



The

BOOK CLUB

for

TROUBLESOME

WOMEN

a novel

MARIE BOSTWICK

New York Times Bestselling Author

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CLUB FOR
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WOMEN

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HARPER MUSE

The Book Club for Troublesome Women

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Chapter 1

MEMBERS OF THE CLUB

MARCH 1963

On a Wednesday morning in March 1963, twenty-five miles and yet a world away from the nation's capital and the rumblings of change that were beginning to be felt there, in a northern Virginia suburb called Concordia, so new that the roots of the association-approved saplings were still struggling to take root, and so meticulously planned that when the first wave of residents moved in the year before, the shops, library, and church opened on the very same day, as if God smote the ground and a fully formed suburb had erupted from the crack, Margaret Ryan stood in a sunny kitchen with appliances and matching Formica countertops of egg-yolk yellow, trying to decide what to serve the three women who would be coming to the first meeting of her new book club.

Beth Ryan, eleven years old and the eldest of Margaret's three

children, peered over her mother's shoulder, shaking her head at the small mountain of recipes Margaret had torn from her extensive collection of women's magazines.

"Why so many? Why not bake oatmeal cookies and be done with it like any normal mother?" Beth snatched a recipe clipping from the stack. "Anchovy and cream cheese canapés? If that's dinner, I'm eating at Melanie's."

Every family has its smart-ass. Beth was theirs.

With her strawberry-blond hair and enviably long lashes, Beth was the image of her father. But her cheek was pure Margaret, and a payback, Margaret was sure, for the sins of her youth. When her own mother was still alive, she had cursed Margaret countless times, saying, "When you grow up, I hope you have a daughter that's as fresh as you are. *Then* you'll know."

Now she did know, and it wasn't so bad. Margaret liked that her daughter knew her own mind and wasn't afraid to speak it. It was an underappreciated quality in women, one that often faded with age.

At age seventeen, Margaret had promised herself that she would grow up to be nothing like her mother. After a promising start, the fruit of her early efforts had shriveled. Now, at age thirty-three, Margaret sometimes wondered if every woman was destined to become her mother eventually. Recently, however, things had started to shift.

And not just for Margaret.

As with any seismic occurrence, the impact would be felt more keenly by some than others, and responses to it would vary widely. Some would embrace the change. Some would decry it. Some would avert their eyes and pretend nothing had happened. It didn't come all at once, of course. Meaningful change rarely does. There would be more rumblings, more waves, more altercations in decades to

come. But in the fullness of time, no one could deny that landscapes and lives had been irrevocably transformed.

Nevertheless, Margaret didn't fully appreciate that yet. Neither did she understand that the impulses she'd given in to over the last three months and the secrets she kept—including the rented seafoam-green typewriter she'd hidden in the far reaches of the linen closet—would alter her family, her future, and her sense of self. Today she was just excited about the book club, thrilled to be the point of connection for the other three women who had agreed to take part, some more reluctantly than others, and determined to make their first meeting memorable.

Without the assistance of an alarm, Margaret's eyes had flown open promptly at five that morning. Walt hadn't come home from the VFW until well after midnight, so there was little chance of disturbing him, but she slipped quietly from bed and tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom anyway. Why risk endangering her good spirits with some pointless confrontation?

Half an hour later, she emerged with her chestnut hair curled and sprayed into a shoulder-length flip, wearing lipstick, heels, and a black watch tartan jumper over a cream-colored blouse, as polished and pulled together as any magazine model. Coming downstairs for breakfast, the kids had hovered on the kitchen threshold, confused to see her looking so smart so early in the day.

"Is it Sunday?" six-year-old Susan whispered to Beth, who shook her head but didn't budge from the doorway. Bobby, eight years old but already the tallest in his class and perpetually famished, broke the spell. "Mom? Can we have waffles? And bacon?"

"Waffles are for Saturdays," Margaret said, chewing her lip as she scanned an ingredient list for turkey and mushroom roll-ups. "Have some cereal. There was a new kind at the market."

Bobby trotted to the cupboard and let out a whoop.

Marie Bostwick

“Cap’n Crunch! That’s the one from the TV! You are the best mom ever!”

He threw his arms around her waist. Margaret patted his back. He was so easy to please.

“Slice some banana on top,” she said. Despite the cereal company’s claims about vitamins, feeding her brood a sugarcoated breakfast with a cartoon captain spokesman didn’t make her *feel* like the best mom ever. Tomorrow she’d make scrambled eggs.

“Suzy,” she said, noticing the child had missed a button on her cardigan, “come here.”

Susan, who most closely resembled Margaret in looks, hopped up from the banquette. She stood perfectly still when Margaret knelt to rebutton her sweater, examining her mother’s face.

“How come you’re so dressed up? Are you going to the doctor?”

“My book club is tonight, remember? It’s our first meeting, so I’m excited.”

“You don’t look excited. You look nervous.”

“Well . . .” Margaret picked a pill off Susan’s cardigan. “It’s always a little scary, isn’t it? Getting to know new people, letting them get to know you? So, yes. I am a little nervous. But also excited.”

“Like I felt on the first day at our new school?”

“Something like that. Go finish your breakfast.”

Beth tilted her chin toward a bright red book lying next to the coffee percolator Walt and Margaret had received as a premium for opening a new checking account.

“Is that what you’re reading?”

“Uh-huh.” Deciding that Beth had a point about anchovies, Margaret moved the canapé recipe to the reject pile. “It came out just last month.”

Beth picked up the book, lips moving silently as she sounded out the title.

“What does *mystique* mean?”

Margaret hesitated. Their bookstore order had been delayed, so she'd only had time to read the first few chapters. Even so, the declarations she encountered there were electric, jolting a shrouded, dormant part of her brain to life with ideas that seemed utterly fresh but also uncannily familiar. Reading about the strange stirrings and unnamed problem, knowing she wasn't the only one who had wondered why “having it all” somehow wasn't enough, had left Margaret awash with relief and an unexpected sense of vindication, akin to the moment she'd first spotted Charlotte Gustafson in the drugstore—a complete stranger who still barely qualified as an acquaintance—and somehow known they were in sympathy.

