Praise for *The Mary Pages*

"This is a gorgeous, soul-stirring book. There is no sanctimony here—only evocative imagery and poetic prose that lays bare the terrain of a complicated, Mary-haunted, grace-ridden life. *The Mary Pages* is a work of art, an icon in words."

—**Abigail Favale**, author of *The Genesis of Gender* and Professor of the Practice at McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame

"I am in awe at what Sally Read has given us in these pages. What an extraordinary journey she has been on, and she now takes us with her in her discovery—step by patient, even unsettling, step—to understanding the beauty and necessity of falling in love with the Mother of God. There's humor, wit, honesty, vulnerability, poetry (yes!), and a profound understanding of Mary's life entwined with God's, and her radiant presence over the centuries, from Nazareth to Walsingham to Mexico City and a hundred other places. Reader, listen. You will come away changed, even transformed, by what you find in these pages."

—**Paul Mariani**, University Professor of English Emeritus at Boston College

"*The Mary Pages* provides a unique tour through some of the most iconic images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, making them strikingly relevant to women of today. Sally Read's moving memoir recounts the dilemmas and distractions of modern women, but also reveals her poignant game of hide-and-seek with the Mother of God through a series of works of art. As a poet who searches for meaning beyond the immediate, Sally Read helps the reader see that those faces of Mary—above altars, in museums, by bedsides—are calling to her children in whatever circumstances they may find themselves. A truly inspiring read."

—**Elizabeth Lev**, art historian and author of *How Catholic Art Saved the Faith*

"'If anyone is in Christ,' writes St. Paul to the Corinthians, 'he is a new creation.' Through her search for some real Mary represented in art, Read examines her own life as a self-creation, seeking 'liberation' in a fallen and sordid world. What Mary, the 'unsurpassed solely human icon,' reveals to her is that her 'body was made to be a piece of Eden.' It is in recognizing in the Blessed Mother an image of what it is to be a 'new creation' that the writer finds her own soul luminously remade."

—**Sally Thomas**, author of *Works of Mercy*

"Sally Read follows a winding path into the Church, led by the arresting beauty of Mary's fiat, not a sanded-off, sentimental, safe kind of love. Read's own prose mirrors the jarring loveliness of God's invitation."

—**Leah Libresco Sargeant**, author of *Arriving at Amen: Seven Catholic Prayers That Even I Can Offer*

The Mary Pages

The Mary Pages

AN ATHEIST'S JOURNEY TO THE MOTHER OF GOD

SALLY READ

WORD on FIRE

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For Sofia Abasolo
And, of course, for Mary

Wild air, world-mothering air

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

I love all things that need my lover's life,
And live to give my newborn Morning to your quiet rooms

—Thomas Merton

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

—Emily Dickinson

Contents

Acknowledgments

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And thank you to the design and editorial teams at Word on Fire for letting the story reach those who are curious about Mary and those who simply love her.

A Note to the Reader

This is a literary memoir, combined at times with what might be termed historical fiction. Let me explain how I have worked within both those genres.

With regard to literary memoir, all the personal stories told here are true. Please bear in mind, however, that I have sometimes changed details to protect the privacy of the real people involved. As such, I've occasionally dispensed with a documentary respect for real names and locations. The *literary* aspect of literary memoir means that I have favored the shaping of narrative over what would otherwise be a succession of diary entries. These narrative choices (the way in which we tell a tale: where we begin and end, what we leave out or include, and how we order the telling of events) are about finding the best way to illuminate the action of Mary in my life. Readers of my 2016 memoir *Night's Bright Darkness* will recognize here a limited number of events that were told in a briefer or more peripheral way in that book. *The Mary Pages* casts new light on those events and takes both reader and writer into previously unnavigated territory.

As far as historical fiction goes, I believe John Donne's assertion that no man is an island. That is to say, Mary's role in others' lives also impacts my own life. I have therefore, very occasionally, interwoven narratives from what we know of decades- or centuries-old happenings with my story. In doing so, I hope I have uncovered Mary's role in those distant events—or how God, through Mary, has used those events to reach me. Instead of historical fiction, we might call these sections "Marian Narrative": they involve looking at stories with an eye for her vigilant presence.

