Hi, my name is Leigh Stein, and I’m the author of the novel *Self Care*, which came out from Penguin Books on June 30th. *Self Care* is a satire of the wellness industry and “Girl Boss” feminism. It’s about Two women, Maren and Devin who are founders of a wellness starter called Richual—R-I-C-H-U-A-L—that is like if Instagram and Goop had a baby. And the book is told in alternating first-person point-of-view between Maren, Devin, and their star employee, Khadijah, who has a secret that will expose the company is not as feminist as they may seem in their brand.

It’s been really fun to launch this book, and one of the most fun things has been to see readers responding to the book on Instagram in the language of the book. My book is very internet-y, I am an extremely online person, I’ve been making friends on the internet since I was thirteen years old, so I definitely had a lot of fun imitating Instagram and Slack and branded content when I’m writing this.

So the passage I’m going to read is when Maren and Devin first meet. This is from Maren’s point of view.

If you met Devin, you wouldn’t know she was sick. Her smile looked expensive. Her complexion advertised good genes. She seemed to genuinely enjoy the taste of edible flowers. If her body appeared beside a headline about how this woman gets it done, you’d click.

When I met her at an entrepreneur retreat, she had a six-figure business as an intuitive eating coach. This was during a period when I would photocopy proof of my income for any scholarship opportunity I could find—I just wanted a break from New York City, my $28,000 annual salary as executive director of a nonprofit organization that was going to end gender-based oppression through public sculpture, and the cage-free egg salad sandwiches that were often the most ethically nutritious food I could afford.

They paired me with Devin as my mentor.

“What’s your edge?” she asked. “What are you better at than anybody else?”

“Working,” I said. “Relaxing stresses me out.”

“You’re a total pitta,” she said.

“I’m a what?”
“Your dosha. Do you eat a lot of salted cheese?”

“If I say yes, are you going to tell me I have to stop?”

As executive director, my job was to eat salad with rich women from all over the great island of Manhattan, compliment their avant-garde jewelry and trend-driven philanthropic work, and then beg them to come on as sustaining donors for a series of anatomically accurate yet artistically rendered vaginal sculptures. Every lunch ended with me half-heartedly reaching for the check until they stopped my hand. It was the least they could do. No one ever wanted to come on as a sustaining donor at this time, but there was always someone else I should really talk to; they would make an e-intro and I had to thank them for their generosity before moving them to BCC. My future was an infinite horizon of fine dining in vain.

“I’ve built this organization that’s supposed to be changing the world, but I’m killing myself,” I told Devin. “I’m killing myself for other women.”

She placed a hand on my forehead like a blessing. Her palm was surprisingly warm and calming. “Your pain is sending you a message right now,” she said. “Your pain says it’s time to pivot.”

I knew a pitch was coming. I should hire Devin as my coach. She’d tell me how much cheese I was allowed to eat (none) and make me text her photos of my treadmill workouts. After her three-month program, not only would I feel incredible, but I’d look like her. The last time I was her size, I was about ten years old. The proof of her program was written on her body. I started to sweat, preparing how I would tell this person I couldn’t afford the program. Self-consciously, I put my face in one hand, to cover the patch of acne near the ear I always held my phone to.

“Forget the cheese,” I said. “The cheese is not the problem.”

“You know you don’t have to keep doing this, right?” Devin asked.

“No,” I said. “I do have to keep doing it.” Of course she wouldn’t understand. While she was selling self-improvement, I was out here trying to change the world.

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“Hold that thought,” Devin said. She opened a fresh page in her rococo floral notebook that had likely cost more than twelve dollars, and began writing. After a couple of minutes, she tore out the page.

“PERMISSION SLIP

I give myself permission to listen to my intuition.
I give myself permission to prioritize my own psychic space over what other people want from me.

I give myself permission to decide when it’s time to walk away.”

Devin’s handwriting was as tiny and perfect as a font, the product of years of practicing her uppercase I’s.

“Now all you have to do is sign it,” she said.

I had so thoroughly braced myself to say no to her that I felt defensive about her reframe.

“But what if my true calling is to ignore my intuition and put myself last?” I joked.

“Uses humor . . . as coping mechanism,” Devin recited, as she wrote it down.

“What about you?” I said. “What’s your coping mechanism?”

“For me, I find intense physical activity to be really grounding.”

I thought that sounded like horseshit, but I signed the permission slip so I could ask her to help me with my bigger problem, which was convincing women like her to give me money.