

Evan Rehill

The Garden or the Empire

She comes from New York, New Jersey—that’s how all her trouble started, and where it still lies. Can she begin this story again? No. She grew up on the Hudson in the oldest house in the county. Her earliest childhood memories involve the place falling apart. The roof blew away in pieces. Holes punched through every step to the front door. Its basement flooded. None of the closet nor bedroom doors closed in summer; no sooner would a door be sanded down than the humidity would shift again, altering the frames. In winter the walls molded and they had to spray them with bleach then scrub, scour, spray; spray, scour, scrub until spring, when they repainted, hoping the fungus would not return, but it always did, always had, always knew to, probably is still blooming black in a white corner of her former bedroom just this moment.

Right now a glare through the train’s window blocks her view of the landscape she travels. Tunneling through her purse’s chewed-up pens and melted Jolly Ranchers, the sunglasses and paperback, crumpled receipts, expired coupons, unopened bills, her Binaca and pepper spray, the ring that holds every key to all the apartments she has ever lived, she finds the greeting card that reads *From This Day Forward*. Under its cover she will pen her signature and insert a pair of fifty-dollar bills. As she frees her wallet and pries it open, contents spill into her lap. She recovers her driver license (expired), Discover card (deactivated), library membership (delinquent), the Union card where her most recent photograph stares back. Eyes of bitter chocolate, her trademark frosted hair, a patrician nose, the chin that doubles if she does not angle herself right. Take a good look at

her—thirty-seven years old and single in 1989. In the realm of the overeducated yet underemployed, she has been many things since college: flower arranger, coat check attendant, copy editor for self-help books, delivery person, photographer of school portraits, ice sculptor, desk clerk at a Chelsea hotel that is not the Chelsea Hotel. The last is the one job she has kept, will keep, must hold on to, cannot lose. You reach a certain age when employers read your résumé and wonder what you've been doing with your life.

The hotel will soon have benefits, a retirement plan, automatic pay increases for time you serve. Wearing a beard and a toupee, the Local 124 representative explained all this to her. He unites neighborhood smut hotels like hers to protect the workers.

The sex workers? she asked.

No, he said, people like you.

And I'm supposed to pay? For protection?

All you pay are dues, monthly, out of your check.

But my checks are small enough already.

Consider it insurance.

She said, *Where's the money go?*

He said, *Let's say somebody calls a strike, that money pays you for the time you're not working.*

I need a weekend off in August. Can I call a strike for that?

You only go on strike when you need to call for help. It's your way of having a voice.

What do you get out of it? she said. *What's your cut?*

I'm one of the good guys, lady.

A man who says that is always lying.

What are you doing for dinner tonight?

Strike! she yells. *I'm calling a strike right now!*

She works midnight to 8 AM. The only customers come from a west side "gentlemen's club" where you need a dinner jacket to enter; inside you can wolf a steak and guzzle a martini while talking to a topless girl. In the private back rooms the girls light candles, snort the men's coke, laugh while twirling their locks, but do not get any further naked. The men they bring to the hotel all sign their names *John* in the guest book, excavating rolled twenty-dollar bills out of the pockets of designer slacks. The slacks have wax stains over the inner thighs. A trick used in the club's back rooms: a girl holds a glass-belled candle over a panting man's lap, her hand in

his gelled hair as she whispers, *Make a wish . . . how about a nice, slow . . .* and he blows so hard on the flame it SPLATS—hot wax oozing into his 500 thread count. *That needs immediate attention*, the girl says, and leads him to the hotel.

The last girl was all bracelets and eye shadow. She leaned across the reception desk until the musk of her perfume poured from her tube top. *You got an iron?* she said. *In the room, you got an iron? The steam kind? That's how we get wax free. Iron those slacks, inside out.* She loosened the man's tie and said to him, *Wouldn't I make the perfect wife?*

Perfect, he said, placing a hand on the backside of her faux leather miniskirt. The girl choked him with her tongue until he gagged.

Behind her desk, she adjusted her blazer with a shrug and said to the man, *You need a full name, in the ledger. We require a surname, sir.*

The man looked like all the men who arrived in that office, with drunken eyes but powdered hands twitching as though touched by some loose wire as they shocked, steadied themselves, and scrawled: *Doe*.

