WRECK

Catherine Newman



doubleday

ALSO BY CATHERINE NEWMAN

We All Want Impossible Things

Sandwich

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

001

Copyright © Catherine Newman 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact,
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity,
encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture.
Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual
property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means
without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to
continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.
In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Typeset in 10.9/15.15pt by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBNs:
9781529959697 hb
9781529959703 tpb

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



What a large target we make.
The great dramas all begin like this:
a surfeit of happiness, a glass-smoothed pond
just begging for a stone.

—Beth Ann Fennelly, "The Gods Watch Us Through the Window"

Death is a sniper. It strikes people you love, people you like, people you know - it's everywhere. You could be next. But then you turn out not to be. But then again, you could be.

—Nora Ephron, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*

The dark grid of the town is punctuated only with streetlamps and garage lights and fireflies, although the bird can sense every living thing: ripples beneath a crisping lawn, a body's rogue cells, the smell of vole, a mother's worried heart beating inside her ribcage. Here's something else it sees: a car moving perpendicular to a moving train, both slicing through the quiet toward the same crossing. The car travels at one speed, the train another, and this great horned owl, perched on the branch of an Eastern white pine a hundred and fifty feet above them, doesn't know algebra—can't predict when car and train will intersect—but if it had hands, it would cover its ears. Because a great screeching has begun.

1

In one single day, in two different directions, my life swerves from its path. Even if I don't know it at the time. And even if you might not technically call it *day* given that it's the middle of the night. There's a headlamp shining out from my forehead like I'm a miner, and what I'm mining is my own insomnia. Like I'm a spelunker, penetrating a deep cave that is filled only and completely with the absence of sleep.

I move my hand to turn a page of the novel I'm reading, and the light catches something on my arm, just below my elbow: a red bump with three smaller red bumps trailing away from it—a kind of dermatological shooting star. The bumps are spherical and shiny. *Pearlescent* is the word that comes to me.

"Hey, Nick, what do you think this is?" I don't say out loud, because my husband is asleep the way regular people are at 3:38 AM. Also because I know he wouldn't help me. He'd peer at the bumps and shrug: "Spider bites?" Or he'd say, "Here?" and touch my boob because we are starring in a perpetual middle-aged remake of *Porky's II*. Or, worse, he'd squint at them and say, "I can't see anything. This?" and point to a freckle that is completely unrelated to the likelihood of my imminent death from Pearlescent Melanoma or whatever the actual fuck this is.

I click off my headlamp and lie in the dark, listening to the late August crickets sing their song about the night. The trick, as every insomniac knows, is to fall back to sleep before the birds start singing their song about the morning. *Don't Google it* I think to myself, too late, because I am already up and headed for the kitchen, where I leave my phone so I won't look at it in the middle of the night.

"No, no, sillies, not yet," I say to the pussycats, who are busy flinging themselves past me down the stairs, falling down the stairs in front of me, talking all the way down the stairs about their breakfast and how excited they are to eat it. I can only assume that this is how I will break my first hip.

Here's what's true about the internet: very infrequently do people log on with their good news. "Gosh," they don't write. "I had this weird rash on my forearm? And it turned out to be completely nothing!" Because after I return to bed, take a picture of the bumps, and plug it into the search engine, and after I wade past the Webmd shallows of *bites* and *mites,* I am deep in the Reddit thread r/melahomies, where one person has responded to another, like the world's most perfect bumper sticker, "Just because you're a hypochondriac doesn't mean it's not malignant."

But what's also true is that this really doesn't look like any of the truly bad skin things. If it's galactic, it's more champagne supernova than, say, dark nebula. If it's cancer, it's more basal cell carcinoma than metastatic melanoma. Suboptimal, sure, but not catastrophic. Knock wood, kinahora, inshallah, etc.

Chicken, the older cat, is pleading his case for me to return downstairs and open a can of food. He is standing on my chest and neck, peering around the phone with his massive face,

purring encouragingly, and drooling like a Newfoundland. He gives my eyebrow an occasional perfunctory lick. Meanwhile Angie the tabby-striped kitten is asleep again, curled around herself on my pillow like a hibernating chipmunk. I have to stop myself from waking Nick to exclaim with me over the unbearable cuteness of her being.

