

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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RATON**

WARMER

**LAUREN
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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It was very late and Ange couldn't sleep. She had tried the usual things, had drunk a bottle of wine and watched a glacial Scandinavian film, had stared at her daughter smiling in her dreams, but her mind stayed bright, and there was no fatigue in her bones.

The insomnia came from the Girl Scout cleanup of the creek that afternoon. Lily had spent the whole time crouched in the water, poking at a turtle with a stick. Ange had let her slack off because there was such a huge amount of trash in this scrap of a place that Ange was afraid it could harm her daughter's soul to see how awful human beings could be. Out of the mud and from under the foliage, Ange had wrested license plates, condoms, popped balloons, Ping-Pong balls, beer cans—the effluvia of disposable lives. Up and down the creek, all the other mothers and their girls were grimly pulling junk out of the weeds.

Then Ange bent down and pushed aside a broad leaf, and there she saw the horror: the downy outlines of what used to be chicks, everything once alive wasted away, the last browned bits tracing a halo around the knots of bright plastic that the poor crazed mother bird had fed her babies.

Something flipped over hard inside Ange. She reached down and felt the clammy bits of the chicks through the gloves as she put them in her garbage bag. Then she threw up and called her daughter urgently, tossed the trash bag into the back of the leader's pickup truck, and raced home, Lily trotting beside her, far too winded to whine. Ange felt only a little better when she slammed the front door and locked it against the dread that had trailed them back to their house.

For a minute Ange panted there, and Lily stood in the middle of the room, sucking her finger and glaring at her mother with her dark eyes.



Everything was off all afternoon, and dinner was impossible—roasted chicken and, oh my God, ravioli like little boiled sacks of flesh. Ange ate

nothing, fighting her nausea, but Lily ate well.

Then there were the empty hours, until at last Ange trailed out to the porch in her mother's crocheted afghan to sit under the strange warp of the night, alone with the bats that were only fleeting darknesses in the starless sky.

It was barely visible through the trees, but the street rolled gently downhill from the house for a mile before it met its full stop at the ocean. There, between the end of pavement and the beginning of sand, was a hidden place where people parked their cars so that, surrounded by the dunes, they could feel invisible. Teenagers and squirrely adulterers went there at night to screw. If the wind was coming off the ocean just right, the music from the car speakers flew up the gentle incline to the little house in its ring of citrus trees. From this distance, it was warped into only a whine and a beat, which somehow more clearly expressed the songs' yearnings toward love, love found, love of self in love, love lost, love being sweatily made. Ange had listened for hours, though it filled her with a seething discontent.

But now at this time of early morning, nobody was awake; this part of Boca Raton was all old people clinging to houses they'd bought in the seventies for a whistle and a fistful of peanuts. Ange's luck in owning her house hinged upon another family's tragedy: a mother not much older than Ange had waited until her only son drove off to college before going weepily into the house, cooking up three-bean chili with rat poison in it, and shooting herself in the throat after her husband had finally stopped breathing. For three years before that, Ange had passed the house twice a day, walking to and from work at the history library, but mostly she had missed seeing the little white cottage for the overgrown citrus trees circling it. Even in neglect, the orchard had produced so much fruit, there was always a humming, moving carpet of wasps on the ground. The college boy had driven back home before he had even unpacked the car into his dorm room, and Ange had been walking by the moment after he had climbed out of the car and bent over, weeping on the sidewalk. Near him stood his uncle, who looked distressed but for some reason wasn't hugging the child to comfort him. Ange didn't yet know the story but put her arms around the boy. For a very long time, the boy had wept on her shoulder, Lily kicking between them. At last, he raised his head, looked at her with haunted eyes, and said, *I never, ever want to go in there again.*

The uncle said, *We'll sell it. Don't worry.*

The boy said in despair, *But after this happened, who would ever buy it? Me*, said Ange, surprising herself. *Me. I'll buy it.*

He looked at her for a minute and said, *Ok, yes*, and then wept again. Then he said he wouldn't keep a penny from the sale, that it'd be infected money, and that Ange must pay only what was left on the mortgage. The uncle, who happened to be a lawyer, tried to argue until the boy screamed wordlessly, a sound as terrible and thrilling as a train's metal shearing when it derails. Then the uncle agreed.

This was a Friday. On Monday, papers were signed, every penny from Ange's savings plus two hundred bucks borrowed from her coworker Phyllis, but, really, no money at all.

Then she was a homeowner, eight months pregnant, Teo, Lily's father, off jazz drumming somewhere in the Midwest—a bitter little harbinger of the life to come. She rented a dumpster and tossed everything from the house she thought too intimate: sheets, mattresses, clothes, curtains, soaps, spoons that had tasted the insides of the family's mouths, blankets that had warmed their bodies, the carpet still wet with blood. There was very little left to the house in the end. It was just a bungalow of two bedrooms, five rooms total, an antique cottage with old crazes in the heart pine where the termites had chewed. She painted the walls white, then the furniture a different glossy white—the king-size bed, the kitchen table and chairs, the wooden parts of the couch. She taught herself how to upholster with a bolt of cheap pale velvet and a staple gun. She had wanted no color at all; it was like living in a cloud when the sunlight shone in through the leaves of the citrus trees. She had carefully saved what she thought the boy should have when his grief was less fresh and sharp: papers, photographs, trophies, stuffed animals, the cache of love notes proving that the darkness that had ended the marriage so explosively hadn't been there all along just biding its time. When she dropped the stuff off in plastic containers at the law office, the uncle crept out, blinking rapidly. His shirt was sweated through, and without asking, he put his hands on her belly. *I'm so glad*, he stammered. *In that house. Where my brother. Not death, but life.* She breathed three times slowly, until she felt the frayed end of her patience slip out of her grasp, then gently removed the man's hands.



