

This Life She's Chosen

Isabelle would arrive in Seattle on the three o'clock flight. She preferred to fly in the afternoon, she'd said on the phone after making the arrangements, as she had never been suited to doing anything in the morning. "I'm too old," she announced. "I've decided to do only what I like now. No more hassles with things like early flights. And anyhow, a person wants a little breakfast before crossing the globe."

"I won't be able to pick you up then," Camille said. She always lied to her mother. "I'm sorry. You'll have to take a cab."

She put the phone down into its cradle and felt only a little guilty. But honestly, she thought, three o'clock, through the heart of traffic.

Only her mother would pick such an hour.

Camille was in the gallery when Isabelle knocked at the front door. The gallery was nothing but a small, dark room with no windows, a billiards table Michael had found at an estate sale, and a new, boxy television set they had bought to replace the older, smaller one. But when she'd looked up these old houses, Camille had found that such rooms were once called galleries, and so she'd begun calling it that

to herself, secretly. She liked the elegant sound of it and pictured images of well-dressed couples retiring to galleries for martinis before dinner or coffee after. To Michael, who talked about finding a pinball machine and a dartboard for the space, she obliged and still called it the rec room.

“Mother,” Camille said as she opened the heavy front door. She leaned toward Isabelle, waited for her kisses.

“Hello!” Her mother gushed and dropped her bags on the stoop. She raised her hands near her head and fluttered them, as if Camille were something delicious she was about to bite into. Isabelle’s gold pendant swung out away from her chest as she inclined her body and pulled Camille into the soft wrinkles of her embrace.

Camille did not put her arms around her mother, but tucked her head into Isabelle’s white hair. Isabelle smelled of the metallic, winter air outdoors, and of cigarette smoke, and of the airport and the old leather seats of the cab, entirely unfamiliar.

“Let me take those bags,” Camille said, and lifted the straps onto her shoulders, bending her knees with the weight.

Upstairs, Camille showed her mother the guest room. “You’re the first to sleep in it,” she said, and smiled. She set the luggage down on the floor and straightened, put her hands into the pockets of her gray sweater and looked to her mother.

The room had been done with Camille’s friends in mind, women she’d met in college and tried to keep in touch with over the years, women she’d worked with before she married Michael, women who might, she thought, someday come to stay. She’d

covered the double bed in a white down comforter, and thrown a red mohair afghan over the foot. It was for winter. In March she would fold it back into the cedar chest and lay out the powder-blue quilt instead. There was an armoire in the corner, as the room did not have a closet, and inside, Camille had hung padded hangers and a lace sachet of lavender she’d found at a store downtown. The window looked out into the bare branches of the backyard oak.

“This will do fine,” her mother said. “Should we eat something now? I’m half starved.”

Downstairs, the television was still on and Audrey Hepburn was sitting on her catwalk, singing “Moon River.” Lately, Camille had taken to watching the afternoon movies, a double feature that ended just before Michael arrived home.

Isabelle settled her plate on her lap and put her feet up on the coffee table. “You’re watching trash,” she said. “These romances.” She shook her head and bit into a square of orange American cheese, the only cheese Camille could find in the refrigerator, though her mother had complained that she should keep looking until she found something better, Brie at least, or Camembert.

“I like romances,” Camille said.

“Trash.”

Camille uncrossed her legs, stood up, and clicked off the television set.

“A wife always loses her mind,” her mother said, picking up her plate as she stood as well. “It’s just a question of how long it takes.”

Camille was ten when her parents' marriage finally fell apart. Later, when Camille was older, Isabelle confided that she just couldn't do it anymore, it was that simple. When Camille had pressed, wanting a reason, a flaw in the marriage or in her father to blame, Isabelle had laughed at her. "Sometimes, dear, a rose is just a rose." She paused and frowned. "Or something like that. Anyhow, I wanted to leave and we did," she said. "That's all there is."

