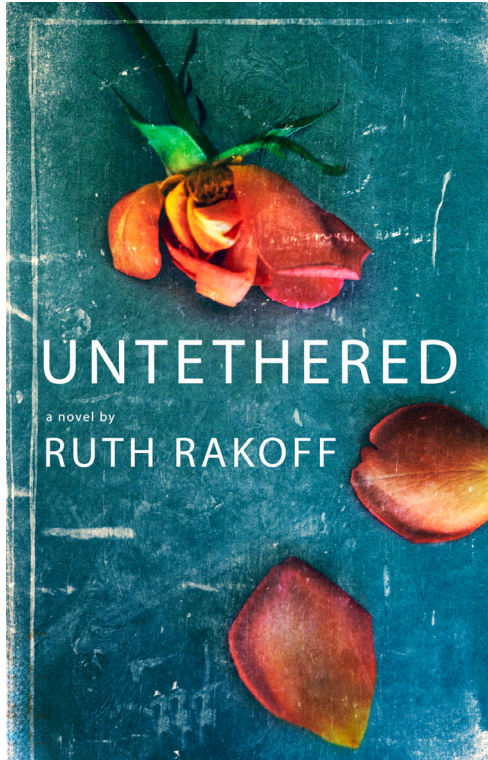


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by Ruth Rakoff



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Liberation from months of built-up stress had left Petal with a tension-release migraine that throbbed so hard behind her left eye she knew she was about to vomit. She made the obligatory pass to shake hands with each member of her thesis committee and excused herself. Three steps down the echoey hallway of NYU, Petal barfed in the miraculously convenient garbage can.

Celebration's never been my strong suit, she thought.

Benjamin was waiting in her lobby with a bottle of chilled champagne and a bouquet of flowers. Petal squinted her left eye and pointed to her temple.

"Dr. Wolffe, I presume?" Benjamin said, handing her his gifts.

Petal kissed him on the cheek, muttered a barely audible, "Thanks," and took the elevator up to her apartment to sleep off her good-news migraine. Tomorrow, she would revel in her success. Tomorrow, she would call Der.

Petal woke feeling human. She pulled on her jeans, sniffed the armpits of the closest T-shirt, brushed the night off her teeth, and headed out to meet Benjamin. Her phone purred inside the kangaroo pocket of her oversized hoodie as she locked the door behind her. *I will not let anything interfere with today*, she thought, placing the key on top of the doorframe. Benjamin had warned her against this reckless practice in New York City, but she prided herself on having nothing worth stealing in her five hundred square feet other than the two-ton Murphy bed he had forced her to buy. Petal wasn't good at ownership.

“You cannot continue to live in this place!” Benjamin had decreed the first time he’d visited her previous apartment, a dingy studio with a bathtub in the kitchen. “This ‘Joad abode’ is a straight shot to razor blade land! I must find you something better!” He’d made it his mission. He’d practically camped out in the lobby of the building across the street from his Tudor City apartment when he heard about a vacancy, accosting the building manager and forcing a cash deposit into his fist.

Petal moved in with nothing but her two duffel bags of old clothes and books. Benjamin was appalled. “A bed! A chair! A plate that doesn’t come from the thrift store, complete with someone else’s scars and stains!”

He took her shopping. Petal hated shopping.

They lay side by side on the Princess and the Pea model at Manhattan Murphy Beds.

“You need to live like an adult. You need to believe you are worthy of owning two thousand pounds of stuff! And you can’t underestimate the importance of back support,” Benjamin encouraged.

Petal sighed deeply. The salesman rolled his eyes. “It comes in white and grey. Glossy or matte.”

“We’ll take it,” Benjamin said.

“We’ll?” Petal said. “Does that mean you’re going to pay the ridiculous price for this bed?”

“You know I would give you anything, Pet, but I’m afraid that would defeat the purpose of this particular purchase. Don’t think of it as paying for a bed. Think of it as buying roots.”

Petal bought the Murphy bed, spending endless wakeful hours between the time of purchase and delivery contemplating how she could have so much inherited proverbial baggage but no actual baggage.

Petal checked her back pocket for a lighter.