La Madonna del Granduca
by Raphael, 1506–1507

PRELUDE

My First Marys

I first saw her in my grandparents' house—a luminous oval in the darkness of an oil painting. I'd lie on the settee in the afternoons, with nothing before me but climbing on haybales and soft-boiled eggs for tea, and look at her. I didn't marvel at how her skin glowed like olive oil (I didn't know olive oil). I couldn't have begun to consider the genius of painting folds of blue fabric and shadow, not to mention *light* and *thought* and all of that. She just *was*—a part of the wallpaper of the child's world that is indistinguishable from earth and sky. The baby in the painting was easier to see. He was bonny with a full-on gaze and lit just like his mother. But, back then, it was the woman who harnessed my attention. Her light seemed to emerge from thick night. I had no way of looking directly into her eyes. She was, somehow, less important. But without her, the baby would not be there at all.

Around the house where I lay in such glorious idleness, there was no landscape to speak of. Just acres of grey sky. The trees resembled dissected lungs for most of the year. The crows made their large black nests in them. I saw the path before me in the deep tread left by my father's boots. In the slime of wet leaves and the milky clouds of breath. As we walked, churches swung into view like ships in a flat brown sea. Their graveyards were stuffed with lichened graves; often, the village around them had been wiped out by plague. There was nothing of Mary in those churches, though many were named for her. The shrines and niches were empty. On one whitewashed wall hung a large black iron wheel, utterly detached of meaning. Hundreds of years before, it would have been spun by the sexton to determine on

which of the Virgin's feasts a fast should begin or end. But there was nothing and no one to explain this. The ornate black circle looked, to me, incongruent and mysterious. As if it belonged to the ghostly carriage my grandfather swore he saw outside the church one winter's night.

How many glimpses of Mary I must have had without even realizing it. In my infancy and youth, she was my Old Testament: she foreshadowed the coming of Christ himself into my life. There was no God in my own home, no prayer. There was only an injunction to kneel to no one and nothing, and a right-sounding insistence that I would grow up to be successful and strong. But I saw that oil painting, an imitation of Raphael's *Madonna del Granduca*, on my grandmother's wall. I knew the name *Mary* as I knew the names of chaffinches, sugar-beet, and lily-of-the-valley. When I scrambled out of my grandmother's spare bed in the morning and looked out at the fields of charred stubble, I could have seen her, as the Scripture says, sitting at the gate. Hers was the hand that would lead me slowly to her son.

In that back bedroom, there was another, smaller picture of Mary. This time her skin had a sepia tone, almost mimetic among the rocks. Her expression was tender but remote to the point of coldness. I couldn't even have told you that there was a woman in the picture, or angels, or a baby. All the shapes seemed of a piece with the dull gold Florentine frame. The same way my life felt as one with the plowed fields and grey light.

But that was how Mary got in—not through statues or cute Christmas cards, not through prayers or teaching or through a historic wheel, but through those pictures. Mary got into my head against all likelihood, against the mighty determination of my father that our lives would be devoid of anything religious. She got in, just as a door that's slammed and locked and the chain pulled across cannot keep out air.

After my grandmother died, I asked Granddad not for the large Raphael of mysterious light but for the smaller picture of the sepia-skinned Madonna. It was her I wanted for my new room in the nurses' home in London. He gave me a fob watch too (my grandmother's had fallen to pieces) and instructions to find the house where they lived during the Blitz when she was a midwife and he a policeman. But I didn't put the picture on my wall: I kept it in tissue paper under my bed, in a suitcase crammed with letters and cassette tapes. It was a keepsake, a relic of childhood. Neither it, nor Mary, seemed to have anything to do with my life and the city I was trying to make home.

But my obsession with Mary's face only grew. Once I qualified as a nurse, I kept a picture of her in every room I lived in. My first published book of poetry contained several poems that mentioned her, and so did my second. Going through boxes of early manuscripts in my mother's attic recently, I was stunned to find crowds of references to her on yellowed pages.

Strange, then, that when I became Catholic at the age of thirty-nine, I didn't much feel Mary's presence. I was even a little dubious about the startling array of Marian devotions on hand and the never-ending reports of apparitions from all around the globe. Yet I continued to write about her. I was aware, after so many years, of the significance of Marian art in my life. But the messages she brought me through those images have taken decades to sink in.

