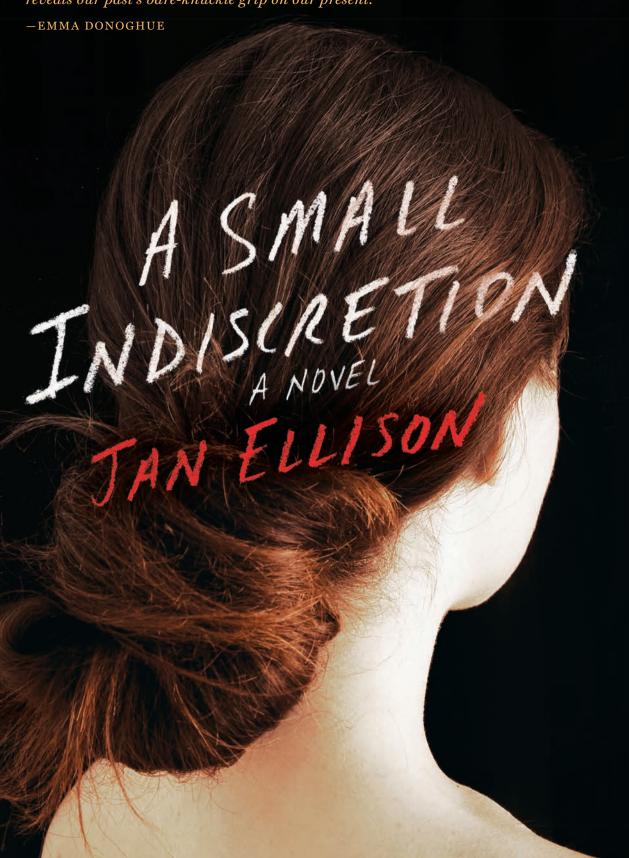
"An engrossing, believable, gracefully written family drama that reveals our past's bare-knuckle grip on our present."



I wore a winter coat, the first I'd ever owned—a man's coat purchased at a secondhand store. I wore it every day, along with a silk scarf tied around my neck, imagining I looked arty or sophisticated. Each scarf cost a pound, and I bought them from an Indian woman who kept a stall in the tube station at Victoria, where I caught my train to work. They were thin, crinkled things, not the sort of scarves that ought to be worn to work in an office or that offered any protection against the cold. But I could not resist them, their weightlessness and soft, faint colors. The money I spent on them, and the habit I adopted of wearing a different one each day, seems to me now a haphazard indulgence, an attempt to prove that I was the kind of girl capable of throwing herself headlong into an affair with her boss—a married man twice her age—and escaping without consequence.

"Church," he said, the morning I arrived at the address the woman at the agency had printed out on a card. "Malcolm Church."

He extended his hand, and right away I was struck by a certain contradiction in him—the impressive height and mass of him in opposition to his stooped shoulders, his hesitant manner, his unwieldy

arms and legs. He had a square face and round brown eyes and brown hair streaked with gray, but his features were mostly overwhelmed by his size, so that all I remembered afterward was the pleasing sensation of feeling small, by comparison, even at five feet eight. He had a strange way of talking, his head tucked into his neck and his eyes fixed in the empty space beyond, as if something were suspended there, ripe fruit or a glimmer of light, as if he were not quite brave enough, or perhaps too polite, to look a person in the eye.

He asked me how long I was available. I told him I planned to be in London three months, but that my work permit was good for six, through March of next year. I'd intended to claim I was available indefinitely, since the position was listed as full-time permanent, and I was entirely out of money and badly needed the job, but something had stopped me. Not a sense of right and wrong or fear of getting caught, but a hard center of self-importance I had not lived long enough to shed, the notion that I would offer myself on my own terms or not at all. And I was buoyed up by my typing speed—eighty words per minute—about which he never even inquired.