She checked her watch: 8:43. It always said 8:43. Petal found its consistency reassuring.

Her phone buzzed again. She tried not to check but then thought she should since it might be Der.

“I knew it!” she said out loud to nobody, her sister’s number glowing. She pocketed the phone and took the elevator down.

The beautiful spring weather meant she would meet Benjamin across the road in the small courtyard behind his building instead of under the sheltered front awning of 325 East 41st Street.

For four years, they had been meeting every morning no matter the weather at exactly 8:45 a.m. Benjamin brought strong black coffee in ironically garish mugs, Petal brought two cigarettes, and together they shared what they referred to as their “morning motivator.” When the weather was at its worst, Benjamin would leave the coffee on the large table in the Tudor-style lobby of his building while they cowered under the awning by the front door, smoking their one-a-day. They would drink their coffee at the theatrical table where Benjamin liked to pretend to be a medieval knight, showcasing his impeccable comic timing and acting talent. Petal always squirmed with self-conscious embarrassment when he nudged her to play along.

“Sir Codswallop, has your pillaging been profitable of late?” he would prompt.

Petal would blush, nestling her face as far into her coffee mug as she could.

“I say, my dear man, have the wenches on your travels been as ample of bosom as you are of bottom?” he’d prod.

“I really have to play this game every time we sit at this table? I

hate make believe. I'm no good at it."

"Do as you wish, but I will not skirmish for you if you upset our lord the king."

And so it would go, never more than a few minutes, just long enough for Benjamin to cajole a good-natured, character-worthy response from Petal. He liked coaxing her out of her default drive of heavy oppression toward silliness. For that she loved him. For that and more, she needed him. She also knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that skirmish he would for her.

Normally, by 9:30 they would each be at their respective writing. Most days that happened, though occasionally, rather than motivating one another, they did precisely the opposite and enabled mutual slacking and lack of productivity. Today, there would be no writing.

Petal crossed the threshold of the wrought iron fence into the garden as Benjamin exited the back door of his building. They met at their bench. Petal pulled two cigarettes from the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt, put both into her own mouth, retrieved the lighter from the back pocket of her loose, faded blue jeans, fired the cigarettes up, inhaled deeply, removed them both, placed one between Benjamin's lips, and relieved him of one of his cups of coffee in a series of well-rehearsed motions.

"Let's not be us today!" she said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Okay, sweetie, who shall we be? Knights?" he teased.

"Anybody but knights! Today I feel I could be anybody." Petal flung her arms away from her body as though preparing for flight, snagging her wild brown curls on the articulated band of her grandfather's ever-constant watch.

"If anybody, then why not us? I sense an anybody good, not an anybody bad, in your constitution this morning, Pet. What's up?"

Her phone buzzed inside her pocket.

“That!” she said, clapping her hand over her ringing abdomen. “She’s called at least three times this morning! I will not let her fuck up this day!”

“Today is yours. You don’t have to answer the phone, but you shouldn’t feel you must be someone else to enjoy it. You worked damn hard for today. You deserve to celebrate it, Dr. Wolffe!” Benjamin cradled Petal’s shoulder. “Doctor! Can you believe it’s finally official?”

“Not really. That’s why I don’t want to answer. I’m terrified my sister’s drama will steal my thunder again.” Petal dropped her cigarette butt on the ground, crushing it with the toe of her sneaker, and bent to pick it up.

Petal and Benjamin would often invent thematic motifs to give direction to their wanderings. To celebrate her hard-won doctorate, Petal and Benjamin had decided to spend the day roaming Alphabet City and the East Village in pursuit of things to eat in alphabetical order. It seemed an appropriate place to fete almost five years of research about literacy education and comprehension.

Walking down Second Avenue, they stopped at a fruit cart in front of Gristedes and bought an apple and a banana they shared while ambling downtown. It felt strange to amble. New Yorkers do not, as a rule, amble. Benjamin prided himself on being able to walk faster than a city bus, covering two street blocks in one minute. He could calculate very precisely how long it would take him to walk from one place to another and found immense self-satisfaction in being absolutely on time for everything, almost as much as he found in calling himself a New Yorker.

