscurity as they go further into adolescence, framed by a

large doorway and these gorgeous, tall, shapely vases, and nothing behind them but blackness.

I felt safe somehow in this room. In Meg's room. Maybe she got it about the Sargent painting.

So Levon. His email. He said, Hey Sam. He told me he had talked to Meg, and that while he wasn't wildly enthusiastic, he had to graduate, and he thought Meg was good people, the best. A very cool woman, in fact. He said he didn't mind how we did this. Text, Skype, email, phone, though he was not a big fan of the phone. He wasn't sure what Meg had in mind. The drill, the protocol. But he figured we could figure it out to our mutual satisfaction. Mutual satisfaction. He actually said that. Like a Henry James novel or something. Well, there it is. Well, where *what* is? *It* kept changing. And *where* was never quite clear. And *is* was shifting too. Beautifully ambiguous.

He said, Welcome to Ithaca. This is a pretty cool town. There's a lot of interesting stuff here for such a small place. Then he pastes in this thing he wrote about a fat lady who lived across the street who he barely knew and who had just died.

It was kind of interesting, but I didn't know what to make of it. It was sad, a little anyway. I mean, the woman's life sounded sad, and that she lived there so long and he hardly knew her was sad, and her obituary was sad. She liked

dogs, never shirked a task, was always happy, never argued with anyone. Never? Anyone?

What struck me most of all was that he said he, Levon, never went out much, and in the last paragraph he wrote, I always thought of the closed curtains, and what life must be like for them, and where they came from, and what they did all day.

It was slightly creepy the way he watched them carry Mr. Smithie out on the stretcher so many times and thought he was going to die. And then Dakota Goddell died, and he didn't even know.

But it bothered him that he didn't know them, that she was gone, and he wondered about their lives. Not so much like being nosy or being a spy, but feeling curious and kind of feeling sorry for them.

And maybe too—and I wonder about this, I wonder if he was aware of this—he saw a little of himself in their lives. This guy behind closed curtains who didn't go out much. Who peeked out, and like Dakota, he had a slightly weird name.

I would never say this to him.

After the four pages, he wrote, This is what I have for now. I don't know if it means anything. But I hope to hear from you, and I'm looking forward.

I thought about it for a while. I sat on my bed on the third

floor, and looked at the empty walls, which were empty because this had only been my room for like two months.

Finally, I wrote: Good. Okay.

Then I wrote down this poem I'd once made out of refrigerator magnets:

*lick smooth*

*my shadow*

*together*

*whisper*

*weak music*

*say here her*

*feet rose*

*languid through*

*white summer*

That's all for now, I wrote. There it is, as it were.

Fair skies and following seas.

I hit send.

A sailor's term for good luck. I wondered if he'd get that.

## Three



## Meg

*I gathered they emailed each other. They didn't say* anything about what they said, of course, but the first big hurdle was crossed. He wrote to her and she wrote back, and they both let me know. So that's a good thing.

But get this: they both expected this project was going to happen over email. Ha! They'd work together on a project over an entire school year, and they'd never have to lay eyes on each other. They'd never even have to be in the same room together at the same time.

I disabused them both of that idea immediately. I told them the three of us would be meeting Tuesday at ten o'clock, in my office, the first week of classes.

You can both wear masks and disguises, if you wish, but you will both be here, I said in my most imperative Meg Goldman voice.

I didn't hear back from either of them after that one, but

I was confident they'd be here. Sometimes kids like a lack of ambiguity.

I'd been working with kids, my Lord, almost twenty years. I got an undergraduate degree in English with the idea of being a teacher, and then after getting certified, I went on and got a master's in social work as well. I figured I'd be employable one way or the other. I did all of that at Syracuse, and then came down to Ithaca, which was like paradise.

Most people don't know it, but Syracuse is officially the snowiest city in the continental United States. It gets more snow than Buffalo, Fargo, Minneapolis, than anywhere. It has something to do with its proximity to Lake Erie, and air currents, so the winter is long and grim, and the city is not Paris. It's not even Cairo.

