

**OBJECTS
MAY
APPEAR**

a novel



KHRISTIN WIERMAN



SHE WRITES PRESS

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Part 1



**OBJECTS MAY APPEAR
TO BE
FARTHER AWAY
THAN THEY
ACTUALLY ARE**

Chapter 1

Quinn's Video Journal, Entry #1

The first time I flew, I just couldn't believe what was happening. All I could think was, *Is this happening? Is this really fucking happening?* And yes, I'm talking about physically flying: body in the air, feet off the ground, no airplane or jet packs involved. The kind of thing we all know is beyond our ability. The kind of thing we all know is absolutely, unequivocally impossible to do.

Except that I'm flying. The only reason I know I *can* fly is because I *am* flying. Logic doesn't usually flow that way, I get that. Then again, there's nothing usual or logical about this whole situation.

I'm not quite sure where to begin, but I guess I'll start with my first impression: Flying is fucking awesome. The motion is completely effortless and natural and makes you feel that we were born to move this way. Once you're airborne, every other movement feels like you're pressing

through molasses . . . like you've got binds wrapped around all your joints that make every action harder than necessary.

The experience of flying has been amazing for me, but not quite as pleasant for everyone else. The first time Bo saw me fly, he nearly lost his mind. Bo's our yellow Labrador and the sweetest boy you could ever imagine. That was maybe the second or third time I'd flown? That's one of the reasons why I'm making this video journal for myself, to keep track of all that's happening.

Poor Bo seemed to think some winged creature had swept through the window and was trying to take off with me. I had to sit on the floor with him for half an hour to settle him down. Fiona, our black cat—and, *no*, the significance of having a black cat is not lost on me—handled the situation much better. She watched me circling the dining room chandelier for about thirty seconds, then curled into a puffy half-moon and went back to sleep.

The real test was when my husband, Jake, accidentally walked in on me a few weeks ago. Obviously, I'd waited to fly until he left for work because I still hadn't worked out how to break the news to him. But he forgot his gym bag, and I was up in the air dusting the mantel of our eight-foot fireplace when he walked back inside.

I heard him before he saw me. He looked up, and his face was . . . well, I think his expression conveyed exactly what you'd expect a person to feel if they came home and saw their wife flitting around like a witch in a fairy tale, only without a broom.

The worst part was that seeing Jake jarred me. A lot. Flying is all about focus and feeling. Seeing Jake freaking out totally freaked me out. I was so flustered that I tipped forward and picked up speed. Then I was sort of hurtling, head first, at Jake, who was standing there with his mouth

silently opening and closing like one of those pretty koi fish in our neighbors' pond.

"Honey," I said, when I finally stopped, my face inches in front of his and my feet stretched out behind me, nearly six feet off the floor. "*Honey.*"

I'll give Jake credit, he didn't scream. He did not sprint out of the room or out of the house or out of our collective life, which, honestly, was a fear that had been niggling at me since the first time my feet came off the ground. Actually, you know what? That fear has been with me since our third date when I realized how different he was than anyone I'd ever met; how much I liked him; and that, somehow, he seemed to like me. As soon as I realized those three things, I began to experience a creeping fear that he'd be taken away from me or leave. From that moment on, I've always harbored this secret terror that one day he'd decide he didn't want me anymore. So far that hasn't happened.

Anyway, Jake handled his wife breaking the laws of physics far better than I suspect most partners would. Shit, I've got to get the laundry started—he's also out of clean socks. I guess that's the end of journal entry number one.

Georgia

At 9:02 a.m., Georgia slipped out of her century-old colonial home and into her sparkling Polestar in what felt like one fluid motion. She'd woken that morning braced for a meeting with a client who could be a bit of a bully, then decided that if he went too far, she'd fire him. The idea that she could simply *not* deal with him anymore left her feeling light and free, and she could only attribute the peace she felt to a decision she'd made years ago, on the day she signed her divorce papers: She would never again accept being pushed and bullied.

She would never again accept the metaphorical pushing from her mother that had propelled Georgia to skip a grade, making her the least physically and emotionally developed kid in middle school and evaporating her identity as intellectually strong. She would never again accept the literal pushing her father had chronically inflicted, shoving her when she didn't move fast enough, once right into the back of a restaurant host who hadn't even pointed out which table was theirs.

