

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. The window is covered in raindrops, and the background outside is a bright, hazy white. The woman is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored top. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

I Am Alex Locus

my search
for the truth

Joseph P.
Garland

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A WARNING

This is the story of a family, though it is entirely fictional. In the course of discovering the truth about her family, Alexandra Locus will come upon some uncomfortable truths. Particularly in regard to the relationship between her mother and her father. This includes, she will learn, abuse and **rape**, all of which is discussed as happening in general terms, i.e., there are no explicit scenes, in the past, well before the story begins. Insofar as you as a reader will be overly troubled—I use “overly” because I assume most readers will be troubled—please consider *not* reading this novel.

To my sister Patty.
Without whom none of the Garlands would be who we are.

PROLOGUE

At 3:18 p.m. on August 8, 2008, a New York City 9-1-1 dispatcher efficiently processed a call. A woman had collapsed in apartment 3F at 34 West 94th Street in Manhattan. Within fifteen minutes, the patient was on the way to St. Luke's Hospital, never regaining consciousness. Upon arrival, she was placed in a medically induced coma as doctors tried to come up with a course of treatment. The damage from the woman's stroke, however, was beyond repair and at 2:22 p.m. on August 11, 2008, she was removed from life support, and she died, surrounded by her husband Steven, her fourteen-year-old-daughter Alexandra, her parents, and her mother- and father-in-law. Her name was Emily Locus. She was thirty-eight years old.

I am Alexandra Locus. This is the story of who I am and, more importantly, who my mother was and how I came about learning that.

It started on a Thursday night in mid-September 2017. I was twenty-three and living in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a brownstone on West 85th Street in Manhattan. Near Central Park. My job was deadly boring and mind-numbing, in the back office of a mega-bank in midtown.

Thursday nights were my chance to get out. Getting out usually meant meeting my childhood friend Kate Winslow at a not-too-grungy/not-too-upscale bar on Broadway, Columbus, or Amsterdam and sometimes hooking up with some guy with the same kind of empty life as mine.

Actually, the hooking up rarely happened, and when it did it was usually with a sweet-enough guy from some other bank or law firm or maybe ad agency or publishing house. None of them went anywhere.

On this particular Thursday, Kate was working late at her PR firm. "*I can only get there at nine,*" she texted at about 5:30, and I texted back "*Fine. See you then at Teddy's,*" a favorite spot nearby, on Amsterdam.

There were usually book readings on Thursday nights at the Barnes & Noble on Broadway and 82nd Street. It goes up half a block and was, swear to God, the model for Fox Books in *You've Got Mail*. So that'd help me kill time, and if this one was boring, I could bail and wander around and do some magazine scanning before meeting Kate.

It was warm for September 14, and after work, I changed into something flirty but casual—nice black pants, a dark red blouse buttoned to the neck (with burgundy lingerie beneath), and black flats. Before leaving and after I'd put my hair up I couldn't resist a

somewhat theatrical/somewhat pathetic routine I sometimes had with myself in the small mirror of my small bathroom.

"Do you feel lucky? Well do ya, punk?" I asked myself as I paused from dabbing just the slightest amount of perfume behind each ear and, well, strategically in what slight cleavage I have.

"Oh. You are such a naughty, naughty girl," I added before turning off the light and heading out.

A quick walk and I was through the revolving doors into the B&N. A poster set up to the right of the main escalator said that at eight a Karen Adams would be reading from her collection of stories. From her photo, she looked to be about my age. It was five of or so. I hurried up the long escalator to get a seat and found one on the righthand side near the back.

There were maybe fifteen people in the rows of chairs, and in front was a table on which the author's books were stacked, and a poster for the book—entitled *Lonesome*—draped nearly to the floor. She was there with a B&N staffer and an older—though not old—woman, who I took to be her mother.

Ms. Adams wore a standard-issue suit like I wear to work. It was blue and the blouse was beige, and she had sensible low-heeled black pumps. She'd wrapped a Hermès scarf around her neck, which brought out her rather attractive if narrow face, and her hair looked to have been done, I was guessing, at lunchtime.

I'd been to these readings before and the usual podium with the Barnes & Noble logo and a microphone was off to one side, and after about half the seats were taken, a little past eight, the staffer welcomed us and introduced Karen Adams. Her book was in her right hand, and she opened it as she got to the podium. After looking out across us and covering her mouth with a fist for a brief cough, she started. She thanked us for coming. She stopped. With a shake of the head, a sip of water, and a deep breath, she tried again.

"I am going to go with the beginning of a story that is one of my favorites, though I know I'm not supposed to say that." A few

people chuckled. “It came to me when I was thinking back on summer vacations I took in Vermont, and I wrote it when I was in college. It’s about...Well, it’s called *Lonesome*, and here’s how it begins.”

Her hand shook as she tried to keep the book open but after a sentence or two, her voice and her hand relaxed. The murmur of people passing off to the side vanished as her words began to flow.

It was the story of two women, a pair of married New Yorkers. They’re in Western Massachusetts with their kids and husbands at a house the two families shared each August. It’s the Thursday of a week the husbands are working in the city. The kids are at camp, and as they often do the two women are out on a rowboat lolling around a small lake. Others are out too, particularly other wives whose husbands are in town.