Ithaca has long, tough winters, but Ithaca is cool in so many ways I can't name them all. It has a major research university, a major college with a fine music conservatory. It has a wonderful unspoiled lake, a farmer's market, gorges, and really interesting people. Nabokov wrote most of *Lolita* here, and a significant part of its Ivy League institution is a state agricultural school, so people have cow shit on their shoes, and somehow, that keeps people, many of them anyway, just a little bit grounded.

I loved the town wholly and forever when I got here and started teaching English at Boynton Middle School.

I taught for four years, and the biggest surprise was how widely diverse the students were. There were plenty of university brats, but there were kids from the projects, and kids bussed in from the Town of (rather than the City of) Ithaca. I started learning about all the kids with special needs, and assessments, and IEPs, which stands for individualized education programs. It sounds weirdly close to IED, an improvised explosive device, used so widely in the Middle East.

IEPs were mandated by the state. What it meant was that if a kid was having trouble in school—couldn't keep up with schoolwork, was disruptive, couldn't sit still, was withdrawn, overly aggressive, anything that consistently stood out—the teacher would talk to the school social worker, the parent or parents would be brought in, and an assessment would be done. A special-ed person, a social worker, a teacher, and often an administrator would go over the kid's records at length, talk to the child's present and former teachers, and decide if this kid needed to be deemed a student with special needs. If the child was so deemed, then an IEP was drawn up by a team consisting of a psychologist, social worker, special-ed expert, and the child's teacher. It required that the child consult a doctor or psychiatrist. Meds were often dispensed.

The child might get counseling, a one-on-one aide in the classroom, hours out of the classroom being tutored,

particular protocols of therapy, and physical or psychological or anger management therapy.

Essentially, our wealthy school system brought its considerable resources to help the child.

Basically, after four years of teaching English at Boynton, of watching IEP plans try to make up for messed-up homes and the quirks of biology and bad or overwhelmed parents, I was offered a job at the high school as a social worker. I thought, Now I can do some real work. Get in there with the kids and their families, and really get my hands bloody with dirt and grime and broken calluses. Plus no more papers to grade.

But boy, it was a ride. Five years in the dark heart of really broken families, of seriously damaged kids. One-parent families, or no-parent families, or parents addicted or alcoholic or in jail or on parole or under the supervision of the court. Sometimes the saddest cases were the kids living out in the trailer parks, a few living in the woods in abandoned buses, the incest, the sisters or half brothers or “aunts” or “cousins” trying to raise a whole brood of kids.

So many of them were listless; they had no light in their eyes. You could just look at them, and they were unwashed, and badly fed, and unloved. Many of them had parents who worked at Walmart or Burger King, or cleaned houses or hotel rooms, and still had to get food stamps.



The worst was when fourteen- or fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girls came in and told you they were pregnant and wanted so much to keep the baby. They were so happy. They would finally have something all their own.

This was by no means the majority of the students. Many of the I-High kids were worrying about getting into Princeton or Williams, or whether they should take a gap year. They had, as we say, first world problems.

But after five years, I started to feel bleak. I'd come home after work with this feeling of heaviness, with something like despair.

Then I started hearing about the Clock School. Special needs, but kids who were generally quite good students, but wanted really small classes and lots of attention. A charter school for grades seven to twelve. State, city, and federal funds, plus grant money. They were talking about roughly 150 students, twenty-five per grade. A staff-to-student ratio of one to five, which was outrageous, and few of those staff would be administrators.

It took over two years to get it off the ground, to get it funded, to get the Calendar Clock Building renovated, to hire staff, but, man, boy oh boy, I wanted it. One of the big arguments for it was that some gifted kids were so bored in regular classes, even in Advanced Placement classes, that they just checked out. They basically said, Fuck this. They became disruptive, depressed, disengaged.

So I applied for and got the job at the Clock School. And the kids there were amazing.

I remember first reading Levon's file and seeing that in the fourth grade he was tested in reading, and he was at the level of someone in the third month of the twelfth grade. It was so at odds with his class performance that they retested him, and he tested at the sixth month of the twelfth grade. In science he tested below grade level, despite the fact that his mother taught neurobiology at Cornell. *WTF?* his teachers seemed to think, but didn't the fact that there was no father on the scene, ever, have something to do with it?

