

The Man of My Dreams

Curtis Sittenfeld

Published by Picador

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

June 1991

JULIA ROBERTS IS getting married. It's true: Her dress will be an eight-thousand-dollar custom-made two-piece gown from the Tyler Trafficante West Hollywood salon, and at the reception following the ceremony, she'll be able to pull off the train and the long part of the skirt to dance. The bridesmaids' dresses will be seafoam green, and their shoes (Manolo Blahnik, \$425 a pair) will be dyed to match. The bridesmaids themselves will be Julia's agents (she has two), her makeup artist, and a friend who's also an actress, though no one has ever heard of her. The cake will be four-tiered, with violets and seafoam ribbons of icing.

"What I want to know is where's our invitation?" Elizabeth says. "Did it get lost in the mail?" Elizabeth—Hannah's aunt—is standing by the bed folding laundry while Hannah sits on the floor, reading aloud from the magazine. "And who's her fiancé again?"

"Kiefer Sutherland," Hannah says. "They met on the set of *Flatliners*."

"Is he cute?"

"He's okay." Actually, he *is* cute—he has blond stubble and, even better, one blue eye and one green eye—but Hannah is reluctant to reveal her taste; maybe it's bad.

"Let's see him," Elizabeth says, and Hannah holds up the magazine. "Ehh," Elizabeth says. "He's adequate." This makes Hannah think of Darrach. Hannah arrived in Pittsburgh a week ago, while Darrach—he is Elizabeth's husband, Hannah's uncle—was on the road. The evening Darrach got home, after Hannah set the table for dinner and prepared the salad, Darrach said, "You must stay with us forever, Hannah." Also that night, Darrach yelled from the second-floor bathroom, "Elizabeth, this place is a bloody disaster. Hannah will think we're barn animals." He proceeded to get on his knees and start scrubbing. Yes, the tub was grimy, but Hannah couldn't believe it. She has never seen her own father wipe a counter, change a sheet, or take out trash. And here was Darrach on the floor after he'd just returned from seventeen hours of driving. But the thing about Darrach is—he's ugly. He's really ugly. His teeth are brownish and angled in all directions, and he has wild eyebrows, long and wiry and as wayward as his teeth, and he has a tiny ponytail. He's tall and lanky and his accent is nice—he's from Ireland—but still. If Elizabeth considers Kiefer Sutherland only adequate, what does she think of her own husband?

"You know what let's do?" Elizabeth says. She is holding up two socks, both white but clearly different lengths. She shrugs, seemingly to herself, then rolls the socks into a ball and tosses them toward the folded pile. "Let's have a party for Julia. Wedding cake, cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off. We'll toast to her happiness. Sparkling cider for all."

Hannah watches Elizabeth.

"What?" Elizabeth says. "You don't like the idea? I know Julia herself won't show up."

"Oh," Hannah says. "Okay."

When Elizabeth laughs, she opens her mouth so wide that the fillings in her molars are visible. "Hannah," she says, "I'm not nuts. I

realize a celebrity won't come to my house just because I invited her."

"I didn't think that," Hannah says. "I knew what you meant." But this is not entirely true; Hannah cannot completely read her aunt. Elizabeth has always been a presence in Hannah's life—Hannah has a memory of herself at age six, riding in the backseat of Elizabeth's car as Elizabeth sang "You're So Vain" quite loudly and enthusiastically along with the radio—but for the most part, Elizabeth has been a distant presence. Though Hannah's father and Elizabeth are each other's only siblings, their two families have not gotten together in years. Staying now in Elizabeth's house, Hannah realizes how little she knows of her aunt. The primary information she has always associated with Elizabeth was acquired so long ago she cannot even remember learning it: that once, soon after Elizabeth became a nurse, a patient left her a great deal of money and Elizabeth squandered it. She spent it on an enormous party, though there was no occasion, not even her birthday. And she's been struggling to make ends meet ever since. (Hannah has been surprised to find, however, that her aunt orders takeout, usually Chinese, on the nights Darrach is gone, which is at least half the time. They don't exactly *act* like they're struggling to make ends meet.) It didn't help, financially speaking, that Elizabeth married a truck driver: the Irish hippie, as Hannah's father calls him. When she was nine, Hannah asked her mother what *hippie* meant, and her mother said, "It's someone fond of the counterculture." When Hannah asked her sister—Allison is three years older—she said, "It means Darrach doesn't take showers," which Hannah has observed to be untrue.