"Hey, Fat Chungus," I whisper-scold the big cat, kissing his whiskery cheeks. "Take a little break from yourself." I turn on my side and he sighs, gives up, curls into the crook of my hip and falls immediately, voluptuously to sleep, snoring like a cartoon human. I am putting my phone away, I am. But I just peek at the local news and there, among the usual headlines about the county fair and the lunch menu at the senior center and a resigning town administrator, is this: "One Dead in Collision between Train, Car." And a flush of goosebumps rises up my arms. The birds are singing.

2

I'm on hold with the dermatologist's office and also standing on a stool with a screwdriver in my hand, trying to deal with the broken fan, which makes an occasional revving sound and then clatters around like it's a helicopter about to lift off from the ceiling.

Calls will be answered in the order they are received, a robot is telling me. "In the order *in which* they are received," I say out loud, correctingly, like I'm squinting grimly through my bifocals at a schoolchild I'm about to paddle.

"Honey, honey, no." Nick has come into the kitchen. He reaches up a hand to help me down and unlaces the screwdriver from my fingers. "Let me." He likes to do the man things around the house—the snaking of drains and the splicing of wires and whatnot—and also he has enjoyed more than his fair share of my extreme hormonal impatience. For example, it's not out of the question that I'll Godzilla the entire fan out of the ceiling and throw it to the floor, screaming.

"Hey, do you—" he starts to say, and I hold up a finger. "Not urgent, no," I say to the appointments person who is back on the line and looking at her calendar. She offers me February 7th, which is more than five months from now, so I change my

mind about the urgency of the rash. There's a cancellation for this coming Friday, and I take it.

"Ugh, why is the floor so slippery and sticky?" This is our daughter Willa, flopping herself onto the couch in our kitchen. "And ugly."

"Because, my princess angel baby, it's made of ugly tiles and we're too cheap and lazy to replace them and it's humid. Or maybe because we're bad parents. Do you want to put some slippers on? It's hot today. Do you want to wear something that's not that massive hoodie with the hood up?"

"I do not," she says. "But do you want to bring me over some watermelon even though I'm a cranky asshole?"

I do, given that indulgence seems to be the only religion I practice. My dad comes in the kitchen door while I'm cutting the rind off the melon. My mom died a little over a year ago, and he's lived in the in-law apartment behind our house since then. He hasn't given up his rent-controlled apartment in New York—he's just testing this out for now. "Good morning, everybody," he says. He's shaved and showered, as always, and is wearing khaki pants, a clean navy-blue sweatshirt, and New Balance sneakers.

"Do I have to take my sneakers off?" he says, like he does every morning. "I know you people don't like shoes on touching the floor."

"You're fine Dad," I say, like I do every morning.

"I don't know about fine," he says, "but I seem to be still alive, so there's that."

"Good morning, Grandpa." Willa pats the couch next to her, and he shuffles over, lowers himself with an enormous groan.

"Why is this couch so low?" he says, and Willa laughs and says, "We're in the exact same mood today."

"It's freezing out in the shack," he says, and I sigh. It's the only part of the house we've actually renovated, and it's got hardwood floors, pretty molding, and skylights. A waterfall showerhead, quartz countertops, and a view out to the mountain range from every window. The big house is all Formica and textured ceilings—although our kitchen is sunny and glorious, with a glass door out to the yard, a woodstove, and this couch where everybody congregates day and night.

"Dad, do you want to turn your AC down?" I say.

"It gets very warm back there," he says, and I smile at him.

"I hear how I sound," he says, sorrowfully. "Like my own father." He shakes his head before adding, "Doesn't anybody work around here?"

I almost say, "No, Dad, nobody works around here." But then the truth is? We do kind of work abnormally. Nick is a physical therapist and works odd and, if you ask me, excessively discretionary hours. I'm a writer and "work" mostly from bed. Willa works at a lab at the big university in town, dissecting fruit-fly brains for money, while she applies to neuroscience PhD programs. Jamie, her older brother, is the only person who has what one might traditionally call a job—he's a junior analyst at Dickens, the kind of massive consulting firm that, say, helps rebrand the flame-retardant chemical company after everyone's pajamas give them cancer and they die—but he lives in New York, and is not here to represent our industriousness as a family.

