

On Isabelle + Madison

Isabelle Chan was the one, ironically enough, who told Madison Gardenia to open her throat chakra. To activate *viśuddha*.

Isabelle and Madison seemed, at first, like natural allies. Both were wealthy women, and around the same age, which was almost enough. Of course, Isabelle's professor parents had fled from communist China to Vancouver, and Isabelle had reinvented herself from a traumatized child to a beautiful, self-made, all-loving yoga instructor who ran teacher trainings that went for \$6000 a head. Madison, on the other hand, was skinny and blonde, and her father was a hedge fund manager. Her mother was a former model and beauty queen and her uncle had given up a job running an oil rig to become an MP for the Conservative Party and get himself into hot water every other week. But then, money was money. Isabelle and Madison both had it; they both lived by the water. At the end of the day, wasn't that really what mattered?

Isabelle really had one of the most beautiful voices in the world—soft and syrupy and little girly, with just the hint of the accent that she had mostly lost. Isabelle *was* beautiful, all almond-shaped eyes and perfect skin and songbird voice, and she radiated love in a way you couldn't understand until you really saw her. Even through the screen, it came through: her Instagram lives and Zoom workshops seemed hazy in a way, the screen itself dimmed by the brightness of her eyes, that natural sweetness. She was only a couple years older than Madison but seemed significantly older, because she had started doing everything so *young*. She was so successful, already, by the time she was nineteen and she had held Madison so tightly, once, in a shitty studio in the absolute worst part of the city—people were shooting up heroin outside, and sheltered seventeen-year-old Madison was going to have to walk past them, and normally she would be panicking about this, but she didn't care, actually, because Isabelle hugged her and told her she was just as innocent now as she had been the day that she was born.

And the thing was, Madison believed her. Which was a big improvement on the girl she had once been. See, Madison had OCD and she was much better now and had started to understand that intrusive thoughts did not define her and that she did not actually have to spend hours ruminating and minutes on end praying compulsively. But sometimes—not always, but sometimes—Madison fell down the rabbit hole again and had to pull herself out, had to remind herself not to pray obsessive-compulsively. That she was actually not a sick, dirty, shameful, loathsome person. And when she had to remind herself of this, she often cast back onto moments spent in Isabelle's classes, in her workshops. In butterfly pose, Buddhist-sounding chants broadcast over the stereo, the smell of lavender in the air. And somehow, Isabelle's sweet voice rose above everything until it became the only thing that mattered, the only point that Madison could focus on.

Isabelle told Madison that she was pure as a baby, and Madison had believed it. Had latched onto this promise, and—by extension—Isabelle, desperately, because she had needed to hear it so badly. When you've lived in shame all your life, such a promise is a priceless thing. It saves your whole self-image: it allows you, not even to love yourself, just to tolerate yourself. To not hate yourself. Isabelle Chan allowed Madison Gardenia not to hate herself anymore.

That's the first thing to note about their relationship.

As both women grew older, out of teenagerhood and into their twenties, Isabelle became both richer and angrier. She had a baby with a real estate agent at twenty-five and moved with him and their daughter to the south of Florida (again, right by the water) where she unschooled her daughter and wrote fiery Instagram posts about the evil overlords who ruled over them, and all the people too blind to see the truth.

Madison, on the other hand, continued coasting, as she was wont to do. She began hosting free weekend retreats for women at her father's compound in West Vancouver, which Isabelle promoted for her, at the very beginning. Here the women had dance parties at the studio her father had built for her as a little girl, smoked weed, did tarot card readings and practised yoga, and listened to Madison's free-spirited ruminations on life. Also, they did poetry readings sometimes (TS Eliot had always been a favourite of Madison's).

There was something about Madison, an aura around her. People, most everybody, noticed it. It may have been the way she walked, a slight bounce in her step. Or perhaps it was her expression, the vague smile she always wore, as though life were a present she got to unwrap every day, over and over again. That placid smile stayed in place whenever she was in public, whenever she was on TV, whenever she was in the presence of other people. This was what growing up rich, and somewhat in the public eye, taught you. And Madison played her part well. She used the honeyed, babyish tones of the born rich when she spoke, except for when she forgot or was too comfortable. Her natural voice was an octave lower.

Madison knew how to be unhappy, but not to be angry, and certainly not to complain. Madison was not a *complainer*; she had nothing to complain about. She was a placid smiler. She smiled placidly.

On White Wine

Except for at the bar. Madison did not smile placidly at the bar.