Petal’s phone rang incessantly.

“If you’re not going to answer it, maybe turn it off,” Benjamin suggested.

“I’m going to give Der a quick call. He’ll be waiting to hear how

yesterday went.”

“Here’s to family-by-choice!” Benjamin held his hand high in anticipation of Petal’s high five, which she didn’t return.

“You, my dear Benjamin, are my FBC. Der, not so much. By the time I was born, he had been my grandparent for almost twenty years. When I was little, I thought everyone had a Der — like uncles and aunts and Ders. Only I didn’t have uncles or cousins or anything other than Der. Did I ever tell you about my first-grade teacher going on holiday?”

“Do tell,” Benjamin encouraged.

“I told my bubby my teacher was going to her Ami for Christmas. Since we didn’t have any family, I figured that when she said she was going to Miami, an Ami was just something else I didn’t have.”

“You are too much! We should all be so lucky to have a Der like yours,” Benjamin said.

“Ain’t it the truth!” Petal dialled her Der. “The last answering machine on the planet,” she said, holding up one finger and waiting for the beep. “Hey, Der, I guess you aren’t home. Just wanted to let you know that yesterday went very well. I’m relieved. Spending the day with Benjamin. I love you forever and for always. Talk later,” she added before hanging up.

“Done,” she said, switching her phone to vibrate. Standing in line for coffee, Petal noted almost triumphantly that she had ignored seven calls from her sister. Ignoring her sister had never been easy.

“Why’s she calling so much? What could possibly be so important?” Benjamin said. “It’s not likely she’s calling to congratulate you.”

Petal snorted.

“She needs money for Passover next week,” Petal said. “This

happens every year. She only calls when she needs something. It's always been like that."

"Why is Passover different than other days?" Benjamin asked.

Benjamin, a Jew by birth, self-identified as Jewish but was entirely non-practising. He knew just enough to be intrinsically burdened by the historic plight of his people. In other words, he liked to blame a lot of his neuroticism on his membership in the tribe but knew little about the details of the faith.

"They go overboard even for them and their religious wackiness at Passover. They throw away perfectly good food in order to replace it with the same stuff that has been labelled kosher for Passover by some rabbi. They live in abject poverty with their way-too-many kids and insufficient income and have no problem throwing away food!"

"Let's get doughnuts," Benjamin said, redirecting Petal away from her aggravation and toward their shared mission.

"And egg tarts," Petal added.

"Does pho count as 'F' food?" Petal asked Benjamin as they passed a Vietnamese restaurant at the corner of Second Avenue and 23rd.

"Oh, look at little miss literacy — I mean doctor literacy! Absolutely not! If you want pho, you'll have to wait till we get to 'P,'" Benjamin said, turning east on 23rd. "Or should we go along Fourteenth to First?" he asked.

"Either way," Petal said, following him. She knew he liked to walk through StuyTown so he could tell her about its checkered history. Benjamin liked nothing better than to play New York tour guide, spouting obscure facts only someone who had worked hard to know everything about New York could know. Stuyvesant Town was like the bonus round of NYC trivia. Anyone could wax philosophical about where the homeless used to dwell before Mayor Gi-

uliani sanitized the city beyond recognition or tell you where they had been on 9/11, but for Benjamin, the beauty was in the obscure details of the city. And for Petal, the beauty was in the obscure details of Benjamin.

“You know, this isn’t actually StuyTown,” Benjamin said. “It’s Peter Cooper Village until about Fourteenth Street.”

“Really?” Petal said. “You know, you’ve never told me that before. Except for every time we come this way.”

“I’ll make it up to you. When we get down to Fourteenth, we’ll double back and stop at Trader Joe’s.”

“Excellent! Then we can get freeze-dried mangosteen for ‘F.’”

“I don’t know why you like those. They taste like Styrofoam packing peanuts with an ungenerous dusting of fructose.”

“Exactly! That’s what I love about them. When we were kids, my sister and I would play this game. I’d get her to think of the most disappointing things in life. I know it’s weird, but I tried to get Rosie to understand how I felt sometimes. Anyhow, one of my most disappointing things was that Styrofoam wasn’t edible.”

