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— SPRING 2020 —

What Will You Read Next?

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First published by Random House, Ballantine Books, Knopf, Dutton, Putnam, Doubleday, Random House, and Riverhead, which are divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Other Press.
First published by Crooked Lane Books.

First Printing, 2020

Printed in the United States of America.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE
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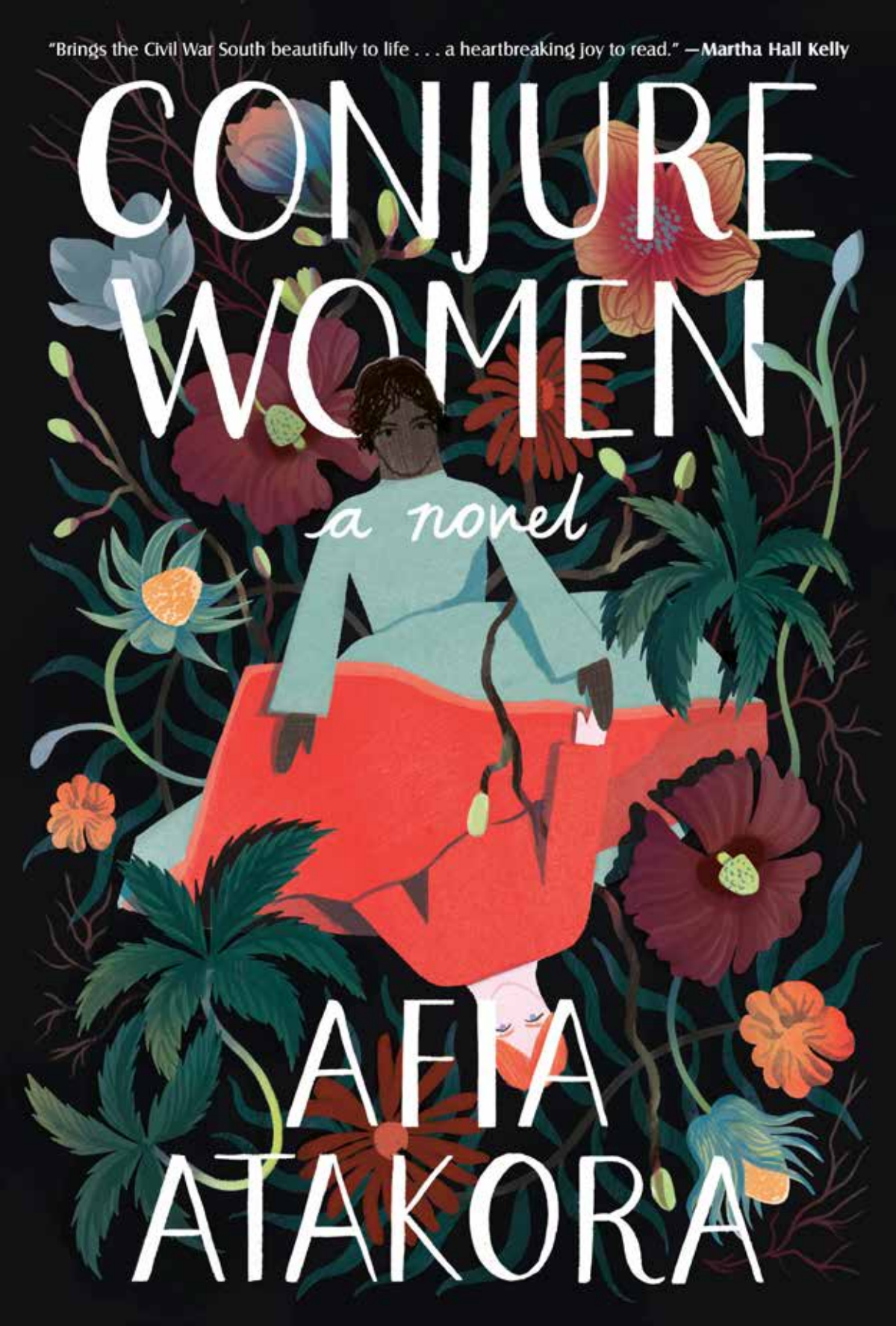
What Will You Read Next?

"Brings the Civil War South beautifully to life . . . a heartbreaking joy to read." —**Martha Hall Kelly**

CONJURE WOMEN

a novel



AFIA ATAKORA

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Hardback ISBN 9780525511489

Ebook ISBN 9780525511496

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

987654321

First Edition

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Freedomtime

1867

The black baby's crying wormed and bloomed. It woke Rue by halves from her sleep so that through the first few strains of the sound she could not be sure when or where she was, but soon the feeble cry strengthened, like a desperate knocking at her front door, and she came all the way awake, and knew that she was needed, again.

She unwound herself from her thin linen sheet. If there were dreams, she'd lost them now that she'd stood up. There was only the crying, not so loud as it was strange, unsettling. She smoothed her nightmare hair and made ready her face. Stepped out from her cabin, barefooted.

At the center of the town, between the gathering of low cabins that sat close and humble, Rue could make out the collection of folks, like herself, who'd been drawn from their sleep by the haunting cry. Anxious, bedraggled, they emerged to suppose at that unearthly sound. It was a moonless night, the clouds colluding to block out the stars, and the crowd knitted itself tightly in a weave of black whisperings.

"You hearin' that, Miss Rue?" one of them said when she approached.

What little light there was streamed down from behind the crowd, hiding them, illuminating Rue. She couldn't make out their faces for the darkness but replied just the same. "Can't help but hearin'. That some poor sufferin' somethin'?"

As she walked, already she was holding herself straighter, prouder. It's what they were expecting. No matter how weary she was feeling on the inside, she knew she had to walk easy,

like she were floating, same as her mama used to do. Rue's magic ought to be absolute, she knew, not come to them sleepwalking and unsure, or it wasn't magic at all.

"Never heard nothin' come close to that cry."

"Ain't no creature."

"That's one a' Jonah's li'l 'uns."

Rue knew they suspected already what child it was. That wrong child, born backward in a caul, a bath of black.

Jonah himself was opening the front door of his cabin and stepping out of it, and Rue did hope that Jonah, calm and right-headed, had come to silence the rumors on his child. But there was no denying that beyond him was the origin of the crying. Even his tower-tall presence in the doorway couldn't block out the menacing sound.

"Miss Rue," he called, and his voice was thin like river silt. "You there, Miss Rue?"

Rue did ache for Jonah's predicament. She answered, "I'm here."

"Sarah's thinkin' the baby's took sick. She's wantin' you to look him over."

Rue stepped forward, took her time going up the few sunken-down steps to the little porch. She could feel all them eyes clinging to her back like hooks. At the top step Jonah, dark-skinned and strong and sure, reached down for her and took her elbow in his hand, guiding her. His calloused palms were hard against her bared skin, rough the way only a man's hand had cause to be, and as he moved her through the door, he gave the point of her elbow a slow rub, a caress away from their fastened eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Rue," he said and showed her in.

The home was made up of two rooms, more than most folks could boast, though the thatch roof wept from some long-ago storm. Rue followed Jonah to the front room's far corner where Sarah was knee bent, washing the children.

The tub was large enough to fit all three of Sarah and Jonah's little ones, but their elder boy and girl stood outside of it, naked but dry, waiting to be washed. Their faces were damp and ruddy beneath their high-yellow skin, like they'd been crying but had exhausted that sorrow, left it to the baby to do the weeping for them.

Inside the tub the baby was on his back looking like a white island. The steam rose up from his skin in waves. He was crying, Lord, was he crying. Rue heard in it a lost cry, and it was a call she felt compelled to answer, if not with comfort then with a mournful cry of her own. In the water beside the baby a chipped cup bobbed along the ripples created by his movements. It hit the walls of the tub out of time with the high, piercing whine that had snaked its way into Rue's dreaming.

When she leaned forward, the baby stilled his squall. He opened his eyes as if to look upon her, revealed the oil-slick black irises that had heralded his strangeness, that had prompted the name Rue had given him at his birth: Black-Eyed Bean.

Rue said to Sarah of the baby's eyes, "They ain't changed." She spoke it low enough to be out of Jonah's hearing.

"No, they ain't," Sarah said, in just the same whisper. "He ain't changed."

There was no magic in birthing. No conjure, neither. The birth of Black-Eyed Bean had occurred one year back. Had begun no different than any other birth that Rue had known, and she had known many.

Rue just walked the women. That was it. All it took in the birthing room was good sense, the good sense that a thing hanging ought to fall, the way swollen apples brought their branches low before the apples plopped down to the ground. Shouldn't it be the same with a baby? Let them hang low in the mama when it was time to fall, the mama being the branch near snapping.

Since the end of slaverytime, Rue had birthed every last child in that town. She knew their mamas and their daddies, too, for she was allowed into sickbeds for healing and into birthing beds alike, privy to the intimate corners of joy and suffering, and through that incidental intimacy she had come to know every whisper that was born from every lip, passed on to every ear. She knew what folks said about each other, and Lord, she knew what they said about her.

What folks said about Sarah, Jonah's wife, Bean's mama, was that she was beautiful, and it was so. She was a fiery woman, petite as an ember but just as dangerous, with skin light as wheat. Sarah was one of those who had sung when she walked the birth walk, had done so the two births before this, sung and moaned and sung right up to the moment that her bigger than big babies came on out to the world. Sarah had sung while she was heavy with Bean, a sonorous song with no words but so much soul. Her one hand gripped on too tight to Rue's while the other hand beat out the tune she was singing against her sweat-slicked thigh. It was when Sarah's squeezing got too tight, the veins standing up like blue rivers in her high-yellow hand, that Rue started her usual worrying.

Truth was Rue didn't want nothing to do with any of that mess, the moan-singing mamas or the anxious daddies—when there were daddies—wringing their hats and their hands outside the door, or the wet and wailing babies or, worst of all, the babies that came into the world just quiet, gone already before they ever lived, just lost promises with arms and legs and eyes for nothing. Why would she want to meddle in all of that?

As she laid Sarah down Rue had begun to think of how it all could go wrong, and if it did, what was she to do? Because just as easy as folks' praise came, it could turn to hating. Magic and faith were fickle. Life and living were fickle. And didn't Rue know that as well as anyone?

Still, when the time came for bearing down—the women praying with their cussing and cussing with their praying—it was in the way they looked up at her, weepy eyes filled with worship, that kept her door open. Like apples, babies came in seasons, and Rue would always tell herself in the lull, *Not next year. Next year I be done.*

Bean had been born in one such lull, Sarah being the fertile kind. The "Her man gotta do no more than look at her," kind, like Rue's mama used to say of the women who could show up twice in a year with their bellies making tents of their dresses.

It was easy going year after year with Sarah. She was still young, twenty-and-some years to her, and already she'd made two babies who had been born after no more than the usual struggle. Still she stayed smooth and sweet, and her breasts remained like two fat fruits just shy of ripe.

"He's a'comin'," Rue had said, laying her open palm on Sarah's restless belly. How Rue knew even before the crown of him started pushing through that Bean would be a boy she could not account for, not in words. There was just her knowing.

Rue had rolled her rough-hewn sleeves on up—just about everything she wore and ate and owned was a gift from those mamas who had no other way to pay—and she had knelt the way she had knelt near a hundred times now, though her knees did ache for it despite her youth. Rue was nearabouts twenty also if her old master's accounting was to be believed, not much

younger than Sarah, though every day Rue felt more worn, like she were living out each one of her years double, aging out of time.

They'd grown up together, true, through slaverytime, wartime, freedomtime, but Sarah had kept herself young, and even here, at her most vulnerable hour, the sweat sitting on her skin had the audacity to glisten. In every way they were opposites—that was clear enough as Rue laid her thick dark fingers on Sarah's thin thighs and parted them.

"Lord. Miss Rue." Sarah sighed, praying to them both.

