

THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

I woke up two minutes before my alarm went off, like usual. Five fifty-eight and *bing*: eyes wide open, ready to greet the day. I've never had a hard time waking up in the morning. Never used the snooze button, either, not once in my life. Sobriety helps. I don't drink. Discipline helps, too. I was born with spades of discipline, I'm practically overflowing with it—which is why, I think, I've never had that much trouble with anything in my life. Not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to me as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order. I know it's not that easy for other people, but it really is for me.

That's why all those strangers liked me so much.

That, and the money. The money definitely helped too.

It was wintertime. January. A cold front had just blown through the pass. By my bedroom window, the radiator was puffing hot air. The sky outside was deep-as-death black, and would be for another few hours. Our farm was nestled in the rolling divots between two mountain ranges in Idaho, which meant we didn't see the sun until nine or so in the winter months. We were located five miles down a long, winding gravel country road. Not even airplanes flew overhead.

In the darkness, I listened to the distant mooing of Sassafras, our beloved dairy cow. I could tell by the pitch and register of her moans that my husband, Caleb, was milking her. Right on time. The man was good.

My husband was not disciplined before he met me. He was the youngest of five boys, the runt of the litter in an American dynasty. His father was the latest senator in a long line of U.S. senators, cur-

## YESTERYEAR

rently barreling through a presidential bid (third time's the charm!); his mother was a homemaker who had spent most of her life drowning in Chardonnay. Together, through a near-fatal combination of paternal neglect and maternal sympathy, they had raised Caleb to be soft and spoiled and sweet. But the only thing more valuable than a person with God-given traits is a person who's willing to learn, and my husband, *that man*, had been willing to learn.

And who was I?

A flawless Christian woman. The manic pixie American dream girl of this nation's deepest, darkest fantasies. The mother every woman wanted to be, and the wife every man wanted to come home to. Like a nun in a porno, it didn't make sense, but also, by God: it worked.

My name is Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

In the silences between Sassafra's near-human groans of pleasure (sometimes I joked online that my husband had a bovine mistress, *ha ha!*), I could just hear the distant chicken coop chatter, that meditative *bockbockbockbockbock* that served as the white noise machine of our farm. I loved our chickens. They were as domesticated as dogs, as harmless as toddlers. Sometimes I went out to the coop just to sit with them. I liked to stroke their silky necks, let them peck softly at the feed in my cupped palms.

We'd be killing them soon. In the darkness, my mouth watered. I'd been yearning, lately, for fresh bone broth. Once you've made it from scratch, the store-bought kind tastes rancid.

Through the open crack of my bedroom door, there was a spilling of little-boy laughter. The children were down the hall, having breakfast. I closed my eyes, felt the rhythms of my house like a heartbeat. Nanny Louise—*a godsend for our family*—was at the stove, making pancakes. Producer Shannon—*my right arm*—was by the kitchen sink, getting the video equipment prepared for a long day of work. Stetson and Samuel—*my darling young men*—were sitting at the table, shoving and pulling one another in equally groggy measure. Clementine—*my eldest, the girl who made me a mother*—was at the head of the table, ignoring her brothers, reading a book.

Nanny Aimee—*our second in command*—was moving through the far corners of the house, waking up each of the littles, kissing sleepy eyelids, tugging my two toddlers gently forward into the day. She would bring one to the kitchen, hand her over to Nanny Louise, and go back to get the other.

I closed my eyes and whispered my daily thanks to the Lord for everything he had provided me.

*Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, Junebug, and the little angel we haven't named yet.*

My hand moved instinctively to my stomach, resting at the height of the curve. I was thirty-two years old. Six months pregnant with our sixth child. It had been the easiest pregnancy to date—though all my pregnancies, relatively speaking, had been smooth. I was born to be a mother. I never felt more connected with Him than when I was tasked with carrying one of His creations.

(Do you see what I'm saying? Perfect.)

Beneath my palm, my baby girl rolled slowly to her side. My little sea creature. I loved her so much.

*Thank you for watching over the farm animals, Lord, and thank you for helping us pass five million on Instagram this week. We're only a few souls away from one million on YouTube, Lord. It's through Your will, and Your will alone, that I have reached so many hearts and minds. It's in Your name that I work to spread Your truth.*

A wave of nausea passed over me, and I suffered beneath the shadow. Sometimes it actually made me sick, how perfect my life was, and how good I was at living it.

On the bedside table, my phone sputtered awake. I reached over and silenced it, then threw off the sheets and got up.

We hadn't always had this much help. For the first few years, it had been us and the kids and the farm. When I became pregnant with my fourth, we hired Nanny Louise. When I was pregnant with my fifth, I hired Nanny Aimee, and shortly after that, we hired Producer Shannon. What we had now, in terms of help, was more

## YESTERYEAR

than enough for the time being. It allowed me to be present with both my children and my followers in all the ways I wanted to be at all the different points throughout the day. That's the thing about being a mother and a wife and an influencer, all at the same time: it's basically like breastfeeding three babies simultaneously. Like seducing three lovers at once.

*Why don't you ever show all the help you have behind the scenes?*

"We love our employees like they're family, so we go to great means to protect their privacy as they've requested. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if my social media account ended up compromising them in any way."

