

THE LAST SEPTEMBER

A Terror Since September: A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



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My husband and I had been married two years when his brother Jared, in the midst of another psychotic break, wrote a to-do list that included buying a gun and five bullets to kill his family. My mother-in-law noted that number included me.

“You’re really one of us now,” she said.

At his commitment hearing, Jared insisted the list had been a joke. “I don’t even know how to use a gun,” he told the judge. This was true, and really most of our concern was directed toward Jared and his need for psychiatric help. The list was alarming, absolutely, but Jared had always been a gentle person before he got sick, and he had no experience with firearms. None of us *truly* believed he’d get hold of a gun, let alone use it.

Still, it’s the kind of image that doesn’t exactly leave you. And when Jared was unmedicated, the violent chaos that had taken

over his mind roiled just below the surface, visible enough so it was hard not to be afraid that one way or another it would break through his exterior.

At the time my husband and I lived on Cape Cod year-round. I loved the desolate feel of the off-season, all the neighboring homes vacated and most of the nearby businesses shuttered. Our house was right on the ocean and a short walk from the harbor, where after Labor Day the boats sat stacked and unused. I could walk the beach for hours without seeing a soul. It was easy to pretend I was the last person left on earth. Sometimes this was a lonely fantasy, and other times it suited my mood perfectly.

But that isolated, windswept landscape seemed less romantic when my mother-in-law suggested moving Jared from North Carolina to Massachusetts. My husband and I met with a family therapist, mostly to allay my fears about the new arrangement—fears that we would become responsible for Jared, or worse, that he would appear on our doorstep in his most agitated state. That he would be dangerous.

When I voiced this concern, the therapist waved her hand dismissively. “If he shows up uninvited, just dial 911. The police will be there before anything can happen.”

And my mind did not relax but chased after the fears she so easily swept aside. What would we do, out on our deserted stretch of shore, in the minutes between when a phone call was made and help arrived?

THE LAST SEPTEMBER BEGINS when Brett finds her husband murdered, his head bashed in and his throat slit. From the moment she stumbles upon this shocking scene, it seems clear to

everybody that Charlie's brother, Eli—who's been in and out of mental hospitals for years—must be the perpetrator.

It's September when Brett finds Charlie dead at their borrowed home on Cape Cod. The last tourist has gone home, the seals have returned to the bay, the air is getting colder. And now, the back deck of their house is soaked with blood. As Eli disappears before the police can make an arrest, Brett is left to wonder not only if she's next but how everything she'd done in the years since she met Charlie might have led to exactly this moment—him and Eli both, each in his own way, gone.

FICTION TAKES THE GERM of an idea and reshapes it into something entirely different. I never really knew Jared before mental illness commanded his life. Brett not only knew Eli but loved him: they were best friends in college, until schizophrenia interfered the way nothing else can. As Brett tries to make sense of what happened to Charlie, she can't help but sift through the three versions of Eli that loom large: the person he used to be before he got sick, the person he could have been if he hadn't, and the tragic figure he's become. In this way the novel is an elegy not only for Charlie but for what's been lost to Eli and the people who love him.

Mental illness steps between a person and every wish he's ever had. For the person suffering, it's the most dangerous thing I can think of. And then there's this other way it feels dangerous. If you've ever crossed the road to avoid someone who's talking to himself—engaging his voices—then you can imagine what it's like to be in the same room with a family member who's in that florid, irrational, unreachable state. Even when you know the statistics,

that a person suffering from mental illness is more likely to be the victim of a crime than the perpetrator, it's terrifying on a primal level. You can understand how myths of demonic possession are rooted in psychosis.

Whenever I see Jared, if he's been taking his medication, I feel guilty for ever doubting him, for ever being afraid. Then when he's off his meds, it doesn't take long for the same uneasiness, the same fear, to rise again.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "I had a terror since September I could tell to none." Brett's terror begins long before the September she finds her husband dead. It goes all the way back to when Eli was nobody to be feared at all, just a friend full of promise, until one strange night at a party, a night that proved to be prescient. That was when Brett first wondered, as she does again and again, until the very end of *The Last September*, whether Eli needs to be feared or protected, or both.

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Last September* begins in the middle of the story. It's the first thing Brett tells us: "Because I am a student of literature, I will start my story on the day Charlie died." How does this structure inform the way you read the novel? Would the story be different for you, as a reader, if it were told chronologically? In what ways?
2. Brett knows Charlie is not the best choice for her, and yet, as she says, "I loved him enough to wreck my life." Do you agree that loving Charlie wrecks Brett's life? If she were your friend, how would you advise her when she comes to the crossroads of choosing between Ladd and Charlie? Have you ever loved someone enough to wreck your life?
3. When Charlie is murdered, he and Brett are trying to pick up the pieces of their marriage. What do you think would have

happened if Charlie had not been killed? Would he and Brett have been able to work things out? Do you think he loves her?

4. Each section of the novel begins with a quote from Emily Dickinson. How does each quote pertain to its section? Are these poems interacting with other literary works referenced in the novel? How does Brett's preoccupation with literature affect the decisions she makes and the way she thinks about her life?

5. When Ladd asks Brett to sign a prenuptial agreement, she isn't happy, but she goes ahead and signs it. Do you think she might have stayed with Ladd if he hadn't asked her to sign a prenup? What do you think of prenuptial agreements? Would you ever sign one? What role does wealth play in the novel?

6. Daniel Williams, Ladd's uncle, keeps photographs of his late wife, Sylvia, hidden throughout his house. What do you think is the connection, in his mind, between Brett and Sylvia? Why does he finally start displaying pictures of Sylvia? What is the root of his kindness and concern toward Brett?

7. Mental illness plays a strong role in the novel. The person most clearly suffering is Eli. Are there other characters in the novel who might have a personality disorder of some sort? What do you think the diagnoses would be?

8. Brett is a witness to Eli's first psychotic break, when he jumps off the roof of a fraternity house. From that moment on, Brett's

life rises and falls according to Eli's illness. Is Eli a character who inspires sympathy? If you had stumbled upon the same murder scene as Brett, would you suspect Eli of committing the murder? Did you suspect Eli of committing it? If he *had* committed the murder, would you still find him a sympathetic character?

9. Charlie and Ladd are each flawed in his own way. Which man do you prefer, and why? Which do you think is better for Brett? Are there any character flaws or virtues that they share? What does Brett's preference for Charlie tell you about her? How would you rate Charlie as a brother? A father? A son?

10. Brett acquires two pets in the course of the novel—a cat and a dog, both inherited from Eli. What roles do these animals play? Does Eli's affection for animals affect your opinion of him? What do you think of his theory that animals love humans for their hands? How does each pet unite or divide Brett and Eli?

11. Brett is writing her dissertation on Emily Dickinson's letters. What other letters appear in the novel? What is their importance? Why do you think Brett writes the same e-mail to Charlie over and over again?

12. Brett's father died when she was five; now her daughter is fatherless at an even younger age. What role does Brett's fatherlessness play in her decisions? Is there any connection between that loss and her romantic choices? What do you think Brett will tell Sarah about Charlie?

HARRY TAYLOR



Nina de Gramont is the author of the story collection *Of Cats and Men*, which was a Book Sense selection and the winner of a Discovery Award from the New England Booksellers Association. Her first novel, *Gossip of the Starlings*, was also a Book Sense pick. She is the coeditor of *Choice*, an anthology, and the author of several young adult novels. She teaches in the MFA program at the University of North Carolina–Wilmington.