

ravenous

a novel



sara cooper



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For—but not about!!!—John and Theo, my absolute loves.

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One

“bsessed.”

I’m ripping open the box. My synapses are firing. My skin is flushed. I’ve never been smarter, better, prettier. My pupils are the size of Guerlain Météorites.

“Omigosh,” I’m gushing, “thank you so much.” I’m digging into whothefuckknowswhat, clawing, pulling out handfuls of my new acquisitions, my treasures, my eyes moist, my chin wet with tears or lip oil or saliva, who knows, who cares, it’s mine, all of it, every last lotion and lash strip handpicked for me, for my pleasure, my enjoyment, my enhancement, my augmentation and transformation and blessing and beautification, and I’m still talking, smiling, giggling, squealing. “This is such a vibe! Literally, holy grail. I love”—whateverthefuck—“clean girl hydropowder matteglosse setting cream!” More boxes, more offerings. My chest aches. My hands shake. “Slay. Bet. Chef’s kiss. Fire. Honestly? Bury me with it. I mean, this is next level, game-changer, must-have, life-saver. It’s giving old-money quiet-luxury corporate-baddie tomatogirl summer patchouli Wes Anderson goddess trashbag indigo baby corecore divinity oolong tamtam crwth hallux interrobang goodness!!”

My body is filled with such radiant warmth, such unadulterated joy, such a sharply electric thrill for living that I almost can’t stand it. I am the face of God. I am the center of the universe.

“Yes,” I say. “Obsessed.”

I slash the taped top of the next box with shaking hands. The dizzying high of the hunt so overtakes me that I can barely stop myself from sinking my teeth into it. I hear my voice from outside my body, transported by the carton's contents into an ever-elevating state that runs screaming out of my control as I unsheathe each holy artifact, my hands touching each object with rapacious reverence, each epithet tumbling sanctified from my lips, primal and sacred and profound: "Mango sole polish!" "Latte glass contour!" "Stainless steel easy-grip dermaplaning tools!" "Mole pens! *Obsessed!*"

With each product, my pulse increases. My hunger heightens. My high intensifies to near nirvanic bliss, a state of being so enlightened, so holistic, so *aesthetic* that it cannot be denied or defined. I am whole. My plumped lips, preternaturally moist, are forming high-pitched diphthongs of an unknowable tongue, a dialect of that ancient timeless language: Money Talks. It's the new, the beautiful, everything I'm starving for, sex, love, attention, the unattainable ideal, God, fill me up with that capital speech, that evergreen currency. Like me it will *never* get old. I am shredding boxes, tasting the beating sweetbreads of free goods, the hot tickly breath of viral adoration on my neck, moaning my pleasure, my deep primordial want, all my needs in one perfect package that I tear apart, destroy, and disembowel, their purpose to be shown, paraded, coveted, and discarded.

I sway, depleted.

The carnage of my rampage lies before me, a cardboard wasteland of dilapidated dreams, an asteroid-sized crater of misery where my manic delight once lived. There is nothing left. The dread sets in. Soon I will create a post. Soon I will edit myself into oblivion, my despair filtered, edited beyond all recognition until it is reincarnated, phoenix-like, rising from the static as easy satisfaction. But for now, I sit, exhausted, devoid of intent, my room a graveyard of joy, my bed a million deaths, my mirror an endless hell, and, at the center, staring back at me, an empty box.

Are you dreaming?

What do you think about in there? Do you, wholly new, wait to enter the world, perfect and unstained, a painless blank expanse with no beginning and no end? Or do you know you'll come crashing out of me in a torrent of sticky blood and meconium, an amniotic sleep terror, screaming into the world, shriveled and ugly and afraid? I walk into your nursery and pat the part of my stomach I imagine houses your head. Are you dreaming, Baby? Am I? Look at this beautiful house we're moving into. Do you believe it? This is our perfect life. Our perfect space. A brand-new home. A brand-new beginning.

A wave of nausea knocks me off my feet.

"You okay in there?"

His voice pierces the nightmare I've already forgotten. He's one part concern, one part irritation. He's trying to work.

"I'm fine." I say, pulling myself up off the floor. Did I pass out? I should eat something.

I do the math. No, I'll save my calories for dinner. Tonight's a special night. Every night is.

Baby, we're so grateful to Daddy. He's given us this life.

I sink into the Greenguard Gold-certified, twice-imported velvet infant chaise and put my ankles up. Willing them to drain, I troll my DMs for offers. Porn...porn...

Hi Breigh! We love your content & think you'd be a Fabulous fit for the roll of Brand Ambassador! Want to collab?

"Yes," I type. "Obsessed."

