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The Modern Lovers

Written by Emma Straub

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Modern Lovers

Emma Straub

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For Nina,
who made moving to Ohio sound like fun,
and for the Rutland Readers,
with gratitude for seven years of neighborly affection

If I could settle down
Then I would settle down.

– Pavement

You can't help yourself, but neither can we.
Together, mighty past, we dominate things.

– Kenneth Koch

PART ONE

Ruby Tuesday

MARY ANN O'CONNELL REAL ESTATE

New Listing

Gorgeous 5-Bedroom Victorian Showstopper in Prime Ditmas Park. Many original details including pocket doors, moldings, intricately carved grand staircase. Kitchen updated, new roof. WBFP. Two-car garage. Gracious living in the heart of the neighborhood, close to shopping and fine dining on Cortelyou Road, close to trains. A Must See!

One

In June, the book club was at Zoe's house, which meant that Elizabeth had to carry her heavy ceramic bowl of spinach salad with walnuts and bits of crumbled goat cheese a grand total of half a block. She didn't even have to cross a street. None of the dozen women in the group had to travel far, that was the point. It was hard enough to coordinate schedules and read a novel (though only half the group ever finished anything) without asking people to get on the subway. Make plans with your real friends on your own time, drive your car across the borough to have dinner if you want to, but this was the neighborhood. This was easy. It was the last meeting before the annual summer hiatus. Elizabeth had sold houses to six of the twelve. She had a vested interest in keeping them happy, though, in truth, it was also good when people gave up on Brooklyn and decided to move to the suburbs or back to wherever they came from, because then she got a double commission. Elizabeth liked her job.

Of course, even if the rest of the book club was composed of neighbors who might not otherwise have crossed paths, she and Zoe were different. They were old friends – best friends, really, though Elizabeth might not say that in front of Zoe for fear that she would laugh at the phrase for being juvenile. They'd lived together after college way back in the Stone Age in this very same house, sharing the

rambling Victorian with Elizabeth's boyfriend (now husband) and two guys who had lived in their co-op at Oberlin. It was always nice to carry a big bowl of something homemade over to Zoe's house, because it felt like being back in that potluck-rich, money-poor twilight zone known as one's twenties. Ditmas Park was a hundred miles from Manhattan (in reality, seven), a tiny little cluster of Victorian houses that could have existed anywhere in the United States, with Prospect Park's parade grounds to the north and Brooklyn College to the south. Their other friends from school were moving into walk-up apartments in the East Village or into beautiful brownstones in Park Slope, on the other side of the vast green park, but the three of them had fallen in love with the idea of a *house* house, and so there they were, sandwiched between old Italian ladies and the projects.

When their lease was up, Zoe's parents – an African-American couple who'd made their tidy fortune as a disco duo – bought the place for her. Seven bedrooms, three baths, center hall, driveway, garage – it cost a hundred and fifty grand. The moldy carpet and the layers of lead paint were free. Elizabeth and Andrew weren't married yet, let alone sharing a bank account, and so they sent their separate rent checks to Zoe's parents back in Los Angeles. Zoe had borrowed more money to fix it up over the years, but the mortgage was paid. Elizabeth and Andrew moved a few blocks over for a while, all the way to Stratford, and then, when their son Harry was four, a dozen years ago, bought a house three doors down. Zoe's house was now worth $2 million, maybe more. Elizabeth felt a little zip up her spine thinking about it. Neither Elizabeth nor Zoe thought they'd still be in the neighborhood so many years later, but it had never been the right time to leave.

Elizabeth walked up the steps to the wide porch and peered in the window. She was the first to arrive, as usual. The dining room was ready, the table set. Zoe pushed through the swinging door from the

kitchen, a bottle of wine in each hand. She exhaled upward, trying in vain to blow a lone curl out of her eye. Zoe was wearing tight blue jeans and a threadbare camisole, with a complicated pile of necklaces clacking against her chest. It didn't matter if Elizabeth went shopping with Zoe, to the consignment shops she frequented and to the small, precious boutiques she liked, nothing ever fit Elizabeth the way it fit Zoe; she was as preternaturally cool at forty-five as she'd been at eighteen. Elizabeth knocked on the window and then waved when Zoe looked up and smiled. Zoe gestured for her to come in, her thin fingers waggling in the air. 'Door's open!'

The house smelled like basil and fresh tomatoes. Elizabeth let the door shut heavily behind her, and set her salad down on the table. She shook out her wrists, which crackled like fireworks. Zoe walked around the table and kissed her on the cheek.

'How was your day, sweets?'