Or that Sam, whose file is thick as a Dickens novel, consistently tested in the mid- to high 130s in both Stanford-Binet and Wechsler intelligence tests, and always underperformed in school. Because of something in the DSM? Because she took more than a dozen different meds between the ages of seven and sixteen? Because she cut? Didn't get out of bed for days? Had nearly a dozen rounds of electroconvulsive therapy at age sixteen?

I knew that her father, Nathan, had worked seventy hours a week as a vice president at Fidelity in Boston, as the top IT specialist in computer security, which is to say that he was chief guard for nearly one or two trillion dollars in investments, virtually all of which traveled by computer, but he gave that up for the less stressful

position of guarding Harvard's thirty billion dollars in investments, and now guards Cornell's modest six-billion-dollar portfolio.

And that her mother, Vera, a trained economist, according to the file, seems never to have worked since her only child was born, but has poured her considerable intelligence and energy into anxiously hovering over her daughter, making sure she was all right, then just ignoring her. Which is to say, according to one postdoc at McLean, the famous psychiatric hospital associated with Harvard Medical School, making sure she was sick. After last fall at McLean, Nathan and Vera left Chestnut Hill and Boston, came to Ithaca, and Sam spent the spring semester, as it were, at Austen Riggs, a topflight treatment center for the very rich in the Berkshires, which is closer to Ithaca.

She graduated, as though from school, in May.

Meanwhile, I do not have a partner, since Rob and I split two years ago.

I am forty-three years old, and I have a wonderful chocolate Lab named Buster. We walk in the woods on the Finger Lakes Trails. In the fall, when it's cool in the shade of the woods, and Buster has raced ahead of me, I'll rest, my back against a tree, in an open spot, my face to the warm sun. I'll close my eyes, and hear Buster's feet pounding toward me. He'll lick my face, scratch my shoulder with his paw as if to say, C'mon. Let's go. Stop sitting.

I'll think, This is good.

I forget for the moment that most kids in the world, that many in this affluent, sweet city, have very little of what is good in life. That even the kids who seem to have everything are often as broken and lonely as dolls, naked, missing limbs and eyes, discarded in woods, next to rest stops, just off the tens of thousands of miles of interstates of our country.

## Four



## Chloe

*There were no single rooms at McLean, not in the adolescent units anyway, and that was because they didn't want any of us to "isolate," to be cut off from the world and other people. It was part of the "therapeutic" and "socialization" process. That's what they called it anyway.*

So it was me and Sam, pretty much the whole time I was there, which was from September, last year, to December. Then I was an outpatient, going to appointments three times a week, and then by this summer they got my meds settled, which is to say, they got me settled. And so it's back to Miss Porter's School in another week for me, just about. So no more cutting, no more bingeing and purging, no more crazy shit. No more McLean.

Just a nice pretty rich girl going to a rich girl's school, then maybe a pretty good college, if I can get into one. The McLean stay kind of put a wrinkle in the works. I took my

junior year off to be crazy. Do I write that in my application to Smith or Wellesley or Bard? Probably, most likely, I'll spend an extra year at Miss Porter's.

I got there about a week after Sam did. I think the first week of September. Instead of boarding school, our family SUV pulled up the at the reception area at McLean in the morning, and they unloaded me and my baggage (haha-haha), and there's a lot of baggage in every way. At that point, to be honest, I didn't give a shit. I was so fucking tired. I so didn't care about anything anymore. They could have dumped my useless carcass in a field somewhere, or on the bank of some weedy river or marsh, and I would have curled up and stayed there forever.

After about five interviews and three days in the medical unit, they brought me to the room I was gonna share with Sam, and she wasn't there. The only thing I noticed was how neat everything was. Clothes hung in her closet, a few pair of shoes, some Birks and Docs, a bunch of books lined up on the shelves over her desk, and her bed really neatly and tightly made.

