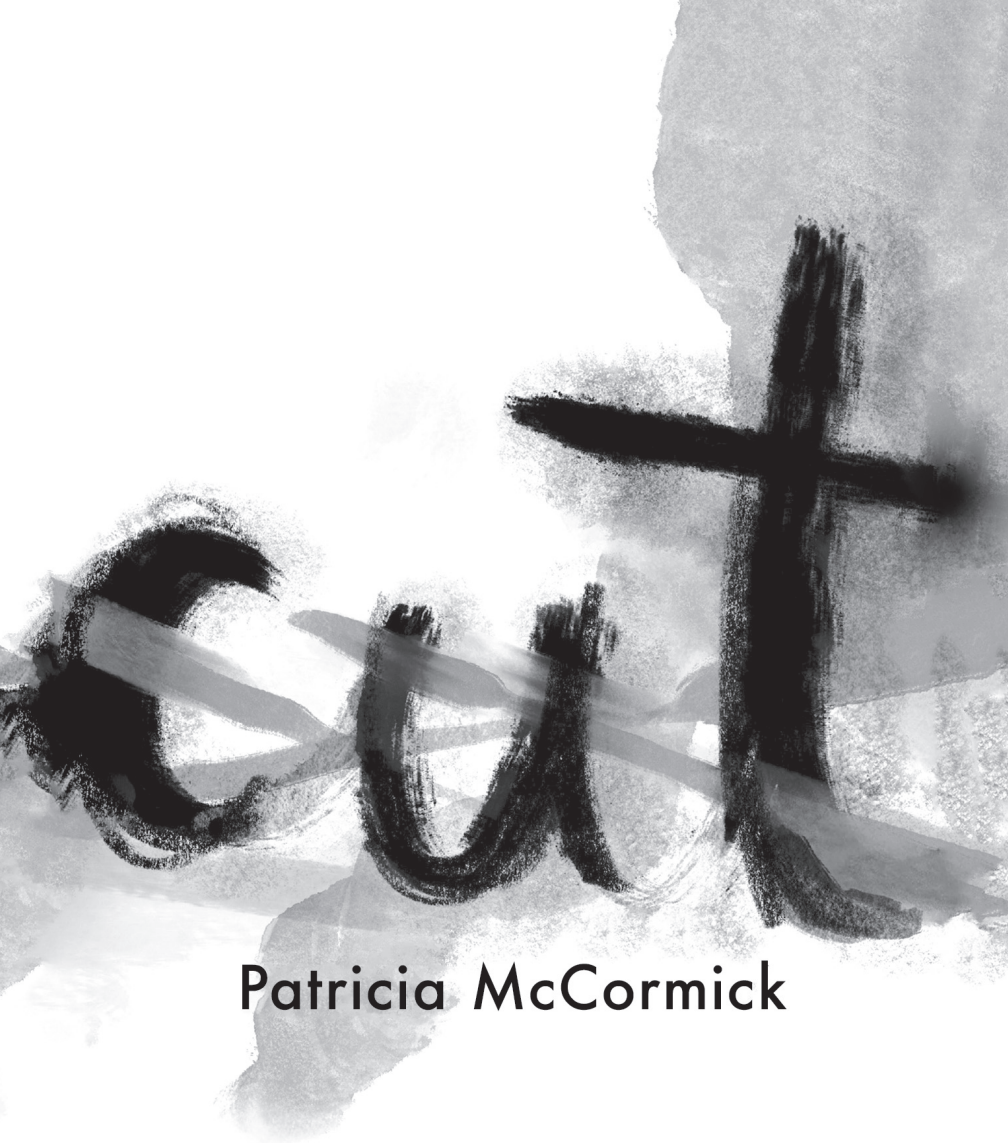

Patricia McCormick

PUSH

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ISBN 978-1-339-05464-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 24 25 26 27 28

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
First printing 2024

1

you say it's up to me to do the talking. You lean forward, place a box of tissues in front of me, and your black leather chair groans like a living thing. Like the cow it used to be before somebody killed it and turned it into a chair in a shrink's office in a loony bin.

Your stockinged legs make a shushing sound as you cross them. "Can you remember how it started?" you say.

I remember exactly.

It was at the last cross-country meet, right around the four-mile mark. Everybody had passed me, just like the week before and the week before that. Everybody—except a girl from the other team. We were the only ones left in the last stretch of the course, the part that winds through the woods and comes out behind the school. Our shadows passed along

the ground slantwise; slowly they merged, then her shadow passed mine.

