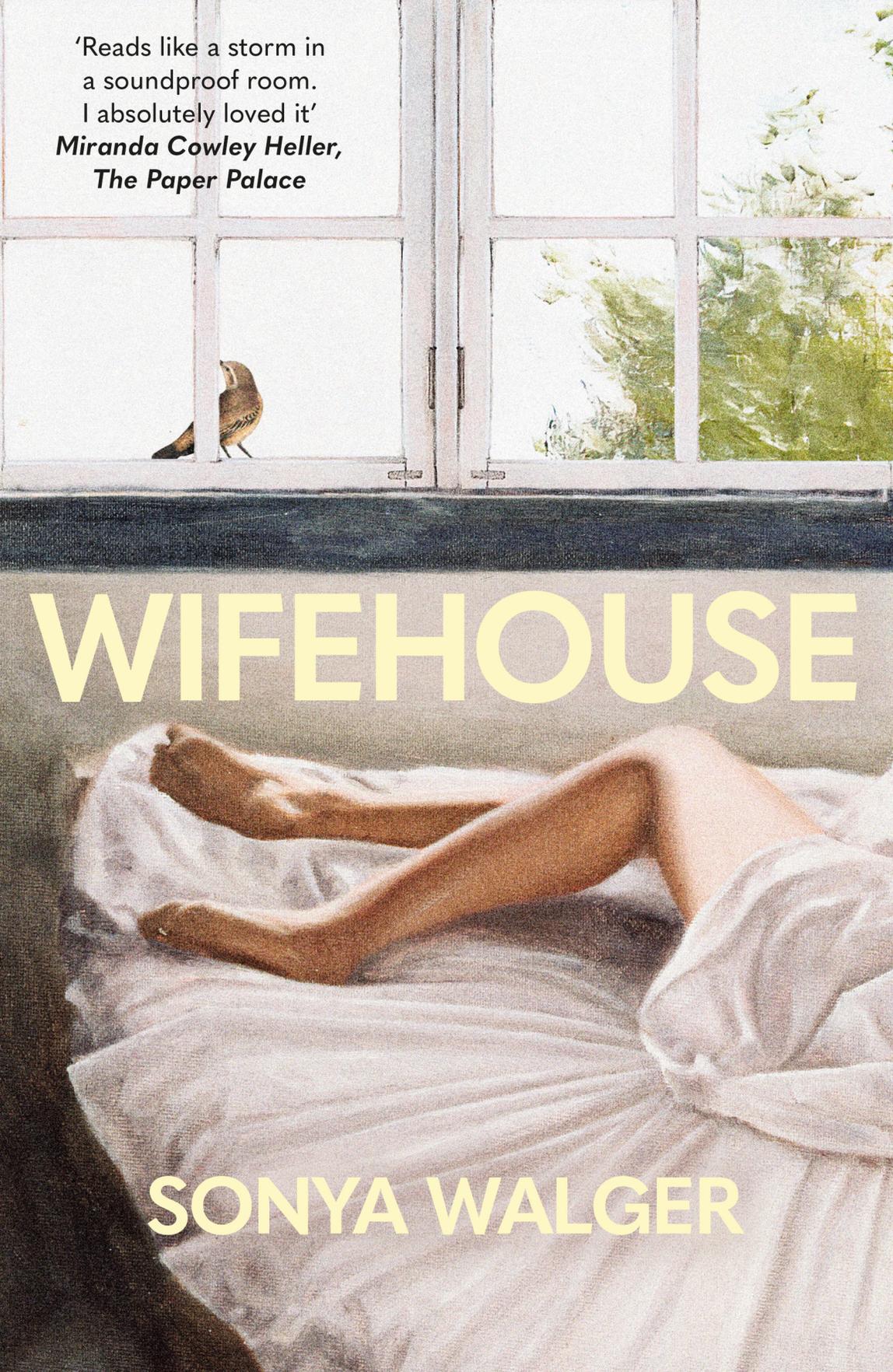


'Reads like a storm in
a soundproof room.
I absolutely loved it'
Miranda Cowley Heller,
The Paper Palace



WIFEHOUSE

SONYA WALGER

***A captivating, beautifully written novel
about a mother who chooses to leave***

Annie and Hector have been hosting family friends in the guest house of their Connecticut home for many months. As a thank-you, Annie is gifted French lessons with a twenty-six-year-old local French tutor, Thierry. Hector, an actor, goes to Argentina to film on location, leaving Annie to single-parent their two kids. As the lessons and life progress, she finds herself unexpectedly vulnerable to the charms of a man closer in age to her teenage daughter than to her own. A new life for Annie emerges, one she could never have foreseen.

