

CLOSE
YOUR *Eyes*,
HOLD
Hands

A NOVEL

CHRIS
BOHJALIAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Close Your Eyes, Hold Hands

A NOVEL



Chris Bohjalian



DOUBLEDAY CANADA

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*For Jenny Jackson
and
Khatchig Mouradian:
Godparents.*

*For Grace Experience:
Voice.*

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A Note About the Author

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;*

EMILY DICKINSON

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—

EMILY DICKINSON

PROLOGUE



~~I built an igloo against the cold out of black plastic trash bags filled with wet leaves. It wasn't perfect. The winds were coming across the lake, and the outside wall that faced the water was flat—not like the igloos I had seen on TV somewhere or I guess in a book. It looked like the wall on the inside of a cave: flat and kind of scaly. But the outside wall that faced the city looked round like a melon. I couldn't stand all the way up inside it, but in the middle I could crouch like a hunchback. It was big enough for three people to lie down if you curled up, and one night we had to squeeze in four. But most of the time it was just Cameron and me. I really had to trust the fuck out of someone before I would let them anywhere near Cameron in the night. But, the truth is, people came and went. You know how it is. Especially in the winter. But the igloo kept me warm. Warmer, anyway. I mean, it's not like I got frostbite. I knew kids and grown-ups who did. I knew one kid who got gangrene. They say the doctor had to cut off both of his feet, but I don't know that for a fact because I never saw him again.~~

I'm going to try and tell you only the things that I know for a fact are true. When I'm guessing, I'll be honest and tell you I'm guessing.

You build the igloos in the day when the leaves are soaked but the ice has melted from the sun, and then they freeze at night inside the bags. So does the water on the outside of the bags; that's why the bags stick together like glue.

.....

Some people said I left the shelter because someone must have tried to rape me. No one tried to rape me. I left for a couple of reasons. I mean, I did feel kind of hounded—by the other girls, one especially, but not by the people who ran the place. The “staff.” Whatever. One of the girls was starting to suspect who I was, and I knew that once my secret was out she'd turn me in. I thought she'd want no part of me. And you know what? I wouldn't have blamed her. A lot of days I wanted no part of me.

Also, I knew the staff wanted me gone. Or, at least, they wanted to figure out who I really was. They were getting pretty frustrated because they couldn't find my parents. My story was starting to unravel. So, I just left.

Given that I was always kind of—and here's a pretty awesome little euphemism—troubled teen, it's a miracle that the counselors who ran the shelter didn't send me packing a lot sooner. It wouldn't have surprised a lot of people who knew me if I really had managed to get myself thrown out on my ass. But I didn't. That's not what happened. I was already plenty scared, and so I tried playing by the rules. I tried to behave. But it didn't work. And so it would be the last time I'd try for a while.

This was back in the days when the city was still trying to figure out what to do with the walkers. Technically, I was a walker, even though I didn't walk. I stole a bike and rode to the city from the Northeast Kingdom. I don't know how many miles that is, but it took me two full days, because I hadn't ridden a bike since I was in, like, fourth or fifth grade. The work was going up and over the mountains. I just walked the bike up the eastern slopes. That took an entire afternoon right there. One time a guy in a bread truck gave me a lift, but he only took me about twenty miles. Still, a lot of those miles were uphill, so I was grateful. Lots of people—most people—had families or friends in the city or the suburbs around Lake Champlain who could take them in. And people were taking in total strangers. Vermonters

are like that. I guess decent people anywhere are like that. But there were still a lot of walkers just pitching tents in City Hall Park or sleeping in their cars or pickups or out in the cold, or building their igloos down by the water. Squatters. Refugees.

I guess it would have been a lot worse if Reactor Number Two had exploded, as well. You know, gone totally Chernobyl. But it didn't. It was only Reactor Number One that melted down and blew up.

.....

When I was a little kid, I used to take my American Girl dolls and play orphanage. The make-believe stories were always based on *A Little Princess*. The movie and the book. Whatever. One of my dolls would be a beautiful rich girl who suddenly winds up poor and in an orphanage. No mom or dad, no aunts or uncles. Some of the other girls hate her, but some love her. The woman I had running the place was always a total whack-job bully. Think of that lunatic in the musical *Annie*. She was the model. So, I guess, *Annie* was an inspiration, too. When I got bored, I'd simply have the girl rescued. Her dad or her mom and dad would just show up at the orphanage. Boom. Game over.

Sometimes I tried playing the game with Barbies, but that never worked. The Barbies looked pretty hot. If they were going to be trapped somewhere, it sure wasn't going to be an orphanage. It was going to be someplace way more awful. I know that now, too.

.....