These two women are particularly far from the beach when a lowering sky comes across the hills to the west, and they’re slow in noticing the clouds. As things darken more, the others are all safely ashore and these two, laughing as they try to coordinate their rowing, are still far away when a curtain of water overwhelms them.

Their friends on the shore are waving their arms and calling to them in the thickening air, but the little boat begins to rock as their now desperate rowing flails and suddenly it nearly capsizes and one of the two is in the water. Neither has a lifejacket on—there was no forecast of storms—and, besides, they would never be far from shore and they are both good swimmers.

Once. Twice. Three times the first woman’s head surfaces and her arms flail as the rain pours down. Her friend reaches for her, but she’s just too far away.

Cruelly, this was where Karen Adams stopped.

Pausing only a moment, she turned to a later page.

“This next story is not about me.” She then launched about a bunch of Tufts students wandering around Boston on a Saturday

night in the fall. It's actually early Sunday morning, and the competing factions in the gang are arguing in increasingly irate tones about how they're to get back to campus as they move from bar to bar.

Again, she stopped. The B&N woman jumped up.

"Now you didn't expect she'd give everything away, did you?" She took the book from the author and held it up to us. "We have plenty of copies for you to purchase, given how I know you are all interested in how these and other stories end."

There was applause in the crowd. I checked my watch. About eight-forty. I'd wait for the Q&A and buy a copy to support a struggling artist and have plenty of time to meet Kate.

"Now," the staffer said, "I'd like to introduce American Book Award finalist Nancy Penchant for a few words about her protégé."

The older woman rose and walked to the microphone. This older woman, the famous author and apparently not the mother, was far more stylish in black pants and a raspberry blouse. She had a string of pearls around her neck, which looked to be some sort of heirloom, and her black hair hung loosely a few inches below her shoulders. She was slim, and I guessed of average height but wore three-inch heels that I saw were Louboutins when she sat and dangled her left leg over her right knee. She could have been about my mom's age, which would put her late-forties, early-fifties, and the only concession to her age was a pair of tortoiseshell reading glasses that dangled from her neck.

She leaned into the microphone and placed her hands on the sides of the podium.

"I'm so honored to be here with you tonight. I take some credit for Karen's book. Not what's in it, but what led her to give her writing the attention it deserved. She was a sophomore at Dartmouth and wrote a short story for its literary magazine. I don't know how, but I saw it, and it spoke to me. I know that's quaint, but it did."

She reached to her right and lifted a bottle of water with a B&N label and took a quick sip before putting it back.

"I was thinking at the time of an old friend, who passed too young. That friend had some secrets, and one was that she wrote. And she wrote well but made no effort to have others see her words. I may have been the only person who read any of it. I decided to create an award with a small stipend named for her, to encourage writers, and Karen was the first recipient of the Emily Locus Award."

The what? Did I hear that right?

That's what shot through my brain like a laser beam. But what did she say before mentioning my mom's name?—yes, Emily Locus was my dead mother. I know what it was now but sitting there back then I couldn't recall. Something about writing and not telling anyone and secrets.

What I do remember is getting up and rushing down a short, yellow hallway to the ladies' as a bit of light applause rose from the crowd. It was empty and blue and dreary, and I locked the door behind me.

Maybe it's not my mom.

Be serious. How many Emily Locuses can there be?

This was what I was thinking: I could wait it out or slip around and be gone. No one'd know.

Except me, of course.

My mom died when I was fourteen. I didn't really know her, and I'd come to regret that. This was a woman, this older writer, who may have known my mom and not in the context of some village social or school thing. In the big, wide world.

As I was trying to make sense of whatever was happening, someone knocked. "I'll be right out," I said. I turned the water on and put some on my face and dried it with a paper towel. A woman was bounding back and forth as I opened the door, and I let her in and headed down the hall.

The Q&A was just wrapping up, and there was more light applause. I reached the reading area, and seven or eight people were lined up to get Karen Adams to sign her book. She sat at the table and the B&N staffer and this Nancy woman stood behind chatting with one another and with the customers.

I tried to recall what this woman said before she mentioned the award, which may or may not be named for my dead mother but seeing as there can't be all too many Emily Locuses I thought odds were that this author knew my mom and that they might very well have been important to each other—though *my* Emily Locus was a simple suburban housewife, unlike *her* Emily Locus who was some kind of writer and friends with this real writer.

I debated approaching her. *What good could that do even if it was my mother?* She was long gone and buried and everyone who knew her had moved on. No, I decided, best to leave it. Then they—the young and the old authors—were heading to the escalator. I walked along a separate aisle that intersected theirs and stopped just before it did. They passed, and the younger one got on. Nancy Whatever was about to, her hand already on the rubber railing and her foot on the step, when I said a bit loudly to be heard over the din, “I am Alex Locus.”

I had no idea whether “Alex Locus” would get a reaction. It did. She almost tripped on the moving step as her head shot around and she locked on me all the way down. At some point, she waved to me as I stood watching, with the younger woman oblivious to what was going on behind her.

