

Fall



2007

IT WAS ODD HOW QUICKLY NATURE RECLAIMED THE LAND. Emily stepped out of the car and headed into the grass. Where the house used to be, there was only meadow now—her family’s own piece of rolling Berkshire hills.

Ahead, the trees stretched black and bare against the sky. Though it was the end of October, she’d hoped to catch at least a few scarlet maple leaves and pick the last apples of the season. She glanced at Clay, wandering aimlessly with his hands in his coat pockets. There was something about the way he looked, angled against the wind in his wool jacket, that reminded her of an old Bob Dylan album her dad used to have. Dylan if he were half-Korean and had come to New York for a finance job instead of rock and roll. Her hair blowing across her face, she started toward him,

then stopped as her eyes fell on a rusted metal rod sticking up out of a block of cement.

Trying to orient herself, she began slowly mapping out the first floor: were the walls still standing, she'd be in the kitchen right now. She could see the whole room in her head—the big wooden table, the fireplace, the old fridge—could practically even see her brother, Thomas, slicing mushrooms at the counter. What would he think of that guy over there? She saw herself leading Clay into the room. *Hey*, her brother would say, wiping his hands on his pants before reaching out to shake, *really great to meet you*. Thomas would set Clay at ease immediately, and before she knew it the two of them, her brother and her boyfriend, would be cooking together, experimenting and laughing at the stove. At some point, her mother would come in all aflutter, carrying a basket of herbs and flowers from the garden. *My God! When did you get here? I never heard you pull in*—trying to mask her surprise as she registered Clay's Asian American features. *Your father's upstairs, of course, working. Don't bother him just yet.*

According to the laws of science, neither mass nor energy is created or destroyed; the total amount in the universe always remains constant. And fundamentally, Emily understood this. But, as she moved through the knee-high grass, which used to be the kitchen and used to be animated by four lives—one of which was no longer being lived—she could not fathom where it had all gone. Was the energy still there? And what of Thomas? How did the laws of conservation apply to him?

Following the pattern of cement blocks, she circled the periphery of the house, mentally rebuilding and refurnishing each room. There was the bathroom with the pedestal sink, where she'd fallen and chipped a tooth while she and Thomas were horsing around; her bedroom where she retreated to write poetry and listen to music, but mostly to get away from her mother; and the living room with the couch in front of the fire.

For the first time, the actual destruction of the house didn't have the feeling of something that had happened to her personally. It felt instead like an epic or a myth. And it *was* mythic, really, the way her father had destroyed everything: his house, his family, and of course most tragically, his son. In retrospect, it all seemed inevitable, as if fate had destined things to be so and had never offered the possibility of them happening any other way.

“So, I guess we'll put the reception tent here. Right?” Clay was standing several yards away, sweeping his arm to include the relatively flat area where they were both standing.

She looked at him blankly. There was something incongruous about the sight of him on this property. He didn't seem to belong here, and that concerned her.

"Em?"

"Sure. That makes sense."

He watched her for a moment before coming over. "What's up? Do you want to wait for your mom?"

"I don't know." She gazed up the road and shivered.

He wrapped his arms around her, rubbing his hands up and down her back to generate warmth. She looked into his face. She loved that face, she knew she did—the soft curves of the nose and chin, those beautiful eyes rimmed with thick black lashes. *This is an amazing person*, she told herself, *a unique and amazing person*.

They'd come here the first time a few years ago, after they'd been together about a year. She'd brought other boyfriends before Clay, and something about being on this property with them had forced her to stop lying to herself about them. But with Clay, it was the opposite—a sure sign that what they had was real. He hadn't felt the need to act formal and somber as they walked up the hill and through the woods, nor had he felt a compulsive need to lighten things and make her laugh. He'd simply been himself, which meant what it always meant: letting her be without leaving her alone.

She watched him walk away and lower himself to the ground. Exactly a week ago, she and Clay had been strolling through Central Park. It was a perfect fall day, crisp and bright, and the entire city was reveling in it. But when the two of them arrived at the Alice in Wonderland sculpture, they found themselves alone. Clay suggested they climb up on the mushroom as they often saw children do, and laughing, she agreed. As she began to pull herself up, however, she noticed that he hung behind, jangling his keys in his pocket.

"Don't worry," she told him, "nobody's going to see you."

He looked at her with a funny smile. "I'm not afraid of looking dumb. It was my idea in the first place."