“You’re a total nut bar!”

“Think about it. It has the most wonderful texture, makes incredible sounds when you break it or bite into it — yes, I would bite it on occasion — it begs to be eaten! But obviously it isn’t for eating. When I found freeze-dried mangosteen, I felt a piece of life’s significant disappointments was eliminated. That’s a pretty big deal. That’s probably thousands of therapy dollars and countless hours saved. The only thing that would make it better is if it came in slabs.”

“Aren’t rice cakes like slabs of Styrofoam?”

“Yes, but they’re also deprivation food, which, as you well know, makes me sad. They’re what you eat when you don’t have any choice. No one ever says, ‘I prefer rice cakes to chips.’”

“You really are loopy, my Pet.”

Petal’s phone vibrated in her pocket. She reached in to touch it.

“Answer it or leave it alone,” Benjamin said.

“She makes me crazy!” she said, stomping her foot too gently.

“You let her. You are here. She is there. You know what she wants. Answer the phone and get it over with. Don’t let her control you,” Benjamin said, sounding exactly like Dr. Farmer.

Not surprising that Benjamin could mimic the doctor so accurately. He’d been a patient of Farmer’s for years. Long before Petal had even set foot in the office of their mutual therapist, Benjamin’s ass had worn a divot in the doctor’s aubergine velvet couch. That is in fact where the two of them had met. Not in the couch divot but at the office in the 16th Street brownstone, where said couch and divot resided. Petal had gotten a referral to Dr. Farmer following a brief hospitalization her first year in the city.

It had been a difficult time for Petal for many reasons. She knew enough to recognize the edge of the cliff she was on, having stood there before. She walked herself from NYU over to Bellevue and asked to be admitted to psych. After three days, she was released from hospital with a referral to Dr. Farmer.

Petal began seeing him once a week on Tuesdays at noon. It was a quick scoot across 4th Street and up 3rd Avenue to 16th Street from the university, and on a good day Petal could make it in about twelve minutes. Exactly enough time to get her full forty-five-minute session in and be back at her desk before anyone noticed she was gone. Not that anyone would have either noticed or cared that a graduate student was not at her desk for months on end let alone a little over an hour once a week. After she moved out

of her depression-inducing studio into her Tudor City apartment, Petal mostly worked from home, venturing to the university only on Tuesdays.

Dr. Farmer's office was on the third floor of a beautiful (but perpetually in need of a good dusting) walk-up that was reached via a once-grand glossy black staircase with a smooth handrail and generous treads with worn black carpeting that felt beneath her feet as though it might have once upon a time been expensive. His office, in what was actually a parcelled-off piece of a former apartment, was entered through what must have been a servants' closet of some sort, dark and tiny. Dr. Farmer had tried to make it comfortable with a small, exquisitely embroidered chair and a designer floor lamp, but despite its costume, it was an awkward alcove that required passing patients practically rub up against one another upon arrival and departure. The inner sanctum of his office gave Petal an almost instant sense of warmth and uncharacteristic calm, with its rich, jewel-toned furnishings, hardwood floor scattered with kilims, wall of books, and subdued lighting — the kind of place that felt as if a fireplace roared and warm drinks were being served, though neither actually existed.

At first, she found it somewhat disconcerting that he would eat his lunch while she was with him, but to be fair, he always asked if she minded, and she always said she didn't. Eventually, she actually didn't mind and occasionally brought her own lunch with her, though usually she grabbed something greasy from a food truck on her way from or back to the university. Dr. Farmer was not Petal's first therapist, but he was the first one she'd grown to genuinely like. That was partly to Benjamin's credit and partly because Dr. Farmer was a good practitioner.

Benjamin had the appointment before Petal, and weekly they would cross paths in the waiting area outside Dr. Farmer's office.

Benjamin always said, “Hello, lovely lady,” which Petal found both unnerving and enchanting. Benjamin was devastatingly handsome, but she was on her way in to see her shrink. She would smile sheepishly and lower her chin to her chest like a shy child, but week after week he greeted her in this way as the close quarters necessitated some acknowledgement.