When I stepped into the kitchen, Producer Shannon was in the corner, fiddling with a tripod, and my four oldest children were eating breakfast at the table, each wearing a thick wool sweater. Nanny Louise was helping Jessa, our three-and-a-half-year-old, as she poured orange juice into her glass.

"I can *do it myself*," Jessa whined.

Nanny Louise, who also served as our homeschooling teacher, nodded and said, "Of course you can. Look. You're doing it right now. All by yourself. Big girl."

Jessa grinned, the verbal pronouncement of her autonomy enough to make her forget how Nanny Louise's hands never left the cup. "Big girl," she echoed. Nanny Louise tipped the glass, and my little girl drank greedily. I watched with approval as the pulp dripped down her chin. The orange juice was homemade. The tutorial would go online later this week.

"Good morning!" I said to the room. Five heads swiveled toward me. A chirpy chorus of *Morning, Mama* came in reply.

I made my way around the table, kissing each perfect cheek, ruffling each perfect head. All my children, even the boys, wore their hair long. The girls looked just like me: freckled, narrow faces, soil-dark hair, expressions prone to penetrating seriousness. Catch one of us in a pouting moment, and you'd be forgiven for summoning

images of some sixteenth-century martyr on a hunger strike. As for the boys, they looked like Caleb: ruddy cheeks, big toothy smiles. When they were all walking in a group (and they often were; the boys worshiped Caleb) they made me think of a trio of politicians in lockstep, scouring the land in search of babies to kiss.

I rarely paid attention to the differences in the children. Both the girls and the boys spoke similarly, laughed similarly. Their clothing was a rainbow of neutrals. The same pile of olive and tan and ocher had been tumbling down our growing family tree for over a decade.

*It's amazing how long good cotton can last.*

I walked over to my two boys, Stetson and Samuel. Stetson was eight years old, a full year younger than Samuel, but as of last summer the boys were the same height, same weight. With their shoulder-length hair and the way they seemed to do everything—run, play, do chores, shovel food into their mouths—in jerky, awkward-limbed unison, they reminded me of a pair of dressage ponies.

I rested a hand on either head as they ate their cereal with little-boy gusto, felt their skulls move around beneath my palms like possessed bulldozer levers. “What’s on the docket for today, boys?”

“Needa builda new enclosure for Sassafra,” Stetson said, mouth full.

“Mmm,” I said. “Very important. Papa will love the help.”

“Papa said I could use the nail gun.”

Samuel shoved Stetson, knocking the spoonful of cereal out of Stetson’s hand and sending it clattering to the floor. “It’s *my* turn to use the nail gun.”

“You’ll *both* use the nail gun,” I said. “Nanny Louise . . . ?”

She nodded, wiped the pulpy juice from Jessa’s cheeks and chin, then got up to clean up the mess.

People refused to believe my babies were as amenable as they appeared online. There’s no way this is their actual life!!!!, the Angry Women would write. (That’s what Caleb and I called them. The Angry Women.) To which I would reply: absolutely nothing, of course. A mother’s main task is to protect her children from the

## YESTERYEAR

world. There was no need for some hateful witch in Manhattan to see how physical Samuel got with his brother (and even his sisters, sometimes), no need for them to witness Stetson's daily tantrum over arithmetic (I loved that boy, but he had not been gifted with a standard helping of brains). If the Angry Women found out about any of my children's failings, they'd go crazy with bloodthirst. They'd also be devastated. None of them realized it, of course, but they needed me as much as I needed them. It was a symbiotic relationship. I was a shark, and they were five million tiny fish, nipping at the nutrients along my belly.

Little idiots. They were desperate to eat me. They had no idea I was the one who was keeping them alive.

*How does it feel to know that millions of people around the world know intimate details about your children?*

"I show only very selective moments of my children's lives. And besides, none of them have *any* access to screens—have you seen the studies, by the way? Of what screen time does to children's brains? If you ask me, my children are much better off in this household, where they occasionally show up in videos for my account, than in some other household where they'd be staring at an iPad all night. I mean, really." Sympathetic cluck. "It's an epidemic. So sad. You should look into *that*."

"You're up early," I remarked to Producer Shannon as I poured my coffee.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. She was frowning at one of the knobs on the camera, twisting it one way, then the other, a grumpy expression on her face. When Shannon first showed up at the ranch, she was nineteen years old, a Barnard dropout with pink hair and a nose ring who was willing to do professional work at a student rate. Now she was twenty-one. The nose ring remained; the pink hair had been abandoned in the name of her natural brown. I wasn't sure if that was an indication of any personal identity shift so much as a practical acceptance of the realities of living an hour away from

the closest city. Not exactly many options when it came to qualified hair colorists near a five-hundred-acre farm.

I paused, then said delicately, “Are you having those dreams again?”

She looked at me. “Who told you about that?”

In the dreams, Shannon stood on the nearby hillside, watching the farm burn to the ground. The house, the chicken coop, the gardens: all aflame. Car-size balls of fire raining down from the violet heavens. As the fire spread across the fields, she would run—or try to run—while the barn collapsed, the animals screaming in the rubble. Sometimes she could see us in the distance, waving to her. Saying something. And sometimes—when the dream lasted this long—she could see beams of light shooting down from the heavens, shining grace onto my children and Caleb and me. Saving everyone but her.