Rue had to love and hate equally being called *Miss*. She was every time reminded that she'd earned the title—and the respect of it—only after her own mama's dying.

Rue's mama, called Miss May Belle, had gotten the kind of sickness that could not be seen and for that reason could not be cured. Its origins were in heartache for her man, Rue's daddy, who some said ran himself crazy for lust of a white woman.

Well, let folks have their stories. The only truth was he'd been hanged, strung from a tree just outside the town, his dangling toes making circles in the dirt as his body spun on the rope. And Rue had hardly known him.

She'd been under Miss May Belle's tutelage the whole of her life. From her Rue had learned one true thing, that all birthing was performance. Mamas were made to believe that a bit of pepper by their bed would ward off evil spirits, but it was only meant to cause them to sneeze if what was required was a good last push to get the baby out. Rue learned to tell women to blow into a bottle or to chew on some chicory or to squat over a pot of boiling water to make their babies strong, to make the birthing easy, to protect them in that most crucial hour.

Bean's mama was easy. Birthing came as natural to Sarah as it did to animals who need only to pause and squat and be off again.

Rue knew that she ought to be glad of that, but she wasn't. Sarah was silk, free to slip from one type of wanting to another. Rue was rough, coarse linen, starched in her life. Freedom had come after the war for all black folks. All excepting Rue, she felt, for she was born to healing and stuck to it for life. And stuck to this place. Her own doing that, a secret curse of her own making.

"Lord Jesus," Sarah had crooned as she'd labored. She'd gripped the bedsheets near to ripping. "Get me through this 'un. I swear, Miss Rue, this here's my last."

Rue knew sure as she knew the sun would rise that Sarah would come up pregnant again soon enough. Weren't men drawn to her like flies to shit?

And it was on that thought, potent as a curse, that she realized something between Sarah's legs was going wrong.

Rue nearly drew away in shock. A black mass came out, all in a forceful gush. The coal-dark sack squirmed in Rue's hands. The blood that surrounded it was a red made more ominous by the darkness it covered. Through that black sheath Rue could make out the small surprise of a pale face, the mouth working soundlessly, nothing like suckling but more like an old man chewing on the words of a curse.

It wasn't unusual for babies to come still wearing the veil. "It means good luck," Rue would be quick to tell the mamas when they saw the extra skin wrapped around their baby's heads, looking as final as a shroud. In a moment she could wipe it away, and the healthy wail would fight back the unsaid fright in the mama's eyes that from her womb had come something unexpected, something unnatural.

Bean made Rue's heart jump in absolute horror of him. She felt that she knew him for what he was, a secret retribution for a long-ago crime, the punishment she had been dreading.

He was fighting, his arms moving inside that black wrapping like he was swimming, or more like drowning. She had never seen a baby so fully encased in the caul.

Rue forced herself to draw up the scissors she'd heated in preparation to cut the cord; she held them near the baby's mouth. Sarah had not moved at all from her position braced against the sheets.

"He come dead?" Sarah said, straining to hear the telltale cry.

Rue might've said yes. The black thing curling and quivering in her palms stayed gasping. It could not break through the veil without her intervention. She might've left it to struggle or smother in its own black sheet.

"Oh, Miss Rue," Sarah started moaning, squinting her eyes hard to get a look at the bundle. "Don't say he dead."

A snip. That's all it took, and Rue did it. A snip beneath the little nose and then slowly, like peeling back the skin of a strange fruit, she shucked Bean of his dark veil and revealed him to the world. He began, finally, to cry.

"He alright," Rue heard herself saying. But was he? Was she?

Divested now of the veil that was like his second skin, his true coloring showed, lighter even than his mama was. There was no warmth to the color, only a pallid white. The baby's skin was peculiar dry too, near scaled, dry as though no loving had ever touched him. Rue had the urge to do more than rub him the way she did to warm life into all the new babies. She had, instead, the urge to scrub the strange skin clean off.

The eyes were the next shock, for when they blinked open they were full black, edged thinly in egg-boil white. The baby's eyes were the same glossy black as the veil-like husk that

had held him. He rolled them slow and looked up at Rue as if he could see clearly through to every thought she had in her head.

When she'd sucked the blood from his nose and had him clean as she could get him she tied off the cord. Her practiced hands shook with the force of her nerves as she hurried to lay this strange baby by his mama's side and wipe off the stain he'd left on her hands.

Sarah looked at the child. She did not move to give him her breast. Instead she pulled the dirtied sheets around herself, and when Rue came to press on the stretched skin of her belly to check that nothing had been left in the womb, Sarah would not let her near. She wanted only to stare at her baby, not with that new-mama affection but in the very same way you'd stare at a snake you'd woken up to find coiled beside you in your bed.

"He's a big 'un," Rue said, to say something.

"Them eyes?"

"Like little black-eyed beans, ain't they?" Rue said. She wished she could snap back those words soon as they left her lips. She should have pretended that everything was as it ought to be. Her mama, Miss May Belle, had she been living, might have had the words of reassurance, might have made the baby a miracle, for she had that way about her that Rue had never learned or inherited.

Sarah still would not take the baby up. His crying grew more shrill in the silence, like an accusation, and Rue felt she had to go on talking.

"Folks says babies born under the veil got the gift a' the Sight," Rue said. It was meant to be a comfort. It came out sounding grim as a burden. Rue found that she pitied that babe if it were true, for here he was not a clock's tick old and already he had to bear the whole knowledge of the world.

Rue had stripped the sheets, stepped out of the cabin without saying any more. There was Jonah, the daddy, waiting. He'd been keeping himself busy chopping more firewood than the hot summer day rightly called for, and when he saw Rue step out, he stopped mid-swing and smiled.

She studied him, taking in his sun-darkened skin and his eyes that were the same easy brown as the bark he was cutting. He bore no resemblance to his son. His son bore no resemblance to any living thing she had ever seen.

When Rue stepped forward, the bloodied birthing sheets bundled in her arms, Jonah looked up at her with trepidation. He could not lend voice to the question that needed asking.

Rue spoke to spare him the effort: "You got yo'self a thriving baby boy."

His sweat-shining face broke out into a grin and before he could ask her anything more, she handed him the bundle of sheets that contained the damning black caul, bloody and shapeless, in its center. She knew even if he got a look at it, he wouldn't understand it. Men could not make sense of women's work.

"What do I do with all a' this?"

"Burn it," she said, telling him what he was needing to hear. "Burn it for luck."

Slaverytime

1854

Miss May Belle had used to turn coin on hoodooing. As a slave woman she'd made her name and her money by crafting curses. More profit to be made in curses than in her work mixing healing tinctures. More praise to be found in revenge than in birthing babies.

In slaverytime a white overseer had his whip and a white patrolman had his hounds and a white speculator had his auction block and your white master had your name on a deed of sale somewhere in his House, or so he claimed. But those things were afflictions for the battered-burnt-bruised body only. Curses were for the sin-sick soul and made most terrifying because of it.

"Hoodoo," Miss May Belle used to say, "is black folks' currency."

She had admitted only once, to Rue, in confidence: "The thing about curses is that you can know who you've wronged the most by who you fear has the notion to curse you."

Black neighbors would whisper against black neighbors, sure, but by and by a white man would come from afar having heard of Miss May Belle's conjure, asking for cure of some affliction set upon him by an insolent slave, or even by his own white wife. Other slavefolk got hired out for their washing, for their carpentering, for their fine greasy cooking. Miss May Belle was hired for her hoodooing.

So it was that Big Sylvia, the cook of the plantation House, came to the slave cabin where Miss May Belle and her daughter lived alone, to ask after a curse.

Rue saw her coming from afar. The diminutive house slave had a crooked walk on bowed little legs, and Rue stood tiptoed in the cabin's one window, watched as the cook came down the dust road at dusk, determination in her little steps but a look like fear on her face, as she headed to the healing woman's house. Beyond Big Sylvia, Rue could see from where she'd come. Marse Charles's white-pillared House blazed big and hazy opposite the setting sun.

"Come away from there, Rue-baby," Miss May Belle said, and Rue obeyed her mama. "Cook's comin' to ask after hoodoo. Now, you know that ain't nothin' that a child needs to hear 'bout."

How Miss May Belle knew before Big Sylvia's knock what the matter was Rue could not rightly say. But she tucked herself in the corner of their one-room cabin, balled herself small between the stove and the bedpost, and pretended at not listening.

Miss May Belle creaked the door open, allowed their visitor in.

"I ain't been workin' in the kitchen for some months now," Big Sylvia complained. She sat across the supper table from Miss May Belle and held up her right hand. It was bundled up covering a deep cut that some weeks back had near took away her fingers.

Rue's mama undid the bandages, revealed the hideous slash from finger to wrist. It was deep, angry and oozing. Big Sylvia's dark skin and eyes were shining with a fever she couldn't kick. "It won't never heal 'cause somebody's put a fix on me."

"Who you think done it?"

"Who else? That woman. Airey. She the one that's took up cookin' in my place. She's been schemin' after it for years tryna get herself a place in the House."

Fact was that Airey's mama had been the cook when Marse Charles had been a child, back when the plantation had been all but a few rows of hopeful seedlings. By all accounts

Airey's mama hadn't been all that good of a cook neither, but there was no taking a white man from his auntie nostalgia. Airey had believed that because of her mama she was owed the kitchen, with a lineage as good as a lordship, but Big Sylvia had been bought special with commendations for her cooking. Airey had taken after her field-hand daddy instead, a sharp beauty but mule-strong, bred with hands for picking.

"Now I'm left to do the washin', even now I'm one-handed, mind," Big Sylvia said, "and Airey, she at the oven, got Marse Charles smackin' his lips after every meal, thinkin' he gon' get rid a' poor ol' Sylvia, maybe sell me next time the prospector come 'round, keep Airey on."

Miss May Belle tutted. She shut her eyes as if consorting with herself, let Big Sylvia stand there panting for a long while, working herself up into a deeper fury the more she thought on the unfairness.

"You best be sure now." Miss May Belle finally said. She rebandaged Big Sylvia's hand good and tight.

Big Sylvia nodded in earnest. "It was her face I saw when my hand slipped and the knife cut me. Yes, I saw her face plain. She tol' me I was to die. Now I see her in my sleep every night. She set by the foot of my bed with the devil on her left side stabbing at my hand."

To undo Airey's magicking Rue's mama advised that Big Sylvia circle her own bed with a sprinkle of salt, nightly. This Big Sylvia swore to do.

"But, Miss May Belle, how am I to get my place back?"

"You'll needa take somethin' a' hers. A piece a' her hair like. When you fetch it, come back to me on Friday."

Big Sylvia repeated her thanks over and over. Her rewrapped hand was thick and clumsy with the new bandaging, and she struggled at the pocket of her apron 'til she produced a silver dollar with the promise of more coin to be had come Friday.

"I'd bring you them good ashcakes a' mine too, but I can't cook nothin'."

Rue watched her mama slip the coin easy into her own pocket.

"We'll see to it that you back in yo' rightful place, by the Lord's grace," Miss May Belle promised.

Rue knew that her mama, thin as she was, did have a love for Sylvia's ashcakes.

On Sunday her mama picked nits from her daddy's hair and Rue pretended to be asleep. Half days were for praying and for visiting, the one day that Miss May Belle saw her man. He journeyed from the neighboring plantation, a trip that took him 'til nightfall, and Rue would struggle to stay awake to see her daddy arrive in the doorway and greet her mama. From the bed, Rue strained to watch them, but she could see only their shadows twist and join, stretched out black and big on the dirt floor.

Rue fought off sleep but she did every now and again succumb, and their hushed, soothing voices—her daddy's as hard as timber, her mama's as soft as pulp—were sometimes things of her dreams. Her daddy sat on the floor between her mama's bare thighs, his head pushing up her dress, his lips kissing healed-up grazes on her kneecaps, and her mama sat in the chair above, cussing softly at tangles.