My family had a beautiful woodstove. Not one of those black boxes that look like they do nothing but pollute the crap out of the air. It was made of gray soapstone that was almost the color of my mom's favorite piece of jewelry: an antique necklace that was made of moonstones. I think it had once belonged to my grandmother. It was Danish. Anyway, the woodstove had a window in the front that was shaped like the window in a castle or a palace. I'm sure there's a word for that shape, and I will look it up.

My dad or mom would build a fire in the woodstove when we were all home on the weekend and hanging around in the den. The den was next to the kitchen, and the woodstove would heat the den and the kitchen and even the TV room on the other side of the kitchen. The rooms had baseboards and LP gas heat, too, of course. The whole house did. It was pretty new. I know now that a lot of people called our kind of house a meadow mansion or McMansion behind our backs, but we didn't build it. We just moved there from a suburb of New York City when I was a little kid.

There was a thermostat stuck through a pipe-cleaner-sized hole in the stovepipe about a foot and a half above the soapstone box. When we had a fire going, my dad wanted it to be around four hundred to six hundred degrees. When it got above six hundred, one of us would close up the flue and the temperature would go down. If it got above eight hundred, you were in danger of a chimney fire. The thermostat was kind of like a car's speedometer: the numbers went a lot higher than you were ever going to need. It went up to seven hundred, and you were totally fucked if it ever got that high. We're talking chimney fire for sure.

B.C.



It was the middle of June, and we only had two days of school left. We had one more day of exams and then one day when most of us would either not show up or, if we did, the teachers were pretty chill and didn't mind what we did so long as we didn't get stoned on their face or do something ridiculous that would make them look bad or get ourselves killed. I was in eleventh grade. It was midmorning, and I had just taken my physics final. I did okay, I think, but who knows? Doesn't matter now and, to be honest, I really didn't care that much even then. Besides, I was going to be a poet and a novelist, if only because I figured poet and novelist was a career choice that meant little or no human interaction. I kind of understood that at a young age that I didn't play well with most other kids in the sandbox. (Not all, of course. I mean, I had friends. Not many, but a few.) Anyway, I really believed I was going to write great books. I honestly thought like that. I was going to go to Amherst—the town, not the college, because there was no way I was getting into the college—and find out who Emily Dickinson actually was. You know, get the real dish. Discover things about her that no one else knew. Friends. Lovers. A secret society. Not kidding. I thought like that. We had the same first name, and her poems were as short as mine. Hers, of course, were better. But you see my point. There wasn't a lot of logic to the connection. Still, she wasn't hugely social, and we had that in common, too.

*Dare you see a soul at the white heat?
Then crouch within the door.
Red is the fire's common tint;
But when the vivid ore*

*Has sated flame's conditions,
Its quivering substance plays
Without a color but the light
Of unanointed blaze.*

Obviously this poem wasn't about a nuclear core. But it could be, right, if you didn't know it had been written in the 1860s? Also, Emily's pure hell on a computer's spell check—and this poem isn't anywhere near the grammatical nightmare that some of her other work is. I used to love that, too.

That day a bunch of kids in the tenth and eleventh grades were just hanging out on the side of the cafeteria with all the windows that looked out on the courtyard, watching it rain, when we heard the sirens from the fire station. The courtyard had a couple of concrete tables and benches where mostly seniors went, especially the smokers, but it had been raining for days—weeks, actually, since Memorial Day weekend—and so nobody was out there now. There were mushrooms growing up between the tiles outside, that's how wet it was. But the windows were open, and so even with the sound of the rain we could hear the sirens. Most of the seniors had peaced out by then because they were done with high school and knew what

they were doing in September. A lot of us usually got out, you know. People outside the Kingdom think we're all dumb shits up here, and a lot of us are; but a lot of us aren't. I went to Reddington Academy, which is named after the town, and was built and funded years and years ago by a guy named James Howard Haverford. He fought in the Civil War and then made a fortune making sewing machines. Every kid in Newport and Reddington and Bartonsville and Lowell goes to the Academy for free, like it's a public school, but it's also a pretty expensive boarding school and students from something like seventeen states and a couple of countries come here every year. There are about four hundred locals and about two hundred boarders. Or there were. The school is still closed and will be pretty much forever.

It was ten o'clock in the morning, so they weren't serving lunch yet. I was sitting on the table and kind of flirting with a boy named Ethan Gale, who was sitting on the bench. I was wearing pretty tight jeans and I had kicked off my sneakers, so I was barefoot. I don't know why, but being barefoot always made me feel very sexy. Think poet. We were talking about a couple of local girls who worked after school at this nearby fitness club and, looking back, being kind of snarky. But the two of them sort of didn't know what they were doing and just sat behind the front desk where gym members were supposed to sign in. If someone dropped a boatload of weights on his chest or something, he was completely screwed, because those girls sure as hell wouldn't have known what to do. I mean, they were perfectly nice, but what the hell they were doing working at a gym was completely beyond Ethan and me.

