

This Is a Love Story

ALSO BY JESSICA SOFFER

*Tomorrow There Will Be Apricots*

# This Is a Love Story

A NOVEL

Jessica Soffer



First published in Great Britain in 2025 by  
Serpent's Tail,  
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ

*www.serpentstail.com*

First published in the United States by Dutton,  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

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Book design by Patrice Sheridan

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

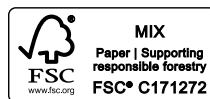
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80522 492 1  
eISBN 978 1 80522 493 8



*For Alex, Ula, and Scout.*  
*The greatest love stories of my life are ours.*

# 1

## CENTRAL PARK

Some people come to the Park because they want to fall in love for the first time, the twelfth time, the final time. Some have been used, widowed, or bored stiff. They have spent the past decade in deep introspection, falling in love with themselves—and no one else—first. Some come for a short respite—roughly twenty blocks west to east, east to west—from a spouse who will not help themselves or from no one home (she even took the dog; you can't imagine the sudden quiet). The Park is a beating heart, an adagio, a dreamy parenthesis.

Abe and Jane come after chemo and because they never know when it might be the last time. There are six bottles of pills, two notarized wills, and a nebulizer in a tote between them. Jane can walk

only a few steps without needing to rest, but you couldn't tell that from the serene composure on her face. The Park is where the most important moments of their lives have taken place. The Park is their home away, homing device, pen pal, fifth season.

In the Park, romance is alive and well. Among the tulips, fritillaries, and anemones, juniors from Bronx Science make promises across the Whisper Bench—I want to exist in the same quantum state as you. An optometrist who has been married five times finds love again at the Rumi Festival in Shakespeare Garden. It feels like 20/10 eyesight. On Tuesday evenings from May to October, in Sheep Meadow, a small group gathers for Sensual Yoga (unauthorized; who's going to stop them?). They move their bodies in ways that make them weep or giddy or ashamed. At SummerStage, Bon Iver a capellas "Blood Bank." The Public Theater produces *Romeo and Juliet* for the sixty-second year. Everyone sweats. The cardiac surgeon writes a love letter to her husband on the same bench near the Center Fountain every Friday. She is in green scrubs and clogs. She couldn't save him, but in her letters, she imagines that she can and that they have shrimp lo mein on the couch again. Watching the kids push their model boats at Conservatory Water, the entertainment lawyer offers to try one more round because her husband wants nothing more than a gaggle of kids and she cannot bring herself to tell him the truth. Perhaps it's the body, she thinks, as referee. A group of divorcés—one a matchmaker with an acclaimed series on HBO, he signed an NDA, no one can know but this crew—gets their grooves back rollerblading at DiscOasis. Old love—we've been together since Eisenhower—recalls their vows, word for word, at the Inscope Arch. I promise to love you and your

stamps forever. Margaux and Marc kiss every year for twenty-one years on the vernal equinox at Belvedere Castle. They have dedicated their lives to art and beauty. Belvedere meaning *good view*. Oh, the blooms. The housepainter, so far from home, watching for a sign in the clear blue sky on his twenty-fifth anniversary, forgets the heartache of time and distance for the brief moment that two red-tailed hawks glide by, dip, and land across from Trefoil Arch no more than ten feet away from him.

Every year, there are nearly 250 weddings at the Loeb Boathouse. There are nineteen other suggested venues on [CentralParkWeddingLocations.com](#) within the Park's 843 acres. There are hundreds of marriage proposals on Bow Bridge every year—we found each other on Facebook; we met last week; we have three kids and two dogs and a whole lot of chickens together. Most take place between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but there is an upward tick around Valentine's Day too. There are thousands of engagement shoots, mostly in June and October because, arguably, those are the Park's most standout times. The machinist wears all white. The personal assistant has been juicing for a week. In the Park, there is handholding, making out, blushing, the sharing of ham and cheese sandwiches, iced teas, double chocolate chip cookies, blazers, gloves, tissues, and headphones playing Billie Holiday. There is a lot of so-called quality time. There are at least a dozen domestic disputes reported to the Park precinct a week. Oh yes, sir, I really did want to wring his neck.

