



Love, Loss,  
and What We  
Ate

Padma Lakshmi

A MEMOIR

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and  
what we ate

Padma Lakshmi



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# ***dedication***

*For TJF*

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The heart knows no pain sharper than love's arrow.

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## chapter 1

*It was the end of summer* and the end of a life as I had lived it. The year was 2007. Inside the Surrey Hotel, which I would come to call the “Sorry Hotel,” then a musty residential place (much like the Chelsea Hotel, but without the artists), I sat on the floor with cardboard boxes towering all around me. These walls and floors cloaked in dusty beige and brown, with a linoleum- and Formica-laden kitchenette, would be my refuge—a place where the displaced, like me, put themselves.

One month earlier, I had finished moving out of my beautiful home: taking the last pictures off the walls, wrapping the last trinkets in tissue, and finally, nauseatingly, separating the wedding photos into two neat piles. Everything I had been carting from one stage of my life to another, to remind me of me, was in the boxes that surrounded me. And there were so many of them now, just days before my thirty-seventh birthday. But so little left of me. At the end of a marriage, no one wins. There is only anger, sorrow, guilt, emptiness, and defeat. Outside, it rained. There had been many rainy nights that summer.

I had been sitting, staring at nothing, for so long that my tailbone had started to throb. Far off, the muffled sound of a phone ringing and ringing finally penetrated my daze. As I rose to silence the phone, shifting my weight, I felt the sharp, sudden pull of surgical stitches on my abdomen. I reached out to steady myself against a box. As I did, it shifted. I heard the silky, scratchy rustle of cellophane against cardboard. Down tumbled dozens of dusty kumquats, from a bag that had been perched precariously on top of the stack. They were a gift from my worried mother, shipped from her garden in Los Angeles. When the avalanche stopped, my gaze focused on the bright, beautiful fruit, the original glowing orange against the dull backdrop of everything else. The man I had left was like that: he could illuminate any room, no matter how dim.

My future husband and I had met eight years earlier, in 1999, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. After my European modeling career had more or less come to a close in the late nineties, I embarked on a professional acting career in Italy. Starting in 1997, I also began to cohost an Italian television show called *Domenica In*. I was surprisingly busy with work, and after acting in two period miniseries in 1998, decided to build on what I hoped was a burgeoning career by moving back to L.A., where I had lived as a teenager. I came to New York frequently, too, as most of my friends and extended family lived there. I was finding my way again in the U.S. after spending most of my twenties in Europe. For the first time since college I was single. I dated some, but not seriously. Instead, I focused on auditions and on writing and then on promoting my first cookbook, *Easy Exotic: A Model's Love and Fat Recipes from Around the World*.

For my first role, I had to gain twenty pounds, which was a cinch and a pleasure. Best three months of my life. Losing the weight after filming ended, not so much. I wanted to do it in a healthy way. The regimen I came up with was not quite a diet. There was no deprivation involved, mainly because deprivation is miserable: the more brutal or austere the diet, the harder it is to keep. Instead, I tweaked

recipes for my favorite foods from around the world in an attempt to excise calories but not flavor. And those recipes became *Easy Exotic*. I landed a publishing contract for the book largely because, well, everyone wants to know what a model eats.

Tina Brown, ex-*Vanity Fair* and *New Yorker* editor, had recently founded a new magazine, *Talk*, as well as a publishing imprint, Talk Books, in conjunction with Miramax Books. My book, left over from the previous Miramax list, was one of her first books. I doubt my silly little cookbook, closer to pamphlet than proper volume, was her first choice. But somehow, I was invited to the new magazine and book imprint's launch party, a Great Gatsbian affair on Liberty Island. It is still the best party I have ever been to, except of course for my own wedding, five years later.

On a balmy, beautiful August night, I came with a few friends, including my book editor (who would eventually become one of my bridesmaids). We all boarded the ferry and arrived at a fete lit by candles. Tina had invited such a strange and wonderful mix of people, a combination of the high-minded and the pop—a particularly glamorous herd of heads of state, cultural taste makers, movie stars, artists, models, writers, and other starstruck dilettantes like myself. After all, this was the woman who as editor in chief of *The New Yorker* had devoted (to jeers as well as to applause) an entire issue to fashion, starring writers like John Updike. She employed similar juxtapositions on the pages of *Vanity Fair*, too, and it had served both the magazine and her reputation well. It was what Tina was very good at. She brought really interesting people from the far ends of the cultural spectrum together. She enjoyed it. And she had the power to do it. It is a very important lesson in good hosting and curating that I still use today. This time, that room just happened to be all of Liberty Island. I found myself in an electric-turquoise Calypso slip dress (*so nineties*), laughing and dancing with the likes of Henry Kissinger, Todd Solondz, and Madonna, excited about my first book and my new life back in America. Colorful fireworks lit the sky.

There was certainly magic at work that night. Typically, parties are the perfect setting for the spectator sport that is people-watching. But, whether intentionally or not, this party was so dimly lit that you couldn't quite see who the other guests were. There were low-wattage fairy lights strung about, powered by generators, but that was it. If you wanted to really experience the party and its luminaries, you had to dive in and walk around, get up close and personal. I found myself passing a very fair-skinned Indian man who looked familiar. We both turned somehow just in time as our eyes met. As we talked, I developed a hunch that this twinkly-eyed man with his arched eyebrows, salt-and-pepper beard, bald pate, and sharp nose might be Salman Rushdie. I was a teenager when the trouble had started, but even then I'd seen the images—I imagine most Indians had—of the man, our own Hemingway, whose life was under threat for his book *The Satanic Verses* and its supposed affront to Islam. His eminence was compounded by the controversy. But *this* man couldn't be him. He seemed to know all about me. He asked me about my life in Italy, my childhood in Madras. I decided he was probably some distant uncle.

At some point, he gave me what even a naïf like me recognized as a pickup line. "I've always been interested in Indian diaspora stories," he said, or something like that. "Perhaps we could talk about yours." I was game, I told him. We exchanged numbers. "Can you write your full name?" I asked, which must have seemed odd, but he said nothing and did. *Aha!* I thought, as I read the scrawl. It was him. I wasn't thinking very clearly but at least I'd have his autograph. This is how removed from my life this man was.

The next morning, I was in NoLIta, contemplating a Tracy Feith mustard-yellow scarf dress, when I got a call from a man with an Anglo-Indian accent. "Sorry, wrong number," the man said, and hung up. How strange, I thought as I bent over with the dress still half over my head in the tiny fitting room.

I called back the number that now appeared on my nifty new cellular telephone. “Salman, is that you? Are you *crank calling* me?”

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“Um, well yes, I think I just dialed the wrong number. But it didn’t sound like you. Uh, what are you doing?” he asked, uncharacteristically fumbling for words.

“Trying on a dress. I think I like it.”

“You should buy it,” he said.

And I did.

So our telephonic relationship began. At first, I thought it strange that someone as important and assumed, busy as he must be had time to talk as often as we did. Little did I know that writers are incredibly gifted at finding ways *not* to write. I soon solved the mystery of how he’d known about my life. Several months prior, in the course of promoting his latest novel, he had been featured in the Italian magazine *Panorama*. Inside, there was a small profile of me—he’d read it and saved it.

I had just gotten my first American cell phone a month before we met and the novelty of being able to take him with me anywhere—the Santa Monica Pier or the farmers’ market in West Hollywood—brought an intimacy to our calls. And a thrill, too. I described the world to him as he experienced it. I felt like a Bond girl with that phone pressed to my ear and that charming Anglo accent on the line. Years later I would see the film *Her*, by Spike Jonze, and identify with the main character’s mounting feelings about a computer OS that he becomes emotionally attached to. What would my friends think of me, having this telephonic relationship with a married author almost a quarter of a century older than me and living in England with Special Branch security protection? The whole thing seemed surreal.