One Tuesday, when Petal had been seeing Dr. Farmer (and Benjamin) for some months, Benjamin opened the door between the office and the antechamber and introduced himself.

“Hello, I’m Benjamin Vessel,” he said, offering his hand formally. He then proffered a wad of bills. “Dr. Farmer would like to apologize, but he has been called away on an emergency. He asked me to either give you this money so you can go for lunch on him — he feels really bad — or he wants me to take you to lunch. Either way, he’s paying.”

Petal was so shocked she said nothing.

“I’m not hitting on you. I swear, Farmer asked me to. I promise I’m a card-carrying homosexual with no agenda other than helping out a man who has helped me immeasurably over the years.”

“Years?” Petal said.

Benjamin laughed. “Yes, years. I’m pretty fucked up, but not nearly as fucked up as I used to be. So, would you like to have lunch? Union Square Café? He’s picking up the tab.” And before Petal could answer, Benjamin hooked his arm into hers and started walking and talking.

“Let’s start with your name,” he said as they descended the swooping staircase out to the street.

“Petal,” she said. “He asked you to take me to lunch and didn’t tell you my name? Doesn’t that seem a bit odd to you?”

“Yes, a bit, but that doctor-patient confidentiality thing. He is nothing if not a gentleman. If you cancelled on him, he would

charge you. He felt it only right that he compensate you in some way for cancelling at the last minute. He's rather old fashioned and thought you might not feel comfortable dining alone. So, you got me. Unless, of course, you would rather just pocket the cash and be done with it."

"Union Square Café it is," Petal said.

Petal felt beautiful, almost buoyant, walking with Benjamin. It was not like her to feel beautiful, and weightlessness was even more alien to her. Benjamin had fair skin, larger-than-life features, light-reflecting green-grey eyes, glossy black hair, and perfect posture. He carried himself like he was perpetually looking over the crowd for a lost friend, yet he managed to be entirely with her. Walking across Union Square arm in arm with Benjamin felt to Petal like how confidence might feel if she were ever to find any.

Benjamin listened as though he genuinely cared. He spoke poetry and swore with equal aplomb, which made Petal feel stupid until she got used to it and realized it was just the way he spoke. He was humble and self-deprecating, but Petal had a hard time believing his insecurity was genuine. From her perspective, he was overflowing with God-given gifts. From his perspective, his flaws overshadowed any minimal talents he had. The world disagreed with Benjamin's assessment of himself. So did Petal.

Benjamin was a twenty-first-century Renaissance man. He'd begun his time in the city doing improv theatre. "You know why the improv group is called Second City?" he asked Petal early in their friendship.

"Because it originated in Chicago — the second city," she said.

"Wrong. It's the second lowest form of performance art, playing a close second to mime. It's bullshit. It's what people who are afraid to be real actors or writers do until they give up the arts completely with full-fledged self-loathing or grow a pair of balls

and try to create something real.”

“Didn’t a lot of really famous people start in improv?” Petal asked.

“Not nearly as many famous people as complete ne’er-do-wells.”

Later, Petal learned that Benjamin had been on the cusp of being one of those famous people who got their start in improv. Before he gained notoriety from his writing, he had been offered a spot on *Saturday Night Live*. The timing was wrong, and that is always a fatal flaw in comedy.

“It was the eighties. It was a devastating time in the gay community. Everyone was scared. There was a cancer on the loose that was targeting us. The Christian evangelists were right. It was the fucking fires of hell.”

Petal and Benjamin had been friends for almost two full years before she learned about Scott, the love of Benjamin’s life. When he’d died in 1988, he was thirty-five years old. It wasn’t until ten years later, when Benjamin reached the age of thirty-five himself, still alive (much to his own amazement and in spite of his very risky behaviours), that he sought counselling for the first time.

“Even with AIDS everywhere in the gay community, you still had unprotected, anonymous sex?” Petal said, not disclosing her own high-risk conduct of that time. Perhaps, even years later, she was not ready to acknowledge that as a straight woman, the risk was as real to her as to anyone.