Charlotte had called the book groundbreaking. Margaret agreed. Would the others feel the same? As if they'd been unburdened of a shameful secret? Reprieved from a long, lonely, and unjust exile?

“Mom? *Mystique*?”

“It's . . . a kind of aura, a sense of mystery or power, a sort of magical reputation attached to a person or group. But I don't think that's really what the author meant here. I think she's saying a *mystique* can be a lie, or even a kind of diversion.”

“Sounds boring.” Beth tossed the book aside. “Who's in the club?”

“So far, it's just me, Viv, Bitsy, and Mrs. Gustafson.”

“Mrs. Gustafson? The new neighbor? People say she's an oddball.”

“You shouldn't be listening to what people say. Or repeating it,” Margaret said. “Anyway, Charlotte's not an oddball. She's just different, artistic, a freethinker. Heaven knows we could use a few more of those in Concordia.”

Beth frowned. “What's wrong with Concordia? I like it here.”

Marie Bostwick

“Nothing,” Margaret said, smoothing her daughter’s hair. “I like it too. It’s just that sometimes the people here can be a bit . . .”

Margaret searched for a word to sum up the conflicting emotions she felt regarding their new home, but her lifelong facility with language, which she’d honed to an even sharper edge over the previous three months, failed her. How could she explain her love-hate relationship with Concordia to her little girl when she didn’t really understand it herself?

Later that same morning, thirty-nine-year-old Charlotte Gustafson put a Newport between her lips, leaving a fire-engine-red imprint on the filter. She tilted her chin and exhaled, watching the smoke drift to the ceiling of Dr. Earnest Barry’s office.

His practice was located on the ground floor of a three-story redbrick townhouse in Alexandria, Virginia. Charlotte had to drive forty minutes each way for her twice-weekly appointments because there weren’t any psychiatrists in Concordia and she’d been referred to Barry’s practice by her old doctor in New York. She didn’t mind. Alexandria wasn’t Manhattan, but it had a few good antique shops, a decent shoe store, and a certain charm. Dr. Barry, who had a pompous attitude and an excess of nose hair, was considerably less charming. But anything to escape the mundaneness of suburbia.

Charlotte took another drag and crossed her feet, clad in Italian leather pumps the same shade of sapphire as her sheath dress and matching swing coat, trying to get more comfortable.

“Charlotte, I’ve asked you before not to smoke.”

“Dr. Gould always let me smoke.”

“Dr. Gould doesn’t have asthma.” He held out an ashtray. Charlotte took a quick puff and stubbed out the cigarette butt.

The doctor picked up his pen. “Did you dream this week?”

“I told you before, I don’t dream.”

“Everyone dreams.”

“Fine,” she said, clutching the fingers that should have been holding her cigarette into a fist. “I don’t *remember* any dreams.”

“All right. Let’s move on. What was your week? Anything new?”

“Same old, same old.” She shrugged. “The mutual loathing Howard and I feel for one another continues unabated. My father still prefers him to me, treats my husband like the son he never had and me like a titian-haired, addlebrained idiot. Denise won’t take her nose out of her books to speak to me, or anyone else, and is still set on going to Oxford after graduation. I don’t blame her for wanting to escape, but why England? It rains incessantly, there’s no central heat, and the men have terrible teeth. Why not go someplace hip, with good weather and good-looking people? Why not escape to Rome? Or even Los Angeles?”

Charlotte craned her neck to the side, as if actually expecting a response. The doctor made a note on his pad. Charlotte sighed, wishing she’d worn her watch so she’d know how long it would be until the end of the session and her next cigarette.

“I suppose Junior is doing fine at the military academy, but he hasn’t written in weeks, so who knows? Laura and Andrew are still sweet, but at twelve and eleven, you’d expect that. Of course I was an early bloomer, but I don’t think most people start despising their parents until they hit their teens, do you? Let’s see . . . What else is new?” She drummed her fingernails against the brown leather of the therapy couch, which was really more of a chaise.

“Oh yes! Another gallery turned me down. This time the owner phoned *personally* to say he found my paintings amateurish and derivative. Good of him to make the effort, don’t you think? But

that's about it. Nothing new to report.

"Oh, wait," she said, and snapped her fingers. "There is one thing. I joined a women's book club."

"A book club?" Barry scooted forward in his burgundy wing-back chair. "Well, that's excellent, Charlotte. Do you know these women?"

"Just one, Margaret Ryan. She showed up at the door unannounced with a plate of cookies and invited me to join."

"Making connections with other housewives can be very therapeutic and help you adjust to your role. Do you think you can become friends with this woman?"

"We'll see," Charlotte said, squishing her lips together. "She may be too nice. Her taste in literature is *much* too nice. I only agreed to join because she let me pick the book."

"And what book is that?"

Had Dr. Barry been able to read Charlotte as well as he thought he could—something she was determined to prevent him from ever, ever doing—he would have seen the bow of her lips and known it was the smile of a woman who took pleasure in baiting hooks and seeing the barbs swallowed whole.

"*The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan," Charlotte said sweetly. "Have you read it?"

Barry's bristly white brows became a disapproving line. "I've heard about it, and that's quite enough. Therapeutically speaking, Charlotte, I don't think—"

"Oh, but you *must*," she interrupted, rolling onto her side and fixing him with her emerald-green eyes. "I found chapter five, 'The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud,' *particularly* enlightening. I'm sure you would too. Would you like to borrow my copy?"

"No, thank you," Barry said stiffly, and scribbled another note on his pad.

Charlotte's purse was sitting next to the couch. She reached inside for her cigarettes.

"Sorry," she said when he shot her a look. "It's beyond my control. Oral fixation. You understand." She pushed herself to a sitting position and lit up. "I believe our time is up for today. But I think we've made real progress, don't you?" She stood. "Oh, one more thing? I'm going to need a new prescription. The one Dr. Gould wrote for me is about to expire. Doesn't have to be today though. I can get it at my next appointment.

"See you then," she chirped, giving a little wave as she headed to the door.