Elizabeth rolled her head sideways, from one side to the other. Something clicked. 'You know,' she said. 'Like that. What can I do?' She looked around the room. 'Do you need me to go home and get anything?' Even in Ditmas Park, a twelve-person dinner party was a lot for a host. Usually only a small quorum of the book club was able to come, and so the hosts could scrape by and cram everyone around their normal dining-room table, but every so often (especially just before the summer) all the women would happily RSVP and, depending on who was hosting, the group would have to carry extra folding chairs down the street in order to avoid sitting on the floor like pouting children on Thanksgiving.

Overhead, there was the sound of something heavy falling to the floor – *thump* – and then twice more – *thump, thump.*

'Ruby!' Zoe yelled, craning her chin skyward. 'Come say hello to Elizabeth!'

There was a muffled reply.

'It's fine,' Elizabeth said. 'Where's Jane, at the restaurant?' She opened her mouth to say more – she had actual news, news not fit for their neighbors' ears, and wanted to get to it before the doorbell rang.

'We have a new sous, and I'm sure Jane is standing over his shoulder like a goddamn drill sergeant. You know how it is in the beginning, always drama. Ruby! Come down here and say hello before everyone you don't like shows up!' Zoe rubbed her eyebrows with her fingertips. 'I just signed her up for that SAT prep course you told me about, and she's pissed.' She made a noise like a torpedo.

A door slammed upstairs, and then there were feet on the stairs, the nimble herd of elephants contained by a single teenage body. Ruby stopped abruptly on the bottom step. In the weeks since Elizabeth had seen her last, Ruby's hair had gone from a sea-glass green to a purplish black, and was wound up in a round bun on the very top of her head.

'Hey, Rube,' Elizabeth said. 'What's shaking?'

Ruby picked off some nail polish. 'Nothing.' Unlike Zoe's, Ruby's face was round and soft, but they had the same eyes, slightly narrow, the sort of eyes that were made to look askance. Ruby's skin was three shades lighter than Zoe's, with Jane's pale green eyes, and she would have been intimidating even without the purple hair and the surly expression.

'Graduation is Thursday, right? What are you going to wear?'

Ruby made a little noise like a kazoo, her mother's torpedo in reverse. It was funny, what parents did to their children. Even when they weren't trying, everything got reproduced. She looked toward her mother, who nodded. 'I really want to wear one of Mum's dresses. The white one, you know?'

Elizabeth did know. Zoe was not only good at buying clothes, she was good at keeping them. It was lucky that she'd married a woman who wore the same blue jeans every day and a small rotation of button-down shirts, because there was no room in their giant walk-in

closet for anything else. The white dress was a relic from their youth: a crocheted bodice that was more negative space than material, with a skirt made of dangling strings that started just below decent. It was the kind of dress one wore over a bathing suit while on vacation in Mexico in 1973. It had originally belonged to Zoe's mother, which meant it probably had Quaalude dust ground deep into the seams. Before she met the Bennetts, Elizabeth had never met parents who had the kind of life that made their children both proud and embarrassed simultaneously. Cool was good, but only up to a point.

'Wow,' Elizabeth said.

'It's still under debate,' Zoe said.

Ruby rolled her eyes, and jumped down the final step just as the doorbell rang. Before their neighbors began to pour in, each one holding a dish covered with tinfoil, Ruby had streaked in and out of the kitchen and was running back upstairs with a plateful of food.

'Hiiiiiiiiii,' three women trilled in union.

'Hiiiiiiiiii,' Elizabeth and Zoe trilled back, their voices performing the song of their day, the enthusiastic cry of the all-female dinner party.

Two

When Elizabeth was out at night, it was up to Andrew to feed Harry. Unlike most teenage boys, who would eat cardboard if it was topped with pepperoni, Harry had a delicate appetite. He ate around things like a toddler, piling up the rejects on one side of his plate: no olives, no avocado unless it was in guacamole, no cream cheese, no kale, no sesame seeds, no tomatoes except in tomato sauce. The list was long and evolved regularly – it seemed to Andrew that whenever he cooked, something new had been added. He pulled open the fridge and stared inside. Iggy Pop, their skinny calico, rubbed his body against Andrew's shoe.

'Harry,' he said, turning his head toward the living room. He could hear the repetitive beeps and bloops of Harry's favorite video game, *Secret Agent*. The game starred a frog in a trench coat and deerstalker cap and, as far as Andrew could tell, was made for eight-year-olds. Harry had zero interest in *Call of Duty*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, or any of the myriad other games that celebrated murder and prostitutes, and for that Andrew was glad. Better to have a son who liked frogs than automatic machine guns. Andrew himself had played gentle video games and read three-inch-thick fantasy novels about mice. They were two of a kind, he and Harry, soft on the inside, like underbaked cookies. It was what people always wanted, wasn't it?