"That'll be fine," Malcolm said, staring intently over my shoulder as he proceeded to explain that his work was in structural engineering, and that he was currently preparing a bid for the new Docklands Light Rail station at Canary Wharf. The London Docklands, he explained, was an area in east and southeast London whose docks had once been part of the Port of London. The area had fallen into disarray, and in the seventies, the government had put forward plans for commercial and residential redevelopment. Malcolm had been involved in the early phases of the project. Now he was hoping to work on the renovation of the original rail station.

There would be dictation and word processing, he said, a little research and generally helping to set up the office and assemble the bid. The office was a single room upstairs from a sandwich shop near Bond Street, with two desks, industrial gray carpet and two folding metal chairs. On one desk was an unusual photograph of a woman and a baby, a posed black-and-white image with a startling play of silver light and shadow set against a background of trees and sky. A single smudge of pink had been hand-painted over the baby's lips. It was Malcolm's family—his wife, Louise, who would feature so prominently in my thoughts, and their infant daughter, Daisy, who was by then ten years old and away at the boarding school in the north that Louise had attended when she was Daisy's age. I was to learn later that the photograph had been taken by a young man named Patrick Ardghal, the son of an old family friend of Malcolm's, who was living in the cottage out back of Malcolm and Louise's house in Richmond. He'd taken the photo a decade earlier, when he was in art school.

In the photo Louise had blond hair and a fine straight nose and a smile with a hint of impatience in it, perhaps not with the baby per se, but with the general condition of motherhood into which Louise had finally plunged. It had taken them seven years to conceive their daughter, Malcolm told me later. By the time they became parents they had already been married a decade, and Louise had not wanted another child. She didn't have the temperament for it, Malcolm said. It overwhelmed and exhausted her and the delivery had nearly killed her, the baby, Daisy, having inherited from her father a rather large head.

I MOVED FROM a youth hostel in Earl's Court to a boardinghouse in Victoria. The building was five stories high, made of gray stone, on a block not far from the tube station. My room was ten feet square with bright-blue walls, a laminate desk and a hard, narrow bed covered in a thin white spread. There were bathrooms down the hall. There were no showers, only a single tub and a hose you attached to the faucet for washing your hair. There was no lock on the room with the bathtub, so I made a habit of propping a chair in front of the door for privacy. The chair, as I recall, did not stop Patrick Ardghal. Nothing much stopped Patrick when he had an idea in his mind. He simply shoved the door hard, and I welcomed him, I suppose, as I always did, and he undressed and climbed in. Our wet bodies were awkwardly entangled long enough to please him—then he left, as he always did, taking my heart with him.

My rent was sixty pounds a week, including breakfast and dinner. The meals were served buffet-style in the dining room downstairs. There were eggs and toast and stewed tomatoes for breakfast, meat pie or fish and chips or baked ham for dinner. It was a source of solidarity among the other boarders to complain about the food but I could not in good conscience join in. I loved those meals, the bounty and efficiency of them, the thick gravies, the custards and puddings and soft, fat rolls. It seemed a small miracle to me, to have so much available and to be paying for it all with my own wages. It pleased me, too, each time I handed over a pound coin in exchange for a scarf, and when I purchased, at the secondhand shop in Notting Hill, the winter coat, a full-length single-breasted gray tweed with covered buttons and a wide collar that could be turned up against the cold. I wore my coat and scarf and descended the escalator into the bowels of Victoria Station, emerging again into the dense, unyielding energy of city life feeling brisk, and stylish, and superior to the person I'd been when I'd left home. I was taken over by a sense of liberation and possibility. Any false steps I made now would be mine alone. Any foolish moves would be private business that had no bearing on the hopes and dreams of others, and that would not later be a source of remorse or reckoning or pain.

What a shock to discover, some twenty years later, that exactly the opposite was true. To learn, in the aftermath, that I hadn't known the half of it. To stand in my San Francisco kitchen last June and slip my finger through the flap of a white envelope, and to find a blackand-white photograph of myself in that tweed coat, standing on the chalk down of the White Cliffs of Dover, waiting to board a ferry to Paris.

