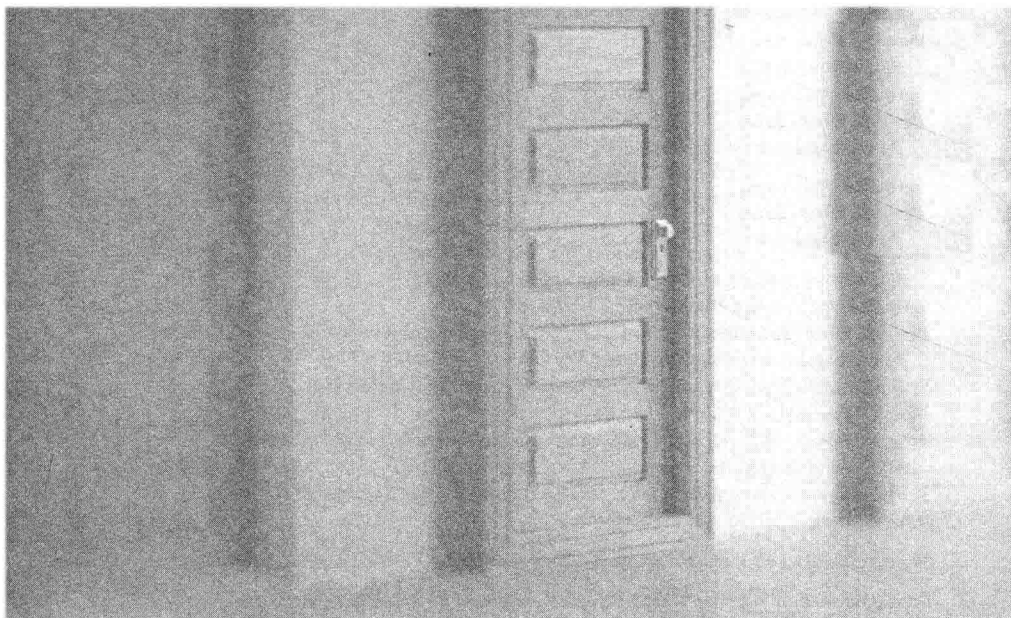


ALISON LURIE

truth and consequences

A Novel





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VIKING

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TRUTH AND
CONSEQUENCES



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Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales
Fabulous Beasts

FOR ALISON VAN DYKE

TRUTH AND
CONSEQUENCES

ONE

On a hot midsummer morning, after over sixteen years of marriage, Jane Mackenzie saw her husband fifty feet away and did not recognize him.

She was in the garden picking lettuce when the sound of a car stopping on the road by the house made her look up. Someone was getting out of a taxi, paying the driver, and then starting slowly down the long driveway: an aging man with slumped shoulders, a sunken chest, and a protruding belly, leaning on a cane. The hazy sun was in her eyes and she couldn't see his face clearly, but there was something about him that made her feel uneasy and a little frightened. He reminded her of other unwelcome figures: a property tax inspector who had appeared at the door soon after they moved into the house; an FBI official who was investigating one of Alan's former students; and the scruffy-looking guy who one summer two years ago used to stand just down the road where the ramp to the highway began, waving at passing cars and asking for a lift downtown. If you agreed, before he got out he would lean over the seat and in a half-whiny, half-threatening way ask for the "loan" of a couple of dollars.

Then Jane's vision cleared, and she saw that it was her husband Alan Mackenzie, who shouldn't be there. Less than an hour ago she

had driven him to the University, where he had a lunch meeting at the College of Architecture, and where she had expected him to stay until she picked him up that afternoon. Since he'd hurt his back fifteen months ago, he hadn't been able to drive. Jane snatched up her basket of lettuce and began to walk uphill, then almost to run.

"What's happened, what's the matter?" she called out when she was within range.

"Nothing," Alan muttered, not quite looking at her. His cane grated on the gravel as he came to a slow halt. "I didn't feel well, so I came home."

"Is it very bad?" Jane put her hand on the creased sleeve of his white shirt. Crazy as it was, she still couldn't quite believe that the person inside the shirt was her husband. Alan wasn't anything like this, he was healthy and strong and confident, barely over fifty. This man had Alan's broad forehead and narrow straight nose and thick pale-brown hair, but he looked at least ten years older and twenty pounds heavier, and his expression was one of pain and despair. "You said at breakfast you were all right—anyhow, no worse than usual. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"If you want to know, I had a fucking awful night, and now I'm having a fucking awful day." He moved sideways so that Jane's hand fell from his arm, and made a slow detour around her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?" She was following him now, speaking to his long stooped back. How could I not have known him? she thought. It wasn't my fault, it was because the sun was in my eyes and he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was surprised, that's all, the way you are when you run into neighbors when you're abroad, so at first you can't quite identify them. *But Alan is your husband*, her conscience said. *You should know him anywhere.*

"No." He paused by the kitchen door. "Well, maybe. You could help me off with my shoes. It just about kills me to bend over. And if you're going upstairs, you could bring down my pillows."