Ethan was a junior and, like me, he was a local. His dad was the Eye on the Sky—the meteorologist for Vermont Public Radio—which meant that Ethan was kind of a celebrity because his dad's voice was super well known. But it also meant that we gave Ethan cascades of shit because even a very good weatherman is wrong, like, half the time.

My dad sometimes joked about that. "What a great job," he would say. "Imagine if pilots only had to be right half the time. Or doctors. Or architects. But the guys who try and forecast the weather? We sure cut them a lot of slack. And no matter how many times they're wrong, we still tune in." See what I mean about my dad? We used to have some very impressive fights—not nearly the shouting matches I used to have with my mom, but still pretty gnarly—but he really was kind of funny.

And, of course, he was very smart. I agree with him about the weather. With all the satellites and stuff we have orbiting the earth, I have no idea how you could ever get the weather wrong. Really, I don't. And doesn't the weather usually just move from west to east? Frankly, I'd think you could just call some town a few hours away in New York or Ontario and ask what the hell was going on outside the window. But technology is what it is. It doesn't always work. Exhibit A? A nuclear reactor, apparently.

I always figured Ethan was going places. Maybe he still is. Maybe, like me, he kind of gave up. I should make a note to see if he's anywhere on Facebook. I should make a note to see how many lots of people are anywhere on Facebook. I haven't been super social the last year—even less than before the meltdown, if that's possible. I know Ethan's dad is no longer on the radio; they have a new Eye on the Sky. But that might only be because VPR doesn't broadcast from the Fairbanks Museum in St. Johnsbury anymore. St. J. isn't in the Exclusion Zone, but it's close. Lots of people left, most of the town, they tell me.

Anyway, I knew instantly what the sirens were, but I figured it was just a drill. We'd had one a couple of years earlier. A pretend evacuation. Still, even those "this was just a drill"

moments on the radio that the FCC requires could always make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I remember Ethan looked in the general direction of the firehouse and then in the direction of the plant.

“What do you think that’s about?” he asked.

The sirens were loud, but not so loud that we had to raise our voices or anything. We could still hear three serious overachievers from out of state freaking out about physics, and a couple of drama geeks making a very big deal about some summer musical in Stowe one of them was in. Everyone stopped talking for maybe a second or two when the sirens started and looked around, and then went right on with their conversations.

It was only when Mr. Pettitt, a history teacher, came into the cafeteria and clapped his hands to get our attention that we shut up. Most kids liked Mr. Pettitt, and a lot of them even called him Brandon—his first name. I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t call him anything. He kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I thought he was totally bogus. He was in his early thirties, and he had a cute wife and twin baby boys. He had curly blond hair, and I know there were girls who had a crush on him, but obviously I wasn’t one of them. Two things happened at almost the same time when he clapped. First, everyone looked at him, and then, once he said there might be a problem at the nuclear power plant, everyone looked at me. Second, Ethan handed me my sneakers.

“You better put them on,” he said.

“You think?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I think.”

By then, of course, the crisis at the plant had been going on for roughly two and a half hours. I’m sure someone caught some serious shit for waiting so long to sound the alarm.

.....

The Northeast Kingdom got its name a long time ago from a Vermont governor. It was, I think, a way to promote tourism. It’s the northeast corner of the state and, even by the standards of Vermont, crazy rural. But there are a couple of ski resorts and Lake Memphremagog, which is nowhere near as big as Lake Champlain. Not long after one Vermont governor nicknamed this part of the state the Northeast Kingdom, another one convinced the state legislature that Memphremagog was the perfect spot for a nuclear power plant, especially if it was built beside one of the rivers that fed the lake. Some people had been talking about constructing a plant on Lake Champlain, about ten miles south of Burlington. Can you imagine what kind of cluster-fuck disaster this would have been if the plant had been built there and had the same accident? God. People actually live in Burlington. Hundreds of thousands of people must live in Chittenden County and around Lake Champlain. Fortunately—there’s a weird word for me to use—they chose Memphremagog instead. It was just big enough, and the river current was just powerful enough for a nuclear power plant, especially after they built a special dam.