Otherwise the graveyard shift stayed dead. In an elevated swivel chair, her feet eighteen inches above the cigarette-burned carpet, she read the same Virginia Woolf book checked out from her local branch downtown in January. No *Room* and no *Lighthouse*—those titles stayed in endless circulation. Each night she cracked the spine and started at the beginning, the prose washing over her so she was more meditating than reading, absorbed but unfulfilled. She had once dreamed of a life where she could read uninterrupted. But on those long nights she felt relieved when somebody would pound on the glass door. Spread-eagling the book on the desk, she eyed the mannequin laid out on the floor behind her. The mannequin had gotten smuggled into a room upstairs then left behind. No sign of abuse, only vulnerability. Its nakedness, and wiglessness. From the waist down it was sexless, but it had breasts the size of two cupcakes, with nipples pointing out of each like unlit birthday candles. The maintenance man who found the mannequin stood it behind the reception desk. When she'd come in at midnight and found it she said to the maintenance man, *Isn't our image bad enough?* and placed the mannequin on its back. It took up half the cramped floor space. Now she wanted to cover it with a sheet. The banging on the door rose in pitch and she shook her head, buzzing in the stilettos, the wingtips.

Fleeing New York, New Jersey at eighteen she escaped to New York, New York. Some of the friends she grew up with relocated to the West Coast. Postcards arrived from California where everybody kept happy under the sun and no one

missed winter. *Don't be a stranger*, the postcards said. *Come visit*. She did not visit, having never yearned to go west. Easterly is her compass point. Even Manhattan, she told herself, was a sojourn, for she belonged further away, in Europe, not a high and mighty Scandinavia or magisterial Britain or the expansive Netherlands, but the razed east (east again), into the cracked shells of Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria—those besieged lands where the names of streets and buildings and parks and playgrounds had been altered, revised, changed, taken away. Along the fringed borders she would find gypsies and join their caravan. She would say: *I belong with you. I am from New York, New Jersey*, and they would leave her in the dust, the sand, the mud, the blades, the frost. For she cannot bond with gypsies, herself having a connection to a fixed place on a map. And this coordinate point marks the one thing she has against her.

Where you come from will always get held against you.

You only need one thing against you.

You only need one thing against you to be held, to never be held.

Behold: she blames where she is from for her conflict with relationships.

She flirted with casual sex. One rule she put out: no questions. But still the query came, kept coming. Reverse psychology seemed a viable option. Slips of the tongue. A repositioning. *I'm from New Jersey, New York*, she trilled, naked, sweating, the B-cups of her brassiere over the lampshade glowing a preternatural gold.

Beneath her a hirsute stranger gasped, *I mean originally*.

Tit for tat.

With men she comes down. With women she falls flat. In her one ménage a trois she pulls a French Exit. Alone she goes astray. Her pets run off. All the plants dry up at their roots. She dips fingers into the hardened soil and says, *Screw ME*.

With men she comes down. With women she falls flat.

The world unwinds outside the window of this train, its engine accelerating her toward her sister. Her only sister. Her younger sister all grown up. Twenty years before this her sister, a teenager, silkscreened t-shirts all colors and sizes that read: *I heart New York, New Jersey*. Everybody in town bought one or two. For a year her sister became rich, a celebrity, some precocious entrepreneur. Her sister lavished in fame; it no longer mattered if she was pretty or smart or athletic or gifted or kind. *I-heart-girl*, they called her sister. Popularity reigned king, and her sister became queen.

But she dethroned herself by falling for a complete nobody in the high school band. The first (and only) chair in his section. Her truest love. Her swain. He who

would become her off-again/on-again switch for the next seventeen years. The one who refused to go all the way away. *He'll never marry me*, her sister said when graduating high school. The siblings sat at the kitchen table drinking apricot wine coolers. *And all because he's adopted.*

I used to wish—

Everybody does who isn't.

To be able to say, 'My whole life is a lie!'

That's what he—

That's what he says?

He says his BLOOD MOTHER—that's what he calls her—cut herself out of his life. That his foster parents are strangers. That he'll always feel thrown away. That intimacy gives him the creeps. And trust—he can't trust anyone. He says trust is for string players.

Am I missing something?

He plays the bassoon.

Ten years ago, after their mother's service, the bassoonist left again. In her arms she cradled her sister and said nothing.

Seven years ago the siblings sat in what they still called their mother's living room, on a slumped sofa, leafing through the yellowed copies of magazines.

She earmarked a page of a *Cosmopolitan* with an article on better-sex advice then turned to her sister. *You should have had multiple orgasms with many many men.*

I wanted a home life.

I wanted an away-from-home life.

I never had a dad.

Me neither.

I wanted a man who'd settle.