'Harry,' Andrew said again. He closed the refrigerator door and stood quietly. 'Harry.'

The game noises stopped. 'I heard you the first time, Dad,' Harry said. 'Let's just order a pizza.'

'You sure?'

'Why not?' The noises started again. Andrew pulled out his phone and walked through the doorway into the living room, Iggy following behind. It was still light outside, and for a moment Andrew felt sad, looking at his gentle son, so happy to stay indoors on a beautiful June evening. No solo penalty kicks in the park, no pickup basketball, not even any contraband cigarettes on a secluded bench. Harry looked pale – Harry *was* pale. He was wearing a snug black sweatshirt with the zipper pulled all the way up to his neck. 'Want to play?' Harry asked. He looked up, his brown eyes shimmering, and then Andrew put his sadness away in a deep, deep pocket and sat down next to his son. Iggy Pop jumped on to his lap and curled up. The frog winked, and the music began.

It was someone's job to write that music – a tinny little melody that played in the background on repeat. It was someone's job to write the music that played behind actors' dramatic pauses on soap operas. Cell-phone ringtones. Someone was getting paid, maybe even cashing royalty checks. Andrew had never been a very good bass player, but he had always been good at coming up with melodies. It was probably the only thing he'd ever really loved doing, professionally speaking, even though it was never exactly professional. Still, whenever he was feeling low, which was more often than not, Andrew would think about his own royalty checks, his and Elizabeth's, and how they were paying for most of Harry's tuition at private school, and it would cheer him up a little. There was always someone doing better, especially in New York City, but fuck it, at least he'd done something in his life, something that would be remembered.

'Dad,' Harry said, 'it's your turn. I'll order the pizza.' Harry

pushed the hair out of his eyes and blinked like a baby mole seeing sunlight for the first time. He was such a good kid, such a *good kid*. They talked about it all the time, ever since he was a baby – Andrew and Elizabeth would huddle together in bed, cozy and content, the baby monitor between them, listening to his coos and hiccups. He'd always been easy. Their friends all warned them that the next kid would be the doozy, here comes trouble, but the next one never came. And so it was just the three of them, steady as anything. At first people would ask why they'd had only one child, but the longer you went, the more people assumed it was by choice, and let it go. Even their parents had stopped asking by the time Harry was six. And who needed more grandchildren when Harry would climb into his grandmother's arms and kiss her on the cheek without being prompted? Who could ask for more than that? Some people in the neighborhood – not really their friends, just people they waved at when they were taking out the trash – had three or four kids, and it always struck Andrew like something out of the last century, where you needed as many small hands as possible to milk the cows and hoe the fields. What did you do with that many kids in Brooklyn? Were their genes that good, that important to the human race? He understood when it was for religious reasons – the Lubavitchers up in Williamsburg, the Mormons in Utah – they were in it for the endgame. But he and Elizabeth? They were just doing their best, and their best was Harry, sweet Harry. Andrew half wanted him to bomb the SATs and live at home forever. But of course he'd ace those, too, thanks to the purple prose of the novels he loved. Even when he was a baby, Harry had loved multisyllabic words – 'this is exTRAWdinary,' he said before he was two, about the fountain at Grand Army Plaza, which shot jets of water high into the air.

'Love you, buddy,' Andrew said.

Harry was staring into his phone, pushing buttons. 'Ordered.'

Three

Ruby hated the fucking SAT as much as she fucking hated high school. Both were examples of the patriarchy's insistence on male domination and total sexist bullshit like that. Whitman was a good school by Brooklyn private-school standards – not the best, but not the worst. Maybe one kid would get into an Ivy, but maybe not. Most people would go to places like Marist or Syracuse or Purchase. But not Ruby. Ruby was taking a gap year. That was the polite way to put it. The truth was that she had gotten into exactly none of the five schools she'd applied to, and her falsely optimistic mothers were convinced it was her SAT scores that were to blame, not her bad attitude or bad grades or shitty essays about being a black Jew with lesbian moms (the essay that everyone incorrectly assumed she would write), and so she was going to have to take another prep course, the summer after her senior year. Who even did that? Nobody did that. It was a joke, and she was the punch line.