"Yes, of course." It occurred to Jane for the first time that there

was a pattern here. Lately, Alan usually refused any offer of assistance at first, but soon corrected himself, asking for various objects and services. On other occasions he would wait longer, until she was somewhere else in the house and in the middle of some other activity, and then he would call for help.

"I can't go on like this. It's worse every day," he muttered, leaning over the kitchen sink, gulping water and pills. He wiped his mouth on the cuff of his shirt, which should have been thrown in the laundry basket two days ago.

"I'm so sorry." Jane put her arms around the soiled shirt and began a hug—but Alan winced, and she let go. "Sorry," she repeated.

Not acknowledging either her sympathy or her apology, he shuffled into the sitting room and slowly, with a muffled groan, began to ease himself onto the big flowered sofa, which was now placed diagonally across the middle of the room. It had been moved around last fall so that Alan could watch television while lying down, and an end table and coffee table had been positioned awkwardly beside it. The sitting room of their hundred-and-fifty-year-old farmhouse was low-ceilinged and small, and now resembled a crowded antique furniture store. It was difficult to have more than two people over, because with Alan stretched out on the sofa there was nowhere for them to sit. They hadn't had a dinner party for months, and they couldn't have had one anyhow because Alan couldn't sit in a straight chair for more than five minutes without excruciating pain. He had to eat standing up, or balance a plate on his chest as he lay on the various squashed pillows and cushions that now covered the sofa.

Only five—or was it already six?—years ago, Jane suddenly remembered, Alan had lain on this sofa in almost this same disarray of cushions, and she had lain there with him. The sofa was new then: it had just been delivered. After the man from the furniture warehouse left, Alan and Jane stood there admiring it. Then they sat on the sofa, bouncing a bit on the thick down cushions, laughing lightly. They congratulated themselves on their purchase; they kissed, and kissed again.

"We should launch it," Alan said presently, pressing closer.

"What? Oh yes."

"Let's."

It was a mild, sunny autumn day, and their clothes came off easily, falling to the carpet like the bright leaves outside. And then something strange and wonderful happened: the sofa, though of course it did not actually move, seemed to slide into a warm sea, to be borne through gently turbulent waves, which lifted and dropped them, raised and rocked them. When she was a small child, Jane had used to pretend sometimes that the big sagging green couch in the sitting room was a ship, sailing over the carpet. Now her story had come true.

"Look, we match the slipcover," Alan had said afterward, raising himself on one elbow. Jane sat up, and saw that it was so: the creamy beige and soft brown and subdued crimson of the eighteenth-century flower pattern were echoed in their nakedness.

"Yes," she said.

"You're so beautiful, and so lovable," Alan said.

"You too."

That sea voyage, that afternoon, had been one of their best moments. And now, again, Alan lay there on the same sofa in a confusion of cushions, but he was no longer beautiful, and the expression on his face was one of pain and despair.

It wasn't fair that he should suffer like this, Jane had told her mother only last week, it wasn't right. But Jane's mother, who went to the Congregational church almost every Sunday, did not agree. "We can't understand these things, dear," she had said, as she had said before in other circumstances. "We just have to accept them, and ask God to give us the strength to bear them."

In a moment of despair, Jane had passed on this advice to Alan, who thought her mother a well-meaning ninny. He also did not believe in God and, as far as she knew, had never asked him for anything. "Yeah?" he had said. "And what if he doesn't give us the

strength? Even among true believers, the record for answered prayers isn't that good."

Now, with a cheese-grater groan, Alan turned over on the sofa. He stuck out his feet, and Jane sat on the narrow edge of the sofa beside him. Awkwardly, she untied and removed the oxfords she had put on and tied earlier that morning. It was like taking care of a giant toddler, she thought—but this child's bare feet were not soft and smooth and lovable, but hard and knobby, with horny toenails. "Is it really bad?" she asked.

"I already said it was bad." He spoke impatiently, angrily.

"Where does it hurt?"

"The back. Always the back. And I've got that shooting pain in my left leg again."

"I'm so sorry," Jane repeated weakly.