Some see the past as another country or a station further down the railway line from where we've come. To me, it's a lit house at night. I've told the story of my life in many ways, but I have never managed to fully reveal the role of Mary within it. I have had to walk around the past, that "house in darkness," and peer through other windows to make sense of her quiet yet tremendous presence. Events I had thought finished reveal, hidden in a corner, away from the direct line of the front door, the most

significant woman in history. As I walk the dark garden of memory, scenes of my life are witnessed from a new perspective. Some stories are tangential to my own. Some happened hundreds of years ago and involve people unknown to me; yet they are a part of my story, and hers, and in them I meet her face.

Any mother is more than a prosaic flesh-and-bones presence. She is a shape, a smell, a place, a sense of belonging. She is what roots us in the world. Mary's presence in my life has shape-shifted from image in art on my Grandmother's walls, to archetype, to historical woman, to something almost impossible to define. For the world, she is no easier to pin down: she is the New Eve; she is heralded by Sarah, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, and Judith; she is the bride in the Song of Songs; she is the New Jerusalem and the Ark of the Covenant; she is Wisdom personified. To some Protestants, she is a "glory-stealer." To feminists, she is a victim and a symbol of woman's defeat. To Catholics she is that seemingly impossible thing, the Mother of God. In my journey of discovery, I have realized that the tension between the woman of flesh and blood born in Judea more than two thousand years ago and her total essence is vital. Mary is simply a woman who lived and died. And yet she is, through this unique essence, far more. Misunderstanding this "more" leads to heresy (if we say that Mary is not the Mother of God, then we are denying the union of divine and human natures in Christ). It explains the Reformation rejection of her as an object of devotion (if we do not see Mary as Mother of God, then why would we revere her?) and the feminist fury about her (if we do not see that Mary's total obedience leads her to be the most powerful woman of all time, then we have to accept that she is a glorified doormat). But, as I hope to show through these stories, it is Mary's essence, and all that it entails, that holds the key to her indispensability in our lives. It explains how she haunts me, inhabits me, and pulls me on the only Way; how she so pervades our consciousness that she

breaks through and into our culture no matter how much we deny and mistake her.

Our galleries are full of her. The Reformation couldn't begin to stamp out every image. Her face has been replicated thousands of times, by monks, masters, and even postmodernists. Yet the overwhelming feeling I'm left with—like Bernadette Soubirous when she looked at the statue at Lourdes—is that no one has got close to conveying what she is.

So how can I?

These pages can't contain a compendium of the Virgin Mary: *de Maria numquam satis*. They only attempt to delineate one sliver of her presence, her action in one life, in one person, and the impact on me of how others have engaged with her across the centuries, through art, distortion, piety, and prayer.

There have been, from the beginning, paintings and statues of Mary that have accompanied me. Some I sought out; others were given to me. The five artworks with which I subhead this "Prelude" and each chapter (*La Madonna del Granduca* by Raphael; *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* by Fra Filippo Lippi; *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, made without hands (an *acheiropoieton*); *La Pietà* by Michelangelo; and *The Statue of Our Lady of Walsingham* by an anonymous artist) have been the most iconic in my relationship with Mary. Their relevance to what was happening in my life is obviously idiosyncratic, but what they have taught me, directly and indirectly, about Mary has an uncanny and universal ring of truth. Interestingly, in all of the many works of art described in this book—even Chris Ofili's controversial Marian portrait made with elephant dung—inaccuracy and departure from who Mary really is have only helped me along in my journey to her.

I first wrote about Fra Lippi's *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* decades ago. But its message, through Mary, has continued to unspool. The tale begins in London, years after those

weekends in the flatlands of Norfolk, in the room I returned to after a day working on the hospital wards. A room of one particular love affair, where the picture that my grandfather gave me was stowed in a suitcase under the bed.

Madonna and Child with Two Angels
by Fra Filippo Lippi, 1460–1465

ONE

New Eve

i

She is more beautiful than the sun,
and excels every constellation of the stars.
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,
for it is succeeded by the night

The London sky at night was never black. Polluted by streetlights and fumes, it was dyed in otherworldly hues of orange, violet, even green—which meant the birds, confused and exhausted, endlessly proclaimed the dawn.

The hospital where I was training to be a nurse was relentlessly wakeful too. As the dayshift went home, the sick, the mad, and the bad washed up to the gaping doors of the emergency room. Everything seemed to save itself for the night: babies were born, people died, patients fell over. Night was a place of intimacy and ungovernable pain, as though both patients and staff saved up what the day couldn't deal with. It was a time of skeleton staff and emergency prescriptions. Departments were closed, consultants were sleeping. An organ might be removed, or a violently psychotic man drugged to unconsciousness. We didn't have the luxury of team consensus or reflection. By the time the night staff handed over to the day, there was an abyss between them—the lack of empathy you find between two very different races.