Her phone vibrated on the bed: MEET ME AT PLAYGRND AT 10? Dust was nineteen, with a chipped front tooth and a shaved head. He was one of the church kids, the tiny gang of skaters that spent all day kick-flipping off the church steps right across the street from Whitman. None of them went to school, as far as Ruby could tell, not even the ones who were under eighteen. The Whitman security guards

sometimes chased them away, but they weren't doing anything illegal, and so it never lasted long. Dust was their leader. He wore jeans that were the perfect size – not so tight they looked girly, but not too baggy so they looked like somebody's dad's. Dust had muscles that looked like they had occurred naturally, like he was a 1950s greaser who spent a lot of time working in a garage. Everything Ruby knew about the 1950s was from *Grease* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Basically, being a teenager was the worst for everyone, unless you were John Travolta, who was obviously twenty-nine years old, and so it didn't matter anyway. The only kids at Whitman who ever spontaneously burst into song were the musical-theater geeks, and Ruby hated them as much as she hated the athletes, who were even more pathetic given that Whitman barely had a gymnasium. Then there were the regular geeks, who did nothing but study for tests, and then there were the do-gooders, who were always trying to get you to sign their petition to kill the whales or save Ebola or whatever. The church kids were really her only hope, sexually.

CAN'T, she wrote back. MY MUM'S BOOK CLUB IS HERE. PARTY TIME/SHOOT ME.

IT'S COOL, he texted, and then nothing.

Calling her mother 'Mum' wasn't a British affectation – there were two of them, Mom and Mum, and so she had to call them different things. Anyway, it didn't matter about the book club. That was only the most recent excuse. Ruby wouldn't have gone to the playground regardless. She'd broken up with Dust three weeks ago, or at least she thought she had. Maybe she wasn't clear. There was the time they went to Purity Diner on Seventh Avenue, right by school, and she wouldn't let him pay for her french fries, and then two days later, she was leaving school and Dust was across the street on the church steps and she pretended not to see him and walked straight to the subway instead of letting him walk her into the park, where they would

do as much fooling around as one could possibly do in public, which was a lot.

The thing about Dust was that he wasn't smart or interesting except if you were counting skateboarding or oral sex. For a few months, his messed-up teeth and his bristly head and his crooked smile were enough, but after the effects of those wore off, they were left talking about *American Idol* (which they both hated) and the *Fast and the Furious* franchise (which Ruby hadn't seen). The problem with Ruby's moms was that their restaurant was three blocks from their house, and so you never knew when one of them was going to be home. What Ruby knew for sure was that she didn't want them to meet Dust, because them talking to each other would be like trying to get a dog to speak Chinese. Dust was not made for parents. He was made for street corners and nuggets of hash, and Ruby was over it. She slumped off the bed and on to the floor and crawled over to her record player. While her mom was no one's idea of cool, with her kitchen clogs and her barbershop haircut, Ruby's mum had her moments. The record player had been her mum's in college, in the days when the dinosaurs roamed the earth, but now it was Ruby's, and it was her most prized possession. If Dust had been worth her time, he would have known all the bands she loved to play – the Raincoats, X-Ray Spex, Bad Brains – but he only listened to dubstep, which was obviously one of humanity's greatest atrocities.

Ruby pushed through the pile of records on the floor, spreading them out like tarot cards, until she found what she was looking for. Aretha Franklin, *Lady Soul*. Aretha had never had a zine and probably hadn't pierced her own nose, but she was a fucking badass anyway. Ruby put on side A, waited for the music to start, and then lay back on the rug and stared at the ceiling. From the floor, she could hear the book club starting to cackle more. Honestly, it was like no one over thirty had ever gotten drunk before, and they were always doing it for

the first time. Pretty soon they'd start talking about their spouses and their kids and her mum would whisper when she said anything, but Ruby could always hear her, could always hear everything – didn't parents get that? That even when you were on the other side of the house, your children could hear you, because they had hearing like a fucking bat and you only thought you were whispering? The summer already sucked, and it hadn't even started yet.

Four

It was almost eleven, and the only women still at the party were all in the kitchen helping Zoe clean up. Allison and Ronna were both new to the neighborhood and eager for details. Elizabeth had sold them both their places – a lovely old fixer-upper on Westminster between Cortelyou and Ditmas for Allison, and an apartment on Beverly and Ocean for Ronna. They were in their thirties, married, no kids. But trying! Young women loved to tack that on, especially to real-estate agents. Elizabeth had been a therapist, a marriage counselor, a psychic, a guru, all in the name of a quicker closing. There were things you weren't legally permitted to discuss – the strength of the local public schools, the racial breakdown of the area, whether or not anyone had died there. But that never stopped people from trying. They were so excited to meet each other, too, giggling about looking for faucets and wallpaper hangers. Elizabeth kissed them both on the cheek and sent them off to inspect each other's kitchens.

Zoe stood at the sink, her wet hands sending sprinkles of soapy water across the floor every few minutes. 'You got me,' Elizabeth said, brushing some water off her arm.

