#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION

EMILY HENRY



A NETFLIX FILM

What people are saying about
People We Meet on Vacation

'Full of sexual tension and tantalizing possibility. I fell head over heels for Alex and Poppy, and loved travelling all over the world with them both'
BETH O'LEARY, author of *THE FLATSHARE*

'This is a perfect romcom, and I completely adored it – I think Emily Henry might be our generation's answer to Nora Ephron'
SOPHIE COUSENS, author of *THIS TIME NEXT YEAR*

'I knew it was going to be good, but WOW. I adored this so much, it was everything I love in a romcom – definitely what I needed in a book right now – all round loveliness and warmth'
JENNA, Netgalley, ★★★★★

'Funny and heartbreaking and gave me butterflies'
PAIGE TOON, author of *THE MINUTE I SAW YOU*

'It's a pitch-perfect balance of loveable characters, hilarious wit, heartfelt desires and steamy sexual chemistry that smoulders off the page'
LAURA JANE WILLIAMS, author of *OUR STOP*

'If you want to read an incredible book that takes you on an adventure whilst seeing two people fall in love, you should read this book. Or if you just want an amazing book, then you should read this book. Just read it. Please. It's so good'
SOPHIE, Netgalley, ★★★★★

'Emily Henry is my newest automatic-buy author . . . The perfect getaway: a heartfelt, funny, tender escape that you wish could last forever'
JODI PICOULT, author of *THE BOOK OF TWO WAYS*

'This has all the feels and is full of warmth, friendship and love'
DEBBIE VIGGIANO, author of *WHAT HOLLY'S HUSBAND DID*

'If I could give this ten stars I would'
RACHEL, Netgalley, ★★★★★

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Henry is the *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestselling author of the butterfly-inducing romantic comedies *Beach Read*, *People We Meet on Vacation*, *Book Lovers*, *Happy Place* and *Funny Story*. She studied creative writing at Hope College and now lives and writes in the American Midwest. *Great Big Beautiful Life* is her sixth novel.

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TITLES BY EMILY HENRY

Great Big Beautiful Life

Funny Story

Happy Place

Book Lovers

People We Meet on Vacation

Beach Read

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I wrote the last one mostly for me.
This one's for you.

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Dear Reader,

Every book starts out a little differently for me. Some begin with a setting; others expand from a premise. Usually, it's a slow process, teasing the story out from this little kernel, building in layer after layer of character and dialogue and atmosphere. But this one exploded like popcorn.

Alex and Poppy dropped into my head in an instant, and their shared world sprang out of them nearly wholesale. I've never known two characters so quickly, so completely. I could hear them in my head, talking to each other and to their families, to strangers. I knew them, and that made writing their story relatively easy: with every scenario I threw at them, I just had to pause long enough to ask them how they'd react.

When I found out *People We Meet on Vacation* was going to become a movie, I was equal parts nervous and excited. Not just for myself, but for the readers who fell in love with these characters, who *knew* them every bit as well as I did. When we found our leads, Emily Bader and Tom Blyth, and I saw their chemistry together, my hopes soared.

So as work on the movie progressed, I was unsurprised to find myself falling head over heels in love with our cast, growing more and more confident with each scene I was able to watch that the readers would be just as smitten as I was. But one thing that *did* surprise me was how Tom and Emily forever changed the characters in my mind. Perhaps *changed* isn't the right word. *Expanded*, maybe.

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They took these characters I've loved so deeply for years now and breathed life into them. Into every look they exchange, into the way they laugh, and how they argue.

It's an immense and humbling honor to see such talented artists take something that came from your brain and build on it. I feel in some ways like I built my dream house and then the cast and crew of the movie entered that home and lovingly furnished every room.

This is the same book that came out in 2021, but I will never read it quite the same again. I'm so grateful to the readers for this new version that lives in my head, that I'll watch on the screen too for years to come.

None of this could have happened without you, and it's all for you.

Emily

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PROLOGUE

Five Summers Ago

ON VACATION, YOU can be anyone you want.

Like a good book or an incredible outfit, being on vacation transports you into another version of yourself.

In your day-to-day life, maybe you can't even bob your head to the radio without being embarrassed, but on the right twinkly-light-strung patio, with the right steel drum band, you'll find yourself whirling and twirling with the best of them.

On vacation, your hair changes. The water is different, maybe the shampoo. Maybe you don't bother to wash your hair at all, or brush it, because the salty ocean water curls it up in a way you love. You think, *Maybe I could do this at home too. Maybe I could be this person who doesn't brush her hair, who doesn't mind being sweaty or having sand in all her crevices.*

On vacation, you strike up conversations with strangers, and forget that there are any stakes. If it turns out impossibly awkward, who cares? You'll never see them again!

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You're whoever you want to be. You can do whatever you want.

Okay, so maybe not whatever you want. Sometimes the weather forces you into a particular situation, such as the one I'm in now, and you have to find second-rate ways to entertain yourself as you wait out the rain.

On my way out of the bathroom, I pause. Partly, this is because I'm still working on my game plan. Mostly, though, it's because the floor is so sticky that I lose my sandal and have to hobble back for it. I love everything about this place in theory, but in practice, I think letting my bare foot touch the anonymous filth on the laminate might be a good way to contract one of those rare diseases kept in the refrigerated vials of a secret CDC facility.