“Nanny Louise is worried about you,” I said—which was more diplomatic, I thought, than *Nanny Louise is sick of being startled awake in the middle of the night by screaming*. All our farm employees lived in a set of rooms above the stables, next to the homeschooling classroom.

“I’m fine,” Shannon said. “It’s no big deal.” She leaned past me to plug in a battery charger. For a moment, we were silent, standing side by side in the small corner of the house where we spent nearly all our waking hours together.

*You might just have the most beloved kitchen in America, these days. Can you tell us a little bit about it?*

“Oh, gosh—where do I even start?”

Through the camera’s discerning eye, the cooking space was perfectly cluttered: a half-filled mason jar of water here, a flour spill there, a few forgotten flower stems strewn across a worn-looking cutting board. It looked like a space where a mother worked; like a kitchen in the real world, only obviously better than anything the real world had to offer. People think they want minimalism, they think they want a house absent of stuff, when in fact a perfectly

## YESTERYEAR

uncluttered home makes them want to kill themselves. A space must always look lived-in for someone to want to live in it. This is a completely obvious notion, when you take a moment to really think about it, but most people don't take a moment to really think about anything. Most people are morons.

Another bonus of this area of the kitchen was that it was right next to a long row of windows, so the light, once the sun rose, was a perfect soft-bright at any hour of the day. Just standing near that kitchen corner made me look and feel a good six years younger. God-given plastic surgery, I called it privately, though I wouldn't dream of saying something like that online. The Angry Women would eat me alive.

*Have you ever had any work done?*

Laugh, laugh, laugh.

"God, no. I'm sorry, no offense to others who *have*, but me? Personally? I would never."

Shannon was looking blankly at the windows now, which seemed on these early winter mornings to offer a portal into a world shrouded in black. I knew she was thinking about the dreams. It was clear she didn't even have an inkling of an idea of what they meant. How could she be so dense? God was clearly trying to reach her, in about as direct a way as He could, He was sending smoke signals and carrier pigeons and writing messages to her in the sky, and she was ignoring all of it. She'd probably schedule a call with some scam-artist dream interpreter before she even considered that her brain might be offering her a nonmetaphorical insight. It was a shame to watch her totally bypass revelation, but not exactly surprising. Shannon's partially Barnard-educated brain was a blunt instrument, secular and smooth; it was about as suited a tool for speaking directly with God as a pair of rubber spatulas were for open-heart surgery.

And why might the Lord want to reach Shannon so badly?

Well. Shannon had misbehaved.

Shannon looked up at me, and our eyes locked. My cheeks flushed for having been caught staring at her with such an openly judgmental look on my face. “By the way,” she said, “my new phone arrived today. Thanks, again, for letting me do the rush shipping option.”

“Of course.” One of the children had dropped Shannon’s phone into a puddle, apparently, a week earlier. And because I was such a good boss, I’d remedied it immediately, handing her the company card to order a new one along with a little lighthearted joke: *Wouldn’t want you to be stuck out here without access to the real world!*

“Weren’t you going to wear the purple apron today?”

“Ah!” I said, and laughed. “Whoops! Pregnancy brain.” I hated that phrase, *pregnancy brain*, but it was an excellent way to sound relatable. The apron I was wearing was a dark navy. We were using these videos to announce a new shade option for the aprons on our online store (\$35.99, 100 percent cotton, buttons made of recycled plastic, made in Spain). “I’ll go get it now.”

As I left the kitchen, Nanny Aimee walked in with my toddler, Junebug. Jessa got up from the table, her glass empty now, and trailed whimsically after me like a dandelion puff. She grabbed Junebug’s hand as she passed, and soon both nannies were calling plaintively after the little girls as they followed me up the stairs.

“It’s fine,” I called over my shoulder. “They can come with me.”

It was a particularly special gift from our Creator that we had been blessed with three girls in a row. All children were gifts from God, of course, but *groups of girls*, little jewelry sets of two and three? That was something else altogether. A girl was lovely, a boy was nice, but *girls, plural*, were rainbows and fluff, personified. Radiant balls of delight. Such community-oriented creatures; with the addition of each new little lady to their little-lady tribe, they all seemed to grow a little taller, glow a little brighter. They carried each other like dolls. They braided each other’s hair. They picked and preened and poked at one another with motherly obsession.

The boys would keep us fed when we were old and feeble, I liked to say, but the girls? They would dance around our wheelchairs,

## YESTERYEAR

toss rose petals over our graves. Plus, I'll admit it: they were easier to train. The boys occasionally resisted or got frustrated or bored, but not the girls. They could perform on film for hours without complaint, just like their mama.

"Mom."

I winced instinctually, then rearranged my expression into softness. "Yes, honey?" I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, fixing the new apron, and my eldest daughter, Clementine, was standing in the doorway. She had turned twelve over the summer and promptly stopped calling me *Mama* a few days after. It made my eye twitch each time I heard her say *Mom*; I hated the word. It was such an ugly sound, so short and masculine, far much less musical than my preferred alternative. I didn't fight it, though. Clementine was a preteen, which meant she was testing me. The worst thing I could do would be to push back.

I watched through the mirror as Clementine crossed the room and sat next to the girls on my bed. "What does tradwife mean?"

Record scratch. "Who said that word to you?"

"What? Is it bad?"