The whole evening was a bit stupid, really, but then it had a big impact. Madison went with Eliza to the Neighbourhood, a bar that was a five-minute walk from Madison's apartment, maybe not even. Eliza left her car there, at the surprisingly nondescript building housed above a store that sold dried fruit and nuts, and an insurance company. Not where Eliza had imagined Madison Gardenia might live. Before she could chew on *that* too much though, the car was parked, and Maddie was chatting her ear off on the way to the bar. About mystery novels. Eliza had attended one of Madison's free retreats, and they had found that they both shared once-debilitating (in Eliza's case, still-debilitating) cases of OCD, and a love of mystery novels. They didn't really have that much else in common: Madison was thirty-one by this point, while Eliza was nineteen, this raven-haired beauty who lived with her mother in co-op housing. But OCD and a love of mystery novels were like an abundance of money: if it was something you both had, that was enough to be friends. Nothing else really mattered.

So, Madison was chattering on about mystery novels.

“I’ve always loved Agatha Christie, I mean, I think it’s so funny when people say she wasn’t an *artist*? I had this English teacher in high school, Eliza, and she seriously thought that anything popular couldn’t be art. I think that’s wild, you know, and maybe this is controversial, but I think it takes the absolute same level of talent to write a really well-crafted mystery novel as it does a beautiful poem. Think of the *concentration*, the attention to detail... it’s superhuman, really. And people never learn, you know, English teachers love to remind you that people thought Shakespeare was trash back in the day, but then they’re the first ones to criticize what’s popular *now*... it’s so short-sighted, it really is.”

“Oh, *totally*,” Eliza agreed.

Then they were at the bar at a corner table with these huge glasses of wine—they both ordered a glass, but the waitress brought over a decanter to each of them alongside the glass, so it really worked out to be almost two glasses, for only six dollars. Eliza was sure it was a mistake, but Madison blinked and said, “No, that’s just what they do here.” And the bar itself was maybe the nicest bar Eliza had ever been to, which, okay, she hadn’t really been to many nice bars, but she had been to a few trendy bars downtown, so she knew what they were supposed to look like. And this was nicer than any of the bars downtown, because it had personality. Next to each table was a bookshelf stocked with novels, which she couldn’t figure out—the music was much too loud for people to come here and *read*, surely? Probably it was just an ambience thing. If it was, then it was working—Eliza now felt like more of a literary person than she had when she’d walked in. She tried to find some theme within the titles, but they seemed completely random: romance novels from the eighties were housed next to new editions from the 1800s. Madison picked up a romance and read a couple scenes out loud until she got bored. And the bathrooms were filled with pop art of Queen Elizabeth and Kermit the Frog. It was all very charming.

“Listen,” Madison said recklessly, once she’d necked her first two glasses of wine (but really it was more like three, because of the decanter) and was on her third or maybe fourth, “I don’t understand why alcohol is not considered therapeutic, like other drugs?” She peered up at Eliza, blue eyes and blonde hair framed by her white coat. All innocent.

Eliza half-smiled. She adored Madison, in a semi-lustful way: she *liked* Madison, and she didn’t really like that many people. This alone was enough to make anything Madison said make sense, even though Madison clearly lived in a different world. The first time they’d gone out to lunch together after the retreat, Madison had gifted Eliza a little pot of moisturizer that Eliza knew, without a doubt, cost more than all the beauty products she and her mother owned, combined. “Because you’re such a beautiful girl,” Madison had said, “and you need beautiful hands, too.” Then she’d taken Eliza’s dry, cracked, practically bloody hands in hers and rubbed the moisturizer into them slowly, gently. It was possibly the most maternal thing somebody other than her mother had ever done for her. “And say a mantra instead next time, maybe,” she’d continued, still rubbing the moisturizer in. “Not forever, just for now. Eventually you’ll stop doing that too. But think of a mantra to say next time you want to wash your hands, and then just say it instead. I like the Sanskrit mantras, myself. Very loving.”

See, so how could she not love beautiful, innocent Madison who recited Sanskrit mantras and believed alcohol was a therapeutic drug?

“Alcohol ruins people’s lives, Maddie,” Eliza said, downing the rest of her glass. *How* it ruined people’s lives, she couldn’t fathom in this moment—how could something that made her feel so light and warm and floaty and beautiful ever have a dark side—but it did, definitely.

“So do other drugs,” Madison said obstinately. “But this one just gets a bad rap, for some reason.”

“Well, weed doesn’t ruin other people’s lives. And neither do shrooms.”

“That’s not true, actually,” Madison countered, so mildly Eliza almost missed the fact that she was being disagreed with. “Weed does. My uncle, he was an addict in his teens and twenties...to weed. But then he got older and kicked it.”

“Your uncle...” Eliza squinted her eyes shut, pinched the bridge of her nose. “Is this the same uncle who is now an MP?”

“Oh, yes. The very same.” Madison nodded, looking vaguely satisfied for some reason.

