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A Novel
**The
Marriage
Plot**

**Jeffrey
Eugenides**

*Winner of the
Pulitzer Prize*

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A Madman in Love

To start with, look at all the books. There were her Edith Wharton novels, arranged not by title but date of publication; there was the complete Modern Library set of Henry James, a gift from her father on her twenty-first birthday; there were the dog-eared paperbacks assigned in her college courses, a lot of Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë sisters. There were a whole lot of black-and-white New Directions paperbacks, mostly poetry by people like H.D. or Denise Levertov. There were the Colette novels she read on the sly. There was the first edition of *Couples*, belonging to her mother, which Madeleine had surreptitiously dipped into back in sixth grade and which she was using now to provide textual support in her English honors thesis on the marriage plot. There was, in short, this mid-size but still portable library representing pretty much everything Madeleine had read in college, a collection of texts, seemingly chosen at random, whose focus slowly narrowed, like a personality test, a sophisticated one you couldn't trick by anticipating the implications of its questions and finally got so lost in that your only recourse was to answer the simple truth. And then you waited for the result, hoping for "Artistic," or "Passionate," thinking you could live with "Sensitive," secretly fearing "Narcissistic" and "Domestic," but finally being presented with an outcome that cut both ways and made you feel different depending on the day, the hour, or the guy you happened to be dating: "Incurably Romantic."

These were the books in the room where Madeleine lay, with a pillow

over her head, on the morning of her college graduation. She'd read each and every one, often multiple times, frequently underlining passages, but that was no help to her now. Madeleine was trying to ignore the room and everything in it. She was hoping to drift back down into the oblivion where she'd been safely couched for the last three hours. Any higher level of wakefulness would force her to come to grips with certain disagreeable facts: for instance, the amount and variety of the alcohol she'd imbibed last night, and the fact that she'd gone to sleep with her contacts in. Thinking about such specifics would, in turn, call to mind the reasons she'd drunk so much in the first place, which she definitely didn't want to do. And so Madeleine adjusted her pillow, blocking out the early morning light, and tried to fall back to sleep.

But it was useless. Because right then, at the other end of her apartment, the doorbell began to ring.

Early June, Providence, Rhode Island, the sun up for almost two hours already, lighting up the pale bay and the smokestacks of the Narragansett Electric factory, rising like the sun on the Brown University seal emblazoned on all the pennants and banners draped up over campus, a sun with a sagacious face, representing knowledge. But this sun—the one over Providence—was doing the metaphorical sun one better, because the founders of the university, in their Baptist pessimism, had chosen to depict the light of knowledge enshrouded by clouds, indicating that ignorance had not yet been dispelled from the human realm, whereas the actual sun was just now fighting its way through cloud cover, sending down splintered beams of light and giving hope to the squadrons of parents, who'd been soaked and frozen all weekend, that the unseasonable weather might not ruin the day's festivities. All over College Hill, in the geometric gardens of the Georgian mansions, the magnolia-scented front yards of Victorians, along brick sidewalks running past black iron fences like those in a Charles Addams cartoon or a Lovecraft story; outside the art studios at the Rhode Island School of Design, where one painting major, having stayed up all night to work, was blaring Patti Smith; shining off the instruments (tuba and trumpet, respectively) of the two members of the Brown marching band who had arrived early at the meeting point and were nervously looking around, wondering where everyone else was; brightening the cobblestone side streets that led downhill to the polluted river, the sun was shining on

every brass doorknob, insect wing, and blade of grass. And, in concert with the suddenly flooding light, like a starting gun for all the activity, the doorbell in Madeleine's fourth-floor apartment began, clamorously, insistently, to ring.

The pulse reached her less as a sound than as a sensation, an electric shock shooting up her spine. In one motion Madeleine tore the pillow off her head and sat up in bed. She knew who was ringing the buzzer. It was her parents. She'd agreed to meet Alton and Phyllida for breakfast at 7:30. She'd made this plan with them two months ago, in April, and now here they were, at the appointed time, in their eager, dependable way. That Alton and Phyllida had driven up from New Jersey to see her graduate, that what they were here to celebrate today wasn't only her achievement but their own as parents, had nothing wrong or unexpected about it. The problem was that Madeleine, for the first time in her life, wanted no part of it. She wasn't proud of herself. She was in no mood to celebrate. She'd lost faith in the significance of the day and what the day represented.