You never should have started reading those magazines you're reading—what are you reading there? 'Bitter Homes and Gardens'?

Five years back she said to her sister, *Maybe this is what it is.*

Maybe this-is-what-it-is is not enough, her sister said.

So? Pop the question.

That's not how it works.

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Two years gone:

It's not the end of the world.

I'm 34. The bastard.

He'll get tired of her. He'll come crawling back.

Maybe I'll move away.

That's a laugh.

I'm not kidding—bastard!

At the hotel desk the phone rang late into the night. Lifting the receiver she breathed heavy into the mouthpiece then said, *How can you help me?* The purr of static in her ear convinced her this was another prank call. Studying the buttons before her, she punched in the number of her childhood home. When the familiar notes finished she righted herself and said, *I mean, how can I help YOU?*

People help themselves, said the voice of the Local 124 representative.

The clock beside the hotel ledger read 4:03 AM. From a room above the office, a woman screamed, *Give it to me, Daddy! Oh, yesyesyesyesyes, give it here, oh Daddy!*

I'm getting busy just now, she said.

Rush hour, the rep said. *Sounds inviting.*

She hung up and swiveled a fast 180 in her chair before the spring release snapped, the seat pitching her forward. Plunging to the floor, she landed atop the supine mannequin, whose bullet-pointed nipples shot into her ribs. She cried out. The woman upstairs sired. No one came.

Last year, during the worst snowstorm in northeastern history, her sister opened the front door of the house to find the bassoon player apologizing in slurs. Snowflakes dusted his long eyelashes. Over his broad shoulders giant elms swung. Hail pounded the tin awning above. The telephone wires whipped the flanks of their poles.

Why do you stink of cinnamon? she said.

He spat a wad of pink chewing gum onto the *Home Sweet Home* doormat, falling to his knees over the threshold. With a bare foot she kicked him in the teeth so hard he somersaulted backwards off the porch. Blood smeared across her pedicure. Through the hail she ran to his slumped body, punching for the kidneys as she tackled. Rolling through the snow he throttled her neck with ungloved hands before catching the thrust of his kneed testicles. He curled into himself, whimpering, unable to feel his fingertips. When she kneeled beside him he swallowed his pain to slap her hard the first time, harder the second. His handprint stayed on her cheek.

She boxed his ears, split his lip. Curbside Christmas carolers dropped their jaws and sheet music. By the ankles he dragged her back to the house, kicking a permanent dent into an illuminated plastic reindeer. He bent to her in the slush, intoxicated by the scent of her vanilla shampoo. She elbowed him with an uppercut to the chin and he took it, lifting her familiar body in his swollen arms. Then they disappeared into the front door, through the living room, to the kitchen and down the stairs for the basement where they ripped, unzipped, tore loose, stumbled free, cursing all the way into and throughout the acts that fixed them again, there beside the furnace on the cot where seventeen years earlier they lost their virginity together the first time.

The siblings had a rendezvous come spring. Perennials bloomed in their dead mother's garden. Across the renewed grass, rabbits darted. Green flashed in all directions. The Hudson looked gray as ever. Seated on lawn furniture nearing its last legs, the siblings drank lemonade. A warm breeze caressed their faces, necks, their bare arms. A lock of hair blew into her sister's painted lips. She spat it out and said, *Shotgun*, a ringed finger glaring from the waistline of her low-rise jeans.

I'll be damned.

All her cousins (eight girls, turned eight women) plus her sister continue to live in the town where she grew up. They buy or, like her sister, inherit houses with which they are familiar. By pointing to a doorknob, some tablecloth, the penciled names in a jamb, one scorched oven mitt, knives all sizes they can say: *Now THERE'S a story*. The saga of any family relies on casting a spell. This makes legends pass among us and down the line. You know where you are—even your past selves who enter these epics—by your part in the narrative. Without the stories we no longer exist. Is this why people decide to have children?

For other people—this was her maxim from eighteen years old. Kids: for other people. Marriage: for other people. Also for other people: brunch, romantic comedies, happy hour. Talk about investments, genuine holiday cheer, Long Island as 'the country,' bridge, horoscopes—for others.

No easy fixes, the baby-faced doctor with the blonde ponytail said at the free clinic. He wore a yin-yang pendant instead of a stethoscope. His voice sounded like the speaker on an anti-anxiety cassette: *The nature of a bruise is memory*. Like Bob Ross on television, painting a lake black with blue. *It hurts a long time before it heals*.