"It just won't quit. Fifteen months." Alan eased himself over onto his side, facing away from her, and in the process rucking up his shirt and revealing the back brace he now habitually wore, a kind of stiff heavy white plastic corset, all straps and Velcro, that made him look even more overweight than he was.

"Could you get me the pillows now? And maybe a couple of icepacks out of the freezer."

"Yes, of course."

Jane stood up. Who is this man lying on our sofa? she thought as she looked down at him. He's still called Alan Mackenzie, but he's not the same person. And I'm not the same person either, she thought as she climbed the stairs. I'm tired and worried and no fun for anybody, including myself. In a way we're not really husband and wife anymore. We're housekeeper and employer. Or maybe, in the language of a blandly instructive pamphlet she had read while waiting for Alan in some doctor's office, caregiver and caregetter.

At first they had both thought his back trouble couldn't be anything major, anything permanent, because it had begun in such a small way. Last year the departmental Memorial Day picnic had

been held at one of the local parks, and Alan had joined his graduate students in a vigorous game of volleyball. It was a hot day, alternating sun and brief showers, and most of the other faculty members weren't playing—he was the oldest person on the court by at least ten years. But watching him you would never have known that: he was so tan and strong and he moved so lightly and quickly.

The ball came over the net, and Alan reached for it—a long elegant reach, too long. He skidded on the bright wet grass and fell in an awkward heap, with one leg out sideways. Everyone stopped playing; people gathered around and asked if he was all right. Alan stood up at once, a little awkwardly but smiling and replying, “Fine, just winded.” But he didn’t go on with the game—instead he came to sit on the bench by Jane, saying something about getting his breath back. After a while, he suggested that they leave. He thought maybe he’d pulled a muscle, he told her, and wanted to get into a hot shower.

The shower had seemed to help, and Alan was cheerful the rest of the evening, but the next morning his back was worse. It would get better in a few days, they kept assuring each other, but it did not get better.

For a while life went on more or less as before. Alan was uncomfortable and impatient to be well, but good-natured and affectionate, just as he had been after other, earlier minor accidents or during brief illnesses. But instead of moderating, his pain grew worse. He began to move more slowly, to favor the injury. One day, Jane caught him dragging a garbage can across the floor of the garage rather than lifting it as usual; she heard the coarse scraping sound of plastic on cement that she was to hear again so often—louder after a few months, when she took over the job.

It was not the only job she took over. As time passed Alan began to do less and less around the house. He began to put on weight from lack of exercise, and to show signs of what he called “grumpiness.” But of course this was temporary, Jane told herself. In a few weeks more, a month or two at the most, he would be himself

again—healthy, handsome, slim, athletic; good-natured, affectionate, and often passionate. He would love her again and make love to her again, instead of apologizing and explaining that he really wanted to, but it just hurt too goddamn much. Now, when they tried to meet, as they called it, it never really worked. Jane could never let herself go: she was always afraid of hurting Alan by a sudden movement, and sometimes she did hurt him, or he hurt himself. Then he would groan, or even cry out in pain. So she held back, and watched herself constantly, and soon their meetings had become tentative and awkwardly self-conscious, as if they were two adolescents on a date. Often Alan would break off halfway. “I’m sorry,” he would say. “I want to go on, but it hurts too goddamn much.”

“Yes, of course, I understand, that’s all right,” Jane always said. But it wasn’t all right, it was all wrong.

Alan hadn’t complained of pain much at first, but as time went on he mentioned or showed it more and more often: he groaned when he got out of bed or lay down, and cursed violently when he dropped anything. Of course, everyone complained when they were ill or injured, Jane told herself at first, and then they got better and stopped. Or, if they didn’t get better, they got medical help. And indeed, when his back didn’t improve after a few weeks, Alan, with the upbeat decisiveness that had for so long been part of his character and had made him such a successful department chairman, sought this help.

According to the experts, his problem was something called a slipped disk, which as Jane understood it meant that a kind of spongy pad between two of his vertebrae had slid out of alignment and was pressing on the spinal nerves, causing continual pain. Sometimes these disks slid back into place after a while, the doctor told them, and sometimes they did not. There were, he was told, many different treatments that might help.

For the next ten months, therefore, Alan consulted a series of health professionals. Each one approached his problem with new suggestions, and each time Alan and Jane hoped for a while that they

had found the solution. But every treatment ended in disappointment, and some of them in rage and despair and increased pain. By Christmas Alan had seen what one of his colleagues had described as four physical therapists, three orthopedic surgeons, two neurologists, and an acupuncturist in a pear tree: a peculiar pale woman who worked in a cloud of smoky fruit-flavored incense and had inserted needles into Alan's back and shoulders and then left him to lie in pain for half an hour listening to oriental music while she spoke on the phone in an unknown language. He had submitted to agonizing injections of cortisone and other substances, and practiced many different sets of exercises. He had sat and bounced on various inflatable devices, including one that looked like a dull black rubber donut and another that resembled a giant shiny electric-blue beach ball.

