

WAKE ME UP excerpt

Maddy sits in her office, still and silent. She doesn't touch her pens, the pile of In-box letters to answer, poetry reading requests, could she speak to the Ladies-Who-Lunch crowd, wear a smart hat and pretend the tea-drinking, local-mall-suit-wearing, nose-in-the-air, snobby wives of the faculty have any interest in her words. She's done it before and swore she'd have to remember to stock comfort bags in her briefcase if ever forced—politics—to give lectures to the covetous college world at large. Maddy once attended a Writers' Conference in Spokane. Close enough to drive herself, but far enough to make it seem like a vacation, alone in a bed and breakfast, quaintly chosen because writers are supposed to love the antiques, the gated seclusion and forced communal attributes of the inns. Let's have all the visiting writers stay together and break bread around a rickety surface!

She meets everyone and wonders what she's doing there. The conference sent an ambassador, a high school student with a big smile and fervent dreams that coming so close to a published writer will rub off on him, to ferry her around to the city's hot spots, preferable coffee shop, this is what it feels like to observe the world and write about it, and Maddy takes all of this in stride, and can use it, perhaps, and she'll take to the lecture tent, hot and humid in the summer. She'll feel a beginning stickiness on her skin and

hope the hour passes quickly. Maddy stands at the podium with her sheaf of papers, a slim volume of her fourth book of collected poems, and a cappuccino—make it a triple—with organic skim milk, please, and smiles tightly at everyone. She's stiff in her walk up the stairs and she knows the audience watches her stiffness and wonders about it. Most of them don't know about the car accident and she's only written about it in passing phrasing; most of them have never heard of her before, she's the lone poet amongst the group of fiction writers. The woman who introduces her says Madison Dakota is—finally, implied—working on her first novel—as if to confirm a future reverence writers of prose receive once they give up their fanciful poetic dreams. Now, she wonders about this fact. The audience views her from far away. Maddy equally views them all as sitting so far away from her, and she's the one who has to move them closer to her with her words. They're all so neat and skeptical and awash with a hope for greatness, for entertainment. Yet, Maddy stays so physically stiff in her manner it tends to push people away. She reads her words, not as a poetic spokesperson but as an actor, and this mindset helps her relax and enjoy the words excavated from her long ago. By the end she's looser and the audience pulls closer and she has them with the finest of metaphors, the phrases duplicating the simplest shades of life's puzzlement.

Maddy remembers the feeling she gets when she finishes a reading. The applause and the smiling wonder. Then the faces in the audience become clear, someone thanks her as if from a great distance—would anyone like to ask a

question of our poet? Always, there's a pause as the clapping dies abruptly and an older woman in a patterned shirt, flannel, it must be, raises her arm and asks: Is there anything behind the anger in your work?

Life is about caging anger. Disappointment.

Maddy feels compelled to complement the questioner: "That's a very interesting observation. I can honestly say I've always been propelled and repelled by conflict. It's my job to find a way to describe the human experience, the universality we share." Blah. Blah. Blah.

The next question makes Maddy think of the comfort bag again. Oh, excuse me, folks, I'll be right back, and she ducks beneath the podium and vomits into her imagination, the scene makes her hide her thoughts with a plastic smile and a nod and a sip of the coffee, now cold at the bottom of her cup, and bitter. All these people in attendance aren't writers or poets or anything close; they're mostly readers, flush enough to afford the high ticket price for the conference, and their wants and needs show this so clearly to Maddy she's on the verge of laughter. She's not laughing at them either; it's more than this; it's the moment she vows never to repeat. The people pay a fee to attend and she imagines them coming year after year, sitting in the same seat under the same tent now yellowing with age, the hands holding the interchanging programs wrinkling, the questions about inspiration no longer filtering out their desperation and Maddy smiles widely and thanks everyone and moves where she's directed and finds herself in a bar three doors down from the bed and breakfast with three

other writers who accepted the chance to run workshops for the beginner and in two hours all four of them are plowed.