They'd left her father with the house, the furniture, everything, and took only one suitcase of clothing apiece, nothing else, her mother's rule. Camille tried to bring along the pink spotted umbrella her father had given to her on her last birthday, the Grimm Brothers book he'd read as bedtime stories when she was small, but Isabelle found them in her bag and took them out. "These are wasting space," she said. "Bring things you'll really need." She tossed the umbrella into Camille's closet, chucked the book across the room.

They lived first in an apartment in Chicago, then one in Denver, then in D.C. On weekends, they went to the symphony and the ballet. Isabelle had private French lessons with a tutor and started pronouncing Camille's name with a deep flourish on the second syllable.

In D.C., there had been an Indian restaurant her mother liked just down the street, and on Fridays after school, Camille arrived home to the scent of the curry. Isabelle sat on the floor in her nightgown, the thrift store coffee table she'd bought after the move pushed back and a blanket spread out across the carpet. "Good, yes?" Isabelle always said as they ate. She refused

to bring out the forks, and scooped with her fingers at the yellow lump of curry potatoes on her plate. "You couldn't get aloo dum like this in Detroit." She smiled, poked another potato into her mouth.

Camille's father still lived in Detroit. He'd remarried—a mousy, pale-haired woman who had two mousy, pale-haired children of her own. Camille could have gone to stay with them in the summers but never did. Each time she considered the three months away, she imagined her mother eating dinner alone on the front room floor and decided she couldn't go. "I don't want to meet his new family," she told her mother every spring when the invitation came, and Isabelle would pull Camille onto her lap, hold her as if Camille were the one who needed to be looked after.

"That's fine," Isabelle would say, kissing Camille's forehead. "That's just fine, chérie. But you have to be the one to call him. You must be responsible for your decisions."

When she called, her father said only, "I see." And then, "Of course." He sounded far away, unfamiliar. Camille could see him in their old house, his white shirt rolled to the elbows, the undershirt her mother had always complained about just showing at his neck.

Once she'd seen him dance with her mother, around the furniture in the front room, Isabelle in her bare feet at first, coaxing him. He laughed as he stood up. He took Isabelle in his arms and glided her around the room. "Look at your pretty mother," he said to Camille over the music. "Isn't she just too much? She's too much for us."

Into the phone, Camille said, “Maybe next year, though, Dad. Or for the holidays.”

Isabelle, who sat listening at the kitchen table, waved her hand to show the phone bill was running up, mouthed the word *good-bye* until Camille said it and hung up the phone.

“Do you miss your father?” Isabelle had asked once, long after they’d left him.

“Yes,” Camille nodded. “Every day.”

“Oh, darling.” Isabelle reached out and touched Camille’s hand then, squeezed it. “Stop wasting your childhood.”

When Michael arrived home, Isabelle was in the kitchen, a tea towel tied around her waist with a length of packaging twine, and a pot of soup boiling on the stove in front of her. “My daughter can’t cook,” she said as an introduction. “She doesn’t even have an apron.”

Michael, his arms still full of his coat and briefcase, turned and looked to Camille where she sat at the kitchen table, as if unsure about whether he should defend her or make fast friends with her mother. Camille shrugged.

“I would apologize to you for not raising her better if you were anyone but her husband,” Isabelle said, and laughed at her own joke. She had pulled her white hair back into a loose knot to cook, and under the warm lights of their kitchen, in the glow from the hanging rack of silver and copper-bottomed pans near the stove, she looked jovial, festive, benign.

“She cooks,” Michael began, then paused. Camille waited to see how he would finish his sentence. *Beautifully*, she thought

for him. *Deliciously. Like a pro.* But he left it at that, stooped to kiss Camille’s forehead, and disappeared upstairs to change his clothes.

Later, in bed and in the blue darkness of their room, Camille rolled over, searching for his body beneath the weight of sheets and blankets. “She won’t be here forever,” she said. “Two weeks and then she’ll go.” She pressed her face into the bend at the back of his neck.

“I don’t mind her.” He was tired, his voice halfway into sleep already.

Camille listened to his breath, to the wind rattling the old casement windows and the ticks of rain against their purpled, wavy glass.