Bookended by two Christmas lunches and told over the course of one year through the shifting perspectives of wife, husband, lover, best friend and children, Walger paints a contradictory, nuanced portrait of a woman who walks away from every role that tradition and society have expected of her.

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CHAPTER 1

THE WOMAN WRAPS GIFTS THAT NOBODY WANTS. BAREFOOT, ALONE in the garage, her cold hands move scissors, paper, tape. She has left everything so late. It is so late that it is early. A strip of gray light creeps beneath the garage door. It will be morning soon. Expectations will begin. The cement floor is freezing. She should have pulled on socks, but there was no time because everything must be ready in time or else . . . she has no idea how to finish the rest of this thought. She tapes and snips and folds and longs for sleep.

CHAPTER 3

EVERYONE IS WEARING PAPER HATS. THEY ARE TORN AND CRUMPLED. No one's fits quite right on their head. They look like they are in a bad play. Christmas crackers lie wrenched and scattered along the table, vegetables glisten in bowls, wax drips on an errant brussels sprout. Even from this distance Annie can tell it is undercooked. For the fourth time that day Jackson replays the fiasco of his Christmas morning. Only Remy pays attention, although Hector's mother interrupts her conversation with Candace to listen ostentatiously to her grandson with what Annie considers an excess of compassion. Remy shrugs.

“But you still got your presents, right?”

Annie could kiss her friend's son. Remy frowns.

“You don't still believe in Santa, do you?”

Now Annie hates him.

“No,” says Jackson, bravely.

She feels herself floating away. She looks down the table, at the food she has hastily cooked, the tablecloth she has quickly ironed, the silver Vita has sulkily laid. She has been playing catch-up all day, ever since she woke with a start on the mattress on the garage floor and, scrambling to her feet, clutching armfuls of gifts, stumbled out of the open mouth of the garage and into the faces of her astonished family. For a moment they all froze, uncertain of how to proceed. Even now, lunch almost ended, she feels behind the plot, like an audience member who has arrived late and slipped into her seat

minutes after the play has started. It is not new, this sensation. She is always behind these days, always trying to catch up with the drama. She is living in the cheap seats of her own life.

She watches Hector at the opposite end of the table, flushed, intent. His paper hat is lilac, torn almost to the hilt. He leans in, elbows propped, to talk to his father about cryptocurrency, his latest obsession. Derek, who never listens but only waits to speak, sits pushed back from the table, tilted in his chair, cashmere vest stretched wide across his spreading paunch. A tiny man rides a tiny embroidered horse stretched high on his pink cashmere chest. Annie is certain Derek has never ridden a horse in his life. His teeth are reddened with wine, his cheeks claret-flushed. Everything clashes with his sweater. On Hector's left, Edouard sits, nodding. *He is a patient man, thinks Annie, to tolerate this actor expounding on finance, the very field Edouard has spent the last thirty years working in.* She wonders if perhaps he doesn't understand them. Not that Edouard's vocabulary is lacking; he speaks with the accented precision of a visiting academic. No, it is more his cultural capacity to contain these Americans, their slang and familial shorthand, their laxities and conformities to a world so different than the one he grew up in that she questions. Ed's family are very proper, very old French Catholics. His mother has never forgiven him for marrying a Jewess, so Candace likes to say. But Annie suspects Candace relishes the idea of being loathed.

Candace sits beside Hector's mother. They speak intently, with faces inclined to one another, confidential, conspiratorial. Candace gleams like a candle fat with wax. She is glimmering with jewelry. Hector's mother, angular with a slashed red mouth, the liver spots on her hands that no lasers will remove, works her pearls like a rosary. They look like choir boys whispering in a stall. From across the table Vita listens to them, drawn always toward the whisper of a secret. Hector's mother rests her own hand over Vita's, red nails stroking the

stubby ripped ones, careless, possessive, trapping her. Vita loves her grandmother, always has. This is surprising to Annie, but she is grateful. Hector's mother remembers birthdays, dance recitals, names of friends. In her glacial way she is attentive, she retains information. What she lacks in warmth, she makes up for in focus.