"Tradwife," Jessa said, and giggled. She threw her head back and said it again. "*Traaaaadwife!*"

It almost seemed possible Clementine might hear the mechanical clicks of my brain as it whirred into warp speed, sorting through five hundred possible answers to that question. My eldest daughter was like me, not just in likeness but in disposition, too: she held her intelligence like a knife behind her back. Now that she was creeping toward womanhood, I found our similarities a bit unnerving. Like watching a clone of myself walk slowly toward me from a faraway point in the distance: What would happen when she arrived?

I'm aware this isn't the kind of thing you're meant to feel about your own daughter. But motherhood is its own kind of curation. Which is to say: every woman I know lied to me about what it would be like, before I became one myself.

. . .

*If your children became influencers someday, would you be proud of them?*

“I just want my kids to be happy.”

Big gummy smile.

I opted for casual ambivalence. The worst thing you can ever do is let a child know you care. “I know that *trad* is short for traditional. Some people call women like me a traditional wife. For obvious reasons.”

By some people, I meant the Angry Women. The Angry Women were the ones who called me a tradwife, who said *trad* like it was short for something evil, like *traditional* wasn't a fine word in any sane person's universe. But these women were not sane, nor were they happy, nor were they big believers in personal accountability. Instead of asking themselves why they spent so much of their precious time on Earth scrolling through other people's lives when they could be making their own home-cooked meals, or even offering eye contact to their own children—instead of asking themselves why they spent so much time bathing in their own rancid jealousy when they could be building their own lives into something they were proud of—they were apparently far more interested in drinking a bottle of wine each night and typing their little hearts out in online chat rooms about me. I suppose I'm assuming that these women were winos, but judging by the number of typos riddled throughout each of their messages, I'd call it an evidence-based assumption. Tradwives were *ruining* the country by staying married *2there* husbands, apparently. Tradwives were *destoryin* America because they actually liked spending time with their *cildrn*.

To which I would comment, in one of the six rotating anonymous burner accounts I used online: Oh my goodness, heaven forbid!

Before these women called me a tradwife, they had called me a religious zealot, a cult leader, a breeder. Compared to those names, tradwife seemed mild.

“I don't personally think celebrating traditions is bad,” I said. “Do you?”

## YESTERYEAR

The two littles shook their heads. *No, Mama. We love you, Mama.* But Clementine just stared at me. “So you’re saying you are one?”

I felt, suddenly, like I was being deposed for a lawsuit. “Clementine, why don’t you just tell me who told you I was a tradwife?”

“No one,” Clementine said. In a flash, she was bored. “I was just asking a question. Jeez.”

As she stood up, I faced my reflection again, busying myself with the apron bow. I wasn’t smiling anymore. “Tell Nanny Louise to look at the weather forecast,” I said to Clementine. “It might rain today. The children should wear boots.”

Clementine didn’t respond, and by the time I turned back around, she was gone.

Nannies. It had to be the nannies. They were constantly leaving their phones on countertops and couch cushions, no matter how many times I told them not to. It was an overwhelming task, protecting your child from the world. Jessa and Junebug were still so young, so impressionable—but Clementine? Practically a woman now. She couldn’t be trusted.

*Do your children enjoy being filmed?*

“Oh! They love it.”

The plan for this Content Day was to make a boule with my famous sourdough starter and to depict a Nativity scene on the dough with herbs I’d personally picked from our garden. This was, excuse the pun, my literal bread and butter. Plus, the holiday season always led to a major boom for our online store (Yesteryear Ranch Cherry Cutting Board, \$120, made in Brazil; Yesteryear Ranch French Salt Blend, \$45, made in France; Yesteryear Ranch patented indoor paint gallons in shades of Homestead, Pioneer, and Cowgirl, \$80 per gallon, all made in America). The boule wasn’t the main attraction so much as the gateway drug: Baby Lavender Jesus in a Rosemary manger, three wise Thyme sprig men, fa la la and the followers would click, click, click, until their hearts—and their online shop-

ping carts—were full. They would beg—*they were always begging*—for more.

The herb boule took four hours. A standard amount of time, which would be clipped and snipped by Shannon into a thirty-second time lapse, my fingers spinning dizzily around the screen, packing and kneading and caressing a lump of pale dough. The second half of the day was Natural Dinner. I was going to make a traditional Sunday roast (*or should I say a trad Sunday roast?* I planned to write in the caption, with a winky face; that would really drive the Angry Women up a wall). All the ingredients would be sourced from our very own farm, except for the beef itself, which technically came from the supermarket on the other side of the mountain pass.

At some point in the early afternoon, we realized we were out of fresh eggs, so we decided to make a trip to the chicken coop. The sky and the mountains performed beautifully for us. I walked blissfully over to the coop, Jessa and Junebug clinging to my skirt as we mucked along in the mud and said hello to our ladies, which is what I called the chickens whenever I was being filmed. *The ladies.*

“Hello, ladies,” I sang out. “How are y’all doing today?”

Behind me, Shannon tripped on her video cord and swore loudly. “Sorry,” she said, “can you do that part again?”

Of course I could. I could do any of it on command, a million times over, in a million variations of singsong. “Hello, ladies! How are y’all doing today?”

“Perfect. Let’s move on to a shot of the egg pickup.”

“I say,” someone said from behind. “Is that Marilyn Monroe by the chicken coop?”