The soles of her sneakers swam up and down in front of me, first one, then the other, a grid of ridges that spelled out the upside-down name of the shoe company. My steps fell in time with hers. My feet went where her feet had just been. She leaned in around a corner, I leaned in around a corner. She breathed, I breathed.

Then she was gone.

I couldn't even picture her anymore. But what scared me, really scared me, was that I couldn't remember the moment when I'd stopped seeing her. And I knew then that if I couldn't see her, no one could see me.

Sounds from the track meet floated by. A whistle trilling. Muffled applause, the weak sputtering of gloved hands clapping. I was still running, but now I was off the path, heading away from the finish line, past the cars in the parking lot, the flagpole, and the HOME OF THE LIONS sign. Past fast-food places and car repair shops and video stores. Past the new houses and the park. Until, somehow, I was at the entrance to our development.

It was starting to get dark now, and I slowed down, walking past houses with windows of square yellow light where mothers were inside making dinner, past houses with windows of square blue light where kids were inside watching TV, to our house, where the driveway was empty and the lights were off.

I let myself in and flipped the light switch. There was an

explosion of light. The kitchen slid sideways, then righted itself.

I leaned against the door. "I'm home," I said to no one.

The room tilted left, then right, then straightened out. I grabbed hold of the edge of the dinner table and tried to remember if we stopped eating there because it was piled with junk or if it was piled with junk because we stopped eating there.

On the table there was a roll of batting, a glue gun, a doily, a Krafty Kitchens catalogue. Next to the catalogue was a special craft knife with the word EXACTO on the handle. It was sleek, like a fountain pen, with a thin triangular blade at the tip. I picked it up and laid the blade against the doily. The little knots came undone, just like that. I touched the blade to a piece of ribbon draped across the table and pressed, ever so slightly. The ribbon unfurled into two pieces and slipped to the floor without a sound. Then I placed the blade next to the skin on my palm.

A tingle arced across my scalp. The floor tipped up at me and my body spiraled away. Then I was on the ceiling looking down, waiting to see what would happen next. What happened next was that a perfect, straight line of blood bloomed from under the edge of the blade. The line grew into a long, fat bubble, a lush crimson bubble that got bigger and bigger. I watched from above, waiting to see how big it would get before it burst. When it did, I felt awesome. Satisfied, finally. Then exhausted.

• • •

I don't tell you any of this, though. I don't say anything. I just hug my elbows to my sides. My mind is a video on fast-forward. A video with no soundtrack.

And finally you sigh and stand up and say, "That's all we have time for today."

Twice a day we have Group. Group therapy, according to the brochure they give you at the admissions office, is the "keystone of the treatment philosophy" here at Sick Minds. The real name of the place is Sea Pines, even though there is no sea and there are no pines. My roommate, Sydney, who has a nickname for everything, calls it Sick Minds. Her nickname for me is S.T., for Silent Treatment.

We, by the way, are called guests. Our problems are called issues. Most of the girls are anorexic. They're called guests with food issues. Some are druggies. They're called guests with substance-abuse issues. The rest, like me, are assorted psychos. We're called guests with behavioral issues. The nurses are called attendants. And the place is called a residential treatment facility. It is not called a loony bin.

There aren't assigned seats in Group, but people tend to sit according to issues. The food-issue guests—Tara, a really skinny girl who has to wear a baseball cap to cover a bald spot where her hair fell out, and Becca, another really skinny girl who wears white little-girl tights that pool around her ankles and who came straight here from a hospital after she had a heart attack, and Debbie, a really, really overweight girl who says she's been here the longest—sit in a cluster of orange

plastic chairs next to Claire, the group leader. The substance-abuse guests—Sydney, who says she's addicted to every drug she's ever tried, and Tiffany, who seems normal but is here instead of going to jail for smoking crack—sit together on the other side of Claire's chair.

I sit by myself. I pick the chair the farthest from Claire and closest to the window, which they never open, even though it's always about a hundred degrees in here. Today, when Claire invites someone to start off, I decide to work on memorizing the order of the cars in the parking lot. *Brown, white, white, blue, beige. Brown, white, white, blue, beige.*

"All right, ladies," says Claire. "Who wants to go first?" Claire makes a little tent with her fingers and waits. I lean back in my usual spot in the circle, out of her line of vision.