“But doesn’t he want, like, stricter drug sentences? I mean, I know weed is legal now, but other things...” Eliza really only cared nominally about politics, and she would never before have been caught dead knowing some random MP from Alberta’s platform, except after she met Madison she had gone online and read everything there was to know about her and her family, because Madison was the most fascinating person she had ever met.

“Oh, probably.” Madison shrugged. “Look, I am not saying I agree with him *policy-wise*, but I do believe that weed addiction is a thing: why would he lie to me about it? And alcohol is, you know, it does have very therapeutic properties—don’t *laugh* at me, Eliza, you know I mean it...”

“No, I mean, yeah, no, you’re right.” Eliza was snickering slightly, but mostly because she’d hit the point in an evening of drinking when suddenly everything was funny. It usually lasted for only a few minutes, but now that she was thinking about it, maybe Madison was onto something. Weed did calm Eliza down and make her feel more *present*, but alcohol—particularly wine—relaxed her, *and* made her want to dance uncontrollably, *and* made her feel that everything was funny. And didn’t everybody say that laughter and movement were the best medicine? Ergo, then, wine was basically medicine.

“And you know,” Madison went on lazily, “I’ll tell you, I don’t believe in all this open-your-throat-chakra-activate-viśuddha nonsense anymore. No.” She shook her head resolutely, signalling to the waitress for another round. “The wellness community, they think they have all the answers, but really all they do is over-complicate things. You want to speak freely, drink a bottle of wine. Done.” She pounded the table with surprising force, gazing at Eliza triumphantly.

“Because I feel,” she went on, “I feel so loving right now. I’m not anxious at all—I feel so calm, so passionate, so sure of my place in the world... I feel enlightened, actually, and I paid, what? Under twenty dollars? Not thousands, like these people will tell you to... no, I don’t

believe any of it anymore. See, and I'm telling you: I never met a truth I didn't like after a bottle of wine."

"Oh..." Madison appeared liberated in this moment, and Madison's liberation made one feel that they were liberated too. "Well, you never have to hold anything back with me. I don't want you to."

Eliza really did have several questions, so she hoped Madison *wouldn't* hold back. They had actually met at one of Isabelle's workshops earlier in the year, in summer, at a gorgeous studio downtown (Eliza had had to sell her prom dress, and two pieces of jewelry given to her by her great-aunt in order to afford to go). She had been sure it would be worth it, to soak up all of Isabelle's wisdom, her loving presence. But really it had ended up being worth it because that was where she met Madison.

Let's take a trip back, then, to the summer.

On OCD

Back in June, Eliza began a list of everything that Isabelle said made her a bad person. It was satisfying in the same way that picking at a scab was satisfying: you understood it was gross and would make everything worse, but also, it felt so good to stew in your debased humanity.

Isabelle would never *say*, of course, that Eliza was a bad person, but then, she didn't know Eliza well enough. She would probably think Eliza was terrible, though. If she knew.

Eliza had begun going to Isabelle's yoga workshops the year previously, when she was eighteen. Isabelle taught at yoga studios all over North America, each for a couple of days at a time--she was in extraordinarily high demand, and the first time Eliza did one of her classes, she had seen why.

She would always remember that feeling, she was pretty sure, of being in butterfly pose, soles of her feet pressed together, knees wide, head folded over. And Isabelle's voice washing over her--she had the sweetest, prettiest, most childlike voice. The room smelled like lavender, and she told everybody in it softly, softly, that they were all innocent. As innocent as children. Completely clean, deep down inside, of all their pain, all their worst mistakes and experiences. As pure as they had been the day they were born. Next to Eliza, a middle-aged woman had started openly sobbing.

And Eliza had wanted to, as well, though she never cried in front of other people. Ever since she could remember, Eliza had felt that her soul was coated in filth. That every flash of desire, every moment of curiosity, was gross and wrong and awful.

But there, in that moment, she began to feel that maybe, just maybe, it was not true. That she was alright, at least redeemable, after all.

And then that was it. She was hooked.

Isabelle's presence was terribly calming, and her workshops were always soothing in a profound, spiritual sort of way. You partnered with a stranger--in Eliza's case, it was a Korean woman in her mid-thirties--and told them, "You are *loved*" and they would say the same to you. Or Kundalini workshops, where Isabelle orgasmed openly in the silence as the music faded, so stimulated was she by the sound, that music, slithering inside you like a snake, the pulsing of each breath, each dynamic movement. And somehow it wasn't dirty or perverse (it would have been if Eliza had orgasmed in front of a roomful of people, of course, but not Isabelle. Isabelle could do no wrong).