I thought, How does anybody have the energy to be neat and organized? How can anyone care that much about shit like that?

And it was funny because at that moment she was having the first of her ECT treatments, which I found out about later, when they wheeled her down the hallway in a

wheelchair, and she was not with it. She was under it. From the sedatives and the volts of electricity to her brain, from being so depressed she could hardly move her hands even.

When she came to the room a few hours later, the two nurses, or aides, got her out of the chair and into the bed, and she was wearing yoga pants and a loose top, and a nice black V-neck sweater. Her left wrist had a big white bandage around it. They got the pillows under her head, the covers over her, then they took the hairnet off, and she had great hair. Brownish-blond, and a little frizzy, like one of those Botticellis in art history class. It looked soft and beautiful, and you wanted to stroke it to see if it was as soft as it looked.

The nurse said that this was Sam, my roommate, and that she'd need to sleep awhile, and I said that was good with me.

I didn't know at the time she'd just been shocked, but she looked pretty messed up and vulnerable, like a sleeping, damaged princess, and I felt something new and funny. I felt kind of sorry for her. And somehow, that didn't feel right. It felt like it did matter.

She started to stir around eleven, to move her arms and head, and then a nurse came in with a tray of crackers and juice. I had been quietly unpacking my junk, clothes and shoes, a few books, stuff for the bathroom, and I was sitting up on my bed, looking through the folders they gave you

when they released you to the less restrictive wards. Rules and Regulations, Your Safety, Treatment Modalities, and a social worker had come in somewhere along there to say hello. She was Kim, and she looked too young and too cute to be a social worker, and she said lunch would be at twelve thirty, and an aide would come by to show me where to go, and she asked me if I was getting settled okay, and I said, Sure.

Lemme know if you need anything? She patted my shoulder and I thought, I need a new life, a new attitude, a new everything, but I didn't say any of that at the time. I'd promised my mom that I'd do my best, that I'd at least try to get with the program, whatever the program was.

The nurse put the tray down next to Sam's bed, and shook her arm a little, and Sam made noises, and the nurse said, Sam, time to get up. The sun's out.

And I noticed it was. It was streaming through the big windows, it was shining in the leaves of the trees outside.

Sam opened her eyes, and they were brown, and set far apart, and she blinked, and tried to sit up but couldn't at first. But the nurse got her sitting up in the bed, put a few pillows behind her back, poured some juice for her, opened a small package of crackers, and Sam sat there with her head on her chest.

Okay, Sam, the nurse said, we've gotta get some food in you.



Sam blinked some more, and she turned and looked at me, and she said, almost in a whisper, Hey, you're Chloe, then she closed her eyes again.

That's Chloe, the nurse said, your roommate, and I said, Hey.

And it was funny, but I was moved that she knew my name, and that the first thing she said after coming out of the fog was to acknowledge my existence.

I watched her sip orange juice and bite the corner of a cracker.

Good, the nurse said.

Yummy, Sam said, and the nurse laughed.

The nurse took her blood pressure and checked her pulse, and again said, Good. Then she said she was going to check on someone down the hall, and asked me if I could keep an eye on Sam.

Just don't have her up walking around yet, the nurse said.

I said, Sure.

Then we were alone, and Sam said, ECT. Electroconvulsive therapy. Shock therapy.

I nodded, but I was kind of shocked.

How was that? I asked after a while.

Kind of fuzzy, she said. They drug the shit out of you first, so I don't remember much. But I don't know if it's the drugs or the ECT. The tee hee hee.

So that was how I first met Sam, and until she left, the week before Christmas, we were together pretty much all the time. I mean, not all the time. But a ton.

The first three weeks, she was getting ECT twice a week, and I don't know what she was like before, but she was definitely not paralyzed with depression after that. She was fuzzy and funny and pretty forgetful, but she was up and moving slowly around. I pictured bolts of lightning in the dark sky of her brain.

She went to group every day, and we walked around outside with an aide, and she spent a fair bit of time reading. In the lounge, which had big couches and chairs, and in quiet rooms, where you could read or use your computer or write in a journal or write letters.