“We were pretty sure we all had it anyhow. I mean, my life partner died of it, and we had been having unprotected sex for years. You have to understand that until AIDS, condoms were not a product gay men bought. By the time HIV and AIDS had names, we all figured we were goners. I was grieving and angry and self-destructive as hell. We were young, beautiful, and immortal one second and dying hideous, messy deaths the next.

“He wanted to die at home. No heroic measures. We agreed on comfort care. By then, so many of us had died that the community had mobilized. There were care teams who came, put in an IV, brought meds, made it possible to die with whatever dignity remained. We had learned how much morphine we could administer without crossing any technically illegal lines. All of us had already helped too many friends die. Truth was, the hospitals were more than happy for us to stay away. Even healthcare professionals still believed you could catch it by breathing the same air!

“Scott was estranged from his family, but near the end I asked him if he wanted me to call them. They didn’t know he had AIDS, let alone that he was dying. I don’t know what I was thinking. Maybe just that it was the right thing to do. He agreed. I called. His parents showed up from Connecticut at an awful moment. He was in respiratory distress from the lesions in his trachea. It was horrifying to watch him struggle for breath, but I had seen it before and knew the end was near.

“Without asking, his mother called 911. I was shut out. In every way other than statutory, he was my husband, I was his family, but as soon as the ambulance came, his mother claimed him. Fucking homophobic bitch hadn’t spoken to him since he came out, and all of a sudden, she’s calling the shots. They took him to hospital and intubated him. Nothing I said mattered. I had no legal status or documents giving me power of attorney. I didn’t think I would need any. The doctors knew he was palliative, but his mother insisted on interventions. He was tortured with everything he didn’t want at the end.

“I wasn’t welcome at his funeral. He wanted to be cremated, but they didn’t care. They buried him in the family plot in Connecticut.”

“Holy crap, Benjamin! That’s horrible,” Petal said.

“Horrible, but far from unique for the times. In so many ways, we were denied our right to grieve. That’ll fuck with your head but good!”

“No shit!”

“When I turned thirty-five, I threw a party. The theme was ‘Still Alive at 35!’ Pretty fucking morose, huh?” Benjamin grimaced.

“Kind of funny in retrospect,” Petal said.

“But we weren’t laughing yet. We were still too in it. It was a ‘fuck you’ to destiny, but inside, despite still being HIV negative, or maybe because I had dodged the AIDS bullet, I was closer to death than I cared to admit. The invitations were so smug and cynical. I told guests that in lieu of gifts they could make contributions to my therapy fund. We had decorated jars all over the place with labels on them like ‘For Benjamin’s Psychosis,’ ‘For Benjamin’s Neurosis,’ or ‘Benjamin Has Homosexual Tendencies,’ all covered in pictures of Freud and Jung and cigars.”

“Cute idea,” Petal said. “We should have done that for birthday parties when we were kids. Think of how much further ahead the crazy Wolffe twins would be today. I might even be over the trauma of my never-acknowledged birthday.” Petal snorted.

“Everybody thought it was so funny. All night, people were shoving money in the jars. At the end of the party, when I counted it up, there was a couple grand in the therapy fund. I figured I was being given a pretty clear message, if not by some higher power, then at least by my friends. Doc Farmer saved my life.”

Petal continued to ignore her vibrating telephone as they left Trader Joe’s with assorted freeze-dried fruits, guava roll, and a small package of chocolate halva. They headed toward Union Square.

“I’ve been talking your ear off for months with my thesis crap; I feel like I barely know where things are at with your work.”

“Oh, you know, it’s all shit! I thought I was liking the novel for a bit, but I’m pretty sure I was momentarily deluded. It feels stale and trite. Like I don’t have anything new to say, and I fucking hate my main character. She’s a total narcissistic bitch, and no matter how hard I try to get her to do anything compassionate or humane, she betrays my efforts.”