"Would we have our party before or after the wedding?" Hannah asks. "She gets married on June fourteenth." Then, imagining it must appear on the invitations like this, all spelled out in swirly writing, she adds, "Nineteen hundred and ninety-one."

"Why not *on* the fourteenth? Darrach can be my date, if he's here, and Rory can be yours."

Hannah feels a stab of disappointment. Of course her date will be her eight-year-old retarded cousin. (That's the final piece in the puzzle of Elizabeth's financial downfall, according to Hannah's father: that Rory was born with Down's. The day of Rory's birth, her father said to her mother, as he stood in the kitchen after work flipping through mail, "They'll be supporting that child all the way to their graves.") But what did Hannah think Elizabeth was going to say? *Your date will be the sixteen-year-old son of one of my coworkers. He is very handsome, and he'll like you immediately.* Sure, Hannah expected that. She always thinks a boy for her to love will fall from the sky.

"I wish I could find my wedding dress for you to wear at our party," Elizabeth says. "I wouldn't be able to fit my big toe in it at this point, but you'd look real cute. Lord only knows what I did with it, though."

How can Elizabeth not know where her wedding dress is? That's not like losing a scarf. Back in Philadelphia, Hannah's mother's wedding dress is stored in the attic in a long padded box, like a coffin.

"I gotta put the other load in the dryer," Elizabeth says. "Coming?"

Hannah stands, still holding the magazine. "Kiefer bought her a tattoo," she says. "It's a red heart with the Chinese symbol that means 'strength of heart.'"

"In other words," Elizabeth says, "he said to her, 'As a sign of my love, you get to be poked repeatedly by a needle with ink in it.' Do we really trust this guy?" They are on the first floor, cutting through the kitchen to the basement steps. "And do I dare ask where the tattoo is located?"

"It's on her left shoulder. Darrach doesn't have any tattoos, does

he? Even though that's, like, a stereotype of truck drivers?" Is this a rude question?

"None he's told me about," Elizabeth says. She appears unfazed. "Then again, most truck drivers probably aren't tofu eaters or yoga fanatics."

Yesterday Darrach showed Hannah his rig, which he keeps in the driveway; the trailers he uses are owned by the companies he drives for. Darrach's current route is from here in Pittsburgh, where he picks up axles, to Crowley, Louisiana, where he delivers the axles and picks up sugar, to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he delivers the sugar and picks up women's slips to bring back to Pittsburgh. The other night Darrach let Rory demonstrate how to turn the front seat around to get in the sleeper cab. Then Darrach pointed out the bunk where he meditates. During this tour, Rory was giddy. "It's my dad's," he told Hannah several times, gesturing widely. Apparently, the rig is one of Rory's obsessions; the other is his bus driver's new puppy. Rory has not actually seen the puppy, but discussion is under way about Elizabeth taking Rory this weekend to visit the bus driver's farm. Watching her cousin in the rig, Hannah wondered if his adoration of his parents would remain pure. Perhaps his Down's will freeze their love.

After Elizabeth has moved the wet clothes into the dryer, they climb the basement steps. In the living room, Elizabeth flings herself onto the couch, sets her feet on the table, and sighs noisily. "So what's our plan?" she says. "Darrach and Rory shouldn't be back from errands for at least an hour. I'm taking suggestions."

"We could go for a walk," Hannah says. "I don't know." She glances out the living room window, which overlooks the front yard. The truth is that Hannah finds the neighborhood creepy. Where her family lives, outside Philadelphia, the houses are separated by wide lawns, the driveways are long and curved, and the front doors are

flanked by Doric columns. Here, there are no front porches, only stoops flecked with mica, and when you sit outside—the last few nights, Hannah and Elizabeth have gone out there while Rory tried to catch fireflies—you can hear the televisions in other houses. The grass is dry, beagles bark into the night, and in the afternoon, pale ten-year-old boys in tank tops pedal their bikes in circles, the way they do on TV in the background when some well-coiffed reporter is standing in front of the crime scene where a seventy-six-year-old woman has been murdered.

“A walk’s not a bad idea,” Elizabeth says, “except it’s so damn hot.”

Then the living room, the whole house actually, is quiet except for the laundry rolling around downstairs in the dryer. Hannah can hear the ping of metal buttons against the sides of the machine.