"It's the weekend, Grandpa," Willa says.

"Ah," he shrugs. "It's all the same to me." Me too, apparently.

"But can someone give me a ride to the lab later? I have to

make fly food. Also, I have to euthanize some parents so they don't inbreed with the hatching larvae."

"Ew," I say.

"Coffee?" my dad says.

"Coffee?" I say back to him, and he says, "Thank you. I'd love some."

"I think my coffee invitation maybe got lost in the mail," Willa says, and then, when I pour two mugs, she claps her hands together prayerfully and says, "Iced? Pleeeeease? Lots of half and half. Maple syrup. You're the actual best. Dad, please don't electrocute yourself, okay?"

"I disconnected the power supply," Nick says, from inside the fan.

"Okay, but don't, like, fall off that stool and break your neck either."

"Wait, do or *don't* fall of the stool?"

"Ha ha ha, it's very funny when somebody has an anxiety disorder," Willa says, and I see Nick turn to look at her—evaluating—before he says, in earnest, "I'll be careful. I promise."

"Dad, when you're done with the fan, can you look at the upstairs toilet? I think something needs to be adjusted or else maybe we just need a new toilet pencil." My dad looks at her questioningly. "You have to poke a pencil into the place where the flusher broke off," Willa explains, and my dad's eyebrows rise, but he makes no comment.

I return to cutting up the melon and Willa and my dad drink coffee and look at their phones.

"Everybody's videos are suddenly about morgues on cruise ships," Willa announces. "Not my favorite."

"Oh," I say, "I actually had a dream that you and Dad—"

"Ugh!" Willa says. "Why are other people's dreams so boring? Sorry, sorry. Go ahead, Mama."

"Are you holding space for my dream?" I say, and she laughs and says no.

My dad, meanwhile, is trying to remember the name of the plumber in his building in New York. "Do you need something done?" I ask, and he says no, just that it's driving him crazy that he can't remember.

"Shit," Willa says suddenly. "A kid from Jamie's high-school class died. Miles Zapf. Oh my god. Mom. His car got hit by a *train*." I look over and her face is a round white tablecloth with saucer eyes and a tiny fringe of dark crewcut.

"I saw that too," I say. Watermelon juice is running off the cutting board onto the counter and I'm using a sponge to stop it from running onto the floor. "It's so sad, honey. Are you reading the story in the *Gazette*?"

"No, no. People are talking about it online—people from high school. I don't think Jamie was really friends with him, but still. It's so awful. I mean—he's Jamie's age. Was. It feels so close to us." The rims of her eyes turn red then spill over with tears, and she pulls her knees up into her sweatshirt. I bring her the box of tissues and bend down to hug her, squeeze in next to her on the couch and slide an arm behind her. She leans against me and cries a little, blows her nose. "It's so weird," she says. "I mean, not weird—*sad*. But weird too. We *know* him. It could be Jamie or any of his friends." My dad pats her shoulder, his eyebrows pulled worriedly into his forehead. We've kept the worst of it from him—the way Willa's mind can slide into catastrophe—but I know he frets about her wellbeing. He once asked me if I'd noticed that she seemed *overly sensitive*, and I'd

almost rolled my eyes—it's the same expression I once overheard him and my mom using about me, when I was a tearfully anxious teenager myself. "That's not the clinical diagnosis they use these days, but yeah," I'd said, and then saw that his face was creased with concern. "Don't worry, Dad, we're dealing with it," I said gently, and he said, "Of course you are. I just want everyone to be happy." "Same," I said truthfully.

Willa is showing me the school picture someone has posted. A boy with brown hair and a thin smile. A blue shirt with a collar. A face I don't quite remember, but that looks familiar enough. Somebody's child who is no longer alive. "How does a car end up getting hit by a train?" Willa says.

"I'm not sure," I say. Although I have some ideas I don't share.