The late afternoon sun was shining in Rock Creek Park, turning the newly unfurled leaves of the trees that lined the horse trail an even brighter shade of green.

As the end of the bridle path came into sight, Bitsy Cobb—whose hair, worn in a pageboy held back from her face with a narrow red velvet ribbon, was as black and shiny as the coat of her mount—loosened the reins, letting Delilah canter for the final hundred yards. Though the same age as her twenty-three-year-old rider, the horse moved well.

"You've still got it, don't you, girl?" Bitsy said as they approached the stable and Delilah slowed to a walk.

The horse, spotting a well-dressed woman of middle years standing near a fence, perked up her ears and picked up her pace, jogging toward the woman, who murmured affectionately when Delilah stopped in front of her.

"Beautiful girl," the woman said, pulling half an apple from the pocket of her well-cut tweed jacket and offering it to the horse.

Marie Bostwick

“You’re aging better than I am, aren’t you?”

Bitsy climbed down from the saddle.

“Mrs. Graham, have you been waiting? I’m sorry. I didn’t know you’d planned to ride.”

“No time today, I’m afraid. Two dozen editors, plus wives and girlfriends, are coming for dinner. Tomorrow it’s freshman congressmen—Democrats *and* Republicans. I’m putting the summer slipcovers on early in case blood is drawn,” she said, then laughed.

Katherine Graham was an heiress, the wife of Phil Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post* newspaper, and one of Washington, DC’s, most influential hostesses. Though Bitsy had only been working at the stables for a few weeks, she’d found Mrs. Graham to be unpretentious and kind.

“I just dropped by to say hello to my girl,” Katherine said, stroking Delilah’s neck as the horse munched the apple. “She was a wedding gift from my father, did I tell you? I was far more excited about Delilah than I was about those eighteen place settings of Limoges, believe me.” Mrs. Graham smiled. “Thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Bitsy said in a soft Kentucky drawl. “Sometimes I can’t believe how lucky I am, getting *paid* to ride horses. Honestly, I’d do it for free. Don’t tell my boss though.”

“It’ll be our secret. But you do a lot more than just ride the horses. You curry, water, and feed them too, among other less savory jobs.” Mrs. Graham shifted her gaze to a nearby manure shovel. “And always with unflagging dedication, I’ve noticed.”

Unaccustomed to much praise, Bitsy felt her cheeks go warm. “Well, I grew up with horses. My daddy was barn manager at Prescott Farms for thirty years before he passed.”

“In Lexington? You don’t say. They’ve produced some fine

thoroughbreds, quarter horses too. Delilah's grandfather came from Prescott Farms. You should be proud."

Bitsy beamed. "Yes, ma'am. I am. Ever since I was this high," she said, flattening her palm just above her knee, "I'd tag along behind Daddy, helping in the barn. Mother wanted me to be a lady, but the only thing I cared about was horses and books."

Delilah nudged her shoulder, and Mrs. Graham stroked the animal's nose. "I thought as much. I didn't suppose that as the wife of a successful equine vet, you took this job for the money."

"Well, he's still building his practice," Bitsy said. "But yes, we're comfortable. We bought a house in Concordia. It's nice, but different from Lexington. I'm the youngest woman in the neighborhood and the only one without children, so I don't quite fit in. King is older than I am and anxious to start a family—I am too, naturally—but no luck so far.

"Anyway . . .," she murmured, fearing she'd shared too much and remembering Mrs. Graham had things to do. But instead of making an exit, Katherine nodded.

"It's a lot of pressure, isn't it? You know, nearly three years passed before Phil and I had our first child. My mother called every single day to ask what was taking so long."

Bitsy gasped. "Mine too! She doesn't even say hello now, just, 'Well?' It's unnerving!"

When their shared laughter faded, Mrs. Graham patted Bitsy's arm. "Things have a way of working out when and how they're meant to. You'll see. As far as the women in your neighborhood, don't turn yourself inside out trying to make everyone love you. Instead, be on the lookout for two or three like-minded souls who'll take you as you are and stand by you no matter what. Acquaintances abound, but true friendships are rare and worth waiting for."

"I just joined a book club," Bitsy offered. "Maybe I'll find

Marie Bostwick

friends there. We're reading *The Feminine Mystique*. It's interesting."

"And controversial." Mrs. Graham nodded appreciatively. "I like these women already."

"Me too. So far."

"Give it time," Katherine said, then glanced at her wristwatch. "Speaking of which . . ."

Bitsy led Delilah toward the stable, and Mrs. Graham walked to her waiting sedan. After turning on the ignition, she pulled the car up alongside the fence and rolled down the window.

"Bitsy?" she called out. "When your mother phones, tell her that not only is it possible to love horses and books and still be a lady, but Katherine Graham says it's practically *required!*"

After laying the teasing comb on the counter and giving her blond bouffant a final coat of hairspray, forty-one-year-old Vivian Buschetti cranked up the volume of the bathroom radio, hoping the sound of Eydie Gormé blaming it on the bossa nova would drown out the noise of her six children, whose argument over the television set was reaching a fever pitch.

Knowing she had only moments before the kids would start pounding on the bathroom door and demanding justice, Viv applied her eyeliner and pulled a black nylon and lace slip over her head, tugging to clear her full bosom and generous curves. There was a knock.

She turned down the radio. "Do not make me come down there," she warned through the locked door. "If I do, *nobody* is watching *anything* for a week. Vince? Andrea? You hear me?"

"Loud and clear. But it's not Vince. Or Andrea."

Viv smiled and blotted her pink lipstick with a tissue. "Who

is it?”

“The man of your dreams. But don’t tell your husband. I hear he gets crazy jealous.”

Viv opened the door. After eighteen years of marriage, the sight of tall, dark, and handsome Anthony Buschetti in his crisply pressed naval uniform, with his melting-chocolate eyes and teasing smile, still made her a little weak in the knees.

“You’re an idiot,” she said, shaking her head.

“*You* are a bombshell.” Tony’s eyes traveled over her body. “Va-va-voom!” He stepped across the threshold and locked the door behind them, backing her up against the countertop and nuzzling her neck.