It was kind of like Miss Porter's, in some ways. Rich girls, only here, oddly, ironically, they were better behaved. Maybe because of the drugs, or the fact that there were way fewer of us. On our unit, there were just twelve of us, and my God, there was enough staff for fifty. Doctors and interns, nurses, aides, social workers, recreational and physical therapists, psychologists, grad students in biology, neurology, psychology, social work, public health. I don't know what else.

I'm from Philadelphia, Mount Airy, much of which is pretty ritzy. And Sam is from Chestnut Hill, which is just outside of Boston, like McLean, and very ritzy. We didn't

talk a lot during those first three or four weeks, when she was getting zapped. There were two other ECT girls on our unit—Melanie, who was pretty overweight, and way depressed, and Lila, who was small and had long black hair that usually covered her face. Lila was always cold, so she wore a ski sweater and one of those Peruvian hats with the earflaps and the strings hanging down from the earflaps.

Maybe they were getting more voltage than Sam, or more sessions a week, but they seemed way more out of it. Not that Sam wasn't fuzzy and foggy and forgetful, but she was up and around and doing things. She told me a little about herself. That she had no sisters or brothers, that her dad used to work for Fidelity, and now worked for Harvard in finance and IT security, and that they were probably moving to Ithaca in New York so he could work for Cornell. He was tired of working sixty- and seventy-hour weeks. Her mom used to be a banker in New York City before Sam was born, but after Sam was born, Sam was her full-time job.

I was one of seven kids. Catholics, I told her. The middle of seven, and I was the designated fuck-up. Both my parents were attorneys, were partners in law firms in Philly. We probably had opposite problems. I got no attention; she got way too much.

But there was something about Sam. She was just so

gracious and thoughtful and kind. I felt like such a piece of shit, and she treated me like I was someone special, like I was someone with dignity, and deserved respect, and it started to kind of rub off on me. That if someone like this could think so well of me, and treat me so well and thoughtfully, then maybe I could treat myself that way too. Like just being with Sam made me respect myself more.

Even though she was one of the ECT girls and wasn't required to do much, like go to group, gym, or any of the therapy stuff except individual, she was usually in one of the quiet rooms, the lounges, in a big chair, under a blanket, reading. And she didn't read crap. She was reading *Lord Jim* and Henry James and Willa Cather, and the thing that impressed the hell out of me, she was reading James Joyce. When I said something about that, she said, Oh, it's only *A Portrait*. That's like climbing Mount Washington. *Ulysses* is K2. Then she started to tell me about this German book, *The Magic Mountain*, where all these people are stuck for years in a TB sanitarium in the Alps.

Kind of like here, I said, and she laughed.

Except a bunch of them die, and it ends in World War I, and that sucks.

By the end of September, I think, her ECT sessions were done. They'd switched up meds on both of us, and neither of us could sleep. We'd lie in the dark and talk, and it was

almost like we were little kids. I told her about going in our giant Suburban to our lake house in the Poconos, and how at night we built campfires and toasted marshmallows, and tried to tell ghost stories, but they only scared my youngest brother, Tad. And how going to bed really late on the sleeping porch there was a wonderful smell of wood smoke and lake and pine trees and wet towels and bathing suits. There was the sound of crickets, and moonlight, and it was delicious to lie there, so, so tired, but not wanting to sleep yet.

Sam was quiet for a while.

That sounds gorgeous, she finally said.

You know what I could go for right now? I said.

Yeah?

A cigarette.

You think we could bum one from Juanita? Sam asked, which surprised me.

Juanita was a grad student who sometimes worked the night shift. We knew she smoked because we'd hear her prop the door open onto the patio, and we could smell the smoke.

Sam called her Wan. She said, Why so pale and wan, fond lover? Why so pale and wan? It was from some old poem.

We went out to the lounge, and the office next to the lounge.

Wan was staring at her computer.

Wan, I said, we can't sleep, and we were wondering,  
I began.

We're dying for a smoke, Sam said.

Wan said, You girls.

You could tell Wan really liked and trusted Sam.