She'd been pushed into a lackluster marriage that eventually turned brutal and took a near herculean effort to extricate herself from. She'd been pushed into motherhood by *everyone* and could only thank her lucky stars that her daughter, now twenty-five and utterly self-sufficient, was such an angel.

The strange part was that immediately following her initial decision many years ago, she'd been more shoved around than ever. Sitting in the attorney's office on the last day of her marriage, her ex-husband had tried to bulldoze a new clause into the divorce agreement granting him more time with their daughter, which cost Georgia several more hours in attorneys' fees and what felt like the last drops of her precious stamina. After the papers were finally signed, she'd gone to have a glass of wine at a small upscale bar. A man had elbowed his way around her as she stepped out of the revolving door, sending her flying into the arms of a server. The next day, a new client at her PR firm had announced he was not paying the remainder of his bill because he was unhappy the *New York Times* hadn't called yet to discuss his recent barbeque pit cleaning invention, which Georgia had barely managed to get accepted for a trial run on QVC.

In those first few days after she'd made the decision that she would no longer accept being pushed or bullied, it seemed to Georgia that something in the universe was

screaming: *You shouldn't decide this. You can't choose this. You won't have this.* But blow after blow, Georgia had held her ground, including firing the prickly client, which prior to her decision would have been unthinkable. Perhaps the strangest part was that as soon as she resigned herself to spending the rest of her life in some metaphorical cosmic battle, the shoving had faded away to such a degree that sometimes she wondered if she'd imagined the whole episode.

Except she hadn't.

As her Polestar purred out of her driveway, Georgia gazed at the five stately homes that stretched around the leafy cul-de-sac in the small Pennsylvania community where she lived and attempted not to judge her neighbors. This was a recent goal not always easy to uphold.

Diagonally across the street, and on the corner to the old farm to market road that eventually led into Philadelphia, water was flowing out of Ayaan's garage. Again. Why Ayaan and her wife, Nari, could not keep their pipes under control was a mystery. They were brilliant, successful women, yet there always seemed to be some flood pouring out of that house. Georgia blinked and searched for another place to rest her eyes. *There!* Ayaan's hydrangeas were blooming. When Georgia didn't let the rushing garage river into her view, she could see that the lavender flowers were lovely.

Next door to Georgia, Quinn was watering her cherry blossom tree, her buttery blond hair wisped into a long ponytail that was already half down, her milky face spacey, and what in the hell was Quinn wearing? Some one-sie pajama outfit printed with brightly colored—Georgia squinted—elephants. Georgia loved Quinn, she truly did. But what business did a fifty-seven-year-old woman have wearing that? Quinn was beautiful and looked way younger than she was supposed to, but how was that an appropriate

garment for any adult woman? Something weird was going on with her, Georgia was certain. Something weirder than Quinn's normal spaciness. Lately, Quinn seemed so half put together, half here and half not—

Judgy. Superior. Her own gentle, whispering thoughts stopped Georgia cold. This inner commentary had been happening for weeks, and the sentiment was not wrong. Georgia had spent her childhood watching her father relentlessly pick apart the flaws he perceived in others, and his smug superiority, she'd long ago decided, would have no place in her own mind or identity.

Yet here she was judging, which was really a masked way of seeing herself as *better*. Why should Quinn wearing elephant pajamas bother Georgia? Especially when Quinn was doing so in her own front yard? She wasn't outside topless or screaming. She wasn't forcing her choice onto anyone else. And why in the hell was that damned outfit filling all of Georgia's vision when she looked at her friend? Quinn was smiling, caring for her own tree, yet all Georgia could see was the one element of the picture she didn't like. Why should anything about Quinn be a problem for Georgia?

"It shouldn't," Georgia muttered to the empty car. "It isn't."

As if the universe was adding an exclamation point to that thought, Quinn's husband Jake exited the house, took one look at Quinn, and doubled over in laughter that was full of fondness and appreciation.

Quinn accepted Jake's goodbye kiss, waved at Georgia, then somehow her hose was spraying Georgia's newly washed windshield.