"Have you seen that doctor?"

I heard of her before I saw her. In the packs of whitecoats standing at bedsides, she stood apart. She was slender, her skin was pale, her hair shiny black, her voice quiet, her lips full, her

nose retroussé. Yet she wasn't what we might label as "beautiful" or "cute." She reminded me, fleetingly then, of my picture of the Virgin by Fra Lippi that I kept under my bed.

"I'm going to ask her out," said Mark, one of the male student nurses, over breakfast. We all hooted and someone spat their bacon out in hilarity.

"Different league, pal," guffawed John from Yorkshire.

But, male and female, we all liked watching her from afar. She looked kind, I thought, as she yawned at 3 a.m., writing drug charts, pager beeping, the charge nurse pulling at her elbow. Just kind.

The high-rise nurses' residence was home to hundreds of twenty-somethings, and we were all, in one way or another, looking for love. The corridors were full of sniffing, red-eyed girls who'd been dumped, or couples in their nightwear saying goodbye at the lift. Fevered mumblings and screams of passion pitched through the building at any hour; shrieks of despair and hurled plates were common too; and the bustle of nurses in heels and tight skirts screeching as they headed out to clubs. There were elaborate roast dinners cooked in tiny stoves at odd times and parties that blasted loudly for hours.

One day, a man, who I would only ever see in a police sketch, walked in the ever-open front door, took the lift to the thirteenth floor, climbed the stairs to the roof, and jumped. The last two or three seconds of his life were magnified by the paralyzed witnesses who saw him tumble past their windows: the physio and nurse making love, the student writing an essay at her desk, the Irish girl gazing at the cluttered London skyline and yearning for the green hills of Kerry. When I got home, the road outside was covered in yellow sand. To soak up all the blood, the policeman told me.

After a week, they brought a pencil sketch of the man to my door. I looked at it for as long as I could without seeming

suspicious. I wondered if it was drawn from his corpse, grainy CCTV, or witness accounts. Was the calm, steady look in his eyes, the neatly combed hair, artistic license? Was it possible that a competent artist, by measuring what remained of a dead man's bones, listening to a passerby, or squinting at footage, could conjure true likeness and spirit? I thought of an artist I once knew measuring the nose of a woman with a paintbrush from afar, calculating the distance from the center of the eye to the bridge of the nose. It surprised me, then, that he was so concerned with mathematics. But it is only through careful calculation, he said, that we can light a fire. The wood has to be laid with great accuracy. It's the base structure that determines the color and shape of the flames.

We student nurses never found out who the pencil-sketched man was. But we recognized the city in him. We were all lonely; the wards were full of loneliness. The eyes of a Greek grandmother, who couldn't speak a word of English though she'd lived in London for thirty years, swarmed with misery as I washed her. Babies with thick legs or outsized heads had mysterious fits in dark rooms. There were overdoses and slit wrists; broken pelvises and elderly with no home to go back to. The psychiatric ward, where I ended up working, was home for months to a man with a briefcase and short pajama bottoms who was convinced he was president of the United States; a tall, handsome black man who thought he was Jesus Christ; Lilian, who performed ballet in the day room, her eyes opaque with madness; and Jen, who threatened to push me out of a high window. "I want to die, I want to die, I want to die," I heard over and over again. When I left the hospital after a night shift, I'd gulp life in the cold air, exhaust and roar of buses, the green smell of cut grass from the park, stale beer spilled on the pavement, baking bread and croissants. In the onrush of traffic, an old homeless man would be proclaiming the end of the world on a scruffy cardboard sign. A skinhead busker

might play the saxophone, his notes tangling with car horns and the screech of trains. A conga of bald, orange-clad Hare Krishnas might weave through the rush hour, clashing cymbals and chanting. Occasionally, the image of a stranger—the beautiful doctor who we all watched, the Greek grandmother, the falling man—would magnify their lives to me in a disproportionate way, and I would feel the urge to reach out my hand and say, "I'm here!" or "No!"