Just one, Sam said.

Wan smiled. Don't breathe a word. And stay on the  
patio.

She took a pack of Newport 100s from her bag, gave us  
each one, and said, Use the doorstep to prop the door open.

We were leaving the office, and she said, Girls.

We turned, and she was holding up a yellow lighter.

Outside was beautiful, and though the moon wasn't  
full, it was pretty close. One of those big October moons.

We sat on the patio steps, under a big oak tree that had  
dark scarlet leaves. We lit our cigs, and Sam coughed, and  
then we just sat and looked out. It must have been two or  
three in the morning, and it's something I remember most  
of all. Because the cigarettes tasted so good, and we didn't  
say anything. Just the two of us, like old soldiers, under-  
standing something we couldn't say.

## Five



## *Sam*

*Classes at the Clock School started the Tuesday after Labor Day, and it was kind of funny because the last official school I'd gone to was Groton, which was as WASP-y as it gets, and tony as all get-out, with quads and old red brick, and oak trees that went back to the Civil War, or to Roosevelt's time, and you never knew which Roosevelt—Franklin or Teddy—though I'm not sure if both of them went there. Now I was going to school in an old factory building, which was whitewashed, but you could still see the black lettering under the paint—Ithaca Calendar Clock. I kind of liked it, because I had hated Groton, just as I read somewhere that Roosevelt—I think FDR—had hated Groton. Good for him.*

I'd been to the Clock School twice, in midsummer with my mom and dad, and then later to meet with Meg. The summer in Ithaca had gone well, not that I'd done much.

Dad was around much more; none of those Fidelity days when a car picked him up at seven in the morning and often dropped him off at nine or ten at night. He'd also ditched the black Benz for an Accord, and Mom gave up her Lexus for an Austin Mini. A red Mini, but still. Dad worked more or less normal hours, and he taught me to drive, first in the high school parking lot, then in this beautiful park that had small roads that ran along the southern end of Cayuga Lake, which is one of those giant Finger Lakes that are thirty or forty miles long. Then in a cemetery that had a view of the lake, then along the roads in Cayuga Heights, which is the fancy neighborhood in Ithaca.

By Chestnut Hill standards, it was modest. No ten-thousand-square-foot houses. You could see the houses from the road, and our house, which was relatively big, but not crazy big, had been owned by a retired horticulture professor, and the yard was unbelievably beautiful. I mean, all kinds of trees and plants and small terraces, all on a small scale, but it was like you could die there happy.

I had two rooms to myself on the third floor, with slanted ceilings, a couch, two big chairs, my desk, bed, bookcases, and these great old leaded windows. I had my own bathroom. It felt good up there. It felt like home.

By July, I had my license, and Dad bought me an orange Honda Fit.

I didn't know anyone, but the town was small enough,



and I was on lithium and a small dose of lorazepam for anxiety, so I felt pretty comfortable driving around, parking near downtown, getting coffee at this place called Gimme!, then sitting in a park shaped like a triangle, which was next to a brook. The town felt mellow and right-sized. It felt like a place I could reason with.

By late August it started to get noticeably busier. You'd see a lot of rental trucks and vans, and stupid me, it took me two days to realize that the college students were coming back. Between Cornell and Ithaca College, twenty-five thousand college students were moving back. You could feel the energy, and the streets were way more clogged with cars.

So Tuesday: eight fifty a.m. I parked on this leafy Fall Creek street. No problem with parking. All these neat, funky-looking houses. Buddhist prayer flags over some front doors, No Fracking Way signs on some front lawns, kind of like Cambridge.

I went in the side door of the big white building, and there was a table, and a man and woman, teacher-like, were handing out folders in the lobby. Upper-school, lower-school. I went to the upper-school guy, who had a beard and was wearing a suit coat over a T-shirt. Hello, he said. You look new.

I nodded.

He put his hand out and we shook.

And you are?

Sam Vash.

Yes, I've heard of you.

It kind of made me start. I felt myself blushing.

Shit, I thought. Shit. Shit. Should've taken an extra lorazepam.

