

Once You Know

Madeleine Van Hecke

Unknown Source Publishing (Oct 15, 2020)

Softcover \$18.00 (384pp)

978-1-73332-461-8

Once You Know is a complex, gripping novel about how that which is unacknowledged can do the most damage.

A family is left reeling after a father's unforgivable betrayal in Madeleine Van Hecke's novel *Once You Know*.

As she finishes her first year of college, Rachel's main concern is convincing her mother, Colleen, to let her rent her own apartment. But when a class on gender and violence brings disturbing childhood memories to the surface, she finds herself at odds with Colleen for much more serious reasons. Colleen can't reconcile the husband she loves with the father Rachel remembers, and the distance between their perspectives threatens to tear what's left of their once happy family to shreds.

This tense, emotional story switches between Rachel and Colleen's perspectives. Rachel, despite going to therapy, struggles to maintain a relationship with her boyfriend and turns to self-destructive behaviors. Colleen buries herself in reckless self-delusion, clinging to her religious faith and the impossible dream of reconciliation. Izzy, Rachel's little sister, is caught in the crossfire, stuck on the wrong end of their mother's volatile temper without understanding what is wrong. Derek, Rachel's father, is despicable as he alternates between genuine contrition and revealing self-pity. It is hinted that some supporting characters, particularly Rachel's friend Mandy, have their own troubles, though their issues are never explored.

The wrongness of Derek's actions is the only clean-cut feature of the story. Colleen keeps revisiting their happy years, oblivious to the depth of Rachel's anguish. Her actions are understandable in some ways, but nonetheless infuriating, given the severity of Derek's crime. Neither Rachel nor Colleen wants to see Izzy hurt, but it takes them a while to agree on how best to keep her safe. Their arguments—and, on Colleen's side, willful ignorance—are painful to witness. The family's journey highlights how hard it is to let go of a loved one, even when doing so is the only responsible course of action. It comes as a relief when Colleen is at last shocked out of her fantasies and realizes that forgiveness has limits.

The characters are flawed and even unlikable at times, but that is the point: trauma is ugly and can drive people to dark, cruel places. It takes time, love, and patience for these very imperfect people to crawl their way towards healing and a new normal. Their troubles do not disappear—Rachel and Colleen must learn to confront them rather than avoid them. They grow closer, forgive where possible, and find a solution that works for them. It is a hard-earned happy ending for a difficult story.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (June 24, 2020)

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