



JILLIAN LAUREN

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SOME GIRLS

My Life in a Harem

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Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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chapter 1

The day I left for Brunei I took the subway uptown to Beth Israel, schlepping behind me a green flowered suitcase. The last time I had used the suitcase was when I left my room in NYU's Hayden Hall for good, dragged all my crap out of the elevator and onto the sidewalk, and cabbied it down to the Lower East Side, where a friend of a friend had a room for rent. The time before that, my mother had helped me unpack from it my college-y fall clothes, labeled jammies, and ziplock bags full of homemade chocolate-chip cookies. Each time I un-

zipped that suitcase it contained a whole different set of carefully folded plans. Each time I packed it back up I was on the run again.

I heaved the suitcase up three steps, rested, then heaved again until the rectangle of light at the top of the staircase opened out onto the bright buzz of Fourteenth Street. Underneath my winter overcoat the back of my shirt was damp with sweat. I hadn't thought I'd packed so much. I'd stood in front of my closet for hours wishing the perfect dress would magically materialize in a flurry of sparkles, would soar through the door, held aloft by a host of bluebirds. I was going to a royal ball, goddammit. I was traveling to meet a prince. Was my fairy godmother really going to leave me with such a lousy selection of clothes to choose from? Apparently she was.

In the end, I'd settled for packing two tailored skirt suits, three fifties prom dresses, an armful of vintage underwear-cum-outerwear, two hippie sundresses, a pair of leather hot pants, and some glittery leg warmers. All those not-quite-right clothes weighed too much. Or maybe it was the anvil of guilt I was carrying around for the act of desertion I was about to commit by abandoning my sick father in favor of an adventure in a foreign country. Either way, I'd yet to learn how to pack light. I pointed myself toward the hospital, merged into the stream of pedestrian traffic, and allowed the collective sense of purpose to pull me along.

My father was being operated on for a paraesophageal hiatal hernia, a condition in which part of the stomach squeezes through an opening in the diaphragm called

the hiatus, landing it next to the esophagus. The danger is that the stomach can be strangled, cut off from its blood supply. Hiatal hernias occur most often in overweight people and people with extreme stress levels, both of which apply in my father's case. In 1991, the surgery for a hiatal hernia was dangerous and invasive, requiring a major incision that would travel from his sternum around to his back. I had originally told my mother I would be there to help out in any way that I could, but when the Brunei job came around, I changed my mind.

This compulsion of mine to be forever on the move may have been a genetic inevitability. My birth mother named me Mariah, after the song "They Call the Wind Mariah," from the Broadway musical *Paint Your Wagon*. Maybe she knew I'd soon sail away from her in the airborne cradle of a 747. The name didn't stick. My adoptive mother renamed me Jill Lauren after nothing at all; she just liked it. An amateur thespian herself, she thought Lauren could serve as a stage name if I ever needed one, and so it has.

I may have been named for the wind, but I am a triple fire sign, a child of heat and sun. I was born mid-August 1973 in Highland Park, Illinois. *Roe v. Wade* was decided on January 22, 1973, which would have placed my biological mother at nearly three months pregnant, still swaddled under the layers of down that insulated her from the Chicago winter. I don't know if she considered an abortion as her slim dancer's body morphed into something cumbersome and out of control, as her flighty boyfriend took their car and headed east one day and

never came home again, as the wind off the water turned the slushy streets to sheets of ice and bit at any inch of exposed skin, made more raw and vulnerable with the pregnancy.

Seven hundred miles away, in the not-so-posh apartments across from Saint Barnabas Hospital in West Orange, New Jersey, a young stockbroker and his wife despaired of their childless state. It was a time rife with shady adoptions, sealed files, and what my father has referred to as “gray-market” transactions. My parents contacted a lawyer who knew of someone who knew of someone who knew of a pregnant girl in Chicago looking to give her baby up for adoption. That lawyer was later disbarred and imprisoned for his role in many such adoptions because you’re not supposed to arrange for babies to be bought and sold.