I dance-hop back to my shoe, slip my toes through the thin orange straps, and turn to survey the bar: the press of sticky bodies; the lazy whorl of thatched fans overhead; the door propped open so that, occasionally, a burst of rain rips in off the black night to cool the sweating crowd. In the corner, a jukebox haloed in neon light plays the Flamingos' "I Only Have Eyes for You."

It's a resort town but a locals' bar, free of printed sundresses and Tommy Bahama shirts, though also sadly lacking in cocktails garnished with spears of tropical fruit.

If not for the storm, I would've chosen somewhere else for my last night in town. All week long the rain has been so bad, the thunder so constant, that my dreams of sandy white beaches and glossy speedboats were dashed, and I along with the rest of the disappointed vacationers have spent my days pounding piña coladas in any crammed tourist trap I could find.

Tonight, though, I couldn't take any more dense crowds, long wait times, or gray-haired men in wedding rings drunkenly winking at me over their wives' shoulders. Thus I found myself here.

In a sticky-floored bar called only BAR, scouring the meager crowd for my target.

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He's sitting at the corner of BAR's bar itself. A man about my age, twenty-five, sandy haired and tall with broad shoulders, though so hunched you might not notice either of these last two facts on first glance. His head is bent over his phone, a look of quiet concentration visible in his profile. His teeth worry at his full bottom lip as his finger slowly swipes across the screen.

Though not Disney World–level packed, this place is loud. Halfway between the jukebox crooning creepy late-fifties tunes and the mounted TV opposite it, from which a weatherman shouts about record-breaking rain, there's a gaggle of men with identical hacking laughs that keep bursting out all at once. At the far end of the bar, the bartender keeps smacking the counter for emphasis as she chats up a yellow-haired woman.

The storm's got the whole island feeling restless, and the cheap beer has everyone feeling rowdy.

But the sandy-haired man sitting on the corner stool has a stillness that makes him stick out. Actually, everything about him screams that he doesn't belong here. Despite the eighty-something-degree weather and one-million-percent humidity, he's dressed in a rumpled long-sleeve button-up and navy blue trousers. He's also suspiciously devoid of a tan, as well as any laughter, mirth, levity, etc.

Bingo.

I push a fistful of blond waves out of my face and set off toward him. As I approach, his eyes stay fixed on his phone, his finger slowly dragging whatever he's reading up the screen. I catch the bolded words **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**.

He's fully reading a book at a bar.

I swing my hip into the bar and slide my elbow over it as I face him. "Hey, tiger."

His hazel eyes slowly lift to my face, blink. "Hi?"

"Do you come here often?"

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He studies me for a minute, visibly weighing potential replies. "No," he says finally. "I don't live here."

"Oh," I say, but before I can get out any more, he goes on.

"And even if I did, I have a cat with a lot of medical needs that require specialized care. Makes it hard to get out."

I frown at just about every part of that sentence. "I'm so sorry," I recover. "It must be awful to be dealing with all that while also coping with a death."

His brow crinkles. "A death?"

I wave a hand in a tight circle, gesturing to his getup. "Aren't you in town for a funeral?"

His mouth presses tight. "I am not."

"Then what brings you to town?"

"A friend." His eyes drop to his phone.

"Lives here?" I guess.

"Dragged me," he corrects. "For vacation." He says this last word with some disdain.

I roll my eyes. "No way! Away from your cat? With no good excuse except for enjoyment and merrymaking? Are you sure this person can really be called a *friend*?"

"Less sure every second," he says without looking up.

He's not giving me much to work with, but I'm not giving up. "So," I forge ahead. "What's this friend like? Hot? Smart? Loaded?"

"Short," he says, still reading. "Loud. Never shuts up. Spills on every single article of clothing either of us wears, has horrible romantic taste, sobs through those commercials for community college—the ones where the single mom is staying up late at her computer and then, when she falls asleep, her kid drapes a blanket over her shoulders and smiles because he's so proud of her? What else? Oh, she's obsessed with shitty dive bars that smell like salmonella. I'm afraid to even drink the *bottled* beer here—have you seen the Yelp reviews for this place?"

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"Are you kidding right now?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Well," he says, "salmonella doesn't have a smell, but yes, Poppy, you are short."

"Alex!" I swat his bicep, breaking character. "I'm trying to help you!"

He rubs his arm. "Help me how?"

"I know Sarah broke your heart, but you need to get back out there. And when a hot babe approaches you at a bar, the number one thing you should not bring up is your codependent relationship with your asshole cat."

"First of all, Flannery O'Connor is not an asshole," he says. "She's shy."

"She's evil."

"She just doesn't like you," he insists. "You have strong dog energy."

"All I've ever done is try to pet her," I say. "Why have a pet who doesn't want to be petted?"

"She wants to be petted," Alex says. "You just always approach her with this, like, wolfish gleam in your eye."

"I do not."

"Poppy," he says. "You approach *everything* with a wolfish gleam in your eye."