And you know what? None of us really cared that we had a nuclear power plant. I mean there were some folks who made a little noise after Fukushima. A few politicians and a few do-gooders with nothing better to do asked for a study of the evacuation plan and an investigation into the state of the reactors because they were pretty old. (How old? The plant

was designed in the 1960s with slide rules—yup, slide rules—and built in the early 1970s. But it was really no big deal. And it sure wasn't our *local* politicians or our *local* do-gooders. mean this: *None of us cared.*

The plant existed along a spit of land covered with pine trees called Cape Abenaki (that was, as a matter of fact, the official name of the plant), where the Coburn River met the lake. The plant was a quarter mile downstream from the dam. You couldn't even see it from Newport or Reddington, unless you were out in the middle of the lake or almost over on the Canadian side of the water. And then, when you did see it, it was just a part of the shoreline. People used to ice-fish within maybe three hundred yards of the two long lines of cooling towers. People used to kayak within a stone's throw of the two big rectangular blocks that housed the reactors themselves. I swear, no one thought about it until the meltdown. It was like the prison. We didn't think about that either. They both gave people jobs. So, we boated and swam and fished in the lake, sometimes noticing the plant and sometimes not. We figured it was perfectly safe.

Or, if it wasn't perfectly safe, it was safe enough.

.....

My mom, who had always been in public relations, thought the name of the plant was really pretty and really exploitive. "It speaks to the proud heritage of the Native Americans in the United States and Canada," she would say publicly, and then add (but only in private) "and the way we screwed them in every way possible." That's because nuclear power might be clean (except for when it's spewing radioactivity like a Roman candle), but uranium mining is seriously toxic. I don't know precisely how it poisons the water, but it does. One night I saw my mom looking at an article on the computer in the den about the way that uranium mines have fucked the Crow, the Odawa, the Algonquin, and the Sioux.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"Propaganda."

"Oh."

"But it's really not."

I waited.

"It's our bargain with Mephistopheles. Unfortunately, radioactivity lasts as long as the soul." I really didn't know what she was talking about until I shared this memory with one of the doctors here, and he told me the story of Faust.

.....

A couple of months after the meltdown, when I was living in Burlington, I almost told Poacher who I was. He just thought I was one of the walkers who had streamed into the city. I think I wanted to see what he'd do if I told him. Would he freak out the way I always suspected the girls in the shelter would have, or would he be chill? Instead, at the last second, I told him that my dad was Ethan's dad. You know, just lied. I said my dad had once been the Eye on the Sky.

"Abby," he murmured, flat on his back on the mattress on the floor, "you are a revelation

Poacher was long and lean with thick dark hair he combed straight back off his forehead. His eyes were a little narrow, but otherwise he could have been an over-the-hill movie star—one of those dudes who was a leading man once but had managed to drink and party himself into early retirement and now only got work on TV shows like *Celebrity Apprentice*. He had sideburns that somehow didn't look ridiculous and a goatee and mustache that were just the side of creepy. He had a tattoo on each biceps: barbed wire on his left arm and a marijuana leaf on his right. He had a leather vest that he was very—and I mean *very*—fond of.

He was staring up at the ceiling when he said I was a revelation, stoned off his ass, and he thought I was stoned, too. I wasn't. But he sure did use that word a lot. *Revelation*. It was one of about half a dozen words that peppered his vocabulary and seemed unexpected until you got to know him and realized what a total loser he was and why he used them. "Why are you not more fucked up?" he asked me. He meant generally—not why wasn't I as baked as he was right that moment.

"I think I am pretty fucked up," I said. *Really, if you only knew*, I thought.

He must have been forty-five, which meant he was about the age my parents had been. That also meant he was more than twice as old as the rest of us—three times as old as some of us—and some nights he had nine or ten of us crammed into his apartment. It was pretty squalid, because there was only one bathroom and one bedroom and no beds at all. There was hardly any furniture at all. He said he was a war veteran on disability, which was when he got the money for the apartment. He said he had liberated Kuwait and he said it like he had done it single-handedly. Yeah, right.

"No," he reassured me. "You are not fucked up at all. You have a future. I will see to that."

"You will, will you?" I was, as my mom would have said, dubious.

There were two other girls who were, more or less, passed out on another mattress in the Pink pajamas we'd lifted that afternoon from the Victoria's Secret in the mall. One was Andrea, and she'd been a cutter even before all hell broke loose in Vermont. Still was, of course. A nuclear meltdown changes people—and I don't mean radiation sickness or *Twilight Zone* kinds of mutations in babies—but it sure as hell doesn't make a cutter *stop* cutting. Especially a cutter who's now doing OxyContin and Percocet. God, the whole world becomes fucking anxious when there's a meltdown. Anyway, Andrea was eighteen, two years older than I was back then. One of her eyes was closed, and the other was open just a slit. She had just done a little of that hillbilly heroin and was really content.

"Do your dad again," Poacher said, his eyes closed. When I had told him my dad was the Eye on the Sky, I had mimicked the voice we all knew on the radio.

"It's not that good an imitation," I said.