*It might as well have been!* I rolled my eyes and laughed, had a single moment to smooth my skirt and pray that Shannon was still filming before Caleb strode into the coop, grabbed me by the waist, and dipped me low. He kissed me while our daughters cheered. Then he lifted me back up, grinning as I slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “You got my boots all dirty!”

## YESTERYEAR

“Little dirt never killed anybody.” He tipped his cowboy hat to me and winked.

I laughed and rolled my eyes again. “We’re *filming*, Caleb.”

As if he didn’t know.

“Actually,” Shannon said, “we’re not. I paused right before Caleb spoke. So you guys are good. If you want to take a quick break, I can go have some coffee.”

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen. “Okay. Well, we don’t actually have to—”

But Shannon was already trudging away with the camera, walking quickly toward the house.

Caleb patted my behind twice, gently. As we watched Shannon throw open the front door with an unnecessary amount of force, he said, “She still upset?”

A surge of emotion rolled through me.

“Yes, Caleb. She’s still upset.”

“Well. She’ll feel better soon. When we—”

I looked at him, and he fell silent. “You don’t understand women at all.”

He was about to reply, and I was about to cut him off with an even sharper statement, and then both of us seemed to realize at the exact same time that we were being watched.

Jessa, Junebug. Little girls, sweet things, peering up at us. Watching, always. Where the hell was Nanny Aimee?

No matter. It was good practice, anyway. That was what I told myself when I found myself under surveillance by a child who should’ve been under surveillance by someone else: *It’s good practice!* A flawless performance, after all, does not arrive overnight. It takes years—and years, and years—of practice.

I leaned forward on tiptoes and kissed Caleb twice in quick succession. “Get back to work, cowboy.” The girls laughed and clapped, and I flushed from the reward. Caleb tipped his hat to the three of us and strode back toward the barn, where he would probably spend an hour or two messing around with the organization of some hay bales. Caleb was very good at keeping himself busy. He

was also very good at only ever doing the farm chores that he actually enjoyed: milking Sassafras, driving the big John Deere tractor around in tight donuts in the pastures, staying up all night with a laboring sow. As for the chores he didn't enjoy—cleaning, planting, picking, mucking out the stalls—he left all that to the ranch hands.

*Hold on. You have ranch hands, too?*

Pause.

“Did I not mention those before?”

Shit. Consider mentioning pregnancy brain.

“We have two or three, usually. Just seasonal work. Depending on what's going on at the farm. We need as much help as we can get!”

*But why didn't you—*

“Pregnancy brain!”

The filming for Natural Dinner ran late. All throughout the house, moods went sour. Shannon and I started bickering over how to do the overhead filming, and then our bickering wasted ten precious minutes of afternoon light, causing us to rush, which then led to further bickering, then the older kids' homeschooling lesson ended fifteen minutes earlier than usual because Nanny Louise apparently didn't feel like providing a comprehensive education for the day, and all of a sudden the kitchen was filled with incessant whining, the boys arguing with Clementine about what to play before dinner, and the nannies—who were, the agency had assured us, the absolute cream of the crop, but sometimes made me feel like I was paying full-time prices for part-time work—were just sitting there on the couch scrolling on their phones while a world war was waged over the tiny Scottie dog game piece in the Monopoly set. (The only board game allowed in our house, by explicit demand of my father-in-law. It was important, Doug said, for children to learn the value of a free market as soon as possible.)

The nannies. Oh, the nannies! They tended to veer toward uselessness during this time of the day. From Nanny Aimee, I expected

## YESTERYEAR

as much. She was a dumb girl from Los Angeles with a perfectly symmetrical face, capable of keeping the kids alive, and not much else. But from Nanny Louise, who was five years older than Nanny Aimee and had a master's degree in education, I expected more. She was like family to us.

*Did you just say your nannies are like family?*

Silence.

*I'm sure you can understand that there's a long and controversial history of white women calling the people who worked for them "family."*

Longer pause. Soft, knowing smile.

No. That's not right.

Soft, *unknowing* smile.

Better.

"Next question, please!"

"Ladies, can I speak with you for a moment?"

The nannies looked up from their phones.

"Clementine has been using someone's phone unsupervised," I said. "She asked me what a tradwife is today."

"Well," Nanny Aimee said, then paused.

I trained my smile on her. "What?"

"I mean."

Another pause. She looked like a Muppet with a gummed-up jaw. I resisted the urge to step forward and work her mouth open myself.

"We'll be more careful moving forward," Nanny Louise said. She gave Nanny Aimee a sharp look, the visual equivalent of a kick beneath the table, and Nanny Aimee nodded. "Yep," she said. "Won't happen again."

I took a deep breath, sighed my anger out. "Can you both handle dinner prep tonight? I was thinking about making a little trip to Target."

In my periphery, Clementine perked up.

*Right on cue.*

It was a rare gift of decadence, when I took the girls with me to the Super Target thirty minutes away. At the Starbucks inside the store, Clementine ordered a Frappuccino with extra whipped cream, and I bit my lip about having so much caffeine and sugar this late in the day. I got Jessa and Junebug each a cake pop and an apple juice, and then a nonfat decaf cappuccino with oat milk for myself. I tried to limit these trips to once a month; usually Nanny Aimee went out to pick up our groceries for us. But it was nice, even for me, to come here occasionally and float along beneath the mind-numbing fluorescence—though I will say it amazed me that so many people came here on a weekly basis. Spending more than thirty minutes at Target made me feel like I was nursing a cavity.