She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her

On days off in winter, when there were fewer tourists and the parks were too cold to sit in for long, I took to walking around the National Gallery. First, I'd go into Saint-Martin-in-the-Fields for a lunchtime recital of Mozart or Shostakovich, then I'd wander over to the highly polished gallery rooms of medieval and Renaissance art, where I was met with silence, and room after room after room of the Virgin.

Those days, I'd pass, almost quickly, the clean somber lines of fourteenth-century paintings—the flat cracked faces by Barnaba da Modena, the wooden expressions of Giotto, the empty-window eyes of Cimabue. They seemed to leave me alone, with nothing. But I slowed at the blood and feeling in the faces of the Wilton Diptych. I bit on Lippo di Dalmasio's *Madonna of Humility* like a ripe fruit on a dry day; I pondered her fleshy love, her flushed complexion. Room after room I wandered, with no emotion, no words. The guard at the doorway sighed and checked his watch; tourists walked through as if surveying fields, something so vast you take it in on the move. I would always end in room 58, at Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation*, though I would not have articulated that this was my favorite, or even that I liked it. I was drawn to it, for reasons that seemed irrelevant and paltry—like the finely-drawn grey flowers, the colorful feathers, and the

slow arch of the frame that enclosed Mary and the angel's bent heads. It was a shame, I reflected, that the subject was religious. But I had to admit, as I sat down and gazed, that in the lights and pounding of the city, here was silence.

It was about this time that I met Mischa.

I was working on a general ward, and all the patients in my bay were long-stayers who needed basic care and couldn't get out of bed unaided. There was the Greek grandmother who we called Yaya; a white-haired Irish woman who had a thousand shiny possessions and no means of reaching them herself; an Austrian lady who wore a diamond necklace with her hospital-issue nightie; and Edmund, who liked to stand to attention at his walker in the morning to salute me as I passed.

It was the hardest, quickest work I'd ever known. There were so many jobs and so much to organize that I took to trotting around with four thermometers and popping them in four mouths at once, then getting on with fetching clean bedding or taking blood pressure while they measured. Many was the time I'd go off on my break, to come back and find the four of them groaning and gurning, pointing frantically to the thermometers in their mouths. It was exhausting, the changing and making of beds and turning of patients. The knack of moving an un-sprung octogenarian from bed to chair on my own eluded me, and more than once, we both ended up on the floor. But the late mornings after ward-round, or in the late evenings as darkness lit the wards and drew us in, I loved perching on a bed to listen to tales of London during the Blitz or the bragging about grandchildren's prodigious talents.

"I was beautiful like you," the old women with bulbous noses and saggy earlobes often said. "I used to be as slim as you. You wouldn't believe it, would you!"

I didn't believe it. Their faces were smudged sketches of what they had been. Portraits eaten up by mold and damp. I gazed at

them, trying to see their real faces, as I did with the sketch of the man who jumped. As I was beginning to do during my walks past all those pictures of Mary. What I was mining for in those paintings, in the patients I washed and changed, was the light in the eye or the particular tension in the mouth; something elusive but defining: the unchanging yet fragile place of identity.

When one day Mischa breezed onto the ward, I couldn't believe how ugly he was. He had crooked teeth and a weak chin. His eyes were murky grey, and his long hair, the color of dirty brass candlesticks, was shoved into a rubber band. But he made me laugh. He made everyone laugh. However dire the situation, when Mischa spoke, the eyes of consultants, nurses, relatives, and patients would glint; they'd rock with mirth.

When he saw me see him, that glint was multiplied and scatter-gunned through me. I was skinny, twenty-three, and brimming with expectation, like open water ready for lightning.

His face transfixed me. It was a strange face. I supposed that the reason I couldn't stop thinking about it was because it was so very unattractive. And then, as I examined it in my dreams, on the bus on the way into work, I began to conclude that it was beautiful.

"Write him a note and ask him out," my uncle, who was always deeply amused by my obsessions, told me over the phone.

"I wouldn't know where to send it."

"Well, it's a hospital, isn't it? Leave it with the commissionaire." My uncle was a playwright; to him, the world was one huge theater.

I waited until I left that ward, then sent a Greg Larson card to Mischa in the internal mail.

He called me one evening as I sat at my desk ignoring biology books and watching the Jamaican students in their hats and suits coming home from church. He thanked me, sincerely and gently, for my invitation for a drink—he was flattered, and

honored, he said emphatically and with great care—but he had a "partner" (*a partner?* I thought, and wondered if he were gay). He asked me which ward I was working on now and how it was going, and then we hung up. I sat for several minutes with my face in my hands, his kindness burning through me.