“Why do you think we drag ourselves out of our rigidly constructed lives?” asks one of the novelists who thinks he’s on the same wavelength as Maddy. He’s been inching his way ever closer to her, imperceptibly to no one, and Maddy loves the attention, even if he happens to be the largest, most pompous, slob she’s been around in quite some time. After one of his exclamations Maddy asks the group: “Is pompoussistic a word?”

Everyone at the table laughs and another says, “It should be.”

The inching author says, gamely, “Pompoussistic: the state of being a narcissistic, overbearing ass.”

“No,” someone else interrupts, “the state of being so full with the awe and wonder of yourself you have to vomit every detail of every act to anyone who will listen.”

“As if your purpose in life, as a writer, is to instruct the masses on how greatly their lives are enhanced by your written word.”

“Teach them a damn lesson.” “The word’s close to pedantic.”

“See? You just said a pompoussistic thing!” Maddy laughs even harder. She knows she’s drunker than she’s been in quite a long, long time, and wonders if she’s slurring her words. The inching novelist now rests his hand next to hers and Maddy lifts her martini glass, Sapphire gimlet, up, very

cold, with flecks of ice still floating, and finishes the last three sips.

“I now see how we all get through these things.” Maddy glances at her watch and rises from the table, tipping slightly to the left, into the grinning man, but only because she’s had too many gimlets, not because she’s at all contemplating sleeping with the leech. He’s a good writer, but please. She can get even with Geoffrey, she instantly realizes, through the gin haze. She says goodnight to the three authors and they all wish her well and tell her they’ll see her at the breakfast table, which almost makes her gag to think of omelets and buttery French toast. Nice people—regardless of desire. Walking back to her room the sky’s brilliant with stars and Maddy feels a pang of loss. With affection she thinks about Geoffrey back in Montana taking care of me and she longs for a night of romance, not drunken romance either, but something seemingly lost to her and Geoffrey.

Nearing the end of the workday the office ticks and shifts down. Maddy takes out the new Chinese restaurant flier and calls up for mu shoo shrimp, tangerine chicken, and Szechwan pork green beans, three egg rolls and enough hot and sour soup and fried rice. She and Geoffrey always judge Chinese restaurants by the quality of their hot and sour soup. Around Middleton, the ethnic restaurants are few and far between and they settle for the lowest common denominator. She’s heard the food is good yet reasonably priced, which is the first warning sign when she listens to Angela go on and on about her tangerine chicken feast. Maddy wants to remain calm and normal and unthreatening

to Geoffrey; she plans to drive home with the promised dinner, act like her day was spent worrying over a student with promise but who seriously lacks funding, then talk about the state of education in Montana and get into a circular discussion leading to the kicker: Where the fuck have you been spending your empty days? What do you think you're doing? Why are you lying to us? Are you trying to ruin this family? Too late!

Maddy pictures herself yelling so loudly all the windows in the house shatter all at once, the Chinese food so ornately prepared, boxed, scooped onto plates and set on the table then flying through the air following the broken glass and staining the walls. She's been through tough times before with Geoffrey and thinks she can handle another episode, could this be the end? She hears, Rhea, her sister, say, "Well, Madison, we all had our reservations but we couldn't say anything; you said you were deeply in love and what can anyone do but accept your decision?"

By the time Maddy gathers her coat and briefcase she's worked herself into a state of determination. She contemplates her options and how drastic she's willing to become. Geoffrey, his behavior, is far from normal. She worries about his ability to function in a normal world. She scolds herself. She's been a witness to his breakdowns and withdrawals well before she married him, before she even gave birth, but she comes back to thoughts about love and the ups and downs and many more platitudes of saving the fallen.

As she walks down the hallway to the elevator she sees

someone waiting for the lift and decides she feels too raw to make nice in a confined space, even for the short flight down three floors. She'll take the stairs; the walk will be her workout for the day—remember wanting to exercise more? Maddy moves through the exit doorway with a clank of the push bar. Geoffrey waits at home, waits for his next performance. Off the first stair, Maddy feels as if she's stepped on the hardest of marbles, an obstacle under her footing as she takes the first step down, and it's so unexpected, this feeling at the bottom of her right foot, that she's falling swiftly before she can react. Her balance goes away and in the blink of an eye she teeters and her arms pinwheel and fly out, her hand lets go of her stuffed briefcase and she crashes into the metal railing on her left almost sideways. She barely comprehends that she's falling.