Isabelle was too beautiful to ever be thought dirty, too filled with light. She was in her early thirties, probably, but looked younger. Her little daughter, Talia, was always in tow. She brought Talia with her to many of the yoga workshops (not the Kundalini one, fortunately) and dressed her in pigtails and little matching outfits, and gazed at her with a reverence Eliza didn't think most mothers truly felt for their children, even though they claimed to. Talia was Isabelle's partner for the "expression of love" activity: "You are *loved*," Isabelle had told her, cupping her little face in between her palms, and Eliza had begun to cry, because she could never remember her mother having touched her face, having looked at her, that way.

(Afterwards, she had felt incredibly guilty—as though her poor, single mother hadn't done enough! All those terrible jobs she worked, just so Eliza could take private piano lessons at the studio on West 4th with that nice instructor with all the rings, but no, she hadn't *looked* at Eliza the right way, apparently. *You are one ungrateful bitch* said the little voice in Eliza's head and this time, she couldn't even write it off as an intrusive thought, because she was pretty sure it was right.)

It turned out, however, that like Eliza, Isabelle thought that Eliza was a horrible person. Eliza was a member of Isabelle's private Facebook group--*The Divine Sisters*--and in her writing, Isabelle did present a slightly different worldview than the love-filled, all-accepting one she seemed to profess within the walls of a yoga studio.

And so, we come to the list.

#1: Isabelle believes that women should have children young. *And I a) do not really want children all that much RIGHT NOW and b) do not think that I would be a very good mother RIGHT NOW.*

It wasn't as though Isabelle said that women should have children young in a rude, condescending, judgmental way, or in some weird, archaic, ultra-conservative way that made it sound like women were just brainless, baby-making machines. No, she made it sound like women were following a divine path, their divine calling, by giving birth as early as possible, and that to deny this divine calling was to deny nature itself.

A sample of Isabelle's writing (a caption of an Instagram post of her and little Talia, bathing in the river):

A culture that promotes late child-bearing delays (prevents!) a woman's initiation into her full power. Women are designed to have children young (soon after we begin our bleed). The denial of this truth--the delay of this truth--the suppression of this truth--strips away a young woman's power. The pushing of the pill, the pushing of abortion, the celebration of women who choose to live in unnatural ways...

And yet, none of this can be talked about without women being triggered/projecting their failures onto me. I do not teach platitudes or falsehoods, I teach empowerment. I speak what is politically incorrect... I speak the truth to you, my loves.

And then there was Eliza, disgusting Eliza, who was not even sure that she wanted children at all. Alright, so she was only nineteen, but she had started her period six years ago and that was a significant amount of time. In six more years, she would be twenty-five, which was how old Isabelle had been when she had her baby, and how could Eliza possibly have a baby at twenty-five? Never mind the financial aspect--how could she ever be not fucked-up enough to have a child? The idea that she could ever be well enough seemed a false miracle, an impossibility.

Now for the second reason...

#2: Isabelle hates everything mainstream, and thinks the average person is a complete sheep. *And I like some mainstream things, I mean, I get the flu shot and watch the regular news sometimes and drink Starbucks coffee. I could stop, but I would miss it. Not the flu shots or the news, but Starbucks...BLEH.*

Isabelle stated this part in stronger words: oh, she certainly did not hide her thoughts on *this* matter. Another sample of her writing, this time from another smiling, pink-cheeked Instagram post:

We are living in an era of mass misinformation, confusion, and extreme censorship towards any sort of dissent, it's important to get clear on where you stand re: all matters of current events.

Ask yourself, who makes money from propagating the current mass belief system? Why is there only one-sided news coverage of all current events?

Ask yourself, do I believe in bodily autonomy? Do I believe that someone should have the right to choices regarding their own body (i.e. choosing not to get vaccinated) without being actively segregated from other parts of the population, and without being actively shamed, blamed, coerced by mass media?

Ask yourself.

Eliza was pretty sure she knew what Isabelle was getting at—she wasn't stupid, but she also couldn't tell if Isabelle was clueless enough to just be throwing out dog whistles without realizing it (it didn't seem terribly likely, really). *Who makes the money...who propagates the mass belief system...why is there only one-sided news coverage...* Eliza was pretty sure she knew exactly who Isabelle thought was behind this, and she wished she would just come out and say

so. The fact that she wouldn't was maddening, because it meant that anybody could read whatever they wanted into her words, whether it was what she meant or not.

(But, but also, Isabelle often compared the actions of the modern-day government and mass media to the Nazi party. This was something that Eliza analyzed with embarrassing ferocity: did it *mean* something? People compared everything to Nazis now: feminazis, grammar Nazis, you name it. But if she followed Isabelle's comparison to its natural conclusion, surely it meant that she thought Nazis were bad and in the wrong, therefore.... who the hell did she think was controlling the mass media?? Oh, goodness, even for a non-stupid person, it *was* confusing.)