"Sorry," Quinn mouthed to Georgia as she righted the hose, splattering herself in the process and nearly drenching Jake, who managed to leap into his Land Cruiser unscathed, his face still beaming at his nutty wife.

“No problem,” Georgia mouthed back with a genuine smile.

As Georgia neared the turn onto the main road, a group of sweaty people in expensive workout clothes walked briskly around the corner. Instantly, Georgia felt her stomach clench, just like in seventh grade when she was forced to walk past the mean girls’ lockers at school. Faces fresh from that hellish predawn boot camp they were constantly filling up the neighborhood group text about, Ayaan, Nari, Yugi, and Clive (the Minions, as Georgia referred to them) were drinking a concoction that looked like pea soup mixed with mud from transparent smoothie shakers. Georgia could grasp the rationale behind consuming liquified kale and broccoli but could not fathom why anyone would choose to look at the drink while they did.

Judgy. Superior.

For fuck’s sake, Georgia mentally whispered back. She’d been in her forties when she finally allowed herself to drop F-bombs. She let them fly freely most of the time now. With each and every one, she took another step away from the home she grew up in and the person she had to be to live in any kind of peace there.

As the Polestar neared the little exercise group, Georgia blew out a breath that sent her floofy platinum bangs quivering and focused on keeping her pale forehead from folding into an angry crease.

The frown line won when Marcy Mobley trotted around the corner, all glossy brunette curls and alabaster skin. Georgia’s hands instinctively tightened around the steering wheel. In school, the mean girls had usually been a year or two older. Now that Georgia was fifty-two, they were at least a dozen years younger. And Marcy, who lived in the majestic Queen Anne on a small hill at the back of Georgia’s cul-de-sac, was the worst.

The strain between them had started the moment Marcy moved into the neighborhood with her husband, DeSean, more than a decade ago. Georgia was leaving a tray of homemade pecan brownies and a welcome card on their front porch when the door swung open and Marcy, wearing a hot-pink bikini top and microscopic cut-off jean shorts, her hair glossy and flecked with auburn highlights and her flawless skin glowing, squealed, “How sweet!! Would you like to come in and help me arrange the living room?”

Georgia—wearing jeans three sizes bigger than her pre-baby days, her skin crepey and puckering in ways she’d never fathomed possible, and still rattled from the fight with her husband on her way out the door because she’d not made extra brownies for him—had brought the brownies because that’s what you did when new people moved into your neighborhood, the same way you brought over a homemade meal after the birth of a child or a funeral. That was simply what you did. She’d mumbled an excuse to Marcy and fled back home.

From that day forward, Marcy seemed to be everywhere, constantly parading around the neighborhood in brightly colored crop tops and leggings, her thin hips swaying and her impossibly flat stomach just there for everyone to see. And she would not stop smiling!

The worst part was that Marcy seemed to jog by Georgia’s house every damned day, right when Georgia was either trying to leave or get back home, and Marcy would *always* stop and twitter about some new recipe she’d recently perfected or invite Georgia over for a grilled cheese sandwich. What that woman’s obsession with grilled cheese sandwiches was, Georgia could not understand. All Georgia’s energy back then had been funneled into not buckling under her crumbling marriage and keeping its disintegration off the radar of her perceptive thirteen-year-old daughter.

Not once did she invite Marcy inside or accept the sandwich invitation.

The relationship had solidified into an insurmountable feud a few months later, on Georgia's fortieth birthday—a day that still lived in Georgia's mind as some cosmic vortex that would shift her life in unfathomable ways. The events began with Georgia's husband and daughter waking her in bed with “birthday toast” they'd burned and coffee they'd spilled, all of which her husband managed to turn into her fault the moment their daughter left the room: *Why didn't Georgia buy better bread? Why was the toaster setting so high? Why did they still have that goddamned wobbly tray?*

Maybe because of her birthday, maybe because she was half asleep, Georgia would never know, but she'd shocked herself and her now-ex-husband alike when instead of rambling out the usual apologies and explanations, she'd simply said, “I have no fucking idea, Sam. Why are you such a hateful prick?” At which point he had thrown the half-full coffee cup at the wall and stormed out.