"Oh, it is. It is. It is ... awesome." He put his hand on my knee and tried to run it up toward my thigh, but I put my fingers on his like I wanted to hold his hand and stopped him. Then I pretended to be the Eye on the Sky and made up a weather report. I made up one from the days before the accident, when it just rained and rained and eventually—and here some of the nuke-speak the plant experts and engineers like my dad just loved—there was a LOOP: a loss of off-site power. There was an SBO: a station blackout. In plain English, there was a flood. It was one of those once-every-five-hundred-years kinds of floods, someone said. Then lots of people said that. Then it was the once-in-a-millennium flood, because that sounded way more epic. It sounds downright biblical, doesn't it? But it's not subtle. It's not poetic.

But no man moved me till the tide

Went past my simple shoe,

And past my apron and my belt.

And past my bodice too.

See what I mean? That's what you do with high water.

On the day of the Memphremagog flood, the waters poured over the Coburn River Dam and climbed up and over the sides of the brooks and rose from the marshes. It wasn't a tsunami, but people who were there said it sure felt like one. Officially, the dam was breached at 7:31 in the morning. The lake and river water flooded the rooms where the diesel generators were kept and so the diesel generators failed. The water swamped and short-circuited the power lines that led to the plant, which cut the electricity to the pumps that must always—and I mean always—circulate coolant water through the reactors. That meant Cape Abenaki had maybe four hours of life left: the length of time the batteries would last. My father and the engineers who worked for him had that much time to restore power and get the pumps back online. They didn't make it. The reactors began to overheat.

By then it had been raining for two solid weeks, of course, but that dawn it was raining something like four inches an hour, especially between five and seven a.m. If my dad was concerned, he'd never said anything around me in the days before the disaster. I don't remember my mom saying anything either until that very morning. My dad had already left for the plant when I came down for breakfast that day. My mom said he had left sometime in the middle of the night. And I could see as I ate my Cheerios that she was worried. (Cheerios. What a weirdly happy memory Cheerios have become for me. Eating them once upon a time had just seemed so normal.)

The last time I ever saw my dad had been the night before. The last time I ever saw my mom? That morning. She actually went to work, though I'll never know if she went knowing the dam had been breached. But I think she did. I think she went knowing that she was doing something that was either very stupid or very brave. I opened the back door and let Maggie, a shelter dog that looked a lot like a black Lab but was really a mutt, run into the woods way behind our house to poop, and watched for a moment as she wrestled with a piece of birch bark that was at the edge of our lawn. She didn't play with it long because she never much liked the rain. She was nine and very, very sweet. In the winter she slept in a dog bed we kept near the woodstove, but in the summer she slept on the window seat in my bedroom.

After I let her back inside, I went to school, took my physics final, and went to the cafeteria. Then I watched the world—at least the corner where I had lived since I was a little girl—go completely to shit.

It would be months before I would meet Cameron. Or, I guess, before I would find Cameron.

Here's the weirdest part: I had always completely sucked as a babysitter. I just wasn't into it. I really wasn't into kids. When I was in sixth grade, I took a babysitter's course at the library in Reddington. It was my mom's idea, not mine. (Yeah, we fought about that, too. But I went.) It met once a week after school for six weeks, and it taught us things like what to put in a babysitter's bag. The woman teaching it, who was kind of like the social workers I meet when I was older but was also seriously New Age, said we should put a flashlight and first-aid stuff in a special bag we would always bring with us when we had a job. (And by "first-aid stuff," she meant Bactine and Band-Aids, not iodide pills.) She also said we should include things to entertain little kids. So, while mine did have a couple of Band-Aids, mostly wedged picture books and little paperbacks like *Junie B. Jones* and *Bunnicula* into it. I stuffed paper dolls and Barbie dolls (lots of Barbie dolls) and Magic Markers into it. It was kind of retro. I also put in a lot of my dress-up feather boas. I don't know why. My dad said it was so I could tie the kids up when they misbehaved. Nope. As you can see, I was a lot more comfortable babysitting little girls than little boys. As I recall, I didn't have the slightest idea how to entertain little boys. The few times I babysat a boy it was always Michael Dinnar and I just plopped him in front of his Xbox and let him go to town killing things and blowing shit up.

My favorite moment from that babysitting class was when one of the other girls taking the course with me asked the teacher, "What happens if you die?" My second favorite was when another sixth grader told us, "My mom says to stay out of the high school band closet. You can get pregnant in there." When I told my mom and dad that at dinner that night, my dad nodded and said, "Well, then: under no circumstances will you ever be babysitting in the high school band closet." It gave us all a pretty big laugh. (I guess I could tell you the names of those two girls, but they're probably both still alive, even though one lived in a house that was pretty close to the plant. So I won't.)

Looking back, it seems totally crazy that it wound up Cameron and me against the world. I mean, it's not like I had an Xbox to sit him in front of while I figured out what the hell we were going to eat or how we were going to stay warm.

.....