“I like her,” he said. He sighed and shifted. “You’ll tell her to stop calling me Mee-shell, though?” His hand found her thigh, and he squeezed it, rolled away from her to sleep.

Camille lay looking up at the ceiling, her arms folded on top of her chest. She counted back over the dinners she’d made Michael in the last week: pot roast and potatoes; meat loaf and green salad; a turkey-carrot potpie. All sturdy, solid foods, she thought, none necessarily requiring an apron. She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and turned onto her side, closed her eyes, and waited for sleep.

Once Camille left for college, her mother left the country. “We’re French,” she had told Camille over the phone. “Or our family is. It’s just taken me this long to come home.”

Camille did not argue. She didn't remind her mother that she'd been born in Detroit. That the family name had been pronounced *Du-boys* for several generations.

Isabelle began peppering her letters with French words and phrases Camille couldn't always translate but generally understood. *Mon beau rêve is going well*, she wrote. She began addressing them to *Ma Petite Ancre*, nothing but a little joke, she said, but Camille didn't find it funny. Once Camille married Michael, the joke changed, and above her new street address her mother wrote *La Petite Femme* in loopy, feminine cursive.

Isabelle had not come to their wedding, though Camille had folded a small note into one of the blue invitations, asking her directly to attend.

Mother, she wrote. I would like to see your face on my wedding day. Please come. ~ Camille

Fille, her mother responded. Here you are. I wish you luck, at best. ~ Isabelle

Inside the envelope, Camille found a smiling Polaroid image of her mother's face.

Then Isabelle moved to Marseilles and took a job as cook at a convent. "The nuns don't mind me," she assured Camille over the phone.

Camille winced whenever she thought about her mother in a convent. It brought to her mind scenes from *Babette's Feast*, an embarrassing image of her mother stirring up passions, so to speak, and believing in a silly, Hollywood way that her food would move the nuns to lust or grief or joy. She wondered if her mother even

saw the romantic façade she'd put up as her life.

"It doesn't matter that I'm not Catholic," Isabelle had said, "as long as I'm quiet, and I keep cooking for them."

Camille could not imagine her mother ever being quiet.

When Camille made her way downstairs in the morning, she found her mother already awake and dressed and sitting at the kitchen table with the newspaper spread in front of her. Sarah Vaughan was on the speakers in the other room, and there was a French press Camille had never seen before on the counter, full of coffee.

"I brought my own press," her mother said. She looked up at Camille from the news, smiled. She had stopped wearing any makeup years before, and Camille had remembered her as pale, her skin waxy and tight, as if she'd wanted it all—France and the rest of it—just a little too much. But her face had softened, the skin slacked a bit around her eyes and at her jaw line, and the color was high in her cheeks again. Maybe it was age, Camille thought. Or the good influence of nuns. She smiled to herself, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down at the table across from her mother.

Isabelle folded the paper and laid her hands neatly on top of it. She beamed. "You like your coffee? You should have it with milk, easier on the stomach, less American. You've all phased out the taste bud in this country." She stood up, went to the refrigerator, and pulled out a tray of sliced fruit—red gala apples, bright wedges of orange. And from the oven, a loaf of sweet bread, warm and wrapped in towels.

"You baked?" Camille asked. "I didn't smell it."

"You've gotten into the habit of sleeping in. Your husband left hours ago, months." Isabelle cut thick servings of the bread and laid them on two plates that she carried to the table.

"Listen," she said. "I was thinking about all this," she waved her hand at the house around her, a big sweep, "about you and Michael, and I thought the least you deserve is a party." Isabelle pursed her lips and decided on three apple slices, nudged them onto her plate with her finger. "I would like to have a party, here," she went on. "I'll cook." She crossed her arms over her wide chest, raised her eyebrows, and smiled. "Oui?" Isabelle nodded as if it had been decided. "Oui." She picked up her fork, plunged its tines into an apple.