When next Rue jerked herself awake, her daddy had the doll baby in his hand. He was turning it around in his thick fingers. He was displeased; she could tell by the lines etching themselves deep in his forehead.

"It look like her," he conceded.

Indeed, the doll baby Miss May Belle had made of blackened oilcloth and stuffed with straw, though crude, resembled Airey completely. She'd embroidered a face even, wide-set eyes and a line of red stitching for Airey's thin, proud mouth. The doll wore spare calico and the type of red kerchief Airey often favored. But the most prominent detail was the mismatched black paint of the legs where Airey was known to have a pattern of birthmarks that freckled in circles black and white up to her thighs, varying smatterings where her skin lacked color, where she seemed almost to be white in unplanned-for places great and small. The real live Airey kept the marks hid the great majority of the time, but everybody knew her to be proud on them; she'd hike up her skirt and show them off sometimes in the swirl of her dancing. They were there on the doll hid beneath the blue calico rag dress, beneath the white napkin, an approximation of the kitchen apron Big Sylvia coveted. Miss May Belle had made that miniature live.

"It's a sinful thing to be messin' with," Rue's daddy warned.

Rue watched her mama pause in her brushing. She kissed the very top of her man's head, left her lips there when she answered. "I won't hurt her none."

Rue's daddy set the doll down on the floor gentle, like he feared it might start living.

"What is it you mean to buy with all them silver coins?" she heard him ask.

Rue, dozing, might have dreamed the answer her mama gave her daddy: "You."

Friday came, wicked with rain, and Rue, sent to beg a needle off the seamstress, came back to the cabin wet and cold to find her mama and Big Sylvia, heads bent and conspiring. Beneath the doll's red kerchief Miss May Belle worked in quick, neat stitches to sew down the tuft of thick black hair Big Sylvia had stolen from Airey's comb.

"Didn't hardly think you'd get it," Miss May Belle said of the hair.

"Weren't easy. Had to wait 'til Sunday, 'til she'd gone visitin' that Charlie."

"They still courtin'?" Miss May Belle asked, though she surely knew—didn't she know everything?

"They fixin' to get proper married, iff'n Marse Charles will 'llow for it. And he surely will as he's like to get from 'em good strong babies."

Miss May Belle said nothing. Moved or not by talk of sweethearts, she waited patient as Big Sylvia drew two more silver coins from out of her apron pocket. Only then did Miss May Belle hand her the doll.

Big Sylvia's eyes near gleamed. "What do I do?"

"Scratch off a li'l a' the black paint from the arms of the doll baby every mornin'. Not too much now, but slowly, and by and by you'll get what you're wantin'."

Rue wished for her own magic and, failing that, wished for coin. She had no use for money, had no sense of what she might or might not buy, but she wanted to feel them, as though the action of slipping her hands across the cool, rare bits of silver, carved with regal fine-boned faces, could elicit a kind of magic in and of itself.

She had been spellbound, at that small age, by the curious mystery of white faces. She saw so few, save the master and his sons, more rarely his wife. Rue was acquainted with only one white face in particular—Varina, Marse Charles's red-haired, freckle-spotted daughter.

They were both of them six years old, of an age because the master made it so. Varina's birth was the only clear bright star around which the younger slave children might revolve—you were born after or before the master's daughter, thereabouts. Rue could hitch her birth in the

same season as Varina's and so they oft played together, kicking up dust in that one precious hour of their mutual freedom, between dusk and candlelight. Varina wasn't allowed to play at any other time, for the Missus was afeared that her daughter would catch color, spoil away her milk-skim skin.

Rue spent her own days in running favors, not much use in the field or the House and not yet as knowledged as her mama would someday make her. The best use for Rue then was to dash about with a basket, a bucket, or a broom, getting switched on her behind by older folks who complained she was too slow no matter how fast she ran. She was often underfoot. She was often forgotten.

Rue would sometimes look up at the House and spy Varina at the third-story nursery window, knew her for a white figure behind a whiter curtain, looking down. Did she appear wistful? Rue could not truly tell, not from that distance, not with only her hand over her eyes to shade out the midday sun. But it was as though Varina was looking out at her as well, with a sort of wanting, and Rue got to figuring if she ever had magic or money, either, she'd make it so the two of them could play and laugh together in the full sunlight as much as they could stand.

It seemed to Rue that Miss May Belle never had to fetch her coins but could will them into existence, suddenly flipping a flash of silver between her fingers in trade for something or other she was wanting. But where the source was was anybody's imagining.

Rue watched as her mama slipped her daddy one such coin of a Sunday. She slid it clear across the table over knot holes and scratches and set it in front of her man, who did not take it.

"Nah," he said.

Miss May Belle was sore. "Why?"

"That's conjure money."

"Money is money is money," she said and he said nothing and the coin gleamed between them.

"Or is it 'cause it's woman's money?" Miss May Belle took it back and Rue tried to watch where it went but missed that too, an illusionist's trick between her mama's delicate fingers.

Rue looked and looked but she did not find the coins, not in the way she thought she would at least. One day, after the birth of the Airey doll baby that Big Sylvia had bought, Airey herself came to Miss May Belle to ask after a bit of hoodooing. She came upon them at the river where the water was swelled from a season turned rainy before its time.

Rue's mama said, "I been expecting you to come on round."

Miss May Belle was not the type interested in making enemies. That was the reason she only advised on how to make a trick, but she never did dispel it with her own two hands. She oft said, The hunter in settin' his own trap'll sometimes spring it on himself, which was true, of course—they were forever bandaging up men fool enough to go catching rabbits in the dark of night.

Rue looked over their visitor. Airey was truly pretty, made all of thick bones and fine features, such an amalgamation of two kinds of beauty that she could be admired from one direction and feared from another. But now in person it was clear to see just what Miss May Belle's magicking had done: The spangled pattern of white skin that had once been on her legs alone had begun to spread up her arms and to the sides of her neck and along her jaw and nose; a round white swathe sickled around her eye.

If Miss May Belle was shocked by what she'd wrought, she didn't show it, and Airey for her part didn't look vengeful. She came to sit by them at the river's edge, and the reflection of her skin shimmering in the water seemed to make her look like the night sky dotted with stars, beautiful.

"I ill-wished Big Sylvia. I wanted her place in the kitchen," Airey began. "I been up all night with the regret. I had the notion that life would be easier for me in the House, but it ain't easier. No, life just ain't easy nowhere. That's why I come to see you."

Miss May Belle shook her head. "No more conjure," she said. "Y'all settle things between yo'selves. I'll tell Big Sylvia to be rid of the doll and she'll do it if I tell her to."

"Big Sylvia will get her place back I reckon." Airey held up her hands, and Rue saw that the affliction had taken over her wrists and her knuckles. The thumb of one finger looked as though the black had been sucked clean off the skin. "Missus won't let me cook her food no longer, won't let me touch it, thinkin' this is a sign of some cursedness. Marse Charles'll listen to her, just to quit her from her naggin'. He's like to sell me away the next time he's able."

"You wantin' a charm to prevent it?" Miss May Belle asked.

"No'm. I'm wanting a charm to help me run away."

Miss May Belle looked to Rue beside her and Rue knew the look, the get-gone look. This she was good at, becoming invisible on her mama's whim. She strode over to where the river started thinning toward the creek and let her mama think that she wasn't listening.

"I can't make you no promises," Miss May Belle said.

"You made this," Airey accused. She held out her arms.

Said Miss May Belle, quietly, "I don't know that I did."

Rue tried to look busy as the women kept on, talking in hushes. They were similar, Rue came to notice, both soft enough to be shaped by life and hardened by it too. She wanted to learn that type of woman magic also, thought she'd find it in the words they traded if she could only pick up on the strands, the half-speak adults often took up when they were aware of a child listening in on them.

"I can't risk it," Miss May Belle was saying. "Iff'n you do get away, but they catch on to it that it was me that helped you . . ." It was a sentiment not worth finishing.

"Figured you say that, but if you got some charm some somethin', I can pay you for it."

"I'll give you this for free: Stick to the river," Miss May Belle said. "And don't you never look back for nothin'."

"I won't."

"Not even for yo' man? That Charlie?"

"He ain't comin' with me. He think he owe somethin' to these people. And I"—Airey kicked up water with her toes—"I can't be slowed down by nothing. They got all sorts of ways to weigh you down, don't they?"

Rue felt their eyes on her. She pricked up like a rabbit might at some slight, shifting noise, and saw Airey and her mama considering her with their hard, grave expressions, the far-off thinking look of grown folks.

Miss May Belle finally spoke. "You'll wanna rub oak gum on the soles a' yo' feet. Keep to the river, like I say. That'll throw the scent a' the hounds they gon' send. That's all I can give to you 'sides what you already know. An' if you can help it, don't let nothin' or nobody slow you down."

Airey agreed and left then to prepare for it, whatever preparing to leave your life meant. Rue watched her walking away. She was visible for a great distance, her proud back, her speckled legs bared.

By next morning Airey was gone. By late afternoon she was brought back.

They drug her by her arms through the whole of the plantation, her legs kicking, her body twisting and turning over grass and rocks and dirt in a never-ending dust-billowing futility.

The white men she hung between were catchers by trade. Marse Charles paid them handsomely, it was said, heaping handfuls of silver dollars, for the pleasure of having his favorite cook returned to him in a bruised pile. They left her tied up to a horse post out front of the House. Even tied down, Airey bucked and pulled at her bonds, and all the passing black folks watched her do it, watched her scream and piss herself and work one wrist free just far enough to yank at her own thick black hair. They weren't none of them allowed to go near, except at last for Charlie.

Marse Charles gave Charlie Blacksmith the honor of whipping his would-have-been wife, because Marse Charles himself could not be bothered to come out of the House, particularly as the clouds grew dark and it began to rain. He handed Charlie Blacksmith a whip, told him to use all the strength he'd use to forge a horse's shoe, and Marse Charles swore he would know it if he didn't. He'd be checking and expected to see ten good lash marks, drawn blood on Airey's bare back.

Assembled, bade to watch, all the slaves in the plantation came and stood in the yard of the House even as a driving rain fell and slicked down their hair and darkened their clothes and made everything cling.

Marse Charles was somewhere up above and Rue strained to make him out in the windows, not sure what to look for besides a hint of the shape of his darkness behind the billowing white curtains of his daughter's nursery. Or was it Varina herself that Rue spied, looking down on them? Rue searched so hard that after a while she made herself see shadows where there were none.

Whether he was watching or not, Marse Charles surely heard it when the first lick lay into Airey's back; it was that loud.

She hid her breasts the best she could with her arms wrapped around the post she'd been tied to, pushed them up against the raw, splintered wood. She shook with fear as the rain bounced off her, waiting for the fall of a hit she could not see coming, and her heaving panicked lungs rounded out her back just as the whip came down and split clean the skin. Charlie reared his arm just so far back that it looked like there was more force in the action, and the whip whistled through the air and another thwack landed squarely on her spine. Airey hollered and hissed and choked on her sorrow, gurgling out a bit of red-tinged spit. She'd bit her tongue.

"Boy," came Marse Charles up from the window on high. His voice boomed even over the rain, and Rue would have sworn that everybody assembled shook. Up above, Marse Charles was framed in an open second-story window, his arms braced against the sill, the tips of his curly dark brown hair catching the wet. He didn't have to say any more. Charlie brought down the whip harder the next time. Harder still the next.

Rue had to shut her eyes. But there was no blocking that high, fine whistle through the air or the sound of Airey's resistance, quieted from screams now to gut-deep moans to a silence that seemed altogether worse.