At last, just before dawn, the birds in the orange trees started singing their acid little songs, and Lily came out to the porch, still half dreaming. She climbed into her mother's lap, and together they watched the sky go pink, then orange, then stretch into its broad daily blue. If a night of sleeplessness could be punctuated with this body slowly awakening on her lap, this smell of pepper and salt water and sleep, Ange thought, maybe insomnia was worth it. Or maybe not—Lily's breakfast of scrambled eggs nauseated Ange, and she had to retch in the bathroom, thinking how she might never be able to eat anything bird-based again.

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Everything took longer after a night without sleep. She was late to drop Lily off at school, late to work, late to reshelve the books, late to sit with the project she had just started. The history library was a hidden treasure in an otherwise bare-bones university, and it hadn't taken long for the junior faculty to realize that the two librarians could be useful as underpaid research assistants. Phyllis, the other librarian and Ange's boss, grouched about taking on special projects, but Grouse was her native tongue. Ange loved the trickier things the professors asked her to dig up. She had fallen into the job fifteen years ago; she'd vaguely chosen library science because she liked books, particularly history books, because of a single moment in her childhood that was the closest she'd ever come to transcendence. In sixth grade, she had looked up Alexander the Great for a class report and had been reading along happily when, suddenly, the little school library fell away, and in its place rose a jagged mountaintop path where, through the biting wind that drove the snow sideways, she saw the great gray rear of a war elephant. Already huge, it was laden more hugely with wicker baskets, a small man perched atop

whose red cloak was barely visible through the blizzard.

When the mountain withdrew to a small white star and the school restored itself around her—its smell of glue and damp pizza, the boys hucking pink erasers at one another's heads—Ange felt scoured. Dazzled. She held the vision in a close and deep pocket within herself. She majored in history in college, got a library master's, a job. She was paid very little, but she had no mortgage and there was money enough, if barely.

Her newest project, which the best of the professors had just handed her—the most apologetic, the one whose gift card at Christmas was the most generous—was on the Millerites, a nineteenth-century cult who had believed that they would personally witness the end of the world. She'd settled in happily with the white gloves and the brittle diary that was the library's only primary source on this subject when Phyllis came by. Today, her earrings of peacock feathers flapped behind her and tangled in her white hair. *Lunch?* she said and lifted her giant Tupperware seductively. Phyllis was lonely in her marriage to a silent grayish man named Phil—Phil and Phyllis, it should have been a clue—but the woman still felt pity for Ange, whom she considered a noble and struggling single mother. Every day she brought enough lunch for two. Ange gave an inward sigh but calculated the money she'd saved on lunch over the years, added today's ten dollars, and stood.

They ate the salad outside in the wind, watching the students heave by with their backpacks. The women spoke of nothing, of Zumba and politics and how Phyllis had woken at night to find her husband staring blindly into the refrigerator, eating pickles and a block of cheddar, still asleep.

Then Phyllis peered at Ange's face. *You ok?* she said. *You're quieter today. And you look . . . different.*

Different? Ange said. *I must have brushed my hair this morning. Ha.*

No, Phyllis said. I mean you're really pale. Bloodlessly pale. And there's something off, I guess, in your face?

Ah, no, just tired, Ange said. *I couldn't sleep at all last night.*

Then, because Phyllis's eyes were huge in sympathy, Ange told the story of the creek cleanup, the disintegrated chicks, the little knots of plastic.

Phyllis made sympathetic noises. She hadn't believed in climate change until the year before, as if it were an article of faith and not science, as if it weren't her business as a librarian to seek out and understand facts. But after Ange had gently converted her, she took on the fervency of the true believer. On weekends, she marched with other women her age and wrote letters to

corporations.

Phyllis said, *Oh my gosh, I have to send you that article about what Miami will look like when the oceans rise. I swear, it gave me nightmares.*

Oh. Great. Please do, Ange said politely. But she imagined only sun on water and pleasure yachts with women in bikinis dancing on them drifting through the orange stucco buildings of Coral Gables. She smiled to herself as Phyllis talked on.



When she packed up at the end of the day, Ange hesitated, then put the journal she'd been reading in a clean felt cloth and gently placed it in her satchel. She had never borrowed a book illicitly before, and as she walked out the door and into the sunshine, it felt thrilling, like a giant bubble slowly inflating in her chest. She picked up Lily from school and they walked home, buying burritos for dinner on the way. Ange could eat only a few bites, and only when she closed her eyes, because it also looked like a lump of flesh in her hands. Then all the old rhythms of nighttime slowly unrolled: the bath and pajamas and book reading and kiss on the damp forehead and perfect small pink mouth open in sleep. Lily had fallen asleep so early, there was still daylight outside. Ange was weary and yawning, but it was a good weariness; she would sleep well tonight, she knew.