Tara tugs on her hair, Debbie smoothes her sweatshirt over her stomach, and Becca slides off her chair and sits on the carpet at Debbie's feet, her legs tucked underneath her, Girl Scout style. No one answers.

Debbie cracks her weight-control gum. Tiffany, who for some reason wears a purse strapped across her chest at all times, fiddles with the latch.

"Ah, come on," Claire says. "Yesterday was visiting day. Surely somebody has something to say about that."

I add new cars to my list. *Brown, white, white, blue, beige, green, red. Brown, white, white, blue, beige, green, red.*

"OK, OK." Debbie says this like everyone was begging her to talk. "I might as well go first."

There's scattered squirming. Tiffany rolls her eyes. Tara,

who's so weak from not eating that she dozes off a lot during Group, leans her head against the wall; her eyes droop shut.

"It was terrible," Debbie says. "Not for me. But poor Becca." She gives Becca's thin shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Wait till I tell you what—"

Tiffany sighs and her enormous chest rises and falls. "Not for you, Debbie? Then how come I saw you at the nurses' desk last night begging for an escort to the vending machine?"

Debbie turns red.

"How come you're always so willing to talk about everyone else's problems?" Tiffany says. "What about yours? What happened at your visit, Debbie?"

Debbie regards her. "Nothing really."

"Really?" Sydney says, not unkindly.

"Really," says Debbie.

"That's crap," says Tiffany. Little drops of spit fly out of her mouth.

For Debbie this is a swear. She hates it when people swear. The temperature goes up to about 110 degrees.

"Debbie," Claire says gravely, "how do you feel about what Tiffany's saying?"

Debbie shrugs. "I don't care."

Sydney points a shaky finger in Debbie's direction. "You do so," she says. "You're pissed. Why don't you admit it, Debbie?"

Everyone waits.

"Well, I'd rather that she didn't swear." Debbie addresses this comment to Claire.

"Why don't you look at me?" Tiffany says. "Why don't you say, 'Tiffany, I don't like it when you say *crap*. Could you please watch your goddamn mouth?' "

Tara giggles. Sydney tries not to.

Debbie's mouth stretches into a tight smile, then her chin starts to quiver; I wipe my palms on my jeans.

"I know you all hate me because I'm not like the rest of you," she says. The effort of trying not to cry is making her face very red.

"I don't hate you," Becca says, craning her neck up toward Debbie.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I want to graduate," Debbie says. "I don't want to just sit around here listening to people complain about their rotten childhoods."

Tiffany lifts her palms to the ceiling, charade for "I give up."

"Anyone else care to comment?" Claire says.

I hold very still. Claire's a hawk for body language. Biting your nails means you want to talk. Leaning forward means you want to talk. Leaning back means you want to talk. I don't move.

Sydney clears her throat. "I don't care if we talk about my visit," she says.

People exhale.

"My mom kept spritzing her mouth with Binaca but she'd

had a couple of pops before she got here. My dad kept checking his watch and making calls on his cell phone and my sister sat there doing her math homework."

The formula for converting Fahrenheit into Celsius enters my head uninvited. I try to calculate what 110 degrees Fahrenheit equals in Celsius.

"For my family . . ." Sydney taps the end of a pen, flicking an imaginary ash off the end of her imaginary cigarette. ". . . that's quality time."

People laugh, a little too hard.

"How did you feel when they were here?" Claire says.

"Fine." The smile on Sydney's face wilts slightly. "I mean, it's just like home."

This is a joke. No one laughs. Sydney surveys the group.

"Look. I have a strategy. Why expect anything? If you don't expect anything, you don't get disappointed."

Tara raises her hand. "Were you?"

Sydney doesn't understand. "Was I what?"

"Disappointed?"

Sydney still looks lost.

"I mean, I hope you don't take this the wrong way," Tara says. "But a minute ago you accused Debbie of pretending not to be pissed. Well, I think maybe you're pissed. At your mom and your dad and your sister." Tara sinks back in her chair; she gets tired just talking.

"I'm not mad at my sister," Sydney says. "It's not her fault. I mean, how would you like to spend your Saturday afternoon with a bunch of freaks?" She claps a hand over her

mouth. "No offense or anything. I mean, we spend all our time with freaks, but that's different. We are freaks."

A couple of people laugh.