So, the sirens. I put on my sneakers, and Ethan and I were herded with everyone else from the cafeteria. We started toward the lockers to get our backpacks, but we weren't allowed. They said there wasn't time. Mr. Pettitt and Ms. Francis, who was one of the guidance counselors—she was always talking to me about my "potential" and how I wasn't living up to it—instead ordered all of us outside into the parking lot in the front of the school. Other kids were already there, and I could see a long line was climbing onto the first of seven scho

buses. I remember I was kind of pissed because I had my period, and of course my tampons were in my backpack. I asked Ms. Francis if there was any chance I could run back inside to get it, but she was pretty freaking tense and ignored me. She shoved me ahead into the line with the other kids, and even though it was pouring, most of us didn't have our raincoats or hoodies or anything. We were all soaked and—for reasons I didn't understand at the time—that was causing a few of the teachers outside with us to seriously wig out. And whenever any of us would try to find our own school bus, one of the adults would just scream at us, telling us we were wasting time, it didn't matter, we were just to get on the next bus in line.

It was right about then I noticed that it wasn't even our regular drivers behind the wheel of the buses. The bus in front of Ethan and me, which we just missed getting on, had some young guy driving who Ethan said was a volunteer firefighter from Newport a few years older than us. The volunteer looked pretty stoked, like driving this school bus was the most important thing he had ever done with his life. And the bus we got on had a middle-aged guy in a National Guard uniform behind the wheel.

Meanwhile, the sirens just kept screeching. And, of course, it wasn't just the one at the Reddington firehouse. It was every firehouse in the county. It was the sirens at the plant.

Even before we got on the buses and saw it wasn't our regular drivers, the rumors were insane. Some people were saying there had been terrorist attacks in Boston and Montreal, and one boy was telling everyone that a plane had crashed into Cape Abenaki, just like the plane that had crashed into the World Trade Center years ago. And some kids were still saying—hoping, really, you know, whistling past the graveyard in the dark—that it was just a practice evacuation. Especially the other kids whose moms or dads worked at the plant. (Looking back, I find it interesting that my parents weren't friends with most of the families who worked at the plant—and so neither was I. Obviously they hung around with a few of the other employees, but the only close pal my dad had among the other engineers and managers was a guy named Eric Cunningham. Hours after the meltdown, late that afternoon, Mr. Cunningham would kill himself.)

But we had our phones so we were all checking the news, and pretty soon it was the news itself that was firing the rumors. By the time Ethan and I found seats in the middle of one of the buses, we knew that something seriously awful was happening at the plant. Some girls started crying and asking me what was going on, like I'd actually have a clue, and whether the worst reports we were reading or watching on our phones were the accurate ones. But how could I know? I called my mom to see what was going on, but she never picked up. I sent her a text and never heard back. Same with my dad, but I never really expected to hear from him. I figured he was up to his ass in whatever nightmare was going on.

Still, not hearing from my mom was what started to freak me out inside. I tried to keep myself together, because I didn't want to get as dramatic as those other girls, but it was hard. Supposedly, there was a flood at the plant and the power was off. Some people thought that meant there was nothing at all to worry about, while others were already talking meltdown. One boy whose dad worked at the plant was debating with one of our science teachers the difference between a meltdown and a melt-through, like this was just a regular, everyday physics class.

But, in fact, none of us really knew anything. And us kids? We didn't even know where we were going.

I'm an only child of only children. It's not as weird or as rare as you might think. My parents always said that they had loved being only children and, until Cape Abenaki, I don't think it had any effect on me one way or another. (I mean, yes, I had what one therapist called "behavioral issues," but they had nothing to do with being an only child. If they had to do with anything, they had to do with the hardwiring inside my head and the fact my parents hated Vermont, drank too much, and sometimes fought like fisher cats.) As a matter of fact, being an only child might have worked for me even after the reactor blew up. Who knows? Yeah, I was seriously alone afterward. But those first months when all hell was breaking loose? I was in no condition to take care of a younger sister or brother. If I'd found Cameron back then, in the early days? It wouldn't have been pretty. I don't know, maybe it would have been nice to have had an older brother or an older sister at the time. Or a twin. Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to have a twin. But aunts or uncles or cousins were what I needed, I guess. I had two grandparents still alive. My mom's mom and my dad's dad. But my grandma was deep into the shadows of Alzheimer's by then. The last time I had seen her had been about three months before the explosion. She lived in a place for people with Alzheimer's in Hanover, New Hampshire, and she couldn't even find her way out of the bathroom by the time I was in eleventh grade. And my grandpa lived in Phoenix, Arizona. That's where my dad grew up. My grandpa had had a colostomy the year before and wasn't coping real well with it. He was also in an assisted living place.

