
SUCH SHELTERED LIVES
A NOVEL
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The Coroner

The body will be shipped back to its family. A shame, the coroner thinks; the body belonged to a person who had been young—relatively young—and beautiful.

So much life left to live, people might say. *Taken too soon.*

Most of the time, the coroner deals with elderly bodies: skin lined with wrinkles, marked by scars from surgeries and injuries and the bumps and bruises accumulated over a lifetime, the sort that never entirely fade.

Despite its relative youth, *this* body is mangled nearly as badly as those older ones, its skin scattered with remnants of the aches and pains it endured in life. The coroner surveys each blemish carefully, noting which are recent and which are from months, even years ago. Every line on the body is a clue. The family will want an explanation; when someone dies like this—unexpectedly, needlessly—there are so many questions.

Over the years, the coroner has told himself that his is an honorable job, that giving a family answers helps them accept the loss of their loved one. But now, for the first time in his long career, he wonders how much the answer itself matters. After all, he need only give the family *some* reason. Just last week, he prepared the body of a seventy-four-year-old woman for burial. She'd had metastatic breast cancer, though the true cause of her death may have been any number of contributing factors: According to her family, she'd been on high doses of painkillers for weeks and had all but stopped eating months ago, barely taking even sips of water. Still, he'd recorded her cause of death as *cancer*.

Would it have given the family more peace if he'd discovered that the true cause was dehydration? If he'd told them that the painkillers their beloved had taken for relief in fact hurried her demise? Or would it have been a burden to know that if only they'd forced more water down her throat, curbed her pain pills, their mother, or wife, or grandmother (depending on

who'd been managing her care; the coroner doesn't know) might have lived a little bit longer?

Absently, he fingers his phone in his jacket pocket, wondering when it might ring again. It's cool inside the morgue, but his palms are sweating. It's hard work, conducting an autopsy: sawing open a body, lifting the organs one by one.

He finds it easier to think of his subjects as *bodies* than people. Some might consider him insensitive or cold, but he thinks it's simply fair this way. He treats each patient exactly the same, no matter their background. After all, they say death is the great equalizer, coming to the rich and poor alike.

He brushes the body's hair away from its face. He cleans beneath its fingernails, bitten to the quick. Perhaps this may begin happening more often, given the goings-on at the nearby recovery center. *This* being finding younger bodies on his table, troubled people meeting an untimely end. People don't go to a place like that because they're *healthy*. They don't go there because the rest of the world has been a safe place.

The center, the coronor knows, promises its guests the utmost discretion, but he and his neighbors will certainly be able to find out which Wall Street scion or Hollywood celebrity is taking up residence at any given time. His daughter works on the ferry, saving for her college fund, so he knows the island's arrivals and departures better than most.

He thinks it's fitting that the center is on Shelter Island, where his family has lived for multiple generations. He's always found the island's name comforting, conjuring images of a port against the storm, barricades against invaders, safety when the earth tilts off its axis, isolation from the noise and madness of the outside world. He understands why so many millionaires have chosen this small stretch of land for their lavish vacation homes. Many locals resent the summer people who take over the island each year, but as far as the coroner is concerned, the occasional crowds are a small price to pay for living in paradise.

He eyes the bluish cast around the body's fingertips. All the money in the world can't protect the wealthy from their own bodies, as vulnerable to the elements as anyone else's.

The coroner estimates the time of death to a narrow window—one hour, perhaps two. It will be a week before he receives the results of the tox screen, but he can suggest a cause of death without it. There are so many ways for even a young, healthy body to die: blunt force trauma, overdose, accident, hypothermia. There's even such a thing as death by misadventure. He looks at the body's blue knuckles and writes one word on his form: *exposure*.

Now, he must prepare the body for its journey home, shut tight in a casket for the flight. The family might hire another examiner—some expensive city type, no doubt—to verify his findings. Should someone else come to a different conclusion, the coroner might be questioned, but he won't be blamed. He's small-town, after all, accustomed to preparing bodies for burial, not investigation. No elite practitioner, charging, he imagines, more for one examination than the coroner makes in a year, would question his incompetence. It would merely confirm the wealthy's confidence in their wealth. Someone else might get into trouble, but not him.

The coroner is not a religious man, but he finds himself offering up a small prayer, wishing the body more comfort in death than it, apparently, found in life.