“I don't understand.”

“Maybe understanding isn't as important as you think,” Deepika says with the same enigmatic emphasis. I need to get out of her house. I stand to leave. “Let me drive you home,” Deepika says, switching to a careful, honest tone. I can't call it fake; she's been up front with me—yeah, an honest deceiver.

“I'd rather walk.”

“You have a lot to take in. If you want—please, come back to see me and we can speak—” Deepika doesn't have any intention right then to be in Middleton for very much longer.

“Do you realize how horrible my parents have been? And knowing you’ve been a part of the last year’s—”

I can’t go on and I feel the anger twisting my stomach into knots. I study Deepika’s face—as if I believe I’ll never ever see it again—as she grows alarmed, concerned for me, my state of mind. I quickly put on my shoes without bothering to lace them in her presence. I shut her front door and enter the darkness of the coming night. I don’t know where I’m heading, but it’s far too late to change paths; my anger propels me.

The fall down the third floor stairs is stopped when Maddy panics even more and flings her left arm out to grab onto the railing just as she’s about to lose her footing and go down hard. She catches herself and realizes she’s sweating again, profusely, a full, instant, sheen. She wiggles her feet one by one and breathes a sigh of relief. Shortly her heart calms its racing and she glances at the top of the stairs and looks for a pebble, some stone, something she’s tripped over, but finds nothing there.

Maddy remembers the episode in her classroom, sitting without making a cry. Something's wrong; she can't control her body. Twice now in one week she's been startled by the immobility, the numbness in her extremities, and thinks about the cause. She blames Geoffrey, his wallowing act, and secretive nature causing her system to stress and crash. Then she remembers another similar tripping episode almost a month ago on the front steps of the Union Café.

She laughed it off. Silly. (I wish I could comfort my mother here and tell her she's going to be okay. No one knew. She didn't tell us.)

She sits on the top step and hangs her head. Her hair falls in front of her face, limp, at the end of the day and she stares at her briefcase at the bottom flight of steps. Nothing bursts out of the seams and she's grateful for that. The panic in her mind continues to take shape and she wants to call her best friend, Nadine Gosling, on her cell and let Nadine take her to the hospital. She doesn't tell Nadine everything but knows she can count on her. She's the first friend Maddy made when they moved to Middleton, a working mother of two grown children, who has no connection to the college.

Cancer? Is something dark growing within her? Is she starting to show symptoms? She goes to grim places in her mind. Maddy can't remember the last time she's had a medical checkup and scolds herself anew, this time letting out a curse. How reckless can she be? It's been a tough year. She argues with herself.

Nadine will help, but then Nadine's husband, Bernard—Bernie to everyone—will also know; they tell each other everything. All couples should. Nothing to hide, really! She starts to focus her anger. Her breathing calms even more and she wants to keep it that way. The railing's there for her weak grip.

Maddy stands and stretches her left ankle, then stretches the right. There's no pain and she feels a sense of déjà vu. Her feet are working the way they should but she remains tense

as she makes her way to the landing and gathers up her briefcase. She takes out her cell and punches the speed dial button for Nadine. It rings and rings once again before Nadine's voice comes on with the artificial cheer of a recording. Maddy hangs up without leaving a message.

From the College Maddy will pick up several take-out cartons from the Chinese restaurant. Then she'll drive home; she'll set the table and call Geoffrey down from his office, and me from my bedroom. I won't be home but all the same she'll think I am—my room lights are on—and she won't brave the steps to go upstairs and check. She'll think I'm listening to my music or a language tape with my headphones blocking her voice but she'll be wrong. She'll assume Geoffrey is in his office but he's in the bathroom. She won't think of anything except her body's failing operating instructions, her fall. She'll think so much about her own physical problems she'll never realize she has the house to herself; Geoffrey won't answer her; how can he when he lays on the floor of the bathtub unconscious and for all Maddy knows—when her impatience and unraveling fury get the best of her and she rushes up the stairs and flings open my bedroom door first and finds me gone—dead.