“Let’s get ice cream,” Elizabeth says. “But don’t bring the magazine.” She grins at Hannah. “I don’t know how much more celebrity happiness I can take.”

HANNAH WAS SHIPPED to Pittsburgh. She was sent away, put on a Greyhound, though Allison got to stay in Philadelphia with their mother because of exams. Hannah thinks she should still be in Philadelphia for the same reason—because of exams. But Hannah is in eighth grade, whereas Allison is a high school junior, which apparently means that her exams matter more. Also, Hannah is viewed by their parents as not just younger but less even-keeled, and therefore potentially inconvenient. So Hannah’s school year isn’t even finished, but she is here with Elizabeth and Darrach indefinitely.

According to the letter signed by Dr. William Tucker and hand-delivered by her mother to the principal’s office, Hannah has

mononucleosis and the family has requested that she be allowed to make up her coursework later in the summer. This is a lie. Dr. William Tucker does not exist but was concocted by Hannah's mother and Hannah's aunt Polly, her mother's sister. It is with Polly's family that Hannah's mother and Allison have been staying for the last ten days. Hannah does not have mono (the other option her mother and Aunt Polly considered was chicken pox, but they decided Hannah seems too old not to have had it yet, and besides, people might wonder later why she didn't have scars). Hannah is missing school because one night, her father exiled her and her mother and Allison from the house. This was, obviously, somewhat insane. But it wasn't more insane or cruel than other things he's done, which is not to say that he's insane or cruel all the time. He's himself; he can be perfectly pleasant; he's the weather system they live with, and all of their behavior, whenever he is around, hinges on his mood. Don't the three of them understand that living with him simply is what it is? To complain or resist would be as useless as complaining about or resisting a tornado. This is why her mother's current refusal to return home bewilders Hannah most, and why it's her mother as much as her father whom Hannah faults for the upheaval. Since when has her mother stood up for herself? She is no longer playing by the family rules.

Maybe it was the external aspect that made it worse, having to drive over and knock on Aunt Polly and Uncle Tom's door after midnight, when usually the effects of her father's rages are confined within the house, out of sight. Or maybe it was the escalated aspect, how his making them leave was, in its way, more dramatic than the usual shouting, the slammed door or occasional shattered plate. And it's true that it was embarrassing (Hannah was standing there in front of her cousins Fig and Nathan in her pink nightshirt with

gumballs on it, which is from fifth grade), but the episode wasn't shocking. For her mother to refuse to return home—she's acting like it's shocking. She's acting like they, any of them, can make normal demands of Hannah's father. But they all *know* they can't make normal demands of him. And Hannah's mother is the one who has accommodated him most all these years, the one who has taught Hannah and Allison, both by example and by instruction, exactly how accommodation works.

HANNAH TURNS OFF the television—having it on in the daytime reminds her of being sick—and picks up the magazine from the day before. She is in the house alone: Elizabeth is at work, and Rory is at school, and Darrach, who is leaving for another run tomorrow, is at the hardware store.

It would be good to be famous, Hannah thinks as she turns the page. Not for the reasons people imagine—the money and glamour—but for the insulation. How could you ever be lonely or bored if you were a celebrity? There wouldn't be time, because you'd never even be by yourself. You'd be getting shuttled between people and appointments, reading scripts, being fitted for the beaded silver gown you'd wear to the next awards ceremony, doing stomach crunches while your trainer Enrique loomed over you and barked encouragement. You'd have an entourage, people would vie to talk to you. Reporters would want to know your New Year's resolution or your favorite snack; they'd care about this information.

Julia Roberts's parents divorced when she was four—her father, Walter, was a vacuum cleaner salesman, and her mother, Betty, a church secretary—and then her father died of cancer when she was nine, which must have been terrible unless it was a relief. Regardless, Julia's childhood was a long time ago, in Smyrna, Georgia. Now she's twenty-three, living in California, which is a place Han-

nah has never been but imagines as windy and bright, full of tall people and shiny cars and a sky of endless blue.