Just then the bartender approaches with the drink I ordered before I ducked into the bathroom. "Miss?" she says. "Your margarita." She spins the frosted glass down the bar toward me, and a ping of excited thirst hits the back of my throat as I catch it. I swipe it up so quickly that a fair amount of tequila sloshes over the lip, and with a preternatural and highly practiced speed, Alex jerks my other arm off the bar before it can get liquor splattered on it.

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"See? Wolfish gleam," Alex says quietly, seriously, the way he delivers pretty much every word he ever says to me except on those

rare and sacred nights when Weirdo Alex comes out and I get to watch him, like, lie on the floor fake-sobbing into a microphone at karaoke, his sandy hair sticking up in every direction and wrinkly dress shirt coming untucked. Just one hypothetical example. Of something that has exactly happened before.

Alex Nilsen is a study in control. In that tall, broad, permanently slouched and/or pretzel-folded body of his, there's a surplus of stoicism (the result of being the oldest child of a widower with the most vocal anxiety of anyone I've ever met) and a stockpile of repression (the result of a strict religious upbringing in direct opposition to most of his passions; namely, academia), alongside the most truly strange, secretly silly, and intensely softhearted goofball I've had the pleasure to know.

I take a sip of the margarita, and a hum of pleasure works its way out of me.

"Dog in a human's body," Alex says to himself, then goes back to scrolling on his phone.

I snort my disapproval of his comment and take another sip. "By the way, this margarita is, like, ninety percent tequila. I hope you're telling those unappeasable Yelp reviewers to shove it. *And* that this place smells nothing like salmonella." I chug a little more of my drink as I slide up onto the stool beside him, turning so our knees touch. I like how he always sits like this when we're out together: his upper body facing the bar, his long legs facing me, like he's keeping some secret door to himself open just for me. And not a door only to the reserved, never-quite-fully-smiling Alex Nilsen that the rest of the world gets, but a path straight to the weirdo. The Alex who takes these trips with me, year after year, even though he despises flying and change and using any pillow other than the one he sleeps with at home.

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I like how, when we go out, he always beelines toward the bar,

because he knows I like to sit there, even though he once admitted that every time we do, he stresses out over whether he's making too much or not enough eye contact with the bartenders.

Truthfully, I like and/or love nearly everything about my best friend, Alex Nilsen, and I want him to be happy, so even if I've never particularly liked any of his past love interests—and especially didn't care for his ex, Sarah—I know it's up to me to make sure he doesn't let this most recent heartbreak force him into full hermit status. He'd do—and has done—the same for me, after all.

"So," I say. "Should we take it from the top again? I'll be the sexy stranger at the bar and you be your charming self, minus the cat stuff. We'll get you back in the dating pool in no time."

He looks up from his phone, nearly smirking. I'll just call it smirking, because for Alex, this is as close as it gets. "You mean the stranger who kicks things off with a well-timed 'Hey, tiger'? I think we might have different ideas of what 'sexy' is."

I spin on my stool, our knees *bump-bump*ing as I turn away from him and then back, resetting my face into a flirtatious smile. "Did it hurt . . ." I say, ". . . when you fell from heaven?"

He shakes his head. "Poppy, it's important to me that you know," he says slowly, "that if I ever *do* manage to go on another date, it will have absolutely nothing to do with your so-called help."

I stand, throw back the rest of my drink dramatically, and slap the glass onto the bar. "So what do you say we get out of here?"

"How are you more successful at dating than me," he says, awed by the mystery of it all.

"Easy," I say. "I have lower standards. And no Flannery O'Connor to get in the way. And when I go out to bars, I don't spend the whole time scowling at Yelp reviews and forcefully projecting *DON'T TALK TO ME*. Also, I am, arguably, gorgeous from certain angles."

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He stands, setting a twenty on the bar before tucking his wallet back into his pocket. Alex always carries cash. I don't know why. I've asked at least three times. He's answered. I still don't know why, because his answer was either too boring or too intellectually complex for my brain to even bother retaining the memory.

"Doesn't change the fact that you're an absolute freak," he says.

"You love me," I point out, the tiniest bit defensive.

He loops an arm around my shoulders and looks down at me, another small, contained smile on his full lips. His face is a sieve, only letting out the smallest amount of expression at a time. "I know that," he says.

I grin up at him. "I love you back."

He fights the widening of his smile, keeps it small and faint. "I know that too."

The tequila has me feeling sleepy, lazy, and I let myself lean into him as we start toward the open door. "This was a good trip," I say.

"Best yet," he agrees, the cool rain gusting in around us like confetti from a cannon. His arm curls in a little closer, warm and heavy around me, his clean cedarwood smell folding over my shoulders like a cape.

"I haven't even minded the rain much," I say as we step into the thick, wet night, all buzzing mosquitoes and palm trees shivering from the distant thunder.

"I've preferred it." Alex lifts his arm from my shoulder to curl over my head, transforming himself into a makeshift human umbrella as we sprint across the flooding road toward our little red rental car. When we reach it, he breaks away and opens my door first—we scored a discount by taking a car without automatic locks or windows—then runs around the hood and hurls himself into the driver's seat.

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Alex flicks the car into gear, the full-tilt AC hissing its arctic

blast against our wet clothes as he pulls out of our parking space and turns toward our rental house.

"I just realized," he says, "we didn't take any pictures at the bar for your blog."