Gray-market babies didn’t come cheap. My parents were not yet wealthy, but they were desperate for a family. They ate inexpensive food and wore old shoes and waited. They waited as the neighbors filled their plastic kiddie pools. They waited while my mother graciously attended baby shower after baby shower, tossing the little candy-filled baby-bottle favors into the trash on her way home. My parents waited and avoided the subject, talking instead about the stock market, tennis, the neighbors, until the lawyer finally called them and told them to get on a plane because their daughter had been born. My mother was a social worker at the time and she swears that she was at home to hear the phone because she had called in sick that day with an unexplained stomachache, psychic labor pains.

We lived together in that crowded one-bedroom for two years, until my father's stockbroking business picked up and my parents were able to buy a house in a neighboring town with a desirable zip code and good public schools. I grew up in the kind of town in which orthodonture was mandatory and getting a nose job as a gift for your sweet sixteen was highly recommended.

Those very early years were a love affair of sorts between my father and me. My father was a man who was most pleased by good looks and accomplishments, so I worked at being precociously bright, athletic, musical—anything to impress him. And whenever I wasn't, I cheated or I faked it. My father was wild about his little sidekick and to me, he was the king of the world. I waited each day at the top of the steps to hear the rumble of the garage door so I could run to greet him when he emerged, so important in his shiny shoes and Brooks Brothers suits.

My parents told me only one thing about my birth mother. They told me that she was a ballerina. In my fantasy, my birth mother was a life-size version of the tiny dancer twirling inside my satin-lined music box. My plastic ballerina had the smallest brushstroke of red hair and limbs the width of toothpicks. She never lost her balance; she never had to let her arms down. I imagined my birth mother posed in a perpetual arabesque, swathed in white tulle, with a tiara of sparkling snowflakes in her hair.

I would wind the key tightly and the opening notes of *Swan Lake* would chime double time at first, then more slowly, until they would plink to a stop. But somewhere in between, the little plastic figurine would turn at just the

right speed. That was when I would raise my arms in the air and twirl along with her. Somewhere between too fast and too slow, we would be in perfect sync.

In my memory of that time, my adoptive mother is a blur with long red fingernails. She is the hand applying zinc oxide to my nose, the bearer of pretzels and Twinkies, Sisyphus in the kitchen. This may be the fate of mothers in memory—to be relegated to the ordinary and therefore condemned to invisibility. I think of this now as I watch my friends chase down their kids poolside wielding bottles of chemical-free sunblock.

I'm sure it's not entirely the truth, but the way I remember it, it was my father who responded to the screams of my night terrors, who towed the sweat off me and scratched my head until I fell back asleep. It was my father who avidly coached my soccer and softball teams. It was my father who took me to see *Swan Lake* at Lincoln Center and showed me a world in which girls floated along as bright as snowflakes.

I watched the ballerinas glow blue-white in the spotlights and ached to be where they were. I watched the ballerinas and imagined that I understood why my birth mother had given me up for adoption. You had to lose something to be that light. It was reason enough to give your baby away—you could always be that luminous, that free.

The crowd spat me out at the entrance of Beth Israel. If I didn't have a fairy godmother who gave me dazzling ball gowns, at least I had one who gave me courage. Ever

since I was sixteen and I'd first heard *Easter* and decided that Patti Smith was the barometer of all things cool and right, when faced with tough decisions, I would ask myself, What would Patti Smith do? It was the yardstick by which I measured what was the authentic choice, the balls-out choice. When faced with the decision of taking the job in Brunei, I had weighed my options: Should I stay or should I go? What would Patti Smith do? She would go. She would board the plane to exotic lands and she would never once look back. As I walked through the hospital doors, in my mind I was already settling back in my airplane seat and watching the city recede beneath me.

The lobby was actually quite posh as far as hospitals go, but my eye was drawn to every sad detail—the forced cheeriness of the gift-shop daisies, the seam of elusive grime where the floor met the wall. In truth, I'd always had a walnut of trepidation in my gut, a pinch of anxiety between my shoulder blades, when going to see my father, even at his healthiest.