Since I made this leap, I had to say *something* to her, so I got on. There were now two or three people between us. She pulled the other writer to the side at the bottom and was saying something to her as I went down.

I got to them, and she pulled me out of the way and then said, “Did you say you’re Alex Locus? *Alexandra Locus?*”

It was a little uncomfortable, the intensity of her stare and of her grip on my arm, but I confirmed that I was, in fact, Alexandra Locus.

“Your mother was Emily?”

I nodded. Before I knew it, she’d pulled me close, so hard that I nearly bounced off her. I looked over her shoulder and the younger writer was completely clueless about what was happening.

The stranger’s arms were around me and she whispered, “I so miss your mother,” before pushing away, using the back of her right wrist to dab away a tear that started down her cheek.

She was back to holding my upper arms, which were dangling at my sides, as she apologized for her outburst. She took a deep breath.

“Karen and I are going to dinner. Please come.”

At a loss and completely bewildered, I backed away.

“Another time, maybe,” and before I knew it, I was out on Broadway amid the pedestrians and heading over to the bar to meet Kate. After almost getting picked off by a cab as I crossed 79th—my mind was a blur, and I didn’t notice that the light had changed—I reached the bar in what they used to call “a state.” (Me, not the bar.)

Teddy’s was typically loud with bass-heavy music and a crowd’s rumble as I got close. The front door was open and the tables on the sidewalk were full. Kate and I usually tried to find a spot off to the right at one of the small, tall round tables that have a couple of high stools at them. After adjusting to the general darkness and the bright lights behind the bar, I spotted her at one before she saw me.

The music was always too loud here, but lots of cute guys hung out there, and though it smelled like a bar it didn’t *reek* like a bar and didn’t have too many Goldman-types in their expensive suits and ties loosened below the collars of their white shirts, so we

went there often. She saw me and gave me a salute with her wine glass.

"I need one of those," I said by way of my abrupt greeting, and Sally, a waitress who knew me, took my Pinot Grigio order and was gone by the time I was on the stool across the table from Kate.

"You are not going to fucking believe what just happened to me." It was loud, but not quite so loud off to the side where we were, even with the window open.

As I say, Kate's my oldest and best friend and she knew my mom well. Anyway, she was like *What?*

"I went to a book reading at Barnes & Noble to kill time before meeting you."

"I'm sorry but I did have to work late." She was still in her office attire, though where she worked things were a lot less formal than at my bank.

Anyway, I said, "So I'm at the reading by some girl about our age. She's reading from some short stories and there's this older, very classy looking woman with her. Upper West Side type. I assumed it was her mother."

"And it wasn't?"

Just then, Sally moved my glass from her small tray to the table, and Kate said she was fine with what she had.

I took a long sip. A gulp, really.

"No, it wasn't her mother. She was some sort of mentor for the young one. A big deal author. The girl finishes, and this woman gets up and says some things about getting to know her and that she was the first recipient of the... 'Emily Locus Award.'"

"The what?"

"That's what I thought. The Emily Locus Award. No doubt that's what she said. It hit me like a brick, and I got up and went to the bathroom and I was, like, did she say, 'Emily Locus' and if she did could it be my mom?"

"What else did she say?"

"I was leaving, to get a handle on it, but something about this 'Emily Locus' being a writer who never did anything with it."

"Did your mother write?"

"I don't remember, frankly, though I kind of recall her doing it while we were on vacation at her folks' place upstate. But it gets weirder. Someone needed to use the bathroom and so I left and I went down the hallway and they were just finishing up on the Q&A and a few people are lined up to buy the book and get her to sign it.

"I didn't know what to do. I thought of just disappearing. But what if it *was* my mom? So, I went to that long escalator they have and watched them and just as they reached it and the younger one was going down, I told the other that I was Alex Locus. That's all I said. 'I am Alex Locus.'"

"And?"

"She almost falls down the escalator and is staring at me and waving for me to come down. What was I to do? I started this. So, I go down and she pulls me off to the side and it's clear that this other, younger writer has no idea what the fuck is going on but the older one literally pulls me to her. She asks if I said I was Alexandra Locus and when I say I am, she whispers 'I miss your mother so much.'"

"So, her Emily Locus was your mom?"

"I think so. She asked me to go to dinner with her and the other writer, but I said I had to go and raced here to see you. What am I supposed to do?"

"Can she track you down?"

"Who knows? How many Alex Locuses can there be?"

This all exhausted me, and I took a long slug of my Pinot.

"I need to think," I said. Somehow, I finished the glass and grabbed a twenty from my bag and threw it on the tall, small round table and rushed out.

I barely made it a block before a breathless Kate tapped my shoulder and then was next to me.

“You can’t just go. Let’s be logical here.”

We both slowed for the seven or eight blocks to my place and on the way, we agreed to go online and find out what was going on.

My place. I was lucky to get it, and it was only because there was a lawyer in my father’s firm who represented the landlord who let me have it. It was nothing great, not like you see in the movies. You walked in and you were in the living room. This once was a larger room, and there was simple molding on its high ceiling, but a wall was placed between the left and the center of the three windows that looked out onto the street to create the bedroom.