"That's so sad," Nick says from somewhere above us, his face obscured by a fan blade. "Wasn't he an ultimate frisbee player?" he says, and Willa shakes her head.

"Definitely not."

"Was he a theater kid? I feel like I almost remember seeing him in stuff."

"Maybe?" Willa says. "No. I don't think so. Oh, maybe he did tech? He might have done the lighting for *Little Shop* when Jamie was in the pit band. I'm not sure."

"*Little Shop of Horrors*—we went to that," my dad says, surprising us that's he's been both listening and hearing. And remembering too, for that matter. "Grandma didn't care for that scene with the dentist." This is true. "Also, where we were sitting—we could hardly see Jamie behind the piano. There was that big light shining right in our eyes." This was almost ten years ago.

"I remember that," I say.

"Let me see him," he says, and Willa hands him her phone. He takes his glasses off to look, then shakes his head. "Awful," he says. "Poor kid. Zapf. Do I know that name?" We don't know.

"I think I played bridge at the senior center with his mother? Is that possible?" He is literally scratching his head. "It's ringing a bell. A dim one. I can't quite remember," he says. "Which I realize is not news. But I think so, yes. Pat Zapf. No, no. Sam? That kind of name. She was my age, though. It must have been his grandmother, I guess. I think she was a bit of a screwball."

"Like, eccentric?" Willa asks.

"No, no. More like she'd been in and out of psychiatric hospitals."

"Like, she was mentally ill?"

"Yeah. I guess she was more of a *clinical* screwball."

"Girl," Willa scolds him. "No."

My dad shrugs, says, "I am what I am," sips his coffee, spills some down the front of his sweatshirt and curses. Willa blots him with the tissue she's still got balled up in her hand. I stand to get the bowl of watermelon cubes, situate it between them on the couch, and hand them each a fork.

"Was anyone else hurt?" Nick asks. He's standing on the counter now, crouched under the ceiling to screw a pair of lightbulbs back into the fan fixture.

"I don't think so," Willa says. "I'm reading this now. It was just the one car. I don't see anything about the train—like the passengers or anything."

"I think it was a freight train," I say. "So, a driver but no passengers. It was at that horrible railroad crossing in Hampton."

"Ugh—that one where you can't tell where you should even stop because of the traffic light right after? I hate that crossing,"

Willa says. She's got a mouthful of melon, which she slurps and swallows before adding, "I will literally drive fifteen minutes out of my way to avoid it."

"Smart," my dad says. "Avoiding level crossings—that really is the best way to not get hit by a train."

"I don't know the term *level crossing*," Willa says, and my dad explains that it's just any intersection between tracks and roadway.

"But maybe that's a British term," he says. "I say all these stupid things because Grandma said them." He's talking about my British mother. "Herbs," he says, emphasizing the H. "I say sha-LOT like a dingbat, even though regular people say SHALLot. *Gooseflesh* instead of goosebumps. Maybe we just call those railroad crossings. Ack! You again." The kitten has climbed up into his lap and he strokes her small head with a large, open hand, the way you would pet a dog. She flattens her ears and her eyes turn into happy slits. She has an actual little smile, like a drawing of a cat. "Don't spill my coffee again," my dad says to her and Willa says, "He's gaslighting you, Angie. He spilled it all by himself."

"Rogney!" my dad announces. When nobody says anything, he adds, "The plumber."

"Rogney?" Willa says. "Are you sure it's not *Rodney*?"

"That seems more plausible," my dad says.

"I should call Jamie," I say. "About Miles." Willa shakes her head.

"You don't need to call Jamie," she says gently. "He'll definitely hear about the accident, and he'll call us or text if he wants to talk. I don't think you need to, like, burst into his day and alert him."

I am becoming my own mother. "I'm afraid I've a bit of sad news" was one of her favorite conversational openers.

"Remember the health-food store on 97th street?"

"No."

"Yes you do. Where we used to buy that granola with the sliced almonds in it."

"The corner store?"

"No! The *health-food* store."

"Wait. Do you mean the Whole Foods on 99th?"

