

I N T R O D U C T I O N

IN THE LATE WINTER OF 1955, MOM SAT IN ONE OF THE BURGUNDY fake-leather chairs in Dr. McClelland's waiting room, leafing through an issue of *The New Yorker* from 1950. The décor was in keeping with the magazine's vintage—the steel-frame chairs, as well as the muted peach walls and the tall metal rack where she had chosen the magazine, had been exactly the same since my mother's childhood—a room separate from the passing of time. Ankles crossed primly but distracted by the lethargic, lightheaded way she had been feeling for days, my mother glanced briefly out the sole window at the dismal sky, searching for signs of an early spring. When she glanced back down, she was too fuzzy-brained to be devoting any serious attention to the magazine's contents. But a particular illustration caught her eye amid the flick of pages.

My mother often mused about the seemingly haphazard chain of events. That she would pick up a magazine she generally looked down on for its stuffy snobbery. That she would leaf through the pages in her absent-minded lassitude and somehow be captivated by a small illustration of a flower market at the bottom of two solid pages of type. That the unobtrusive, restrained typeface of the story that filled those

two pages would catch her eye. “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor.” She glanced at the writer’s name. My mother had not heard of J.D. Salinger, though she considered herself a very serious reader. She glanced back at the title. And she swore that in that exact moment, staring at the title for the second time, she understood the reason for her malaise. She was, she felt certain, pregnant. She further understood, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that her quickly-dividing embryo was to be a girl, and that the girl’s name might be Esmé—depending on whether she liked the story as much as her intuition told her she would.

Does our parents’ choice of name influence who we are to become?

Swahili speakers in Kenya give their babies a name at birth, which usually refers to the newborn’s appearance or the circumstances surrounding the birth itself. But up to forty days afterward, the parents and paternal grandparents choose the final, adult name with great care.

In parts of India, it is believed that each child’s birth is ruled by a *nakshatra*, or birth star constellation. The *nakshatra* is thought to play a significant role in determining the characteristics of the child, and many parents follow certain sounds or syllables based on the *nakshatras*—all of which are determined after the child is born.

Some parents in China seek fortune tellers to help name their children instead of relying on more usual traditions. Some believe that the child may lack one of the four elements, depending on the time and circumstances of the birth, which

can lead parents to choose a name that incorporates the element the child could be deficient in.

Dr. McClelland’s nurse Ruth opened the inner waiting room door to usher my mother into the doctor’s office. My mother had known Ruth since Ruth had been the nurse for the first Dr. McClelland, when Ruth was a young woman and my mother was a little girl. Ruth’s face looked remarkably similar to how she had always looked, but her body had undergone a gradual widening that gave the impression that her younger self had been somehow inflated, as if Ruth’s body had expanded in direct proportion to her diminishing time.

“Ruth,” my mother said, waving the April 8, 1950 issue of *The New Yorker* back and forth. “I know why I’ve been feeling so poorly. I’m going to have a baby!”

Ruth well understood that she was getting on in years and feared that she didn’t always catch on to things as she once had. “The magazine told you that you’re pregnant?”

My mother laughed and put her hand gently on Ruth’s arm. “No, no. I just figured it out while I was *reading* the magazine. And she’s going to be a girl. I’m sure of it.”

Ruth dabbed at her eye and said, “Thank the Lord, that I have lived long enough to see my babies have babies of their own,” and she threw her arms around my mother and drew her as close as Ruth’s tremendous bosom would allow. “If only Dr. McClelland could have lived to see this. The first Dr. McClelland.”

“I don’t need to see the doctor, Ruth. Not yet. Not so early. But would you please ask Dr. McClelland if I can borrow this

magazine? There's something I'd like to read. I promise to return it."

"I don't need to ask him, and you don't need to return it. For heaven's sake, do you think Dr. McClelland has any idea what's in his own waiting room? Just get your rest, and make sure that sweet boy takes good care of you. You can tell him I said so." It is highly likely that Ruth—who had known my father, like my mother, since his birth—was the only person who ever thought of him as a "sweet boy." Not that he didn't have a deep warmth and a certain sweetness, but it was so overshadowed by his towering, smoldering seriousness. Even when I was a young child, even when he laughed and played with me, I always sensed a weight. It was as if gravity exerted a stronger pull on him, and he could never break free.

"I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."

It was not until many years later that I realized my father had stolen that line from Virginia Woolf's suicide note to her husband.

"Never, never blame your mother, Esmé," my father had written. "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."

