

New Fiction from Ruffi Thorpe: An Excerpt from 'The Knockout Queen'

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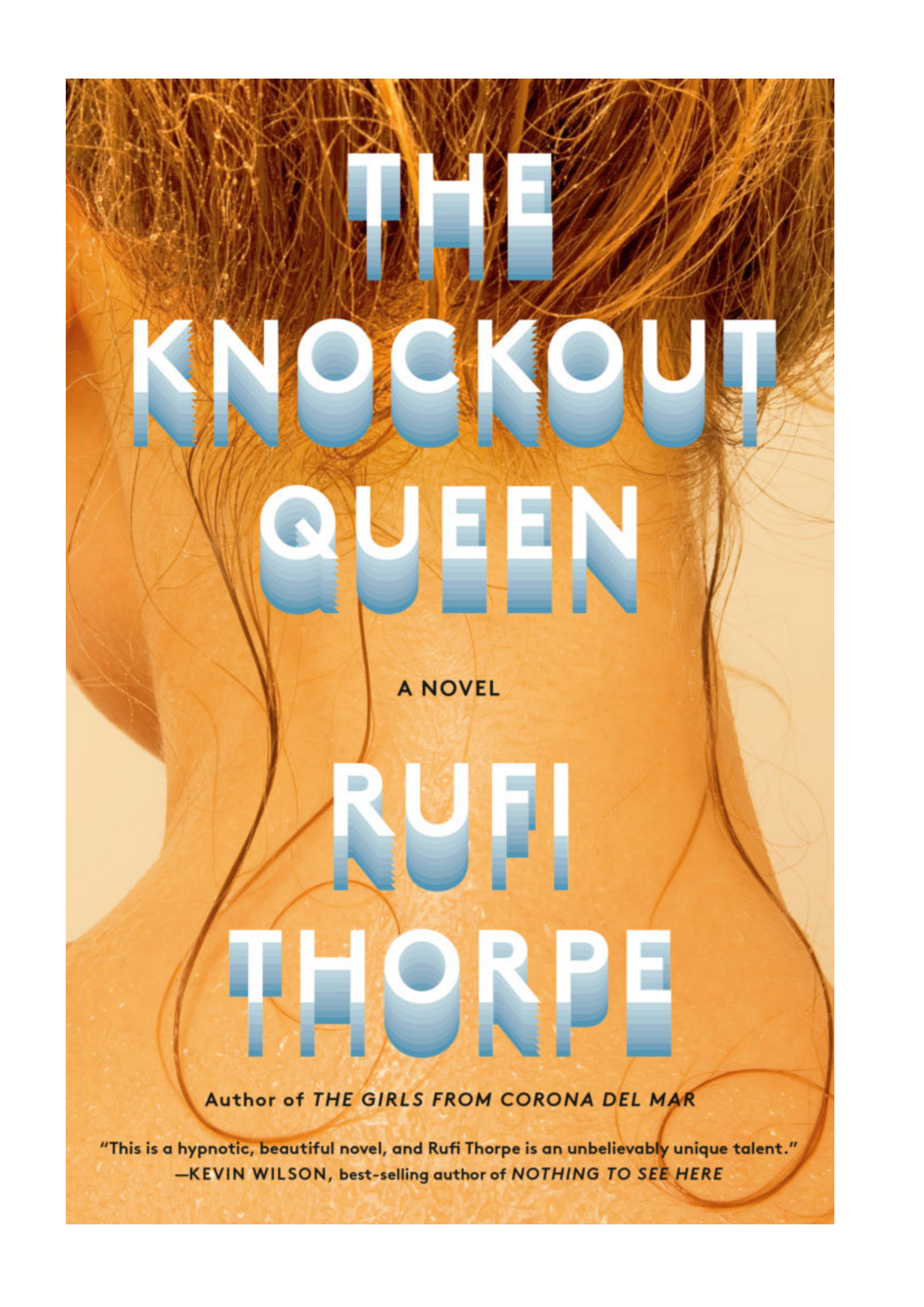
When I was eleven years old, I moved in with my aunt after my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too. Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. *Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated!* If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting. You have seen them so often on TV that seeing an actual one is grotesque: the real live lawyers, all sweaty, their dark mouths venting coffee breath directly into your face, the judge who has a cold and keeps blowing his nose, the defendants who are crying or visibly shaking, whose moms are watching or whose kids are trying to sit still in the back. It's a lot to take in when you're eleven and even just a few months prior you were making an argument that not receiving a particular video game for

your birthday would be “unfair.”