I start to laugh, then realize he's not kidding. "Alex, none of my readers want to see pictures of BAR. They don't even want to read about BAR."

He shrugs. "I didn't think BAR was that bad."

"You said it smelled like salmonella."

"Other than that." He ticks the turn signal on and guides the car down our narrow, palm-tree-lined street.

"Actually, I haven't really gotten *any* usable pictures this week."

Alex frowns and rubs at his eyebrow as he slows toward the gravel driveway ahead.

"Other than the ones you took," I add quickly. The pictures Alex volunteered to take for my social media are truly terrible. But I love him so much for being willing to take them that I already picked out the least atrocious one and posted it. I'm making one of those awful midword faces, shriek-laughing something at him as he tries—badly—to give me direction, and the storm clouds are visibly forming over me, as if I'm summoning the apocalypse to Sanibel Island myself. But at least you can tell I'm happy in it.

When I look at that photo, I don't remember what Alex said to me to elicit that face, or what I yelled back at him. But I feel that same rush of warmth I get when I think about any of our past summer trips.

That crush of happiness, that feeling that *this* is what life's about: being somewhere beautiful, with someone you love.

I tried to write something about that in the caption, but it was hard to explain.

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Usually my posts are all about how to travel on a budget, make

the most of the least, but when you've got a hundred thousand people following your beach vacation, it's ideal to show them . . . a beach vacation.

In the past week, we've had approximately forty minutes total on the shore of Sanibel Island. The rest has been spent holed up in bars and restaurants, bookstores and vintage shops, plus a whole lot of time in the shabby bungalow we're renting, eating popcorn and counting lightning streaks. We've gotten no tans, seen no tropical fish, done no snorkeling or sunbathing on catamarans, or much of anything aside from falling in and out of sleep on the squashy sofa with a *Twilight Zone* marathon humming its way into our dreams.

There are places you can see in their full glory, with or without sunshine, but this isn't one of them.

"Hey," Alex says as he puts the car in park.

"Hey, what?"

"Let's take a picture," he says. "Together."

"You hate having your picture taken," I point out. Which has always been weird to me, because on a technical level, Alex is extremely handsome.

"I know," Alex says, "but it's dark and I want to remember this."

"Okay," I say. "Yeah. Let's take one."

I reach for my phone, but he already has his out. Only instead of holding it up with the screen facing us so we can see ourselves, he has it flipped around, the regular camera fixed on us rather than the front-facing one. "What are you doing?" I say, reaching for his phone. "That's what selfie mode's for, you grandpa."

"No!" he laughs, jerking it out of reach. "It's not for your blog—we don't have to look good. We just have to look like ourselves. If we have it on selfie mode I won't even want to take one."

"You need help for your face dysmorphia," I tell him.

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"How many thousands of pictures have I taken for you, Poppy?" he says. "Let's just do this one how I want to."

"Okay, fine." I lean across the console, settling in against his damp chest, his head ducking a little to compensate for our height difference.

"One . . . two—" The flash pops off before he ever gets to three.

"You monster!" I scold.

He flips the phone around to look at the picture and moans. "Noooo," he says. "I *am* a monster."

I choke over a laugh as I study the horrible ghostly blur of our faces: his wet hair sticking out in stringy spikes, mine plastered in frizzy tendrils around my cheeks, everything on us shiny and red from the heat, my eyes fully closed, his squinted and puffy. "How is it possible we're both so hard to see *and* so bad-looking simultaneously?"

Laughing, he throws his head back against his headrest. "Okay, I'm deleting it."

"No!" I fight the phone out of his hand. He grabs hold of it too, but I don't let go, so we just hold it between us on the console. "That was the point, Alex. To remember this trip how it really was. And to look like ourselves."

His smile is as small and faint as ever. "Poppy, you don't look anything like that picture."

I shake my head. "And you don't either."

For a long moment, we're silent, like there's nothing else to say now that this has been settled.

"Next year let's go somewhere cold," Alex says. "And dry."

"Okay," I say, grinning. "We'll go somewhere cold."

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1

This Summer

"POPPY," SWAPNA SAYS from the head of the dull gray conference table. "What have you got?"

For the benevolent ruler of the *Rest + Relaxation* empire, Swapna Bakshi-Highsmith could not possibly exude any less of our fine magazine's two core values.

The last time Swapna rested was probably three years ago, when she was eight and a half months pregnant and on doctor-mandated bed rest. Even then, she spent the whole time video-chatting with the office, her laptop balanced on her belly, so I don't think there was a ton of relaxation involved. Everything about her is sharp and pointed and smart, from her slicked-back high-fashion bob to her studded Alexander Wang pumps.

Her winged eyeliner could slice through an aluminum can, and her emerald eyes could crush it afterward. In this moment, both are pointed squarely at me. "Poppy? Hello?"

I blink out of my daze and skootch forward in my chair, clearing my throat. This has been happening to me a lot lately. When

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you have a job where you're only required to come into the office once a week, it's not ideal to zone out like a kid in algebra for fifty percent of that time, even less so to do it in front of your equal parts terrifying and inspiring boss.

I study the notepad in front of me. I used to come to the Friday meetings with dozens of excitedly scribbled pitches. Ideas for stories about unfamiliar festivals in other countries, locally famous restaurants with colloquial deep-fried desserts, natural phenomena on particular beaches in South America, up-and-coming vineyards in New Zealand—or new trends among the thrill-seeking set and modes of deep relaxation for the spa crowd.