As I pushed the cart slowly down the main aisle, the girls trotted forward and behind me in haphazard loops, hopping from distraction to delightful distraction. The jewelry stands. The clothing racks. The shelves of body lotion in colorful packaging, tangerine and persimmon and bubblegum pink. *See how good the little things can feel, girls? See how thrilling a sugar high can be if you choose it consciously, after so many days of careful—*

“Natalie?”

I paused, looked around. Pretended to be confused, when really I was thinking, *Oh, Jesus Christ. Not you.*

Vanessa and I had gone to high school together. She'd been on the track team too but had made varsity only her senior year, so we hadn't spent much time together. She was in nursing scrubs now, standing by two overflowing shopping carts, her preteen daughter glowering behind her with the same expression of profound disappointment that Vanessa had worn at every track meet. I glanced at the cart closest to me. Disposable razors, disposable tissue boxes, a half dozen slices of chemical-bloated ham wrapped in three layers of plastic. I could practically smell the stink of the landfill where all this stuff, all these products designed to be trash, would end up a month from now. Then I looked back at Vanessa, who was now frowning at me with the same sour expression as her daughter, and

## YESTERYEAR

my heart softened with nostalgia. *Poor thing.* She'd never won a race in her life.

"It's so good to see you!" I said. "It's been, what—a decade?"

She sniffed, looked at my empty cart. "I didn't know you came to Target."

"Of course I do. I'm human, aren't I?" I turned my grin to her daughter. "And who is this?"

Vanessa looked at her own daughter with a strange expression, like she was trying to see what she looked like through my eyes. "This is Zoe."

Zoe looked to be a few years younger than Clementine. If she recognized her own name, she didn't show it. She just stared at me, her expression a springboard of tight misery.

"And those ones, I'm guessing, are yours?"

I followed Vanessa's gaze to see Clementine crouched in the aisle ahead, flipping through a picture book while the little girls peered eagerly over her shoulder. A flush of pleasure ran through me, stronger than any artificial sugar high. "Yes. Those are my girls. The oldest is Clementine, and the younger ones are Jessa and Junebug."

When I turned back to Vanessa, she was smirking. When was the last time I'd seen a grown woman smirk? "You know, I really admire your commitment to the olden days with those names."

My smile shrank by an inch. *Here we go.*

Vanessa had grown up in a strict, devout family, much stricter and more devout than my own, but she'd since emancipated herself from her parents, and now liked to write long-winded diatribes about her *terrible upbringing* via Facebook statuses that garnered, on average, three to five likes a pop. Vanessa wanted the world to know she was modern, now. She'd changed. She ate organic! (*Except when she got her groceries at Target, apparently!*) Self-proclaimed progressive women like Vanessa were chemically addicted to hating women like me. I knew that. I knew this woman got embarrassingly drunk at family parties and pulled up my Instagram page, showing anyone stupid enough to walk past that *she knew this woman personally,*

*she knew her in high school*, before launching into some recycled slur of a speech about how all traditional people are idiots, all religious people are idiots, all people who choose to live a different lifestyle than hers are idiots, idiots, idiots, when what she really wanted to say was *I am so nauseatingly jealous of this woman I used to know that I think it might actually kill me.*

Women like Vanessa, with their expensive latex foreheads and their *I'm with her* bumper stickers? They didn't know what they wanted. They couldn't possess a truly principled stance even if someone injected it straight into their faces. Lord knows they couldn't take responsibility for their own lives, so they blamed their unhappiness on me. The dumb, ignorant, backward-thinking trad-wife. Never mind the fact that I graduated in the top three of my high school. Never mind that I got straight A's at Harvard, studying global religious history while Vanessa ping-ponged her way through the rooms of the club rugby house at Michigan. (Yes, I'll admit: I checked in on her Instagram from time to time, too.) Never mind the fact that I lived my life *actually adhering* to all the principles they loved to virtue blast on Instagram. *Eat local! Support small businesses! Reduce waste!*

The Angry Women could say what they wanted, but facts were facts. I was a woman of principles. A woman *defined* by principles. No amount of money in the world could've gotten me to take a nibble of the cancerous ham in that Tetris-packed cart. No amount of smooth-brained social acceptance could've gotten me to name my daughter something so toothlessly trendy—something that so desperately shouted *pick me*—as Zoe.

*Cunt.*

Sorry, Lord. My anger was getting the best of me, these days. It was a problem that needed to be fixed, and I planned—I really did!—to fix it. If I'd had a little more time, I swear I would've fixed it.

“It's wonderful to see you,” I said smoothly. “You should bring the kids over to the farm sometime!” I peered down at Vanessa's

## YESTERYEAR

sullen ogre of a daughter. “I bet you’d love to see where ham comes from, wouldn’t you?”