Some people come to the Park when the red-eared sliders are mating or when they're the best man at the *Swan Lake*-themed



nuptials at Wollman and hoping the bride's aunt will be flying solo. They come to carve names into a tree—Lucy loves AF, Stella + Sass. They come to honor the one they will always love, especially on October 17 when it's as if the leaves are singing HALLELUJAH AMEN and they can throw them in the air and feel them on their body like whispers. They come for Jewish speed dating with their best friend and kiss the friend on the mouth on the way home just to see. No dice. LOL! They come by the busload in white sneakers on a Romancing the Apple tour. Some people come to train for marathons: they are running away from their problems; they are racing for their wife's cure. They come to learn holotropic breathwork in the Hallett Sanctuary as an antidote to trauma. It is my last resort. They come because there are long-stemmed red roses growing in a location that won't be disclosed here. They have never been snipped. What kind of monster?

The assistant producer comes to the Park before filming. She is in the gray spandex she bought with the guy on the six-mile loop in mind. She wonders about his name: Brad, Jake? Or maybe he's Australian? Luke? Martha and Marilyn come after work; it is the only time they have to themselves before the kids demand a different dinner, no bath, twelve stories, told in corresponding voices, a lot of songs. I fucking hate Raffi! A feng shui consultant comes from West Virginia once, in the spring, to meet an old lover. He never shows. He shows; what a disappointment. Stephen and Mitch walk to and from work every day at eight and six, holding hands, planning dinner. Caraway salmon with rye berry and beet salad. Elaine and Jack come with their two old Labs because their therapist said it was a good idea. It was! It was not! The sanitation worker comes

to work; but he also comes for the gray catbirds' love songs, particularly in the morning in April near Shuman Track. They remind him of his first ex-wife, who sang in the shower first thing. Leena, the new vegan—she promised him she'd try—comes because there is no one waiting at home anymore. Some people come because, at home, the yelling has gotten worse. Some because, at home, they don't touch; they haven't in years. Some because the touching has become too much.

Some come only when the sun is out. Some come only in the dark.

For those who feel it, there is nothing like the warm embrace of the Park. North of the Lilac Walk, they're playing Chaka Khan, wearing short shorts, and grinding. Outside the Swedish Cottage, carnations are sold by the stem. See the nuzzling rollerbladers on Center Drive, the kids in nursery school at the Hans Christian Andersen statue, kissing each other's chins. There is a Oaxacan woman by the Mall who sells mangoes with chile and limon, cut into hearts, singing "Espérame en el Cielo" like she means it. The *Ancestor* sculpture at the Park's Fifth Avenue and Sixtieth Street entrance represents fertility and the masculine and feminine at once (though the sculptor's husband has faced allegations of sexual misconduct). There are Roy and Silo, the gay penguins at the zoo who attempted to mate for half a decade before giving up. It can be said: there is no greater ecstasy than reaching the pinnacle of Cat Hill on bike. No purer pleasure than holding hands, watching the ducks flap flap flap. Even as raging wars, another mass shooting, Me Too, hostages, hateful graffiti, youth cyberbullying give us no reason to

have faith in passion, the brown-belted bumbles are rapturous, pollinating beardtongue and American wild columbine. For some, the Park's branches are arms stretched up and out, abating hate. It is possible to see them as that. Perhaps, for some, to love the Park makes seeing them as that essential.

## 2

ABE

Some days, you want to tell me everything that you remember.

You remember when we met. Tavern on the Green, July 1967. You were waitressing to pay for books at Cooper Union. I had just graduated from Wharton and was taking my father's clients to lunch. It was my era of "at least it'll make a good short story." They were Italian milliners on their first trip to America. It would.

You remember my pants were too short, my jacket was too big, but there was a leather notebook in my lap that heartened you immediately. You remember that every once in a while, I would jot down some words, urgently, furiously, as if they were house keys on the shore, at risk of being whisked out.

You remember when you brought us Bloody Marys and deviled eggs, I gestured to the blue paint on the latent part of your wrist

and said, I bet you're very good. You remember recognition like a night-light. I remember I missed every word of that lunch. Sometimes, I think, the stories write themselves.