It’s hard to explain now, but I fell in love with Salman over the phone. I was still in my twenties and no one of his artistic or intellectual caliber had ever so much as crossed my path. He had such a mellifluous voice. Calm and mysterious, it gained an impish lilt just when he was telling you some juicy punch line. He had a wicked sense of humor and he seduced with his greatest weapon, his words. He knew how to construct the perfect compliments, too, layered with acute observations about me that seemed unimaginable coming from someone who’d been in my actual presence for mere minutes. He told me stories of his own childhood in Bombay, his early years in London. He confided in me and seemed interested in the most mundane and microscopic details of my new, lonely life in Los Angeles. He listened to stories of my childhood. He understood what it was like to be Indian in the West. He understood the awkwardness and melancholy of going back home, too. For the next three weeks we spoke two to three times daily.

In the soul-sucking intellectual desert that L.A. was for me at the time, I was starving for that kind of connection, and my future husband’s phone calls were a nine-course meal airlifted in with ice champagne to boot. His attention, almost more than his charm, seduced me. Despite my small potatoes cookbook deal and the occasional invite to a glitzy party, I was not exactly flying high in L.A. I had left a life of glamour and a dram of success as a model and, more recently, as an actress in Italy to return to the city of my adolescence. As a foreigner, I felt there was an implied limit to my career in Italy, where I would always be a curiosity. I wanted to try my hand in America before it was too late. I wanted to make the transition to more stimulating work before modeling decided it had had enough of me. Worse still, I was turning thirty in a little over a year, a milestone that in the business of appearance might as well be a gravestone.

That was the backdrop when he started calling. During a time when no one seemed interested in me in Los Angeles, a man came along who was, and not just any man. Once, he called as I stood at the sink eating a peach, the juice streaking down my arm. I picked up.



“Hi, Salman,” I said. “Hold on for a second, I’m eating a peach.”

“What color is it?” he asked.

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Could I really be so inconsequential if Salman Rushdie wanted to know the color of my peach? sounds silly in retrospect, but at the time, in the midst of a crisis of self-worth, I eagerly took up the fantastical notion that I had begun to inspire this great man.

Salman lived in London at the time, but he rented a place on Long Island every summer. He liked being in New York, where even during the fatwa he felt safe enough to enjoy the city without his typical security detail. After a few weeks, I was set to come to New York to make my first appearance on the Food Network to promote *Easy Exotic*. He told me he was soon returning to the city for work and asked if I’d like to have lunch. He said he was married sometime in the first week by saying he was here in the States with his “family.” Nothing more. I knew damn well what he meant even though he had said it in the blandest way possible, but I didn’t stop speaking to him, because I was incapable of giving up this new exhilarating presence in my life. Up to that point our connection had been only verbal, only telephonic. So it was easy to justify how I could keep speaking to him. Nonetheless, I didn’t want to be that woman. I convinced myself that ours was a platonic relationship. Since no hanky-panky had gone on, I could continue my friendship with this man. I was powerless to refuse any contact from him whatsoever.

“I can’t go with you to lunch,” I said.

“It’s just lunch.”

Touché.

I proposed a stroll instead. It seemed simpler, more innocent, less fraught with potential for misunderstanding, less like a date. A walk, a stroll, could end at any time for any reason I could conjure up if needed. We were to meet at four o’clock in the afternoon on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum. He sat there waiting as I got out of the yellow cab, in my mustard-yellow dress. He wore his slightly rumpled look: a faded black T-shirt, baggy slacks, and a loose blue cotton jacket. We walked in Central Park, around and around the lake. The weather was perfectly sunny and pleasant. It was one of those rare late-summer afternoons when it’s warm but not too hot. Sunlight streamed through swaying maple leaves. Families were trying to squeeze out the last drop of summer picnicking on the grass. Teenagers were playing Frisbee. We heard snatches of music from street performers as we circled the lake, smelled the occasional whiff of pot smoke. We enjoyed Mister Softee cones and lingered until the lake glowed, until the sun sank behind the trees. I cannot remember what we talked about except that we never stopped talking. I suppose we spoke of everything and nothing, just happy to be speaking now while standing, finally, on the same ground together. I lost track of time but knew some hours had passed.

He was staying nearby at the Mark Hotel. I said I’d walk him there. Because neither of us wanted the day to end, we had a drink at the hotel bar. In an attempt to be cool, I ordered a single-malt Scotch on the rocks. I was so nervous that I drained my glass. I had dinner plans with friends nearby, so he walked me to the restaurant. Not thinking what it might imply, I invited him to come along and sit down with us. I just couldn’t bear to say good-bye to him.

We fell into bed that night. At 3:00 a.m., I woke with a start. *I’m naked in a married man’s bed.* I got dressed and skulked out of the Mark, feeling like a hussy. Once home, I showered, attempting to scrub away my shame. There were so many reasons we shouldn’t be together. He was married, for one, with a young son. He lived in London. The ominous cloud of the fatwa hung over his head. He was twenty-three years my senior, old enough to be my father. I consoled myself by resolving that there was only one decision to make; the next step was too obvious to doubt. We would stop speaking.

would go back to my life and he to his. But he kept calling. And I kept answering. I could not resist him.

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Speaking to his disembodied voice allowed me to convince myself that we were still two innocents. Our courtship already felt like a dream. His face had lit up television screens in India and around the world. Even before the trouble with Iran, he was considered a formidable writer and a great intellectual mind. Up close I had known only the weighty world of lingerie modeling. His gravitas was the spark that lit my attraction. He was everything I wasn't. He was a lot of what I wanted to be. I did not try to fit in. I had spent my career trying to be what other people wanted me to be, to embody whatever quality they felt was needed to sell jeans or bras or perfume. He had made a life of being different. I was totally taken by this man, and my admiration for him propelled me ever toward him. The fire burned because of his wit and charm and the connection between us. I had to admit, if only to myself, that this was not innocent, that now I had no platonic alibi to hide behind.

In him I had found a fellow wanderer, someone who knew what it was to always feel slightly displaced. In my case, I had spent years shuttling between India and the U.S., then later throughout Europe. He, too, was an Indian raised in the West. He understood my experience firsthand.

In L.A., I spent much of my time milling around commercial sets with teenagers. Many models don't finish high school. The girls were sweet, the conversation less than stimulating. I was intellectually curious and I wanted to be stimulated and challenged. I loved books. The important mentors in my life had valued learning. There was Mr. Henniger, my high school English teacher and Academic Olympiad coach, who threw end-of-the-year parties where you had to come dressed as a literary character. He came as Godot, a sign on his chest reading, "I'm here!" There was Michael Spingler, a French professor from my college and later, when I was a starving model in Paris, a savior who invited me into his home to share pots of beans and lardons with his friends—bookstore owner, poets, and authors. There was my grandfather, a hydro-engineer who retired only to get a law degree and become a practicing attorney, only to retire once more to become a tutor to college students studying math and science as well as the humanities. I was primed to value what Salman had to offer of himself, and it fed me so completely that I was blinded to everything else.