The town to which my little sister and I were relocated after a brief stint in foster care was a suburban utopia a la Norman Rockwell, updated with a fancy coffee shop and yoga studio. We moved in just before the Fourth of July, and I remember being shooed into a town fair, where there were bounce houses and hot dogs being sold to benefit the Kiwanis club. What the fuck was the Kiwanis club? I was given a wristband and ten dollars and told to go play. A woman painted a soccer ball on my face. (All the boys got soccer balls, and all the girls got butterflies; those were the options.)

Bordered on the west by the sea, on the north by a massive airport, on the east by a freeway, and on the south by a sprawling, smoke-belching oil refinery, North Shore was a tiny rectangle. Originally built as a factory town for the oil refinery, it was a perfect simulacrum of a small town anywhere in America, with a main street and cute post office, a stately brick high school, a police department with predictably brutalist architecture; but instead of fading into rural sprawl at its edges, this fairy-tale town was wedged inside the greater body of Los Angeles.



THE
KNOCKOUT
QUEEN

A NOVEL

RUFI
THORPE

Author of *THE GIRLS FROM CORONA DEL MAR*

"This is a hypnotic, beautiful novel, and Ruffi Thorpe is an unbelievably unique talent."

—KEVIN WILSON, best-selling author of *NOTHING TO SEE HERE*

My aunt's place was one of those small stucco houses that look immediately like a face, the door forming a kind of nose, and the windows on either side two dark, square eyes. She had a cypress bush in the front that had turned yellow on one side, and many pinwheels planted on the border of her lawn, the bright colored plastic sun-bleached to a ghostly white as they spun in the wind. North Shore was a windy place with many hills, and I was shocked that people could live in such a wonderful climate without smiling all the time. The air pollution from the airport and oil refinery were pushed inland by the sea breezes. Even our trash cans did not smell, so clean was the air there. Sometimes I would stick my head into them and breathe deeply, just to reassure myself that trash was still trash.

On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions, as was the case on almost every street of the town. Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

If there were people living in the mansion to the right of our house, I never saw them. Their trash cans did not go out, no cars parked in their drive, except a gardener who came like clockwork every Tuesday, who always gave me a nervous but friendly wave. In the mansion to the left of our house, there lived a girl and her father, a girl who, though I would never have guessed it from looking at her, so young and unsullied did she seem, was my own age, and with whom I would go to school for the next seven years. Her name was Bunny Lampert, and she was the princess of North Shore, and somehow, almost against my will, I became her friend.

One thing that Bunny and I had in common, besides being next-door neighbors, was an unusual lack of adult supervision. North Shore being the paradisiacal bubble that it was, many children walked to school or rode their bikes. But I noticed that Bunny and I were never scooted out the door by parents who rushed to remind us of lunches or fetch lost backpacks, but instead climbed out of houses empty and untended, checking our belongings ourselves, distracted as adults about to set out on the morning's commute. Perhaps it would have been natural for us to walk to school together, but this did not occur. I was invisible to Bunny, and so I came to know a great deal about her before she learned anything about me.

The first year I was in North Shore, we were in sixth grade, but even then Bunny was tall, the tallest girl in our year, but also taller than the tallest boy. I'm sure there are people who would tell you who the most beautiful girls in our school were, and Bunny would not have been found on any of their lists, and yet I loved to look at her. Not for any arrangement of features or gifts of figure, but because she was terribly alive. Like a rabbit or a fox. She was just right there. You could see her breathing, almost feel the blood prickling in her skin, her cells gobbling the sunlight.

I think, as we headed into middle school, it was this vital, translucent quality that kept boys her age from having crushes on her, crushes that required a more opaque surface that they could project onto, that evoked different things than life itself. They were interested in girls who reminded them of movies, or who seemed older, or who seemed innocent, or who seemed smart. Bunny didn't seem. She didn't remind me of anyone. I liked to walk behind her for the cute way she would pull a wedgie from her butt, the way she would sing to herself, always a little sharp, the way she ate an Eggo waffle from a paper towel as she went, careful to throw the paper towel away in a trash can when she got to school.

Her father, though I hardly ever saw him, I saw everywhere. It

was his wolfish grin on almost every dangling for sale sign in the town, his arms crossed over his chest, his white teeth showing in a friendly laugh. He was on for sale signs, but he was also on banners at our school, where he sponsored a seemingly endless number of fund-raising events. He was on the city council and so his name was further attached to every fair, carnival, rally, or Christmas parade. Ray Lampert was inescapable.

I had seen him at that first Fourth of July fair, a huge sign with his headshot on it at a booth where a pretty blond woman gave out picnic blankets with his company's logo stitched on one side. Two Palms Realty. I was afraid to take one of the blankets, even though the pretty blond woman manning the booth told me they were free. In my child gut, I believed they were sewn with some kind of voodoo that would ensnare anyone who touched them.