You remember mid-meal I found you—rushed, red wine down your front—by the kitchen and said, Excuse me. I had sweet eyes, you say. Like a horse by a fence.

You remember that I didn't speak. Instead, I reached for your hand and squeezed it. It was as if I was telling you something about safety, you say. Until then, you hadn't realized you'd felt unsafe.

Or something like that, you say. You can change the wording later.

You sit up taller in bed as if the remembering is an IV of something. Life or life twice.

Sure, I say. I nod. I do not tell you the truth: I haven't written in three years. It is not for lack of effort but focus, stamina, drive. I've been with you at all of your appointments. I go to the supermarket, pharmacy, acupuncturist in Springs. Sometimes, I come home, stare at the windshield, unable to mobilize my legs. I don't want to come in and you're not painting, clicking on a lamp for reading, making blueberry crumb pies in my wool socks.

Still, today is a good day. Your eyes are clear as a temple. The red asterisk of your mouth is far from slack. Your voice is whole as a bell. I can do better. Your voice is a match, lit.

I write that down.

Do you remember those awful shoes they made us wear at Tavern on the Green? you say. And the hats? It really was misogyny, wasn't it?

You shake your head but now you are smiling. When you are like this, it feels like hitching my wagon to your horse. I want to follow you raspberry picking, listen to you contemplate fish and sun and shadows in oil on driftwood. I try to attribute the clarity to something specific: a change in medication, sugar, sleep, the moon. I cannot.

I remember, from the day I met you, you lit up a room, put everyone at ease. I remember how you crouched down with the Italian guests so that when you repeated yourself—*che cosa? che cosa?* they kept saying—you could tell them the specials as though they were a secret gift.

I remember that whenever I saw you, it seemed, somehow, as if you'd just been swimming. I remember the plant life of your eyes, you smelled like spring, moved like a bird, but you were steadier and lighter than the rest of us. That has remained true, decades and decades later. I remember the gap between your teeth, the dimple under your nose, how your hair was lighter around your face. It might be overkill to call it a halo, a frame, an immutable, immaculate light. I remember I wanted to do everything over again when you were around—be bolder but also more still.

You remember falling leaves in Central Park, and as we walked, radio somewhere, gray clouds like ribbons in wind. I'd never noticed

till you. I remember your back ten steps ahead of me. You were looking for acorns, rocks. You were planning to make sculptures with wax. I remember your deer bones, the way your steps were intentional, as if you were composing a song with your feet. What was that scent you wore? What happened to that polka-dot dress?

You remember sometimes, we'd stand under lamplight near Bank Rock Bridge or the Obelisk or we'd take the M7—down and then up—just to ride. You remember my hand on your knee, your hand on mine. You remember the Chinese restaurant that was next to a cleaner's, and on the other side, a church where we read each other's fortunes, though you don't remember any exactly. You remember the smell of soy sauce and old tea, white napkins knotted into swans, sauce always getting on my shirt.

I remember sitting across the table from you, how I felt flattered just being with you. I remember how people always gazed at you not just because of your beauty but because of the way you were quiet both before you spoke and after—and also because of what you said. I remember how light always found your cheekbones, butterflies flocked to your hair.

You remember, in the beginning, we walked everywhere together: the Park's Outer Loop, Upper Loop, from Columbus Circle to Harlem mostly parallel to Central Park West. You remember listening to the saxophonist under the trees, pignoli cookies from Ferrara, counting convertibles on Fifth. You remember pistachio ice cream and espressos, a black cat in a tree and a fire truck, a man who only walked backward—to and fro, singing Bob Marley, on the Seventy-Second Street Traverse. You remember I kept my hand on your back

as if you were a stray egg—and that we never stopped talking, laughing, telling each other everything.

What exactly? you say.

When we met, you'd been seeing a Turk who wore turtlenecks, had lived at an ashram, collected art. Yours. You remember yoga in a temple, discovering the sutras, how you spoke them to yourself when you almost got mugged in the Park. You remember getting mugged, not in the Park. You remember even now: yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhi. You remember the painting wasn't going well. Your father kept calling and asking if you'd finally come to your senses yet. Yet?