Salman wanted to see me once more that week before I went back to L.A. Again, he asked me for lunch, and again, I should have said no. This time, however, lunch seemed like the best option. Meeting in a public place meant we couldn't even hold hands. We met at Balthazar, the old-world SoHo brasserie, which in the late nineties was all the rage. Propriety be damned. My twenty-ninth birthday was approaching, and he handed me a copy of his latest book, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. On the title page, he had crossed out "her" and written "your," and signed it, "Love, Salman." As if this were not enough, he asked me what I would like as a present. As long as it wasn't a Maserati, he would be happy to oblige. I'd known him then for less than thirty days. I searched my mind for something appropriate—it couldn't scream "mistress," and I couldn't exactly ask *Salman Rushdie* for a CD player. So I asked for a story. Sure, he said, he could easily dig up an unpublished piece in a drawer somewhere. No, I said, an original story. Something you write for me. The story synopsis that I had written for Random House, and faxed to me, would eventually become *The Enchantress of Florence*, his ninth novel, finally published a year after our divorce.

Just three weeks had gone by since I'd first met him fleetingly on Liberty Island. We had indeed only been in each other's actual presence thrice. Yet I could no longer imagine a life without this man in it. I didn't know what had hit me. It was like living in a landlocked place all your life, and then one day seeing the ocean. And swimming in it. I had opened a door I didn't know existed. My heart leapt every time the phone rang. My heart began to sink every time a few hours went by and it didn't ring.

Salman was a great talker. He could speak knowledgeably about anything, one minute enlightening you on an obscure eastern European author, then in the next moment speaking with fluency of Mexican music. He could use baseball stats to drive home a point about history. Even when I went out with friends in Los Angeles, or feigned interest in the dates I was still going on (what elaborate lengths we go to fool ourselves), the best part of the evening would be coming home and telling him all about it just as he woke in London. He could be erudite and serious. But he could also be sardonic. He was an equal-opportunity derider, poking fun at everything from poetry to pop culture. He often joked about poets, "Their words don't even go to the end of the page." I felt lofty by association, which buoyed my shaky confidence. I had achieved some measure of success in my industry in Europe, yes, but I was one of the only people in my family without a graduate degree. I had always felt conflicted about my work, at once proud of how far I had come and eager to prove that I had more to offer than a nice silhouette. I saw in him, even if I didn't admit it to myself at the time, the pathway to a life full of learning and growing.

Our relationship continued over the phone for several more weeks and I continued my life in L.A. as if nothing had changed. Only a year had passed since I'd moved back to the States after spending most of my twenties in Europe. My theater degree and lack of real job experience hung around my neck like a yoke. I had done two films in Italy, but I was hustling even to find an agent willing to take me on in Los Angeles. The book had done modestly well, and I soon got word it had won the 1999 Versailles World Cookbook Fair Award for Best First Book. They sent me a scrolled-up certificate with a very official gold seal on it. But no one knew or cared except my mother and my editor. My advance had long since been spent and it would be ages before I earned it out and saw any checks from book sales. It had been a few months since I'd published the book, and after the promotional tour, I returned to the slog of commercial castings and the loneliness of California, the isolation chamber of my mom's '86 Nissan Stanza. This was the same car I had learned to drive in at sixteen. Regardless of all I had seen and done, in college and abroad in Milan and Paris as a model, as an actress and TV host, I suddenly didn't feel like I had come very far from those high school days. Los Angeles would have this effect on me until years and years later.

That November Salman's latest novel was to be published in French and he would be going to Paris to celebrate. "Come with me," he said. "I'll send you a ticket." I had to say yes, yes to Paris, an escape from L.A. And yes to him. I couldn't refuse the adventure.

I'll admit I applied very little rational thought to the decision to go. I didn't think of what accepting the invitation might mean. People are so strange, aren't we? This man invited me to Paris. We'd spent so many nights baring our souls on the phone. We'd slept together once—months ago, but still. And yet I insisted that we stay in separate hotel rooms. God forbid a rendezvous in the City of Love with a married man have a whiff of impropriety.

The trip lasted about four days and immediately introduced me to the realities of the fatwa. When I arrived at the hotel, Salman and I managed a brief hello before I was introduced to the office assigned by the French government to his protection. The head of security in Paris was a stocky black man with a shaved head, who looked stern and terrifying until he smiled. He was a teddy bear and comforted me with his warm presence. "*Je suis le Kojak negre,*" he told me when I asked his name, flashing that disarming grin, and a lollipop! *Just call me the black Kojak.*

There was an official dinner hosted by the English ambassador and a reading of Salman's work by the French actress Marie-France Pisier. I met Salman's publisher, Ivan Nabokov, Vladimir's grandson. We even went to visit my old professor and mentor, Michael Spingler, who still lived in the same apartment on Rue d'Alésia where I had spent so many happy evenings with his family.

Throughout the trip, my separate hotel room stayed empty except for my bags, my bedsheets unrumpled. But I suppose it was good to have it there in case the spell was broken somehow, now that we were actually in each other's physical presence for more than a few hours at a time. Or, perhaps what if his wife suddenly showed up? I was aware that I was involved in something indecent otherwise why would I have asked for the room in the first place? I had become one of those women you read about and cannot imagine being. My morality and sense of right were eroded by the allure of this man's ardor and attention. That I could burn one day for the sin of choosing adventure over decency did not deter me from running toward that adventure. I cannot remember a distinct moment when I made the decision to offer myself to this married man, a thing that until it happened would have been unthinkable to me. I suppose drowning my inhibitions in Scotch at the Mark Hotel in August had allowed me to break the glass of propriety, but now there was little will left in me to put a halt to things, to say no to the best thing that had ever happened to me. I still thought we'd soon go back to our separate and very different lives. But for those four days, I wanted to savor every second of my unexpected and fantastical jaunt, an adulterous Cinderella not wanting the clock to strike twelve.

That December, I went back to India, as I almost always do over Christmas. At my grandmother's house, between meals and temple visits, I gave myself a crash course in Rushdie. I couldn't get enough. I read *The Moor's Last Sigh*, set in Kerala, my family's ancestral home; *Midnight's Children*, a story of India's independence told through a writer who is involved with a cook named Padma and another girl later known as Parvati (my middle name); *Shame*; and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. I had read some of *The Satanic Verses* when I was young, and tried again. Every time he'd call, I'd recount what I'd just finished reading. It was great fun being able to ask the author to clarify or expand on any given page on any given day. I began to fall in love with his writing, too.

Due in part to his presence in my life, I had begun to grow as a person. I spent the night of the millennial New Year at an orphanage in Chennai (née Madras), cooking for the children there and playing until we fell asleep before midnight. I suppose I had to find a way to cleanse my soul as well.

On one of the first few times we spoke in the new year, Salman had an announcement. By phone he reported that he had asked his wife for a divorce. As hard as it might be to believe, this development was a shock to me. I don't know what I expected from our relationship, but I had not expected that. We had never discussed our future. We had never discussed the idea of his divorcing his wife. My reaction was a fully emulsified mixture of shock and guilt. I didn't want to be responsible for breaking up a little boy's family. I didn't get it. We'd spent a total of less than two weeks together (if you added up New York, Paris, and a trip he made that winter to L.A.) and he was leaving his wife? I insisted he not divorce his wife on my account. He assured me again and again that the marriage had been over before we met. We decided to keep things between us as they were, to not make any sudden moves.

But my intentions and worries proved no match for my affection. I still scurried to the phone whenever I thought a call was from him. I was young, starstruck, and lovestruck, and after a few months, we started making plans. I spent time traveling to and from L.A. and Salman went to his usual awards ceremonies, symposiums, readings, and the like. I often came along. I joined him in Amsterdam for the Boekenbal, the ball that launched Dutch Book Week, when he was the first foreigner they ever honored. I still look at photos of that ball to remember the couple we once made: He in his tux and gray beard, which still had a streak of black near the chin. Me, in a sleeveless red gown and little diamond earrings, which I had bought years before during my early modeling days, my first-ever extravagant purchase. ("Seven hundred dollars!" my mother had yelped when I told her.) We looked

so in love. Few people could spend time with us without feeling our charge.