Whenever Georgia recalled that memory, the following moments would unfold as viscerally as they had that morning:

Staring at the coffee dripping down the wall and scattered shards of porcelain, she understood a line had been crossed. Until then, Sam's outbursts had been cruel and explosive but entirely verbal. His rage as a physical expression was different.

Immediately, Georgia's mother's voice began chirping in her mind: *This is marriage, Georgia. This is just what it is.*

When Georgia had called in tears from the bathroom floor of her honeymoon suite because Sam had offhandedly remarked that a one-piece bathing suit might be more flattering than the bikini she'd bought, her mother's response was dismissive: “This is marriage, Georgia. This is what it is.”

When their daughter, Caitlin, was two, and Sam stopped showing up for dinner on any regular basis, her mother had sighed deeply: “This is marriage, Georgia. This is what you chose.”

When Caitlin was eleven and Georgia had called hysterically after finding an unfamiliar earring in the back of Sam’s Mercedes, her mother hadn’t even paused doing the dishes Georgia could hear clinking in the background. “This is what you signed up for, Georgia. Love is about sacrifice. Go to counseling. Make him buy you a nice present. This is what love is. This is what marriage *is*.”

Georgia had stopped calling her mother for any kind of consolation after that.

Sitting in her bed, staring at the burned toast, Georgia allowed the full truth of her situation to settle upon her. There were *many* lines between throwing an object onto a wall and directing physical violence at a person, and most people would not continue to cross those lines. Yet distinguishing between those who would and those who wouldn’t was damned near impossible. And once someone began to cross lines, you could never be sure where they would stop. Georgia had endured enough blows from her father’s belt to understand that. As unfathomable as the idea might seem, there was the possibility that at some point in the future, Georgia herself might be thrown against that wall. Or, heaven-forbid, Caitlin.

Although that seemed unlikely. Sam doted on Caitlin and made sure his fights with Georgia were confined to their bedroom or the garage. But Sam treating Georgia the way he treated her now had once been incomprehensible, too.

As she forced herself to consider the truth of her situation, Georgia felt a ball of white-hot anger forming inside her—piercing and clear in a way she’d never experienced before—and had instantly known: This could not *possibly* be the way that love or marriage was supposed to be.

Then the clarity rushing through Georgia became a forest fire blowing through a tract of dead trees, revealing a stream of truths that once would have broken her in half. Sam did not love her. Perhaps he never had. He did not wish to be in this marriage anymore. The more shocking revelation was that Georgia no longer wished to be in it either.

A memory shimmered: a petrified tree that had been so well hidden in that dead forest, Georgia had completely forgotten what had happened. When Sam initially proposed, Georgia had not wanted to say yes.

They'd met when Georgia was a freshman at Emory and Sam was beginning the MBA program there. After graduating, Sam had moved to New York where he'd gotten a coveted job as an entry-level research analyst at Lehman Brothers. Georgia visited most weekends.

Sam loved basketball, so he proposed at a New York Knicks game one month before she graduated. Georgia could still remember her stomach dissolving into liquid when, seeing them both up on the big screen at Madison Square Garden, she watched Sam sink to one knee. The thought that she'd say no had never entered her mind—until that moment when some small voice deep inside her whispered, *I'm not sure I want this*.

Georgia's face must have betrayed her because Sam's turned desperate.

Looking at the hurt bubbling in his eyes, all Georgia could see was little-boy Sam with his violent father and alcoholic mother, living in that tiny rundown house he'd driven Georgia by only once, to show her the squalor he would never allow himself to live in again.

And Georgia just couldn't. She couldn't say no to him in front of twenty thousand strangers. Even though she'd never liked basketball.

After the proposal, Sam had told her parents about the engagement before she'd had a chance to convey any feelings

of doubt about it. The one and only time Georgia mustered the courage to mention her unease about her decision to them, her father had railed that she would be a fool to turn down such a gift from God and her mother had burst into tears.

Georgia graduated, moved back home, and the wedding planning began. Then one day she was standing at the back of the sanctuary in the church she'd grown up in, her father's hand like a vise around her arm, and she'd understood that any hope of an exit ramp had long passed.