I remember our first picnic in Central Park, somewhere north of Sheep Meadow. I remember we ate tuna sandwiches, dill pickles, Linzer tortes with raspberry jam. I remember you packed extra and gave it to two men with no shoes and a shopping cart filled with cans. I remember we lay on a blanket, our sweaters rolled up under our heads, and watched the sky. I remember how you made time expand.

I remember you turned to me and said, Isn't this something? Just being here? It is, I said. I remember, with you, the reel stopped running. Like: I am. You are. This is enough. Please stay.

You remember we were at the Sixty-Fifth Street entrance or by the carousel. You were peeling an orange or purple grapes with your teeth. You were in a green dress with long sleeves or short denim with rips, paint on your ankles. You remember it was your phase of



flowers and bugs, mostly pastels. You could draw anything: a bird, a plane, the United States. You were learning hue, spheres, and hatching. You were so focused. I was in awe.

You remember I was writing short stories about a Mafia family in New Jersey. What did I think I was doing? I say. We both laugh.

You remember, in the beginning, how much we talked about art. How it felt. Wild in the head, calm in the body. Like having just sneezed or just yawned. I remember that before you, I'd never called it art to anyone. I admitted to loving it to you before anyone else. And though it was different for me, especially then—I had never imagined writing full time, it was a cherished hobby, a tic even—I knew that feeling of protection, satiety, you spoke of. It made me feel seen. You did.

I remember you'd ask me if I could see that blue bud, sparkle on pavement, schools of fish and coral in the clouds. (No.) I remember you imagined art out of everything: straws, water, mints. We'd sit on a bench and even if you didn't have paper, you'd make a crown out of twigs, twist leaves into perfect figurines. I remember you narrow-eyed, tight-jawed, always composing something in your mind.

You remember, from that time, nightmares, night sweats, waking up, calling out. You remember dreaming about your mother, the urge to show her a painted stone, city lights, a burn on your forearm from hot glue. When you woke, the longing for her was something physical. You lost her when you were twelve. Every day, you wore the gold bangles she had hidden on her upper arms when she

came to Ellis Island from Baghdad. Your father was a geography professor but always getting lost. They met at a country club when your mother had just arrived. She cleaned the club kitchen at night. Ten months after she died, your father remarried a Croatian woman with parrot-colored hair and you went to boarding school. He couldn't be alone and you couldn't be alone with him. From then on, you took care of yourself.

### 3

You remember falling asleep in the studio, black paint under your nails, charcoal on your socks, your thumbs so dry they were like frost and cracking, the growl of the trucks, dirty East Fifth Street, men lined up outside the church. You remember pigeons that ate cigarettes, clapping for rats, purple light at dawn, and how it was the only time when you could hear the birds. You remember sitting in empty churches to watercolor. Something about the light in there, vastness, drama, the hollowness of sound. You remember you were smoking too much. The Turk was volatile. You remember being afraid a lot.

There are white pillows behind your back like graceless wings. On the little table next to your bed, a ginger tea bag, used tissues, lavender oil, a blurry photo Max took of a bench in Central Park—empty, in the pouring rain—in a wooden frame. There are unopened cards from Rio, Seattle, and Old Lyme from friends who are well and worried. Some artists, some from your book club, some wives

of my friends. They adore you. Who doesn't? I keep meaning to read them to you. It is something, I think, how everyone believes they're your favorite. It has something to do with your attention to detail. Just being with you feels like being chosen, winning a prize.

I find your hand beneath the blankets. I want to say something about your fingers in mine as a chronicler of time, but it feels like committing you to something that I won't.

I remember, from that time, seeing other women—my mother was always setting me up with her hairdresser's daughter; she didn't know you yet—but really, truly, only that none of them was ever you. I remember going to you like there was a strong wind at my back. I remember the first time we slept together, you moved my face toward yours like it was a reading light and said, Here. I remember that whenever I left you it felt as if I'd moved away from a fire.

There must be a more subtle way to relay urgency. There must be a better word than love.

You remember that every time we were together, you talked more, breathed deeper, felt like your feet were wrapped in warm towels and held. There could be another metaphor here, you say. For protection, for coming back home when there was no home to begin with.