Surreptitiously, beneath the tablecloth, Remy plays a video game on his father's phone. Jackson leans in to watch. Hector's mother's mouth twitches. Annie wonders what the women are talking about. She does not care. She has nothing to confide in Hector's mother and Hector's mother loves nothing more than to be needed, confided in, relied upon. She, Annie, has failed her for years in this regard. In most regards, she suspects.

Annie gets up to clear plates. Hector's mother, as usual, has eaten nothing. Annie is not sure she has ever seen food pass her mother-in-law's lips. She lives on sparkling water and stomach acid. Vita has merely moved her food around the plate, Jackson has slicked everything that is sliced, diced, or mashed to one side and eaten only the roast beef. The men's eyes flicker up at her appreciatively as she removes their plates; the women do not register her at all. Jackson hands her his plate.

"Is it dessert?"

"Yes, in a minute."

He squirms off the chair.

"Where did Jackson go?" asks Remy, not looking up from the game.

"To look for dessert," says Vita.

"The cake thing?"

Edouard glances over.

"La bûche de Noël."

Remy grunts.

"Can you say it?"

Remy works the phone. His father repeats himself. Candace looks over. Hector's mother frowns, hating to be ignored. Remy scowls into his game. His father reaches across, tries to take the device, but the child swerves it deeper beneath the table. His father stretches fruitlessly across his son's lap.

"Say it, and you can keep playing."

"Remy, give it to Papa."

Remy reaches his hands far beneath the tablecloth, straining to not lose sight of the game, of his working thumbs.

"*La bûche de Noël*," insists Edouard.

He pushes his chair back, the better to reach his son. Remy turns his full body away from his father now, swooping his hands deep beneath the table, but this time with a clatter and a slide of cream linen he swipes the cloth, pulling the glasses, which swerve and spill and clatter on their sides. One shatters on the floor. Red wine bleeds across the cloth, blots into abandoned tissue hats and torn crackers, splatters across plates of congealed meat.

A convulsion of movement. Hector's mother jumps back as though scalded, Candace yells at Remy, Hector gets to his feet and starts mopping at the tablecloth, righting bottles, candles, dishes. Derek holds fearfully to his own glass and pushes his chair farther back from the table, tutting. Edouard grabs Remy by the arm and marches him out of the dining room. Wine drips on the floor, a candle gutters.

Candace follows her husband out of the room but, remembering her promise to her therapist to let Ed handle his son more often, drifts into the living room. She flops on the pink tartan sofa (so lovely, she must ask Annie about this fabric), dabs ineffectually where she's splashed gravy on her blouse, and gives up. She releases one more straining pearl button, folds back the placket so she can't see the stain. She flops her head back on the sofa. God, she can't wait

till their own house is ready, this has gone on long enough, this being someone else's guest. Annie is amazing how she puts up with them, although Candace suspects she actually likes having them around. It is probably a useful distraction from just how useless Hector is. She doesn't know how Annie stands it. But all men are useless. Ed, too, in a different way. At least Ed works. Hector lounges around looking decorative, lifting weights in that moldy gym, quoting dreary Russians, moping about, waiting to get cast, dragging everyone down with him, then springing back to life the minute the phone rings. She's never known anything like it. How Annie puts up with it, she has no idea. It's like living with a lovesick teenager. A half-drunk glass of wine sits on the coffee table. She drinks it. Probably been there since last night but it tastes fine. *Oh God, where is Remy now?* she wonders. Fucking *bûche de Noël*. She kicks off her shoes, closes her eyes.

Vita slips under the table to retrieve broken glass. On her knees she gathers the dripping shattered crystal in a napkin. It glitters, seeps. She is glad to be away from the presence of the food. She is happier under the table, like a dog. She wishes she could sit down here for the rest of the day. Her grandmother peers down at her, as though at a mouse in a trap.

"Alright, my love?"

"Just cleaning up."

"Such a help, sweetheart."

The white tablecloth drops again, the scene is over. Trust Remy to cause a scene. He's an only child, which means he gets away with murder. No way she or Jackson was allowed to have phones at the table, and definitely not at Christmas lunch, but everyone just turns a blind eye to Remy because he's their guest, even though he actually lives with them.