“Stop, honey,” Viv giggled. “We can’t. The kids.”

“They’re fine. I told them to go outside and wait for the pizza delivery guy.”

“You ordered pizza?”

“Uh-huh.” Tony’s lips moved from her neck to her décolletage. “So you can get ready for your hen party without having to worry about making dinner. Ain’t I a prince of a guy?”

“Yes. But it’s a book club, not a hen party. And I still need to get ready, Tony. Really.”

“Seriously?” he asked, lifting his head and groaning in response to her nod. “Well . . . okay. But try to come home early. Because you look amazing, absolutely irresistible.”

She turned to the mirror to fix her lipstick. Tony sat on the counter and watched her.

Viv sighed. “I don’t feel irresistible. I feel bloated, cranky, and tired. If I didn’t know it would hurt Margaret’s feelings, I’d skip tonight. I only agreed to join because she was so excited about it and because that stupid doctor made me so mad,” Viv said, her irritation rising. “The nerve of that man! Refusing to write me a prescription

Marie Bostwick

for the pill unless you show up to sign off on it. As if I'm a child instead of a grown woman. And as if an officer assigned to the Pentagon has time for his wife's doctor appointments!" She stabbed the air with an eyebrow pencil. "If he wasn't the only gynecologist in Concordia—"

"I know," Tony said. "But let it go. I'm taking Tuesday off. We'll see the doc, get the prescription, and that'll be that. Play your cards right, and I might take you to lunch after."

"You know something, Anthony Buschetti? You really are a prince of a guy."

Tony spread out his hands. "What do I keep telling you?"

Their kiss was interrupted when their eldest, seventeen-year-old Vince, rapped on the door to say the pizza had arrived. "Be right down," Tony called, then peered into Viv's face. "You really are tired, aren't you? Maybe we should rethink the idea of you going back to work."

"No!" Viv smacked her eyebrow pencil down on the counter. "We always said I'd get back into nursing once the kids were in school. It'd only be part-time. With Vince starting college next year, we need the money. And I need . . ."

"You need what?"

Tony pulled her close, resting his hands on the swell of her hips. Viv pressed her lips together, trying to compose herself. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse.

"I need to feel important again. I was a good nurse, Tony."

"Best on base. Best in the whole damned European theater," he said. "The CO threatened to bust me a rank for taking you away from it. You *are* important, Viv. You're the glue that holds this family together." He traced a finger on her cheek. "You know that, right?"

Viv bobbed her head. She did know. Viv loved being a mother

and was proud that they'd raised six terrific, respectful, clean-cut, all-American kids—Vince, Andrea, Mike, Nick, Mark, and little Jenny. Not a delinquent in the bunch. But now she wanted more.

Viv had never been much of a reader, and that book Margaret had talked her into reading for the club was so boring it practically put her to sleep. But one part—an interview with a housewife who reported realizing one day she'd already hit all the expected milestones of the feminine achievement and had nothing new to look forward to—sounded a deep chord within her.

Tony tucked a blond strand that had somehow escaped the hairspray behind her ear.

“You know what? I think you need a break. On Saturday I'll make pancakes for the kids so you can sleep, then drop them at a matinee and come back to join you. How's that sound?”

“You, me, and the house to ourselves for two whole hours? Like heaven.”

“Good. It's a date.”

Tony went downstairs to pay for the pizza, leaving the bathroom door slightly ajar. Viv opened a package of pantyhose she'd ordered from Sears, her first. She perched on the toilet seat to don them, amazed at how light they felt compared to a girdle. Would they hold her in as well? Probably not. But who cared? Margaret said she ought to give them a try, and she was right. They were so comfortable!

Viv got to her feet to pull them up. The sound of happy, hungry children digging into boxes of pizza wafted through the air, along with a powerful smell of greasy pepperoni that assaulted Viv's nose, and then her stomach, making her gag. She spun toward the toilet, doubled over, vomited twice, then sank to her knees, overcome by an old, all-too-familiar weakness.

“No, no, no,” she murmured, her voice choked and rasping.

Marie Bostwick

“Not again. Not now!”

“Viv?” Tony’s voice boomed from below. “You coming? We saved you some pepperoni.”

Pepperoni. Even the word sickened her. She screwed her eyes shut and swallowed bile.

“That’s okay,” she called. “Let the kids have it. I’m not hungry.”

She went to the sink, pulled a flowered paper Dixie Cup from the wall dispenser, and rinsed out her mouth. A minute later, Tony appeared in the doorway.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course,” Viv said, screwing the top on the toothpaste tube.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You said you weren’t hungry.”

“So? I’m running late, that’s all. Don’t wait up.”

She turned sideways, trying to squeeze past. Tony put a hand out to stop her, frowning.

“Yeah, but honey—you love pizza.”

“Tony,” she laughed, “could you possibly be any more Italian? Just because a person isn’t hungry doesn’t mean something’s wrong. I’m saving my appetite for the book club, that’s all. I bet you anything that Margaret’s been cooking since dawn, trying to make things special. Remember what happened at Christmas? I know she tried to laugh it off, but I think that whole thing with Walt really hurt her feelings. She’s been acting funny ever since, like she’s keeping a secret or something.”

Viv dropped her gaze, speaking more to herself than to her husband.

“Margaret is my closest friend in Concordia, my only friend. I just can’t stand to see her disappointed again.”

Chapter 2

CONSEQUENTIAL CHRISTMAS

LATE DECEMBER 1962

Walt said she was going overboard. Maybe she was. But it was their first Christmas in the new house, and she wanted to make it memorable. Was that so terrible?

“It’s a day like all the rest of them, Maggie,” Walt reminded her when she brought home kits to make needlepoint Christmas stockings for all three kids. “Don’t you think it might be a mistake, getting yourself worked up like this?”

His concerns were not unfounded.

The things Margaret set her heart on almost never came to pass. And if they did, they turned out to be less satisfying or meaningful or lasting than she’d imagined. Just less. Building up expectations was almost always a prescription for being let down, and never more so than at Christmas.