#3: Isabelle thinks that if you have a bad thought, you should think good thoughts repeatedly until you've cancelled the bad thought out. *This is exactly what I would like to STOP doing, because I'm sorry, but it gets exhausting pacing around all the time, praying compulsively, trying to cancel out every intrusive/bad thought. Maybe it's lazy, but I cannot do this my whole life. I cannot spend my whole life this way. I cannot, cannot, cannot.*

This little tidbit did not come from Isabelle's Instagram page, but rather from an email she sent to those lucky enough to be on her email list (with the subject line PRAYER RITUAL):

All my life, I have been watching my thoughts - and I am very strict about where to place them. Even as a child, if I ever thought 'a bad thought', in my four-year-old mind, I would immediately take action to reverse it. I would 'cancel' out that thought, with a prayer for forgiveness, and immediately replace it with several kind, loving thoughts.

So did Eliza, and this was the source of much woe in her life. It was impossible for her to be free--it had always been. Never had she managed to escape the compulsion to beg God for forgiveness for minutes on end. Not wholesome, positive, fulfilling prayer, but panicked, feverish. Praying and pacing, praying and pacing. Sometimes she thought about all the hours she had spent doing this over the course of her nineteen years, and she was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of what this number must be. She didn't think she could stand to know it: it would prove in a quantifiable way that there was something truly, deeply wrong with her.

And here she had thought that perhaps Isabelle could help her to stop doing this, that one of her little phrases of wisdom would be the missing piece Eliza had been waiting for her whole life, and suddenly she would click into place, a whole person. And now here it turned out, in this frightening twist of fate, that Eliza had been doing what she was meant to be doing all along. She was *meant* to spend half her life praying, only she was doing it with a bad attitude. Not gently and lovingly, like Isabelle, but frantically, panickedly. These were hardly the words she'd hoped to hear.

It was easy to say that Isabelle was a hypocrite; hell, easy to *see* it. It was obviously hypocritical to preach about cancelling out negative thoughts and replacing them with only kind, loving ones, while also declaring that every member of the mass media was an evil overlord hellbent on destroying the natural order of things. On some level Eliza knew this. She had always been a clever girl, not easily taken in.

Not easily taken in, except by those dreaded OCD thoughts, and that was the problem. Isabelle's words preyed on every one of Eliza's doubts about herself: that she was somehow unnatural in some profound and spiritual way, an abomination. She was stupid and sheeplike. Her intrusive thoughts were not actually intrusive thoughts; they were evil thoughts, and she too was evil, and would always be, unless she cleansed her soul by praying compulsively each day.

Eliza was, quite simply, drowning. Drowning in Isabelle's spirituality. And then she met Madison Gardenia. And then everything changed.

The thing was, Madison had reminded Eliza of what it was to be human again.

Eliza would always remember it, lying on her thick purple mat in the private yoga studio built into the Gardenia family compound. It would have been so easy to hate Madison at this point: this woman who had everything. Except, she did have everything, but she also had OCD. She knew what it was like.

It was funny, actually—Eliza had signed up for the weekend retreat because she thought it would be a good story to have been spiritually healed by a girl named Madison, whose father was a hedge fund manager and whose uncle was (if you believed the rumours) vying for the leadership of the Conservative party. Also, because it was free. Well, by donation. Madison did not charge anybody for working with her, and she gave all the donations to charity. That was what you could do, Eliza guessed, when you didn't have to work.

She had read to them, though. She had read to them by candlelight in that darkened yoga studio, and Eliza had felt something shift within her at Whitman's words: *Leaves of Grass*. Eliza had disliked English class in high school, because very rarely had they read beautiful books like this. The British Columbian curriculum had an absurd focus on Canadian literature, so most every book they read was about surviving out in the frigid, unforgiving wilderness. Nothing that felt relevant, or even true. But this... this was not that.

"And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, and that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers," Madison had read out slowly, clearly, and Eliza had needed to bite down hard on her lip to keep from crying. It would sound so pretentious to admit to this, but it felt like a part of her was being touched that was so deep down, she had not known it even existed.

She continued: *"I believe in the flesh and the appetites, seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle... If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it..."*

Obviously, she was jumping around, reading her favourite passages, but it felt to Eliza that each word had been expressly written and then chosen for her.

"I used to feel so unclean," Madison had told the group, all these people lying on their backs. "It's hard to put into words, even. I can't explain it... I had OCD, and I had the most

awful intrusive thoughts. Every day, constantly. I felt that I was wicked, you know, deep down inside... that my soul was filthy.”

Eliza had never heard anybody admit to this before, outside of TED Talks. Yes, she knew that OCD and intrusive thoughts were real, and millions of people had them, but not in her world. And anyway, she felt, nobody had ever experienced them the way she did. It sounded ridiculous, but somehow she was certain that hers were just a little bit worse. That all these other people who had them were not awful, but that she was. That she alone was contaminated.

