

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

me up when I howled from our bedroom, unable to find the door out after two hours; he tolerates my mysterious headaches that last weeks; he ignores my hand-clenched rages. Yes, Roger is without fault – one of those men so handsome you assume they're stupid, though he most certainly is not. Only child of a Swiss banker and a French blue blood, my husband was born here in New York, raised in Singapore and Paris, attended Yale for good measure, and entered publishing thereafter, scraping by then at his dad's vacant penthouse. Strikingly fit for fifty-six, Roger retains a full head of salt-and-pepper hair and wears a frosting of white stubble, handmade suits cut in Florence, always a perfect white Hugo Boss shirt and a linen scarf around his neck, a different color each day. He speaks six languages with a proficiency ranging from native fluency to irritatingly excellent, knows food and wine and important people, and never overdoes any of them. What's most seductive is that Roger is *always* at ease. More than anyone I've known, he's convinced that he should be wherever he is. Including beside me.

So it was for sixteen years. Then I fell, and I woke, and it occurred to me: I have no connection to this man. When we were successful, that didn't matter. We were just the perfect match. I recall a scene from years back, when his daughter Scout, still a little girl then, walked into one of our parties in her pajamas, asking loudly, 'Daddy, who's smarter between you and Georgina?' Nervous titters ensued. However, there's no question anymore. Everyone just admires Roger – for his goodness in sticking with me, paying for the private nurses, tolerating the impairments. I'm a duty. An object here.

A burst of uproarious laughter in the living room. I reach for the bathroom light switch – it's been off this whole time; no difference to me. But I want the fan to blot out the noise of them. Gingerly, I touch the back of my head, as if bleeding again. My fingers trace the horizontal scar. How strange that 'me' is inside this skull. 'Me' used to be outside, wittily among them. Now I'm stuck in here, urging myself to do as I've planned. My mouth goes dry. Because I will wreck myself this evening. I will wreck us both.

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

Roger awaits me in the hall, and darts into the bathroom as I leave it, collecting my dark glasses, which I intentionally forgot. He hates it when I appear with exposed eyes, which fix sinisterly on people, dead blue monstrosities glowering at them.

He directs me to my place on the couch, where I'm engulfed by voices.

'What *I* don't get about chiropractors, osteopaths and physios is how they interface, you know?' Increasingly, our parties sound like a triage tent. The stage of life where people prattle about medical procedures, it seems, is also when they drift rightward politically. Coincidence? Mind you, everyone around here clings to the old leftie values, much as I wear jeans that are too tight, the only sign being that I tend to start arguments after a large meal. Thankfully for us, America has done us a grand favor in recent years, careening so ludicrously to the Right that we may drift from our Left lane and still consider ourselves radicals. Thank you, fly-over states!

'But what actually *is* the difference?' asks one of

our younger guests, the radio host and activist Vanessa Tejada.

‘If I may mansplain?’ says the comic Andy Rosner. ‘Physios have actual training, while chiros and osteos are essentially frauds with mystic beliefs in “alignment”. They’re found with some combination of scented candles, pictures of Mother Teresa, mandalas, dried-flower arrangements, and whale-noise tapes.’

Chuckles abound.

But, dear reader, I’ve failed you. I’m used to everyone but me seeing for themselves. However, you need narration, too. So look around: an apartment in Tribeca, open-plan living room, a half-dozen couches draped in Gujarati mirror-linens. Hardwood floors, covered by crimson rugs from Baluchistan. Twin industrial-chic coffee tables of upcycled airplane parts, the surfaces piled with fine-art photography collections and old copies of the *New Yorker*. Along the walls, floor-to-ceiling shelves, heaving with books. An antique map of the world. A few framed shots of my work, too – which is to say, snaps of pouty stars of yesteryear:

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

impish Liza chewing her green fingernails, Martha Gellhorn looking daggers, Truman Capote glazed after cocktails at Studio 54.

As for my work, I set out as just another posh girl in London, best known for drinking men under the table, taking my top off at parties, and being intimate friends with Mr. Jagger – a chain of facts that were highly correlated. I overcame this early infamy by way of New York, where I took magazine photographs of actors and singers and socialites. Which is how I met Roger, then a hotshot young publisher still at Taschen when he commissioned my first collection, *Vicious People Doing Stupid Things: The Worst of Georgina Peet, 1974–1991*. I can smell that first copy still, its gloss under my hand, each page sliding away as I turned to the next celebrity grimace.

Funny to think of those early pictures – already so acerbic, as if my Leica sensed what I was going to become before I did. But in the Seventies, a girl did need sharp elbows. Men were gropey then, and nobody much objected, except possibly the groped. Fortunately, I was skilled at

bringing the impudent to heel. My mother taught us that anger is *the* worst tool. It's scorn you want, the colder the better. And I had a talent for it, honed by dismantling the egos of my older brothers, Hugh and Will, poor fellows. By comparison, pop musicians were a cinch. How they shriveled before my lenses!