"Of course not! The little health-food store next to the dry cleaners on Columbus—with the bulk-nut bins. Where I used to get those lozenges."

"Okay. Yes. Tell me. What? Did it close?"

"No. But the lovely man who owned it—Robby. Or was it Bobby?"

"Oh sad! He died?"

"No, but he had a dreadful case of shingles, and now he's had some neuropathy in his foot."

"I just want to connect" is what she was probably trying to say to me. Or even, "I'm afraid I'll die—or you will." I don't know why all our tender feelings have to masquerade as news.

"Voila!" Nick is saying as he flips a switch. The fan whirs to life and doesn't wobble. We cheer. The motor makes a cracking sound and then a grinding one. Smoke wisps out, the lightbulbs both ping dark, and Nick groans.

"Could I get another cup of coffee do you think?" my dad says.

And I say, "Of course."

3

I'm back at it—on my phone in the night, scrolling through our local Buy Nothing group, where many "gifts" are on offer: a Starbuck's card that may or may not have any money left on it, two broken television sets, a dot-matrix printer, a cardboard box full of "pretty nice gravel," a plastic tortoiseshell eyeglasses chain along with a pair of sporks ("Please take all"), a collection of *barely expired* Portuguese spices, a brand-new name-brand twin mattress, and a working air purifier shown with a banana for scale. Also someone is gifting five slices of turkey bacon. "Not our favorite of the breakfast meats," the poster admits, "But not past its expiration date." "Sure!" a game somebody else has commented. "I'm interested. Can you deliver?" Unfortunately, the turkey slices must be picked up in person. I love that people are living outside of the grinding engine of consumerism and exploitation, but used bacon feels like such a sad form of resistance.

"Don't," I think—but I am already typing "Miles Zapf car train" into the search engine to see what I can see. I'm not sure why this feels so wrong. Maybe because it's a kind of voyeuristic excavation of someone else's tragedy. Heartbreaking, but from a remove because *not us*. Or, at least, *not us right now*. Here's what

I find out from a pair of follow-up stories in the news: the train was owned by a freight railroad company called RCX; an investigation is pending, and the interested parties seem to include the National Transportation Safety Board, the Federal Railroad Administration, local police and, because there was a roadway involved, the highway patrol; no witnesses have come forward; the driver of the train was unharmed and has not released a statement; the family has asked for privacy at this time; nobody from RCX has been available for comment.

I look at a picture of the car, which is flipped over, the driver's side obliterated. I back-arrow quickly away from it. Has his mom looked at that picture? Or worse—did she see this in person? Did she climb into her own car in her nightgown and rush to her child, where he'd been pronounced dead on impact? The empathy part of my brain shuts down protectively when I try to imagine it—like a gate lowering, and a sign on it says simply: *Not available*. No information can be shared between brain and heart at this time.

When Willa and Jamie were little, we played a game called Rivers, Roads, and Rails, which involved laying out illustrated transportation-themed tiles to create a grid of linked highways and byways. And honestly? I never liked the way the train tracks ran so close to the roads and waterways. The kids would be bent over the game with their rosy cheeks, plump limbs, and comically mild oaths ("Drat, I've run out of river.") and I'd be lost to my doomsday imagination: a train sliding from bridge to river one car at a time, like the heavy links of a chain; a car tire stuck on the tracks—like a high-heeled shoe in a subway grate—with ten-thousand tons of freight bearing down. I always pictured the kids looking at me trustingly from their seats, me wrapping

them in my useless, protective arms. "Let's just agree to walk everywhere!" I had to stop myself from saying aloud. The enormity of my love for these tender, fleshly beings was twinned with a potential for loss so unimaginably deep and powerful that it was like a black hole lurking just outside our window.

Why had we all been taught the expression "Accidents happen"? The presumed inevitability paralyzed me with fear. Was I brave enough to love anybody? Maybe. Maybe not.

There's a handful of comments below the article, mostly of the condolences variety—sorrow, prayers, godspeed, a single "May his memory be for a blessing"—but two stand out: "OMG, but are the shareholders okay?" someone has written. And someone else has written, cryptically, "Accidents do not happen by accident."