Or: it felt like putting a spoon into an old cup of coffee and stirring around and around?

I remember, in the beginning, writing poems about you and not sharing them. You were a moth, a petal, a sheet on a clothesline, a

stack of old letters in the wind. You were everything, but how to say that? I remember, eventually, sharing them because you said, How else do we get better?

I remember how kind you were, but also how honest. I read like a fiend but had never studied craft. I was meant to work for my father. Textiles, like his father. And his. I remember, before you, not so much a feeling of destiny as of fate. And because my father believed that the best thing he could give us was stability, and because between my brother and me, I was better at numbers, and more reliable . . .

Oh, Abe, you say. That was such a tricky time for you. You didn't trust yourself.

I remember some days, we'd meet at the Ramble shelter in the Park and you'd watercolor; I'd write. I remember the first short story I was ever proud of I wrote as we were perched on a rock. You were making paper-clip flowers, our thighs touching, the sky flamingo pink, reflecting on the silver of my pen.

I remember that one, you say. It was about chess and a night mouse, wasn't it?

It was.

I remember that sometimes, I wouldn't hear from you for days. When I'd buzz your apartment, you'd come down, squinting, white paint in your hair and on your neck, hungry, thirsty, late for your shift. I was working, you'd say. I lost track of time.

In the beginning, it is not that I wrote for you but I had no idea how to make writing a life. Because of you, I found that the more I wrote, the more I wrote. And because a story runs on hope in the beginning, until it grows legs . . . and then it runs on those.

You cough. I lurch. The doctors say the coughing is a good thing: an expulsion. I try to think of it as a sign of life.

You put your hand to where your hair would be. You rub your elbow, squint your eyes, as though you are wishing for something or wishing something away. Me too. Sometimes, it's as if you're blurred. Or maybe: underwater. You move as if in slow motion to rub your nose. It's the medicine. It's everything.

You reach for your legs. They ache in the evenings.

Shall I shut the windows? I say. Turn on a light?

You shake your head. Outside, there is a salt breeze that we dreamed about affording since my first book sold and the Roman collector with a glass eye purchased the giant steel sunflower you welded on our fire escape. In those days, we never would have imagined dying here. When we moved, this place felt like more life.

Do you want to keep on? I say. You nod, close your eyes.

You remember the first time you invited me up. You hadn't noticed how bad it had gotten till I was there: the unpaid bills, laundry, anti-war sign so big that you couldn't see out your window. You

remember I took your laundry to my mother's and your bills and paid them. You remember I opened the window, put the sign on the street.

You remember I brought you matzo ball soup and a silver ashtray. You remember tulips in the Park, pennies at Bethesda. You remember getting yelled at for feeding apples to the horses on Seventy-Ninth and how we did it anyway and then raced down Fifth. You remember the time we got caught, no pants, by a policeman not far from Bow Bridge. We were sure no one was around. You remember tiramisu and the opera. Creativity begets creativity is something you liked to say. Which opera was it? We can't remember.

You remember when you showed me what you'd been working on, it turned out my favorite painting was also yours. Yellow shoes were in it but that's all you remember. It was so long ago now. You sold it to a man who lived in Canada. I remember he was in gas.

## 4

You remember meeting my family. You remember feeling, because of them, that it was as if I'd been taking a vitamin since birth that you never knew existed. As if you were deficient in something that I got.

You remember our first Hanukkah—challah, kugel, brisket, suf-ganiyot. You remember my brother, David. How the good thing about being an outsider is you can spot another outsider from a mile away. You sat together at every brunch, every dinner, every nosh from then until now. We used to call you two Javid Dane.

You remember my father, showing up late, kind but kind of evacuated, reading in the living room as everyone gathered in the kitchen and helped. You remember making eyes at me: that that wouldn't be me. Until then, I hadn't ever placed fault. It wouldn't, I said with my eyes. You were a beacon, a gut check, a litmus test, even then.



You remember how my mother always kept a hand on yours. You remember the first gift she gave you: a blue cashmere shawl. It was so delicate, so mighty. Every woman needs one, she'd said. How could you be anything but grateful? You wore it thin.