* * *

From the kitchen Annie hears the clatter, the shriek. She hesitates. She grabs her coat and her phone, opens the back door, and steps outside into the cold. It is almost dark again, the grayness bleeding up and outward, a watercolor of wintery light, a sky the color of bathwater. She dials her mother's number. It is early morning in Melbourne. Christmas is already over for her. Her mother will be up, feeding the chickens. She will be outside with an old yellow bucket, tossing grain to her chickens, her stubby hands dipping into the loose grains, the golden nubs, and then releasing them, a shower of tiny pebbles, over and over. And the chooks will gather at her feet, clucking and appreciative, bowing and scraping at the dirt, her tiny servants.

The phone rings and rings. Annie waits. She sees her mother crossing the yard, wiping her hands on her purple velour tracksuit, patting her hips, muttering to herself, searching for the phone.

"Hi Mum."

"I was just feeding the chooks—couldn't find the phone. Pippa's crook, I have to hand-feed her these days. But Lila's bounced right back, I told you she had the blight—had to isolate her for a week—they all lost their minds, but she's quite frisky now . . ."

"Happy Christmas."

"Oh. Yes. Does Vita like the bag?"

"Vita loves the bag."

"Good. And the jumper? For Jacko? Will it do?"

"He loves it too," Annie lies.

"Well, that's something. I wasn't sure. You never know. Your kids have so much stuff, it's hard to know what . . ."

She tails off. Annie decides not to ask her mother how she could possibly know what her children do or do not have since she has never once visited them.

"Thanks for all the gifts, Mum. You good? How was your Christmas?"

“Spent the day with Helen. She grilled us some lamb steaks, with a bit of mint on the side. Bit different. I got us a pudding from Coles. He’s doing quite nice puds now, tarts and that. It was alright. She’s got that schnauzer. Limerick, she calls it. Can’t think why. It licks everything. Sam and her girlfriend invited me over to their Boxing Day thing, but I didn’t want to go.”

“Why not?”

“Bunch of lezzies talking about how much they hate men. I’ll stop by later in the week. Drop them off some eggs. Lila! Leave Hetti alone! Lila! How’s your Christmas? Bryony behaving herself?”

Annie struggles for a moment to think who her mother means and then remembers that Bryony is Hector’s mother. She never calls her by her name. She thinks of her only as Hector’s mother. As though that were her sole identity. She wonders for how many people she is simply Vita or Jackson’s mother.

“She’s fine. I leave her to Candace. And Vita. Vita loves her grandmother. Grandmothers.”

She wonders why she corrects herself, why she bothers to protect her mother’s feelings.

Annie’s mother has never left Australia. She has never seen where her daughter lives. She has met Vita twice, Jackson never. She does not reproach Annie for not coming to visit her more often because she herself does not travel. Bluey refuses to fly. It is simply how things are. As a young girl she flew to Tasmania to visit cousins with her parents. It was her first time on a plane, and an extraordinary extravagance for the whole family. Half an hour from Hobart, the pilot fainted, the plane nosedived, and they crash-landed in the ocean. The passengers clung to the wreckage, to the waterlogged seats, the shattered tail, slapped by the freezing oily water. Bluey’s father dragged her onto the fractured wing. She was shaking so hard,

she felt her little gym shoes drop off her feet. They were rescued by lifeboats. There were, astonishingly, no fatalities; even the pilot recovered consciousness as soon as he hit the water. Bluey refused to leave solid ground ever again. Not so much as a Ferris wheel, she liked to say. Annie has heard the story so often, she can recite it like a poem. Family trips were taken in a van along the coast, on occasion to Sydney. Once they drove to Uluru, but Annie was so carsick she barely saw it.

“You still there?”

“Yes, Mum. Still here. I should go and get on with dessert. I’m in the doghouse because I slept through breakfast.”

“I expect Hector managed. Did you get some nice presents?”

Annie frowns. Her mother moves through life like one of her hens, pecking briefly at one kernel, then another.

“Candace gave me French lessons.”

“That was nice of her.”

Annie wonders, not for the first time, if her mother is sincere.

“Now Hetty’s fussing. Love to you all.”

The line goes dead.

Slowly, silently snow begins to fall.