I was eager to leave L.A. and had wanted to move back to New York. He, too, loved the city, and so it was decided. We moved in together in the spring of 2000. We rented a gorgeous brownstone on the Upper West Side with four floors, including a grand dining room dominated by an ornately carved wooden fireplace. The dining room had a little bay window that looked onto the back garden. We sublet this place for six months. This was the house in which my husband would write *Fury*. Our landlords lived upstate on a farm that supplied many of the city's finest restaurants. Every now and then, they'd send us a crate of vegetables—leeks and zucchini, carrots and tomatoes. I remember making a lot of ratatouille that summer.

My American television career began to take off. In the course of my book tour for *Easy Exotic* I'd appeared on the Food Network a couple of times, and that had led to a development deal the following spring just as soon as we had moved in together. I would join *Melting Pot*, a series that aired every day at the same hour, each episode featuring a different pair of tag-team chefs representing a particular world cuisine.

There was Team Latino with Aarón Sánchez and Alex García. There was Team Mediterranean with Rocco DiSpirito and Michelle Bernstein. Michael Symon and another chef had the midweek eastern European slot. There was Caribbean cooking and soul food from the South. And then on Fridays there was me: Team, well, International Brown, I guess. The show was called *Padma's Passport*. Oddly, I had no cohost. And of course, I wasn't a chef, but a home cook. It was the first time—but far from the last—that I would feel completely out of my depth in the food world. Meanwhile, I still occasionally auditioned for parts in L.A. and New York. I played a bitchy, talentless pop singer named "Syk" in Mariah Carey's *Glitter*. I played a kidnapped princess on *Star Trek: Enterprise*. Nothing groundbreaking, but I was having fun and happy to be working.

The next few years were, for the most part, blissful. I was in love. I soon was living in a beautiful house, which Salman bought and which I renovated. I trawled Simon's Hardware for knobs and handles and hired contractors. We restored the brownstone from four apartments to its original glory as a Gilded Age single-family home. When we were together in New York, even before we moved out of our sublet, we had our daily routine. Salman typically woke before I did. He'd make me green tea with honey and buttered toast and sweetly set it on my bedside table. I'd go to the gym, shower, then go to auditions or jobs or sit at a stool in the kitchen with my laptop, cooking and reading in preparation for my show. I overthought the process, researching cardamom and rehearsing the dozens of facts I'd learned so I would be armed with enough things to say on camera. I was learning on the job and until then had only my experience on Italian television to go by. I'd do my own work until I knew Salman's daily writing session was almost over, then I'd bound up the stairs to the third floor where his office was, all the while thrilled that I lived in New York City. In a house. With a staircase.

I'd poke my head into his office and find his lap. Occasionally, he'd show me drafts of his work—an article for *The New Yorker*, an op-ed for *The Guardian*—and I'd pore over each one, trying to impress him with my thoughtful feedback. He ultimately made it clear that anything but my gushing approval would be ignored. But I didn't mind. He was the writer, after all.

One summer, we were walking together in the middle of Central Park when it suddenly started to rain. The clouds spilled sheets of water on us, and we took shelter under a tree. I was tugging at his arm, trying to pull him back out into the downpour, because after growing up on Bollywood romance sequences, the notion seemed quite romantic to me. He wouldn't budge, muttering about not wanting to turn his clothes into a sappy mess. I just laughed then. When you're in love, such differences of opinion seem beguiling.

At my most ardent, I sought to please and charm him, by preparing his favorite foods, decorating our home, looking my best, and telling him funny stories that I had rehearsed in my head on the way home to him. We had countless dinner parties for our friends, and I tried to create evenings that would please everyone, but particularly him. I loved hearing him hold forth from the head of the table telling his layered stories as I flitted in and out of our kitchen barefoot. My feet throbbed as we lay in bed, satiated after those long evenings, reliving what funny things everyone had said and done as we fell asleep in each other's arms. We had our own patois, a jumble of East and West, a language of love and humor for comparing notes on the world.

Early on, I was both entranced and terror-stricken by his friends. I didn't realize that authors, like basketball players, hung out together. His friends were literary giants like Susan Sontag, Peter Carey, and Don DeLillo. Dropped in the middle of these people, I was unsure of myself and daunted by what he had said about them. I loved talking about books, but I was in constant fear that my English-lit class knowledge would extinguish itself midsentence. And so I would sometimes retreat to the kitchen, where I could relish our guests and their stories from a safe distance. At the table, among others, were Don and his wife; Paul Auster and his second wife, Siri Hustvedt, herself an accomplished writer; their daughter, Sophie, barely a teenager; and Susan Sontag.

My insecurity at meeting Salman's friends revealed itself mostly in my cooking. My strategy for overcoming feelings of inferiority was to keep my hands busy, to cook and bring drinks and clean plates. For our first dinner party in our Upper West Side sublet, I planned a simple Indian menu. Our food is more regional than most Westerners realize, and I wanted to show the nuances of flavor from both my South Indian roots and Salman's northern Kashmiri ancestry. I had perused a cookbook written years ago by Salman's sister and noted that as kids they loved chicken—their father would complain about how much Salman and his sisters wanted to eat it all the time. The first four recipes all had yogurt in them. It was common for North Indian and especially Kashmiri dishes to have yogurt or cream, so I made a creamy chicken curry with mint from my first cookbook named after my uncle Chidambaram. The recipe called for a healthy dose of fiery dried red chilies, as well as garam masala, a North Indian spice blend of freshly dry-roasted and ground spices such as cinnamon, coriander seeds, cardamom, and cumin.

I wanted Salman to feel not just at home, but like he was *back home*, where we were from. It was how he made me feel. I could not be his first wife (or his second or third for that matter). Indeed, because of our age difference, I could not experience many of his firsts with him. But I could, with my cooking, take him back home, to a sweet, idyllic place and time, back to those smells of childhood in India. I wanted him to feel that with me, he *was* finally home.

I found a heavy cast-iron pan, heaved it up onto the stove, and began to roast the whole spices and chilies together. I tossed around the coriander seeds and cinnamon twigs, scraping the pan with my metal spatula as I raked them back and forth. My eyes began to burn and tear as the spices released their oils. The aroma of those spices I hoped would be carried upstairs to his workroom, where he spent his writing. I ground them up in an old Vitamix and wondered if our landlords would ever get the smell out of the machine. I doubted the sweet patrician kitchen with eyelet curtains and Betty Crocker décor had ever been assaulted with such smells. I made a mental note to soak the inside of the flask with lemon juice.

I made white beans with tomatoes and *amchur*, or dried green mango powder. The plump, round pink tomatoes here in the U.S. tasted bland and watery to me most of the year. I took to adding a pinch of palm sugar and green mango powder to duplicate the sweet and sour notes in the less good-looking but delicious tomatoes from back home. I used a whole stick of butter to fry the ginger and red onion.

in the wok, before adding the rest of the ingredients. There was a street-food stew we ate with fluffy white bread buns as children called *pav bhaji*. I remembered having it first in Pune when I went to visit my aunt Neela after her marriage. There would be a semicircle of scooters and motorcycles gathered around a man with a huge black iron griddle about three feet across. Here the various vegetables would be bubbling away with tomato and ginger, a ton of not ghee, but Amul butter. Whole bricks would be buried in the hot stew, which got darker and darker as night set in. The tangy mix of ginger and dried green mango, fat and spices, bathed the soft, buttery white beans in just enough heat.