She decided to hold off on looking at the journal, saving it like a dessert, and sat down with her computer to email Teo his weekly photos. They'd met when she'd taken a spring break trip on her own to Puerto Rico. He'd been playing in the hotel band, and within minutes after the end of the set, they were in the elevator up to Ange's room. He was warm, funny, shining; even while she was with him, he filled her with an ache that was maybe loneliness, maybe sex. For the first time in so long, though, Ange felt seen. She'd been in her late thirties, running out of time, so when he suggested he come home to Boca Raton with her, she said sure. They were pregnant quickly, and then he was hired as the drummer for a jazz trio about to go on tour and returned home only half a day after Ange had given birth. In those first few hours, she had held her daughter and felt the girl was ferociously and entirely her own; that feeling never quite left, even when Lily's father arrived with his armfuls of carnations and balloons, weeping.

For a while they tried to make a go of it, but babies are deeply unmusical creatures. They scream without much sense of rhythm or timing, and Lily's father suffered a slow diminishment of self under all the noise. A remarkable sight, the amazing shrinking man. His brown paled, his smile dimmed, and at last he was nearly nothing at all, a ghost of himself. Then there were the arguments, the quick viciousness of his insults, her cold shoulder. To save his soul from the annihilation of being a father, he at last went back to San Juan. His life in the seven years since had been full of rum and jazz and moonlight and the perfume of tourist ladies he reluctantly seduced. Ange sent a weekly email about life in the white cottage; he sent back either nothing, a single emoticon, a video in which he played a song he'd written for his daughter on the guitar that Lily watched over and over again, or long letters in which he said things like "the love of my life" and "the gaping black hole of my soul."

But there had been nothing from him, no note at all, for well over a hundred days, since the twin hurricanes had come through Puerto Rico like a left jab and then a knockout hook. He had video-chatted during the worst of the second storm, showing them how the palms outside were pressed flat against the ground, how the plate-glass windows of his apartment seemed to be pulsing under the wind, but the video cut out when the cell service died. Most of the island still had no electricity, even after months, which may have excused Teo in his own mind from sending a note saying he was alive, but it did not, Ange thought. No, it did not excuse him at all. He couldn't be dead; there was a sort of live nerve he still was pinching somewhere in her. But she did think the pleasure of throwing away an old life and sparking a new one had caught hold of him again, and that he was still in its throes, that eventually he would surface. So every week she sent out the email with the update on Lily and a few pictures to show him what marvels he was missing; in this week's photo, her daughter was in messy pigtails, with no front teeth, beaming over tonight's burrito as fat as her head. What kind of monster wouldn't see that girl and want to be close to her, wouldn't want to know her entirely?

Ange had worked herself into a rage and finally erased the genial note she'd written and replaced it with: *Lily hasn't heard from you since the hurricanes. If you're still alive, Teo, I'll kill you.* She hit send.

For a little while, she had to stand and pace to calm down. The night was cool, and the wind licked through the open windows and the screen door. It was ten and she was still not tired, which worried her. After some time, she

sighed and opened a bottle of wine—white, for fear of spills, though any liquid at all was bad, she knew—and sat down with the cloth gloves and unpacked the journal from its wrapper.

It was a strange document, in the hand and with the terrible spelling of a little girl of a Millerite family in Upstate New York. The girl had begun it in 1843 with her daily concerns: a chicken found roosting in the pump house, a braid caught in a candle and singed to the scalp, a little boy on a neighbor farm trampled by a horse. The entries were labored over in thick pencil, slow going until Ange got a feel for the warp of the girl's brain and the girl herself grew out of her shyness and into a clearer style. It seemed that in August 1844, a fiery preacher came to the tent revival and, under the pouring heat of day, proclaimed that the Day of Ascension was at hand in October, when Jesus would return to the earth to carry his children to heaven with him. The girl was caught up with the fervor that had infected everyone around her. She prepared as intensely as her parents did and gave her own calf to the little lame neighbor boy; his family wasn't believers, wouldn't be carried to heaven. On the chosen day, she took her journal with her to the rooftop and scribbled by candlelight while around her the family wore white robes and sang their hymns in excitement as the stars came out and the moon beamed down as if in benediction.

When Ange looked up, the house was shivering in her vision; then the dark windows slowly folded inward, like hands. And Ange was sitting in the moonlight with shingles cold beneath her bare feet, and all around was the reedy song of the family, the three babies sleeping in the parents' laps, the boys all over the rooftop barely visible in white, the candles long ago melted, the breath white plumes in the moonlight. But what's this? Over the horizon, a thin red string of morning was beginning to grow. And all at once, the family's song was snuffed out. Morning. The night had passed. They had not been taken. They were not of the elect. They would not be saved. Such a disappointment inside her was like a hard wind roaring. The little boys woke, and together the family wept as the fields sharpened clear and yellow in the dawn.



Ange came to at her kitchen table with a dry mouth, dry eyeballs from

staring, a body aching from being clenched in the hand of horror. And through the gaping windows, this world of here and today, too, was graying into daylight.