By the time I was twelve years old, my love affair with my father had, like most, ended in heartbreak. We spent my high school years and beyond locked in a constant battle for control that sometimes ended in violence. When I was in high school, my father ate and ate until he was an obese freight train of rage, and I, in turn, starved myself until I was the smallest possible target for his invectives. Years of therapy helped him to forgive himself, though he quit before he got to the part about not holding everyone else eternally accountable for his misery. In the

great tradition of Jewish parents, his dearest belief is that when he's dead I'll spend the rest of my life regretting my callous behavior toward him. His emblematic song for this sentiment is "Something Wonderful," from *The King and I*.

He called me the night before his surgery.

"Hi, honey. I was just sitting here on the couch in front of the fire and watching *The King and I* and Lady Thiang was singing 'Something Wonderful' and it made me think of me."

My father may be the only man in the world who would call to tell you he heard a song that made him think of himself. I hated him for making those ridiculous phone calls, in which he foisted on me the sentiment he wished I had for him. "Something Wonderful" is a love ballad to an imperfect but charming king, and it's a risky song to hang your hopes on. Unless you own a country and can waltz like Yul Brynner, it's never a safe bet to count on your enduring charm to redeem you from acting like a big asshole. If my father most identified in that pivotal moment with "Something Wonderful," I suppose I would have picked "There Are Worse Things I Could Do" from *Grease*.

There were worse things than taking a job that required I leave for Brunei on the day of my father's surgery. The Southeast-Asian sultanate of Brunei was a country I had only recently even heard of. My job description was elusive at best, but I fantasized that I might arrive and find a wild adventure, a pile of money, and an employer who was no less than Prince Charming. This was my op-

portunity to shake off my bohemian mantle and reimagine myself as an enigmatic export, maybe a royal mistress or the heroine of a spy novel. More realistically, I suspected I had signed on to be an international quasi-prostitute. There are worse things I could do.

I had prepared my parents for the fact that I was leaving town that day. I told them that I had gotten an important acting role in a movie, but that it was shooting in Singapore and I had to leave right away. When they later asked about my big break, I planned to tell them that my role had been cut. I justified my lies to my parents by imagining that I would make them come true and they would no longer be lies. Okay, the fantasy movie in Singapore probably wouldn't happen, but my soon-to-be stardom would overshadow it and all of this would be rendered irrelevant.

My parents believed in my acting career and had stoically received the news that I was leaving. Before I even got on the plane that day, they had already begun the process of accepting my absence. I would become the prodigal daughter, always off on an exotic adventure that few in my parents' world could ever fathom. That day at Beth Israel, they began their wait for my repentant return.

I hung out with my mother and my aunt in the bucket seats of the waiting room outside the ICU, our coats draped over the backs of the chairs. My aunt is a wild-haired ex-hippie who spent the sixties in acid-soaked communes and sleeping on European rooftops—a prodigal daughter in her own right. When my aunt and I

get together, it's usually a nonstop talking marathon, but that day we were unable to think of anything to say. We focused instead on the *Jeopardy* answers coming from the TV mounted in the corner near the ceiling. My relatives were all *Jeopardy* fiends. I loved *Jeopardy*'s Zen premise: All the answers are really questions. When she was dying of cancer, my grandmother could easily clear a board, even in her morphine haze. My aunt and I held hands and answered in unison.

“Who is Thomas Mann?”

“What is the Panama Canal?”

My brother, Johnny, was notably absent, off at yet another boarding school and probably engaged at that very moment in a scheme to grow his own psychedelic mushrooms or to break out of his dorm and hitchhike to the nearest Phish concert. My mother sat quietly reading. Her hair was styled into a tastefully highlighted wedge, her diamond earrings twinkling under the hospital fluorescents. My mother shines in a crisis—hospitals, funerals, support groups. She is the lady you want around when things go way south. This is not to say that she wasn't worried about my father; just that worried is her natural habitat. When my grandmother was dying, my mother taught me that you have to make yourself at home in hospitals, have to know where they keep the ice, have to keep track of your own medication schedule, have to make friends with the nurses. If you sit around and wait for someone else to bring you a glass of water, you're bound to get very thirsty.