When he was done, Charlie threw down the whip, his one act of defiance, let it sink in a puddle. There they were, the ten strips of open flesh wrought neatly in Airey's back like the lines of crude accounting marks. Already the force of the rain was thinning out the intensity of the blood, and Rue found herself worrying, as the crowd began to murmur and break apart, that if Marse Charles didn't hurry down, he might not see the blood he was after as proof. They might, she feared, have to do it all over again.

Spring came on, like it did, and Rue and her mama stayed busy for seven straight days serving bitters to the slave folks Marse Charles sent through their cabin—a spoonful for each was meant to set his field hands ready for the coming heavy season. By the sixth day Rue was more than tired of looking into the pink expectant quiver of other folks' mouths, of observing their outstretched tongues and the dangling fleshy marble at the back of their throats. Her mama relegated her to filling up the waiting wood spoons, a dull task.

Rue looked up and there was Airey, strange to behold in the sunlight, nothing to her but deep pockets between her bones. Sunken—shoulders and chest and all around her eyes. Her voice came out gritty.

"Thank you," she said, "Miss May Belle."

Rue handed her mama a spoon, and her mama began to hold out the mixture to Airey's small beak of a mouth, the edges of which were white and dry. At the last minute Miss May Belle pulled the spoon away. The pour puddled down to the floor, wasted.

"Rue-baby," Miss May Belle said. She didn't take her eyes from Airey. "Fetch me a cup instead."

Rue had to dig to come up with a small cup of tinned iron; she handed it to her mama, who filled it high with the bitters. Airey drank it all down at once.

"Meet me Friday night," Miss May Belle said, in a voice hushed and hurried. "If you still wantin' what you wantin'."

Airey nodded once. She gave her cup back to Rue and moved on down the line, her face betraying nothing, no elation and no fear.

The fact was if there was magic—and Rue, as a child, believed earnestly that there was—her mama had not taught it to her, had not wanted to.

On Friday night, Rue lay in their bed with her eyes closed, listened to her mama move about their small cabin. Miss May Belle took her time leaving, as if she sensed that the moment was not quite right or else sensed, in the knowing way of mothers, that her daughter lay tense and restless beneath the thin sheet ready to follow her into the night. They waited each other out.

Rue dozed and found herself dreaming. She was in Marse Charles's House, which could not be so, she was hardly ever allowed in there, yet there she was in a room so white it was as though the very air was ash water, the world all bleached through as though by lye. In the center of the white room was Varina, the master's daughter, waiting on Rue like a prize.

In the dream, Rue took Varina's hand, led her away, took her down the stairs from the nursery and through the House kitchen and there was Big Sylvia, removing ashcakes from her stove. The cook set them by the window to cool. Wriggling free of Rue's hold, Varina aimed to pluck one of them ashcakes from the pile. Rue hissed after Varina, but the cook seemed not to see the little girls. Instead Big Sylvia opened up the fire-spitting mouth of her stove, and now she drew from her pocket the little doll Miss May Belle had made of Airey. Easy as that she tossed it

into the waiting fire. The doll made of straw and hair caught instantly in the flames, and Rue woke. She sat up from sleep sweating like she'd been in the oven herself.

The cabin was still. Miss May Belle was gone.

Outside the night was allover chill, the road through the slavequarter empty of souls. Rue steeled her shivering little body and walked through the blue midnight, picking her way to the river by way of recollection rather than by sight.

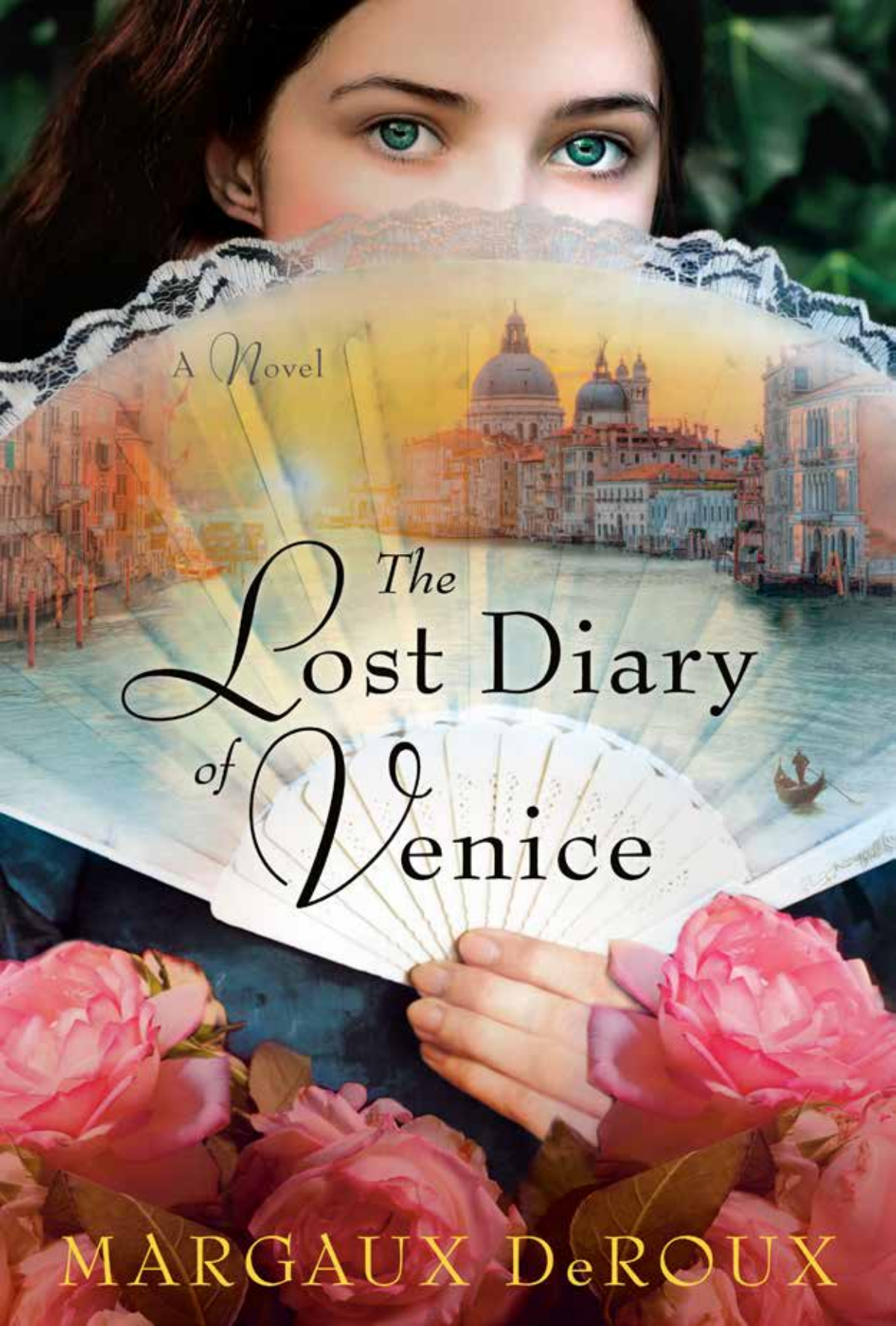
She found them a ways down the rushing river. Airey had her feet ankle deep in the water, and Miss May Belle had her arm in the knot of a tree. When she pulled her arm slowly out, the silver dollars in her hand glimmered in the moonlight. Miss May Belle had crossed to the river, was speaking in urgent whispers to Airey with all those coins offered in her outstretched hands. But Airey didn't move to take them, and Rue soon saw why. Miss May Belle, one by one, began to drop her silver dollars into the stream at Airey's feet. As she watched them go, Rue had half a mind to jump in after them. They made tinkling little splashes as they hit the surface and sparkled and spun, and then disappeared.

"Travel by night. Follow the shine of 'em coins on the river surface," Miss May Belle told Airey. Suddenly Rue could hear her mama's voice impossibly clear, like it boomed from the river itself. "That shine'll take you where you goin'. All the way to the North."

They embraced there, one woman in the river and one woman out, and Airey who had become so thin looked frail in Rue's mama's arms, she seemed liable to disappear. But when Airey pulled away, her arms flew out with fearsome strength. As Rue watched, Airey seemed to dance, her bones twisting, reshaping beneath her skin; her pouting lips grew sharp and pointed and hardened and, by and by, her back arched and her frame narrowed, and Rue watched as Airey at last sprouted big, thick black wings.

Rue was still breathless in her bed when her mama returned some time later to the cabin. Miss May Belle crawled in quietly beside her, her body radiating warmth like a furnace. Now Rue was sleepless. She lay still the whole night trying to make sense of what she thought she'd seen. A woman become a bird. There was no sense to be made of it. It had to be dreaming.

The very first moment of sunup, Rue stole away, took herself to the river to see if she could make out any bits of silver in its bed. But the stream was calm and quiet, undisturbed, reflecting the orange haze of the new-day sky. Rue looked upward, like the answer might be there. Her eyes traveled the neighboring trees and there she did glimpse, only in the corner of her sights, a starling—its skin oil black and spotted dazzling white—as it took wing and departed from the ledge of a branch, the starling just then starting to soar.


A Novel
The Lost Diary of Venice
MARGAUX DeROUX

The Lost Diary of Venice is a work of historical fiction, using well-known historical and public figures. All incidents and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situation, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Hardback ISBN 978-1-984-81948-2
Ebook ISBN 978-1-984-81949-9

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

Prologue

She could smell him, standing this close. A fresh-wet scent brought in from outside, where it'd just begun to rain. Warm earth cut by an edge of ozone: the tentative odor of spring. Rose concentrated on keeping her hands steady. *Christ*. Whoever tied these knots had really outdone themselves. Digging with her blunt nails, she finally pried the strings free. As she unwrapped the linen that swaddled the stack of papers, another scent blossomed—the familiar dry aroma of disintegrating vellum. She slid her fingers down the loops of stiff thread that held the stack together. The top page was blank, patinated by a layer of grime. She lifted one corner, felt the threads putting pressure on the already cracking parchment. He leaned in closer.

"Tried to open it, but that paper looks ready to tear." The remnants of a southern accent hung at the margins of his voice; she imagined woodsmoke and stars. "But I thought I saw a few drawings inside . . ."

"Well, I think we should cut these pages loose. Do you mind?"

She looked up. His eyes were dark, iris nearly indistinguishable from pupil.

He shook his head. "Go on."

With small scissors retrieved from the top left desk drawer, Rose snipped the binding. A glint of silver, and the threads lay sprawled and severed on the tabletop. She removed the cover sheet and surveyed the title page. Italian calligraphy swirled across the parchment, ornate designs inked into each corner.

"*Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scultura, ed architettura. Di Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo.*" She read the title out loud. "My Italian isn't very good, but I think *'pittura'* is 'painting,' so . . . treatise on the art of painting, sculpture, and architecture."

"It's a book about art?" He glanced back down at the page.

"That's what the title says . . ."

"Oh—but that's what I do. I mean, I'm an artist." He scraped his fingers through his hair, then crossed his arms tightly, as if he didn't know what to do next with his hands.

I

Time had begun to loop in on itself. Rose Newlin realized this one day, on her bike ride to work, when she looked up and noted with some surprise that the red maple trees had budded. Her routine had become so fixed, so circular, that only the seasons seemed to change. First, always, came a bike ride. The wind pinked her cheeks and tugged a few curls loose from under her helmet as she wound her way through the university campus to her bookshop. Then, a quick walk to the café on the corner, with its familiar scent of roasting coffee beans. The barista there wore button-up shirts and had small tattoos on each of his fingers: an arrow, a compass, the figure eight of eternity. Slender tips of more ink peeked out from under his cuffs.

"Good morning, Rose."

"Good morning, Joel. Latte for me, thanks." She always gave her order, even though they both knew what it'd be.