It was a photograph innocent enough to anyone unacquainted with its history, its treacherous biological imperatives, its call for reparations left unpaid. It had been solarized, just as the photo of Louise and the baby on Malcolm's desk had been. It had been subjected to a light source in the darkroom, causing a reversal of dark and light. My form, and Malcolm's, along with the inch of air between us, were bathed in silver light that brightened at the edges like a halo. Louise and Patrick, on the other side of the photo, were deep in shadow. The scarf I was wearing had been hand-colored a blunt red. It was tied around my neck like a choker, like a noose. But it wasn't me who was about to hang.

## One

T'S NOT ALWAYS WISE to assume that just because the surface of the world appears undisturbed, life is where you left it.

Monday morning, September 5, 2011. Twenty minutes after eight. I was doing the breakfast dishes when the phone rang. I wiped one hand on a dishcloth and picked up on the second ring. I spoke a quiet hello. You were sleeping directly upstairs in your sister's room, and after the commotion of the night before, I didn't want the noise to wake you.

There was static on the line. I was about to launch into my "national-do-not-call-list" speech when a stranger spoke your name.

"Are you related to a Robert Jonathan Gunnlaugsson?"

"Yes," I said, "Robbie's my son."

There was a brief silence, into which I said what I believed—that you were still asleep. You couldn't come to the phone.

I heard voices in the background, then a contusion of words—automobile accident, broken rib cage, possible brain injury, blunt renal trauma. I began to shake. I called for your father. I thrust the phone at him as if it were burning my hand.

He grabbed a pencil and pad off the kitchen counter and made a

few notes. "Get a helicopter to take him to the trauma center at Stanford," he barked into the phone. "We'll be there in an hour."

I ran upstairs. Part of me was certain I would find you where I'd left you, on top of Polly's bed, her decorative pillow, shaped like a ballet shoe, still cradling your head.

I flung open the door to her room. I stepped toward the bed. But you weren't in it. Your truck was in the driveway, Robbie, but you were nowhere in the house. We learned later that you'd been riding in the passenger seat of an old Volvo sedan when it flipped just north of Santa Cruz and expelled you into a ravine. The driver's seat belt had held, but yours had not.

Jonathan and I battled our way through the San Francisco traffic and sped thirty miles south on the highway, out of the fog and into the sunlight. We reached the peninsula and took the off-ramp and argued over the route in voices clipped with panic. We made our way through that alien topography—the university, with its low, wide sandstone buildings and flat expanses of sky and lawn, the shopping center, with its vats of flowers and its acres of parking lot, the hospital inside its immaculate suburbia—that sunlit peninsula pressed between the green bay and a bank of hills the color of straw that five months later your father would begin to call home. We drove up the hospital's main drive and circled the extravagant brick fountain, an oasis of shaped trees growing in its center.

I was the one who'd counted your drinks the night before. I was the one who'd somehow incited a riot, then, in the aftermath, set about making sure my three children were safe for the night under the same roof. I was the one who'd moved a sleeping Polly in with Clara so you could have Polly's bed. If I had not made you stay, if I had not altered that sliver of fate, if I had not plucked that single

wing from that single butterfly, you wouldn't have ended up in that car. You'd have said your goodbyes and driven across the Bay Bridge to Berkeley and fallen into bed and slept until noon. You'd have returned to the lab a day later to carry on with your investigations in particle physics, along with the pursuit of other elusive truths.

At the main entrance to the hospital were two dogs—eyes half closed, chins flat on the ground in a posture of patient defeat. That was the attitude to avoid. The task at hand-my task-was not to wait patiently but to act. To undo the twist of fate. To be vigilant and merciless in advocating for your medical care. To accept nothing less than a full recovery. To ask every question. To overturn every stone.

Did I suspect, that first morning, that there were some stones better left buried in the dust? That I might wish for the results of certain biological interrogations to be kept hidden, not only from you and from your father, but from myself? I don't think I did. Denial, as any addict in recovery will tell you, is not defined as knowing something and pretending you don't; it is failing to see it at all.