Nothing but praise, he said. Chuck Vallely. English. But I'm afraid Meg's claimed you. I get to feed the robotics kids. Give them their sci-fi.

He nodded and smiled more.

Upstairs to the Big Room.

I took the folder, which had my name typed on a sticker in the upper right corner. Samantha Ariel Vash.

I went up the wide staircase, which was polished oak and had oak banisters. It was startling, the contrast between the inside and outside of the building. I was also startled by how little some of the kids were, how small and nervous they seemed. They must have been eleven, twelve years old. Was I them? I thought. Starting at the start?

They were thin and awkward, and they seemed to be trying hard to hug the walls, to stay low and unseen. But you could also see that they were trying hard to wear the right clothes, the canvas sneakers, the hair ties, the short skirt or the jeans with the huge rips in the knees.

At the top of the stairs was a long hallway they called Main Street, which was wide and carpeted. Everything else

was windows, and refurbished brick, and old beams and new oak supporting the beams.

We were directed to the Big Room, which was a small auditorium that sat maybe three hundred. It was beautifully done. They had somehow cut into the floor above, and it was tall and spacious, and the seats were inclined. Four people were sitting on the stage, and kids were clustering into groups. More or less by age and friendship. There were six or seven kids near the front, older kids, all wearing tie-dyed T-shirts, all but one with glasses, and I was betting ten to one that these were the robotics kids.

The kids looked more or less normal, though the kids at McLean and Austen Riggs had always seemed kind of normal, until you dug a little below the surface or spent time with them. They all had their stories, though. I guess everybody has their stories.

A big guy in a dark blue checked shirt got up first with a handheld microphone. He said, Okay, everybody, seats, please. Time for kickoff.

I was in the top row, on the side, on an aisle, and I could see everybody. While Gus, the principal, was saying, Welcome back, we're gonna have a great year, I was kind of scanning the room. I saw Meg down near the front, in an aisle seat, and I guess, without realizing it, I was looking for Levon.

I had no idea who I was looking for. A short chunky guy

with bad glasses, a medium skinny guy who twitched, someone with a ponytail or rat-tail, someone in tie-dye, but I guessed that was the science kids. There was a group you could tell were the art kids. They wore black, and had part of their hair shaved, and had tats and piercings. It was the same everywhere—at Groton, McLean, Austen Riggs.

Then a woman, a social worker, was saying that she was always available, she was here all the time, her door was always open, and then a kind of severe-looking woman with very short helmet hair and a suit, who was the nurse practitioner, said she was at the school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons, and she said her specialty was psychiatric meds, and her door was always open.

The last guy was big and shambly and kind of old, maybe in his sixties. He wore a baggy tweed jacket, a shirt with a button-down collar, and corduroy pants. He spoke softly. He was the school psychologist. His name was Ron and he just wanted to say one thing. He said, If you're trying to move a box, and it's not too big, then you can probably move it by yourself. No problem. But if you're trying to move a couch, you can't do it by yourself, no matter how big and strong you are. You need someone on the other end. So if the box is really heavy, and really uncomfortable, and is really painful to move, then it's probably a couch. That's when you need to get some help. That's when you talk to one of us. Any of us. It made sense. I liked this guy Ron.

Then we broke up and went to different classes, though they weren't like other classes I'd been to. One was called Quest for Justice, and there were five of us, plus Justine, the teacher. She was maybe fifty, had gray hair, and her glasses kept slipping down her nose. We talked about what we would read—Voltaire, Camus, Seneca, a little Plato and Nietzsche, some novels later in the year. There was the Biology of Ecology and there were three of us in there, and then art class, which had about ten of us in this big room, and the teacher was Francine, and I liked her. She wore a smock and black tights, and she said we could do what we wanted, but that she wanted us to try a little of everything. Clay, silk-screening, oils, watercolor, digital, which might be fun.

A guy name Andre, who was tall and had black hair and multiple piercings in both ears, was very friendly and kept showing me different things in the studio, then Francine called him over, and this girl who was short and really pretty and had warm eyes came over. She said, Hey, Sam, welcome. Just want to warn you—Andre thinks he's the biggest player in all of Ithaca, but he understands the word *no*.