Afterward, strolling back to the shop, she watched fragments of herself slip past in store windows: auburn hair twisted up in a knot,

rangy frame she could never seem to add any muscle to. Faded jeans and her favorite knit sweater, a lightweight parka thrown on top. She reminded herself to work on her posture. Her eyes flashed back at her from the glare of glass, green flecked with gold. In certain lights their color seemed to change, tilting blue or nearly gray. Her father had called them "labradorite eyes," after the gemstone.

Rose focused on the cracks in the sidewalk. She didn't need to think about him today.

She reached the shop then and unlocked the door, flipped the sign to OPEN. Though she'd owned the place for two years, each time she stepped inside she still felt a swell of contentment, like a farmer taking in his crops at dusk. *This parcel of life, this here, is mine and mine alone.* She'd decorated the space carefully, filling each nook with well-padded reading chairs and antique lamps. A few months after she'd opened, a stray tomcat had arrived on the doorstep to complete the picture. Black and stocky with one eye gone, he'd claimed the burgundy chair by the front window as his own.

"Wake up, Odin!"

At his name, the cat jumped from his perch and padded over to rub a cheek against her calf. His empty socket was a tight-screwed slash of puckered fur, and when he closed his eyes it was hard to say which was missing. Rose bent to give him his morning scratches. She filled his food and water bowls, then took her seat at the register. Odin leapt to join her, circling several times in her lap before settling down, paws tucked under his chest. The hours passed in a sorting of bills and a shuffle of patrons, an occasional shift of position. Outside, it began to mist, draping a delicate silver beading over the windows, the cars parked outside. A hush settled through the shop. Rose's bun slid loose; even the sturdiest elastic proved futile against her hair, thick and coarse as a horse's mane.

Then the clank of the heater, the creak of the door.

Later, she'd research what had happened to her. She'd learn about the scientific intricacies of attraction, the complex chain of

chemicals that flood the prefrontal cortex. She'd underline with blue ink a scholarly article on the way synapses and neurons firework the brain, inundating the mind with dopamine. How norepinephrine, a neurotransmitter, dries the mouth, shakes the hands, pumps the heart. How the body experiences obsessional thought patterns and cravings.

None of that could help her in the moment, though, as she floundered: half-standing then sitting again, frantically twisting her bun back in place as the man at the door made his way toward her. He wore a red flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a black quilted vest, droplets of water hovering in constellations across its surface. His dark hair was wet, threaded through at the temples with early gray, and a canvas bag hung from his shoulder. Rose noticed his left thumb was bandaged; when he opened that hand, she saw her name written across his palm in blue ink, a small drop of blood penetrating the gauze.

He said her name out loud, then tucked his hand away in the pocket of his vest.

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"I'm Rose." At her feet, Odin ventured around the corner of the desk to sniff at the stranger's shoes.

"My name's William." He put his other hand to his chest. "I called up to the university library about restoring a book and they said to swing by here. Told me you're exceptional, as a matter of fact." He paused politely for her to say something.

Nothing came to mind.

He cleared his throat. "Do you still do restorations?"

She nodded, rubbing her suddenly damp palms on her thighs under the table, trying not to make any visible movements. It didn't matter: he was too busy wrestling a stack of papers out of his bag to notice.

"Great. I was hoping you might be able to take a look at this." He set the stack down on the desk in front of her. It was wrapped

in gray and white striped linen, and tied with twine. She'd known what to do then, at least. As she picked at the knots, he bent to scratch the cat. His disembodied voice floated up from behind the counter.

"So, the story is that my great-grandmother passed away—"

"I'm sorry." A reflexive response. She could hear Odin's guttural purr start up, a small motor.

"Don't be. She was ready to go—beyond ready: a hundred years old. I never really knew her. All the family's moved away, and she was in a care facility with her stuff in storage. Anyway, it turned out I was the only one willing to fly over and go through her things. It was fascinating though, what she had." He stood back up, cheeks flushed. "This seemed like it might be important. It was at the bottom of a trunk with family portraits, her wedding dress, things like that . . . Oh, sorry if I tied it up too tight."

"It's okay." Just as she said it, the twine yielded. After asking to use scissors, Rose carefully angled the blades between the brittle pages; he bent close to watch.

She read the title out loud.

"A book about art," he repeated, gazing down at the calligraphy. "I can't believe it. By Giovanni Lomazzo . . . That's my last name, Lomazzo."

"Then this certainly belonged to your family." Rose set the cover sheet to one side; beneath it was a full page of text.

"Shouldn't you be wearing gloves?" He was staring at her hands again.

"No, that's a misconception."

"Why?" He tilted his head, and she noticed he was a few days past needing a shave.

"Well, a lot of glove fibers—like cotton, for example—have fats and alkanes in them."

His eyes widened, which she took as a sign to continue.

"They insulate your hands, which can stimulate the sweat

glands. Then, as you produce moisture, they'll wick and transfer it to the vellum. So, it's actually better to just handle the paper directly."

"Guess it makes you crazy to see people wearing gloves on TV shows, then."

"Mmm." She squinted down at the second page, which looked like an author's introduction. The ink had faded, but she was able to make out a notation at the bottom: *Venezia 1571*. She lifted the pages to see if the writing continued through to the end of the stack. It did.

"It's dated 1571 Venice. Where did your great-grandmother live?"

"A town called Padua. Wow, is it really that old?"

"I'd say so, judging by the vellum. I don't think Padua is that far from Venice." She bent to examine the writing. He leaned in too. She could smell his breath, tea tree and mint, like the flavored toothpicks sold at health food stores. "Oh! This is a palimpsest!"

"A what-sest?"

She couldn't help but smile. "A *palimp*sest. It means there are actually two documents here." She pointed down at the page, tracing her index finger along the lines for him to see. "The author wrote one text, scraped it away, turned the page, and wrote over the top again crosswise. It might not be the same author who wrote both, but based on the calligraphy I'd bet that it is. What's interesting is how visible the undertext still is." And it was, ghosting beneath the top layer of ink like a weak perpendicular shadow.

"Is it possible to find out what they both say? Both the writings?" He glanced up from the page, eyebrows raised.

"I think so, yes. It might've been an issue if the undertext had been completely scraped away . . . but in this condition? I should be able to render both."

"How does that work?"

"Well, I'll clean up the pages, then scan them. I use a software

program to isolate the layers, so they're legible enough to translate." He was watching her lips as she spoke. "If it's an original document and the content is meaningful, it could be valuable. But a full restoration will take time, and some cost." She straightened her shoulders.

He nodded, assessing the pages spread out between them. "Well, you obviously know what you're doing." He leaned in, putting the weight of his bandaged hand on the desk, as if he were sharing a secret. "It doesn't matter to me if it's worth anything, or what it costs to restore. I want to know what it says. I'd like to know—" He stopped, though there seemed to be more to his sentence.

"I'd like to know too. I'll give you an estimate."

"Time and cost?"

"Yes. Time and cost."

His hand disappeared into the back pocket of his jeans and emerged holding a brown leather wallet worn pale at the corners. He flipped it open, took out a thick white business card, and handed it to her. *William Lomazzo*. Website and email, all done in letterpress, with a streak of indigo printed across the top. He shoved the wallet back into his pocket and offered his hand; she extended her own. For a single moment, her radial artery pushed flush to his. Pulse against pulse, between forefinger and thumb, heartbeats separated by paper-thin flesh.

Walking back to where his black Ford truck sat lonesome in the drugstore parking lot, William was oblivious to the rain. He fumbled to unlock the door. Inside, his heat coaxed a thin layer of fog out along the edges of the windows. Tilting his hips up toward the steering wheel, he rummaged around in the back pocket of his jeans with one hand. Rain was coming down in earnest now, playing a heavy staccato on the rooftop.

He found it, fished it out.

The silver band he wasn't supposed to, shouldn't have, taken off. He'd looked through the window of the shop, seen her sitting behind the desk, and suddenly it was in his pocket and he was opening the door. And now he couldn't point to *why* in a way he'd feel comfortable saying out loud. He measured the weight of the ring in his palm, watched how it shone in the flat gray light. Swallowed. The metallic taste of blood; he must have bitten his cheek somewhere along the way. Sitting alone in the truck, William buried his face in his wide hands and spoke simple words to a God he'd long ago abandoned.

2

Giovanni stared down at the drawing he was working on—a study of dried roses he'd arranged on the table in front of him: crisp petals, wrinkled and withered but still red. He squinted to sharpen the lines. Spirals of shadow and, just below, points of thorn peeking out from under clusters of brittle leaves. He thought of them, not so long ago, blooming supple beneath a summer sun. What was it Petrarch called time? *Our delight and our prison.*

Through the open studio window, the San Zanipolo tower rang, three bells in a major chord. Time to leave. Standing and shaking out his robes, Gio glanced around his studio at the scattered stools and velvet chaises, the delicate screen in one corner embroidered with birds in flight. He noted that the oiled paper tacked across the windows to diffuse the light needed changing. That morning, however, he'd been busy grinding pigment: madder and malachite, orpiment and ultramarine. Lapis lazuli from Far East traders and the unassuming yet crucial coal. Preparations for the work to come.

The bells sounded again, jostling the weighty quiet of the room.

"I hear you, I hear you." With a sigh, Gio untied his glasses, which were fastened to his face with two loops of black ribbon. They pinched his nose, but their thick lenses worked well as magnifiers—certainly better than the bowl of water Seneca would have used. Even though his central vision was still adequate, nothing a squint here or there couldn't fix, he wore the glasses daily. His hope had been they might hold at bay the blackness that hemmed in his field of vision and steadily gnawed away at it. Increasingly, that hope was fading. It'd been just over a year since he'd first noticed the signs, and already a permanent vignette had arrived to frame the world in a disheartening, advancing darkness. Using the lenses felt a bit like trying to clean up spilled wine while the whole house was flooding, but it was all he knew to do.

Gio shook his head, as if that motion could dislodge his thoughts from the rutted path they tended down. Tucking the frames into the pouch that hung at his waist, he rubbed his eyes, then hitched his satchel of supplies up on one shoulder. As he stepped out into the street, the last bell toll sounded.

Under bridges, canal waters reflected hot sun glare and snatches of blue sky, bright streaks of color from painted tenement walls. The smell of stew and a muffled clamor of domesticity wandered through the alleyways, while overhead, lines of laundry swayed in mild breezes. From rooftop nooks, birds murmured and cooed. A cobblestone struck Gio's foot, and he stumbled; righting himself, he caught sight of his own reflection in a pool of dirty street water. Deep-set hazel eyes, straight nose, well-molded mouth. Beard trimmed close to the jaw, cropped chestnut hair that curled at the tips. An unremarkable face, but one that had grown more dignified with the arrival of a few wrinkles, a dusting of gray at his temples.

He pressed onward. From open doorways and windows, dark-eyed children watched him pass.

Before long, he arrived at a great house set back some distance

from the avenue. Columns and arches sent shadows curving in the sharp light; from a corner of the garden came the cool sounds of a fountain. Gio approached the front door and peered at the elaborate knocker: a bronze snake eating its own tail. Grasping its head, he pounded. Within moments, a solemn-faced girl in a white apron swung the door open. She stared at him, expressionless, with large brown eyes set slightly too far apart. He fumbled in his pouch for the scrap of parchment.

"Sebastiano Venier is expecting me." He thrust the scrap in her direction.

The servant took the paper, unfolded it, and began to read the summons—signed with her master's distinctive scrawl. The note mentioned in two separate places that Gio should come to Venier's city palazzo and not his family estate in the country. Reading between the lines, Gio guessed he'd be tasked with painting a portrait of Venier's latest courtesan; as he aged, the man seemed to take increasing pride in the beauty of his young escorts. With rumors circulating that Venier—currently a statesman—would soon be nominated "next doge of Venice," nubile companions weren't difficult to come by.