THERE WAS NO parking at the hospital that morning. Up and around we went, three, four, five levels, then down again, your father taking the corners hard and fast. When we ascended and emerged a second time onto the top level and into the onslaught of the September sun, a car just ahead of us was pulling out of its spot. Jonathan kept his foot on the brake and undid his seat belt and reached into the back for his jacket and his wallet. I dug in my purse for my sunglasses. In that momentary lapse, a car angled into the spot from the other direction.

"What the fuck," your father said.

He thrust the car into neutral and leapt out. He was not so different from when I'd met him. He was as windblown and rugged, as blue-eyed and broad-shouldered and good-looking as he had always been. He still had a full head of dirty-blond hair that made him seem younger than forty-seven, as did his calm, positive, compact energy, his effortless refusal to bend to the mood of the day. So it was shocking to watch him now, storming toward the offending vehicle like an animal protecting its young—vicious, and angry, and so unlike himself, but in a way, beautiful.

He stood up close to the driver's side window and the car door opened a crack, whacking his shin. A leg reached toward the ground. Your father could not see the leg, since he was almost on top of it, but I could see that it was thick and squat and encased in knee-high nylons, the ankles swollen with fluid, the calves mottled with varicose veins. The shoes were flat and white with rubber soles. The foot, and the leg, were attached to a woman to whom your father said, "My son was airlifted here, and this is my fucking parking spot."

The woman hauled herself out of the front seat. Her face wrinkled with the effort and her small, old eyes leaked and blinked in the sun. Your father took a step back. He stood for a moment, shoved his hands in his pockets, and crossed the parking lot toward me, the rage fading and his face becoming again the mask it had been since I'd returned from London and, four days before, made my foolish confession—a mask I no longer had a right to question or remove.

We exited the structure and pulled into a handicapped spot in front of the emergency room entrance and ran. I held my sunglasses in my left hand and clutched my purse with my right. I had forgotten my sweater. Your father flung his windbreaker over his shoulder and the zipper stung my cheek, the beginnings of retribution, perhaps, for a past that had long ago laid down the invisible blueprint of our future.

WHEN WE RETURNED to the car at midnight, there was a ticket tucked under the windshield wiper.

"Two hundred and seventy dollars," Jonathan said. He didn't tear the ticket up but dropped it on the ground and crushed it beneath his foot, the way he might have snubbed out a cigarette. By then, a serious traumatic brain injury had been ruled out. But you had a concussion, a punctured lung, four broken ribs and a chipped right kneecap. And, most threatening, a severed renal artery that had potentially compromised your kidney—the only one, it turns out, you had.

They say the human body can lose 50 percent of its body parts and survive. But it depends on which parts, and which body. Renal agenesis. They don't call it a disease; they call it a condition. The condition of being born with only one kidney, occurring in roughly one in two thousand people. Most never know the condition exists, because the single kidney grows large enough to accommodate the body's needs.

What was it that hit you? Not a tree. Not the hard ground. Not a rock jutting up from the ravine. But something manufactured, plastic or glass or steel, some man-made, hard edge of the car that caught the curve of your body as you flew, piercing you on impact.

When we arrived at the hospital, you were in a medically induced coma, which I was made to understand was a sort of freezing of you, a fabricated reprieve from your own body that would allow your internal organs to rest. We had been informed that while your body was in that state, there was not much we could do. The coma might be necessary for a few days, or a few weeks, or even a few months. It was too soon to tell.

We called my mother. She said your sisters were sound asleep. She said that my father, whom I hadn't seen in more than twenty years, had indeed finally arrived from Maine. She said the two of them would hold down the fort. Jonathan and I drove up and down El Camino Real until we found a room in a motel close to the hospital, the Mermaid Inn, a pink stucco affliction squeezed between a Starbucks and an independent bookstore. Aside from its proximity to you, and the coffee that could be procured next door, the single feature that can be put forward in that motel room's defense was the price—sixty-three dollars a night.