For the second time in her life, Ange had had a waking vision of history. But instead of elation, this time she felt a deep disquiet beating in her blood.

Still, she rose. She was a competent woman; she was steady. She would not allow visions to sidetrack her. Besides, the mere fact of her daughter, so vivid now in the present—crying because she had a hole in her sock, letting milk dribble down her chin, dancing to the sound of the dishwasher—was so bright. It pushed into shadows any threat from past or future. Day had already dawned in the past. All was remainder, nothing saved. The future was a hurricane of so many elements—plastics and sea risings and drought and hunger—that it was hard to know from which direction the true full stop would come. So Ange showered. She got her daughter ready mechanically. Lily walked to school beside her mother, quiet, frowning, watchful, and ran off to class without saying goodbye or kissing her mother, the way she always did.

**The future was a hurricane of so many elements—
plastics and sea risings and drought and hunger—
that it was hard to know from which direction the
true full stop would come.**



Ooof, Phyllis said when she caught a glimpse of Ange's face as she came in. *Don't tell me you had another sleepless night*. She poured Ange a cup of coffee, reconsidered, then poured it and most of the pot into her own giant mug and handed it to Ange.

Two in a row, Ange said. *I'm going for the record*.

Oh, honey, Phyllis said.

Ange, who was unused to tenderness, felt her eyes fill with tears and,

hating herself for the weakness, turned away, pretending to be busy.



Her body was deteriorating, she thought in the afternoon, somehow finding herself in the bathroom. She had lost a few hours of the day in a mist, it seemed. The bags beneath her eyes were giant and blue, and her skin had the moist paleness of a frog's belly. She looked bloated all over. Her joints ached. She'd snapped at Phyllis for misplacing a book she'd needed, she remembered with shame. There was a steel band slowly tightening inside her skull. She sat on the sink and watched the thin hand of her watch tick slowly toward five. When she came out, Phyllis was on the phone and made a few frantic *Stay! I want to talk!* motions, but Ange pretended not to notice and waved goodbye, then sped out the door and into her evening.

She had high hopes for sleep tonight: the weather was cool, and Lily was quiet again and went to bed easily. But though Ange lay in bed for hours, no sleep came, and at first she groaned aloud for a while to let her fatigue out, and then she binged on a whole television series she could barely remember when the last credits rolled. There were still three endless hours left in the night when she opened her email. No reply from Lily's father, of course. In pique, she looked at her in-box of over four hundred messages and threw most of them into the trash folder. Her sleeplessness was bestowing on her a radical honesty tonight, and it told her that if she hadn't responded in the last month, she wasn't ever going to. The very last remaining email was Phyllis's forward of the article about what Miami would look like under the rising seas. Ange sighed, but because it would give her something to talk about with Phyllis over lunch, she had to click it. Within moments, she sat up to look more carefully.

It was stunning, a near-photographic simulation of what would happen with one inch, three inches, five inches, nine inches of water. Miami Beach swept up and gone. Whole neighborhoods underwater.

Worst of all and somehow surprising, because she hadn't thought it through, was how the Everglades would be full of salt water—and soon.

And under the salt, all the vegetation, all the freshwater fish and birds and frogs and snakes, the wild teeming life of the Everglades, would die. What had been swamp and a mucky cradle of life would be a great black

blank at the bottom of the state.

She moved the map northward. The whole coastline, Boca Raton itself, would be only a thin spit of land between dying ocean and dead sea.

Her house, this place, was in the path of the swallowing water.

And underneath what land remained, the dark freshwater sea of the aquifer would be made salty. No potable water out of the taps. No sprinklers shooting green into the lawns. No trees with their deep taproots seeking out the fresh; there would be great dead oaks everywhere, stark as skeletons.

Without an aquifer, human life in this place would be stupid, impossible. All heat and dust and thirst.

And then Ange thought of the chicks in the nest; she thought of them a hundred times over, a thousand times, a million times, the dead Everglades a scattering of plastic knots. She thought of the thin trace outlines of people in their beds, each with a little ball of plastic where their innards had been.

She ran to the bathroom to throw up. Insomnia was going to be an effective weight loss program, she told herself and laughed until tears formed in her eyes. In the dark mirror, her skin sagged on her face.

She went back to the couch and lay there sleepless, her bones aching, seeing over and over in her mind the water seeping up the street and swallowing their little house.



She was still feeling ill when Lily came out of her bedroom in the first light of morning. She warily approached her mother and put her hands on her feet.

What's wrong? the girl said. *Your face is all red and puffy. And your eyeballs have, like, veins in them.*

Oh, Lily, it's nothing. It's just, Ange said, *I haven't slept in three nights. I'm so, so, so, so tired.*

Take a sick day, Lily said. *Take a nap. I'll stay home and take care of you.*

I know you would, honey, Ange said and heaved herself to sitting, and her head spun a little bit. Lily made a face at her mother, then went into the kitchen, got the sugar cereal down, and put extra honey on top. She was acting out; she was angry. Since she was a baby, Lily had always been a tuning fork; she rang with her mother's hidden emotions. Just before Teo left,

she'd felt the emotion and responded with colic, baby Lily taking her mother's side.