One evening soon after, my Irish flatmates, Rosario and Siobhan, cooked a big roast in the tiny oven, and we drank several bottles of red wine. I couldn't bring myself to tell them about Mischa, but after hearing his voice address me so long and so carefully, I was still feeling paradoxically elated—triumphant and lucky.

"Here's to being lucky in love!" Siobhan toasted, her voice breaking open on the grain of cigarette-induced bronchitis.

Bach cantatas whirled out from my room and lit the flat, and smoke made it impossible to see our lamb and charred vegetables in the windowless hallway; we drank till we couldn't walk straight to the kitchen for a tall glass of London water. Siobhan, in her red satin nightie, her uncontained cleavage on her knees as she bent forward to lecture us, called for brandy, and Rosario trotted obediently off to get the bottle her brother had brought over the day before.

Siobhan tossed back a glass, and Rosario poured a good deal over a bought cake and lit a match. A blue flame roared up past our eyebrows then morbidly stroked the blackened sponge. Siobhan blew smoke rings and told us about her new man, a physio from pediatrics. They weren't having sex; it was all in the *sexual tension*. I knew what the term meant, but she labored it so much and wrapped it in so much theory that I was confused. "He's not yer man. He doesn't see you that way," Rosario kept saying. "It's *sexual tension*," Siobhan would argue. "The more he looks at me, the more we want each other, the more we don't do it . . ."

"And how long can this situation go on for?" Rosario interrogated, drably dressed and earnest. She and Siobhan were flatmates only because their aunts in Bantry were friends.

"He likes to *look*," Siobhan jabbed her cigarette at us. "He says I've got Bette Davis eyes." Her own laugh dragged her off her chair and onto the floor.

I didn't take any brandy. But when I fell into bed past midnight, the room was pitching, and I fell into a sleep that was more like a coma.

Deep in the night, the phone on the wooden desk beside my bed rang. I had the sense it had been ringing for a long time.

"Hello?"

"I woke you."

I knew it was Mischa. I have a terrible memory for faces (perhaps that's why they obsess me), but I can identify someone by their voice in a syllable. His was relaxed and dark. He never had to strain to make himself heard. The world was pulled to his words.

"No. Not at all." I blinked strenuously into the dark.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading the paper."

He laughed. "It's been an odd week. If you're really up, do you want to meet for that coffee? I don't want to bother you."

I switched my lamp on and looked at my watch, but the time was irrelevant.

I was up, downing as much water as I could stomach. I was pulling my jeans on, and combing my hair, and running up the hill to the hospital in the cold dark. It was no trouble. It was 2:30 a.m., and in the false orange dawn of the London sky, the blackbirds were beginning to sing.

I knew who Mischa's "partner" was before I knew—a kind of déjà vu that belongs to the gut. "You mustn't think like that," he told me over the phone one evening, the way most of our conversations happened. "It's like when I was driving to my mother's for Friday dinner last week and this boy on a motorbike overtook me, bombing along. I thought: he's going to come off, and as I thought it, he did—skidded right across the road and was hit by a truck. Killed outright. He was only eighteen. But we don't cause things by thinking."

We don't cause things by thinking, but sometimes we just know. Knowledge lies like a wordless footprint across our mind, and then we see the foot swing forward to make the print that's already there. As if those paintings of Mary in the gallery were simple shapes awaiting her specific lines. Or mourning her departure.

"You're going to hell," Rosario might have said, had she known that the phone calls that came many times a day and through the night were from him. "Ah, go for it. Ya could be dead in the mornin'," Siobhan would have assured me, funneling her smoke out the side of her mouth.

"They're not married. They don't even live together," I reasoned to myself in the mirror. "This is the end of their relationship and the beginning of ours."

"No one's ever free," my uncle shrugged when I met him in a bar with deep velvet armchairs in Leicester Square. My shaggy-haired uncle was my guru on matters of love and literature. His cigarette was always lit; he was always listening. "People are always just out of a relationship, or in one, or chasing someone else," he told me. "There's overlapping, underlapping. No one is ever one hundred percent available. Doesn't exist. You have to stick your hand out into the traffic and hope."