Still, on some level I was also really angry in those months after the meltdown. Really pissed. Way more pissed than usual. That's pretty clear. The truth was, I felt deserted. I felt unbelievably alone, but not in a playful "I'm nobody! Who are you?" sort of way. I just knew I had no one. Not a soul. Even my Maggie was gone. It didn't matter that my parents hadn't made a conscious decision to peace out on me. It's not like they were at some spa in Montreux or Venice or someplace.

And, of course, I was terrified. It was like the end of the world.

About a month after the explosion, when things were starting to settle down for most of New England, I was watching TV at this bar on Main Street in Burlington. I wasn't actually inside the bar because I knew I smelled awful and I looked pretty sketchy. I was outside on the curb. But this was July, remember, and so this big awning was open and I could stand there on the sidewalk and look in at the TV behind the bartender—a pretty handsome dude in his mid-twenties. He had red hair, and it was pulled back in a ponytail with a blue rubber band. A lot of guys can't make that look work, but he sure could.

On the TV screen was a map of something the newswoman was calling the "Exclusion Zone." She was explaining that nothing had been decided yet, but it looked like there was going to be an exclusion area around Cape Abenaki. It was more of an oval than a circle because the wind had been blowing northeast, and the anchor said it might be as large as thirty square miles. There had been some sort of presidential decree, and the whole area was going to be under military control for a while. (Translation? Forever.) They said there were people's pets—dogs and cats—left behind and running wild inside the zone, and of course I thought of Maggie. The truth is, I thought about Maggie a lot. Maybe I thought of her as often as I thought of my mom and dad. Sometimes, when I'd imagine her trapped inside our house slowly starving to death, I'd get a little sick and hope for a miracle: Maybe my mom had

her out before she left for the plant. Maybe my friend Lisa's mom had rescued her. Of course even if Maggie was outside, that didn't mean she was going to be okay. She still might starve to death. She still might die of radiation. She still might get eaten herself by a coyote or wolf. A couple of times I considered texting Lisa to see if she knew if Maggie was okay, but what if she wasn't? What, at that point, could anyone have done? Besides, I didn't want anyone to know where I was. I wanted to remain anonymous.

Anyway, as big as thirty square miles sounded, it really didn't look that huge on the map—and a part of it was Lake Memphremagog. Of course, it did include most of my world when I was a kid. All of Newport and Reddington were in the middle. The woman on TV said the towns were in the "black" zone. And Barton and Lowell were in something she was calling the red zone. But then there was the issue of the rivers. There were three of them, the Clyde, the Coburn, and the Black. In theory, they all flowed north into Lake Memphremagog. But it was impossible for people outside of the Kingdom to look at a map of Memphremagog and not assume that all that water is flowing south. And so when people were talking about the Exclusion Zone in the beginning, they often talked about the plume and the rivers. In the end, it was mostly the plume that mattered. Besides, no one was going to fish in those rivers again: everyone figured the trout would all have three and four eyes and glow in the dark.

As far as I know, the fish never did glow. But by the next spring there would be some super-scary, super-gross mutations. There were frogs with three legs. There were turtles with shells as soft as damp pastry dough. There were fish with strange, funky lumps. I saw the photos on the web and one day in a newspaper—which, you can bet your ass, I hid from Cameron.

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The word for the kind of window on my family's woodstove was "Palladian." I told you I'd look it up.

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One night Andrea showed me her kit, and the first thing I thought was this was a real twisted version of my old babysitter's bag. I didn't watch her slice herself, at least not that night, but she showed me the cuts. I think she thought it would turn me on and then, maybe I would cut myself, too. You know, join her or something. Which, I guess, I did.

We were sitting on the mattress we shared on the floor at Poacher's, and she was wearing nothing but her underwear and a T-shirt that said "War Is Over" and had one of the Beatles and his wife on it. She'd lifted it from the Urban Outfitters on Church Street the day before.

"This is what you do," she said, and she sounded like a very confident kindergarten teacher. *Children, this is the way you clean up your blocks. This is how you do it.* You know the tone of voice. She was sitting cross-legged, and she pointed to the insides of her thighs. It was like a cat had scratched her over and over, or maybe a much bigger animal with much bigger claws. Long, swollen red marks, some pretty new and some pretty well healed. There were some scars, too. Most were on her left leg because she was right-handed. One of the cuts was infected: it was straight like the others, but bloated and raw and there was a pretty gross

discharge. Her kit had old-fashioned razor blades and an X-Acto knife and Band-Aids and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. There was a roll of gauze. There was a tube of Bacitracin. There was a pair of scissors. She kept her tools in a very elegant Estée Lauder cosmetics bag she stole from Macy's. That was her kit.