While Petal found Benjamin’s diatribes about his writing fascinating — the lack of control he claimed to have over the fictitious characters and situations he created — she never really believed him when he lamented his literary shortcomings. It wasn’t that she was unsympathetic to the woes of writing, but his brilliance and success were so evident in everything she had ever read or seen or heard from his oeuvre that it seemed suspect that anything he was working on was less than stellar. Nonetheless, she recognized that just because he always managed to eventually produce plays that got rave reviews, screenplays that got nominated for awards (though thus far hadn’t won anything big), and a couple of high-brow novels, each of which had had brief appearances on the *New York Times* bestseller list, he struggled with the process and fought demons of angst and self-doubt every step of the way. Maybe that was why his writing was so good. He was never satisfied.

“Maybe if you introduce a nasty friend or a bitchy mother, she’ll look good in comparison,” Petal offered. “Like you’re friends with me because I make you seem super well-adjusted.”

She pushed her arm through his and clung to his bicep as though it were a life jacket.

Benjamin chuckled. “What now?”

“Like, right now? Or now that I’m finished my dissertation and defence?”

“Both,” Benjamin said.

Petal stopped and thought for a moment. “I can’t eat another thing, and we’re only at ‘I.’ If we walk down through Washington Square Park and into the Village, I might be able to work up to something savoury and some juice. After that, maybe we can just name foods that begin with the rest of the alphabet instead of eating them.”

“You’re a lightweight. You talk a good game, but you haven’t got what it takes to eat the alphabet,” Benjamin said.

Petal smiled. “As far as the other now, I hope to do as much of nothing as humanly possible until my teaching term starts in September.”

“So, you just want to lie around in feathered silks and eat bonbons?”

“Correct! I best run out and buy me some feathered silks!”

“You best run out and buy yourself some decent professorial clothing for the fall, Dr. Wolffe,” he said, gently tugging on the hood of her sweatshirt.

They walked the full circumference of the park; standing underneath the arch in Washington Square, Petal was feeling both preternaturally optimistic and a bit peckish. The city was at its zenith of perfection. The weather was warm but not humid, the sun was bright but not oppressively so, the trees were in bud but the allergens were nonexistent, and the park buzzed with the springtime activity of people released from months of indoor incarceration. “I love New York” was never truer than on a day like this one.

“All the vibrating against my belly has activated my digestion,” Petal said. “Let’s get Indian food truck dosas.”

“First call your sister. This is supposed to be our day, and I feel like I’m sharing you with some kind of mythological siren beckoning you to her island. Just call her and get it over with.”

They sat on the sun-warmed slats of a park bench. Reluctantly, Petal reached into her pocket and took a deep breath, mentally preparing to dial her sister in Toronto. But the vibrating phone beat her to the punch.

“Hey, Rosie,” Petal said, answering.

“Mrs. Wolffe?” said a man.

“Who is this? Who are you looking for?” Covering the mouth-piece, she stage-whispered to Benjamin, “Some guy.”

“Is this Mrs. Wolffe?” he asked again.

“This is Petal Wolffe,” she said over Benjamin’s correction of “Dr. Wolffe” in the background. “Dr. Wolffe,” she corrected.

“Are you the sister of Mrs. Hirsch?” the man asked with a heavy Brooklyn accent.

“I’m Rosie’s sister. Who are you?” Petal asked again.

“Mrs. Wolffe,” he said.

“Doctor,” Petal corrected, pricklier than before.

“Dr. Wolffe, I am a friend of the family. I do not have good news.”

“What’s wrong!” Petal grabbed Benjamin’s arm. “Something’s wrong! My sister? The kids?”

“Dr. Wolffe, I think your sister is not well,” said the still unidentified caller.

“What do you mean, you think my sister is not well? Who are you? What the hell is going on?”

“My name is Rabbi Glisserman,” the man said. “I study with your brother-in-law, Schmeil. I know him well. I’m the one they call when there is trouble in a family.”

Rosie was chozer b’teshuva — someone who had found their way back to religion, not raised Orthodox from birth. This fact was not exactly hidden so much as kept close and quiet within her adopted family and community. That Petal was a doctor should

have perhaps been a clue that she herself was not ultra-Orthodox, though it wasn't entirely a dead giveaway, for she might have been a more modern Orthodox. Nonetheless, Orthodox or orthodox-Orthodox, Petal might have understood that Rabbi Glisserman was the sort of man who might be called upon "when there is trouble in the family." But since he only knew the world he lived in, it didn't occur to him that Petal wouldn't understand. And since she knew very little of his world, the notion of a guy who gets called when there is trouble in the family was completely foreign. She pictured a plumber, but that image quickly changed to an electrician. Even the un-handiest of Jews could plunge a toilet, but electrical work required a phone call, though to be fair, there were in fact Jewish electricians.