I made delicate lemon rice, common in our southern state of Tamil Nadu. Mustard seeds and curry leaves (sent from my mother's garden in Los Angeles), fresh serrano chilies, and white gram lentils were fried in hot oil with turmeric and cashews. That hot oil was mixed into the rice with fresh lemon juice and kosher salt. The bright-yellow hue would look stunning at the table. And to cool things off, I made *raita*, a yogurt-and-cucumber relish.

I kept my hands a little too busy—I cooked three times the amount I should have. We didn't even have room in the fridge for the leftover lemon rice and *raita*, the curried chicken with cream, or the white beans. But luckily, everyone seemed to enjoy the meal. Beautiful young Sophie proclaimed she liked the spread and would be happy to take much of it home, which a few of the guests did.

It helped, too, that I cooked. Who doesn't like the cook? My favorite among the guests was Donald. I often found myself, at dinner parties and Thanksgivings, sitting with him. He spoke to me, as he always seemed to, softly and with great care. The opposite of pretentious, he spoke about his work, at all, as a plumber might about installing pipes. Generously, he treated me like a peer. My favorite aside, I appreciated them all for their kindness toward me. If they were judging me, they never let on. For all of Salman's warnings that there was "good Susan and bad Susan," Ms. Sontag was always a pussycat.

My relationship wasn't all glamour and high-minded discussion, of course—and thank goodness. Early on, acquaintances would ask me breathlessly, "So does he just walk around being brilliant all the time?"

"Yes," I'd say. "I keep a notebook on me at all times to record every word."

"Wow, what did he say last night?"

"He told me to stop hogging the sheets."

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## chapter 2

**By 2001, I had begun writing** for magazines: first *Vogue*, then a style column in *Harper's Bazaar*, and a regular stint on food and fashion at the *New York Times* syndicate. I was still doing occasional modeling jobs here and there, but I began to enjoy the writing much more. That is to say, I enjoyed having written, once the piece was done. I still had serious insecurities as a writer, which being published did nothing to assuage. I was lucky in that Glenda Bailey of *Harper's* and Gloria Anderson at the *Times* pretty much left me to write about whatever interested me. I began by doing a piece for Anna Wintour on the scar on my arm, but I was terrified of writing it. Here, my future husband was extremely supportive and edited the piece before it went to *Vogue*. Having him upstairs in his office while I was down in the basement writing was daunting. But if I really got in a jam, it was also helpful—except that he knew little about fashion and had little patience for being interrupted. But he damn well did know how to write.

The series on the Food Network did not get renewed after the first season. I did land a gig hosting a couple of documentaries called *Planet Food* for the network and for Discovery International. A sort of light precursor to Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* (but with better hair!), it involved me traveling to a country and getting to know its people through their food. They were hard shoots, but I was totally in my element. I loved nothing more than spelunking around a place and tasting my way through it. I had done as much throughout my modeling career anyway. All those years of traveling to shoot French bras in Bali and Scottish sweaters in the Seychelles led me to taste and experience the world in a way I would have never been able to otherwise.

Because I had started modeling later than most, after my bachelor's degree, I was able to appreciate it more. At the end of those many trips, my suitcase was jam-packed with strange spices and sauces, seeds and twigs. I would use these in my own kitchen back in Milan, Paris, or New York to try to re-create what I had tasted in those various corners of the planet. Coming from India and spending what seemed like most of my upbringing in the kitchens of my grandmother, mother, and various aunts (that's where all the action was, after all), I valued and took a keen interest in spices. Living and cooking in Europe during my twenties taught me for the first time about French technique. And the modeling jaunts afforded me the possibility to learn how people ate in other parts of the world. But I was just a good cook with a bottomless curiosity about food. I had never in my life entertained the idea of a career in the culinary arts in any form until the Food Network thought I was capable of one. I still wasn't sure they were right. I would have never even thought of publishing my first cookbook, but my publisher, who suggested the idea, thought there was a marketing hook in banking on our culture's curiosity about models and their diets.

The acting was slow going; my degree in theater mattered little. I would audition for parts in film and TV while still writing and modeling. I'd get a few bites or at least callbacks. Often I heard that they liked me but just "weren't going ethnic with this role." When it finally came out, *Glitter* was panned. The transition out of modeling and into a new career was a very haphazard and gradual one.



had to look hard at where my professional life was going and decide to be open to whatever work there was. My modeling career had been born of financial necessity, and then pursued because I had become easily accustomed to the lifestyle and, of course, the money. I had been able to pay off my college loans before many of my peers even settled into their first jobs or careers. But I felt some measure of self-loathing and deep insecurity for being in a profession that didn't engage my mind, that seemed to be due to no accomplishment of my own but rather to the alchemy of the genes endowed to me by my parents. I wasn't feeling guilty or bothered enough, however, to do something about it until the flow of work slowed down. My schedule also made it easy for me to travel around the globe with Salman for awards, literary festivals, and red carpets, but it was unpredictable and work came in waves. It was hard to plan dinners with friends and then have to cancel them at the last minute because some show or modeling job came up. And bookers don't eagerly continue to push for work for capricious girls with catalog and ad clients. I was luckier than many of my colleagues making the same transition because I had a roof over my head. Still, I was anxious to make something of myself beyond modeling and prove my worth to my family back in India. I knew they were happy for me. My modeling had brought me much financial success, and also brought me home to India more often. But I am not sure if I could call what they felt about my work "pride." The thing that gave me the most satisfaction was cooking. In the kitchen I felt happy and confident.

Eventually, I got around to signing another contract with my publisher, who had been asking for my second cookbook for quite some time. This was right before my marriage to Salman. I had been tinkering with recipes for a few years, but my other writing always took me away, as did those intermittent auditions. I would stop everything I was doing to study my lines or finish an article on a deadline. I also had, of course, to sit home on these occasions instead of accompanying my future husband to the many events he developed an appetite for attending. Salman's movements had been so extremely curtailed and limited by the fatwa and the entailed security issues that now that he was free—or freer—to go about his business, I found he was making up for lost time. Who could blame him?

At first it was fun going to all those events. I met many wonderful people I would have never had occasion to come across. I was modeling, acting, writing, and now about to embark on getting another book published. I was also trying to develop another show on food. It became difficult to manage it all. When I was cooking, I felt the hours slip by. I was never so happy as when barefoot in the kitchen with my hands sticky and my hair smelling slightly of grease. My schedule was erratic and unpredictable. It was a bummer to stop what I was doing in the kitchen, shower, and go to audition for a part that I knew I probably wouldn't get. I should have been happy to have the audition. Wasn't that what I wanted? Hadn't I studied for a chance to do precisely this?

My acting work was picking up: I had just been cast as Princess Bithia in ABC television's new version of *The Ten Commandments*, which meant I would be away for five weeks in Morocco filming. Salman grumbled about my being away that long. Coming to visit me in a Muslim country was not a possibility. Indeed, the producers hired two security officers to accompany me twenty-four hours a day, the whole time I was there. I felt embarrassed because I was the only actor who needed that precaution due to my personal life. But I was relieved that the producers were willing to hire me in spite of this additional expense.

I still wanted to find a way to combine being in front of the camera with my love of all things culinary. I wanted to do another show about food and culture. I had loved doing *Padma's Passport*, but I didn't want to do another how-to show. I took to hosting *Planet Food* like a duck to water and found I was actually pretty good at it. I had a glorious time doing that show. Being thrown on Italian television when I was at the tail end of my modeling days in Italy as part of the cast of *Domenica*

taught me much about hosting. You had to be quick-witted and ready for anything. You had to gauge the set and your guests and adjust accordingly. The adrenaline rush of having no script and being on live TV suited me well. I learned so much on *Domenica In* that I still use today. I wanted to go back to TV, as a host, and do another show on food. I met an executive at the E! network in L.A. who suggested I meet with her friend in New York at Bravo. I was an avid watcher of their show *Inside the Actors Studio*, and I knew they had had great success with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. So I went up to 30 Rockefeller Center to see Bravo's president, Lauren Zalaznick. She and her vice president Frances Berwick listened intently to my pitch. My idea felt too narrow and highbrow for them; they needed something broader with more mass appeal. But they did want to do something in the food space. And to that end, they were developing a food competition show and wondered if I would be part of it.