All the walls were painted in a standard New York off-white. There was a closet in the living room and one in the bedroom. The latter was small, and my bed—just a mattress and box spring on a metal frame—was along one wall. My three-drawer dresser was next to it, along that same wall, and a decent-sized horizontal mirror was over that. I had framed art-deco posters along the opposite wall, and a small table with a lamp and clock next to the bed, near the window. And that was pretty much it for the bedroom.

The living room was twice as big. It had a sofa along the wall to the left—the wall between the two rooms—and a bookcase near the windows. A coffee table was in front of the sofa, and two armchairs were opposite the sofa. They were a matching cream-colored set my father got for me when I moved in. A high-quality if old-fashioned sideboard I got my dad to let me take from home was along the opposite wall, and my TV was on it. To its right, beside the closet, was a table that had two leafs and that was round when the leafs were up. Usually, though, they were down and at most I lifted one for eating or for my laptop, and a couple of wooden chairs were tucked beside it.

The kitchen was tiny, and a door opened to an equally small bathroom with just a toilet, sink, and shower. It sounds

depressing, but it was very near the park, and it was my home and I loved it.

Kate was its most frequent visitor, and on the Thursday night I'm talking about, she went straight to the kitchen when we were inside where she opened the fridge for a bottle of Pinot and grabbed a can of mixed nuts from a cabinet and she carried them to my little coffee table before returning with a couple of glasses, which she three-quartered filled.

By then I was on the sofa searching on my laptop and she was quickly backseat driving me. I started with the B&N site for the Broadway store. There was an announcement of tonight's reading and Karen Adams. There was a photo.

"She's kind of cute," Kate said. "Check out the award."

Emily Locus Award went into Google, and there it was.

"Shit."

"That's her," I said, pointing to a photo on the homepage. "That's the older woman. Nancy Penchant."

Kate leaned in as I clicked the "About" tab.

"Impressive," she said, and it was. Her novel *Scream* was an American Book Award finalist. She had several other novels and a collection of short stories with links to literary publications.

I went back. On the front page was an explanation:

Emily told me that she had written many stories over the years that no one read. The purpose of this award is to give someone who discloses who she is in writings that might otherwise end up being stuffed away in boxes left in the attic or a basement, never to be seen by anyone else, the opportunity to come forward and have those stories shared with others and, perhaps thanks in part to this little stipend, with the world.

We both leaned back.

"Did your mom write?" Kate asked again.

joseph p. garland

“I have no idea if she did it seriously. Just stuff when we were away and she was bored. There may be some boxes in the attic in Bronxville.”—our hometown—“It was years ago.”

As I scrolled down the page, I found a picture of my mom. With Nancy Penchant. So that was that. In Central Park. They were standing. Nancy had an arm around my mom’s waist. They were in jeans and polo shirts and wearing sneakers, their heads tilted slightly towards one another.

My mom was smiling, though she was never much of a smiler.

“Your mom may not have been who we thought she was,” Kate said, and I thought she might be right. I grabbed my wine and stared at the photo.

It was a while since my mom died, and I didn't really think of her much though there were times when I felt a gap where she was supposed to be, and suddenly—BOOM!—she was all I could think about. She was kind of there while I grew up and overprotective more than anything. My dad would roll his eyes and say, "Just let Mom be Mom."

Then one August day I was walking through town—it's an upscale suburb I'll describe shortly—with Kate and some other friends when I got a call from my dad that something terrible had happened with my mom and he'd have a car bring me to a hospital in the city. Kate offered to go with me, but I told her it'd be best if I did whatever it was just with my dad.

The car took me near Columbia. At the hospital, the security desk paged a nurse who met me and took me to an elevator. The elevator was very big and smelled like a hospital. The fourth floor smelled worse, and the hallway lights were almost blindingly bright.

The nurse didn't say anything beyond asking me how I was, and I was afraid to ask what was going on. She led me to a large room with beds lined up on either side of an aisle. It was not nearly as bright or smelly as the hall. Beeping was happening everywhere. There were four or five beds with curtains on rods, some open, some closed, on either side. My dad was by the last one on the right. I didn't look at the other patients. Just my dad.

Things are a bit blurry from that point. She was lying there with something attached to her nose and an IV in her arm. Monitors were blinking and showing what I guess was her heartbeat, which looked steady.

She didn't move, and my dad had his arm around me and took me to the hallway. He asked if I wanted something to eat, and before I could say anything he led me to a vending machine near

the elevators. He got some chocolate candy for me, and then I followed him to a row of orange plastic chairs that were in an opening. There were a couple of other rows, but they were empty—except for one woman sitting near us and staring ahead as she rocked front and back. She must have known someone in the ICU. Sure, I felt bad for her, but my issue was my mom.

My dad simply said she was visiting a friend when she had some kind of medical “episode” and they got her to the hospital very fast, but the doctors were, he said, “not optimistic.”

“She’s on life support. They say she’ll be a vegetable if she even survives. They said we should think about pulling the plug.”