I often passed by his office, which was on Main Street. He was never in there, though I grew used to seeing the blond woman I had met at the fair, wearing her headset, tapping keys on a space-age-looking computer with a monitor bigger than our TV at home.

Because our houses were next door to each other and on rather narrow plots, the bedroom windows were directly across from one another on the second story, and so I had a literal window into Bunny's life, although I could not see her without being seen myself. When she was home, I kept my blinds carefully closed, but when she was not at home, I would look into her room and examine its contents. In fact, I looked in all the windows of their home, which was decorated with a lavish '80s decadence: gilt dining chairs and a gleaming glass-topped table, white sofas and white rugs over dark, almost black, mahogany floors. The kitchen, which I had to enter their backyard in order to properly examine, was a Grecian temple of white marble, though they never seemed to cook and what was obviously supposed to be a fruit bowl was filled instead with

junk, papers, and pens and keys.

They had no dogs or cats, no hamsters, not even plants. Nothing lived in that house except for Bunny, and presumably her father, though he was never at home. As to what had happened to Bunny's mother, I knew only that she had died and that there had been some air of tragedy about it, a suddenness, not a prolonged illness, and I was in high school before I learned that it was a car accident. I found this explanation disappointingly mundane. Why had a simple car accident been so whispered about, so difficult to confirm? My informant, a glossy, sleazy little imp named Ann Marie, the kind of girl who is incessantly eating a sucker or popsicle in hopes of being seen as sexual, giggled. "That wasn't the scandal," she said. "The scandal was that her mother was fucking a day-care worker at the Catholic preschool. Mr. Brandon. And he was only like twenty at the time." Where was Mr. Brandon now? He had moved, had left town, no more was known.

I often walked by that little preschool, attached to the Catholic church, which was a lovely white stucco building on a corner lot with a playground and red sandbox, and wondered about Bunny's mother and Mr. Brandon. No one could tell me what he looked like, but for my own reasons I pictured sad eyes, too-low jeans, ice-cream abs begging to be licked. Perhaps I imagined him so only as a foil to Bunny's father, whose salt-and-pepper chest hair exploded from the collar of his dress shirt in that ubiquitous head-shot. Everything else about Ray Lampert was clean, sterilized, the bleached teeth, the rehearsed smile, the expensive clothes, but that chest hair belonged to an animal.

The gossip about Bunny's father was that he drank too much, and specifically that he was a regular at the Blue Lagoon, a tiki bar tucked a few blocks off Main Street, though he was what was referred to as "a good drunk," beloved for his willingness to spring for pizza at two in the morning and

listen to the tragic stories of other sad adult men. There was further supposition that his incredible success as a real estate agent was due to his habit of frequenting drinking holes, making friends with anybody and everybody. Having spent many years observing their recycling bin, I can attest that such a justification would be a bit economical with the truth. Ray Lampert was turning his birthday into a lifestyle, to quote Drake. Each week there would be two or three large gin bottles, and then seven or eight wine bottles, all of the same make, a mid-shelf Cabernet. Perhaps he bought them in bulk. It was difficult to imagine him shopping, wheeling a cart filled with nothing but Cabernet and gin through the Costco. How did someone with such an obvious drinking problem go about keeping themselves supplied? Or rather, how did a rich person go about it?

In my experience, addiction was messy. A pastiche of what you bought on payday as a treat, and what you bought on other days, convinced you wouldn't buy anything, then suddenly finding yourself at the liquor store, smiling bravely, like it was all okay. What did the cashier at the 7-Eleven make of my own father? Did he note on what days my father bought two tall boys and on what days he bought the fifth of cheap bourbon as well, and did he keep a mental tally of whether he was getting better or worse, like I did? Or did everyone buy that kind of thing at 7-Eleven? Perhaps my father was so unremarkable in his predilections as to avoid detection at all. And what was happening to the children of all those other men? Buyers of beef jerky and vodka, peanuts and wine? What did a 7-Eleven even sell that wasn't designed to kill you one way or another?

Most scandalous to me, and yet so alluring, so seductive, was the possibility that Ray Lampert felt no shame at all. That a rich man could stroll through the Costco, his cart clinking with glass bottles, and greet the cashier smiling, because she would just assume he threw lavish parties, or that he was stocking his wine cellar, that these dark bottles were just

like shirts for Gatsby, talismans of opulence, but whatever it was, even if it was weird, because he was rich, it was fine.