Sydney goes on. "I don't care about my mom. I mean, what do you expect? That she'd wait till she got out of here for happy hour? Yeah, right. But my dad . . ."

I unfold and refold my arms across my chest. Bad move. Claire notices. Luckily, Sydney keeps talking.

"I don't know. He's not very good at stuff like this . . ." Sydney wrings the hem of her sweater; her hands are really shaking now. She laughs, sort of. Then, with no warning, she's crying. "I'm not pissed," she says. "It's . . . I'm just . . . I don't know, disappointed."

I squeeze my arms to my chest and feel embarrassed for Sydney, the way I used to in grade school when someone wet their pants. I hate Group. People always end up saying things that make them look pathetic.

"At least they came," says Tiffany. "My dad didn't even show."

Something else comes into my mind uninvited. It's an image of a dad walking up the sidewalk on visiting day, his hands stuffed in his jacket, his head tucked down against the wind. I tap on the window in the reception room. He glances up and I see that he has glasses and a red face and he's not my dad at all; he's someone else's dad. I go back to memorizing the cars in the parking lot.

"How do you feel about that?" Claire says to Tiffany.

"Screw him. That's how I feel."

I cross and recross my arms.

Claire pounces. "Callie."

At the sound of my name the heat closes in on me. I squint my eyes like I'm trying to make out something totally fascinating in the parking lot and think *Brown, white, white, blue, beige.* I lose my place and have to start again.

"Callie?" Claire's not giving up. "Do you want to tell us about your visit yesterday?"

There's a fly caught between the window and the screen. He seems sort of surprised each time he bangs into the glass. But he just staggers away, then rams into the glass again.

"Callie?"

I pull a curtain of hair down in front of my eyes and wait. After a while, someone from the other side of the circle starts talking. I can't really make out what she's saying, though. All I hear is the *zzzzzt-zzzzzt* of the fly banging into the window

There's a burst of chatter as everyone files out of Group. I hang behind the other girls, then go down the hall and check out the chalkboard next to the attendants' desk. On the board is a list of everyone's names and the treatments they go for after Group. Tiffany goes to Anger Management. Tara goes to Relaxation Therapy. Sydney and Tiffany also go to the infirmary for urine tests—to make sure they aren't taking anything. Becca, Tara, and Debbie go too—to make sure they *are* taking things: vitamins and food supplements for Tara and Becca, heart medicine for Becca, Prozac for Debbie. After that, Debbie goes to an exercise room where a

trainer puts her on the treadmill. Tara and Becca get taken on a slow walk around the grounds to make sure they don't get on the treadmill.

There's nothing on the board next to my name. I don't get taken anywhere.

I duck around the corner before anyone can see me checking the board, because the other day I overheard Debbie, who spends a lot of time hanging around the attendants' desk, telling Becca that the people at Sick Minds were still trying to figure out what to do with me.

When you're a Level One (a new guest, or a guest exhibiting Inappropriate Behavior), you aren't allowed to go anywhere unsupervised. Level Twos (anybody who's accumulated ten points for Appropriate Behavior) are allowed to go to the dayroom and to their appointments on their own, but they have to get escorts to go to the laundry room or the vending machine. Level Threes (people who are about to graduate, like Debbie) *are* the escorts. But even Level Threes with food issues have to get attendants or other Level Threes to escort them to the vending machines. It's complicated learning the Sick Minds system. It's easier being a Level One, if you ask me.

Since I'm a Level One, the only place I can go while everyone else is at treatment is Study Hall. It's supervised by an attendant named Cynthia, who sits in the front of the classroom answering multiple-choice questions in a big workbook. The only good thing about afternoon Study Hall,

besides the fact that I'm usually the only one here, is that it's quiet. There are signs all over the place politely reminding us guests to respect each other's needs for silence; at least in here, I'm actually displaying Appropriate Behavior.

The walls are lined with cork board that other guests have covered with graffiti. I spend a lot of time reading their messages—names and comments like "This place sucks," or "Mrs. Bryant is a bitch." (Mrs. Bryant is either the lady who works in the admissions office or the head of the place, I'm not sure.) Mostly I listen to the rustling of paper as Cynthia turns the pages in her workbook.