The three of us went to eat sweaty lasagna in the

hospital cafeteria. We sat with poor posture, like the rest of the people there, who huddled in groups around their lukewarm food. Laughter cut through the room from a table of doctors in scrubs. I couldn't imagine having to eat in that place every day. My father's doctor, Dr. Foster, was standing next to the table where the doctors were laughing. He was a handsome, young guy with a shock of black hair and tortoiseshell glasses. He glanced around the room; his eyes rested on us for a second, then moved on without an acknowledgment. It is the unique province of doctors to be in the same room with the family of a man whose internal organs he was just handling and not even nod hello.

I watched Dr. Foster walk away. When we had talked after the surgery, I had noted a flirtatiousness to his manner. (I know, classy timing.) There had even been a vague but unmistakable suggestion that we should have a drink later in the week. At any moment in time, I imagined, a parallel-universe Jill could make a different choice, could turn a fraction of an inch to the left and step onto a different path.

That moment I imagined a parallel Jill stayed in New York and altered the course of her days not by seeking fame and fortune but rather by succumbing to the dictates of her upbringing. She takes Dr. Foster up on that drink. She winds up the wife of a doctor, with shapely calves, a standing tennis date, and a two-carat diamond on her finger. She finds fulfillment in her children and in volunteer work. She reads design magazines and gourmet magazines and she does things like making homemade

pasta and then indulging in only a few bites. She weekends in the Hamptons and takes two-week Caribbean vacations every year.

My mother radiated the calm of a martyr marching to the stake. She had surrendered to her fate. I never once saw her try to get out of her marriage to a domineering man who persistently demeaned her. I wondered where her parallel selves lived. Did she scroll back to each crossroads of her life and wonder, or did she feel that something higher was guiding the needle of her compass, that she was fated to be living out her life exactly as it was?

When we returned from lunch, a slab of cheese congealing in my stomach, my father was waking up from the anesthesia. A nurse informed us that only one person could go into the ICU at a time, so my mother went first. She emerged after about fifteen minutes looking unshaken, saying only that I should go next because he was asking for me.

My father hovered somewhere between conscious and unconscious. A hundred tubes and wires traveled in and out of him. He had lost more than fifty pounds and lost it so quickly that his skin had failed to shrink to his new body. It hung off him like excess fabric. He looked shriveled.

I have a picture of my father and me when I was a baby. He is lying on the bed and I am sleeping across his round belly. He was so big to me then, a mountain. I feel like I remember the moment. I know it's a trick of memory, a conflation of photographs and reality, because I was only an infant. But I could swear I remember what it was like to lay my head so close to his heart.

His bloodshot blue eyes scanned the room wildly.

“It hurts,” he said, his voice small and labored.

“You’re going to get better now.”

“I didn’t know it would hurt this much.”

I stood next to him, holding his hand, conscious of my teeth in my mouth, my toes in my shoes, the watch on my wrist reading ten minutes past the time I needed to leave to make my plane. I talked about my impressive new movie job. It seemed to cheer him up.

“Look at you,” he said.

I could have simply not shown up at the airport, could have stayed for that drink with Dr. Foster, but I wasn’t going to. I was unsure of my destiny, but I could tell you with absolute certainty that it did not lie there. I told my father that I’d telephone from Singapore every day. Then I kissed his cheek and left.

My father called after me in a whisper, “Grab your star and ride it to the top, Jilly.”

I was a liar. And I left. I cried in the elevator for my dad, for all that was lost between us, for my own alarming recklessness. But my eyes dried up the minute my ass hit the vinyl cab seat. All my regrets and reservations were overshadowed by the fact that it felt so good to be moving—green flowered suitcase in the trunk, thirty dollars to my name, car window open to the unseasonably warm winter day.

As he has mellowed and grown older, my father has rewritten our history together and, with it, his opinion of me. He tears up and greets every milestone, from my marriage to my master’s degree, by saying, “My daughter

took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

With one hackneyed phrase he manages both to praise me and to brand me forever the outsider. Read the poem for real, I want to tell him, and you’ll see that the roads are about the same. The traveler only imagines that one is less trodden than the other.

Nevertheless, two roads diverged. I picked the one that seemed a tiny bit wilder. Because that was who I wanted to be.