She considered not answering. But she knew that if she didn't answer, one of her roommates would, and then she'd have to explain where she'd disappeared to last night, and with whom. Therefore, Madeleine slid out of the bed and reluctantly stood up.

This seemed to go well for a moment, standing up. Her head felt curiously light, as if hollowed out. But then the blood, draining from her skull like sand from an hourglass, hit a bottleneck, and the back of her head exploded in pain.

In the midst of this barrage, like the furious core from which it emanated, the buzzer erupted again.

She came out of her bedroom and stumbled in bare feet to the intercom in the hall, slapping the **SPEAK** button to silence the buzzer.

"Hello?"

"What's the matter? Didn't you hear the bell?" It was Alton's voice, as deep and commanding as ever, despite the fact that it was issuing from a tiny speaker.

"Sorry," Madeleine said. "I was in the shower."

"Likely story. Will you let us in, please?"

Madeleine didn't want to. She needed to wash up first.

"I'm coming down," she said.

This time, she held down the **SPEAK** button too long, cutting off Alton's response. She pressed it again and said, "Daddy?" but while she was speaking, Alton must have been speaking, too, because when she pressed **LISTEN** all that came through was static.

Madeleine took this pause in communications to lean her forehead against the door frame. The wood felt nice and cool. The thought struck her that, if she could keep her face pressed against the soothing wood, she might be able to cure her headache, and if she could keep her forehead pressed against the door frame for the rest of the day, while somehow still being able to leave the apartment, she might make it through breakfast with her parents, march in the commencement procession, get a diploma, and graduate.

She lifted her face and pressed **SPEAK** again.

"Daddy?"

But it was Phyllida's voice that answered. "Maddy? What's the matter? Let us in."

"My roommates are still asleep. I'm coming down. Don't ring the bell anymore."

"We want to see your apartment!"

"Not now. I'm coming down. Don't ring."

She took her hand from the buttons and stood back, glaring at the intercom as if daring it to make a sound. When it didn't, she started back down the hall. She was halfway to the bathroom when her roommate Abby emerged, blocking the way. She yawned, running a hand through her big hair, and then, noticing Madeleine, smiled knowingly.

"So," Abby said, "where did *you* sneak off to last night?"

"My parents are here," Madeleine said. "I have to go to breakfast."

"Come on. Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. I'm late."

"How come you're wearing the same clothes, then?"

Instead of replying, Madeleine looked down at herself. Ten hours earlier, when she'd borrowed the black Betsey Johnson dress from Olivia, Madeleine had thought it looked good on her. But now the dress felt hot and sticky, the fat leather belt looked like an S&M restraint, and there was a stain near the hem that she didn't want to identify.

Abby, meanwhile, had knocked on Olivia's door and entered. "So much for Maddy's broken heart," she said. "Wake up! You've got to see this."

The path to the bathroom was clear. Madeleine's need for a shower was extreme, almost medical. At a minimum, she had to brush her teeth. But Olivia's voice was audible now. Soon Madeleine would have two roommates interrogating her. Her parents were liable to start ringing again any minute. As quietly as possible, she inched back down the hall. She stepped into a pair of loafers left by the front door, crushing the heels flat as she caught her balance, and escaped into the outer corridor.

The elevator was waiting at the end of the floral runner. Waiting, Madeleine realized, because she'd failed to close the sliding gate when she'd staggered out of the thing a few hours earlier. Now she shut the gate securely and pressed the button for the lobby, and with a jolt the antique contraption began to descend through the building's interior gloom.

Madeleine's building, a Neo-Romanesque castle called the Narragansett that wrapped around the plunging corner of Benefit Street and Church Street, had been built at the turn of the century. Among its surviving period details—the stained-glass skylight, the brass wall sconces, the marble lobby—was the elevator. Made of curving metal bars like a giant birdcage, the elevator miraculously still functioned, but it moved slowly, and as the car dropped, Madeleine took the opportunity to make herself more presentable. She ran her hands through her hair, finger-combing it. She polished her front teeth with her index finger. She rubbed mascara crumbs from her eyes and moistened her lips with her tongue. Finally, passing the balustrade on the second floor, she checked her reflection in the small mirror attached to the rear panel.