The servant nodded when she'd finished, the center part in her hair drawing a perfect pale arc over the crown of her head. She turned, gesturing for him to follow. She led them left, down a corridor, and up a narrow spiral staircase: the servants' route, more direct than the wide marble stairs in the center of the courtyard. He took care to remember the way. At the top, the stairway let out into a great hall, brilliant sun streaming in through tall windows at the far end. As they crossed the polished terrazzo floors, their reflections shivered up, glassy and distorted. Rows of columns flanked several pairs of doors on either wall, and between them hung drab paintings in gilded frames: women holding lapdogs, or anemic men in naval uniforms. Lesser-known members of the Venier clan, no doubt. Gio squinted at the portraits as he passed. Even with his

middling vision, he could tell they were unexceptional: the palettes dull, the proportions uneven—

Abruptly, the servant girl halted. Gio pulled up short just behind her, narrowly avoiding a collision. Pressing her shoulder against the nearest door, she pushed it open.

Inside, the walls of the grand room were hung in rose silk, tinting the light. Heavy drapes had been drawn halfway shut, and on a far hearth, embers from a recent fire smoldered. Gio stepped into the glow. For a moment he lost all focus as his eyes adjusted from the glare of the hall. Gradually, three women came into view, floating before him on plush divans. Their skin was powdered to a satin finish, imperfectly concealed by folds of silk and velvet that dripped and pooled onto the floor. Jewels at their throats and fingers shimmered. Their lips and cheeks were stained the same fever shade, and their hair—yellow, chestnut, red—was piled high, growing upward like strange glossy botanicals. At his entrance, they turned to him in unison. From the ceiling, sharp-eyed Gospel figures peered down in judgment, trapped in the landscape of an elaborate allegorical frieze. The women's powdered breasts rose and fell under the apostles' watchful eyes. The choking scent of perfume mingled with the tang of wine; Gio suddenly felt dizzy. The women's faces tilted toward him as the ceiling shifted closer.

At his right, two men sat on walnut chairs. One's beard and hair were a close-cropped silver, the other's a black so dark it shone indigo. The dark one turned to watch as Gio pressed a palm to the wall. Then the older man stood and with wide, intoxicated steps, veered toward him. Gio blinked against the blur. Suddenly, the weight of Sebastiano Venier's hand clamped down on his shoulder; Venier's pale eyes swung in front of him, cold and brisk as seawater. Gio breathed in the strong odor of wine and tobacco and, beneath that, salt.

"Giovanni! You look faint! Don't tell me you've never seen a pretty girl before!" Venier's voice boomed as if he were still speak-

ing out over a sea. His narrow face, usually so stern—steely gaze, thin-lipped scowl—was now soft with good humor, cheeks ruddy from wine. The women tittered: round, glad tones that drifted up and broke open across the apostles' faces.

"Sebastiano, don't be cruel." The yellow-haired woman at the center of the room spoke, bending to pour more wine into an empty glass at her feet. Her voice was soft, with a scratch inside it like a fingertip curling: *come closer.*

"Here, have a drink." She held out the full goblet.

As he neared to take it, Gio saw at once why Venier had chosen her. She was dazzling in a way only something that won't last can be. In a few years' time, he knew her face would be hardened, her posture settled into the architecture of a body accustomed to use. But gazing at her now, Gio felt the same way he did watching sunrise over the lagoon: a near-painful awe at the excessive grace of nature, its beauty offered up without fanfare or expectation, as if it were ordinary.

The girl's skin was nearly translucent and flush with young blood, a shade richer than the ivory silk of her dress or the ropes of pearls at her neck. Long lashes cast shadows on her cheeks. When she raised her eyes, he noticed their remarkable hue: hovering between blue and purple, violaceous and hypnotic. A sapphire pendant dangling at her clavicle reflected their color; the drape of the stone inviting the gaze to travel downward, to the firm curves of her breasts, as yet unmarred by age or childbirth. Her tinted hair had been oiled and braided in a delicate pattern at her crown, laced through with gold thread, so that all of her seemed to glisten in the afternoon haze. It was for women such as this that men wrote sonnets, wept, or went to war. With a quick squint, Gio understood he was merely the first of many who would be summoned to paint her portrait. As he reached to take the glass from her, she tipped her face and smiled.

All went hush.

In that single lavender beam, she shone a terrible, lovely vulnerability up at him—and without words or logic he understood: it was he and only ever he who could keep her safe.

Then she blinked, and the warm bright light was gone.

"Her name's Chiara." Venier whispered loudly at Gio's side. Turning, Gio saw the man—a former soldier, whose hands had famously killed other soldiers on the rain-soaked decks of ships—reduced to an idolater. The girl shifted her gaze to Venier, small dimples suggesting themselves near the corners of her mouth. Someone had trained her well. Without warning, Gio felt the stare of the dark-haired man on his back.

It was like a shadow, passing.

"I want a portrait to put the others to shame, Giovanni." Venier moved closer, dank breath cloying with wine. "I want you to make Tintoretto's eyes bleed. You know he promised me a picture and reneged to paint for that miserable confraternity." The confraternity Scuola Grande di San Rocco, on whose walls Tintoretto was painting the life of Christ.

Venier grasped Gio's forearm, squeezing it tightly. "I want him to see Chiara's portrait and hate himself." He edged in, thin lips nearly touching Gio's ear. "She's sat for none of them yet, you see—you're the first. Virgin territory." The old man leaned back. "Artistically speaking, of course." He let out a dry laugh that fractured into a fit of coughs.

At the sound, the other man in the room stood.

"You know Corvino." Venier gave a wave of his hand, before turning to hack into his elbow.

Gio did know Corvino, who was handsome in a way that other men noticed: black hair trimmed to skim his shoulders, a prominent brow that cast his dark eyes even deeper in shadow. Muscles moved beneath his robes like horse flank stirs and flexes under hide. He'd arrived in Venice the same way Gio's blindness had appeared: not noticed at all until suddenly he was everywhere. Seated

at every important dinner, kneeling in the front pews, walking out from Mass with this senator or that councilman, head bowed. Listening. He dressed in fabric as fine as that of any nobleman, with a heavy gold cross dangling conspicuously. More than once, Gio had overheard him allude obliquely to Spanish connections, to a fortune made in brokering exports with colonists en route to the New World. Yet from the first, Gio had believed Corvino's history about as much as he trusted the street vendors hawking their wares along the Rialto Bridge.

Still, he had to give the man credit for how quickly he'd established himself among Venice's elite. Likely, it had much to do with his looks. It wasn't just that Corvino gave the impression of being a statue brought to life; there was a grace to his gestures, a lilt to his phrases that Gio guessed must have taken years of study. He appeared and behaved the way a nobleman should—but so rarely did—appear and behave: elegant, cultivated, reminiscent of a demigod. For this, he was rewarded with a regular chair at the best dining tables in the city. Yet looking the part is far different than being cast in the role. For all his charm and fancy robes, Corvino still lacked a proper lineage—and without a title, he'd never be allowed any position of real power. Gio sometimes wondered if the senators and councilmen who opened their homes to Corvino ever noticed the hungry way he eyed their fleets of servants, their sumptuous, gilded halls. Likely not—or if they did, they took a perverse pleasure in it. For many of them, envy had become the only measurement of importance. Gio, however, found it unnerving to sit by as Corvino watched others live out a version of life he so clearly felt he was owed.

It came as no surprise, then, when Corvino attached himself to Venier: the statesman had a reputation for being mercurial, as erratic with generosity as with punishment. It was well known he'd arranged an advantageous marriage for the daughter of one of his favorite merchants, pairing her with a noble family that'd suffered

recent losses. They'd gained her dowry, she'd gained a title and coat of arms. Yet by the same token, Venier had banished from Venice permanently a former adviser whose counsel had displeased him. No doubt Corvino was hoping to one day be on the receiving end of a warmer mood. Meanwhile, the statesman had likely taken shrewd measure of Corvino and estimated him willing to do nearly anything to earn influence. With a campaign for the role of doge looming on the horizon, Venier would surely put his acolyte to good use. Until then, he let the man chase at his heels like an underfed lapdog.

For his part, Gio simply did his best to avoid Corvino. In his experience, jealousy had a bad habit of fermenting into rage.

"Well, let's get on with it, then." Venier's voice came again, still at a shocking volume. With his coughing fit over, the statesman returned to his chair. Behind him, Corvino remained standing—seeming, as always, to be attending to a deeper and more important dialogue occurring in his own mind. As the room watched, Gio began unpacking his supplies. From his satchel, he withdrew a portable drawing board and a roll of parchment. Next, he undid the pouch that held his boxes of chalks and charcoals. Today he'd propose a composition; once Venier approved, the real work could be done back in the studio.

Stepping into the role of artist like a seasoned actor assuming the stage, Gio once again approached the girl. He brought two fingers to her chin. At his slightest pressure, she swung her head: first left, then right. Squinting, he assessed her bone structure and profile, quickly memorizing her features while close enough to see them in detail. Her face was perhaps the most symmetrical he'd encountered—though he knew enough of womanly arts to spot that she'd intervened with nature on the matters of her brow shape and hair color. As she watched him appraise her, a pang of doubt flared in her eyes. With his back to the others, Gio gave her a grin, a secret reassurance. *You're safe with me, don't worry.* He thought he

caught her lips start to curl, then she flushed and wrenched her chin away. As he walked back to his station, Gio made a silent promise to no one in particular that he'd capture the cleverness he'd seen in her, before she trained it completely into hiding.

"We must prepare you for immortality, my dear!" Venier reached out a hand. The first signs of a mangling arthritis could be spotted in the subtle bend of his fingers. The girl leapt up like a marionette at his summons. She was shorter than Gio would've guessed, but as she danced toward Venier even the embers seemed to flare, watching. Following along to a tune only she could hear, the girl glided across the floor, swinging her silks out—first in one hand, then the other. She was teasing them. She dipped and swayed and leapt, bending like a swan to raise the hem of her dress, revealing the length of her leg, her shapely, slipper-clad foot. Then she dropped the fabric and spun, arms arching into the air. Curls fell loose at her neck and temples, the hem of her dress swirling and billowing around her like white-gold petals. Gio squinted. The jewel at her chest fractured light, her slender arms fluttered. The room began to melt away at the edges until it was only her, center stage, delicate and pale.

Then she collapsed in a fit of giggles and ran the few short steps to stand in front of Venier. He leaned forward eagerly, plucking at the laces of her gown. The other women gathered close, laughing and clapping with calculated amusement. As Venier's hands stumbled, the brunette and redhead both reached to help, pulling loose Chiara's stays, tugging down her *camicia*.

Gio knew a woman's body—knew it well, in all its iterations. The rough pink spots some could get at the elbows or below the knees. How flesh tended to fold around the bones, how it would fold around itself if there were more fat on the muscle. *We artists aren't so different than butchers, we've seen it all,* he'd say to his models, especially the new ones, to reassure them. *No need to be nervous.*

But now here he was, watching Venier undress the girl, his veins pulsing as if she were the first.

Her silks had ended in a pile of ripples at her feet, so that her body rose from them like a stamen, her long necklaces of pearls and gold chain sliding into the hollow between her breasts. Lean muscles expressed themselves under curves of flesh; Gio caught a pink flush of areola as she turned, then a shock of downy dark. He willed himself to focus on her bone structure, to measure her proportions. Lazily, she extended both arms toward the ceiling again, arching her back, smiling up at the apostles with both eyes closed. Venus as coquette, drunk on wine and youth. In his mind's eye, Gio saw portraits and sculptures—her form echoing for eternity in paint, in marble, in bronze.

Venier broke the spell with a crude grasp.

Spinning her around, he slapped her buttocks and pushed her toward the center of the room, the evidence of his palm still rosy on her skin. The girls squealed agreeably. Corvino glared out the window. Sashaying toward a divan, Chiara settled into place in one fluid movement—aiming her body away from Gio to reveal the long curve of her spine, the suggestive depressions at the base of her back. Then she turned, glancing coyly over her shoulder.