My trademark image became the miffed star. I targeted my subject's security blanket and tore it away, whether it was a lurking manager, a circling lover or, later, a mobile phone. I'd drag out the shoot, playing on the celebrity's nerves, shifting lighting, fiddling endlessly with exposures, all the while prodding them, asking questions like: 'Are you still drinking as much? Or was that only after he left you?' Oh, how the pampered loathed me! But they had to contain themselves – a high-profile publication had commissioned me for the shoot. Only I could land them the cover.

'Think lava when you taste,' Roger is telling everyone, explaining tonight's booze: volcanic wines from Etna, Santorini, Tenerife – a choice esoteric enough to satisfy any *terroir* bores who might be present. The guests slurp

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

appreciatively, nibbling mixed-seed lavosh with spicy feta dip, tossing back marinated olives and pimientos de Padrón. In the distance, the sound of Blitzer and his wolf pack emits from CNN, which is playing in the den, at the other end of the apartment.

A rule at our election events is that nobody watches live television – cable news is too excruciatingly IQ-melting. Also, if food spills on Roger’s vintage Danish furniture in the den, he might weep. For the results tonight, we *were* depending on his now-overgrown daughter, Scout, who is monitoring the TV there. But in an antisocial slap against her father, she is refusing to walk the length of the apartment to deliver them, leaving us reliant on dispatches from her college love and companion, Emma.

Of our guests, I’ve already mentioned Andy, road comic of late-onset fame. He alone interacts normally with me tonight – flippant as ever, each of us ignoring the other but keenly aware. We’ve always been a little in love. Andy’s a mess: scraggly beard, thick glasses, oversmart and not glad about it. I’m a decade his senior, but we might’ve been an

item if we'd met back when Clinton the First was candidate and that name still represented 'youthful and sexy', as did I. Andy is two seasons into a Netflix single-cam sitcom, *Rosner*, in which he plays – hold your breath – a middle-aged schlub comedian. The show has made him what he calls 'niche huge'. Above all, it makes Andy a winner, which is deeply uncomfortable for him.

Reportedly, he came tonight wearing a T-shirt of Donald Trump with a circling American eagle, which was intended sarcastically, of course. That's the upside of Trump: he unites the sane. Sure, everyone has a deranged uncle in Kalamazoo or some such place blogging about how the Clintons molest baby pandas. But, hey, who didn't know that already? Anyone moderately coherent – including all those people you fell out with over the Iraq War – they're back on board now.

Our self-appointed therapist tonight is the aforementioned Vanessa, host of a hip WNYC show on politics. 'It's happening, folks!' she says, explaining Hillary's many routes to electoral-college victory. Vanessa has credibility,

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

too, the only person here who has worked in politics, once a senior aide to Fernando Ferrer when he ran for mayor of New York City and lost to Bloomberg. Discreetly/indiscreetly, Vanessa is planning her house move to DC come January – Huma is a close friend. ‘When the Republicans go down tonight, they’ll hit hard on the voter-fraud baloney. Wait for it. It’s the new Jim Crow. Seriously.’

Her approving chorus is led by David Ephraim, professor of cultural theory at Bard and one of Roger’s long-time authors. His most recent volume argued that Americans ought to judge each other based on decency, not by capitalist metrics of success. This set off a shitstorm by mistake, when the blogosphere called elements of his book prejudiced, noting that David had cited a much-debunked study on race and intelligence. ‘But not *approvingly!*’ he insisted. The controversy was fantastic for sales, Roger told me, yet it nearly drove poor David to a breakdown since bigotry so contradicted his self-image. He kept apologizing on Facebook, but nothing stopped the blizzard of hate. Finally, it was Roger who saved the man, hiring an outside PR firm,

and earning lifelong gratitude from his author. Seated next along is David's wife, Kiara Blonstein-Ephraim, producer of reality television, the socially responsible kind, most recently a series about trans teenagers in backward rural communities of the South, a show watched entirely by rich liberals in urban communities of the coasts.

To David and Kiara's left sits the Williamsburg fashion designer Sindy Pereira, who came tonight with her boyfriend, the novelist, playwright and *n+1* co-editor Enson Carthy. To readers, Enson remains the pretty boy of twenty-nine years old on the back of his 2002 debut, *Sugar Daddy*, a novel written from the perspective of a young bimbo trying to lasso a craggy old business magnate – a storyline that returned the book to bestseller lists this past year. Any similarity to Melania, he assures interviewers, is pure coincidence. Enson – closer to fifty now than to the waif in his still-unchanged author photo – hasn't written a novel since, too aflush with Brooklyn literary bling and magazine meetings.

Our biggest star tonight, as measured by Instagram

followers, is Sweet J Vincent, front man of The Late Jud Fry, an indie band of which he's the sole member. Roger just published a book of J's lyrics called *Poor Jud is Dead*, presented as poetry. He refers to J as 'the next great American singer-songwriter who'll be turning down an invitation from Stockholm'. A self-described OCD pescatarian, J is soft-spoken, tall and gaunt, with that fake shyness of the megafamous.

'Hey, you guys?' peeps a sniffly adolescent voice from the doorway – Emma in her role as second-hand CNN. 'So, Clinton just won Vermont.' Wiping her nose, she adds, 'But Trump got Indiana and Kentucky.'