It is a little after one o'clock, and Hannah ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich an hour ago, but she starts thinking of food she knows to be in the kitchen: Darrach's vegetarian enchiladas left over from last night, chocolate-chip ice cream. She is gaining weight, which is something she'd been doing prior to her arrival in Pittsburgh. Since the beginning of eighth grade, she has gained eleven pounds; she now has hips, and the bra she wears is a displeasing and once-unimaginable 36C. Also, abruptly, a stranger's nose has appeared on her face. She didn't realize it until she saw her most recent class picture: her light brown hair and pale skin, her blue eyes, and there it was, an extra knob of flesh at the end of her nose when before she'd always had her mother's small, upturned model. Hannah's mother is a petite woman, partial to headbands, who maintains blond highlights and plays doubles tennis every morning, summer or winter, with Aunt Polly and two other women. She got braces at the age of thirty-eight, then had them removed at the age of forty—last year—but in fact she'd always possessed the personality of an attractive adult woman with braces: privileged yet apologetic, well meaning but hard to take that seriously. She has never remarked on Hannah's weight *per se*, but she'll sometimes make overly enthusiastic comments about, for instance, celery. In these moments she seems to Hannah less critical than protective, tentatively trying to prevent her daughter from taking the wrong path.

Is Hannah becoming ugly? If so, it seems like the worst thing that could happen; she is letting down her family and, possibly, boys and men everywhere. Hannah knows this both from TV and from boys' and men's eyes. You can *see* how what they want the most is beauty. Not in a chauvinistic way, not even as something they can act on. Just instinctively, to look at and enjoy. It's what they expect, and

who they expect it from most of all is teenage girls. When you're older, like Elizabeth, it's all right to get heavy, but when you're a teenager, being beautiful or at least cute is your responsibility. Say the words *sixteen-year-old girl* to any group of males, eleven-year-olds, fifty-year-olds, and they will leer maybe a lot or maybe a little or maybe they'll try not to leer. But they will be envisioning the sixteen-year-old's smooth tan legs, her high breasts and long hair. Is expecting her beauty even their fault?

She should do jumping jacks, Hannah thinks, right now—twenty-five of them, or fifty. But instead there's the block of cheddar cheese sitting in the refrigerator, the crisp and salty crackers in the cupboard. She eats them standing by the sink until she feels gross and leaves the house.

Her aunt's street dead-ends onto a park, on the far side of which is a public pool. Hannah gets within twenty yards of the pool's fence before turning around. She sits at a dilapidated picnic table and pages through the magazine again, though she has by now read every article several times. She was planning to work as a candy striper this summer in Philadelphia, and she could do it at the hospital where Elizabeth is a nurse if she knew how long she was staying. But she has no idea. She has talked on the phone to Allison and her mother, and nothing at home appears to have changed: They are still staying with Aunt Polly and Uncle Tom, her mother still will not return home. What's weirdest, in a way, is picturing her father in the house alone at night; it's hard to imagine him angry without them. It must be like watching a game show by yourself, how calling out the answers feels silly and pointless. What is fury without witnesses? Where's the tension minus an audience to wonder what you'll do next?

A guy wearing jeans and a white tank top is walking toward Hannah. She looks down, pretending to read.

Soon he's standing right there; he has walked all the way over to her. "You got a light?" he says.

She looks up and shakes her head. The guy is maybe eighteen, a few inches taller than she is, with glinting blondish hair so short it's almost shaved, a wispy mustache, squinty blue eyes, puffy lips, and well-defined arm muscles. Where did he come from? He is holding an unlit cigarette between two fingers.

"You don't smoke, right?" he says. "It causes cancer."

"I don't smoke," she says.

He looks at her—he seems to be removing something from his front teeth with his tongue—then he says, "How old are you?"

She hesitates; she turned fourteen two months ago. "Sixteen," she says.

"You like motorcycles?"

"I don't know." How did she enter into this conversation? Is she in danger? She must be, at least a little.

"I'm fixing up a motorcycle at my buddy's." The guy gestures with his right shoulder, but it's hard to know what direction he means.

"I have to go," Hannah says, and she stands, lifting one leg and then the other over the picnic bench. She begins to walk away, then glances back. The guy is still standing there.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Hannah," she says, and immediately wishes she had told him something better: Genevieve, perhaps, or Veronica.

AT A SLUMBER party when she was nine, Hannah learned a joke wherein whatever the joke teller said, the other person had to respond, "Rubber balls and liquor."