"Chiara, the breasts!" Venier demanded.

"No." Gio's voice burst out, surprising even himself. He held one hand up to keep her still. "This is better—it'll allow for some imagination. The girl knows what she's doing."

Chiara failed at hiding her smile. Venier pursed his lips a moment, considering the pose, then conceded. "You're the artist." As though unable to stay after being contradicted, he stood. The servant girl emerged from the corner to push the heavy doors open, while Corvino darted to pluck Venier's cape from the chair back. He shook it out with a flourish, then held it open for the statesman.

"I'll look forward to seeing how it comes along." Venier shot a

meaningful look at Gio, then busied himself arranging his robes. "Chiara, Corvino will escort you to your appointments."

"I can escort her." Again, Gio surprised himself. Corvino narrowed his eyes. Still in position, Chiara tilted her head. Gio stumbled on, "I'm certain Corvino has more important duties to attend to. And my humors would benefit from leaving the studio more often." A plausible excuse, but only just.

Venier hesitated. Gio held his breath. Then, it was decided. "Very well. See that you do." With a small flick of his robe, Venier strode out the door, Corvino trailing three paces behind. Gio listened to the staccato of their boots retreat into echoes as the two men descended the main stairs and continued out into the courtyard.

He remained alone with the women.

Hundreds of miles away, sun glared brilliant on the Bosporus strait. From the decks of their boats, the janissaries could still hear the bells of the Hagia Sophia beckoning the city to prayer. The whole of Istanbul lay behind them, as if it were floating on the waterway: domes catching the sun, minarets stretching to pierce the sky. Masts of trading ships crowded the harbor, their holds heavy with spices, silks, and slaves. On the other side of the fleet, the horizon stretched out flat and endless.

Then the wind caught their sails, and a mighty gust propelled them west, toward war.

Schrödinger's Dog

Martin Dumont

a novel

Originally published in French as *Le chien de Schrödinger*
in 2018 by Éditions Delcourt, Paris.

Production editor: Yvonne E. Cárdenas
Text designer: Jennifer Daddio / Bookmark Design & Media Inc.
This book was set in Goudy Old Style by
Alpha Design & Composition of Pittsfield, NH

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dumont, Martin, 1988- author. | Cullen, John, 1942- translator.
Title: Schrödinger's dog / Martin Dumont ; translated from the French by John Cullen.
Other titles: Chien de Schrödinger. English
Description: New York : Other Press, [2020] | "Originally published in French as Le chien de Schrödinger in 2018 by Éditions Delcourt, Paris"—Title page verso.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019025749 (print) | LCCN 2019025750 (ebook) | ISBN 9781635429985 (paperback ; alk. paper) | ISBN 9781892746290 (ebook)
Classification: LCC PQ2704.U58 C4813 2020 (print) | LCC PQ2704.U58 (ebook) | DDC 843/.92—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025749
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025750

Publisher's Note
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1

There's someone on the other side of the wall.

I don't think I was asleep. Dozing a little, maybe. I'm lying on my back, I haven't opened my eyes.

The floorboards creak, someone's slowly approaching the bedroom. I'm not sure. Maybe I'm still dreaming.

The footsteps move away toward the kitchen. Seconds drag by, and now I no longer hear the slightest sound.

Suppose it wasn't Pierre?

It's possible, after all; it could have been a burglar. A skillful, well-trained sort of fellow—I didn't notice anything that sounded like an entry. He may have picked the lock and then gently opened the door.

It's easy to verify. I can just get up and go to see. I could even satisfy my curiosity by calling out; Pierre will answer if he hears me. The thief, on the other hand, will flee the scene. In either case, I resolve the doubt.

If I want to know, all I have to do is act.

So why am I staying put?

It's strange, this impression I have: the feeling that I would spoil everything. Because there's an equilibrium to consider. At bottom, it's almost a game: someone's walking around on the other side of the wall; it's not Pierre, it's not a burglar; it's as if they were superimposed. Yes, that's it. As long as I don't make sure, it's a little bit of both.

2

In the end, I sat up. My reflections seemed stupid. Maybe the idea of a burglar had ended up worrying me—I don't know. Let's just say that I wanted to see my son.

I got out of bed and checked the clock. I'd hardly slept. I sighed, thinking I'd pay for that at the end of the night.

As I was leaving the bedroom, I saw Pierre. He was sitting outside on the balcony. He'd put some cookies and a glass of milk on the little iron table.

Pierre is twenty and never misses an opportunity to snack. When I point this out to him, he shrugs and smiles.

I poured myself a cup of coffee in the kitchen—I can't stand milk. I've always liked cookies, but the things he eats are too sweet for me. By the time I joined him, he'd already finished half the packet.

"Hey, Dad."

He smiled at me with a cookie in his mouth and then asked me how my day had gone.

In the course of the morning, I'd picked up several fares at the airport, all of them bound for the center of town. Most of my customers had never detached themselves from their phones; the others had slept with their heads against the window. I'm no longer surprised to hear them start snoring as soon as they've settled into the back seat. In the early afternoon, I came home and went to bed.

None of that was very interesting, so I simply answered "Fine" and asked him the same question.

Pierre's a third-year biology student. He gave me a detailed description of his day. After lunch, he'd gone to his drama club. Not that he likes the theater, exactly, because Pierre doesn't ever attend plays; he prefers to be one of the performers. He's been that way since he was little.

He'd spent the afternoon with the club. I don't understand why he never seems to have classes. Sometimes I ask him for an explanation, but he gets his back up and says I've never been to a university. "You can't understand."

His troupe is preparing a new production. "An original work," he specifies. He's the author.

Pierre really likes to write. That's been the case for longer than I can remember. When he was younger, he used to fill up entire notebooks.

He talks to me about his play and I nod, because he's told me the plot about ten times already. His eyes shine

while he recites the scenes. Rebellion, friendship, fear, and justice. Also love. His concoction contains a little of everything.

"You see, Dad? You should read it!"

I have no excuse. He printed out the text for me last month. I promised to read it, and it's been lying on my night table ever since.

He describes the rehearsals. He gestures dramatically, accompanying himself with exaggerated movements. He laughs a little, but his face hardens when he talks about the leading actors—a couple, if I've understood him right.

"The guy—he's just out of his depth."

The girl, however: a monster talent. He can already imagine her on the screen. I suppose she must be pretty; long hair, angelic smile, good student. My Pierrot always falls in love with the girls at the top of his class.

I figure he'll go on about her for a while, but I'm wrong: in a flash, he returns to his critique of the leading man. This time, it's more scathing. His diction's bad, his acting grotesque. And he's got a big head to boot.

"He thinks he's a star!"

I can't help smiling. Pierre blushes. He says, "Yeah, right, I admit it. I'm jealous." And he starts laughing.

After that, he clears the table. His cheeks seem a little gaunt. It's as though he's gotten tired all of a sudden, and slightly feverish. When I ask, he says no, everything's fine. "It's almost the weekend. It's normal to be a bit exhausted." I don't insist.

. . .

It's Thursday, so he's going out. I don't even ask where he's headed. It's the same thing every week—I've grown used to it.

I'll go on duty at ten tonight. In the meantime, James Bond is on TV. One of the films with Roger Moore. The human zucchini. Pierre laughs when I say that.

I heat up two slices of quiche, but he won't take one. He'll stop and get a sandwich on the way. He kisses me and puts on his jacket. "I'll be home late, maybe even after you." I'm not supposed to worry.

When the door bangs shut, I freeze for a few seconds. In the kitchen, the quiche is ogling me through the glass door of the oven. Ah well. I'll eat both slices.

3

I think I was really in love with Lucille. Put like that, it sounds weird. The first years were great. It's hard to understand how it could all have gone so wrong.

When I met her, she already had her humanitarian side. She was a member of several associations, she donated a lot of money. To fight hunger, war, AIDS. There was also that thing with the panda.

It irritated me to see their self-satisfied faces when they persuaded her to sign up. Automatic withdrawal, fifteen euros a month: the orphans thank you. I never liked the guys who did that sort of work. Cultivators of guilt: "Look me in the eyes when I talk about poverty and squalor." They targeted Lucille because she was weak. You didn't have to observe her for very long to figure that out. Watch her eyes for a minute, maybe less. A sadness heavy enough to split concrete would come back at you like a boomerang.

Me, I wanted to take her in my arms, but not those boys, not them: real vultures. Without an ounce of shame.

They circled around her, salivating. "You see that one, the one lagging behind a little? There could be a way to get something out of her."

Well, all right, maybe that's a caricature. I used to laugh at Lucille, but affectionately. I'd scold her for being naive, because, after all, I thought it was pretentious to want to change the world. But I always let her go ahead and try. She loved doing that, and it's a passion like any other.

I didn't see the moment when she went over the edge. With hindsight, I tell myself that I might have been able to do something. At least in the beginning, when she began to escape me. But I had to work too much, and the kid, even when he was two, still took up an incredible amount of space and time. Besides, the difference wasn't all that noticeable. I mean, she'd always been that way. Fragile, too sensitive. Not sad, no, but melancholy. Yes, there's a word I like a lot. Melancholy.

Her doctors didn't say it like that. "A disease," they said. It had a name I didn't want to remember. A problem inside the head, something ultimately invisible. It's frustrating, because it's so hard to imagine.

Of course, her penchant for misery hadn't escaped my notice. Woe always came upon her in phases, marked by long periods of sighing. Nevertheless, I fell in love with her, because you can't control everything. Maybe I liked being able to help her.

When she was sinking into depression, I played the clown. Sometimes she'd smile.

On the days when all went well, there was such joy—it's impossible to explain. I believe you have to go through pain before you can really enjoy the good times. Pierre's birth had made her so happy. It was such a beautiful success. Concrete proof that what we had could work.

In fact, I always thought we'd make it through. Maybe I still do. It wasn't a big problem. It made life a roller-coaster, but life's often like that. When you hit bottom, you brace yourself and push off to climb back up. I found out a whole lot of things by suffering. Misery has its place; if it batters you, you can leave it a little room.

When Lucille started spending time with her group, I didn't get it at first. I didn't see the difference. Her groups, her associations, those all seemed to me to be more or less the same old story. Pierre was little, and I thought she needed some freedom. I was confident we'd make yet another comeback.

I was wrong.

When she stopped eating fish, I wasn't surprised. She didn't like meat. Then came eggs, milk, honey. She would talk about nature with spellbound eyes. At the time, she used to say she'd been a dove in a former life. I don't think she believed that, but she put her heart into it. In any

case, it remained a circus, and it made me laugh a lot. One day when she was biting into a tomato, I told her she might be chowing down on my father. The fruit caught me right in the face.

So that was how she got inside her circle. From that angle, I mean. But it wasn't just a vegetable affair. There was a guy. He said his name was Yalta. A lot of it revolved around him. I soon figured out why they didn't eat anything, considering what they were treating themselves to . . . though I never knew what it was. Something mind-blowing, without a doubt.

My Lucille, in the underworld. I can see her now: easy meat. She dove in head first, and by the time I realized it, it was too late. All the same, I got her out of the fix she was in, because you can't act like a total idiot. I remember Yalta when my fist landed on his nose. He cried like a child. After a stay in the clinic, Lucille came back home. I did all I could, but I'd already lost her.

4

I drove out of the parking lot early. I didn't turn on the radio right away. First I had to decide.

Always the same questions. Run out to the airport? With all the arriving flights, I'm sure to pick up some fares. Of course, I have to get in line and wait, which I always find unbearable. Going out there guarantees an unpleasant evening. But in the end, the pay is adequate, and that often makes all the difference.

I could also cruise for fares in the city center. It's double or nothing. On good nights, I do really well, but the demand is too unpredictable. Sometimes the city's deserted and I drive around for hours. I've always secretly wondered: is there someone who decides for everyone else? "Tonight, boys and girls, we're staying home." And why does the decider always forget to inform us?