The first time I met Bunny, or what I consider to be our first meeting, because we did encounter each other at school from time to time (in fact we had been in the same homeroom for all of seventh grade, and yet never had a single conversation), we were in tenth grade, and I was discovered in her side yard. I had taken to smoking cigarettes there, and I kept a small bottle of Febreze hidden behind a piece of plywood that was leaning against their fence. The side yard itself was sheltered from the street by a high plank gate, and then was gated again before it led to their back yard, and because it ran along the side of their garage, there were no windows, making it a perfect hiding place. Bunny and her father kept their bikes there, but neither of them seemed to ever ride, and I had been smoking in this part of their property for years now without having been detected, so I was startled when she opened the gate, already wearing her bike helmet, which was pink.

She was surprised to see me and she jumped, but did not yelp, and swiftly closed the gate behind her. She tipped her head, made comically large by the helmet, and looked at me. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"I smoke here," I said, bringing my cigarette out from behind my back.

"Oh," she said, looking around at the fence, and the side of her garage. "Can't people see the smoke as it rises above the fence?" Her first concern seemed to be abetting me in my secret habit.

She was neither offended nor concerned that I had been breaking into their property and hiding in their side yard.

"So far as I know," I said, "no one has. But usually I kind of crouch with the hope that it dissipates. And I always figured

people would think it was you.”

“Your name is Michael,” she said with concentration, dragging my name up through the folds of her memory.

I nodded.

“My name is Bunny,” she said.

“I know.”

“I’m just getting my bike.” She started to walk toward her bike, which was just to my right.

“The tires are flat,” I told her, looking down at them. They had been flat for almost a year now, and I wondered what had possessed her today of all days to take a ride. There was a gust of wind then, and the fence groaned a bit, and we could hear, rather than feel, the wind rushing over the top of the fence, making a sound like scissors cutting through paper.

“Oh.”

“Where were you going to go?” I asked.

“To the beach.”

“By yourself?”

She nodded. “You know, I could put a chair out here for you. Like a camp chair.”

“That’s all right,” I said.

She put her hands on her hips then, and twisted her torso with such strength that I could hear every vertebrae in her spine crack. She was perhaps five inches taller than me. “Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“To your house?”

She took off her helmet. “No one’s home.” There was a babyish

quality to Bunny's voice, perhaps because it seemed too small for the size of her body, and she spoke as though her nose was always a little stuffed. Of course, I wanted desperately to see inside her house up close, and so I put out my cigarette and hid it in the Altoids tin that I also kept behind the plywood, and she watched as I spritzed myself with Febreze, and then we let ourselves out the back gate and into her yard.

"This is our yard," she said. "There's a pool."

I said, "Oh wow," though I had swum in her pool several times when she and her father had been on vacation. I had climbed the fence from my aunt's yard and dropped down into hers, which was dark, since no one was home and the outside lights seemed to be on a timer, and the pool, instead of being a lit rectangle of blue, was a black mass of reflected stars, and, shaking, I had taken off my clothes and slipped naked into the warm water and swum until I felt erased.

She opened one of the French doors that led onto the patio, and we entered the hushed cathedral of her living room. She closed the door behind us, as though it could never be left open. The outside, with its scent of grass and sway of water, its gauzy light and chafing winds, would destroy the interior, the careful, expensive furniture, a pretend world that had to be exactingly maintained.

She gave me a tour of the house, showing me her father's office, with its many bookshelves filled with leather-bound books I doubted he had ever read, and the marble kitchen. She offered me a Pop-Tart, which I declined. She opened one of the crinkly metallic packages for herself, and then, to my horror, spread the two Pop-Tarts with butter and slicked them together as a sandwich. She led me upstairs, taking bites of her Pop-Tart sandwich along the way, and showed me the spare room, decorated in an Oriental style with a disturbing red satin bedspread embroidered with cranes, and the connected bathroom, which had a shiny black vanity and sink, a black toilet, and

black floors. They were ready for Madame Butterfly to commit suicide in there at any time. While the house was uncluttered, I noticed that it was also not exactly clean. Gray trails marked the highest traffic routes on the white carpet, and the sink in the all-black bathroom was spangled with little explosions of white toothpaste.

She gestured at a closed door and said, "That's my dad's room," and then took me into her own bedroom, which was done up, as I already well knew, like a much younger girl's bedroom, with a white canopy bed and a white dresser that had been plastered with My Little Pony stickers. There was a small white mirrored dressing table with a pink brocade bench. Where there should have been makeup and bottles of fancy perfume, Bunny had arranged her schoolbooks and papers. There was a bookshelf that contained not books but trophies and medals and ribbons, all so cheap and garish and crammed together that it looked more like installation art than a proper display. On one wall, there was a bulletin board that I had not been able to see before as it was on the same wall as the window. At first, it appeared to be a Hydra of female body parts, but as I looked closer I could see that they were all women playing volleyball, and then, as I looked yet closer, I could see that they were all the same woman playing volleyball, carefully trimmed from newspapers and magazines.