She buttoned her blouse, watching him cross the room. *Do you always dance when you walk?* she said.

It helps.

With health?

I would say it helps with happiness.

I'm unhappy.

Yes. Yes, I can see.

How long until I'm better?

You have to WANT to get better. Action follows longing.

I want to get better. I want to be longing.

We'll follow up next week. Schedule a date.

At daybreak on a Sunday morning she propped open the hotel's lobby door. Boats moaned from the Hudson. Returning behind the desk, she climbed up onto the new three-legged stool. The day burst bright already at 7 AM. Mid-yawn, she stretched, reaching for her paperback when the wounded rib shocked in her chest. She embraced herself, bracing herself, writhing until tears spat from her eyes and the Union rep slipped through the open door. No clipboard. No hairpiece. His beard trimmed in a fashion almost stylish. He wore a tie, a crisp shirt. Jeans and dress shoes. At the reception desk he stood, groomed, looking to her. *Are you in pain?*

Yes, she said.

Constipation?

I got dumped.

Me too! Me. Too. A year ago. My girlfriend, he said and looked around, lowering his voice, *she left me for an independent contractor.*

Mine was just a piece of furniture.

Thrown out of the love seat?

There was no love. The hurt in her chest had already diminished. She exhaled. *No love.*

He said, I've come to apologize.

No love at all.

She suffers the air conditioning here in the lower level of the train's double-decker express. Her arms form an X across her breasts. Trees the green of emerald, olive, kelly, sage, paris, jade are sucked back out her window frame as the train rushes

onward. With hands tucked into the safety of armpits, her thumb grazes the two-week-old bruised rib.

Outside the August temperature climbs to ninety-eight degrees. The overhead vents gush frozen vapor. Darkness slants the low ceiling and narrow aisle. She could almost drift off and dream herself an Eskimo in a traveling igloo. The Eskimos have 100 words for snow, another hundred for kisses. Her lips purse. Her eyelids flutter. On the verge of forgetting the rib, the ride, herself and where she's headed, she snaps alert to someone entering the boxcar, singing. *Fairy tales can come true*
. . . First a warbling voice, then a waddling man.

**Spooked me, lady.
Didn't expect a
traveler in the
ghost car.**

The conductor's legs appear at the foot of the stairs in orthopedic shoes. These go eclipsed by an enormous belly—*It can happen to youuuu*—straining the fabric of a half-untucked shirt. Burst blood vessels arch the bridge of a small nose. Unabashed, free of inhibitions, vulnerable no more he maneuvers the aisle, crooning off-key, *When you're . . . young . . . at . . .* and freezes at the sight of her. His hand covers a shirt pocket clogged with paperclips and breath mints. Clearing his throat, he pounds at the doughy chest as he says, *Spooked me, lady. Didn't expect a traveler in the ghost car.*

Her ticket stub juts from an arbitrary place in *The Waves* (she has mislaid bookmarks, forgotten many dog ears, tried to hold on to the chapter, paragraph, sentence, word she reached; after starting over or trying to find her way back, she lulls under the narrative again, losing her place again). As she frees the stub the book falls open and she reads: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?” Handing her proof of purchase to the conductor, she returns her gaze to the window. She has no idea where they are.

You're the end of the line, he says, tearing her ticket. *Not much time left.* Consulting a silver-banded wristwatch, he says, *You a New Yorker?*

She has lived on the island of Manhattan a year longer than the place of her birth. Her eyes glass over. *I'm not anything*, she says, closing the book.

The conductor hefts his weight from right to left, following her gaze through the window. *The view's why this car is always empty. Not too many passengers choose a seat facing backwards.*

In a rail car diner on Tenth Avenue, where the waitresses wore stained pink uniforms that could not hide their sleeved tattoos, where taxi drivers entered in brawls

with one another over stolen fares, where last night's hustlers counted out cash on the back of a toilet in the unisex bathroom, where old men cursed at their newspapers in Sicilian, Yiddish, Chinese, Arabic, Greek, she sat solitary in a booth, a half-full glass of Coca-Cola sweating in her hands. She tossed it back in one long swallow. The sugar rushed in her veins the same as when she stood atop sand dunes down the shore—a ten-year-old crushing an aluminum can in a small fist.