The hot wind of London was stronger than my bones. It lifted dirt and flung it in my eyes. It funneled down into the tube where it lifted my skirt. It tangled my hair and raked my skin. Glassy-eyed with thoughts of Mischa, I stayed on trains beyond my stop. I forgot my pasta boiling on the stove, and Rosario came home to find the pan smoking. My mind was tuned incessantly to the phone's ring. If it didn't ring, I sickened; I physically stooped. But it did ring, and there was not one cell inside me that didn't ignite at his voice.

The first time, he came by late at night. "The only time it would ever be," he said, and slid my white cotton shirt off my shoulders. He told me this could never ever happen, and never again, never and never, over and over. "Never," repeated like a thing you cannot bear to put down.

He didn't kiss me at first. Neither of us believed (or had even heard of in a serious context) the notion that the body was a temple. But I knew that some prostitutes guarded their mouths, reserved them as seat of deeper intimacy and respect. And in giving me his mouth, or taking mine, I knew he felt he would betray his partner in a worse way.

I knew that she was the beautiful doctor who everyone watched. The one who had reminded me of Mary in the Lippi painting under my bed.

"Never speak to me of him," Rosario told me when she eventually found out. Rosario was somehow set apart from our shenanigans through those years. She was the cleaner-upper, the confidante, always in the kitchen with her arms folded and her head on one side. "I want no part of it," she said now. "I can't see her at work and know what's going on."

She couldn't understand this wind, I thought, this blindness, this compulsion. As weeks became months, the compulsion became worse, and so did the sickness. We were like Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno*, condemned to be dragged eternally

by torrents of air. We were buffeted on sheer white force—up to Primrose Hill at night, among the weird bird calls of the zoo; on my tiny balcony among the giant chimney pots; down hospital corridors to some anonymous meeting room; in my bed. We would part, but he would be back at 3 a.m., the damp London night on his skin, his hair smelling of cold exhaust. We would break up, cry ourselves sick, meet for a sandwich to console each other two streets from the hospital. There's a painting by Gaetano Previati of Paolo and Francesca where they seem transformed into clouds themselves, borne up and scudding. Their motion never ends. Mischa and I were in ecstatic flux—calling, falling into bed, kissing, parting, waking, crying, laughing, calling, parting—and I thinned out, weakened but could not let go. "You're my *shiksa*," he would joke, "What would my mother say?" "*Shiksa* . . ." he would whisper, "hair like wheat, eyes of sky-blue, oy vey . . ." The tidal pull to each other seemed stronger than any existing tie he may have. Many times I assumed he and his partner had split, or were about to. Or that was the lie that I told myself. Patience was called for, I reasoned to the mirror. And he fed this patience. Wherever I was, he called me: at home, on the ward, at my parents' house. At a bed-and-breakfast in Stratford-on-Avon where I stayed alone one night, suddenly, at 11 p.m., there was a boy of eight at my bedroom door, holding out the family phone: "I thought if the play was good you'd want to talk about it," Mischa said without announcing himself. "And if it was bad, you'd want to talk about it too."

I listened to Mahler and Bach continuously; read Keats, Yeats, Eliot, and Plath; and wrote clumsy poems about the city and heartbreak. He bought me contemporary anthologies of women's poetry and collections by the body-bewitched New York poet Sharon Olds: "I'm going to drag you screaming into the nineties." He read my poems when he came up to my room, his doctor's bag at his feet and his eyes red from the nightshift.

"You're going to be a poet," he told me with his usual authority. And when I longed to be published, "Darling you will be. Even if it's on the side of a carton of milk, you will be."

Mischa and the woman doctor moved in together, then bought a house. They were bound, he said, not only by their history together, but by a deeper, more mysterious narrative. Both Jewish, they were *thinking with the blood*. I qualified as a nurse and moved into my own flat. But even when I no longer saw him, I still listened to the unreasonable song of my own blood; I was still tethered to the phone line. It seemed to have become an umbilicus, the only thing that gave me life. This story is old though. In that sense, it's uninteresting. The true story, the only reason that I tell it, is that it was the next chance that Mary took to step into my life.