I take my favorite seat in the back of the room, in the corner farthest away from Cynthia, and pretend to do the geometry assignment that my school faxed in. Really, I watch the dog who lives next to the maintenance shed. All he does is sleep and pace. Mostly he sleeps, but right now he's pacing back and forth in front of his doghouse. He's barking like mad at a delivery truck that's coming up the driveway. He trots to the end of his chain, barks, then turns and trots back. Then he turns around and does the same thing all over again. He's gone back and forth so many times, he's worn a dirt path in front of his house.

I sit there watching the dust fly as he paces back and forth, back and forth, while nobody pays attention to him. After a while I get up and move to a desk facing the wall.

Ruth, a Level Three from another group, arrives at the door, on time as always, to escort me to Individual. Ruth is this

very shy girl with bad skin and a way of ducking her chin inside her turtleneck; she just appears at the door every day at the same time, waiting for me to notice her. She looks so uncomfortable with her chin jammed into her chest and her hands shoved into her pockets that I always just get up and go with her.

The truth is, I don't mind being escorted by Ruth. I sort of like listening to our sneakers squeak along the hallway and not worrying that Ruth is going to try to make me talk. And I have a feeling that maybe Ruth doesn't mind escorting me either, because when we get to the waiting area outside your office, sometimes she hangs around a while, even though technically she doesn't have to.

After she goes, it's just me and the little white plastic UFO on the floor outside your office. Mrs. Bryant, who gave me my tour on the first day and who I've never seen since, said that the UFO—which looks like a plastic party hat with a motor inside—is called a white-noise machine. She said all the therapists have them outside their doors so people in the hall can't hear what the guests inside are saying. (The UFOs don't, however, drown out the yelling or the crying.)

Since I'm not talking (or yelling or crying), you could turn the UFO off during our session; that way, Sick Minds could save a little on the electric bill. I think about telling you that, but of course that would require talking, which would require turning on the UFO.

You open your door and invite me to come in. I consider lying down on the couch, thinking how nice it would be to

take a nap there for the next hour, but I sit in my usual spot, the corner farthest from you and your dead-cow chair. You sit down and ask about visiting day. "How was it for you?" you say.

I study your shoes. They're tiny black witch's shoes with silver buckles.

"What was it like seeing your family?"

Your shoes look like they're made of fabric, like they're too delicate to be worn in the real world.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?"

I consider saying something totally stupid. Something so boringly normal that you'll finally give up and leave me alone. I think about telling you that my mom wore her good wool coat, the one she wears to church and to doctor's appointments. Or about telling you that she looked tired, like the Before people in the Before and After pictures in her magazines. Or about how she started massaging her forehead as soon as she walked into the reception room.

Sam looked scared and excited all at once. He also seemed skinnier than ever; even though he was wearing a bulky red sweatshirt, his inhaler made a big bulge from inside his front shirt pocket. He let me hug him, then shoved a card at me. "I made this for you," he said. The card had pictures of cats all over it. Cats dancing. Cats jumping rope. Cats drinking tea. Cats playing basketball.

Sam's a really good artist for a third-grader, I imagine myself telling you, in a smart, sane voice. *But his spelling really sucks.* The card, which I hid under the mattress back

in my room, says "Hop your feeling beter." It's signed by Sam and Linus.

Linus is our cat, I'd explain to you. You'd nod thoughtfully and I'd go on to explain that Linus has to live outside now, since the doctor said she was one of the things making Sam sick. I'd tell you that we named her Linus, even though she's a girl, because she used to carry around a sock in her mouth when she was a baby. *It looked like a security blanket, so we called her Linus*, I'd tell you. You'd smile. We'd make small talk. Except that I don't make talk, small or otherwise.

It was weird not saying anything to Sam when he handed me the card. I patted him on the head instead. Then my mom started sniffling, so I was able to walk away and get her a tissue from the coffee table. *That's one good thing about this place*, I'd tell you. *There are tissue boxes everywhere.*

I steered my mom and Sam over to a couch in the reception room. Sam looked around, his mouth hanging open like it does when he watches TV. "Why is this place called Sea Pines?"

He was waiting for me to answer, I think, but I was too busy pulling on a loose thread on the seat cushion. I pictured the whole couch coming unraveled and the three of us sitting on the floor in a giant pile of couch thread.

My mom was rubbing her temples. "It's just a name, Sam, like Pennbrook Manor, where Gram lived," she said finally.

"Where Gram died, you mean," Sam said.

"Well . . ." She gazed past Sam, around the reception room, trying to see what the other families were doing.