It seemed, a few days later as they arrived at the grocery store, that the party had been in Isabelle's mind all along. She pulled a list from the bulge of her purse as Camille wheeled a cart through the bins of produce. Camille had been to this store only once, with Michael, to buy a bottle of wine on their way to an office party his manager at the bank had held.

"I need endive," her mother announced, "and Jerusalem artichokes, shallots and garlic and herbes de Provence, if you think we can find that in this country." She snorted slightly, smoothed her list between her thick fingers.

When she was young, none of the other girls from school had ever wanted to eat at Camille's. They would come for a slumber party, because her mother would give them the front room to sleep in, would dance with them to her jazz albums, and let them

stand on the back stoop in nothing but their babydolls, smoking her skinny cigarettes. But they always went out for pizza before coming over or shakes at the drive-in downtown. Isabelle might serve anything, they said, and wrinkled their noses. She might serve melon soup. She might serve chicken liver pâté.

Camille had offered no defense for her mother. Everything they said was true, and she could forgive them for not wanting to come. *My mother*, she'd say, and roll her eyes. She always felt sick saying it, though, wrenched in her middle. And when she got home to Isabelle, she would eat a little more of the food her friends couldn't stand, to make up for their absence, and for what she'd said.

"Jerusalem artichokes," her mother was going on now, "were sent to France by Champlain after he tasted one in Canada." She smiled at Camille, tossed two heads of red-leaf lettuce into their cart. "You didn't know that, did you? It's true, though. I read it somewhere."

Standing beside her mother, Camille was aware of herself in a way that she had not been in a long time. She felt her mother in the way she walked, in the way she moved her arms and held her shoulders tightly back, her head erect. She wondered if strangers passing them could see the resemblance. If they looked at her mother's high forehead and then at hers, at her mother's height, her square, masculine shoulders and broad bottom, and saw how Camille's body was, though twenty-five years younger and somewhat slimmer, the same.

Her mother had thrown a burgundy fringed silk wrap around her shoulders before leaving the house, and she shifted it now as she walked beside Camille. It hung down below the small of her

back, and its fabric moved as she moved, billowed out at her elbows and fell into a neat drape around her frame when she stopped to bend over the open containers of kalamata and cerignola olives. Her pearl-drop earrings swung at her earlobes, and her hair was the fine, flat white of bone china under the poor fluorescent lighting in the store. “Yum,” her mother cooed, holding out a purpled olive. “Yum-yum, dear. Taste this.” Isabelle licked her fingers, made little, sucking smacks with her lips.

“No, thank you,” Camille said, and pushed the cart away from Isabelle.

At home, settled on the couch, Camille folded herself into an afghan and watched Gene Kelly and Danny Kaye dance across the television screen. This week was musicals. Later today, *Singin' in the Rain*, and tomorrow afternoon, *South Pacific*. Maybe she would make her mother sit down with her, watch silently as the little white children learned to sing in patois.

She could hear her mother upstairs, riffling through cookbooks in the kitchen, sorting through the few recipes Camille had decided to clip from women's magazines and save. She could hear her mother's shuffled footsteps on the hardwood floor, the clanging of pots and pans, and the ceramic rattle of plates being taken from and then re-stacked in the cupboard.

“Let me give you this,” her mother had said as they'd left the grocery store. “Let me give you one night of your life when you can just be a guest in your home.”

“Mother,” Camille drew in a narrow, exasperated breath. “I love my husband.”

“Of course you do,” Isabelle sighed. “But none of this has to do with him.” She took the cart from Camille and moved ahead between the racks of bread and rolls, the silk of her wrap dancing freely around her waist as she went.

When she met him, Michael seemed familiar to Camille in a way she could not explain. He was slight and fair, blue eyed. He did not ever raise his voice. He smelled of the wool sweaters he wore over his dress shirts to combat the wet, Seattle cold, and of the medicinal lozenges he kept in his bedside drawer, and of milky Ivory soap.

None of these traits were what she had first recognized in him, though. No, it was something else, something she could not name, and Camille found herself looking for it all the time. Waiting for it to present itself to her, the way a road sign, though stationary and always standing in the blurry periphery of one's vision, suddenly jumps out into the roadway to yell *Stop*.