But it didn't have to be that way.

Christmas of 1945, the celebration of which her mother had postponed until January 11, 1946, the day Dad mustered out of the military, lived in Margaret's memory as a perfect day, a singular happiness. Had she been forced to choose one day to live over and over, that would have been it.

They didn't have two nickels to rub together. Mom had been laid off from her job at National Cash Register, which had retooled to make fuses, gunsights, and airplane parts during the war. But everybody was strapped in those days; the postwar economic boom didn't really get rolling until the 1950s. Sugar was still being rationed in '46, but had it been otherwise, they wouldn't have had money to buy it or much of anything else. There were a few presents, the kind that prove it really is the thought that counts, but nothing expensive. Her gift from Dad—a wooden bird whistle he'd carved from the branch of a German linden tree—still sat on Margaret's dressing table. And even after all this time, the scent of freshly cut spruce still summoned memories of the fresh garlands and Christmas wreaths her mother had twisted together by hand on that one perfect day.

How that Christmas *felt*, how they felt about one another, was what mattered most. For four uncertain, troubled years, everybody had done their job and their share, pulling in the same direction even when they were apart, and had come out on the other side, united in purpose and together again, a family.

It didn't last, of course. How could it?

When Margaret sat down to brush her hair at night, her fingers would light upon the touchstone of her father's gift. Looking into the mirror, she'd see the earnest eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl who was certain she could recapture the moment once more and hold on to it forever if only she worked enough, did enough, was enough.

That was why, two days before Christmas, when driving home from the poultry farm with a special-order turkey stowed in the passenger side footwell and spotting a stand of spruce trees fifty yards from the road, Margaret had slammed on the brakes, bailed out of the station wagon, and climbed over a barbed wire fence to cut some branches. Her sweater snagged on the fence and her shoes were coated with mud, but the car being filled with evergreens was worth it. Christmas was going to be magical. A holiday they would always remember.

Turning right onto Laurel Lane, Margaret spotted their house, a center hall Colonial with white siding, forest-green shutters, and two scrawny birch trees in the front yard. She would have preferred blue shutters and flowering dogwood trees, but Concordia had covenants for everything, which meant no blue shutters and no dogwoods, nothing that wasn't preapproved in the master plan.

Still, in so many ways, it was a dream neighborhood and a dream home.

Margaret loved her house. After a decade of run-down rentals with water-stained ceilings, what she most loved was the *newness* of it—the fact that she'd been the first one ever to put a bottle of milk in the refrigerator, and that the wall-to-wall carpet gave off a faint chemical scent, like Pine-Sol and motor oil, when she ran the vacuum.

When crossing the threshold for the very first time, footsteps echoing through bare rooms that smelled of paint, Margaret had been filled with a bright, breathless anticipation. She envisioned the house that *could* be, how the naked living room would look furnished with new sofas and chairs, imagined sparkling conversation with interesting friends taking place around a teak dining table she'd seen in a magazine. Mentally she had already papered walls and accessorized rooms, creating a warm, welcoming, and

stylish home.

It wouldn't happen overnight, but that was all right. She could be patient.

She worked with what she had—painting bedrooms herself and placing potted plants by the windows. She built shelves from cinderblocks and boards, filled them with borrowed library books and shopworn volumes purchased from the discount table in Babcock's Best Books, as well as one pristine copy of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* that she bought on her first visit to the bookstore, the same week they moved in. It was a splurge, but Margaret couldn't resist. Buying that book felt like making a down payment on the life she hoped to have.

But now, nearly a year after the move, those hopes were frustratingly unrealized.

Every time Margaret hinted about replacing the secondhand furniture they'd inherited from his parents, Walt shook his head. "Buying the house wiped out our savings. We shouldn't undertake any unnecessary expenditures until we build it up again."

She knew he wasn't wrong. And it wasn't as if they were the only family in Concordia who had emptied their bank account to buy a house they couldn't afford to furnish. But she and Walt hadn't always had such different ideas about what was and wasn't necessary.

They met during her freshman year at Ohio State. Margaret and Walt were enrolled in a class titled Great American Novels, along with seventy-plus former servicemen.

When the war ended, men like Margaret's father, who was thirty-one when he was drafted and had been working at the factory for years before Pearl Harbor, went back to their old jobs. Younger veterans had a harder time finding work. Thanks to the GI Bill, ex-soldiers flooded college campuses to earn degrees in lucrative

fields they hoped would support a family.

They were an impatient generation. War had interrupted their lives, so they were anxious to make up for lost time and eager to tick off the courses required for graduation, including a mandatory two-hundred-level literature class. They were good men, hardworking and focused, but most of them didn't give a fig about great American novels, or *any* novels.

Walter Ryan was the exception.

He had questions, *so* many questions. His hand was always the first to go up, so often that other soldiers-turned-students would groan at the sight of Walt's waving arm. He had observations too. Some were more insightful than others, and not all of them related to the material at hand. Sometimes tried the professor's patience. No one could doubt that Walt was curious about literature, and life in general.

But Margaret didn't really notice him until she walked into the cafeteria one day and spotted him alone at a table, surrounded by books and about fifty packets of saltines, which were free for the taking from the condiment table. He opened the packets one by one, dipping the crackers into a shallow paper cup of tomato ketchup, munching as he pored over a copy of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

He must have felt her eyes on him because he lifted his head.

"Sorry," Margaret said, feeling the color rise in her cheeks when his slate-blue eyes met hers. "Didn't mean to disturb you. I can see you're cramming."

"Cramming?" He blinked, then closed the book. "Oh no. This is just for fun."

"You're not an anthropology major?"

"Was. Then I switched to philosophy, but only for a semester. After that it was political science. At the moment, I'm undeclared,

but I'm thinking about English literature. Or maybe European history. I can't decide. Do you want to sit down?"

Margaret wasn't sure. He was such an odd young man but better-looking than she'd realized at first glance.

In an era when tall, dark, and handsome was considered the ideal, Walt was middling of height and slender of frame, muscular but lithe, and had fair skin and reddish-blond hair. He was handsome, she decided—when he smiled, he reminded her of the actor Van Johnson, his face lit up with a kind of joyous, boy-next-door charisma—and undeniably intriguing.

