Books

Review: *Don’t Be a Stranger*

By Susan Minot ’83SOA (Knopf).

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
Winter 2024-25



Knopf

When Ivy Cooper meets Ansel Fleming, both are fresh from recent traumas — in Ivy’s case a bitter divorce, in Ansel’s a seven-year prison sentence for drug

trafficking. Both are hungry for physical connection, a need that they satisfy almost immediately. But what comes next? In her latest novel, *Don't Be a Stranger*, Susan Minot '83SOA explores the fallout from an unlikely affair and its profound impact on her heroine.

Ivy, a writer, and Ansel, a singer-songwriter, meet at a dinner party thrown by a mutual friend. But aside from this shared social group, their lives couldn't have less in common. Ivy is fifty-two, a single mother to an eight-year-old boy, and her world is full of elementary-school functions, playdates, and social obligations. Ansel, two decades younger, is quiet, enigmatic, and difficult to reach, both literally and emotionally. "Can I ask you something personal?" Ivy says to him after an intense sexual encounter. "You can always try," he responds. The implication, of course, is that she shouldn't get her hopes up.

Those hopes become the biggest wedge between them. Ivy and Ansel begin a sporadic affair, meeting for the occasional rendezvous at Ansel's apartment. He is clear from the start that he doesn't want a relationship, that this is all he has to give. But the longer the affair continues, the more invested Ivy becomes, until she can think of nothing else. "In the days after she saw him," Minot writes, "his face would sit on the inside of her skull, and she would find herself looking at the world imagining how he was seeing it."

Minot writes searingly about lust and loss, about intimacy and obsession, and about the devastation of unrequited feelings. She captures perfectly the nagging toll of romantic infatuation, recognizable to anyone who has had an overwhelming crush. Ivy avoids making plans in case Ansel might be free, and she checks her text messages compulsively, willing his name to appear on the screen. Her productivity wanes — "The blizzard in her head made it difficult to work" — and her friendships suffer: "Years later, Ivy would flush with shame at the amount of time she had spent trying the patience of her friends, wanting them to reflect her hope rather than describing reality."



Susan Minot (Michael Lionstar)

But doubtless the most significant emotional tug-of-war is between the pursuit of Ansel and motherhood. As a single mom, Ivy doesn't have the luxury of losing herself in her daydreams. There are school pickups to do, birthday cakes to bake, babysitters to book, chicken nuggets to reheat. There is an ex-husband in Virginia who needs to see their son, and the complicated dynamics of the ex's new relationship. And of course there are the fragile emotions of a young boy whose life has been upended by a decision that he had no control over.

For nearly a decade, Ivy's son has been the anchor in her world, the being around which she organizes her life, her thoughts, her plans. Slowly, after she meets Ansel, that focus begins to shift: "The concern she had for him when nearby altered when he was absent, into a slight increase in worry, as one would have in a spaceship, noticing the door ajar to the universe beyond." Perhaps for the first time since her son was born, Ivy is dipping her toe into that universe. Minot writes beautifully about what that looks like, about how Ivy begins to understand and accept her need for

selfhood outside of motherhood.

This is Minot's ninth book, her first in more than a decade. It's familiar territory for her; nearly all her work focuses on sex and relationships, on the intimate space between two people. But her books have matured as she has. And here, Ivy's age — the season of her life — plays an important role. Most of her friends are settled into long marriages, something that Ivy had envisioned for herself, and Minot writes achingly about the unexpected place in which Ivy finds herself. Some of the most fraught passages in the book are not about Ansel but about Ivy's divorce — a detailed account of how she and her ex told their son about the separation is particularly wrenching — and the bewilderment of starting over again in middle age.

At fifty-two, Ivy is surprised by the intensity of her new urges, by the fact that she is still capable of desire and of being desired. The pain of being rejected by Ansel is different from the pain of her long divorce. In some sense, it's better. In this pain, there is hope.

Read more from ***Rebecca Shapiro***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Rebecca Shapiro***