One of the nice things about being twenty-two, or about being Madeleine Hanna, was that three weeks of romantic anguish, followed by a night of epic drinking, didn't do much visible damage. Except for puffiness around her eyes, Madeleine looked like the same pretty, dark-haired person as usual. The symmetries of her face—the straight nose, the Katharine Hepburn-ish cheekbones and jawline—were almost mathematical in their precision. Only the slight furrow in her brow gave evidence of the slightly anxious person that Madeleine felt herself, intrinsically, to be.

She could see her parents waiting below. They were trapped between the lobby door and the door to the street, Alton in a seersucker jacket, Phyllida in a navy suit and matching gold-buckled purse. For a second, Madeleine had an impulse to stop the elevator and leave her parents

stuck in the foyer amid all the college-town clutter—the posters for New Wave bands with names like Wretched Misery or the Clits, the pornographic Egon Schiele drawings by the RISD kid on the second floor, all the clamorous Xeroxes whose subtext conveyed the message that the wholesome, patriotic values of her parents' generation were now on the ash heap of history, replaced by a nihilistic, post-punk sensibility that Madeleine herself didn't understand but was perfectly happy to scandalize her parents by pretending that she did—before the elevator stopped in the lobby and she slid open the gate and stepped out to meet them.

Alton was first through the door. "Here she is!" he said avidly. "The college graduate!" In his net-charging way, he surged forward to seize her in a hug. Madeleine stiffened, worried that she smelled of alcohol or, worse, of sex.

"I don't know why you wouldn't let us see your apartment," Phyllida said, coming up next. "I was looking forward to meeting Abby and Olivia. We'd love to treat them to dinner later."

"We're not staying for dinner," Alton reminded her.

"Well, we might. That depends on Maddy's schedule."

"No, that's not the plan. The plan is to see Maddy for breakfast and then leave after the ceremony."

"Your father and his plans," Phyllida said to Madeleine. "Are you wearing that dress to the ceremony?"

"I don't know," Madeleine said.

"I can't get used to these shoulder pads all the young women are wearing. They're so mannish."

"It's Olivia's."

"You look pretty whacked out, Mad," Alton said. "Big party last night?"

"Not really."

"Don't you have anything of your own to wear?" Phyllida said.

"I'll have my robe on, Mummy," Madeleine said, and, to forestall further inspection, headed past them through the foyer. Outside, the sun had lost its battle with the clouds and vanished. The weather looked not much better than it had all weekend. Campus Dance, on Friday night, had been more or less rained out. The Baccalaureate service on Sunday had proceeded under a steady drizzle. Now, on Monday, the rain

had stopped, but the temperature felt closer to St. Patrick's than to Memorial Day.

As she waited for her parents to join her on the sidewalk, it occurred to Madeleine that she hadn't had sex, not really. This was some consolation.

"Your sister sends her regrets," Phyllida said, coming out. "She has to take Richard the Lionhearted for an ultrasound today."

Richard the Lionhearted was Madeleine's nine-week-old nephew. Everyone else called him Richard.

"What's the matter with him?" Madeleine asked.

"One of his kidneys is petite, apparently. The doctors want to keep an eye on it. If you ask me, all these ultrasounds do is find things to worry about."

"Speaking of ultrasounds," Alton said, "I need to get one on my knee."

Phyllida paid no attention. "Anyway, Allie's *devastated* not to see you graduate. As is Blake. But they're hoping you and your new beau might visit them this summer, on your way to the Cape."

You had to stay alert around Phyllida. Here she was, ostensibly talking about Richard the Lionhearted's petite kidney, and already she'd managed to move the subject to Madeleine's new boyfriend, Leonard (whom Phyllida and Alton hadn't met), and to Cape Cod (where Madeleine had announced plans to cohabituate with him). On a normal day, when her brain was working, Madeleine would have been able to keep one step ahead of Phyllida, but this morning the best she could manage was to let the words float past her.

Fortunately, Alton changed the subject. "So, where do you recommend for breakfast?"

Madeleine turned and looked vaguely down Benefit Street. "There's a place this way."