"That's my Misty May-Treanor altar," she said. "She's a volleyball player."

"Not creepy at all," I said. I would have asked her why she had invited me in, or why she had shown me around with the thoroughness of a realtor, except that I already knew, for her loneliness was so palpable as to be a taste in the air. I had been many places in my life. Apartment buildings where babies free-ranged, waddling down the halls with dirty hair and diapers needing to be changed; houses like my aunt's, where everything was stained and reaching between the couch cushions to find the remote left your fingers sticky. Bus stations, and

prison waiting rooms, and foster-care homes, and men's cars, and men's houses or apartments where there was sometimes only a mattress on the floor, and none of them had scared me quite as much as being in Bunny's silent, beautiful house.

"I've never had a boy in my bedroom before," she said, a little apologetically, and she sat on the bed, as though she expected that I would fuck her right there on her white eyelet duvet.

"I'm gay," I said, my affect as flat and casual as I could manage. I had never spoken those words to anyone before, not in that way.

"Well, I've never had a gay boy in my bedroom either," she said, and flopped backward, finishing the last of her Pop-Tart sandwich, licking the butter off her fingers. She contemplated the ceiling and I began to wonder if I could simply leave. I was fascinated by Bunny and I liked her, but I was beginning to realize I liked her more from a distance than I did close up. It was too much, being in her room, smelling her smells, hearing her breathe. "You probably think my room is stupid," she said, still staring up at the ceiling, her legs, in their athletic shorts, agape on her bed in such a casual way that it was almost lewd, even though technically nothing was showing.

"It's a room," I said. "I'm not the room judge sent to adjudicate your decor or whatever."

"It is stupid," she said. "My dad keeps saying we should redo it. But I like it. I like it just like this."

"Well, thank you for showing me around," I said, trying to indicate that I would like to leave, when we both heard a door slam downstairs. Bunny sat upright on the bed, and I froze as we listened to the thumping of feet on the carpeted stairs. And then there he was, a man I had only ever seen in photographs, his giant head wedged between her door and the wall. "You're home!" Ray Lampert cried, giddy. "And you have a

friend! I thought we could get Chinese—do you feel like Chinese?”

“Ugh, I’m starved,” Bunny said. I, who by fifteen was already a neurotic counter of calories, almost gasped at this statement, having witnessed the 700-calorie Pop-Tart sandwich.

“And you’ll join us, obviously,” Ray Lampert said, turning to me. He was substantially fatter than in his picture, and while there were dark puffy bags under his eyes, the rest of his skin tone was so peculiarly even that I could have sworn he was wearing makeup. His blue dress shirt was unbuttoned a scandalous three buttons, and he was wearing a ratty red baseball cap. It occurred to me that I had probably seen him dozens of times and had just never realized that it was the same man as in the photograph.

“This is Michael,” she said. “Were you thinking Bamboo Forest?”

“No, I want good, really good, egg drop soup. Bamboo Forest is so watery.” He turned to me. “Don’t you think it’s watery?”

What I thought was that I didn’t know anyone was such a connoisseur of egg drop soup. To me it just came, like napkins and forks. “I should probably get home,” I said.

“You don’t really have to go, do you?” Bunny said with sudden, cloying desperation. “Say you’ll come with us!”

Ray reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “He’s got nothing better to do, right, son? Don’t tell me you’re one of these overscheduled kids that’s got back-to-back tutoring and chess club right before you off yourself because you didn’t get into Harvard.” He had found me unattended in his daughter’s bedroom; I stank of cigarettes and was wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and eyeliner, and I had a septum piercing. My hair was loose and went halfway down my back. It was unclear to me if his remarks were meant ironically or if he was actually blind.

“Let’s make it a party!” he said, slapped me on the back, and headed downstairs, shouting that he would meet us at the car.

Bunny turned to me and said in a low voice, “My dad’s kind of weird, but I promise it will be fun.”

And I thought: If Ray Lampert was one of the men I met on Craigslist, I would be too scared to ever get in his car, because he was the kind who would lock you in a closet or put a gun in your mouth and then cry about his ex-wife. Bunny took my hand and twined her fingers through my own. And she looked at me with eyes so hopeful that I nodded.

Honestly, I probably would have let her take me anywhere.

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Thorpe, Ruffi. [The Knockout Queen](#) (Knopf, April 2020).

Author photo by Nina Subin.