Margaret set down her cafeteria tray and took a seat. Walt brushed cracker crumbs from the table, as if trying to make things more presentable.

"What's your major?" he asked.

"I haven't declared yet, but probably English. Not sure what I'll do with it. Teach, I suppose, unless I happen to—"

Margaret took a quick drink of milk to mask her near fumble, grateful she'd stopped herself from saying that teaching would be her fallback position if she didn't meet her husband before graduation. Even if she'd been interested in him, which she absolutely wasn't, a girl didn't want to look too eager. Margaret put down her milk carton.

"What year are you?"

"Sophomore. I should be a junior. But . . ."

"You keep changing majors," Margaret said, laughing and finishing his sentence for him. "But you'll decide eventually, won't you? I mean, you can't just be a student forever."

"No, you're right," he said, ducking his head in a way that made Margaret wish she hadn't laughed. "I'll have to graduate and go to work eventually, but when will I ever have another opportunity like this? The chance to think and study and explore ideas and . . . well,

live. Really live.”

There it was again, that earnest, boy-next-door sincerity and enthusiasm. But Walt Ryan was a boy who had already seen a lot.

“I joined up in forty-three,” he told her. “Two days after my seventeenth birthday, me and a bunch of my friends from high school. The recruiting officer knew we weren’t old enough but was willing to look the other way. A lot of us didn’t make it back. Some that did won’t ever be the same. Guess I won’t be either, if I think about it. I was never much of a student—valedictorians don’t lie about their age to join the army, you know? But now, I just . . .”

He spread arms hands to encompass the books piled around him like the walls of a fortress, while smiling and turning his head from side to side, as if greeting old friends.

“Well, I just want to read everything and learn everything and do everything. Don’t know if I’m doing it for myself or the guys who never got to. I only know things are different for me now. Doesn’t make sense, I guess. But there it is.”

Walt shrugged, dunked a cracker into the pool of ketchup, and took a quick bite, as if suddenly afraid he’d said too much. But Margaret understood. The war had changed a lot of people. And there were worse things than returning from combat with a hunger for life and knowledge. Margaret held out half of her ham sandwich.

“Here.”

“You sure?” he asked, accepting the sandwich when she said she was. “Thanks.”

Most everybody at Ohio State was on a budget, and Walt wasn’t the only student to take advantage of the free crackers and condiments. But Margaret had never seen anybody make a meal of them and supposed he must be well and truly broke. She nodded toward the empty cracker wrappers.

Marie Bostwick

“Saving up for a guitar,” he said. “If I only eat one meal a day, I’ll have enough by the end of the term.”

“You play the guitar?”

“Not yet,” he said, grinning as he wolfed down a bite of the sandwich. “But I will.”

She married him two years later, when she was twenty and he was twenty-five.

The guitar was still with them, stashed in a corner of the garage. But Walt never played it or read for pleasure anymore, and the curious and handsome young man who smiled easily and talked too much was gone. She was grateful for the man he’d become, of course, and the life he’d made possible for them. If not for Walt’s cautious self-discipline, they’d still be renters.

But sometimes she missed the boy—the odd, hungry, indecisive, far-too-impulsive boy.

Margaret swung open the station wagon’s rear gate and began pulling out branches just as Viv, whose blue, split-level ranch house stood kitty-corner, was carrying out the trash.

“What is all this?” Viv asked, coming to stand beside her after jogging across the street.

“I’m making garland!”

“How much? You’ve got enough greenery to decorate the whole neighborhood.”

“I’m just going to wrap the banisters. It always takes more than you think.”

“Maggie, I don’t know where you get the energy.”

“Don’t be too impressed,” Margaret said, piling more boughs into her arms. “Not yet anyway. I’ll have to get a wiggle on to

finish before the kids get home from school. Hey, can I borrow your punch bowl? *Ladies' Home Journal* had an eggnog recipe I want to try."

Viv ran ahead to open Margaret's door and stepped aside so she could pass.

"Homemade garland? Homemade eggnog? Tell me you baked a gingerbread house, and I'll slash my wrists with a rusty frosting palette. How are the rest of us supposed to compete?"

Margaret frowned and turned sideways, squeezing through the doorway.

"It's not a competition. I just want things to be nice. For the kids. And Walt."

"No, I get it. I feel the same way. But sometimes I wonder . . ." Viv tilted her head to the side. "Do you think anybody really notices?"

As it turned out, no one did.

Later that afternoon, moments after the kids got home from school to start the Christmas vacation, Suzy vomited onto the freshly waxed parquet floor. All three of them came down with the flu. Margaret spent the holiday bouncing between their bedrooms, bringing crackers and ginger ale, buckets and mops, and words of comfort. There'd been no time to cook Christmas dinner, which was probably just as well. In her rush and enthusiasm to make the garlands, she'd left the turkey sitting in the station wagon for hours. The bird might have been all right, but it wasn't worth taking the chance, so she tossed it into a pot, boiled the bejeebers out of it, and made soup.

After the kids fell asleep on Christmas Day, Margaret and Walt

ate the soup with some of the corn bread she'd planned to use for stuffing, then sat down on the sagging sofa they'd inherited from his parents, careful to avoid the sprung coil in the center, to exchange gifts.

Margaret gave Walt a new cigarette lighter and a set of gold-plated cuff links. She could have used her weekly household allowance to buy them, but that felt like cheating, as if Walt would have been paying for his own present. Instead, she traded in her hoard of S&H Green Stamps, the underground currency of American housewives. Every purchase at a participating store or filling station earned stamps that could be pasted into booklets and traded in for all manner of merchandise—dishes, toys, appliances, sporting goods, and even furniture.

"Weren't you saving for lamps?" Walt asked, slipping the links through his cuffs.

Yes. One more book would have done it.

"The lamps can wait," she said, proud of her small sacrifice.

"Well, these are great." He raised his wrist to admire his gift. "Makes me a little embarrassed about my present though. Didn't have time to wrap it. Hope you don't mind."