In the wind and light of the city, I rested in a gallery of paintings of the Virgin. In the winds of that affair and its aftermath, I rested in one particular painting of her face. Mary's eyes in that Lippi painting, which I took out of the suitcase under my bed and hung for the first time in my new flat, were so like those of Mischa's woman: naked and sensitive. The woman shared with that fifteenth-century Madonna an entrancing look of poise, of pre-collapse. Her face lay across my mind with all the weight and type of a work of art—all the many things it said in its silence. When I saw her in the canteen drinking coffee alone, when I crossed her in the street and even said hello, I thought of that painting of Mary. Once, I sat beside her in a meeting and had an hour to memorize her court shoes and lilac silk scarf; the smudge of black eyeliner beneath her expansive brown eyes; the mascara clump in one epicanthic fold; how she braided her hair. And I saw Fra Lippi's Virgin's smooth forehead, the perfectly painted curve of her nose.

Mischa's woman seemed absolutely untouchable. As she endured, I seemed to crack. As she lightened, I seemed to darken.

As she did not seem to hear my phone calls, my brief entrance into their lives, my almost-plot-twist of her story, I became deafened by the roar of what bound me to Mischa, what would bind me for many years to come. I walked home from work every day, the yellow lights too loud, the buses vicious through the puddles. The cafés were full of lovers, and I felt a banging in my head, as if my thoughts could not be contained. There seemed to be a cool island of existential calm that, on the face of it, was inhabited by successful couples owning garden flats in North London. But beyond that, there existed a serenity that I thought I would never possess. Never.

Mischa still called. It was him I paged when I had my first poem published. It was him I paged when my father became ill. As Mischa and the woman set up home and my time with him began to belong to that shrinking place, the past, it seemed impossible that my indelible thoughts of us could stain the London sky with such violent colors; that they could consume my life.

"You look *desolate*," Rosario pronounced when we met for coffee, as though it were a medical term. *Desolata*, Dante would have said—abandoned—the word built around the Latin *solus*, alone. Even then, even in that moment, I saw the woman walk down the high street, past the window. I couldn't have felt closer to her if she had marched into the coffee shop, sat down beside me, and taken my face in her hands.

Then, one afternoon as I walked home from my shift, Mischa pulled up in his car beside me.

"Want a lift?"

It seemed so normal, getting into a car with him in broad daylight and driving down the high street among shoppers and the school run.

"You don't look well." He snatched quick glances at me as he drove.

We climbed up the carpeted flights of the large white house and into my attic room where I lay down on the bed, for no other reason than that the settee was miniscule, and I only had the energy to be horizontal. For months it was that way. The tears slid out of my eyes, but they meant nothing: there was no seam between crying and not crying.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry." He leant over me and kissed me, with love and apology, on the mouth. He carried on kissing me, almost without moving, as though someone forgot to move the secondhand of the eternal clock onward. We became locked together more deeply than I had ever known, and the tears carried on sliding down my temples. The fit of his mouth on mine was tight and perfect. I couldn't breathe. I felt myself become faint. And then I breathed, as if I had become amphibious and could stay underwater forever. I could open my eyes and see his eyes up close and unguarded, their hardening to black like a country night sky, which is really space, a dark window to something else. I could merge into his face; our thoughts melted and blended. The face: place of leakage, breathing, utterance, laughter, where every tiny thought or feeling ruffles, crinkles, darkens, lightens, like wind over a wheatfield; the place we are read and understood. I had never been entered so thoroughly as during that kiss; never been less alone. It seemed to be the most perfect way of knowing me. It was not only filled with pity; it seemed to *be* love; it was feeding and being fed. At the same time, it took the rest of me from myself.

When he finally sat up, the room was dark and the traffic slower; my neighbor had begun a piano lesson. I could taste blood.

I didn't get up to see him to the door.

It was some months after that encounter that, in search of solitude, I moved again. In my new flat in Mornington Place, I

hung the Lippi picture on another wall. Like Mischa's woman, this Mary was as still as a pool of water. I could not begin to understand her. I couldn't understand the stillness of detachment, the stillness of prophecy. These were things I sensed the shape of but didn't yet have the vocabulary or wisdom to define.

So I began writing poems about Mary, or about this image that claimed to be her. Fra Lippi's Madonna suggested, more than anything, metaphor, not reality. In fact, the lady of this painting shared neither hair nor eye color with Mischa's woman, nor any woman in this world that I can think of. Her complexion was eggshell in both color and texture. Her drastically high hairline and sculpted eyebrows made her seem almost transparent. But her expression was now so familiar to me that it seemed to want to tell me something entirely human. Despite her ethereality, there was an inescapable sensuality in her jawline, her slight overbite, the succulence of arms and breast.