It's you, a voice said. Before her stood the ponytailed doctor. He wore unlaced high tops, shorts with a belt, Blue-Blocker sunglasses ordered off late-night television. In his arms a potted philodendron; it looked wilted—a goner. Taking a seat across from her in the booth, he said, *Cosmic threads, tightening. Because I just came in to use the payphone, to call the office and have them cancel our engagement this morning. All on account of this plant.* He poured her full glass of water into the philodendron's soil. When a puddle spread across the table, he asked a passing waitress for a rag. *This one's having a moment*, he said, pointing to the plant.

The waitress said, *Know exactly how she feels*, toweling down the surface then hobbling off. She walked with a limp.

I have a weakness for the injured, he said, petting the plant. *Abandoned on a street corner—can you imagine? Left behind. We're headed downtown to catch a ferry for Staten Island. Best free view of Manhattan. A healing journey.*

You cancelled a physical examination with me to nurse that plant?

Trauma victim, he said. *But we're lucky. Today's a good day to want to live.*

Hand in hand, she cracks her knuckles and considers the wedding she is en route to. (Pop) How many bridesmaid dresses has she already suffered. (Pop) How many bouquets got choked in waiting. (Pop) How many best men turned away. (A writhing but no sound) At all those holy matrimonyes her high heels sunk into the earth when crossing a lawn, meadow, field, golf course, dell, hollow.

I'm the lone solo act, she will tell a stranger at tonight's rehearsal dinner. This person will think she is a performer for tomorrow's ceremony, an amateur magician who plucks bunnies from top hats, releases doves from her sleeves. To weddings she wears a cape. Smiling into his overwhelmed plate of cheese and grapes, he (he will be a he) will excuse himself to find his girlfriend across the crowded room.

The girlfriend, having witnessed their exchange with interest, then confusion, followed by fear turned to rage, waits. Too far off to hear the voices, she has instead tried to read their lips.

An example: *I'm the lone solo act* became *I'm lusting for your sack*.

Another example: *You must excuse me; goodbye* translated *You, me, rug burn—later*.

When the boyfriend reunites with the girlfriend, the girlfriend will smack the plate from his hand and say, *WHO IS SHE?*

By the time this occurs she will be taking her seat at the assigned table with her cousins and their extensions. She will kiss the cousins. Hug the husbands. Ask after their vacations, jobs, their kids' sports and plays, crushes and heartbreaks. She will stay present by listening, inquiring further, touching down a hand to a padded shoulder with a squeeze.

The cousins catch themselves in time. Shaking their long brown hair (has it been mentioned all the cousins—plus her sister—are deep brunettes? She pictures her own image pointed to in group portraits by family members who explain: *There's our frosted sheep*), they will say *What about YOU? What are you up to?* Stabbing a fork into a Jersey tomato they will say, *How's that big rotten apple?* Maybe the act of leaving New York, New Jersey formed the root of her problem. If she'd stayed in her hometown, would she ever have questioned her place, her part, her past, future, present self?

She will dig out the guts when lobster is served. Cracking shells, she will strip the tail, break the legs, suck meat from claws, squeeze lemons over her veined hands. Before the coffee and desserts arrive, while others pull bibs from their necks and nod off into upright naps, the chandeliers overhead will sway, their lights brightening and dimming according to the state of the generator. Someone will play the piano; banquet rooms such as this all house a baby grand for the token bachelor uncle or estranged solitary second cousin who makes his appearance but is not remembered by anybody (*I'm your late mother's first—*). Seeing the blank expressions on the faces he addresses, he will excuse himself and play a Chopin waltz on the keys.

Across the room a young woman will point her direction with a severed lobster claw. Pounding the heels of his hands on the table hard enough for all the silverware to leap, the boyfriend will shout, *SHE'S THE ENTERTAINMENT!*

While she adjusts her cape, the bruised rib will throb its painful note. A shiv below the bust, twisting. She will cover the pain with a splayed hand, knowing only then she must return to the doctor next week, not to discuss her suffering but to ask after the ferry, to check up on the plant; too late she realizes how she appears caught, red-handed, feeling herself up at the dinner table.

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Now she arrives. The train's engine slows. The windows steady. The sea is there. She gathers her overnight bag, her clutch. Her book. The train pulls into the station. On her feet, she walks down the aisle to where the steps begin. Climbing up, up, and out she enters white sunlight. Her chills melt off. Sweat diamonds her throat. She tastes the ocean's salt across her lips, scents violets from a peddler's cart, hears the wail of some cat stuck in a tree's branches. A carved wooden sign spells out: *Welcome Back*. She has never been to this place. Far from both states that have laid claim to her, she understands it no longer matters where she's from—only what she's come to. What has she come to? Portland—not Oregon; Maine.