In April, when nearly a year had passed without any change, Alan and Jane went to stay in a pretentious and unpleasant luxury hotel in a large city four hours' drive away, so that he could undergo what was called a diskectomy. According to the surgeon, this operation was usually relatively painless and had a ninety-five percent chance of success. In Alan's case, this turned out not to be so. After the operation, in spite of large doses of narcotic drugs, he was in continual agony, and his pain did not improve; rather it spread and worsened. As one of Jane's less sympathetic friends said at the time, "Well, somebody has to be in the other five percent." Before the operation the doctor had announced that usually there was immediate relief. At the follow-up interview afterward, however, he claimed that sometimes it took several months. But by this time, Alan did not believe a word the doctor said.

Since then, he had treated his pain himself. He used heating pads and icepacks, and wore an electronic device called a Tenz Unit that was supposed to block nerve impulses and sometimes did so. He also took a great many prescription and nonprescription drugs. Unfortunately, the drugs all had side effects and led to new complications and ailments. Alan now suffered intermittently from constipation,

severe headaches, insomnia, chills, leg pain, groin pain, weakness, and fatigue. The Tenz Unit had caused an ugly raw red rash to appear on both sides of his lower back. He was also eating too much, and not only at meals. Jane would come upon him in the pantry gobbling peanuts out of a can, or cookies from a cellophane package. Late at night she would sometimes hear a noise in the kitchen that could be mice or burglars and would tiptoe down the stairs to find Alan standing in the half dark in front of the fridge, spooning vanilla ice cream from the cardboard carton into his mouth.

"Jane?" called a grating voice from below. "What the hell is going on up there?"

"Just coming." She snatched three pillows of varying size and consistency off his side of their bed and ran downstairs.

"Sorry I yelled at you."

"That's all right," Jane assured him, thinking at the same time that Alan now yelled at her, or at something else that had irritated him, more and more often. Afterward he always apologized, and seemed to assume that canceled out the yell.

"And the ice," Alan reminded her. "If you could get me the ice now."

"Sure, right away." She headed for the kitchen and opened the freezer, which over the last year had become crowded with refreezable plastic icepacks.

"Here you are." Jane held out a large white sagging object.

"Not that one, it's too heavy." He shoved her hand away with a grimace of irritation. "Jesus Christ. I need the little blue packs. Both of them."

"Sorry."

"That's better," he said a minute later. "And could you maybe bring me a towel to wrap them in? It keeps them cold longer."

"Yes, of course." Jane climbed the stairs again, found a clean hand towel, brought it down, wrapped the icepacks in it, and helped Alan settle them between his back and the back of the sofa. "Is there anything else?"

"Not just now, thanks." He groaned and closed his eyes.

Though Alan had not said so directly, Jane knew he now suspected that his back would never get better, and in fact would probably get worse. He was in almost constant severe pain, except when he was so full of drugs that he was woozy and unsteady on his feet as he had been this morning. In the late afternoon and evening the pain sometimes became so bad that he would have a shot of vodka, or two, or three, though labels on the pills he took clearly stated that it was dangerous to mix them with alcohol.

Pain, according to the nineteenth-century novels that Jane's Aunt Nancy had loved as a child and presented to her at Christmas and birthdays, could be ennobling and inspiring. In *What Katy Did* and *Jack and Jill*, thoughtless young girls, injured in accidents at play (like Alan) had to lie in bed for months, during which time they matured wonderfully and their characters changed for the better.

But Alan hadn't needed to change for the better, Jane thought: he had been perfect as he was. So, logically, he had begun to change for the worse. His admirable evenness of temper, optimism, and generosity of spirit had slowly begun to leak away. He had become overweight and unattractive, he had become self-centered and touchy.

Those books were wrong, Jane thought. Pain is bad for the character, just as all misfortunes are: poverty and unemployment and loss of friends and family. It makes you tired and weak; it makes you depressed and anxious and fearful. Nobody says this, nobody is supposed to say it, but it is true. Even Jane herself, who was only forty and healthy and strong and attractive, would one day be old and tired and ugly and probably self-centered and touchy as well.

"Ja-ane." Alan's voice was tense.

"Yes?" She stopped washing lettuce and hurried to the sitting room.

"Could you possibly get me the bottle of Valium from my toilet kit, and some cold grapefruit juice to wash it down?"