'My deepest apologies,' Zoe said. 'Well, that was nice. What was the next book, again?'

'*Wuthering Heights*! Chosen by Josephine, who has never finished

a book in her life! I wonder if she thinks she'll just rent the movie. In fact, I'm sure that's exactly why. There's probably some new version of it that she saw on her HBO Go, and so now she's going to pretend to read the book. She's going to spend the whole night talking about how it takes place on some beautiful Caribbean island.' Elizabeth picked up the stack of clean plates and put them back in the cupboard.

'You really don't have to help, Lizzy,' Zoe said.

'Oh, come on. That's what you say to people when you want them to leave.'

Zoe laughed. Elizabeth turned around and leaned against the counter. 'There actually was something I wanted to talk to you about.'

Zoe turned off the sink. 'Oh, yeah? Me, too. You first.'

'Someone is making a movie about Lydia, and they need the rights. Our rights. To the song, and to us. Someone famous is going to write it, someone good, I forget their name.' Elizabeth made an excited face, and then gritted her teeth. In ancient times, before Brooklyn and before kids, Elizabeth and Andrew and Zoe had been in a band, and in addition to playing many, many shows in dingy basements and recording their songs into a pink plastic cassette deck, they had sold exactly one of their songs, 'Mistress of Myself,' to their friend and former bandmate Lydia Greenbaum, who then dropped out of college, dropped the Greenbaum, got signed by a record label, released the song, became famous, had her hair and clothes copied by all the kids on St Mark's Place, recorded the sound track to an experimental film about a woman who lost her right hand in a factory accident (*Zero Days Since*), shaved her head, became a Buddhist, and then dropped dead of an overdose at twenty-seven, just like Janis and Jimi and Kurt. Each year, on the anniversary of her death, 'Mistress of Myself' played nonstop on every college radio station in the country. It was the twentieth anniversary, and Elizabeth had been expect-

ing something. The call had come in that morning. They'd been asked before, but never by people with actual money.

'What?!' Zoe grabbed Elizabeth's elbows. 'Are you fucking kidding me? How much do we get paid?'

'Oh, I don't know yet, but Andrew wants to say no. Technically, they need all of us to sign our life rights, and they need us to agree to have the song in the movie. . . .'

'And they can't make a movie about Lydia without the song.'

'Nope. I mean, they could, but what would be the point?'

'Hmm,' Zoe said. 'Who could play her? Who would play you? Who would play *me*? Oh, my God, Ruby, obviously! Oh, my God, it's too perfect, I love it, yes, give me the forms, I say yes.'

Elizabeth waved her hands in the air. 'Oh, I think that part doesn't matter as much. I'll have the woman send you the thing to sign. I'm pretty sure they'll just make us into one giant composite, like Random College Friends One, Two and Three. But Andrew's never going to agree to give them the song. It stirs it all up for him, you know?' For the past ten years, Elizabeth and Andrew had quietly been writing songs again, just the two of them, mostly during the afternoons when Harry was in school if they didn't have to work. They sat on two chairs in the garage and played. Elizabeth couldn't tell if their new songs were any good, but she enjoyed singing with her husband, the way intimate bodies could be feet apart and still feel like you were touching. No one else knew. Andrew wanted it that way. 'Anyway,' she said, 'what was your news?' There was half a pecan pie on the counter, brought over by Josephine, who baked it every month, even though it was totally unseasonable and therefore largely ignored by the book club. Elizabeth picked at it with her fingers.

'Oh,' Zoe said. 'We're talking about getting a divorce again.' She shook her head. 'It seems kind of like it might really happen this time, I don't know.' Bingo, Zoe's ancient golden retriever, lumbered out of

his hiding place under the dining-room table and leaned sympathetically against her shins. Zoe squatted down and hugged him. 'I'm hugging a dog,' she said, and started to cry.

'Honey!' Elizabeth said, and dropped to her knees. She threw her arms around Zoe, the dog wedged in between them. There were good questions to ask and bad questions. One was never supposed to ask why, or to appear either surprised or the reverse, which was actually more offensive. 'Oh, no! What's going on? I'm so sorry. Are you okay? Does Ruby know? Are you talking about selling the house?'

Zoe raised her head from Bingo's back, a dog hair stuck to her wet cheek. 'Me, too. Yes. No. Well, maybe. Probably. And I think so? Oh, God.'

Elizabeth petted Zoe's head and plucked the dog hair from her face. 'I'll help. With any of it. You know that, right?' Zoe nodded, her lower lip puffing out in a pout, its pale pink inside the color of a seashell.