It doesn't matter what the product is. My policy is YES. My world is YES. I am positive, forward-thinking, ready to synergize, integrate, and align.

Who says I'm not using my degree?

Tiffany Smith, that's who. Fuck that bitch. No one made her buy all those leggings.

My stomach growls, angry and mean. Is that you? I know you're hungry, Baby, but we've got to think of my figure. Mama needs a new pair of shoes.

My breath quickens. I check my DMs. A wave of disappointment. No offers for shoes.

That's all right. There's always tomorrow.

In the meantime, there are supplements. I brighten, remembering the unopened packages in the living room. We make our way down the Stonell marble staircase, you and me, chugging electrolyte-laden water from our customized Stanley, and set up the Neewer ring light. I flip my phone into selfie mode and adjust it on the tripod to get my best angles. I hit record.

"Hey, it's Brugh," I say, my voice catching in disgust as I see my puffy face on the screen.

That's not me. Is it?

Am I dreaming?

"Hey, it's Breigh," I say again. I'll cut the first take. "Thank you so much to my brand partners for sending me this amazing haul."

My palms sweating, my eyes cast down, I rip the perforated tab on the envelope and pull out three bottles of tiny, crystalline pills.

"Omigosh, this is perfect," I say. "Bougie maternity vitamins. I love this for me. Because, for real?! This pregnancy has been kicking my ass." I swallow one capsule from each container.

"Obsessed," I say.

"What are you taking?"

I smile into the camera. "Hubba hubba, Hubs," I say as he kisses my bare shoulder. My arm is huge. I'm suddenly ashamed.

"What are those?" he asks.

"Supplements," I say.

He's reading the label. "Did you read this?"

"It's natural," I say.

"Vitamin E," he says. "Black Cohosh. Vitamin A."

"Yes," I say. "Obsessed."

"Okay," he says. "What's for dinner?"

I open my mouth.

"Hold that thought," he says. "Where's my phone?"

I pause the livestream. "Have you checked your desk?" I ask, my voice sweet, soft, and all-knowing. Daddy senses my domestic omniscience. He cocks his head. He hasn't checked his desk. Of course he hasn't, and of course it's there. I am servant and savior. I am goddess and maid. Daddy holds up a finger and exits. I smile and text him my Nordstrom wish list.

Have a gift, get a gift.

I'm a revolutionary, Baby. I'm a pioneer of the new world.

I look around the kitchen and marvel at what my mind and body can do. Here I am, surrounded by my Smeg Retro-style Pink Glossy refrigerator and matching milk frother and citrus juicer. My Gaggenau 400-series fully automatic coffee machine is built sleekly into the wall. My La Cornue Cloud Gray Château Suprême with Polished Nickel Trim is a goddamn work of art.

I own these things.

That's power. Not the buying. The owning.

I'm live again. "Saffron," I say into the camera. "Anti-inflammatory. Risotto? Obsessed."

It's absolutely disgusting but it films beautifully. Yellow, Baby. The color of joy.

I make a mental note to paint your room yellow. Sunshine-themed.

Daddy buys the appliances and I curate the meals. He pays and I design. He manages the money and I build the world. I read the reviews, pick the countertops, charge his card. I make

it comfortable. I make it safe. It's old-fashioned to have a fuck-off fund. It's repellantly traditional to have three months of rent squirreled away in the bank. I trust my husband.

And I know how to sell my jewelry.

That's the new feminism, Baby. Selling. Buying. Opting out of opting out. Let him earn the dollars. Does he hold the power? I'm making *life*.

That's you, kid. I'm building you a Catio in my gilded cage. Don't knock it. It's yellow here. The very act of living is transactional. Breathe in, breathe out. Eat, shit. Come on in, the water's yellow. Which is worse, saffron risotto or student loans?

"Mmm!" I say. "Yum!"

I'm spooning the risotto into my mouth, swallowing huge chunks so I don't have to taste it. That's the best way to keep it down.

I flick out of selfie mode and show the table. It's decorated seasonally with Irish linens, garlands of summer wildflowers and oxalis, quill-adorned napkin rings, and, most importantly, handcrafted centerpieces from Etsy made from signed vintage copies of *Ulysses*, hollowed out and glazed. It's the perfect place setting for Bloomsday.

What's that? you ask.

It's a celebration of the life of James Joyce, Baby. It marks the date *Ulysses* takes place. Usually I cosplay Molly, but my petticoat didn't fit over you.

I suppose this year I'm Mina.

"Beautiful," Daddy says, sitting at the table and waiting to be served.

He is holding his phone. I smile.

Daddy doesn't care about Bloomsday, but he likes that I do. He appreciates my appreciation.