I make it sound like we were always stealing stuff. I guess we were. Sometimes we stole things just because we wanted them, like that T-shirt with the Beatles guy on it, and sometimes we stole stuff because we had to. Either we hocked it for money for food or drugs, or we hocked it for money for Poacher. Sometimes if we didn't feel up to fucking the guys he brought over, he wouldn't make us if we gave him roughly the same amount of cash. The way he'd have another girl do the john—you wouldn't think Vermont guys are gross because the state is so "peace, love, and tie-dye," but I'm telling you, they can be as gross here as anywhere else—and he'd have twice the money to feed us and get us whatever drugs we wanted.

Andrea's mother and father used to deal out of their apartment in the North End until they were both arrested and sent to jail. She told me that when her mother was badly strung out, her dad would make her do seriously creepy stuff before he would give her a fix. Once he made her do another drug mom while he watched—just for kicks, he did that. Another time he brought her out to some physical therapy place and had her fuck his cousin. (At least that was for money.) Andrea had left home by the time the two of them were busted. Like everyone else, she had no idea that my dad was one of the engineers at Cape Abenaki who the NRC blamed for fucking up and helping to cause the meltdown.

That night when she showed me her kit, I said to her something kind of ridiculous like, "Do you know how bad for you that is?" Obviously, she knew how bad for her it was. That's one of the main reasons why she did it. "Do you really want to go through life with all those scars?" I asked.

She tried to hand me a razor blade in its little cardboard folder, but I wouldn't take it. "Let me show you how," she said.

"No."

"Why? Because it will hurt?"

"Yeah, for starters," I told her. But she pulled the blade from its packet and dropped it into my hand. I thought the metal was very pretty in an engineered sort of way. I'd never held one like it before. All my razors were plastic and pink. They all sounded like sex toys. Venus Vibrance. Close Curves. Bikini Trimmer.

"It will only hurt for a second. And then you'll feel great. Besides ..."

"Besides what?"

"Even the pain is, I don't know, cool. It's out-of-body. You'll get a rush, I promise."

"Not interested."

"Try it!"

The fact was, I had already tried a lot of shit and nothing really worked. So why not try this, too?

"Where?" I asked.

"Take off your pajamas."

"No, I'm not wearing underwear."

"Since when did you get all modest on me?"

I shrugged and pulled off my pajama pants. Maybe I was scuba diving for the bottom of the sea. Still, I scooted an extra foot away from her so I'd have a little privacy. I pressed the razor blade on the inside of my thigh, pretty high up—close to where my underpants would have been. I'd figured out that the point was to cut yourself where no one would see. But I only pushed it against my flesh, and I didn't quite break the skin. I couldn't bring myself to do it. So, Andrea did it for me. Before I could stop her, she took my wrist and the back of my hand and in one almost instantaneous motion yanked my fingers down toward the mattress. She moved so fast, I couldn't stop her. It stung—not a huge surprise, I know—and I yelped. I pushed her away, and then together we peered down at the pencil-thin line about two inches long. For a second I didn't understand why it had hurt so much because I didn't seem to be bleeding. Then, like a creek bed filling with water after a summer storm, the narrow little gash started to swell. As if we had never before seen a cut bleed, which of course we both had (though she a lot more often than me), we stared at it. We watched some blood trickle down my thigh onto the mattress. I wondered how long it would bleed if I did nothing. I wondered how big the stain would be on the mattress.

Andrea spoke first. "You won't need any hydrogen peroxide," she said. "That was a brand new blade."

"Just a Band-Aid?"

"Yup." Before she gave me a Band-Aid, however, she took the scissors and cut off a square of gauze. She pressed it very tenderly against the cut, and I was so stunned that I had let her do this whole thing in the first place that I didn't stop her, despite how close she was to the edge of my pubic hair. After a minute she took her fingers away and handed me a Band-Aid. The pad wasn't as long as my cut, but it would do.

"Feel any better?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered, which was the truth. I mean, I knew I felt ashamed. But that would pass. By then I did all kinds of crap that left me feeling ashamed. I just didn't know if I felt—to use her word—better. Maybe I did. Maybe I hated myself a little bit less.

When I was a little girl and we still lived just outside of New York City, my parents said I would punish myself. When I misbehaved as a toddler, they had a "time-out" chair for me. It was a little wooden ladder-back chair, meant for a two- or three-year-old. I guess it had once belonged to my grandfather—my mom's dad, not my dad's. We kept it in a corner of the dining room. But my parents said they almost never had to put me there. I would put myself there. Most of the time, they had no idea what I worried I had done wrong. I was a very well-behaved tyke. At least they thought I was. Apparently, I thought differently.

So who knows? Maybe all along I was ripe for cutting. Anyway, that was the first time.

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Did you know that the little kids in Syria who have been fucked by the civil war only want to color with red crayons? They almost always draw people with some kind of bullet wound or stab wound or injury from a grenade or a mortar. I can't remember where I read that, but I'm pretty sure it's true.

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