The afternoon of the party, Isabelle banished Camille to her bedroom. “I need room,” Isabelle said. Her face flamed from the heat of the kitchen, where the oven had been going all morning, and from her excitement.

In her bedroom upstairs, Camille lay back on the bed and opened up a magazine. She flipped to a dog-eared page, with glossy images of movie actresses, statuesque and glimmering in sequined gowns and thin-strapped sandals. They seemed to her Venuses, sprung from nothing, suddenly, to be photographed and admired. She could not imagine the mother of a single one of them,

the ancient, less beautiful versions of themselves, the hags and the widows and the dying. The entirely unglamorous generation that had birthed these girls. She couldn't see it, and for a moment, she felt the pinch of jealousy for them. They were not daughters. *And they are definitely not wives*, her mother would say.

She closed the magazine, tucked it beneath the bed, and got up to dress for the party.

As she descended the staircase, Camille caught the scents of garlic and cayenne. Michael was at the stereo, adjusting the sound on the same Sarah Vaughan album as the other morning, though this time Sarah's voice seemed deeper, and glinted, as if the sound had been edged in tinsel wrapping and was catching light.

"Lovely," he said when he saw her.

Camille had put on a suit: an ivory laced camisole beneath a jacket and long, creased pants. She'd washed her hair and clipped it back at the nape of her neck with a pearled clasp. "I'd hoped the weather would clear," she said. From where she stood at the midpoint of the stairway, she could see through the fanlight above the front door. The sky was just beginning to darken, and the afternoon clouds had not lifted.

She moved down the stairs and opened the door and stepped outside. The points of her heels dug into the lines of mud between the stones of the walk, and she gently tugged to free them. Michael turned on the outdoor lights, and they beamed small circles onto the wet grass of the lawn, lit the path toward the house just enough in the dusky dark for Camille to see a few steps ahead of herself. She

went to the mailbox and turned back to look at the house. It was angular and imposing, large for just the two of them. *Embarrassingly large*, her mother had said, but still not enough. Isabelle had said it was pretentious, with its stone cornices above each of the lower-story windows and the front door, its mahogany moldings inside, and the wisteria-covered pergola out back.

Who are you to talk about pretensions? Camille had wanted to yell. She liked the house. She liked the way it looked like the kind of place she would want to live in, neat and polished and traditional. She liked the brass doorknocker, the gleaming planks of the wood floors, and the boxy row of hedges that fenced the front yard from the sidewalk and the street. Inside, the house was uncluttered. Michael's white shirts were pressed and hung in his closet. Her cuffed trousers had been folded on their seams and placed into the dresser drawers. The mat in the guest bathroom was clean, and the dust had been swept from beneath the bookshelves in the front room. She liked the solid dove brown of the house's exterior, and the way it sat square on its plot of property, last on the street, so that each time she turned the corner and saw it, the house was there, expected, a certain stop to the road.

She tried to look up at the house now as the guests would in a few moments, its dark hulk against the gray sky, the rain-logged and dripping leaves that still remained on the plum tree near the front door.

It had been Michael's house before he met her. "I know you'll love it," he said when they began dating.

And she always had.

Isabelle emerged from the kitchen with the sound of the first guests arriving. She was wearing a red sheer blouse over a red camisole and a string of shining, colored-glass beads. She'd pinned her hair up, letting long wisps of it fall down at her neck and her temples, where they were already curling with her sweat and the heat of the kitchen. She stood at Michael and Camille's side, shaking hands and being introduced.

"Isabelle," Camille said, "this is Darius and Imogen Smitt. Darius works with Michael at the bank." She smiled, stepped back to let the Smitts shake her mother's hand.

Behind them, Camille introduced the other guests as they appeared at the front door. "Mark and Bill are on Michael's team at the bank," she heard herself say. "Susan is his assistant. Christine is a manager in another department." Camille touched her palm to her mother's back, watched Isabelle take each guest's hand into her own two and pump it, grinning, glossy and pink-faced with the evening.