1

Amelia Blue

Let me tell you what I know.

I know how many calories are in a serving of fat-free Greek yogurt (eighty) and how many are in the three frozen strawberries I chop and mix into it (six each; eighteen total). I know precisely how many miles there are between our house in Laurel Canyon and LAX (17.9), and approximately how many minutes it will take to get there (never under an hour, unless I'm taking a very early morning flight). I know the date of my father's death (December 8, 2001) and the time (4:17 in the morning), but I didn't know it before the general public. (I was only five at the time, and my mother waited days to tell me. By then I'd seen Dad's face plastered on the cover of magazines beneath headlines I couldn't read but could tell were nothing good.)

I know my grandmother's old landline by heart (914-555-0654) even though she hasn't lived in her East Coast apartment since January 30, 2002, when it became apparent that my mother was ill-equipped to raise me by herself. I know that my grandmother has never arrived at an airport less than two hours before her flight was scheduled to take off and that my mother has never arrived more than twenty minutes before her scheduled departure, not even if we lied to her about the time, hoping to get her there earlier. I know my mother's Social Security number and that my father's suicide note was dated two days before he went through with taking the drugs that ended his life. I know that particular fact not because anyone told me but because my mother posted the letter to her Myspace account two years after my father died for the whole world to see (Myspace being all the rage at the time), and eventually the whole world included me. There are, by my count, approximately seventy-seven conspiracy theories suggesting that my mother murdered my father, and that the date on the

note somehow proves it. Personally I think my dad was so out of it by then that he didn't know what day of the week it was, let alone the actual date. I suppose it's strange that he dated his suicide note at all, but apparently Dad dated everything. Here's another number I know: In 2021, some billionaire bought a page of Dad's lyrics dated March 3, 1993, for five hundred thousand dollars from a fan who'd swiped Dad's notepad from his dressing room after a concert.

Right now, I know that my flight (American 29) is scheduled for takeoff at 6:11 a.m. from LAX for a 3:02 p.m. arrival at JFK. Which means it is precisely 4:11 a.m. when my grandmother (Naomi) drops me off at the airport. Traffic is light, and the drive takes fifty-nine minutes; it's hard to say whether the other drivers on the road are early risers or still awake from the night before.

"You sure you don't want me to walk you to the gate?" Naomi asks. "I could park the car."

"You're not allowed past security."

"I could get permission."

They let her walk me to the gate when I was small, flying to meet my mother while she crisscrossed the country, ostensibly to work, though it looked to me like a prolonged party, stretching from sea to shining sea. Back then, I was an unaccompanied minor, often the first person to board. Naomi would hug me tight, and I'd walk up the Jetway alone.

When it was time to send me back home, my mother and I would arrive at the gate panting, winded, having begged someone or other to hold the plane for me, always certain they'd make an exception for her, for *Georgia Blue*, whose face they'd seen on magazine covers and posters and late-night talk shows. There was never time for hugs or kisses goodbye. Sometimes I wondered whether she made us late on purpose so she had an excuse not to hug me, like I was a child made of spikes, like she already knew I would become all bones and angles, not at all pleasant for a parent to hold.

All of this to say, another thing I know is how to navigate an airport. "I'll be fine," I tell my grandmother now.

I merely have to get from the curb to the gate in a timely manner. Then, sit in my assigned seat, where someone will tell me when it's time to fasten

my seat belt, time to drink, when it's safe to stand, when it's safe to leave. If there's a delay, it's not my fault, and if we're early, it isn't because I did something right.

"And it has to be *this* place?" Naomi asks for the hundredth time. "There are dozens of other places that specialize—"

"I've been to those places," I interrupt, also for the hundredth time. "They haven't helped."

Naomi sniffs, and I hear the words she isn't saying, ghosts of arguments we've already had.

"You agreed this was the right choice."

"I agreed that you needed to go back into treatment. You insisted it be there."

In fact, I refused to consider anyplace else. I felt guilty for practically blackmailing my grandmother, but it was the only way I could get her to go to the bank and secure the funds from my trust to finance my stay.

"The best care money could buy. Even Georgia said so, remember?" I say. "They must have something all those other places don't."