I’d just seen her that morning, happy as could be. It was Friday so she’d be going into the city to meet friends as she almost always did. I told my dad it couldn’t have happened. “She was fine this morning.”

“She was just walking with the friend, and it hit her. A stroke.”

He and I spoke about the options, but it was clear that there was only one. After we got her parents down from upstate and my dad’s came from outside Philadelphia—I am an only child—on the Monday, my dad nodded to a doctor who turned off the machines. We stood there. My dad held my left hand and my grandma (my mom’s mom) held my right. We waited. It wasn’t long before the doctor leaned in and put her fingers to my mom’s neck. It didn’t take long for her to look up at my dad and shake her head. She was gone, and somehow I kept from wailing as my dad put his arm around my waist and led me out. By then, the others had already left.

I hadn’t thought of those days in a while. My life turned to shit when she was gone and I nearly flunked out of school—I did enough damage that I couldn’t get into the colleges I wanted to get into and was nearly thrown off my field-hockey team—and it took some mandated anti-bullying counseling to get through it all—and the sight of this author woman at the bookstore that

night reminded me of that visit to the hospital on Amsterdam not two miles due north of where I sat.

Now here my mom was in this photo with this woman's arm around her.

"What do I do?" I asked in some kind of stupor.

Kate got closer. "We'll figure it out, baby girl," and she put an arm around me and gave me a shake. "We'll figure it out."

After a minute, I said, "I should probably speak to my dad about it, but it's, I don't know, a bit weird."

"If it's what it might be, it could be a problem to just bring it up with him. What about those boxes?"

"In the attic? I don't even know if they're still there, but you have a point. I can just ask to come up and see them and maybe get a hint about whether something was really going on between my mom and this—" I looked at the photo and read the name—"Nancy Penchant."

I leaned my head on Kate's shoulder. "That's what I'll do."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

I pulled up, keeping my eyes on the photo.

"Thanks. But just now I think it has to be me going up there alone. I'll play it cool, or at least try to, till I understand it a bit better."

She stood and looked down at me.

"Will you go up on Saturday?"

I nodded.

"I'll be around. Give me a call if you need anything."

Then Kate was gone, with me still sitting on the sofa scrolling for a few minutes until I grabbed my phone.

It was nearing ten-thirty but not too late to call. My dad answered after the second or third ring.

"Hey, baby. What's up?"

"Sorry to call so late, but I was wondering whether Mom used to write stories."

"Write stories? Where does this come from?"

Having brought up writing, I found myself saying more than I planned. "I went to a reading at a bookstore and the author won something called the Emily Locus Award. I looked it up. I think it's Mom"—I didn't want to overcommit—"and it said that she wrote stories she never did anything with, so I was just wondering whether Mom did and whether they're somewhere in the house."

He paused. "There's an Emily Locus Award?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it's her?"

I paused, but not for long.

"I saw this author for maybe five seconds and when I told her my name, she said she knew Mom from years back, when you were in the city."

It was his turn to wait.

"Dad?"

"I'm sorry. An author?"

"Yes."

"I think I know who you mean. I think your mother may have mentioned an author friend she met before you were born who she saw sometimes when she visited the city after we moved up here. I don't know anything more. And you spoke to her just briefly? Nothing more than, 'Hello'?"

"Pretty much. So are there papers?"

“Sorry. Yeah. I think they’re in the attic. Been there for years. Just taking up space. I sometimes think of tossing them. But, yeah, there were stories. You want to see them?”

“Can I come up on Saturday?”

“Saturday? You just found out about them. What’s the rush?”

“It’s just that having found out that they exist, I’d like to see them.”

He said he was fine with it, and I told him I’d walk from the station and see him in the late morning.

I didn't get much sleep. No surprise there. I wasn't in the mood for a Friday schlep to the subway to get to work and, more, being stuck with a bunch of strangers that particular morning and was up in plenty of time to walk through the park—it was quite a nice morning—and to my office on 44th Street, a bit over two miles and quite pleasant if it's not hot and humid and it wasn't.

Fortunately, work moved quickly, and it was noon before I knew it. I grabbed a salad and water near Bryant Park. Though it was crowded, I found a chair close enough to the fountain by Sixth Avenue to hear its gurgling. Instead of going through *The Times* on my Kindle, I checked for Karen Adams's book. I downloaded a sample.

The first story was the one with the boat. *Lonesome*. It was the title story for the book and the one that brought her to the attention of Nancy Penchant. The sample, though, only got to around where she stopped the night before, with the one woman struggling to at least grasp the side of the boat until the initial rush of the storm passed. I bought and downloaded the collection and was soon sitting on a hard, metal forest-green chair in Bryant Park on a beautiful day with people passing oblivious to what was happening on that lake in the Berkshires. The woman in the water—Audrey—tries to hold on and the other—Michelle—tries to grab her wrist. But it keeps slipping away and Michelle panics that the boat will capsize and hurries to the other side until the boat calms.