When her father picked her up from the party on Sunday morning, she decided to try it out on him. He seemed distracted—he was

flipping between radio stations—but went along with it. It felt important to tell him in the car, when it was just the two of them, because Hannah doubted her mother would find it funny. But her father had a good sense of humor. When she couldn't fall asleep on the weekend, she sometimes got to stay up with him in the den and watch *Saturday Night Live*, and he brought her ginger ale while her mother and Allison slept. At these times she would watch the lights of the television flickering on his profile and feel proud that he laughed when the TV audience laughed—it made him seem part of a world beyond their family.

In the car, Hannah asked, "What do you eat for breakfast?"

"Rubber balls and liquor," her father said. He switched lanes.

"What do you eat for lunch?"

"Rubber balls and liquor."

"What do you buy at the store?"

"Rubber balls and liquor."

"What do you—" She paused. "What do you keep in the trunk of your car?"

"Rubber balls and liquor."

"What—" Hannah could hear her voice thickening in anticipation, how the urge to laugh—already!—nearly prevented her from finishing the question. "What do you do to your wife at night?"

The car was silent. Slowly, her father turned his head to look at her. "Do you have any idea what that means?" he asked.

Hannah was silent.

"Do you know what balls are?"

Hannah shook her head.

"They're testicles. They're next to a man's penis. Women don't have balls."

Hannah looked out her window. *Boobs*. That's what she'd thought balls were.

"So the joke makes no sense. Rub *her* balls? Do you see why that doesn't make sense?"

Hannah nodded. She wanted to be out of the car, away from the site of this embarrassing error.

Her father reached out and turned up the radio. They did not speak for the rest of the ride home.

In the driveway, he said to her, "Women who are ugly try to be funny. They think it compensates. But you'll be pretty, like Mom. You won't need to be funny."

WHEN ELIZABETH GETS home from work, as soon as Rory hears her key in the lock, he runs around to the far side of the couch and crouches, his hair poking up visibly. "Hey there, Hannah," Elizabeth says, and Hannah points behind the couch.

"You know what I feel like?" Elizabeth says loudly. She's wearing pink scrubs and a macaroni necklace Rory made at school last week. "I feel like a swim. But I wish I knew where Rory was, because I bet he'd like to go."

Rory's hair twitches.

"We'll have to leave without him," Elizabeth says. "Unless I can find him before—"

Then Rory bursts out of hiding, flinging his arms skyward. "Here's Rory," he cries. "Here's Rory!" He runs around the couch and throws himself against his mother. When she catches him, they both fall sideways on the cushions, Elizabeth pressing Rory down and repeatedly kissing his cheeks and nose. "Here's my boy," she says. "Here's my big handsome boy." Rory squeals and writhes beneath her.

At the pool, Elizabeth and Hannah sit side by side on white plastic reclining chairs. Elizabeth's bathing suit turns out to be brown, and around the stomach, there is a loose bunching to the material

that Hannah sneaks looks at several times before she understands. But it would be impolite to ask the question directly, so instead she says, "Did you just get that suit?"

"Are you kidding?" Elizabeth says. "I've had this since I was pregnant with Rory."

So it is a maternity suit. Elizabeth cannot be pregnant, however; shortly after Rory's birth, she got her tubes tied (that was the expression Hannah heard her parents use, causing her to picture Elizabeth's reproductive organs as sausage links knotted up).

Rory is in the shallow end of the pool. Elizabeth watches him with one hand pressed to her forehead, shielding her eyes from the late-afternoon sun. He does not seem to be playing with the other children, Hannah notices, but stands against a wall wearing inflatable floating devices on his upper arms though the water comes only to his waist. He watches a group of four or five children, all smaller than he is, who splash at one another. Hannah feels an urge to get into the pool with Rory, but she is not wearing a bathing suit. In fact, she told Elizabeth that she doesn't own one, which is a lie. She has a brand-new bathing suit—her mother purchased it for her at Macy's just before Hannah left Philadelphia, as if she were going on vacation—but Hannah doesn't feel like wearing it in front of all these people.

And Elizabeth hasn't said, *Of course you have a bathing suit! Everyone has a bathing suit!* Nor has she said, *We'll go to the mall and buy one for you.*

"How are your movie stars?" Elizabeth asks. "Not long till Julia's big day."

She's right—the wedding is this Friday.

"We've got to get cracking on our party," Elizabeth says. "Remind me Thursday to pick up cake mix after work, or maybe we should splurge and buy petits fours at the bakery."