I could not read when I was five years old. I had not been to school yet and so still lived in a world of runes and hieroglyphics that remained one of many mysterious parts that comprised the realm of older people. I could not understand what my daddy had been thinking when I found the envelope

underneath my pillow. I found it when I reached for my pajamas, which I folded up each morning and placed under my pillow to wear again that night. I knew his handwriting, and I could read my own name—E S M E—which he had written in in large blue letters with rounded, curly edges.

On the other side of the envelope, there were more letters written across the flap: "S-E-C-R-E-T."

I put the envelope back where I'd found it.

When my mother came in to read a story and kiss me good-night, I asked her what S-E-C-R-E-T spelled. She told me, and I decided that I needed to find a very special, very s-e-c-r-e-t place to hide the envelope the next morning. "Can you read me two stories tonight? I'm a little wee bit scared."

Two stories?" my mother said. "Goodness! I suppose if they're short ones, we can. Just tonight, though."

"When is Daddy going to be home?" I asked her.

"I'm not sure," my mother said. "I'm never sure. But you know he always checks on you. Whenever he gets home."

"Promise?" I asked.

"Of course, I promise, silly billy" she said. "He always does."

F A L L 2 0 1 9

C H A P T E R 1

I HAVE BEEN READING MY BOOKS ALOUD TO AUDIENCES, AND signing copies, and shaking hands, and making small talk, for most of my life. I have never been able to figure out why I get *so* nervous sometimes—jumpy and clammy and hands shaking—and other times, not nervous at all. At those times, I feel comfy and relaxed, like every single person staring at me is a kind and kindred soul who wishes me nothing but the best. But this was one of the nervous times.

Sometimes I wonder if my past catches up with me in a funny sort of way. I think about where I came from, the distance I've traveled in life, and the distance feels so far that I need to remind myself that it's real.

I came from a place where dreams were small. Not small because folks lacked the courage, or the vision, to dream bigger, but because small dreams were a great pleasure, a gentle way to approach a life of contentment. The people directly across the street from Mom and me lived in a tiny little house. I had no brothers or sisters, and no father from the time I was five. I watched the Kimballs' comings and goings from our windows. They were my model of everything a family was supposed to be. As a family of five, they crawled all over one another

just going about the business of living their lives in their little home. They made giant bowls of popcorn and watched TV together. They whipped up batches of frosting for no special reason and made them into sandwiches with graham crackers. They had loud arguments. They laughed all the time. The two older children were already teenagers when the family was able to afford their first dishwasher. They rang our doorbell to tell us the news. They invited Mom and me over to see it, and they offered us frosting sandwiches. They—the Kimball family—walked on air, such was the level of their glee.

Before that reading, I found myself thinking about the Kimball family, smiling at the thought of their graham crackers bookending a thick slab of pink frosting.

Perhaps it's not the past that catches up with me, but rather the other way around. Perhaps I get so lost in the past that it's the present that takes me by surprise.

I parked right in front of the old Irish pub where the reading was scheduled. I had gotten there plenty early. I always got to the reading locations early. I would check out the room, feel the feel of it for a while. Rooms hold their histories, their stories, if you take the time to pay attention, look around, and listen to the walls. Some rooms hold on to their stories; these rooms are grim and tight-fisted and fearful that their tales, their precious histories, will be stolen from them, and they will be left with nothing. Other rooms are dying to tell you about their pasts. It leaks out everywhere—the place where broken paneling reveals the tattered stuffing within the walls where a chair toppled during a drunken argument. The chip

on a faded picture frame of an equally faded painting holds the memory of an exuberant toast given during a bachelorette party, though the marriage was fraught with deception from well before the wedding itself. The exact places where much-varnished wood has been rubbed raw by a bartender who polishes endlessly when conversations sadden him past the point of endurance. He sidles along the bar, moving away from the words. He rubs, and he rubs.

This was a friendly room. Old, even tired, but welcoming. A room that stretched out its hand and let you know it was pleased that you had come.

Nonetheless, I was nervous before that reading. I ordered a glass of red wine from the server and was thrilled that it was such a generous pour. Clutching my wine tankard as if it were a lifeline, I sat down at a table near the far back of the lengthy, narrow-ish room to look over the passage I would be reading. Except what I had thought was the far back of the room turned out to be far *front*, which became clear when a woman began setting up the microphone right next to where I sat. The woman was very tall, with a wild head of hair that crowned a broad body. She was one of those people who managed to project a strong air of dramatic exuberance well before they opened their mouths and said a word. It might have been the vintage mini skirt and thigh-high boots rather than an astute acuity on my part that gave her away, plus the fact that she took a breathtaking amount of time to set a simple microphone stand in the center of the room and rest the microphone in the stand's holder.