I used to write these notes in a kind of panic, like every experience I hoped to someday have was a living thing growing in my body, stretching branches out to push on my insides, demanding to break out of me. I'd spend three days before pitch meetings in something of a sweaty Google trance, scrolling through image after image of places I'd never been, a feeling something like hunger growling in my gut.

Today, however, I spent ten minutes writing down the names of countries.

Countries, not even cities.

Swapna is looking at me, waiting for me to pitch my next big summer feature for next year, and I'm staring at the word *Brazil*.

Brazil is the fifth-largest country in the world. Brazil is 5.6 percent of the earth's mass. You cannot write a short, snappy piece about vacationing in Brazil. You have to at least choose a specific region.

I flip the page in my notebook, pretending to study the next one. It's blank. When my coworker Garrett leans toward me as if to read over my shoulder, I snap it closed. "St. Petersburg," I say.

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Swapna arches an eyebrow, paces along the head of the table.

"We did St. Petersburg in our summer issue three years ago. The White Nights celebration, remember?"

"Amsterdam?" Garrett throws out next to me.

"Amsterdam's a spring city," Swapna says, vaguely annoyed. "You're not going to feature Amsterdam and not include the tulips."

I once heard she's been to upwards of seventy-five countries and many of those twice.

She pauses, holding her phone in one hand and tapping it against her other palm as she thinks. "Besides, Amsterdam is so . . . trendy."

It is Swapna's closely held belief that to be *on trend* is to be *already late to that trend*. If she senses the zeitgeist warming to the idea of Toruń, Poland, then Toruń's off the docket for the next ten years. There's a literal list pushpinned into a wall by the cubicles (Toruń is not on this list) of Places *R+R* Will Not Cover. Each entry is in her handwriting and dated, and there's something of an underground betting pool on when a city will be freed from the List. There's never so much quiet excitement in the office as those mornings when Swapna marches in, designer laptop bag on her arm, and strides up to the List with a pen already out, ready to cross off one of these banned cities.

Everyone watches with bated breath, wondering which city she's rescuing from *R+R* obscurity, and once she's safely in her office, door shut, whoever's closest to the List will run up to it, read the scratched-out entry, and turn to whisper the name of the city to everyone in editorial. There's usually silent celebration.

When Paris was relinquished from the List last fall, someone broke out champagne and Garrett pulled a red beret out of a drawer in his desk, where he'd apparently been hiding it for just such an occasion. He wore it all day, jerking it off his head every time we heard the click and whine of Swapna's door. He thought he'd got-

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ten away with it too, until she paused beside his desk on her way out for the night and said, "*Au revoir*, Garrett."

His face had gone as bright as the beret, and though I didn't think Swapna had meant it to be anything but funny, he'd never quite recovered his confidence since then.

Having Amsterdam declared "trendy" has his cheeks flushing past beret red straight to beet purple.

Someone else throws out Cozumel. And then there's a vote for Las Vegas, which Swapna briefly considers. "Vegas could be fun." She looks right to me. "Poppy, don't you think Vegas could be fun?"

"It could definitely be fun," I agree.

"Santorini," Garrett says in the voice of a cartoon mouse.

"Santorini is lovely, of course," Swapna says, and Garrett heaves an audible sigh of relief. "But we want something inspired."

She looks at me again. Pointedly. I know why. She wants *me* to write the big feature. Because that's what I came here to do.

My stomach twists. "I'll keep brainstorming and work something up to pitch you on Monday," I suggest.

She nods acceptance. Garrett sags in the chair beside me. I know he and his boyfriend are desperate for a free trip to Santorini. As any travel writer would be. As any human person probably would be.

As I definitely should be.

Don't give up, I want to tell him. *If Swapna wants inspiration, she's not getting it from me.*

I haven't had any of that in a long time.

"I THINK YOU should push for Santorini," Rachel says, swirling her glass of rosé on the mosaic top of the café table. It's a perfectly summery wine, and because of her platform, we got it for free.

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Rachel Krohn: style blogger, French bulldog enthusiast, born-and-bred Upper West Sider (but mercifully not the kind who acts like it's so *adorable* that you're from Ohio, or even that Ohio exists—has anyone even *heard* of it?), and professional-grade best friend.

Despite having top-of-the-line appliances, Rachel hand-washes all her dishes, because she finds it soothing, and she does so wearing four-inch heels, because she thinks flat shoes are for horseback riding and gardening, and only if you haven't found any suitable heeled boots.

Rachel was the first friend I made when I moved to New York. She's a social media "influencer" (read: gets paid to wear specific brands of makeup in pictures at her beautiful marbled vanity), and while I'd never had a friendship with a Fellow Internet Person, it turned out to have its perks (read: neither of us has to feel embarrassed when we ask the other to wait while we stage photos of our sandwiches). And while I might've expected not to have much in common with Rachel, it was during our third hangout (at the same wine bar in Dumbo where we're currently sitting) that she admitted she takes all of her photos for the week on Tuesdays, changing outfits and hair in between stops at different parks and restaurants, then spends the rest of the week writing essays and running social media for a few dog rescues.