I would meet with Andy Cohen and Dave Serwatka of Bravo and have numerous long conversations with Shauna Minoprio, the show's first executive producer. At first skeptical of the idea of reality television (I tended to watch PBS and the History Channel), I was impressed by how the people wanted to turn food into a serious competition. Shauna referenced the old seventies show *Master Chef* in England, which I had seen years back and liked. She spoke passionately about wanting the new show to be a proper professional competition rather than some bonhomous how-to show about who could make the best Bundt cake. She loved Julia Child but had no interest in adding to the pile of imitators already on TV. They had researched the food world and even gotten Tom Colicchio of Gramercy Tavern fame as a head judge and a woman named Gail Simmons of *Food & Wine* magazine to participate. I was excited to be part of the show. Little did I know that I would spend the next decade with these folks.

In the meantime I was still reading for parts both here in America and in London. We spent half our time in the UK because of my husband's children. I felt the self-induced pressure of making something out of myself and I wasn't going to wait for these TV people to get their ducks in a row. I was still writing for magazines but I could do that anywhere, and it actually helped to be in Europe during the fashion shows. The writing also made me more portable, so it was easier to travel with Salman. I noticed he would get grumpy if my schedule conflicted with his, and lately I seemed to always be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I found it hard to keep all these balls in the air. Salman and I had married in the spring of 2000 and I had hoped that this would bring a sense of calm and additional security to our relationship. That we would settle somehow into a rhythm of work and life. But I was never there enough for him. I was struggling to keep him happy while still pursuing all the things I thought would lead to a life not reliant on modeling lingerie or selling shampoo—or on my husband, for that matter. If I got a callback, I was happy, but then I'd have to break it to my husband that I couldn't leave with him on one of his upcoming trips to Austria or Brazil. If I told my agent I couldn't go to the callback, my agent (who had been hard to get in the first place) would think I was crazy.

By the time Bravo was ready to shoot the food show, I had signed on to do a miniseries for British television called *Sharpe's Challenge* with an actor from the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy named Sean Bean. It was a real bodice-heaver, a period piece set in India during the British Raj. We were to be on location for several weeks, this time in Jaipur, Rajasthan. And I, of course, was to play the local evil queen. Fantastic, I thought. Now we're getting somewhere. Andy Cohen, the programming head of Bravo, called, and I had to tell the network I couldn't do the food show. On the other hand, I had done two miniseries in the same year. I finally felt like my career was taking shape and taking a permanent turn away from modeling.

My culinary ambitions would have to wait. But I watched the first season of *Top Chef* when it came out, and I thought it had some great elements. For the first time, I heard haute cuisine and fine dining being discussed on TV as they were in real life, analyzed matter-of-factly and without pretense. I was frankly surprised it wasn't too inside baseball for most viewers. But I loved what Bravo and the production company Magical Elves had done. They had made the rarefied world of gourmands and Michelin-starred chefs approachable and understandable to those in the audience who weren't necessarily food lovers, or "foodies," as they would come to be called.

Then one day, several months later, I got a call from Andy Cohen again. "Are you free *now*?" he asked. They were green-lighting the show for a second season, and while the ratings were modestly good, they were going to make changes and put a lot more resources behind it. *Top Chef* would become the thing most Americans would know me from. I had no idea how long it would last or what it would mean. I had done live television in Italy and I liked hosting. I had wanted to do some type of work around food. I was still working on my second cookbook, and the show could definitely give it a boost. It seemed like fun. Who wouldn't want to sit around eating delicious food and talking about it all day?

My first season, we shot in Los Angeles. Luckily, my husband also had to be in L.A. for part of it and so could visit. It was daunting how many hours it took to shoot a one-hour program. I was used to live TV and we'd just basically flown by the seat of our pants on the Food Network. Here we did, too, but the "hurry up and wait" of it all was insane. Since then we've gotten much better at streamlining the show, but things can still take a while. We were shooting at UCLA and I remember thinking how nice it was that my husband could finally come to see me working. But watching a TV show being made isn't all it's cracked up to be, and he soon got bored and went back to the hotel.

Things were going really well for me professionally and I started feeling better about myself. Just as I was convinced my days appearing in magazines were over, *Newsweek* called to tell me they wanted to put me on their cover to go with a story about the "New India." I was totally thrilled and I couldn't believe it. I got off the phone and ran upstairs to tell Salman. He was at his desk and as usual I crawled up onto his lap. The moment I looked into his face and uttered the news, some knee-jerk reaction inside me braced for his reply. Lately, anytime I had some good news about my professional life, it seemed to interfere somehow with us. He just said, "That's great, I'm happy for you. The only time *Newsweek* put me on their cover was when someone was trying to put a bullet in my head." I didn't know how to react. I didn't want to anger him by saying the wrong thing or overreacting. I just wanted him to be proud of me, for us to savor this moment together.

I hoped he was indeed glad for me, if only because of how happy it made me. He seemed irked in some barely perceptible way. Lately, we hadn't been getting along as well. I couldn't shake the feeling I wasn't meeting his expectations as a wife. Indeed, at times he had told me as much. And I began to replace my insecurity about work with insecurity about my marriage.

On top of this discord, my menstrual cramps had worsened more and more over the last few years. I had always had pain every month and was used to taking a lot of pain medication during that time, but recently I felt the effects longer and more severely. During these times, I did not want to make love or be intimate in any way, and I actually found it hard to sleep because of my chronic pain. Plus I was a light sleeper and my husband snored, and that had gotten worse over the years, too.

I had been in pain for more than two decades. It had started on the morning of my thirteen birthday with my first menses. The dark liquid, thick and oozing from me, heralded almost immediately a lifelong companion—cramping, pain, a numbing ache. It wasn't very strong at first. I was distracted from the onslaught of my burgeoning womanhood. The hair that grew between my legs

and in my armpits, the newly puffy nipples, and a general awkwardness were as difficult to accept. Pain had not been totally unexpected anyway. My own mother had primed me for what lay ahead. “Some girls get it, and some girls don’t. It’s just our lot in life, part of being a woman,” she said. I had seen her miss work because of her own monthly pain, seen her take pills and lie with heating pads and hot-water bottles. Throughout my adolescence the pain grew, in intensity and duration, as did the flow of blood from my deepest insides. In college at Clark University, I begged my roommate to drive to the all-night pharmacy on Route 9 in Shrewsbury at midnight when I needed to retrieve more pain medication the doctor had prescribed. I became moody during what seemed like a third of the month and wondered if I would suffer from intermittent bouts of depression, as my mother had started during my high school years.

Soon I began to have pain not only during that one week in the month I bled, but also while ovulating. I could tell which ovary produced the egg to be expelled that month just by where the pain emanated from. Along with cramping, bloating, and a general achy malaise, I began to feel my whole pelvis go numb. And at times, I also had lower back pain, and a pain that could shoot down one leg. I suffered severe nausea and headaches, too, though I could not tell if they were from my period or from the various pharmaceuticals I took to quell what was blandly referred to as menstrual “discomfort” or dysmenorrhea. No doctor seemed to know why. Nothing had eased my condition for long.