There were hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table, canapés and crackers, and a salmon mousse for dipping. Michael moved between the kitchen and the front room, stopping at each circle of conversation to pass out glasses of scotch and wine. Camille had met all of these people at Michael's office parties—she had been to their homes—but their faces all looked too alike somehow now, wide and scrubbed and blank, but smiling. They had all come in suits, directly from work, the women in suits too, similar to her own. Blue or black or beige trousers and matching jackets. Seed pearls around every neck.

Camille made her way between them, catching snipped fragments of bank conversation, end-of-the-workday talk. Whenever she joined a group, however, the topic shifted to their families or the movie they'd seen last Saturday, and eventually she was left alone while people went to find the powder room or searched out Michael for another drink.

Isabelle caught her at one point and leaned in close, whispered, "Are any of these people *your* friends?"

Camille raised a finger to her ear, tapped it as if the room had become too loud to hear the question. She excused herself then, and slipped away into the kitchen.

On the tabletop her mother had spread all of the dishes she'd prepared. A pot of mussel stew, baked salmon with Pernod, a large wooden bowl of salad. Camille bent and breathed in the smell of anise, of onions and butter. There were trays of cheeses and crusted bread rounds. A platter of red and green grapes, and another on which her mother had drizzled chocolate and raspberry sauces around a smooth, chocolate gâteau. Isabelle had placed a stack of glass dishes on the table, had polished and lined up the rows of silver spoons and forks and knives, the folded white napkins. There were extra wineglasses and several opened and unopened bottles of wine and scotch and whiskey, and on the counter, coffee cups and saucers waiting for later in the evening.

These were her dishes, things she had been given by Michael's friends and parents, by people she had known, when she and Michael had married. There were the silver serving spoon and fork with the decorative handles; her silver candlestick holders on the

table, and in them, a flickering set of ivory tapers she remembered buying herself, last Christmas. There was the wreath of dried eucalyptus and cranberries on the wall above the stove; the linen tablecloth; the braided red rug. Camille felt weighted by these things as she looked at them, by the heavy, orange light put off by the candles in the dark kitchen. Beyond the door she could hear the low plodding of the music, the thudding of dress shoes and the horse-hoof staccato of high heels as people began dancing.

Camille pushed herself toward the doorway and stood a moment there, her hand flat on the door, then shoved out into the light of the front room. Her mother had set votives along the top of the mantel, and their flames jumped and reflected in quick, bright flashes in the wide mirror above it. The song had changed, and this one was upbeat, Sarah's voice a flutter in her throat, the next note unpredictable. In the middle of the floor, couples danced. The women had abandoned their jackets to the couch, and the men had loosed their ties, so that the low knots swung as they twirled their wives.

Mark Thorgerson had Isabelle in his arms in the center of the room, and she was a swirl of red where he spun her. She had shaken out her hairpins, or they had simply fallen, and her hair hung down to the middle of her back. She looked light, Camille thought, the way Gene Kelly or Vera-Ellen seemed light when they danced, as if joy had somehow lifted their feet from the ground.

Camille felt Michael's hand at her waist and turned, rested her head on his shoulder. She felt too heavy to go on standing. She put her arm around him, held to his belt with her fingers.

"Your mother's the one who started the dancing," he said. He looked between her and her mother, paused for a moment, then chuckled. "She's too much," he said, "dancing with Mark." Michael rubbed his palm against the small of her back and leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

Camille slipped her arm from his embrace and crossed the room to sit on the couch beside the heap of crumpled jackets, the scarves and wrinkled neckties that had been dropped there. She could see her mother from where she sat, her mother's flushed face, and the deep lines around her mouth as Isabelle laughed and said something to her new dance partner.

In the blurry periphery of her vision, she could see Michael as well, still standing where she'd left him, his hands shoved down into his pockets, his back straight and pressed against the frame of the door.

Camille settled back against the couch and waited for her heart, which had quickened, to slow again.

She watched her mother dance.