But Ange couldn't fight her daughter today. She had no strength. She sat next to Lily and stole a few bites of her cereal, and this made Lily laugh, although reluctantly.



Ange tried to work, but her body felt stuffed with sand.

She would go for a walk during her lunch break to clear her head, she decided. Let Phyllis eat her salad by herself today.

But later, Ange snapped to and looked up to find Phyllis frowning at her, having knocked hard, multiple times, on the wood of the desk. On her hip, Phyllis was holding today's giant lunch.

My goodness, Ange, she said. You were so pale and staring, I thought for a second you were dead.

Ange laughed, but dryly. Phyllis's salad smelled garlicky and good. Who was she kidding? She was too tired to go for a walk, and she was ravenous. She could eat the whole world today.

Not dead yet, she said, standing.

But once outside in the good sunlight, Phyllis peeled the top of the Tupperware off, and Ange saw the hard-boiled eggs of her salade Niçoise and had to lay her head on the concrete table to breathe until the nausea passed.



All afternoon she did the write-up of the Millerite girl for the professor. It was as thorough as always, but there was no spark in it; she wrote quickly and mechanically and sent the report off as though she were giving away a haunted thing. The relief when she put the journal back in its archival box made her feel boneless as she walked back to her desk.

For the next few hours, she looked up to see strange flashes of the ocean lapping darkly across the carpet of the library. Then she would blink, and it was the old oatmeal-colored carpet again.

She would stave off this probable fourth night of sleeplessness the old-fashioned way, she decided; otherwise, she felt as though she would likely die. After dinner, she called her friend Elizabeth, who came over with her little kit of pills. Elizabeth gasped when Ange opened the door. Ange put her hand up to her cheek and said, *That bad?* with chagrin.

Elizabeth said, *Oh God, so much worse than you can imagine. You're, like, gray. Like the color of a mouse. You look so bad. Sorry.*

That's nice, Ange said. She took an angry breath and let it out. *You look stunning.*

It was true; Elizabeth was the drabest of Ange's friends, but tonight she glowed in red lipstick and shining earrings.

Date night, Elizabeth said. *My mom's taking the kids. Dave is picking me up in an hour. Tell me about the insomnia.* She looked at Ange from the corner of her eye and said, *I can see the emotional lability.*

Ha, Ange said. *Do you have time for a glass of wine?*

Time for a bottle, Elizabeth said, and they sat on the porch, each in her own blanket, and rocked in the chairs. Ange told about the trash pickup and the chicks, but this time, the dread they'd stirred in her sounded ridiculous in the retelling. She told about Lily's father and the silence that seemed to be growing deeper and darker. She almost told about her strange vision of the disappointed Judgment Day but held it back; it was her own thing, nothing to share. It was almost time for Dave to pick her up when Elizabeth said offhandedly, *So, you ready for me to set you up again? Maybe after a few nights' sleep you won't need pills. Maybe what you really need is to get laid.*

Nope, Ange said. *No way. Not after the last disaster.*

After twenty years of marriage, I'd love a disaster like the dentist, Elizabeth said.

Two months after the hurricane, Ange's friends had grown worried about her because she was spending all her time trying to track down Teo and going around wild-eyed with anger. She had called his mother, who told her nothing; she lived with an image of him asleep in some woman's bed. She liked him best asleep, his quick face stilled, his eyelashes dark on his cheekbones. To distract Ange, her friends took turns watching Lily and setting up Ange with blind dates. The first three were so boring, Ange pretended Lily had a fever and that she had to get home. The fourth, a month ago, was with a dentist who made a point of showing off his very fine set of abdominal muscles within the first fifteen minutes of meeting her. She

laughed in his face but drank four martinis and somehow found herself later in the back of the dentist's SUV in the dune enclosure at the end of the street. He had at least enough taste to leave the music off so all they could hear was the wind and the ocean and the cars shushing by obliviously beyond the dunes. He fell asleep afterward on the uncomfortable synthetic carpet in the back of his car and even snored a little. She was so disgusted with herself that she took her shoes in her hands and walked barefoot in penitence the mile up to her little house, where Elizabeth was sleeping on the couch and Lily was safe in her bed. The dentist himself, when Ange could bear thinking of him, was faceless in her memories, as though his smooth, shaved crown had grown down over his features.

Now Dave arrived, and in his headlights, Elizabeth showed Ange the pills. *You're way beyond melatonin or valerian*, she said. *I'd try Lunesta or Ambien. Honestly, honey*, she said, *you're a prime candidate for antidepressants.*

Ah, I'm pretty sure everyone is, Ange said.

It should be in the drinking water, Elizabeth said.

You're the psychiatrist, Ange said. *You would know.*

And then there was Dave, stepping up carefully over the mushy, rotting oranges on the path—good, lumpy, smiling Dave—and there were hugs and laughs, and Ange watched her friends move off and felt a pang at their ease with one another, their camaraderie. But she needed no man in her life; she had Lily. She banished the pang dead.



With great relief, she swallowed the Ambien down with a glass of water, took a hot bath, and lay under her sheet, waiting impatiently for sleep to come.

But for the fourth night in a row, sleep did not come.