They'd spent their first years of marriage in New York, with Sam succeeding wildly while Georgia flailed away at a variety of marketing jobs she wasn't suited for. Sam had, with preternatural survival abilities, left Lehman ahead of the mortgage crash in 2008 to pursue his own ventures. Whatever they were, Georgia never asked. Her pregnancy with Caitlin prompted them to move to the beautiful Colonial and the quiet cul-de-sac outside Philadelphia. And life had continued to roll along.

T*his cannot possibly be the only way marriage can be,* Georgia had thought again the morning of her fortieth birthday. She rose from bed, picked up the shattered pieces of porcelain, and sponged down the wall. Then, she'd managed to dress, get her daughter to school, and get herself to the tiny PR firm she'd opened when Caitlin started first grade—which had turned out to be the fulfilling career she'd been struggling to find.

Work that day had been an unpleasant frenzy of unimportant dramas, so much so that Georgia felt relief when she entered her dermatologist's office for an appointment. Sitting in the tiny exam room, a dewy-faced young doctor had explained that the bump Georgia had found at her hairline was nothing to worry about at all.

Another wave of relief. Which lasted about five seconds.

“You know those dark spots old men sometimes have? On their foreheads?” the doctor continued, smiling and nodding like a manic kindergarten teacher. “It’s just one of those. Completely normal. Absolutely fine. You’ll probably end up having a few more.”

A vision of herself in the not-too-distant future, her forehead dotted with spots the color of liver, assaulted Georgia’s mind, provoking an acute desire to scream at the top of her lungs that there was nothing, *absofuckinglutely nothing*, fine about that at all.

Georgia hadn’t been home for more than ten minutes when Quinn, who had recently moved into the neighborhood, was tapping on the back door. If she hadn’t been staring at her through the glass, Georgia probably wouldn’t have answered. As Georgia heaved the sliding door open, Quinn thrust forward a fifth of Rabbit Hole bourbon, saying, “Have a few swigs of this.”

Georgia did not consider herself the type of person who drank alcohol in the afternoon. “Thank you, Quinn, but I’m really not feeling—” Georgia began. She was silenced by the ringing of her front doorbell.

“Trust me,” Quinn said, her sapphire eyes glittering.

Too weary to argue, Georgia accepted the bottle and took one gulp before gesturing for Quinn to come inside. Quinn did but declined to go any farther than the kitchen.

When Georgia opened the front door, she was met with a collective scream, “Surprise!”

Marcy Mobley and the Minions—their faces radiant and unlined—stood on Georgia’s front porch wearing black T-shirts with huge white letters that read: Lordy, Lordy, Georgia’s Turned Forty.

“Happy Birthday!” Marcy squealed as Yugi thrust forward a black birthday cake with a candle shaped like a tomb stone.

Georgia had been raised to be careful of others' feelings. But staring at her young neighbors—none of whom had had babies at the time—with the memory of the dermatologist appointment still ringing in her head, the morning fight with Sam still vibrating somewhere inside her, and the consequences of that fight still to be endured, Georgia had felt the forest fire reignite and the last thread tethering her to politeness and being a good person singe into ash.

"No," Georgia had said stonily. "No. No. No." Then she turned and slammed the front door right in their beautiful, glowing faces and rejoined Quinn in the kitchen. The next hour, spent drinking most of the bottle of bourbon together, cemented their friendship.

Georgia had not exchanged a word with Marcy or the Minions since.

Which seemed impossible, sharing a neighborhood street. Yet this wasn't impossible because texts were an incredibly effective means of communication, and Quinn—whose presence at the birthday disaster was unknown to the other neighbors, allowing her to build polite, if not deep, friendships with them—had a gentle and disarming way of passing complicated messages back and forth when required.

Today, approaching the little clique of sweaty neighbors, Georgia moved into trusted autopilot: She resisted both the urge to speed up the Polestar or look away. She girded herself to be ignored per usual.

Except today, the unthinkable happened.

Today, Marcy raised her hand, smiled a sweet and seemingly genuine smile, and waved. The Minions turned in unison and did the same.

Georgia was so flummoxed, all she could do was wave back.