Vanessa let out a tiny moan. As intimate and shameful as an accidental fart in mixed company. Her face turned a bright shade of pink. I knew it was the kind of threaded offer that would catch in her molars. She would know the offer was half-hearted but still consider the possibility anyways, because Vanessa probably wanted to see my picturesque little farm in person more than she wanted anything else in her life. The chickens, *my ladies*. The big red barn, which photographed so beautifully in any kind of light. The gardens, oh, the gardens! The pseudo-erotic fantasy of us baking my signature lemon zest cake together, the two of us laughing at some stupid thing, our children playing peaceably together in the background. None of it would ever happen, and yet: the idea of that impossible day would sit there, growing bacteria in the back of her throat, for the next week or month or year. A profoundly humiliating desire, as strong and confusing and animal as the ones that inspired her to watch lesbian porn on low volume while her husband was sleeping next to her. (She was definitely the kind of woman who watched lesbian porn on low volume while her husband was sleeping next to her.)

*Grind away, Vanessa, I thought, smiling beatifically. Go ahead. Give yourself a migraine thinking about me.* A notion so pleasurable it was worth the guilt that came wrapped up inside it, like a penny candy. She would think about my famous little farm for a year, and then she would bite the bullet and order one of my branded Dutch oven sets (\$250, made in Taiwan), and she would mail it to a friend’s house, one whose name I didn’t recognize, so that I never found out that she personally gave me money. That’s how much this woman hated me. That’s how much she hated herself.

“Say you’ll come sometime,” I said one last time, smiling wide. “Please, just say it.”

“Thanks,” Vanessa said shortly. “I will.” She looked like she’d swallowed a bottle of Advil. I beamed in reply.

We said a few more pointless things, long enough for Vanessa to take a few more obvious glances at my body (noticing, no doubt, that the skirt hanging loose around my hips was the very same one I'd worn in school a decade earlier) and long enough for me to pointedly ignore her body altogether (do I even have to say it?). We said goodbye. As I turned the corner with my girls, Vanessa threw a middle finger at my back. I didn't *see* her do it, but I felt her do it. I swear I did. And who could blame her? I had the life she always wanted, the life she *still* wanted but could no longer admit. Vanessa was liberated, sure—but I was happy. And it was such a shame, wasn't it? The way some women so willingly compromised every ounce of themselves in the name of building a life for themselves that they didn't enjoy.

I passed Vanessa once more at the checkout line and gave a cheerful wave, but she didn't see me. She was bickering with her daughter over something in the cart. By this point, I'd regained my composure and felt nothing but pity for her again.

*What do your friends think of your success online?*

"They're happy for me. Why wouldn't they be?"

Pity. I pitied her.

But also: *fuck her.*

*Sorry, Lord, but really, fuck her—*

By the time we reached the car, it was dark out and I was practically spitting with fury. Vanessa, that *bitch*, was undoubtedly going to run home to post about me in one of those stupid snarky online forums—bet you didn't think someone like Natalie would shop at Target!!!—and then I would have to suffer a whole week of *online commentary*, and Shannon! The nerve! The absolute unbelievable nerve of that spoiled uneducated morally bankrupt little son of a—

*Breathe, Natalie. Just breathe.*

Clementine was in the back, buckling the girls into their car

## YESTERYEAR

seats. I sat in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead, my hands flexed tightly on the steering wheel. I glanced down at my phone on the console. My temper settled.

Yes. That would be nice. I could share the moment myself and take the wind right out of Vanessa's stupid little sails.

I picked up the phone and pressed record, right as Clementine was getting into the passenger seat. "Girls," I said, smiling into the lit-up screen, "what did you get at our *very special* trip to Target today?"

Jessa and Junebug squealed in response:

"A stuffie!"

"Sparkly lotion!"

"What about you, Clementine?"

I angled the camera so it featured me, grinning, and Clementine's form in the passenger seat. Clementine had gotten a new shade of nail polish. But she didn't reply. She was facing away from me. "*Clementine*, what did you get at—"

"Stop filming me."

I froze. My face flooded with heat.

She'd never done that before. Not once.

I glanced quickly in the rearview mirror: Jessa was playing with a bracelet on Junebug's wrist, Junebug babbling quietly about the new stuffed animal. I pressed the button to stop recording and set the phone face down in my lap. My hands were shaking. I threw the car into drive and we rolled toward the parking lot exit.

"I didn't know you were unhappy being filmed, Clementine," I said as we rolled onto the quiet mountain highway toward home. "I've always told you to tell me if you felt that way. Haven't I?"

I hadn't.

Clementine rested her forehead against the window. "I'm telling you now."

"Fair enough," I said. None of the girls were looking at me anymore, and yet for some reason I was smiling. *Stop it*, I told myself sharply. *Stop smiling like that*. But I couldn't. I didn't.

*When it comes to consent, do you think children are capable of—*

“Oh, please.”

Pause.

*Can I finish my question?*

Longer pause.

“Yes. Of course.”

*When it comes to consent and the use of children’s likenesses on public social media accounts—*

“Actually, I need to take a quick break to use the restroom. Would that be all right?”

Later that night, Caleb walked into our bedroom and said, “I spoke to my dad again today.”

“Oh?” I was reading my emails, mass-deleting spam messages, while the nannies got the children ready for bed. At that moment, a new email pinged my inbox. It was from Shannon. The subject line read: formal resignation

I paused. Stared at the subject line for a few moments. Then I clicked on it.

Natalie,

I’m writing to let you know that I won’t be working for you any longer. Between what happened over the summer and all the nightmares, it’s clear that this job isn’t good for my mental health any longer. I’ve got a bus ticket for later tonight. I don’t need a ride; Nanny Aimee is going to drive me to the station.