She started shuffling along the sidewalk. Walking—moving—seemed like a good idea. She led them past a line of quaint, nicely maintained houses bearing historical placards, and a big apartment building with a gable roof. Providence was a corrupt town, crime-ridden and mob-controlled, but up on College Hill this was hard to see. The sketchy downtown and dying or dead textile mills lay below, in the grim distance.

Here the narrow streets, many of them cobblestone, climbed past mansions or snaked around Puritan graveyards full of headstones as narrow as heaven's door, streets with names like Prospect, Benevolent, Hope, and Meeting, all of them feeding into the arboreous campus at the top. The sheer physical elevation suggested an intellectual one.

"Aren't these slate sidewalks lovely," Phyllida said as she followed along. "We used to have slate sidewalks on our street. They're *much* more attractive. But then the borough replaced them with concrete."

"Assessed us for the bill, too," Alton said. He was limping slightly, bringing up the rear. The right leg of his charcoal trousers was swelled from the knee brace he wore on and off the tennis court. Alton had been club champion in his age group for twelve years running, one of those older guys with a sweatband ringing a balding crown, a choppy forehand, and absolute murder in his eyes. Madeleine had been trying to beat Alton her entire life without success. This was even more infuriating because she was better than he was, at this point. But whenever she took a set from Alton he started intimidating her, acting mean, disputing calls, and her game fell apart. Madeleine was worried that there was something paradigmatic in this, that she was destined to go through life being cowed by less capable men. As a result, Madeleine's tennis matches against Alton had assumed such outsize personal significance for her that she got tight whenever she played him, with predictable results. And Alton still gloated when he won, still got all rosy and jiggly, as if he'd bested her by sheer talent.

At the corner of Benefit and Waterman, they crossed behind the white steeple of First Baptist Church. In preparation for the ceremony, loudspeakers had been set up on the lawn. A man wearing a bow tie, a dean-of-students-looking person, was tensely smoking a cigarette and inspecting a raft of balloons tied to the churchyard fence.

By now Phyllida had caught up to Madeleine, taking her arm to negotiate the uneven slate, which was pushed up by the roots of gnarled plane trees that lined the curb. As a little girl, Madeleine had thought her mother pretty, but that was a long time ago. Phyllida's face had gotten heavier over the years; her cheeks were beginning to sag like those of a camel. The conservative clothes she wore—the clothes of a philanthropist or lady ambassador—had a tendency to conceal her figure. Phyl-

lida's hair was where her power resided. It was expensively set into a smooth dome, like a band shell for the presentation of that long-running act, her face. For as long as Madeleine could remember, Phyllida had never been at a loss for words or shy about a point of etiquette. Among her friends Madeleine liked to make fun of her mother's formality, but she often found herself comparing other people's manners unfavorably with Phyllida's.

And right now Phyllida was looking at Madeleine with the proper expression for *this* moment: thrilled by the pomp and ceremony, eager to put intelligent questions to any of Madeleine's professors she happened to meet, or to trade pleasantries with fellow parents of graduating seniors. In short, she was available to everyone and everything and in step with the social and academic pageantry, all of which exacerbated Madeleine's feeling of being out of step, for this day and the rest of her life.

She plunged on, however, across Waterman Street, and up the steps of Carr House, seeking refuge and coffee.

The café had just opened. The guy behind the counter, who was wearing Elvis Costello glasses, was rinsing out the espresso machine. At a table against the wall, a girl with stiff pink hair was smoking a clove cigarette and reading *Invisible Cities*. "Tainted Love" played from the stereo on top of the refrigerator.

Phyllida, holding her handbag protectively against her chest, had paused to peruse the student art on the walls: six paintings of small, skin-diseased dogs wearing bleach-bottle collars.

"Isn't this fun?" she said tolerantly.

"La Bohème," Alton said.

Madeleine installed her parents at a table near the bay window, as far away from the pink-haired girl as possible, and went up to the counter. The guy took his time coming over. She ordered three coffees—a large for her—and bagels. While the bagels were being toasted, she brought the coffees over to her parents.

Alton, who couldn't sit at the breakfast table without reading, had taken a discarded *Village Voice* from a nearby table and was perusing it. Phyllida was staring overtly at the girl with pink hair.

"Do you think that's comfortable?" she inquired in a low voice.



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