And it was funny, so fucking *funny*, how she would wash her hands all day until they were cracked and bleeding, or take three absurdly long showers in a day, draining the hot water tank, pray and pray and pray and pray, all to try to cleanse herself. As though she could ever be cleansed, as though the filth inside of her could ever be purged out with soap and water. As though she deserved to be clean. As though this would ever end. As though she deserved it to.

“The worst part was,” Madison continued, her voice catching, “they would prey on my real worries and insecurities. My feelings. So I... you know, it was so hard to tell myself they weren’t true. I would be mad at somebody, or feel threatened by them, and my head, it would say to me, ‘do you feel that? Do you feel that... that anger? It must mean that you *hate* them. It must mean that you wish for terrible, terrible things to happen to them. That you’re evil inside.” Madison had started to cry now, openly. “I couldn’t look at myself, I was too afraid. People, my yoga teachers and all, they talked about self-study... but I couldn’t do that, study myself. I could never do that. It was the one thing I was most terrified of, because I thought I had this black soul. I was so frightened to *see* it, you know, to see it up close. To see myself up close.”

Eliza’s tears were running into her ears now, running down the sides of her face.

“But it wasn’t true.” Madison had calmed down now; her voice was still shaky, but stronger. “It was never true. It took me years to see that. Years to see that we’re all flawed, that *I’m* flawed, and will always be, but that my thoughts were lying to me. That I was not a hateful person. And I had to be stronger. Stronger than those thoughts.

“You are all so beautiful,” Madison said, and Eliza could hear the smile in her voice. “And we’re all in pain... in varying degrees, maybe, but still. We all hurt, don’t we? But I look at all of you, and I see the beauty, the miracle, of every human life. I swear, I do. I never believed I could ever be happy—I never believed I was ever *worthy* of being happy—but I’m here right now, with all of you, and I am happy. And I promise, I *promise*...” She paused here, drew in a shallow breath. “You deserve to be, too. You are worthy of everything good in the world. And if you don’t believe me, just know that I wouldn’t have believed someone telling me that either, once. But I would now. So it gets better. I promise.”

Then she had put on the Beatles—the spiritual Beatles, with their sitar. Eliza had lay there on the yoga mat, entranced. Clearly this was the most beautiful song in the world. Clearly she was meant to be here. Clearly.

There was a part of her that was still untouched by the OCD. Unstruck. She had not known this—she had thought that it had spread everywhere, consuming all parts of her. An all-encompassing blackness.

But this wasn't true, obviously. It couldn't be true. Because a part of her had been awoken by Madison's words. There was something about them, something about Madison's utter sincerity. Hearing someone so pretty, so rich, so everything-desirable-in-the-world admit to these same feelings gave Eliza a strange sort of jolt. Madison was a good person, obviously. She was sweet, giving, even innocent. Nobody would look at her and doubt that.

And if this were true for Madison, perhaps it could be true for Eliza too. This strange, newly awakened part of her was small perhaps, but strong enough to help her get up the nerve to screw her courage to the sticking point, as it were. To be brave enough to see the light beyond the wickedness of the intrusive thoughts. There was a brighter way of being out there, somewhere.

On Globalism and Pink Flamingos

Here was something else Eliza knew: Isabelle and her ilk loathed Madison. Well—more accurately, they didn't loathe anybody, but if they did, Madison would've been high on the list.

The thing was, the morning before Eliza and Madison went out to the Neighbourhood, she had asked a question about Madison in Isabelle's group chat. (Yes, Isabelle had a Divine Sisters group chat too, which Eliza had also joined, because she was a sucker for punishment.) *Has anyone ever worked with Madison Gardenia before???* The three question marks were meant to signify Eliza's youth, her inexperience, her lack of knowledge, blah blah blah. That she didn't know about Madison, or anything, or anybody. The truth was, she just liked to speak Madison's name, to put it into writing.

One of the women would have worked with Madison before, she was certain. They were all the women from the yoga workshop Eliza had attended in March, and they had stayed a surprisingly tight-knit community in the months since. These women were far more radical than Madison: they were all carbon-copies of Isabelle, except they fell short where she didn't. But the talking points were all the same: take "radical responsibility", be a "sovereign woman." Have children as young as you could and take ayahuasca instead of Xanax. Eliza sometimes read the chat backlog when she was already feeling depressed: it was like guilt porn, reminding her of how stupid and unenlightened she was. It was satisfying in that unpleasant way, reminding herself that having OCD was basically her own fault. It was something she could have controlled, did she care enough to try.

But these women would like Madison, Eliza was pretty sure. Madison did tarot card readings and held full moon circles; they ate that shit up.