Petal stood up. She squinted in the sun and turned her back on Benjamin, who also stood up so he could continue to overhear her conversation.

"Rabbi Glisserman, is someone sick?" Petal tried as best she could to parse her confusion.

"You could say so," he replied.

"Could you please explain, *clearly*, what is going on there?" Petal said, foot pumping the asphalt. "I don't really understand my sister's religious life, so you need to spell it out for me if it has anything to do with God or the laws or anything like that."

"My apologies. These things are not common in our community. When they happen, people don't talk about them so much. It's a struggle both to keep secrets and to admit when the secrets should not be kept. I try to help. I have no official title, no education in this regard, but I have a reputation for discretion and, I suppose, an intuition about matters of emotional well-being."

"Rabbi, tell me quickly, like you're ripping off a bandage, is everyone all right?"

“Your sister seems to have had a breakdown of some kind. She’s here. We are with her — me and Schmeil. The children are in school, but we think you should come.”

“Come to Toronto? You know I’m in New York, right? Like a mental breakdown?” Petal sat down again on the bench. Benjamin sat down next to her, put a hand on her knee, and leaned in close, his left ear tilted toward her right ear.

“I know where you are. Your sister is asking for you, and, in my opinion, she needs you. She needs family.”

Petal sighed, her head falling backward as though it had become unhinged from her neck. She used her left hand to push the back of her head into its upright position. “Can I speak to her?”

“That’s not possible. She’s sedated. It’s best you should come. How soon before you can be here?” Rabbi Glisserman asked.

“Can I speak to Schmeil? Surely he’ll speak with me in a crisis!” Petal had no interest in speaking with her brother-in-law at the best of times, which worked well because he seemed to believe that he could not engage in conversation with a woman who was not his wife. He didn’t seem to be concerned with the fact that, according to all the sources Petal had consulted (she was nothing if not a thorough researcher), there were no laws restricting his communication with his sister-in-law. Nonetheless, they never spoke. Ever. In fact, in the twenty-plus years that Schmeil and Rosie had been married, they had rarely been in the same room together.

“This situation is very trying, Mrs. Wolffe. Let me be the go-between in the meantime. Let’s agree to simplify rather than complicate, as much as possible. Okay?”

Rabbi Glisserman sounded remarkably sensible to Petal despite the myriad of prejudices she had against the whole encompassing paradigm of her sister’s life.

“Okay,” she agreed. “So, you think I need to get on the next

flight out and show up at Rosie's door?"

"As soon as possible. I'll pick you up at the airport. It'll give me a chance to fill you in. We'll work from there. There's a lot to discuss and consider."

"I guess I'll be in touch."

Rabbi Glisserman hung up without saying goodbye.

"You're not going, are you?" said Benjamin.

"I have to." Petal stood and then sat right back down again, overcome with dizziness. "I think I'm going to barf." She folded herself head between knees.

"Oh, sweet Pet." Benjamin placed a firm hand on the back of her neck.

Despite the closeness of their friendship, most of what Benjamin knew about Petal's sister had been extrapolated from complaints about the crazy, needy, parasitic twin who lived north of the border but may as well have been living on another planet, given the extent that their lives did not overlap or correlate.

What Benjamin did not know, or perhaps did not understand, much as Petal herself did not understand it, was that Petal needed Rosie and Rosie needed Petal and that was that. It did not occur to Benjamin that Petal would entertain trekking to Canada to save her sister. For Petal, once crisis was declared, it was not something she needed to think about for even a second.

Petal carried a heavy existential load made up of the sum of her parts, but her fraught relationship with her sister, her sense of responsibility to her, her resentment toward her, and her complicated feelings of betrayal and abandonment were all overridden by her inexplicable love for, need of, and yearning to be needed by Rosie. They were bound together.