The rain will not ease. Audrey is drifting away from the boat, now away too far to touch it. Michelle throws out an oar, hoping it will do. Audrey can't get a grip on it. My heart was beating as I exhort her to grab it, grab it. Then she goes down a final time without a trace, the crust of the lake still violent with the rain.

It's not long before a lifeguard gets close on a board but it's too late when he arrives and it's too late when the storm's fury is spent. Her friend sits in the boat, begging them not to pull it in. "She's here, she's here," Michelle repeats until she must admit Audrey is gone and her boat is towed in by another and an ambulance is waiting on the beach.

It went like that, and I lost track of time as I fell into the story of the kids and the husbands and how calm the lake becomes not ten minutes after the drowning when the firemen paddle out to begin the search for the body. I wanted to throw my Kindle away in each of the trash bins I passed on my way back to my office. How could such a seemingly nice girl write something so...dark?

I went to the ladies' room in my office and looked in the mirror and I couldn't stop thinking of these two women. Michelle and Audrey. Strangers to me. But I had to stop thinking of these two fictional women and was glad the pace of the afternoon's work matched the morning's so before I knew it, it was five-thirty on a Friday afternoon.

I walked home. It was another of the September days that I live for in the city. My mind was a bit of a mush the whole way. I had the remains of the dinner from the night before—the takeout from the bodega that I seemed to have started eating in a different lifetime—and threw it into the microwave.

I thought about opening a bottle of wine, but that was not a good idea, and I had a glass of milk. I set up my laptop on the leaf of that little table in my living room and scrolled while I ate.

The "Readings" link on the Broadway Barnes & Noble page gets me to Karen Adams.

Before she graduated from Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 2016, Karen noodled about writing fiction. An economics major, she found it an outlet. With the serendipitous intervention of American Book Award finalist

Nancy Penchant, she was able to connect with an editor and get her collection of stories published.

Karen lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, not far from the store, and is currently at work on her first novel. We are proud to be the host for her first public reading.

I clicked the link to Nancy Penchant. It took me to her publisher and her author's page with the gushing blurbs she'd gotten from other authors. A Barnard grad who worked through the publishing world until getting stories published in *The New Yorker* and a publishing contract from one of the major houses. After one kindly reviewed but lightly selling novel, she hit upon *Scream*, which got not only good reviews but also solid sales and ultimately to an ABA finalist slot.

She was "happily single but never alone."

I didn't know what to make of that peculiar phrase and suddenly I thought of Kate saying my mom might not have been who I thought she was.

The photo of Nancy Penchant from the page was more recent than the one with my mom. She was pretty with a narrow face, a slightly pointy nose, and a small mouth plus good dark brown hair and a legitimate number of wrinkles. She spent more time at the beach than she should have but if there was one way to describe her from the photo and more from actually seeing her in person it'd be as a, well, classy MILF.

It was still early, and I pulled up Karen's collection on my Kindle. I was almost afraid to go deeper into it, but what she read from that second story about the Tufts kids made it sound like the whole thing wasn't a lot of *Sturm und Drang*. And the next story I picked out, almost at random, was far lighter and as well written.

That done, it was still early, and I thought of looking at Nancy Penchant's novel. I could download it, but the bookstore was only a few blocks away.

It was quiet, being a Friday night. I found the paperback with its sedate cover and "American Book Award Finalist" plastered on

the lower right side and read a few pages. I found a comfy chair and fell into both the chair and the novel. Before I knew it, I was several chapters in and it was getting late. I had to be up for the trip to my dad's, so I headed to the escalator, the one where I'd followed her down the night before, and on the ground floor bought her novel.

I called Kate when I was through my door. We spoke a couple of times during the day, to replay the call to my father more than anything. She again offered to come to town with me when I went to check out those boxes, but I begged off and was back on my sofa reading *Scream*.

I started with: "To Emily Locus. A Too-Soon-Departed Friend." Which I stared at it before returning to where I'd stopped at the bookstore.

Scream tells the story of a woman whose husband dies at thirty-five after suffering a heart attack while they were having sex. (It was *quite* more descriptive and detailed than "having sex," of course, but that was its gist.) The sudden widow was Catholic, and her dead husband was Jewish and after the funeral she was left completely outside her husband's family and was left, childless, to wander. The *Scream* was a reference both to her reaction to his collapsing on top of her and to the frustration she felt every day because he left her alone. A fair number of men were attracted to the young widow, her finances bolstered by a tidy insurance payment. She dates occasionally at the behest of neighbors and work colleagues, but nothing comes of any of it other than the occasional hook-up (including one torrid but brief one with another woman).

The story covered four years, and one never learned whether the wife got past losing her husband. I was pulled through it, finishing a little after one.

I couldn't fall asleep, unable to get thoughts of that widow and her loneliness and desperation out of my brain. I was too tired, though, to get up. I heard the sounds of the city at two in the

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morning, mostly the buses rolling up and down Central Park West. A couple's conversation, echoing in the quiet and somewhat drunken, floated up as they headed away from Columbus was the last thing I remember.

It's important to my story, so let me say something about my hometown, Bronxville, New York. Though I was born in Manhattan and lived on its Upper West Side when I was a baby and for a few years, we moved up when I was small.