When Walt pulled the envelope from his jacket, Margaret felt a thrum of excitement. Because what else could it be besides money, or maybe a check, to buy furniture? What *else* would one put in a plain white envelope at Christmas? She worked her finger under the flap, then pulled out a postcard printed with the image of a delighted-looking woman wearing heels and a polka-dot house-dress, and effusive red script that said: "A Gift! For YOU!"

"I know how you love your magazines," Walt said. "I spotted this one in the dentist's waiting room and thought you might like it." He shifted his weight to one side and pulled an issue of *A Woman's Place* out from under the sofa cushion, where he'd hidden

it. “This’ll hold you over till the subscription starts. It’s only been read a few times.”

As Walt talked—seemingly oblivious to her disappointment—the empty, vacuous sensation that spread through her upon opening the envelope balled into a hard, heavy, and palpable ire, a stone she could not help but throw.

“You shouldn’t have,” Margaret said.

“The dentist won’t care. He’s got plenty more.” Walt slid a Pall Mall from a pack stored in his shirt pocket. “Anyway, you’re welcome. It’ll be like getting a present every month.”

He flipped open his lighter and positioned the cigarette tip in the flame. Margaret stared at him, resentment growing as she counted the seconds it took him to feel the smoldering heat of her gaze, finally look at her, and see how badly he’d blown it.

He thought she was being ridiculous and ungrateful and small. Very small.

“When I was growing up, Christmas was for kids. In forty years, my parents never exchanged gifts! Why can’t you give me a little credit? At least I got you *something*! And you like magazines!”

Yes, but that wasn’t the point. His gift seemed like an afterthought. Was she an afterthought too? Had he not been stuck in the dentist’s waiting room, would he have gotten her anything at all?

Walt stormed off to sleep in the den with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s to keep him company. Margaret climbed the stairs and slammed the bedroom door, feeling furious but also foolish.

And yes, small. Lonely and small and less. Just less.

The day after Christmas, Walt went to work early, mumbling something about “last hired, first fired.” Margaret phoned

the pediatrician, then went to Mayer's Drugstore to pick up a prescription.

Barb Fredericks was coming out as she was going in. "Grab a magazine," Barb advised, knotting her scarf under her chin. "Must be twenty people in line for the pharmacy. Half the town is down with the crud."

Barb was new to Concordia—everybody was. Yet she seemed to know everyone in town, and their business.

"Clark, Wilkerson, Trowbridge," she said, ticking the names of infected families off on gloved fingers. "Bitsy and King are okay, but you'd expect that, wouldn't you? No kids, no germs. Oh, guess what? I saw a moving van parked in front of that new Nottingham model. Think I'll pop over later, invite her to the coffee klatch. Well, I should scoot. Happy New Year!"

After wishing her the same, Margaret entered the drugstore, walking to the center aisle and sighing at the length of the line. She didn't like leaving the kids alone for very long, but there was no help for it.

Margaret took her place at the end of the queue behind a bare-headed woman with a mass of reddish curls who was smoking a cigarette and wearing an exquisite mink coat that fell to her ankles. Fur coats were a status symbol, the sign of a man's success and a woman's too. They measured her ability to support his career so well that he could afford such luxuries, and please him so thoroughly that he wanted to spoil her—at least that's what the ads said. A few of her friends had minks, but none as fine as this, and they'd never have worn one to run errands, not even on a cold day in December. Margaret moved close enough to feel the silky luxury of the woman's pelt as it briefly brushed her forearm. It was so soft!

Oblivious to Margaret's presence, the woman let out an impatient sound, somewhere between a growl and a sigh, and reached for

a copy of the *Atlantic Monthly*. For a moment, Margaret considered plucking the same issue from the rack and sparking a conversation. But Margaret got the feeling this wasn't the sort of woman who was in the habit of chatting with strangers.

She chose a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post* instead, flipping past ads for Longines watches (The World's Most Honored!), Famous Artist Schools (boasting a faculty who "DREW their way from Rags to Riches"), and a purportedly in-depth study of the American woman. Margaret started reading a profile of Eleanor Courter, a housewife who, in many ways, could have been her doppelgänger.

Eleanor was thirty-four to Margaret's thirty-three, and also had three children. Eleanor, too, lived in a middle-class suburb near Washington, DC, but Maryland instead of Virginia. They shared similar attitudes toward religion; Eleanor said faith was important to her, and Margaret felt the same. Walt slept in on Sundays, but Margaret and the children went to church every week. Eleanor Courter was blond and Margaret brunette, but both had athletic, slightly boyish figures, blue eyes, and snub noses sprinkled with freckles.

That was where the similarities ended.

Eleanor was happy and fulfilled, satisfied with days spent cleaning, cooking, and driving kids to scouts, declaring herself to feel useful and "proud of her role." According to the *Saturday Evening Post*, she wasn't alone. In a survey of eighteen hundred married women, thirty-nine percent reported themselves as being "fairly happy" in their marriages. Fifty-seven percent said they were "extremely happy." Adding up the figures and realizing she was part of a very small minority, Margaret felt a hole open up inside her.

What was wrong with her?

There had to be something, didn't there? Some flaw in her

Marie Bostwick

character, biology, or background? If ninety-six percent of women in the survey were contented and fulfilled and *normal*, it could only mean she was—

Feeling a catch in her throat, Margaret blinked quickly and reshelved the magazine, then grabbed the one next to it, which happened to be *A Woman's Place*. The copy Walt brought home from the dentist's office was months out of date. This latest issue sported a glossy photo of Mrs. Rose Kennedy, the president's mother, wearing pearls and a beatific smile. Margaret had to admit it looked like an interesting magazine. But until she started reading, she could never have guessed how interesting.

Between a recipe for hula chicken and the interview with Mrs. Kennedy, Margaret saw an announcement for an essay contest with a top prize of one hundred dollars.

One hundred dollars? Just for writing an essay?