Instead, a face gradually gathered itself in the spinning ceiling fan. With extraordinary slowness, it sagged downward like a drop of water that grows fat before falling, heavier and wider, all the way toward Ange, who lay frozen with terror in her bed. It was no face she knew; it was a white, droopy, androgynous face, all cheeks and angry chin and huge eyebrows like bird wings. The face grew larger as it came closer to her until she thought there was no more distance to go, and then it stopped a few millimeters from her

nose. There it made a series of grimaces, each more awful than the one before. Ange stared into the nostrils, down the glossy throat, wondering if it would soon, now, fall and break into whiteness all over her. Or now. Or now.

She had no idea how long she looked at the face dripping out of the fan, but slowly her body came back into control, and she rolled out of the bed and ran into the kitchen, panting, with a strange feeling at the ends of her appendages, as though she had dipped her hands and feet and nose and ears in ice.

She went outside to the orange grove and stood barefoot in the fruit rot in the dark until her heartbeat calmed in her chest. She stepped backward until a tree was hugging her from behind.

It felt safer out here than it did in the house. For a long time, she stood trembling in the shadows and breathed.

And then slowly, at the edge of her sight, a great singular darkness collected out of the trunks and shadows of the trees. It loomed, twice the height of a man. When she tried to fix her eyes on it, the darkness seemed to dissolve and gather itself in a different place at the edge of her sight, still closer.

Ange took a step back, then ran and slipped over the rotten fruit, falling to her knees, up again, quick, quick, over the porch, in through the front door, closing it hard, locking it behind her. She felt the darkness gathering on the porch through the door at her back, inches away.

She kept the lights off and crept on her hands and knees into Lily's room, bathed in pink from her night-light, and shut the door. She took off her fruit-stained yoga pants and climbed into bed with her daughter, who murmured and turned over. And there for the rest of the night, Ange lay beside her daughter, eyes open wide to the dark, keeping the dread dark thing outside with tremendous effort, keeping them safe with her focused will alone.



She was late to work, an hour late, but could not have gone any faster. Moving her body was like shepherding Jell-O. She was wasting away; yet no human could ever have been heavier.

The note on her desk from Phyllis was in black pen and block letters;

she was angry.

COME SEE ME NOW, the note said.

Ange sighed and slowly went.

Sorry, sorry, she said when Phyllis was in eyesight. Sorry I'm late. Last night was my fourth in a row without sleep. I think I'm going nuts.

But Phyllis was not angry about the lateness, or perhaps she was but was angrier about something else.

There was someone sitting in the corner, but the sun was sharp from behind the chair, and Ange had to blink a few times to make the person out. For a moment it was Teo, dark and smiling, and relief poured through her and made her knees soft. But then she made out the professor who had given her the Millerite project. He was plain, balding, with round green glasses, and he wore too-tight polo shirts; he would have fit in anywhere in Boca. She had always thought he had a crush on her, but it didn't seem that way anymore. He nodded, unsmiling.

Ange, Phyllis was saying, I didn't know you were a creative writer.

What? Ange said. I'm not. I mean, I took a class in college, but . . .

The professor and Phyllis frowned, and the professor said, *I was intrigued by the report you sent. I didn't know we had a journal like the girl's you cited. So I got pretty excited to see it myself and was waiting when Phyllis got here this morning.*

But neither of us can find the book, Ange, Phyllis said.

Huh. That's weird, Ange said.

We can't find it in the catalogue either, the professor said.

It took Ange a moment, but thinking had become so very difficult. *You think I stole it?* she said.

Then she saw their faces and said, *Oh my God, you think I made up a primary source.*

Phyllis said, her voice now rich with sympathy, *I think you're not yourself right now.*

I've never been more myself. Thank you, Phyllis, Ange said. Follow me.

She marched as quickly as she could to where they stored the delicate and damaged books. She found the row, the shelf. But her body stopped short in disbelief. The place where the metal box had been was gone, the two boxes beside it having somehow swallowed the shelf where it had been, having somehow squeezed themselves together.

I . . . , she said, but there was no end to that sentence. Phyllis and the

professor looked at her with pity.

There has got to be an explanation, Ange said.

I'd sure like to hear it, Phyllis said dryly.

Me too, the professor said.

But Ange had nothing. It was all inexplicable. She sat down on the oatmeal-colored carpet, put her face in her hands, and cried.



I think you might need medical help, Phyllis said, driving her home.

No, I just need sleep. I need it so badly, Ange said. *I feel like I'm going to die.*

You're not going to die.

Ange thought, darkly, of the glaciers calving even now, of how in the swirl of the oceans, plastic trash made an underwater iceberg of choking hazards, of the poor future-blackened Everglades. *We're all going to die,* Ange said.

Calm down, Freshman Philosophy, Phyllis said.

They pulled in front of the little house. There were darting black birds in the Meyer lemons, and a hawk drifted in a slow circle over the roof. *I'll get Lily from school,* Phyllis said. *I want you to take the hottest bath you can stand and a nice long nap, ok? We'll be back at five with dinner.*

You're a good friend, Phyllis, Ange said, crying again.

We're friends, yes. But I want you to remember that I'm also your boss, Phyllis said. *And I never, ever, ever want you to pull a stunt like the one you pulled again.*

Ok, Ange said.