I sit across from him as he eats. He reaches up and adjusts my tripod.

"That's a better shot," he says.

“Okay,” I say, even though it’s not.

“How was your day?”

One of us says it. It doesn’t matter who. We’re cosplaying tradition. It’s postmodern in its own way.

He’s talking now. I’m staring at the disgusting risotto as he masticates, the saffron staining the edges of his lipless mouth.

“What?”

Was that him or me?

“What?” I repeat.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I’m nauseous,” I lie, and it becomes the truth.

“What did you do today?”

“I created content,” I say. It’s the truth, but it sounds like a lie.

“That’s great,” he says, reading *The Wall Street Journal* on his watch, specks of sweaty yellowed parmesan sprinkling his chin.

There’s a white-hot rage inside me that I shove down with layers of Tums. It’s nothing. Pregnancy hormones. He’s shoveling my risotto, my time, my labor, into his mouth, not tasting it, his body digesting it without a second thought, his body a vessel of unfathomable emptiness that I feed and fuck and serve.

“Seconds?” I ask.

“Dessert?” he responds.

I readjust the camera and bring out the seedcake. “No thanks,” he says. “I’m full.”

After dinner, Daddy retires to whereverthefuck and I stop recording. I load the dishes into my customized premium Thermador and take a moment to practice gratitude. What a beautiful life I live. What a blessed home.

You will guide me into this next chapter, Baby. You are the new meaning, the new project into which I will pour all my worth and adoration, and I will give you everything and hold back nothing. We will have no secrets. There will be no walls. You will be everything.

You will be my world.

I look around at all the beautiful things Daddy has bought me, the deep blue Le Creuset cast iron signature dutch oven, the matching antique gold-plated French carafes of thirty-year barrel-aged balsamic vinegar and extra extra extra virgin olive oil, the rose-silver electric salt and pepper mills, the triple-wall glassware collection, the Vitamix Ascent X4 next to the Vitamix immersion blender next to the Vitamix 5200, the holy trinity of blenders, the cocktail smoking box we've never used, and seven sets of monogrammed, Italian-washed linen napkins in various shades of eggshell, sage green, mustard, and blush. He bought all of this for me. I am spoiled rotten.

I bend over the toilet and throw up all I had in my stomach. I brush my teeth and the toothpaste makes me gag.

I lie down next to your sleeping father and I feel so sorry for myself, so completely full of doubt and regret, that I wake him up and beg him to make love to me.

"I'm sleeping," he mumbles, turning over.

I plug my phone to charge and try to read, but my head is pounding. My stomach is churning. My memory foam pregnancy pillow farts into eternity as I ease off the bed and waddle into my refuge, my closet, a walk-in with wall-to-wall mirrors modeled after a Louis Vuitton showroom, my own personal Versailles, a funhouse full of unrecognizable reflections and gorgeous clothing, absolutely none of which fits.

Stripping down, I turn to the full-size mirror and look at my body. Yup. There it is: My swollen stomach, which I thought would be cute, my giant thighs, my fat feet.

If the baby is the size of a pomegranate, what the hell is the rest?

It's not you, it's me. It's not me, it's *this* person, this elephant in the mirror, this unknowable, massive creature whose red piggy moon-face is vacant, brittle, and old.

ravenous

I sit on my Anthropologie hassock, my bare ass oozing over the edge, and grab my iPad. It's hot and expensive and I stifle a sob as I swipe open the Sephora app.

This is treat culture, Baby. When you're down, you buy. When you're up, you pay.

I buy sensual cream lipstick. I buy photo finish rouge. I buy moisturizer, toner, serum. Exfoliants. Emollients. Things to make me soft, smooth, wrinkle-free. Easy, young, beautiful. Unused. Unconsumed.

I still feel terrible, so I start ripping through nail polishes, cleansers, tinted sunscreens, peels, essences. I'm less careful about ingredients now. I'm looking at TAT, checking for quick shipping, trolling for next-day delivery, come find me, strip me away, sand my edges and make me new. I am hitting pay now and my shipping information autofills and I feel a cool blast of excitement, *something*, God. I open Net-a-Porter and fill my cavernous bag with shoes, belts, hats, costumes I will never wear, garments I will stuff in the back of my closet with the tags still on or return unopened before Daddy can see the packages, but for now I am purchasing and clicking, ready to receive, my eyes full of tears, my mouth locked in a permanent smile, all of my hopes and dreams in an imaginary shopping cart, in a basket that doesn't exist, in an undefined place of bleak and eternal nothingness out of which emerges sweet consecrated dopamine, holy holy holy, grant us peace, O Neurotransmitter, hallowed be thy name, release, relief, salvation, and, finally, finally, sleep.