It's a square-mile patch built around a train station that sits just about fifteen miles north of Grand Central and grew around commuting bankers and lawyers and businessmen. The houses are big, but the lots are small. And very expensive. It has just a few blocks of stores spread along two business streets. A movie theater, two or three liquor stores, the last remaining Womrath Bookshop, Starbucks and non-Starbucks coffee places, restaurants, and a mishmash of other stores. A population of about six thousand and well-regarded schools (from which, as I say, I was nearly expelled).

Our house was in the area north and east of the train station. It was on a slight hill and its streets—some maintained in old cobblestones—meander around. There's little need for sidewalks. As I say, the houses are big and of a variety of architectures, nearly all pre-dating World War II.

Rich as it is, ostentatiousness is positively frowned upon. You won't see a Ferrari in a Bronxville driveway but you're unlikely to see many cars or SUVs that are more than a few years old either, unless the owner is a contrarian fond of old Volvo or Mercedes wagons.

My father remarried, Maggie Daniels, a few years after my mom passed, and thanks to her I have a three-year-old half-brother named TimTim—Timothy Allen Locus.

It was where I was going on Saturday.

I was up early and after a five-mile run in the park and a bit of post-shower moping around, I walked to Harlem/125th Street for the train north. It was another great September day, but I didn't

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want to get there too early. “*Be up at about 10*” I texted my dad when I got back from the run.

Kate knew my plan. I texted her from the train platform:

{Alex:} Heading to B’ville. Wish me luck!!

She responded quickly:

{Kate:} Good luck. I’m here and waiting.

The train was largely empty. It rolled into Bronxville a little early, and I walked to the house, nodding at the two or three women walking their dogs along the way, though I didn’t recognize any of them.

Passing the brushed-steel Range Rover and black Mercedes huddled at the top of the driveway, I went around to the back and in through the kitchen. This was my stepmom’s pride and joy (other than TimTim, of course). It was large and open with an AGA stove and Sub-Zero fridge. It had a large island and opened to the dining room. When I grew up, a wall separated the two, but it was long gone, and I was used to the open feel. On the island, Maggie’d set up a plate with bagels, butter, and cream cheese.

“I’m here,” I called out. Suddenly steps were bounding down the stairs, and TimTim rushed to crash into me.

“Alex! Alex!” He grabbed my leg as he always did.

“Mama got bagels for you,” he said. I loaded a Keurig and sliced a cinnamon raisin bagel and slathered on the cream cheese. As the coffee machine worked its magic, Maggie joined us. She was in tennis whites, and we exchanged air kisses and shared a slight hug.

My relationship with Maggie was, well, complicated. She was barely ten years older than me. She was a lawyer who was an associate at my dad’s firm but left when told she wouldn’t make partner. She went to work for the legal department of a big bank (not mine) in midtown, where she still was. The official line was that she didn’t begin to date my father until she was long gone

from the firm and that they “ran into each other on Park Avenue one Thursday at lunchtime and it was magic,” and I had no reason to doubt that. I was at Villanova during this courtship and first met her when I was home for spring break my sophomore year.

Maggie was not my mom. No matter how hard she tried, we both knew she never would be. Of course, she fit the Bronxville profile, with long (natural) blonde hair and a petite figure, usually in some sort of Lululemon tights and Nike trainers, in contrast to my mom’s red hair and roundness.

TimTim was a lifesaver for all of us and even my cold heart softened to Maggie a bit when he popped out and when I got to be his godmother. I would like to say I see bits of myself in him, but he was the epitome of cute and sweet. I never was and never will be.

“I hear you’re doing some detective work,” Maggie said, nibbling on the corner of an unsliced plain bagel as I added milk and sugar to my coffee and took my first sip.

“It’s just that I heard some things I want to follow up on.”

“Your dad will be down in a minute,” she said, and we sat across from each other on the island. TimTim was off to show me his latest toy.

“I didn’t know your mom, of course. But are you sure you want to do this?”

I swallowed the bite of my bagel and dabbed my mouth with a paper towel and looked across. She was hard to read, and I didn’t know whether she was thinking of protecting me or my dad. Or even her. *What does she know that I don’t?*

I was honest.

“I really thought about it. I’ve asked myself that question a thousand times. But I always answer that I *need* to know. I was a pretty shitty daughter and now that she’s gone, I think I owe it to her.”

It was probably unfair of me to say this about myself. Over the years, I may have thought more of the difficult times I had with

her, the brattiness of an only child (which exploded when she died). Perhaps I hoped that knowing more about her now that *I* was a woman would remind me of those special times we had as mother-and-daughter. In some respects, then, I think I may have owed it more to myself to discover the truth about her.

Maggie reached over, and I moved my hand across the top so she could tap it. "You know I am always here for you, Alex," she said, "even if we don't see eye to eye and even though I will never be your mother."

"I appreciate that. But I don't know if I'm ready for the friendship thing with you, okay?"

She nibbled a bit more on her bagel, and I was pissed for having said what I did.

"I'm just here to help." This said with a slight degree of pout. She cheered and stepped away, her ponytail giving a quick flip. "Your dad should be right down."