Vanessa assures us that this is fine; as expected. 'Oh, you know Kentucky. It's red, through and through. We knew it was a write-off.'

Somebody touches my hand. A shiver passes through me.

'Just me,' Kiara says, squeezing my fingers as if I were Grandma. 'You're so quiet tonight, George.'

'I'm fine.' I swallow hard. Not like me to be a coward. I take my hand back, telling her: 'I was praying to Jesus for

the right result.’ This is irony, since nobody here believes in God, except possibly Vanessa, and she in a soggy, we’re-all-one way.

Before Kiara can patronize me further, the caterers intervene, delivering appetizers to widespread *oohs*: harissa lamb kofta bites with tahini and sumac; saffron rice with barberries, pistachios and mixed herbs; pan-fried mackerel yums with golden beetroot and orange hazelnut salsa. We always use this catering company, run by a Salvadoran whom we’ve grown close to. Lucio can reproduce from any cookbook – tonight, we have him raiding the pages of Ottolenghi.

J, our singer-songwriter-pescatarian, after loudly eschewing the lamb kofta, tells us that *he* actually knows America – he’s toured the scary states. ‘Don’t you guys think it’s possible something shitty happens?’

‘Remember the Latino vote,’ Vanessa answers. ‘My people are winning it for you people. We get props tonight, you guys.’

‘I’ll just be relieved when this nightmare is over,’ Kiara

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

says, informing us that whenever she and David go into conniptions over Trump they just check the numbers on the *New York Times* website, which brings them back to reality.

David demonstrates this on his iPhone, pacifying everyone with Hillary at eighty-five per cent probability of victory. ‘They’re saying: “Mrs. Clinton’s chance of losing is about the same as an NFL kicker missing a thirty-seven-yard field goal.”’

‘What does *that* mean?’ Andy asks. ‘Does anyone have a clue how often an NFL kicker misses at thirty-seven yards? Least of all readers of the *Times*.’

Sindy, our much-tattooed fashionista, remarks that Hillary was at ninety-three before the Comey letter. ‘Imagine if the FBI decides this election. Holy shit.’

Vanessa: ‘Chill out! We got this!’

Enson directs everyone to the *Huffington Post*, which puts a Clinton win at ninety-eight per cent. Whoops sound around the room.

What Kiara would like to see is Trump absolutely

trounced. ‘Like, publicly humiliated. Or does that make me a bad person?’

‘Uhm, kinda?’ Vanessa says approvingly, and the two women slap high-fives, giggling.

David’s worry is that Trump won’t accept his defeat, throwing the whole democratic process into chaos. ‘I could see violence breaking out. Remember what he said about “Second Amendment people”, how the gun nuts will have something to say about this?’

Sindy sighs. ‘Can you believe someone running for president suggested that members of the public might want to *murder* the other candidate? Like, seriously?’

Roger is topping up everyone’s wine. ‘George, I’m filling your glass. I’m putting it in your hand. Close your hand. No, no – here. Right here. I’m holding it out for you. No, *here*. There we go. Well done.’

They pretend I still have a place in this party. In this apartment. In this city. We all know: I’d be in a nursing home were it not for my valorous husband. I don’t have the funds to manage alone. I blew my money, as proof I

BASKET OF DEPLORABLES

could always land on my feet. Instead, I fell off them, and I cracked, worthless on the labor market, not to mention uncommonly frightenable these days. Is 'frightenable' a word? It's certainly a state of mind. Surrounded by this hubbub, I smell the nursing home, orderlies ignoring my room buzzer, the room-mate with Alzheimer's, a pitying visitor in our day room offering one-bite brownies: 'Take another. Help yourself. They're free.' You see, this is the bad side of never having had kids. Specifically, I'm told, you must have girls. They come home to nurse you; never the boys.

Of course, if I separated cordially from Roger, he'd leave like a gentleman, allowing me the apartment, paying for full-time assistance, too. I know him; he would. I cringe at the prospect – being nobody in a city that cares only for somebodies. I have one act of independence left, the last that anyone ever possesses: do harm. So, yes, Roger wants to be remembered for his famous parties? Tonight will be famous.

As I make this vow to myself, my palms immediately

go sweaty. I'm on the mountainside again, extending my leg over the void, marshaling the courage – just fucking go, George!

'Even *with* Hillary winning,' Enson says, 'it's horrifying that anyone in this country will have voted Trump. Our fellow Americans in Oklahoma or wherever, in the year 2016 – they wanted a *fascist* as president. Unreal.'

'Thank God there's no reason to ever visit a dump like Oklahoma,' Sindy reminds him.

'States like that shouldn't hardly exist,' Vanessa says. 'We should've let them secede back in 1861. Oops – did I say that out loud?' She snorts with amusement. 'But, like, Tennessee? And, like, Alabama? Do we really want those places in the Union?'

'Tennessee has a great music scene,' J notes.

To all of this, Roger offers agreeable purrs. 'What bewilders me,' he says, 'is that people aren't instantly disgusted by this man's narcissism.'

'Watch what you say,' Andy counters. 'Narcissism is America's second-favorite character trait after obesity.'