She fell into this job by way of being photogenic and having a photogenic life and two very photogenic (if constantly in need of medical attention) dogs.

Whereas I set out to build a social media following as a long game to turn travel into a full-time job. Different paths to the same place. I mean, she's still on the Upper West Side and I'm on the Lower East Side, but we're both living advertisements.

I take a mouthful of the sparkling wine and swish it around as I turn over her words. I haven't been to Santorini, and somewhere in my parents' overcrowded house, in a Tupperware box full of things

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that have absolutely nothing in common, there's a list of dream destinations I made in college, with Santorini near the top. Those clean white lines and great swaths of glittering blue sea were about as far from my cluttered bi-level in Ohio as I could imagine.

"I can't," I finally tell her. "Garrett would spontaneously combust if he pitched Santorini and, once I got on board, Swapna approved it for me."

"I don't get it," Rachel says. "How hard can it be to pick a vacation, Pop? It's not like you've been saving your pennies. Pick a place. Go. Then pick another one. That's what you do."

"It's not that simple."

"Yeah, yeah." Rachel waves a hand. "I know, your boss wants an 'inspired' vacation. But when you show up somewhere beautiful, with the *R+R* credit card, inspiration will appear. There is literally no one on earth better equipped to have a magical vacation than a travel journalist with a big-ass media conglomerate's checkbook. If you can't have an inspired trip, then how the hell do you expect the rest of the world to?"

I shrug, breaking a piece of cheese off of the charcuterie board. "Maybe that's the point."

She arches one dark eyebrow. "What's the point?"

"Exactly!" I say, and she gives me a look of dry disgust.

"Don't be cute and whimsical," she says flatly. To Rachel Krohn, *cute and whimsical* is nearly as bad as *trendy* is for Swapna Bakshi-Highsmith. Despite the softly hazy aesthetic of Rachel's hair, makeup, clothes, apartment, and social media, she's a deeply pragmatic person. For her, life in the public eye is a job like any other, one she's kept because it pays the bills (at least when it comes to cheese, wine, makeup, clothes, and anything else businesses choose to ship her), *not* because she relishes the kind of manufactured semifame that comes with the territory. At the end of every month, she does a post with the worst, unedited outtakes from her photo shoots, the

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caption reading: *THIS IS A FEED OF CURATED IMAGERY MEANT TO MAKE YOU PINE FOR A LIFE THAT DOES NOT EXIST. I GET PAID FOR THIS.*

Yes, she went to art school.

And somehow, this kind of pseudo performance art has done nothing to curb her popularity. Whenever I'm in town for the last day of the month, I try to schedule a wine date so I can watch her check her notifications and roll her eyes as the new likes and follows pour in. Every once in a while she'll stifle a shriek and say, "Listen to this! 'Rachel Krohn is so brave and real. I want her to be my mom.' I'm *telling* them they don't know me, and they still don't get it!"

She has no patience for rose-colored glasses and even less for melancholy.

"I'm not being cute," I promise her, "and I'm definitely not being whimsical."

The arch of her eyebrow deepens. "Are you sure? Because you're prone to both, babe."

I roll my eyes. "You just mean I'm short and wear bright colors."

"No, you're *tiny*," she corrects me, "and wear loud patterns. Your style is, like, 1960s Parisian bread maker's daughter bicycling through her village at dawn, shouting *Bonjour, le monde* whilst doling out baguettes."

"Anyway," I say, pulling us back on track, "what I mean is, *what's the point* of taking this ridiculously expensive vacation, then writing all about it for the forty-two people in the world who can afford the time and money to re-create it?"

Her brows settle into a flat line as she thinks. "Well, first of all, I don't assume most people use *R+R* articles as an itinerary, Pop. You give them a hundred places to check out, and they choose three. And secondly, people want to see idyllic vacations in vacation magazines. They buy them to daydream, not to plan." Even as she's be-

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ing Pragmatic Rachel, cynical Art School Rachel is creeping in, giving her words an edge. Art School Rachel is something of an old man screaming at the sky, a stepdad at the dinner table, saying, "Why don't you unplug for a while, kids?" while holding out a bowl to collect everyone's phones.

I love Art School Rachel and her Principles, but I'm also unnerved by their sudden appearance on this sidewalk patio. Because right now words are bubbling up that I haven't said aloud yet. Sensitive, secret thoughts that never fully exposed themselves to me in the many hours I've spent lying on the still-like-new sofa of my uncozy, unlived-in apartment during the downtime between trips.

"What's the point?" I say again, frustrated. "I mean, don't you ever feel like that? Like, I worked so hard, did every single thing right—"

"Well, not *everything*," she says. "You did drop out of college, babe."

"—so I could get my dream job. And I actually got it. I work at one of the top travel magazines! I have a nice apartment! And I can take cabs without worrying too much about what that money *should* go to, and despite all of that"—I take a shaky breath, unsure of the words I'm about to force out even as the full weight of them hits me like a sandbag—"I'm not happy."

Rachel's face softens. She sets her hand on mine but stays silent, holding space for me to go on. It takes me a while to make myself. I feel like such an ungrateful jerk for even having these thoughts, let alone admitting them aloud.