And though fussing isn't the same as mothering and no mother could make you miss your own mother less . . .

You remember sandwiches on stoops with David. He was living downtown then too. You went on walks when everyone else was sleeping, played pranks on each other, exchanged rare art books you'd found used.

When was it exactly that he told you he was gay? It was well before he told any of us, certainly. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense.

You close your eyes. You ask me for your rose water. It reminds you of your mother, whose own mother used it on her. I mist your face. Some days, you sweat only on your upper lip, cold everywhere else. They say it's normal. I've stopped asking what's normal, what's not.

I look around. There is a series of your petite watercolors, six, on the wall, gray, blue, violet. Maybe sea, maybe sky. On the shelves: my books, translated into dozens of languages.

Art built this house, I think. Art and your vim.

You remember we were walking by the Ladies Pavilion in the Park when you said that you could not be with someone who would not put their art first.

And I knew then: I would do it—not for you but because of you. Because you, despite everything you'd been through, were the wisest person I'd ever met.

You gave me one year.

For you, art was simple. A one-to-one. For me, there were more variables. I'm not equating loss to freedom, believe me. I know what you'd been through. I am not making excuses either. What I am trying to say is that it was a different time. Is it inane to say that I wanted to please my parents? Is it macho to say that I wanted to take care of you? I'd always felt: I'd write when I could.

You shiver. I cover your legs with a blanket. You made it. You made them all. I sometimes wonder how you knew so much even then. You learned everything from your mother in such a short time. She was one of eleven. Her name, Lulu, meant *pearl* in Arabic.

I long to meet her even now. But it's more than that: I long to give her to you.

You close your eyes. Soon, the room pulls taut with quiet. I put my hand on your chest. I'm not checking so much as reminding myself.

How many times have we done this over the years? I begin to do the math. At first, it's comforting. Soon, the numbers fall down the well.

Go on, you say. Go on, Abe.

I remember when I wasn't with you, I felt it in my jaw. I remember everything I wrote made me think of you and the other way around.

I remember that—for me—that, as they say, was that. And if life is a series of befores and afters . . .

I want to ask you then—forgive me—what it was about me that you loved. For some time, I wasn't the artist you wanted me to be. I was predictable, neither dark nor stormy. Perhaps it was my mother and brother?

Jane? You do not answer.

Then I remember a sound you only ever made—and you made it since the beginning—when I gathered you to my chest. A singy exhale, as if you were laughing but also crying but also writing a poem with your breath. Whewooooooooo. And then we were still, you and me, me and you, cloaked and kept, heart to heart, cheek to chest, belly to belly. Maybe for you, I think, joy in security, security in consistency, consistency in love.

That's something.

Some nights, I sleep beside you in a chair or on a stack of pillows or I rest my head on the wall and sleep like that. I like to count the number of times you shift in your sleep, as if that could do it. Or as if sudden dancing could stop the illness in your bones. As if you could break it, shatter it, with unbridled movement, like a horse, like the wind.

Some nights, I like to count the beautiful things you've made around us—delicate vases, a drawing of us scrawled in wild inky strokes, a string-and-wax sculpture that sparkles in sun, more. It is not just how talented you are. It is that you make things that feel personal—olive branches, love letters, life rafts tossed in. Some nights, I like to remember deep into the darkness. I write it down or don't. Some nights, I can't.

A doe walks by the window. Who would believe that she stops and sniffs your pansies, stuffs her head under a thicket of gold ones so it sits like a crown between her ears?

## 5

The next morning, as I sleep in the chair next to you, you reach for my hand. Abe? you say. For a moment, I forget the last year. For a moment, we are just waking up together. Life to live. Errands to run. And yet, here we are. Medicine to give. Bedpan. Juice. Isn't it something, I think, how sleep can betray even reason, even time.

And yet, your eyebrows and lashes—who knows how they've clung on?—haven't changed since you were twenty-three. It isn't poetic to say horselike, and yet.

Today you are wearing pink-and-white-striped pajamas, a bib on your chest. I will not remember you this way. As if it is a choice. As if you can avoid closing your eyes and fending off a cliff or a body if that is what appears, if that is fate.