Shawna, a petite, very pretty brunette who wrote even the most meaningless of sentences like they were poetry, was the first one to respond. *No & I would recommend that you do not either my love! Have never met her but have heard from others that she is deeply entrenched in the mainstream and is sadly co-opting our movement for her own gain... she has been deeply*

corrupted by the globalist agenda (\$\$!) and even recommends psychiatric drugs to many. Very sad, as I know many maidens who have yet to be initiated look up to her very much...

Maidens. Eliza had had to bite the inside of her cheek to hold back a cackle on the bus. *Maidens?* This could not be real. Eliza was now picturing herself milking a cow on a dairy farm while Madison stood over her like a Prozac-wielding dominatrix.

A few other women chimed in and agreed that Madison had been led astray by the globalist elite—Eliza had an idea of who they all thought this might be, but, again, did not want to think too hard about it for a myriad of reasons—and was now, wittingly or unwittingly, corrupting innocent maidens everywhere.

And so, they were sitting together at the bar, and Eliza knew Isabelle thought Madison was horrible, and now maybe Madison thought the same about Isabelle.

“Is this about Isabelle?” Eliza made her voice as soft and gentle as she could. “Something she said? It’s okay, Maddie. You can tell me.”

“I’m not even gonna—okay. Shit.” Madison smiled helplessly at Eliza. “I shouldn’t even *say* this to you, okay? But the thing was, I almost got fucking *indoctrinated*, and now I’m scared for you. Okay, because you’re so young, and so *anxious*. Okay. Shit.”

On Contrarianism

Here’s the thing: Madison had always been a little bit of a contrarian.

Not in an over-dramatic, look-at-me way, but just in the way that, when she was in a group of people who all agreed with one another on any given thing, she tended to get a tad irritated. For instance, it had been absolutely maddening, in her college days, how the other girls in tutorial had hated her for saying what was obviously true: “Listen,” she had said once with a blinding smile, when they were discussing the Middle East, “someone just needs to go over there and tell these men what’s what. Who do they think they are!” And then Caitlin, this redheaded girl with a bad attitude, had said, “Um, that’s what America is *doing*, and how is it working?” And as an afterthought: “Also, that’s a little bit racist.”

But then, she also found it maddening *now* when these aging comedians with their grey, bloated, old-man-alcoholic faces complained bitterly about political correctness on college campuses. She’d actually been at a dinner party, and this guy had been there—he must have shared a mutual friend with her father—this guy with a comedy show on streaming, whose tagline was *You Can’t Cancel Facts*. The mere fact that this was the actual tagline had almost made her pee herself from laughing when she first saw it, but nobody else at the dinner party thought that this was as uproariously hilarious as she did. Instead they all fawned over him as he sat on the velvet chairs, drinking red wine, popping shrimp out of their shells, and smiling lustily at the waitstaff. He had no concept, she had understood, that he was far beyond his sell-by date

and should have been happy to have a show at all. What had started out as condescending sympathy turned to revulsion as his eyes passed over the party dimly.

See, so Madison at least *wanted* to be a contrarian, even if she didn't always manage to be one perfectly in her day-to-day life.

The problem with Isabelle was, she made Madison *feel* like a rebel by saying the most inane, mainstream things. Even explaining this to Eliza, now, she felt both boring and mainstream.

“She has these posts... *ask yourself this, ask yourself that...* oh, goodness, they're terrible. Have you seen them, love? But there is one I'm looking for... yes. The vaccine one. Here we are.” She smiled tightly, holding out her phone. “What a sight to behold.”

Eliza leaned over to take Madison's phone gingerly—she always handled Madison's things with such care, as though it mattered what happened to them.

Do you believe that all humans are worthy of basic rights, such as belonging, access to food security, access to work/ financial sovereignty, freedom of mobility + travel, etc., regardless of whether they choose to get vaccinated?

Do you believe in segregation?

Do you believe that the current segregation uplifts society, or is aiding to its destruction?

“It's so terrible,” Maddie explained, “see, they had a vaccine mandate for some preschool in Florida where they live, there was an outbreak of something. And you want to hear something funny... I don't even *believe* in vaccine mandates! I was always the conservative one of my friends—you know, maybe we shouldn't just shoot children up, I don't know. So I was on her side, I've always been. But then she goes and says *this*.

“And I don't care,” she continued, swallowing down more wine, “what the dictionary says *segregation* means. Maybe race isn't technically part of it, I don't know. I'm no scholar. But it's what we *think* of. I'm sorry, nobody is telling her that she and her family can't drink from a fucking water fountain, or that they have to go to a worse school or, I don't know, throwing shit at them when they try to leave their neighbourhood. It's *disgusting*.” Her eyes were glittering now as she reached out to grab Eliza's wrist. “Like, get over yourself. When you're that wealthy... and all you can do is complain, complain about how horrible the world is to you. I would never. Her parents are professors, I thought professors are supposed to be smart... she should read a fucking book sometime! She's spitting on the experiences of all these children, these poor, poor children who were treated so terribly. I can't stand it.”