"It's all pretty much how I pictured it," I finally say. "The parties, the layovers in international airports, the cocktails on the jet, and the beaches and the boats and the vineyards. And it all looks how it should, but it feels different than I imagined it. Honestly, I think it feels different than it used to. I used to bounce off the walls for weeks before a trip, you know? And when I got to the airport, I'd feel like—like my blood was humming. Like the air was just vibrat-

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ing with possibility around me. I don't know. I'm not sure what's changed. Maybe I have."

She brushes a dark curl behind her ear and shrugs. "You *wanted* it, Poppy. You didn't have it, and you wanted it. You were hungry."

Instantly, I know she's right. She's seen right through the word vomit to the center of things. "Isn't that ridiculous?" I groan-laugh. "My life turned out how I hoped it would, and now I just miss *wanting* something."

Shaking with the weight of it. Humming with the potential. Staring at the ceiling of my crappy, pre-*R+R* fifth-floor walk-up, after a double shift serving drinks at the Garden, and daydreaming about the future. The places I'd go, the people I'd meet—who I'd *become*. What is there left to want when you've got your dream apartment, your dream boss, and your dream job (which negates any anxiety over your dream apartment's obscenely high rent, because you spend most of your time eating at Michelin-starred restaurants on the company's dime anyway)?

Rachel drains her glass and globs some Brie onto a cracker, nodding knowingly. "Millennial ennui."

"Is that a thing?" I ask.

"Not yet, but if you repeat it three times, there'll be a *Slate* think piece on it by tonight."

I throw a handful of salt over my shoulder as if to ward off such evil, and Rachel snorts as she pours us each a fresh glass.

"I thought the whole thing about millennials was that we don't get what we want. The houses, the jobs, the financial freedom. We just go to school forever, then bartend 'til we die."

"Yeah," she says, "but you dropped out of college and went after what you want. So here we are."

"I don't want to have millennial ennui," I say. "It makes me feel like an asshole to not just be content with my amazing life."

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Rachel snorts again. "Contentment is a lie invented by capi-

talism," Art School Rachel says, but maybe she has a point. Usually, she does. "Think about it. All those pictures I post? They're selling something. A lifestyle. People look at those pictures and think, 'If only I had those Sonia Rykiel heels, that gorgeous apartment with the French oak herringbone floors, *then* I'd be happy. I'd swan about, watering my houseplants and lighting my endless supply of Jo Malone candles, and I'd feel my life in perfect harmony. I'd finally *love* my home. I'd *relish* my days on this planet.'"

"You sell it well, Rach," I say. "You seem pretty happy."

"Damn right I am," she says. "But I'm not content, and you know why?" She plucks her phone off the table, flips to a specific picture she has in mind, and holds it up. A shot of her reclined on her velvet sofa, laden in bulldogs with matching scars from their matching lifesaving snout surgeries. She's dressed in SpongeBob SquarePants pajamas and isn't wearing a lick of makeup.

"Because every day there are back-alley puppy mills breeding more of these little guys! Getting the same poor dogs pregnant over and over again, producing litter upon litter of puppies with genetic mutations that make life hard and painful. Not to mention all the pit bulls doubled up in kennels, rotting in puppy prison!"

"Are you saying I should get a dog?" I say. "Because the whole travel-journalist thing kind of precludes pet ownership." Truthfully, even if it didn't, I'm not sure I could handle a pet. I *love* dogs, but I also grew up in a house teeming with them. With pets come fur and barking and chaos. For a fairly chaotic person, that's a slippery slope. If I went to a shelter to pick up a foster dog, there's no guarantee I wouldn't come home having adopted six of them and a wild coyote.

"I'm saying," Rachel replies, "that purpose matters more than contentment. You had a ton of career goals, which gave you purpose. One by one, you met them. *Et voilà*: no purpose."

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"So I need new goals."

She nods emphatically. "I read this article about it. Apparently the completion of long-term goals often leads to depression. It's the journey, not the destination, babe, and whatever the fuck else those throw pillows say."

Her face softens again, becomes the ethereal thing of her most-liked photographs. "You know, my therapist says—"

"Your mom," I say.

"She was being a therapist when she said this," Rachel argues, by which I know she means, Sandra Krohn was being decidedly Dr. Sandra Krohn, in the same way that Rachel is sometimes decidedly Art School Rachel, not that Rachel was actually in a therapy session. Beg as Rachel might, her mother refuses to treat Rachel as a patient. Rachel, however, refuses to see anyone else, and so they remain at an impasse.

"Anyway," Rachel continues, "she told me that sometimes, when you lose your happiness, it's best to look for it the same way you'd look for anything else."

"By groaning and hurling couch cushions around?" I guess.

"By retracing your steps," Rachel says. "So, Poppy, all you have to do is think back and ask yourself, when was the last time you were truly happy?"

The problem is, I don't have to think back. Not at all.

I know right away when I was last truly happy.

Two years ago, in Croatia, with Alex Nilsen.

But there's no finding my way back to that, because we haven't spoken since.

"Just think about it, will you?" Rachel says. "Dr. Krohn is always right."

"Yeah," I say. "I'll think about it."

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2

This Summer

I DO THINK ABOUT it.