Naomi nods, not because she agrees, but because this part of the conversation is over. We're at the airport; the tickets have been purchased, my spot secured: I'm going. She gets out of the car to hug me goodbye. "So skinny," she says, her fingers digging into my ribs like she's checking to make sure they're each still there. "You packed warm clothes?"

It's such a normal question that for a split second I believe that I'm magically leaving for college or grad school all over again. "Of course," I promise. I spread out my arms, indicating the oversize cable-knit cardigan I'm wearing even though the average high temperature in LA in January is sixty-six degrees. (Another thing I know.)

"Are you sure you don't want me to arrange a car to take you from the airport to Shelter Island?"

Shelter Island. The name should be comforting, but instead it makes me picture stormy waters and pursuing pirates. Things from which you seek shelter, not shelter itself.

"I don't mind the train," I assure her. I lift my bag over my shoulder and walk into the terminal.

Inside, I'm hit by an onslaught of smells: cheap food, cinnamon chewing gum, bare feet, anxious sweat. I hear children crying, businesspeople taking meetings on their cellphones, metal detectors beeping in protest, change being emptied from pockets. When I was little, I loved airports. Everyone at the airport, it seemed to me, was on their own private mission: checking their bags, getting through security, racing to make it to their gate on time. The people who work at airports wear uniforms with nametags fastened to their chest or on lanyards around their neck; they manage to look at once harried and bored. I used to play at distinguishing the business travelers from the vacationers, the people who are leaving home from the ones returning.

Today, when I reach the gate, I curl into a rubbery chair, circling my left wrist with the fingers of my right hand, pleased that I can do it pinkie finger to thumb, fitting like a loose bracelet. My phone buzzes with a text.

Abby, I'm getting worried. I clear the screen before I can read the rest of the message, before my heart can feel warm at the nickname Jonah gave me. (I really should block his number.)

I stand and pace. Moving burns calories, and there will be no choice but to keep (mostly) still on the plane. The next several hours of my life are literally mapped out, west to east: just under six hours to JFK, two hours on the train to Bridgehampton, followed by forty minutes in a car including ten on a ferry. It'll be long past dusk by the time I get where I'm going. This time of year, the days are short. Shelter Island is so far east that the sun there sets nearly fifteen minutes earlier than it does in Manhattan.

When they board us, I'm the last person to take her seat. My mother used to say, *Celebrities board last. We'd hold up the line with people stopping to gawk at us.* Not that I'm a celebrity. No one on the plane seems to recognize me, and why should they? It's mostly my name that's famous, not my face. And that's only to an ever-shrinking group of fans.

But if you're a certain age and like a certain kind of music, you've heard the stories. You know (because the press said so) that I was addicted to heroin when I was born in 1996. Maybe you read the tabloid articles "report-

ing" that I was kept in the hospital following my birth because I was going through withdrawal. They said that CPS came and refused to release me to my parents' care. They said my dad (Scott Harris, bass-playing Gen X god) paid off the agents who were supposed to keep me safe. They said it was disgusting that government employees would prioritize money and fame over a helpless child's welfare, and my birth story turned into a warning tale about government corruption. Meanwhile, I was (apparently) home with my parents, and my grandmother had taken charge (Naomi moved herself in until I was six months old), so I was fed and diapered and sleep-trained and whatever else you do with infants. If I'd gone through withdrawal, I certainly didn't know it.

When I was thirteen years old, I asked Naomi what really happened and she said the press exaggerated to sell papers, which isn't exactly a denial. I didn't bother asking my mother. (You know what they say: *How can you tell if an addict is lying? Their lips are moving.*)

The flight attendants walk the aisles to offer drinks, pretzels, stale cookies. The person sitting beside me pulls a paper bag from beneath the seat in front of him: McDonald's. I haven't eaten McDonald's for years, but the smell is so familiar it's like I'm five years old again. My seatmate rips his ketchup packets open with his teeth. I feel like sugar is entering my bloodstream through osmosis.

I root through my bag until I find a piece of gum. No minty freshness for me: I prefer watermelon, orange, strawberry, flavors made from artificial sweeteners packaged in colors that don't exist in nature. It's almost enough to overpower the scent of soggy french fries and overcooked meat. I chew so hard my jaw aches, trying to distract myself from the twist of hunger in my belly.