Once they were both up there, lying back on the bronze surface, they stripped off their jackets and used them as pillows. After a couple of minutes, he took her hand and slipped a delicate pearl ring onto her finger. He watched her face with anticipation.

"Emily, will you marry me? I would kneel, but . . ." Indicating the absurdity of their location, he gave her a quick apologetic smile.

“What?” she said, still stunned. “No way.”

“I hope that’s not your answer.”

She laughed. “Yes!” she said, kissing him. “Of course I’ll marry you. Definitely yes.”

They had spoken about marriage many times, and for a while now, whenever they spoke of the future, they spoke of their being together as a given. But still, this was a surprise.

“Oh my god,” she said, admiring the ring. “How long have you been planning this?”

“I didn’t plan to do it here. I’ve been carrying the ring around for a week, trying to figure out something really imaginative. And then this just seemed better somehow.”

“It’s perfect.”

“If the ring isn’t right, there are lots of others. I talked to the woman at the store—”

“Clay, stop,” she said, grabbing his hand. “I love it. Really.” She gazed up at the clouds moving slowly across the sky, thick and lumpy in their centers, thinning out and breaking up around the edges like flour sifted onto a blue counter. Right then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something flapping—a plastic deli sack caught on a bush, *thank you* printed over and over in red down its wind-creinkled side.

Even now as she thought back on it, the ugliness of that sack dominated her memory of the day. She looked over at Clay, partially hidden among the weeds, contentedly fiddling with a piece of straw. Why had they talked so much about the ring? It was such a trivial detail. They’d clearly both been nervous. But why?

Car wheels scraped on gravel, and Clay stood up as the silver Mercedes pulled in next to their Honda. Her mother and Earl eventually got out of the car and made their way toward them. Earl, in a tweed cap, looked ready for a grouse shoot on the Scottish moors. Laura was carrying a shopping bag, which Earl took from her as they leaned on each other and carefully picked a path over the ever so slightly graded ground.

“Sorry we’re late,” Laura said, girlish as always with her unstyled hair and baggy sweater. She hugged Emily and then Clay.

“How was the drive?” he asked.

“Oh.” Earl stopped for a moment, panting a bit. “It was all right.” He hugged them both, surveying the property through squinted eyes. “Nice to be here, though.”

“Mom, you might want a coat.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You sure? It’s pretty cold. Look.” Emily made a hushed *ho* sound, and a cloud of white vapor drifted out of her mouth.

“Boy, look at that,” Earl said.

“I always forget how much cooler it is up here.” Laura took the bag from him and handed it to Emily. “I got you this in Paris. A little engagement present.”

“Thanks,” Emily said, taking the bag. “That’s so sweet.”

“It’s a little something I found for you at a lingerie store. I couldn’t resist.”

“Ooh.” She raised her eyebrows at Clay. “Lucky you.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “A present for me, I guess.”

“I also have a bottle of Lafite for you at home.”

“Mom . . .”

Laura gave a coy shrug. “Well, you can’t drink it for some time anyway.”

“Yes, but I don’t drink at all.”

“Come on. Don’t you think it’s fun to have a bottle of wine that was released the same month you got engaged?”

Emily looked at Clay, incredulous. There was an awkward pause.

“We were thinking we could put the reception tent over here,” Clay said, motioning toward the area behind them.

Laura nodded. “Seems like a good place for it.”

They all grew silent and business-like as they focused on the area.

“Have you decided where you want to do the ceremony?” Laura asked.

Clay shook his head. “Not yet.”

“I know where we’re going to do the ceremony,” Emily told them.

Clay gave her an inquisitive look. They all waited in vain for her to take the next step.

“Do you want to show us?” he asked. “Or are we supposed to guess?”

“I’ll show you,” she said, starting out across the grass. The strawlike strands grew taller and thicker as they moved up the hill so that her shins were eventually plowing through waves of vegetation, the shopping bag making a swishing sound as it skimmed along the top.

Halfway up the hill, the land leveled off as if to serve the cluster of apple trees that dominated the even plane. She stopped in the center of the

orchard and turned to wait for the others. Clay was patiently making his way up the hill in a pair of slippery-soled loafers. Her mother and Earl followed slowly, her mother's hand grasping onto his elbow.

In the far distance, a few developments had sprung up over the years, but for the most part, everything within twenty miles remained unspoiled. Her parents had been lucky—they hadn't realized how lucky at the time—to find a property that was virtually surrounded by state-owned nature reserves, protected from the encroachment of real estate developers and urban sprawl.

