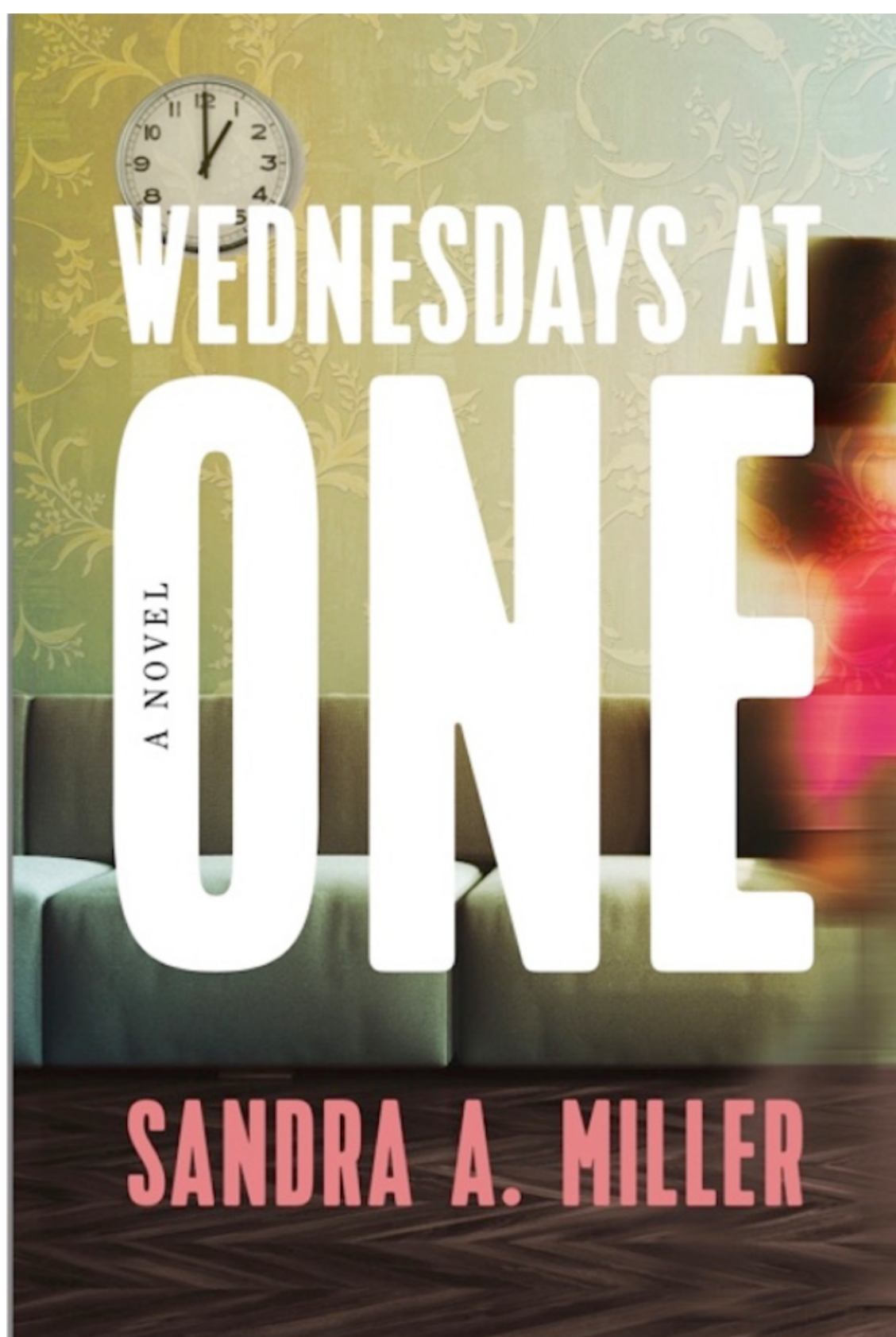


ENJOY THIS
EXCERPT OF



The following day, just before one o'clock, Gregory opened his office door and ushered out his noon client. Fifty minutes every Wednesday with Eleanor S. and her narcissistic personality disorder left him depleted. Worse, he had slept poorly last night. Again.

He decided he had earned a walk to Chinatown for dumplings, but there was a woman sitting in the waiting room. He couldn't remember scheduling a new client. Was she in the wrong office?

She was hunched over a copy of *The New Yorker*, so engaged with the text that she hadn't looked up when his office door opened. Her magenta scarf had slipped down, revealing the strap of a sleeveless orange dress. Only after Eleanor S. had closed the waiting room door behind her and Gregory remained standing, hands by his side, did she lift her head.

Her eyes were chocolate brown, and her easy smile seemed genuine, suggesting a friend delighted by the arrival of her lunch date.

"Hello," she said, her voice so warm that Gregory half expected her to stand and hug him.

"I ..." he started. "Are you here for Dr. Bodkin? I'm afraid he's not in today." Phillip Bodkin, his mentor and friend who had the lease on the suite, was never in on summer Wednesdays, but perhaps he'd made an exception to his weekly round of golf at the club.

The woman stood as if cued, ignoring his question. The magenta scarf drifted down her arms, revealing the rest of the dress, a summer shift that suggested curves without clinging to them. She approached him unencumbered, no purse, no phone, nothing left on the table except the copy of *The New Yorker*. Everything about her was vibrant; against the beige backdrop of the waiting room, she seemed to emit a radiant glow.

"Dr. Weber?" She extended her hand. "I'm Mira. Thank you for making time for me."

When they shook, gripping longer than was customary, he felt like he was tacitly agreeing to something, but he didn't know what. He noticed a pale scar running from her nose to the corner of her lip.

He wanted to tap open his calendar to see if he had scheduled this Mira months ago and overlooked the appointment. He typically tried not to book anything in his one free hour in the middle of the workweek, but he had made some scheduling mistakes recently, an issue he attributed to his problems with Liv and sleep deprivation. But to completely forget an appointment with someone new? This was a first.

Perhaps she was the mother of one of his young adult clients, and they had planned this meeting to discuss the child's progress. He didn't think so. Those mothers approached with a mix of pleading and terror, a desperate hope that this particular mental health expert, with a PhD and twenty years of clinical experience, could extricate their child from a vortex of angst or anxiety, often both. This Mira seemed untroubled. Agelessly beautiful, in that range between twenty-five and forty, she was possibly the most composed person who had entered his office in years.

"Come in, Mira," he said, stepping aside. When she passed, he got a faint scent of her—mint and maybe a whiff of smoke.

Instead of waiting for him to indicate a seat, Mira settled herself in his black ergonomic chair and leaned back. The chair was spun away from its place at Gregory's mahogany desk, pushed against the wall. The positioning allowed him to face his clients without an imposing piece of furniture separating them. But now Mira was the one facing him.

He started to ask her to switch chairs, but instead he half perched on the armrest of one of the two dark green wing chairs and considered how to proceed. That's when he realized that in addition to him not even knowing her last name or how she ended up in his office, she hadn't brought in the seven forms he emailed to every new person before their first session. She must have forgotten them. Or had he forgotten to send the email?

"Mira," he said, trying to steady his voice. "I'd like to have you start by filling out a few intake forms. And please remind me who referred you?"

She focused her gaze on him. "You did. You asked me to come see you."

Gregory pinched his lips together and drew back. Had he really? Because he didn't remember. But he wasn't going to tell her that. "Right. So let's get you started on those forms," he said. "If you'll excuse me." He tried to indicate with a nod that he needed access to his desk, but Mira had already lowered her head.

"Perhaps I can fill them out after our session?" she said. "This is a big step for me, and I'm eager to dive in."