For what it’s worth: I don’t think you’re a bad person. I think you’re just confused.

Please tell the kids I love them.

Shannon

P.S. I’m sorry for screwing up your content calendar.

## YESTERYEAR

“Natalie? *Helloooo*, anyone there?”

“Sorry,” I said, “I just—I need to look at something quickly. Give me one sec.”

I read the email a second time, then a third. Then I looked at Caleb. “What were you saying?”

“Is everything okay?”

I laughed a bit too brightly. “Just silly publicity emails. Now, *please*, I’m all ears: tell me about your father.”

“Well,” he said. He paused dramatically. *Drumroll, please*. “He thinks that now’s the time.”

I nodded impatiently—I already knew what he was going to say—before remembering this was meant to be the grand reveal. *Play along, Natalie. Say your lines*. “Now’s the time for what, darling?”

I knew exactly what was coming. In fact I had seen *all* this coming—my father-in-law’s political push for Caleb, Shannon’s letter of resignation—had arguably orchestrated it myself, but still, I found myself unaccountably shocked that it was finally happening. *Here we go. The dominoes are starting to fall*. And yet: how dare she! I suppose it was the tone of the email that got under my skin, more than the email itself. Such faux maturity. Dripping with unearned condescension. Exactly the kind of letter you would expect from a twenty-one-year-old. Exactly the kind of letter I would’ve expected from Shannon in particular, that lost little lamb, that stupid little bitch.

*Sorry, Lord. Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

“Now’s the time to run,” Caleb said. “For office.”

“Oh my gosh. Wow.”

Caleb’s father wasn’t just a senator. He was a bona fide political icon. He’d been in office for four decades, running uncontested every six years. He was a war veteran, a family values traditionalist, the kind of guy people described with abject sincerity as a *real-life John Wayne*. They weren’t wrong. Doug Mills was broad-shouldered and confident. The ultimate patriarch. Nearly every comment he made to another man was accompanied by a hearty clap on the shoulder. He was, if the polling was even remotely accurate, about

to become the next president of the United States. He was also my closest ally. What my father-in-law and I both knew: there was no *otherwise*. There was only this plan, a very delicate one, in which two variables—my producer, my husband—were taken care of in one fell swoop.

*Final question, Mrs. Heller Mills: Would you like to comment on these horrific allegations of assault at Yesteryear Ranch?*

“Unfortunately, I can’t comment on an ongoing legal investigation.”

I would just like to pause here and say: another woman would have cracked years ago.

*I don’t think you’re a bad person.*

A bold thing to say to the wife of the man you’ve been fucking. That was the word I was looking for: *bold*. The whole email was so hair-raisingly bold that it might have caused another, lesser woman to have a complete nervous breakdown, to throw her phone across the room, to hiss at her stupid, useless, can’t-keep-his-dick-in-his-pants husband, *Look what you’ve done*. Not me. As I stared at my philandering moron of a husband, I gave myself a mental pat on the back for all the work I’d done over the years to harden myself against the world. We were facing down the barrel of our first PR disaster. I could already see the headlines: *Allegations Roil Insta-Famous Family*. Even worse: *Is Natalie Heller Mills a Cult Leader? Former Producer Speaks Out*.

Would a headline like that ruin a nascent political career? Assuredly not. America didn’t care one iota about morality when it came to politicians. If anything, we expected them to be a little sleazy. It might improve the odds for my coddled husband in the heartland. Might even give me a boost in followers, too. *That poor pregnant woman, doing her best to keep her family together*. Really, if you think about it: this whole situation would make for a hell of an Instagram post.

## YESTERYEAR

But I was getting ahead of myself. There was no need to think about that now. No need, even, to tell Caleb about the email just yet. This was not the kind of thing my husband was capable of dealing with. Not the kind of thing he—who, despite his best efforts, still wore his masculinity so roughly and unnaturally, as if it were an ill-fitting sweater I'd forced over his head—would be able to fix. If he knew, he'd only make it worse. He'd do something completely idiotic like drive to the bus stop and beg for forgiveness from Shannon in front of a crowd of strangers.

"I think it's a great idea," I said, exactly like I'd practiced. "I bet you'll be president one day. Just like your dad."

Caleb's face lit up in relief. He would never admit it, he'd spent half his life running away from it, but this was the only thing he'd ever truly wanted: to be just like dear old Dad.

"Now," I said, "let's pray on it."

We kneeled together at the foot of the couch. I pressed my forehead into my clasped hands and tried to breathe the anger out of me, but I couldn't. It was like a germ. It just kept replicating in my stomach. Usually my husband's failures were easy to forgive, but tonight I wanted to kill him. I could practically see his insipid prayers float past me, in little Comic Sans thought bubbles. *Please keep my kids safe, Lord, along with the chickens. Help my wife continue to love me. A blow job would be nice, Lord, and if it's not too much, I'd like the strength to become something memorable. I'd like to become a legend.*

All men wanted to become legends. It was so embarrassing.

And what did I want? An easy answer. I wanted more of what I already had. I wanted the whole entire world to see itself through my eyes. A new level of influence. That's not the kind of thing you ask for directly, though, so I settled for something simpler.

*Please let this plan work, Lord. Please don't let her win. And please give my husband a spine. I'm tired of him needing to borrow mine.*

Amen.