One day, nine months before Salman and I separated, I was at a studio, shooting the photos for my second cookbook. There’s a photo of me by a window, looking out onto the Bowery. In it, I look contemplative and happy, pretty. In the real world, I was realizing I had started bleeding, and was hoping against hope the blood wouldn’t leak through my underwear and onto my clothing. I hadn’t brought tampons—I was two weeks into my cycle—so that afternoon, I stuffed my underwear with tissue.

My family doctor was already worried. He knew I’d had problems connected with my period and sent me to see a specialist on the Upper East Side. The day of the appointment was a hectic one. I rose at five that October morning to do an early cooking segment on the *Today* show. The day included, among other things, a work lunch, meetings with my editor and a group of buyers about the release of my new cookbook, and an early dinner at Bergdorf Goodman, where my publisher’s wife was launching her evening dress collection. I squeezed in my appointment just after running home to change and just before the dinner.

When I hailed the cab to the doctor’s office, I had on a shiny, strapless Marchesa cocktail dress embroidered with large cranes and flowers in gold, green, and magenta thread. The birds’ wings and eyes twinkled with little sequins. My TV makeup from the morning had faded nicely, and in the cab I touched up my lipstick so I would be ready to dash to the dinner afterward.

In the office, I took a seat across from the doctor at his desk, feeling silly for being so overdressed. The doctor, Tamer Seckin, came in and asked me a series of very thorough questions, almost too personal, even for a medical doctor. “How are your sexual relations with your husband?” “Has your libido dwindled over the years you have been together?” (Doesn’t everyone’s?) “What is your emotional and mental state during the week of your period?” “Do you have gas, or constipation?” “Do you ever argue about sex?” “Do your bra and pant sizes change within a month?” “Do you become irritable inexplicably?” “Have your period and the surrounding symptoms ever been an issue in your professional or home life?” “Do you feel understood?” I was taken aback.

He asked me to don a papery gown and meet him in the exam room. When I stripped down, I noticed deep red grooves imprinted on my torso from the dress’s corset. In my effort to multitask that day, I hadn’t thought things through. I wondered if he would think me so superficial that I was willing

to constrict myself in the garment so extremely in order to look good. But surely he had seen a corsage or two in his time?

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I felt embarrassed in front of this doctor and not solely because of my nakedness, yet I didn't completely understand why. The nurse held my hand, and Dr. Seckin wielded what I learned later was a pediatric speculum. I squeezed her hand to fight the pain. He performed two exams, one that I had never had before. He did a rectal exam. No one who had ever examined me in all my thirty-six years had ever performed that exam. No gynecologist had ever been so invasive, physically or otherwise. After he had finished, he asked me to get dressed and meet him in his office. The clock above his head read 6:52 p.m. I had a dinner to get to.

"Will it take long, doctor?" I asked.

"Yes, Ms. Lakshmi, it might."

Sonograms and speculums can see beyond even the most sincere smile, the most glamorous cocktail dress. Sitting across from Dr. Seckin, I heard the word "endometriosis" for the first time. Over the course of the last twenty years, I had dutifully gone for checkups. I had seen doctors and specifically gynecologists of both sexes in various countries around the world. All of them were fixated with prescribing pain pills for regular consumption, and reiterated what my mother had said when she first found out about the atrocities my body was capable of in the name of womanhood. Yes, for some women, it's a lifelong curse, they echoed. No one indicated that what was happening was serious, or damaging long-term, or anything like that. Some doctors thought I was exaggerating. Others became irate, including a woman who insisted that it couldn't hurt *that* much while she pushed her cold metal speculum inside me. I flinched, wincing in pain. One doctor actually smoked during the exam in Milan. I minded the smoker much less, especially since he at least put me on birth control, which did help for a time during my twenties.

I had quit using birth control a few months after my husband and I first moved in together, just around my turning thirty. Spending my twenties under the influence of hormones was enough and I could see the side effects taking their toll on my skin. I had also spent most of that time as a smoker, and that had preyed on my mind, too. Now at the age of thirty-six, my body, unbeknownst to me, had been going full tilt for six years, producing excess tissue it could not expel at a much more rapid rate than in my twenties, when I was on contraceptive hormones to suppress the disease and its effects.

A healthy female body, Seckin explained, expels uterine lining during menstruation. Not so in the case of a woman who has endometriosis. Instead, the tissue pools in the body's reproductive cul-de-sac. The body then reabsorbs the lining, which grows. But the lining is no mere plasma or scar tissue; it has glands and responds to hormones—forming layer upon layer in the uterus, a new one each month that spills out into the peritoneum, or lower abdomen. It can pool outside the uterus and attach itself to all the internal organs of a woman with the condition, preventing normal functioning of those organs. It can choke her reproductive system, as weeds in a healthy garden can take down the tallest shrubs. It can cause gastrointestinal problems and often is misdiagnosed by gastroenterologists, as had happened to me just months before, in April. It can bring your house down with pain, excruciating pain that is ever present during the most normal functions of everyday life. It is very dangerous to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of a patient as well as the general well-being of her whole family. I had gotten my period twenty-three years earlier, a present from puberty that seemed like a bad joke that September morning. Now, decades later, on this evening, I sat in Dr. Seckin's office hearing for the very first time that I had a disease called endometriosis, which could threaten my fertility. I had just turned thirty-six.

For twenty years, this powerful tissue had amassed and twined inside me, growing outward from

my uterus, spreading through my body and coiling around my insides. It felt like it had choked and mutilated every part of my being. I wasn't crazy, or dramatic, and I didn't have a low threshold for pain. In fact, I probably had a high threshold for pain, and that may have been part of the problem. Dr. Seckin didn't understand why I wasn't writhing in pain outside his office. "I believe you when you say you think you have answered my questions honestly and sincerely," he pronounced very deliberately in his strong Turkish accent. "But what I see of your anatomy and the picture you are painting of your life seem very different."

So much was suddenly so clear. Just months before, in April, on our second wedding anniversary I'd had to be rushed to the hospital late at night—the tissue had wrapped itself like a tourniquet around my small intestines, though I hadn't known then what was really happening. I had been in pain all day but didn't want to disappoint Salman, who had reserved a table at Bouley weeks before. To his credit, he suggested we stay home, but I wanted to celebrate with him. We both needed a good time together. I knew, too, that he expected to make love, something I wasn't sure I was capable of. Until recently, we had always been hungry for each other and could never get enough. Lately though, we had been fighting more and more about our lack of intimacy. I figured that after the meal and a bottle of red, he might tire out or, better yet, I might feel better. My plan was not very well thought out. The chef insisted on our having the tasting menu. A third of the way through, I asked the maître d' for a pillow. My lower back was throbbing and the pain was wrapping around to my abdomen, which was cramping, too. I thought the pillow might give me some support, or that I could find a more comfortable position leaning against it. With each course the waiter brought, my pain increased. I barely made it through the meal.

When we got home, I climbed up the stairs to the fourth floor. Halfway up, I began to have trouble breathing and stumbled. I made it to our bedroom, tore off my red jersey dress, and reached for the heating pad, which was always plugged in and waiting under my pillow. I turned on my side and doubled over. My husband came in and I told him that in addition to the back pain, I had begun cramping and that it really hurt. And I didn't know why. "Of course," he said. "How convenient for you. It's not your period and it's not ovulation. What is it this time?"