We laughed, and she said, Wanna go outside for a break?

I said, Sure. I need air.

She said, Me too. I'm Anna.

We went down some stairs, through a heavy steel door,

and there was an old parking lot, and a beat-up picnic table with an old coffee can for butts. She took out ChapStick, did her lips, offered it to me. I passed.

You doing okay? she asked. First day?

Yeah, it's pretty loose, I said.

Yeah, it's chill. People do some pretty cool stuff. Interesting stuff.

We sat a little and picked at the worn wood of the table.

Who's your main teacher? she asked.

Meg.

The Megster, Anna said, and nodded.

She good?

Very good. And I heard she'll team you up with Levon.

Is that good?

She blinked and looked thoughtful. Finally she said, An extremely interesting boy. Could be a disaster, could be brilliant.

How do you mean?

She smiled, kind of mysteriously. I spent half of last year trying to sleep with Levon, she said. No luck. I know at least three other girls, all lookers, who've done the same thing. Same result. I'll say no more. You'll see.

We exchanged cell numbers and email addresses, and Anna became my first Ithaca friend.

I went back inside and things felt more relaxed, or I felt more relaxed. I hadn't realized that all day I'd had this

first-day-of-school anxiety. I hadn't been in a *normal* school in over a year, and the last one had ended in disaster. I had this awful, deep fear that one wrong move, and I'd be back at McLean or Austen Riggs. This all felt, part of it, at least, like one huge trial. And I noticed that the younger kids, too, weren't hugging the walls so much, that they seemed chattier with each other, and I thought, Good for them.

It occurred to me that I was around more people than I'd been in a while, which I guess was since May, at Austen Riggs.

I thought about Andre, who was kind of a skank, and I kept wondering about the mysterious Levon Grady. Andre was slick as puppy shit, as this girl Suzy, at McLean, used to say. Whatever he was, Levon Grady was not puppy shit.

So Wednesday, ten in the a.m., my first class, if you could call it a class, I was sitting in Meg's office, in one of the big overstuffed chairs. Meg asked me if I'd written anything more, and I said, A little, and she said, Wanna show us?

Must I?

She laughed. I think that's part of the deal, she said. But if you want to wait a week or two to let it cool down, that's good with me.

If I wait a week or two I might delete it.

So maybe don't think and just hit send.

I'll try to try, I said.

She leaned back in her rolling desk chair and said, You

know how when you're a kid and you're dipping a toe in the water and they tell you to just jump in, or how they say just pull the Band-Aid off fast?

I nodded.

It works, she said.

It was five past, and still no Levon, and Meg said, Yesterday go okay?

Yeah, I think this might be okay, I said.

Then we didn't say anything for a minute or two, and then there was a soft tapping on the door.

Mr. Grady, enter, Meg said.

She stood up and quickly hugged him, and I stood up, and he was nothing like the way I'd thought.

For one thing, I'm pretty tall, almost five eight, and he was way taller than me, six two or three. He had wide, square shoulders, but was otherwise lean, and he had dark hair that wasn't long, but was loose and kind of curly and unruly and had hints of red in it. He wore glasses with brown frames that had wire on the bottom of the glass to hold the lenses in, kind of like '60s businessman glasses.

He wore a white short-sleeved shirt with the top button buttoned, and black khaki pants and really beat-up black Docs. I only looked briefly at his face, but his eyes were brown, and he was handsome. Jesus, he was handsome. Not pretty, not model handsome, but this slightly wide



nose, and gorgeous lips, and his eyes looked at me a second and then away.

So, Sam, he said. So. Here we are.

He slouched onto the couch, and I sat too straight in the chair, and I said, Nice to meet you, Levon, and then I wanted to kick myself because that's what people at Groton said.

I might have been blushing, but I looked quickly over at him, and he was looking down at his shoes and smiling. Not smirking.

He said, I loved, Say here her / feet rose.

He kept looking at his shoes. Say here her, he repeated. Just lovely.