Six hours later, I watch pale winter sun glint off New York City's skyscrapers as the plane turns east toward JFK. I close my eyes, trying to imagine Manhattan in the early nineties, Georgia traipsing down one or another city block with her bad dye job, dark roots pulled into a greasy bun. Something else I know: The expression *jonesing* comes from Great Jones Street, because it's where dealers used to hang out. Now there are million-dollar condos on the same corners where my mother scored her first highs.

By the time I was old enough to notice, Georgia's celebrity was fading. Still, she always found a way to keep the world paying attention. So many times, I almost told her that *I* was paying attention, but I knew there was no point. One little girl's focus is nothing compared with the whole damn world.

For as long as I can remember, I knew that my mother was a drunk and a drug addict, too interested in her substances to spend time with her daughter, so interested that she found a way to score, time and again, even at rehab. That's what the tabloids said, the industry insiders, her manager, even her mother. It's what I would've said, too, had anyone asked me.

I squeeze my right wrist with the thumb and forefinger of my opposite hand until it feels like my bones are protesting against my grip, as if to say, *Don't you know you can't make your* bones *shrink like you can the rest of you?*

No, I want to tell my bones. *I don't know anything anymore.*

2

Lord Edward

I'm late to meet my sister for lunch. Each step I take through Midtown Manhattan is agony. The restaurant is only a block away, but I might as well be heading to China for all the progress I'm making.

I picture Anne waiting for me, her long brown hair coiled neatly into a bun at the nape of her neck. She's wearing a woolen blazer over pleated trousers, a belt cinched at the waist, a tailored white blouse, no wrinkles. She studies the menu, her face placid, her expression giving nothing away. Strangers wouldn't know how angry she is at her little brother's tardiness, wouldn't recognize how she works her jaw when she's annoyed, the way her pale white skin flushes pink. She's pretending she can't hear the people at the adjacent table staring, whispering, gasping.

Can it really be her?

What's she doing in the States?

Didn't you hear they sent the brother to school here?

Oh, that's right. I read he got kicked out of Eton.

That was years ago, I want to tell them. Since then, I've also been kicked out of Columbia.

Did they kick me out, or did I drop out? My leg hurts so much that I can't concentrate enough to recall. It doesn't matter. The result is the same. Lady Anne's good-for-nothing, undereducated baby brother, well into his twenties now, and utterly useless.

Anne studies the menu like it's a thousand-page novel, though she would never waste time reading fiction. *Frivolous,* I can hear her say, voice dripping with disapproval. Our mother's favorite book was *Wuthering Heights*, one of the few facts I know about her, and that only because it's a running joke between Anne and our father, who took it as proof of the former duchess's foolish romanticism. When I was a teenager, curious what all the fuss was

about, I tried reading the novel myself. It didn't strike me as a romance so much as a cautionary tale.

Anne taps her fingers against the table, a subtle but sure sign that she's furious. Outside, I crumple to the ground, right in the middle of East Fifty-Seventh Street, but no one offers to help. Everyone is looking at me and I want to scream at them to fuck right off. They have their phones out, they're taking photos, recording videos. There's the sound of brakes screeching in the distance, and everyone starts to run, leaving me in a heap on the sidewalk, an out-of-control car coming straight toward me. I hear the crowd screaming for the car to stop, but it only moves faster, as though the driver mistook the accelerator for the brake pedal.

"Please fasten your seat belt, sir. The plane will be landing soon."

I open my eyes, shaking myself awake. I'm not in Midtown. I'm not in New York City. I'm not on the earth at all. I left London this morning, flew to JFK, then boarded a small private plane to East Hampton. Anne wouldn't let me go back to my apartment in Tribeca. She said everything I need will be waiting for me when I arrive. Anne believes she knows what I need, whether or not it's what I want.

I rub my left leg, digging the heel of my palm into my thigh until it aches.

Aches *more*. It already hurt. It always hurts.

"I have to use the bathroom first," I say, and the attendant nods obligingly, walking away briskly in high heels, her gait easy and sure. She tucks an absent strand of blond hair behind her right ear.

I make my way to the back of the plane. Bringing a water bottle would've been too obvious, so I use water from the tap; it tastes sour. I wait a few moments and then flush, in case the attendant is listening.

It's not true that painkillers eliminate pain. They only make it seem far away, as if it's happening to someone else and you have no choice but to watch.