Clay smiled up at her. "I can't believe I didn't think of this. Of course it's the perfect spot." As he arrived beside her, he added, "for so many reasons."

She took his hand. "I'm glad you think so."

Her mother sighed, suddenly looking much more tired than the climb justified. "You want to get married *here*?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ." She put her hands on her hips and gazed off into the distance. "How do you think you're going to fit all those chairs up here?"

"I was thinking people could stand."

"*Stand*?" She said this as if there had never been an occasion on which people had stood for a good thirty minutes beneath these very trees.

"Yeah."

Her mom was looking everywhere but at her. After a while, she gave a tight, forced smile, and Emily could see that there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Mom," she said, putting her arm around her. "It's not a sad thing."

"Yes, it is," her mother shot back. "It's a *very* sad thing."

Emily dropped her arm. "What I meant was . . . I wish you wouldn't see it as a sad thing to be having the ceremony here. I like the idea that he'll be here for it. You know?"

Her mother's lips began to tremble, and she brought a fist to her mouth.

Emily put her arm around her again.

Clay cast a glance at Earl, then said, "Maybe the two of you would like a few minutes up here alone."

Emily nodded.

As the men started to walk away, her mother pulled herself together. "We won't be long," she called after them.

She gave Emily's hand a couple of friendly pats to signal that she could remove the arm from her shoulder. "Have you told your father?"

It took a moment to adjust to this new line of conversation. "Um . . . No. I mean I haven't had the chance to speak to him yet." She didn't feel like mentioning the appointment tomorrow in Dr. Shepherd's office. If all went well, she'd probably tell him there.

"Oh," her mom said, reaching over to a nearby branch and twisting at the stem of a lone brown apple until it released into her palm. She examined it and then tossed it down the hill.

They both watched it roll and hop and roll again until it eventually disappeared into a tall mound of grass.

"How was Scotland?" Emily asked.

"You know . . . It was okay. Of course, shooting isn't really my thing. But it was very pretty, and Paris was fun."

Emily nodded, and they stood there quietly for a moment.

"What are we going to do about bathrooms?" Laura asked.

Emily's face fell. "I hadn't thought about that."

"I still don't see why you refuse to get married in the city."

"I want to do it here."

Laura rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "I should have worn a coat. Are you ready to go back?"

"You go ahead. I'm going to stay a little longer."

Her mother peered at her apprehensively. "I hope you're not upset with me."

"No. Not at all."

"I was only trying to be realistic about the problems you're facing here."

"I know."

"Don't worry. We'll make it work."

She smiled to let her mom know she appreciated the sentiment. Then, as Laura started down the hill, treading carefully on the path the four of them had cleared on the way up, Emily sat down and stared up through the bare apple branches at the sky. There was no symphony of insects, no rustle of leaves—just the sound of the wind blowing cold upon the wood and stroking the tops of the grass, a white noise interrupted by nothing but the occasional squawk of a crow.

One clenched, brown fist of fruit hung directly overhead. The wind moved the twigs around it. The branch itself even swayed a little. But the

apple did not budge. It held strong and willfully still. She thought of how her brother had become a part of these trees, every rainfall and every snowmelt encouraging his ashes to be drunk up by the trees' roots, climbing from there high into the trunk and out through each limb to the buds, flowers, fruits, and leaves.

She wished that her brother would descend from the branches and come and sit beside her for a few minutes. He had always been the one to provide her with a sense of perspective, to let her know when she was being unreasonable, and to nudge her gently back toward her own version of equilibrium. She had never been able, and would never be able, to achieve that extraordinary level of balance which, for Thomas, was simply status quo.

Lying back on the grass, she closed her eyes. In the blackness, she could feel her brother stretched out beside her, propped up on an elbow, his head resting in his hand. It was as if they were lounging on a picnic blanket as they had done so many times over the years no matter whether it was sunny and warm or drizzling and cold.

I think you'd like Clay.

Even Mom likes him, miracle of miracles—crazy about him, in fact.

She imagined Thomas listening as he had always done, waiting until she'd said everything she needed to say before giving any sort of response. He remained still, expecting her to proceed.

He's such a good person. Really nice, solid . . .

Goddammit, the wind was relentless. Wiping a bit of moisture from her cheek, she shut her eyes more tightly. She wanted to keep talking so that the conversation would not end, but she couldn't think of anything else to say. The only response she got was from a crow way off in the distance. She lay there for a little while longer, trying to hold on to the image of Thomas lying beside her. But he was back up in the trees, out of reach.