And when I say don't come back to work until you're feeling better, I mean it, Phyllis said. *If you're acting like this when you get back, we're going to have a very serious conversation. And I don't want to have it, what with you being a struggling single mother and Lily so sweet.*

Yes. Ok, Ange said. Then she had a terrible thought. *Phyllis, she said slowly, what if I can never sleep again?*

But Phyllis was already out of her side of the car, had walked around to Ange's side, was opening it, and now was escorting her up the sour, rotting walk.

You should do something about that nasty fruit, Phyllis said, scraping the bottoms of her shoes on the steps.

Usually takes care of itself, Ange said.

And then she was on the couch, alone again, and the afghan was over her. Her mother had crocheted it with her own hands. Somewhere in its fibers were small traces of her; it still smelled of her, though she'd been dead these many years. It was no substitute for the woman, of course, but it was warm, and it did comfort Ange, and under its weight, she felt less lost.

There she rested, staring at the ceiling, as sleepless as ever.

In the white ceiling, which she had painted herself, she began to see a bobbing sea covered with Styrofoam peanuts.

At the end of the street, the ocean sighed and the birds softly screamed.

And then in the ceiling, another vision began to form. It was Lily. But her daughter's hair was ragged, her lips white with thirst. She was wearing rags and walking alone, northward, on a road so searing hot, it wavered. And not far from her was a line of other quiet, desperate people walking.

It crashed over Ange, the terrible mistake she had made out of loneliness. The sheer selfish stupidity of bringing a child into the beginning of the end of the world as humans know it. It was an immoral act. Each new body on the earth spelled a faster end to the life the earth was supporting.

How Lily will suffer. And how all the children born after Lily will suffer even more, having known less of the good life that had once been.

She was frozen and barely breathing. At last she heard Lily's voice down the walk, and this alone stirred her. When Lily typed the code into the lock and she and Phyllis came in with a sack of chicken sandwiches, the smell forced Ange to crawl—it was far, much too far to run—to the bathroom and throw up the nothing she had eaten all day.



Phyllis fed Lily and tucked her into bed. She spoke to Ange, but Ange smiled and nodded and didn't hear a word. Frowning with worry, Phyllis left.

Ange rose immediately.

Sleepless days were hard. They were searing. They were work.

Sleepless nights were themselves the darkest nightmares.

She paced, clutching herself, around the little house. She tried music,

but all music to her now was full of Teo's absence; all music poured around the ache he'd put into her, and she turned it off.

By eleven, Ange had drunk two bottles of wine and was on her third, and no food eaten in days, in forever. Tonight she would drink herself to sleep.

But as drunk as she was, which was very drunk, sleep still danced out of reach.

Poor Florida, Ange said aloud. She found herself swaying without pants or shoes on her porch. *Poor alligators. Poor ibises. Poor stupid, greedy human beings. Boy, are you all in for it.*

Even now, when she listened, she could hear the tiny rising of the sea. It was the same crackle as rice cereal after milk had been poured in. Or, no, wait, that was the music of fucking coming up on the wind from the parking place in the dunes.

Even now, when she listened, she could hear the tiny rising of the sea.



Was the dread darkness out in these whispering trees tonight? Her eyes couldn't focus to see. And if you can't see it, that means it doesn't exist. The book can't be found; it doesn't exist.

It exists! Ange shouted to the darkness, swiftly moving among the trees, but then she backed as quickly as she could into the house and shut the door.

But this wouldn't do; this wouldn't do at all.

Think, Ange, she said to herself and clapped herself on the cheek to focus. *When was there a time when you could sleep like the dead?*

Oh, as a little girl, the wet grass still on her feet in the clean sheets, the fireflies shining and dying in the mason jar beside her. After a day of sunshine, swimming in the pond, wandering through the forest, a night of running down over the dark hills toward the small bright blinking bugs in the wind.

To be an adult is to live in a tangle of past and future and present all at

once. *So become a child. So run yourself to sleep.*

She went out the back door to fool what dread was waiting in the trees, and at first, under her bare feet, the ground was prickly sand, then rough sidewalk. It felt strange and good to be running down this well-lit street, past all the houses with all the old people in them sleeping, with only the malignant gleam of the ocean ahead. *Faster, make yourself all tired, Ange, and tired, you will stop your brain.* Nobody was around to see her pantsless, and she was so drunk, she didn't care. Let the old men get an eyeful.

Her legs were so strong and so fast. It was good to be away from the house, to be running; it was so good to run. Her own breath pounded in her ears. *Oh, Teo, this is what it felt to fly away from us. I do not condone it, but now I understand.*

There was more sand on this sidewalk closer to the ocean, which she could hear hushing now, and the gardens were full of the white stones that meant plants had a hard time now that denser salt was in the air.

She didn't even stop when she hit the road before the dunes, but there were no cars anyway. It was late, and people who could sleep were sleeping in their stupidity. She ran hard across the asphalt into the parking lot surrounded by dunes. But whatever car had been here unspooling its music, whatever fuckers had been here only a few minutes ago were gone, and she was alone.

All around her the dunes stretched up toward the sky, pale and topped with hardy sharp palms and grasses. Turtles stirred in their sleep, and rats and snakes slept too, all safe, for now, in their dens.

Just beyond sight, the ocean was chewing darkly at the sand.