The whole subway ride home. The four-block walk after that. Through a hot shower, a hair mask, and a face mask, and several hours of lying on my stiff new sofa.

I don't spend enough time here to have transformed it into a home, and besides, I'm the product of a cheapskate father and a sentimental mother, which means I grew up in a house filled to the brim with junk. Mom kept broken teacups my brothers and I had given her as kids, and Dad parked our old cars in the front yard just in case he ever learned to fix them. I still have no idea what would be considered a *reasonable* amount of bric-a-brac in a house, but I know how people generally react to my childhood home and figure it's safer to err on the side of minimalism rather than hoarding.

Aside from an unwieldy collection of vintage clothes (first rule of the Wright family: never buy anything new if you can get it used for a fraction of the price), there isn't much else in my apartment to fixate on. So I'm just staring at my ceiling, and thinking.

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And the more I think about the trips Alex and I used to take to-

gether, the more I long for them. But not in the fun, daydreamy, energetic way I used to *long* to see Tokyo in cherry blossom season, or the Fasnacht festivals of Switzerland, with their masked parades and whip-wielding jesters dancing down the candy-colored streets.

What I'm feeling now is more of an ache, a sadness.

It's worse than the *blah*-ness of not wanting anything much from life. It's wanting something I can't convince myself is even a possibility.

Not after two years of silence.

Okay, not *silence*. He still sends me a text on my birthday. I still send him one on his. Both of us send replies that say "Thank you" or "How are you doing?" but those words never seem to lead much further.

After everything happened between us, I used to tell myself it would just take time for him to get over it, that things would inevitably go back to normal and we'd be best friends again. Maybe we'd even laugh about this time apart.

But days passed, phones were turned off and on in case messages were getting lost, and after a full month, I even stopped jumping every time my text alert sounded.

Our lives went on, without each other in them. The new and strange became the familiar, the seemingly unchangeable, and now here I am, on a Friday night, staring at nothing.

I push off the sofa and grab my laptop from the coffee table, stepping out onto my tiny balcony. I plop into the lone chair that fits out here and prop my feet on the guardrail, still warm from the sun despite the heavy cloak of night. Down below, the bells chime over the door to the bodega on the corner, people walk home from long nights out, and a couple of cabs idle outside my favorite neighborhood bar, Good Boy Bar (a place that owes its success not to its drinks but to the fact that it allows dogs inside; this is how I survive my petless existence).

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I open my computer and bat a moth away from the fluorescent glow of its screen as I pull up my old blog. The blog itself *R+R* couldn't care less about—I mean, they evaluated my writing samples from it before I got the job, but they don't care whether I maintain it. It's the social media influence they want to keep cashing in on, not the modest but devoted readership I built with my posts on shoestring-budget travel.

Rest + Relaxation magazine doesn't specialize in shoestring-budget travel. And though I'd planned to keep up *Pop Around the World* in addition to my magazine work, my entries petered off not long after the Croatia trip.

I scroll back to my post about that one and open it. I was already working at *R+R* by then, which meant every luxurious second of the trip was paid for. It was supposed to be the best one we'd ever taken, and small slivers of it *were*.

But rereading my post—even with every hint of Alex and what happened scrubbed out of it—it's obvious how miserable I was when I got home. I scroll further back, scouring for every post about the Summer Trip. That was what we called it, when we texted about it throughout the year, usually long before we'd nailed down where we would go or how we'd afford it.

The Summer Trip.

As in, *School is killing me—I just want the Summer Trip to be here already*, and *Pitch for our Summer Trip Uniform*, with an attached screenshot of a T-shirt that says YEP, THEY'RE REAL on the chest, or a pair of overall shorts so short as to be, essentially, a denim thong.

A hot breeze blows the smell of garbage and dollar-slice pizza up off the street, ruffling my hair. I twist it into a knot at the base of my neck, then shut my computer and pull out my phone so fast you'd think I actually planned to use it.

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You can't. It's too weird, I think.

But I'm already pulling up Alex's number, still there at the top

of my favorites list, where optimism kept him saved until so much time had passed that the possibility of deleting him now seems like a tragic last step I can't bear to take.

My thumb hovers over the keyboard.

Been thinking about you, I type. I stare at it for a minute, then backspace to the beginning.

Any chance you're looking to get out of town? I write. That seems good. It's clear what I'm asking, but pretty casual, with an easy out. But the longer I study the words, the weirder I feel about being so casual. About pretending nothing happened and the two of us are still close friends who can plan a trip in such an informal forum as a postmidnight text.

I delete the message, take a deep breath, and type again: Hey.

"Hey?" I snap, annoyed with myself. Down on the sidewalk, a man jumps in surprise at the sound of my voice, then looks up at my balcony, decides I'm not talking to him, and hurries off.

There's no way I'm going to send a message to Alex Nilsen that just says *Hey*.

But then I go to highlight and delete the word, and something horrible happens.

I accidentally hit send.

The message *whooshes* out.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I hiss, shaking my phone like maybe I can make it spit the text back up before that measly word starts to digest. "No, no, n—"

Chime.

I freeze. Mouth open. Heart racing. Stomach twisting until my intestines feel like rotini noodles.

A new message, the name bolded at the top: **ALEXANDER THE GREATEST**.

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One word.

Hey.