“Oh, Madison, don't cry.” Eliza rubbed her arm slowly, soothingly. “Please don't be upset.”

“But she's making me...” Madison sniffed, rubbing her eyes with a paper napkin. “She's making me so *boring*. I hate being boring... I want to be interesting, you know? But she's making me be boring. *Segregation is bad!* What a scorching hot take. That's not interesting at all!”

“Oh, but Maddie, you *are* interesting, so interesting. You’re beautiful and fascinating, and, like... I mean, you ran that weird retreat a few years ago, with the same sex orgies? That’s *super* interesting. When I heard that, I thought it was so crazy, I was like, Madison *did* that? You know, I mean, that’s crazy.”

“I never had an orgy, though. I mean, I never participated.” Madison sniffed, wiping her eyes. “But other people had them, so I guess that’s true.”

“They had them because of *you!*” Eliza pointed out. “And, I mean, people love you... people talk about you running for office. They *want* you to run for office.”

Madison put the napkin down, blinked several times. “But how could I ever run for anything? I don’t have any interesting ideas.”

“Oh, yes you do!” Eliza said stubbornly. “You absolutely do. Just because Isabelle makes you feel a certain way, doesn’t mean that feeling is truth.”

Which was probably good advice for both of them.

On Instagram

Madison posted a video of herself to Instagram a few days later, parading around in a variety of minidresses, her little kitten in tow. Set to the tune of some Spanish song everybody knew but didn’t know the name of.

The video was innocuous, but the caption was a firebomb, which was something Madison had learned from Isabelle. She had learned from the best.

I will let you all in on a little secret... even though I seem happy and successful sometimes I am still terribly scared!! I love the wellness community but in the wellness community there is so much judgment and I feel so insecure sometimes about what are these people saying about me?? Always looking to criticize and take down... I think it is so funny how they say we should all be “sovereign women” yet the choices I make about my heavenly body are somehow up for critique. As though it’s shameful to have Starbucks a couple times a week... truly I believe what is good for your soul is good for your body. You need to take care of your body but also your soul and do what makes you feel alive.

I’ve seen some people feeling so sorry for themselves... I know there are many people who suffer and have hardships in life, but this is not who I’m talking about. To be honest I am conservative in some ways (shhh, I know that’s a bad word) but also, I am very aware of my blessings in this life, I am truly grateful for how fortunate I am! I do have struggles, but I feel it is best not to complain... I deal with things privately or I try to uplift people... personally I will be honest and say that even though I don’t believe in vaccine requirements I feel that when such well-off people complain about things like that for themselves it comes off out of touch. I know a yoga instructor who is always comparing vaccine requirements to segregation which I feel is insensitive. I remember as a teenager, seeing that Norman Rockwell painting for the first time. I

can't remember what it's called but it's very beautiful, a little girl on her way to non-segregated school for the first time. It touched me deeply because I couldn't really imagine what she felt like and I never would compare my life to hers. I think such a thing is wrong...

Also, many yoga instructors teach on private beaches or make people pay thousands of dollars to join a workshop. If we are going to go around calling things "segregation" then I guess that is too, because they are segregating their workshops, separating more well-off people from those with less money! And I don't believe that spirituality is only for the elite... spirituality and wellness should be for all. But if you are a yoga instructor who disagrees, you can cry about segregation on your private beach which is also segregated and make people pay thousands of dollars to join you!! Don't oppress yourself and make your life out to be something that it's not.

Maybe this seems obvious to people, but I have been thinking about this recently. I believe in being a loving person... please try to speak kindly to others and think about their perspectives and experiences. Remember: love is all you need!

The post was, Eliza reflected, a roller coaster.

And so *Madison*, everything from her "heavenly body" to declaring Starbucks good for the soul to not bothering to look up the name of the Norman Rockwell painting. So quintessentially her.

The general Internet reaction seemed to be a resounding "huh?" followed by a shrug, and a "well, that's Madison." Nobody had any clue who this yoga instructor was that she spoke of, but yes, most people agreed it seemed inappropriate to compare vaccine requirements to segregation and yes, Madison should be allowed to go to Starbucks a couple times a week if she felt like it.

A journalist on the CBC surmised that perhaps this was Madison trying to garner up positive opinion for a potential political run which, really, what was there to say to that? Eliza had never believed it was possible for anybody to just fall into becoming Prime Minister, but apparently if anybody could, it would be Madison Gardenia and her heavenly body.