Only the ocean was always awake. Ange and the ocean. Ange being eaten, the ocean that will eat everything.

She panted until her breath calmed. Her heartbeat slowed. Her feet, she saw, were bleeding. She had run over broken glass.

Suddenly she saw it all around her bloody feet, the broken glass.

And at the edge of the blacktop, tossed beer cans gleamed in the moonlight. Plastic bags breathed like lungs. And everywhere were bottle caps and cigarette butts and broken plastic shovels and hair ties and flip-flops and hamburger wrappers and sunblock containers and candy boxes and pull tabs and lemonade bottles and dog toys. At her feet, like a slug, a spent condom.

She looked at the condom. She lifted her eyes and looked at the dunes. For a moment, she felt harsh carpet on her cheek, heard the ping of the open

car door and a dentist's satisfied snore. She felt the sour disappointment in herself.

Slowly her hands drifted up from her sides. They met over her abdomen. Her body knew what her brain didn't want to know, not yet.

And Lily came to her, vividly, sleeping in her bed, bathed in the pink night-light. Lily, alone in that house where faces pressed down out of ceiling fans, where there was a bloodstain in the grain of the wood under the living room rug. Where right now a fire could be gnawing that termite-weakened wood, where a murderer could be looming over her bed, where a tsunami sparked by a calving ice sheet would swallow her daughter from below. Born with no real father, born vulnerable, Ange's daughter. It'd be a miracle if Lily found herself among the saved.

No. Force the bad thoughts back and imagine Lily waking, standing. Lily calling out, looking for her mother. Here she was coming out to the porch, where the trees whispered excitedly in the wind and the dead fruit fell.

Mama? Lily said. In the moonlight, in the white nightgown, her bare feet so pale on the porch.

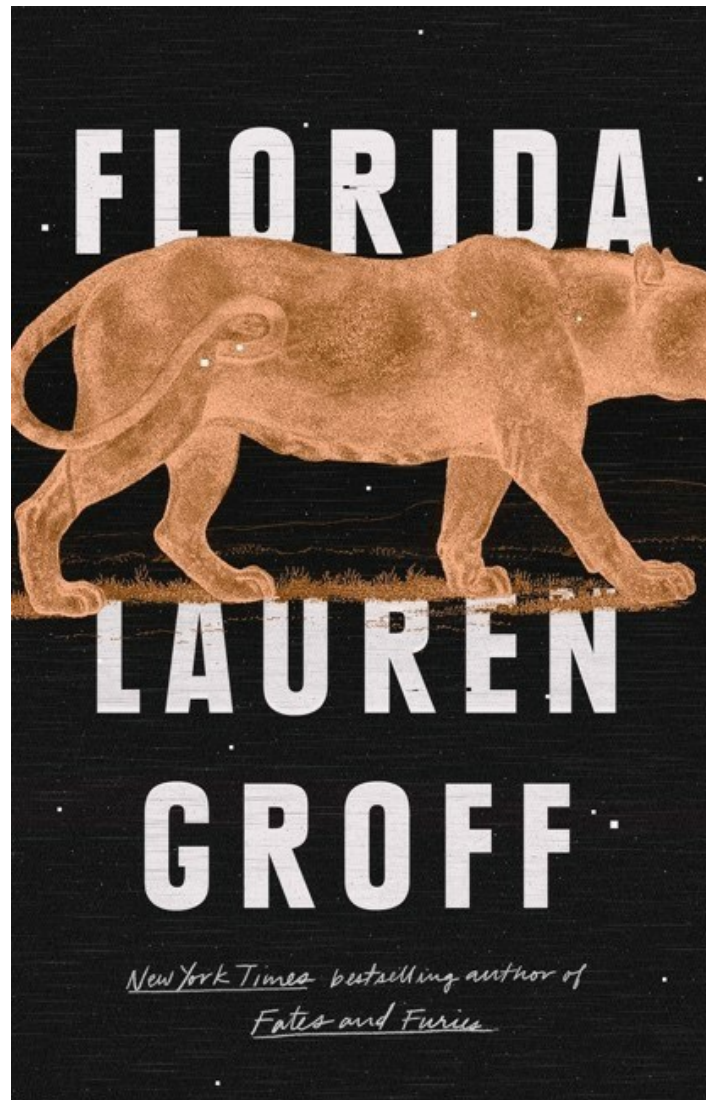
In the moonlight, shining in her white, sitting down. In her hand, the candle burned to wax. The night almost done. And the thin voices of the believers singing all around.

I'm coming, Ange said aloud. But already she knew that she could not save her daughter, that there would be no saving, that she would be left behind among the disappointed; she knew that, even so, she had to try.

Ange limped over the broken glass toward the space between the dunes. Between Ange and her sleeping child was the slightly uptilted street, gleaming gray in the streetlights.

But as she walked, either the lights went out together all at once, or the dread that had followed her down here on the run gathered itself thickly there in the street, and the darkness fell across the way out; the darkness sealed the gap.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Lauren Groff is the author of the *New York Times* Notable Book and bestseller *Fates and Furies* and the thrilling new story collection *Florida*. Named one of *Granta*'s Best of Young American Novelists, Groff was also a finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Kirkus Prize.