Before Bernie, the nurse, comes, you say you want us to do more remembering. You once said that the nurses break a certain seal on the house.

You remember introducing me to Bea, whom you'd met at Cooper Union, who started with the bottlecap forms way back then. You remember meeting my friends from camp, from Wharton: Lee Cohen, Jacob Rosen, Matthew Goldman. A doctor, an accountant, and a lawyer walk into a bar. Every one of them, you said, so adult, and already in the suburbs. Didn't that seem a waste to me? It did and also it did not.

Is it any surprise that they loved you more than me? Is it any surprise that they told me not to lose you, whatever I did?

I remember how many weddings we went to, how you slipped your foot into a high heel, dabbed lipstick on your bottom lip, braided your hair down the side. How fully formed you were even then. Like concrete, cast. I remember how you sucked on lemon wedges, touched everyone on the arm, danced with people much older than us. I remember how you made them feel younger but it wasn't just that. It was as if you gave everyone rhythm. Even me. I remember from across a crowded room, you called my name: as if you threw it into the air for me to catch. I remember how you always reminded me to bring a notebook. And you always brought a pen in your pocketbook for us to share.

In those years, we told each other everything, except whenever I talked about work, you covered your ears. Abe, it is time, you said. If you really want to be an artist, you have to act like one.

It was our fundamental rift, wasn't it? Where we came from, and therefore where we felt compelled to end up. I know, I'd

tell you. And I did. Still, I had responsibilities that you did not, though I didn't know how to put them to good use. You, on the other hand, used your grief like momentum. It carried you, compelled you.

I just asked you to wait. I begged you.

You remember it was 1970 when I told you I'd bought a brownstone near the Park. I'd borrowed money from my parents. I remember not telling you that—the part about my parents. I gave you a set of keys. We stood in the foyer, sipping champagne. You remember herringbone floors, stained-glass windows, the “maid's quarters” with beautiful north light. I told you it could be your studio, if you wanted.

You remember fighting it at first—it wasn't money from art—but taking the keys anyway. You had been fired from another restaurant job. You were painting pearls and also finches. I remember how you made beaks so small and quick they were like heartbeats. You remember feeling, for the first time, that they might be something. They might be really something. You just needed more time in your head. Restaurants were demanding, demeaning places. I bought you an easel, a terra-cotta planter for your brushes.

In the meantime, I signed up for a class.

You remember trying to make a deal with me: you'd move in when I quit, when I really, really quit. Move in now, I said, and if things were the same in eighteen months . . .

It didn't feel like lying. It felt like hope that things might sort.

I remember our love making me feel lighter. You remember it making you feel more solid. You suggest a metaphor here. Feet in the sand as the tide goes out? Yes, you say. I write it down but there is no rhyme or reason to this work.

You get tired. Today you are happy. It was a good day. You close your eyes. It does not feel like surrender. It isn't mine to give up.

Remember, Jane, that time we rented a tandem bicycle? I ask just to keep you with me. It was years later. Remember how fast we went down that hill in the Park near Ninety-Third? You nod, but so often, you just do.

I'm not really asking you these things. You couldn't answer anyhow. But it's habit: the expectation of your response. Like catching an apple that you've batted my way. The satisfaction of that. The sacred code.

Sometimes, when your eyes are closed, I cover my face. Sometimes, my greatest accomplishment in a day is to not wish desperately to go first.



## 6

### CENTRAL PARK

The Park is open 365 days of the year from six a.m. to one a.m. though there are no gates or locks, nothing to keep anyone out if there is a passionate desire to get in. At certain times of year, activity is prohibited on Pilgrim Hill due to significant dog-related damage, too much humping and romping—especially with the greyhounds and French bulldogs. Especially the males. The Great Lawn does close for the season—and is padlocked. It makes Park fondling harder in the winter months. It is harder, anyway, standing up, no warm surface to lie upon.

The Park was designed in 1858 according to the Greensward Plan, inspired by the English countryside and developed by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, who married the widow of his brother, John. There is a book about their romance, having much to do with the Park. There was a fierce design competition, with thirty-two