As if on cue, he came in, also in his tennis whites, and Maggie moved to intercept TimTim, who was holding and waving some sort of colorful robot with flashing green eyes and a bit of a rumble in his right hand as his mom took him to get ready to leave.

I got from my stool for a hug from my dad.

"You sure you're up to this?"

"You make it sound like some Indiana Jones thing. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Not as far as I'm aware," he said. "We're going to the club for a few hours. We'll have lunch there. Give us a call if you need anything. I pulled two boxes down from the attic. They're in the living room."

"We're dropping TimTim off with friends," Maggie said as she left, pushing him in front of her and him calling "Bye, Alex."

"So, you have the house to yourself. There's lunch stuff in the fridge."

With that, and me calling "Bye, TimTim," they were off.

I walked into the living room with my coffee mug. This room, too, was largely Maggie's work. She didn't make major changes but brightened it up and, again, I give her full points for how it turned out. A couple of times a year I went up to a party, and the living room was the center of everything. It was bright while my mom was alive, but Maggie made it more welcoming. It was two steps down from the front foyer. Two sides were lined with tall windows facing south and west. It wasn't the best of views since the neighbors were close, but I always found it peaceful.

An ebony Steinway was near the windows. They bought it when I was nine or ten hoping I'd take to music but I couldn't bear the practicing and knowing my imperfect scales would waft over the town and so it sat unused except when my folks (or, later, my dad and Maggie) held a party. When that happened, a tuner would come in the day before and work it into shape and they'd hire a kid from Sarah Lawrence to play for a few hours. Maggie, though, started taking lessons and I bet TimTim banged on it whenever he got the chance.

The walls of the room were yellow, and a very large (and expensive) oriental rug covered most of the floor. Some feet from the stone fireplace were a pair of couches facing one another across a broad, square mahogany coffee table. The table had a glass top. Quality paintings—landscapes mostly—hung along the walls and the furniture was a dark color no longer in fashion but perfect for this room and this house and this town.

A pair of bankers' boxes sat side-by-side on the coffee table. I put my mug on a side table and stood over them. I went from one to the other and ran my right hand along their lids, and for a moment it felt, not for the last time, like I was touching a bit of Emily Locus.

I won't describe the process I went through in my initial review. Both boxes were messes. One had mostly legal pads filled edge to edge and often on both sides with my mother's distinct handwriting, distinct because she was left-handed and how she

wrote varied by her mood. That box also had bunches of loose papers or five or six pages that were stapled together, and those staples were rusty.

The other box had printed things. Several big groups of pages with big binder clips, which were rusting and left rust stains on the paper. I pulled them out and put each on the coffee table, where I'd made space. Longer pieces. Stories. Some ran over a hundred typed pages. *A Summer Affair. Flying to Paris. The Love of My Life. Pandemonium. Floating Away.* Each had a title and "By Emily Locus" below it, both centered on the cover page.

But this second box also had bunches of legal pads, and as far as I could tell they were drafts of those typed stories or of things that never got past the draft-on-a-legal-pad stage.

"Later for you," I said to the stack of stories and returned to the first box. I took the top pad out. It'd been so long since I'd seen much of my mom's penmanship, and it struck me strangely when I saw it then. There were the lines of her ballpoint pen digging into the pads. I ran my finger across the first page, with its sloppiness and the striking out of a word or two. Near the top, right after the title and the date—6/12/03. It started: "I was late and the morning was ~~rainy~~ overcast and humid when I reached the street." *Taken for a Ride* was its title, and I flipped over several pages.

Follow the rules, everyone said. The unwritten rules. Keep your head down. Hold your bag close. More than anything, don't stare. Do. Not Stare. Read the ads if you must but nothing more.

I followed these rules for months and months. I walked down the steps and put my token in the slot and stood back from the platform with my back near but not against the wall waiting for the train. On board, I liked standing, holding onto the pole as the car rocked. At my station, I shuffled up the wide stairs in time with the others, up to Sixth Avenue, holding my bag close to my body.

I never knew why I stared at him that ~~summer~~ late September afternoon.

The story got a little...racy with that banker she stared at, and I put it aside. If I read everything in this first visit, I'd have been there all day. For this one, with the hot sex with a stranger—oh Mother!—I wondered if my father saw it and what else might be in these papers. I dropped it to the floor face down and stared at the remaining things. I needed a plan now that I had a sense of the papers were like *physically*, how seemingly random and disorganized it all was.

I went to the kitchen for coffee, and while I waited for it to brew, I texted Kate.

{Alex:} Just getting started.

There's a lot of stuff. And I mean A LOT of stuff.

Big. Small. In between.

It's complicated.

Kate called a few minutes later and offered to come up or have me go to her place on the way home, but I passed.

"I can't spend all day here. It's too draining. I'll ask my dad if I can take them with me."

"You want me to come by?"

"I may. I may not. Let's play it by ear."

"I'm around," she said.

"I know."

"And Alex. I mean for everything."

"I know that too."

I was back in the living room by the time the call ended. I put my fresh coffee on a side table and got back to my, well, to my quest.