This didn't sound quite as cruel at the time as it seems now on the page. For years I had tried hard to hide my pain from others, even from him, and to dull my symptoms through denial and keeping busy. My mother told me from a very early age what her mother had told her: that this was just our lot in life. She said that the only thing to do was to try very hard not to let it affect any more of my life than it had to. So I compartmentalized the pain, tried to mostly sequester myself in bed until it subsided enough that I could get up. Now I understand that we were both feeling the effects of the vexing disease. To this day, my mother hasn't been officially diagnosed, but she has suffered the same mysterious pain, the same stab-in-the-dark surgeries. One doctor, ignorant of the cause of her suffering, threw up his hands and removed her appendix.

My husband never truly grasped the extent of my pain, in part because I took it for granted. Not Dr. Seckin was telling me that I probably had pain during sex. I wasn't sure that this was true. For the first several years together, our intimacy was fully gratifying. I don't ever remember having pain during sex. But I'd gotten so used to all the other pain that I didn't even identify it as pain anymore.

Recently I could remember my husband complaining that I rarely wanted to make love, and when I did it was only after we had been drinking. He felt justifiably rejected. I asked Dr. Seckin to call my husband and explain the disease's particulars, which I was only just beginning to understand. Coming from a doctor, I thought, the information would be less charged, more empirical. Then my husband would have to understand that I wasn't just making excuses. Yet my need for reinforcements, though

didn't understand it at the time, reflected a rift in our relationship that grew ever wider.

Now, after just two years of marriage and seven living together, our intimacy was fraught. I began to feel lonely, isolated by my pain. I started to feel happier—or more appropriately, less unhappy—when he wasn't around. In his presence, I felt as though I was not measuring up and was letting him down if I didn't do what or go where he wanted. By myself I was free to wonder what was increasing wrong with my body without being made to feel like I was exaggerating. I was free to wallow in my malaise, and nurse myself without seeing the disappointment in his face. I needed to deal fully with what was happening to me. And I could only do that when I was alone.

That night of our second anniversary in April, he must have thought the pain I reported was in fact equivalent to my saying, "I don't feel like it and have to get up early." After a heated exchange of many words and much door slamming, he went to sleep in the room across the hall. Around midnight I called an ambulance and Salman accompanied me to Mount Sinai hospital, where a gastroenterologist was waiting. Remember, this was *before* Seckin's diagnosis. The doctors were still clueless. The doctor who operated that night was like a landscaper, snipping off a small, unsightly root—"just scar tissue, perhaps from your earlier surgery for ovarian cysts, but you should be fine now," he said—while a massive, gnarled system still lurked beneath my house, threatening to crack the foundation. Sure enough, in the weeks and months after this surgery, the pain resumed. And my husband became increasingly frustrated with me. And I became more and more worried. Not only for my marriage, but also for my own body's health.

Now, just six months later, Dr. Seckin was telling me I wasn't crazy for not feeling like being intimate. He said every fiber of my being would be repelled by the idea of intimacy because of what was going on in my reproductive system and with my hormones. In fact, "I'm surprised you walked into my office on two feet," he said. I started to cry. I remember worrying, for a second, about ruining my makeup.

In the car inching its way down Fifth Avenue, toward Bergdorf Goodman and this glamorous party, I looked back on my past with a new understanding. This sickness, the "endo-whatever," had stained so much—my sense of self, my womanhood, my marriage, my ability to be present. I had effectively missed one week of each month every year of my life since I was thirteen, because of the chronic pain and hormonal fluctuations I suffered during my period. I had lain in bed, with heating pads and hot-water bottles, using acupuncture, drinking teas, taking various pain medications and suffering the collateral effects of them. I thought of all the many tests I missed in various classes throughout my education, the school dances, the jobs I knew I couldn't take as a model, because of the bleeding and bloating as well as the pain (especially the bathing suit and lingerie shoots, which paid the most). How many family occasions was I absent from? How many second or third dates did I not go on? How many times had I not been able to be there for others or for myself? How many of my reactions to stress or emotional strife had been colored through the lens of chronic pain? My sense of self was defined by this handicap. The impediment of expected pain would shackle my days and all plans I made.

I did not see my own womanhood as something positive or to be celebrated, but as a curse that had to constantly make room for and muddle through. Like the scar on my arm, my reproductive system was a liability. The disease, developing part and parcel with my womanhood starting puberty with my menses, affected my own self-esteem and the way I felt about my body. No one likes to get her period, but when your femininity carries with it such pain and consistent physical and emotional strife, it's hard not to feel that your body is betraying you. The very relationship you have with yourself and your person is tainted by these ever-present problems. I now finally knew my

struggles were due to this condition. I wasn't high-strung or fickle and I wasn't overreacting.

All my life, I had had the sense that something was wrong and couldn't put my finger on it. I had seen college roommates pop two ibuprofen pills and skip off to basketball practice with no problem when they had their periods. I always wondered what was wrong with *me*: Why did I have such trouble dealing with one of the most basic and common functions Mother Nature handed all women? I heard my mother's voice echo in my head: "Because I had it, and your grandmother had it. It's just what happens."

In my mother's generation they would just take out all your plumbing if it got really bad. But now "We can treat it with laparoscopic surgery, excise this problematic tissue and expel it from the body," said Seckin. "I am surprised you slipped through the cracks without any treatment this long."

If he was surprised, I was flabbergasted. I had dutifully gone to my gynecological checkups and not one doctor had ever brought up this disease. I even had two ovarian cysts removed at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where my Beverly Hills gynecologist had said that one of my cysts was "endometriotic," or blood-filled. But he never said the words "You have endometriosis. It is a condition that needs to be treated and monitored. It is a serious condition that can and will not only endanger your health and the proper function of your internal organs, but will also affect your fertility." In fact, endometriosis is one of the three major causes of infertility in women, and 10 percent of all women worldwide suffer from it.

As I reached the dinner, I tried to stuff back down all the emotions that had bubbled up, just as I stuffed away from view the pain and discomfort for all these many years. Just like I struggled to fit all my cosmetics back into my small evening bag after I dabbed and patched my face back together. The car door opened; a flashbulb went off. I hopped out of the car and fixed a smile on my face. At dinner there were toasts and cheers as we looked out over Central Park, the first of the blue night's stars visible above the bony trees and the fallen autumn leaves.

Three weeks later, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Dr. Seckin performed his first surgery. I picked the day in the hope I could recuperate over the long weekend without anyone knowing I had been out of commission. At first, he guessed the surgery would take an hour and a half, and I'd be home the next morning and back at my desk by Monday.

I awoke to the sound of my own voice. I smelled the faint odor of mustard seeds and ginger. In the darkness of the hospital room, my mother, two aunts, an uncle, and various cousins kept vigil, leaning or sitting on every surface and quietly nibbling food from round tin containers. *Top Chef* was on the TV. There was a Thanksgiving marathon. Dr. Seckin came to speak to me in the recovery room after the surgery was over. In my anesthetized haze, I heard him say that my right fallopian tube had been rendered functionless from the buildup of endometriosis tissue. He asked if I knew that part of my left ovary had been removed during a previous operation. Incredibly, I didn't. I learned the surgery had taken four and a half hours, my kidneys were in stents, I had stitches on four major organs, and that of the nineteen biopsies performed, seventeen came back positive as deeply infiltrating endometriosis tissue (also known as DIE). Rather than an overnight stay, I spent five days in the hospital. Twenty-four hours after my discharge, my husband had to leave for a trip. "The show must go on, after all," he said.

My aunt Neela, who had flown in from India, and my mother, who had come from Los Angeles, cared for me, something they had done at different times throughout my life. Over the next two and a half months, as I lay bedridden on the top floor of our brownstone, they took turns, flying in and out. As they tended to me, my husband toiled in his office below. Over those many weeks, on my back, staring at a white ceiling, I had ample time to think. There was nothing to distract me, no work I could



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