Though she'd barely picked up a pen in years, Margaret had done quite a lot of writing in college. More than one of her professors had complimented her work, said she had talent. A hundred-dollar prize would attract countless entries, but the third-place prize—a pair of brass lamps that were just as nice, if not nicer, than the set she'd been saving her stamps for . . . That might be possible, mightn't it?

"Don't you think it might be a mistake, getting yourself worked up like this?"

Just as Margaret was about to agree, the echo of Walt's voice in her mind was interrupted by another voice, very sharp and very real, a voice that eschewed caution and authority.

"What do you mean? I've been taking it for years."

Margaret looked up, surprised to find herself at the front of the line. The woman in the mink was standing at the counter, impatiently puffing a cigarette and talking to Mr. Mayer in a New York

accent that sounded more uptown than down.

The druggist pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Yes, but perhaps you shouldn’t. There’s been concern about addiction. Some studies suggest that meprobamate—”

“Oh, please.” The woman puffed, tilting her chin and blowing smoke upward. “Are you trying to impress me with your mastery of pseudo-Latin names made up by drug marketing teams? Miltown,” she said flatly. “Call it Miltown. Everybody else does. Everybody else *takes* it too—Lauren Bacall, Milton Berle, *Lucille Ball* for heaven’s sake! If there was something wrong with it, you think they’d let Lucy take it? People love Lucy! They made a whole damn show about it. *Everybody* loves Lucy!

“Well, everybody but me—I thought her character was an idiot,” the woman said, puffing, and tilting, and blowing again. “But that’s beside the point. My doctor, Alvin Gould, prescribes Miltown all the time. He has an office on Fifth Avenue, a medical degree from Columbia, and privileges at New York Presbyterian. *That’s* the man who wrote my prescription. Now. Are you going to fill it or not?”

Pushing the magnificent mink aside, the woman planted a fist on one hip and an elbow on the other, with her arm bent at an angle and her cigarette clamped firmly between her fingers, striking a pose that said she was willing to stand there for as long as it took. The beleaguered druggist glanced toward the line, which was getting longer, then shoved a white paper bag across the counter. The woman tossed a few crumpled bills onto the counter and pivoted toward the door, clutching the paper sack in her hand.

“Keep the change.”

Margaret’s eyes followed as the woman flounced down the aisle, the scent of cigarette smoke and Chanel No. 5 hanging in the air as she passed. Approaching the exit, she stuck her arm straight

Marie Bostwick

in front of her, flattened her hand, and gave the door a mighty shove, as if intent on leaving a palm print on the glass to mark her departure.

“Mrs. Ryan? Mrs. Ryan, can I help you?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry.” Margaret stepped forward. “Bobby woke up with an ear infection. Dr. Babcock said he’d call in the prescription?”

“Yes, yes, I remember. Just give me a minute to find it.”

While the harried druggist searched the shelves, Margaret turned toward the front of the store and the door the woman had disappeared through. A sunbeam shone through the glass, illuminating a faint but visible handprint. Though they hadn’t exchanged a word, Margaret was certain she wasn’t part of the ninety-six percent either. But there was something admirable in the way she refused to be cowed, how she stood her ground till she got what she wanted. What must it feel like to be like that, a woman who wasn’t afraid to make demands or stir up trouble? Margaret found it hard to imagine herself doing something similar, but in the fleeting moment when she did imagine it, her pulse picked up and her skin tingled.

Mr. Mayer returned with the pills. Margaret fished money from her purse to pay for the prescription. The druggist nodded toward the magazine she’d abandoned on the counter.

“Are you taking that too?”

Fat, wet snowflakes were falling, drifting to the bare pavement and melting, or landing on the slushy piles shopkeepers had shoveled earlier. With the folded copy of *A Woman’s Place* peeking from her purse, Margaret hurried through the town center, trotting past

shops still decked out in holiday finery, while thinking about the woman in the drugstore. Though it would have been a shame to interrupt such a triumphant exit, she wished she'd stopped her as she swept past, asked her name, and confessed that she'd never loved Lucy either.

The wind picked up. Margaret shivered and clutched her coat closer around her body. An icy gust whistled down the alley. Margaret whipped her head to the left to avoid the blast. That's when she noticed the typewriter in the shop window and a placard shouting, "Sale!"

"What is it?" Margaret asked the salesman. "I've never seen a typewriter like it."

He grinned, rubbing his hands together. "*That* is an IBM Selectric, best electric typewriter on the market. It has a type ball instead of individual keys, which you can easily change out if you want a different font." He went on a little longer, explaining the machine's many advantages. Margaret was less interested in the details than one crucial question.

"How much?"

"Regular price is \$350, but the sale price is \$299."

That was more than their mortgage payment.

"Oh. I see. Thank you."

Margaret buttoned up her coat, hearing Walt's voice chiding her for, yet again, getting herself worked up over things that were unattainable. But as she approached the door, the image of the fur-clad woman who wouldn't take no for an answer popped into Margaret's mind. Margaret turned around.

"I don't suppose you have any other models on sale? Something more affordable?"

The salesman nodded. "Everybody wants electric now, so we're phasing out some of the manual models. I can sell you a nice

Marie Bostwick

portable Royal for \$140. That includes the case.”

“Oh well. Thank you anyway.”

“You can rent by the month, you know. And after two years, it’s yours to keep.”

“How much?”

“Eight dollars a month.”

Margaret’s purse held seventeen dollars and change, earmarked for groceries and household expenses. It had to last until Walt replenished her allowance. Was it right to feed her family tuna casserole for the next week just to rent a typewriter and peck out an essay that would probably end up unread on a pile of entries from hundreds of other hopeful housewives? What would Walt say if he found out? Of course, if he never did . . .

“Can I take it home today?”

The salesman beamed. “I’ll carry it to your car.”

Marie Bostwick is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than twenty works of uplifting contemporary and historical fiction. Translated into a dozen languages, Marie's novels are beloved by readers across the globe. Her 2009 book, *A Thread of Truth*, was an "Indie Next Notable" pick. Three of her books were published as *Reader's Digest* "Select Editions." Marie lives in Washington state with her husband and a beautiful but moderately spoiled Cavalier King Charles spaniel.



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