The best idea, no doubt, would be to trawl around the bars. I can very easily be satisfied with that. A little later in the night, I'll even wait outside the doors of some of

the clubs. It's risky—passengers have vomited on my nice leather seats—but it brings in a little cash. And besides, young people have some good qualities. They talk, they laugh. They're never too drunk to make conversation. And that's always more pleasant than the guy who spends the whole ride hanging on his phone.

I haven't always done this. Cab-driving, I mean. When I first got here, I hung around the markets. At the time, there was work to be had in the stalls. I made a living unloading merchandise. You had to get there very early to make sure you got hired. Sometimes, weather permitting, I'd sleep out there. I would bring along a sleeping bag and lie down in a covered area of the market. It wasn't so unpleasant; there were often other young guys with me.

That was how I met François. A super person, always friendly and kind. He'd bring along thermoses of coffee and share them with me. At night, we watched over each other so we wouldn't get robbed. We'd take turns sleeping. In the morning, the first one who spotted the stallholders would wake the other.

As time passes, people end up trusting you. Two or three times, I filled in for the vendors. It was hard, and I don't think I was any good. Finally, I put some money aside and got a driver's permit, because doing that would open doors for me. I became a deliveryman; it was nice, I liked being at the wheel, but in the end I quit that job too. I couldn't stand my boss. The kind of guy who yells

nonstop and sticks you with impossible schedules. I've never been one to let people yell at me.

I learned that some taxi drivers were selling their licenses. François found out all about it, and we discussed the opportunity. He'd already borrowed enough money to start as soon as possible. I was tempted, and the plates weren't all that expensive. There wouldn't be anyone giving me orders. I let a week go by, and then I took the plunge.

I can still remember the day I got my license. I was so proud. When they handed it over to me, I immediately thought of Pierre. I couldn't wait to show it to him. He was little, he'd just turned four. During the day, I'd leave him with Madame Alves, an enormous Portuguese babysitter who took in as many as five children at a time. I would pass by to pick him up around six o'clock, at the end of my delivery shift. That evening, I was terribly late. I'd waited a long time to pick up the metal tag, and then I'd had to have it attached.

Night had already fallen when I rang the doorbell at Madame Alves's house. She opened the door, and the first thing I saw was the relief on her face. I didn't give her time to bawl me out. I seized her hand and covered it with kisses. "Forgive me, forgive me, Madame." I kept repeating that, and she didn't know how to react. Then I saw that Pierre was right behind her. I threw myself on him. His eyes were red—he must have cried a lot. I lifted him up and carried him out to the street. As I ran along the sidewalk, I could

feel his little hands tightly clutching my neck. When we got to the car, I put him down and knelt beside him.

"Look, Pierrot. That's Daddy's car, that one."

He didn't answer, but I could see his eyes open wide. I think he understood. I could feel warmth rising in my chest.

I picked him up and put him on the hood. Now, from where he was standing, he had the roof light right under his nose. He smiled, and I swear I saw the four letters reflected in his shining pupils.

TAXI.

The beginning of a new life.

After that, we spent more time together. I could make my own schedule. During the day I often took him with me in the car. Seeing a kid in the front seat of a cab would amuse the customers. I don't know if I had the right to bring him along, but it doesn't matter. I never had the slightest problem. Later, he started going to school, and things became simpler financially.

As he grew older, I was able to leave him alone at night more and more. That was when I started my nocturnal work routine. I'd give our neighbor my keys, and she'd look in to make sure the kid was asleep. Working at night allowed me to see him during the day.

These days, when I get tired of sitting alone in my taxi, I try to remember those.

5

I ended up heading for the center of town. I figured I'd take my chances—waiting wears me out too much. I couldn't spend any more nights inside a stationary car. The kind of absurdity that can make you crazy. If you drive around, at least you get to see the city go by, and that's already something.

I worked three hours and knocked off. It was a bad evening; I didn't have the heart to persist. I hadn't accumulated more than one hour's worth of fares, not even enough to cover my expenses. To salve my conscience, I swore I'd spend the following week at the airport. I turned a corner and thought I saw a raised arm. Tiredness was stinging my eyes, so I couldn't be sure. I stepped on the gas to chase away all doubt.

Back at the apartment, Pierre was asleep on the sofa. The TV lit up his white face; there was a plate of pasta shells on the coffee table. I smiled as I took in the scene.

Pasta, that was one of his big theories: "The best way to avoid a hangover."

I cleared the little table and shook him. With an effort, he opened his eyes. "You're back already?"

"Yeah. I got sick of it."

He smiled. As a matter of fact, he likes it when I knock off early. For almost two years, he's been insisting that I should quit. "Night shifts are dangerous," "You work too much," that sort of thing. But I like working this way. Time is suspended at night; there's less noise, less traffic. And then there's the nighttime surcharge added to every fare, by no means a negligible amount.

I was surprised to find him sleeping there. When I asked him what time he came home, he shrugged. "I don't know, I was tired."

He added something about a stomachache.

"From alcohol, right?" I said, teasing him.

He smiled and swore he hadn't had a single drink, and then he went to his room.

It was twenty minutes after three. I didn't have the slightest chance of falling asleep. I got a beer out of the fridge and sat in front of the television.

The next day, I drove to the university to pick up Pierre when he got out of class. When I pulled up, he was having a discussion with some friends. I sounded my horn. He shook hands all around and walked over to the car. After

putting his bag in the back, he got into the passenger's seat. "It's all good," he said. I stepped on the accelerator, and the car surged onto the street.

I drove fast. I've always liked that. I was in a hurry; we'd been talking about this weekend for some time. Three days together, just the two of us, with the sea all around. Time passes fast, and such moments are rare. I know it has to do with age. Children grow up and drift apart from their parents; it's in the order of things.

After some traffic slowdowns on the suburban roads, I turned onto the expressway. We started rolling along at a good clip. Pierre smiled at me, and I asked him how he was doing. He told me he was tired. "But delighted to be here!"

He talked about his day, and then he slid over to the topic of the novel he'd been trying to write for months. "I'm getting close to the end."

He talked to me about revisions, about some last details that needed changing. He was almost finished.

Then what, I asked him. He kept quiet for a while, his eyes fixed on the road. Then, with a wink, he said, "I'm going to send it to a publishing house and win a lot of prizes."

I laughed, and so did he. "You'll see, you'll see," he said.

I pointed out that he wanted to become a biologist, but he just shrugged and said, "One doesn't rule out the other."

I agreed, because what he said was no doubt true. I didn't remember ever hearing of any writer-biologist, but

I knew nothing about that sort of thing. I remembered that Pierre also used to talk about making a career in the theater. All the same, it's really something to be twenty years old…

We talked some more, and then rain started to wet the road. Some sunbeams were striving to break through, but the cloud cover slowly overtook the horizon. I switched on the windshield wipers.

"I thought the forecast said good weather."

Pierre turned toward me, laughing. "We're going to get wet in any case, right?"

6

I've always liked diving. I can't remember when it started. My father used to take me out in the early evening, after school. Our house faced the sea, so it was easy. The first times we went out, I was too young, I stayed on the surface with a mask on my face. I'd watch him turning below me, and the sight would give me incredible dizzy spells. I still have the same impression today. To dive is to fall, but it's a fascinating fall. An intoxicating loss of balance.

Pierre got hooked right away. At first, I was glad of that. My father, me, and then my son. Something was being passed down, a part of the family saga. Later he joined a specialized club. He'd made a lot of progress.

He often said his fondness for biology came from his diving. He talked about specializing in the study of the ocean floor. I understood; it's awfully beautiful down there. But hard to describe properly. You have to experience it, you have to slip down into the dark waters. Seriously, it

blows your mind. Often enough, you don't feel like coming back up. You have to be wary of euphoria.

When I was a teenager, my pals and I went diving every day. We dove as deep as possible to impress the girls. We flirted with disaster. When I think back on it, we were assholes. But we didn't give a damn—underwater was where we felt best. There were always things to discover. The local oldsters called us "mullets" because we'd turn up in the port sometimes. They would holler at us to get out of there; the water was disgusting, they'd say. I don't know. None of us ever got sick, and there were lots of pretty sights down in the roadstead too. I've always thought boats are more beautiful when seen from underneath. Well, that was then, and there's no chance I'll go diving in the harbor anymore. When you see the shit floating around in there these days… Things were different back then. I think.

I missed all that a lot after I left. The sea, to start with—it was hard for me to be so far from it. And then the silence. I mean, when I went down, the bottom wasn't the only thing I was looking for. Immensity is also on the inside. I've always loved the moment when your heart slows down and calm spreads into your very muscles. That was how I would stifle the frenzy of the rest. Life, my anxieties—all that external noise. Out of the water, I've never really been at ease.

One day I explained this to François, and he talked to me about *l'ivresse des profondeurs*, "depth drunkenness,"

the rapture of the deep. I hated that word, "drunkenness." It wasn't that. Sure, I like to get smashed sometimes, but when you drink, your speed increases. Your body's working at a hundred kilometers an hour. Besides, that's what you're looking for, isn't it? Fire in your eyes, and in your guts too, if you want to come on to a woman. Underwater, it's the opposite. If you dive down there, it's for the calm. Maybe you'll go crazy, but it's never like drunkenness. It's ecstasy.

Good, but all the same, it takes training. I remember one day, I must have been fourteen. I was hanging around the port when a motor scooter came up and stopped in front of me.

"Are you Yanis? Is it true you can dive down ten meters?"

"I can go deeper than that."

"Ten meters'll be enough. Get on."

We went through three villages and ended up on the big pier. There was a group of guys who all looked to be around twenty years old. One of them came over to us. He was deathly pale.

"You can dive deep?"

"On a good day, down to twenty meters or so."

"And you could find a coin underwater?"

That stopped me cold for a few seconds.

"Yes or no?" the guy asked, getting worked up.

"Take it easy, Félix."

One of the other young men put a hand on his shoulder. The one called Félix moved away, grumbling. The

other guy explained what was up: it wasn't really about a coin.

Félix had gotten married the week before.

"A hell of a party," his friend recalled with a smile.

The next day, Félix had a handsome wedding ring on his finger. The ring had belonged to his grandfather. "Kind of a symbolic thing, see?"

A few days later—the previous evening, actually—Félix and his pals had gone out. A way of proving that nothing had changed.

They'd taken a boat out to the Island, dropped anchor in a cove, and spent the night drinking until sunup.

"A classic evening."

The problem was that Félix had lost his wedding ring in the water, no one knew exactly how. Stupidly, just like that.

I didn't have time to ask for details. They seemed to decide that I was capable of finding the thing. I boarded the Zodiac with them and we charged out to the Island. Félix pushed the motor to its maximum speed, and the boat banged against the waves. The sea was gorgeous, not too rough, just a great swell with a rippling surface. I stared at the horizon and saw a white triangle standing out against all the blue.

The cove was sheltered from the wind. I thought that was a good thing, and I concentrated. It was hard to clear my head with all those guys yammering around me. The only one who kept quiet was Félix. He looked at me

pleadingly, and I smiled at the thought that he might be scared of his wife.

They applauded me after I reached the bottom on my very first dive. The depth wasn't even ten meters, eight at the most. I told myself that as divers, these boys must really be pretty bad. On the sea floor, some little clumps of algae were growing among the grains of sand.

I swam along the bottom but didn't see anything. Gold on sand, not much hope. I went up for air three or four times, and I could tell the guys were getting more and more upset. So I started pushing myself to stay down longer. I pressed my head against the sea floor, and a sense of fullness slowly pervaded me. I became all-powerful, untouchable, in control of even the least of my muscles. That particular osmosis is something indescribable. The fuller I became, the more I felt a desire to go farther. I could leave them all behind, I thought, them and their wedding ring and their insignificant anger.

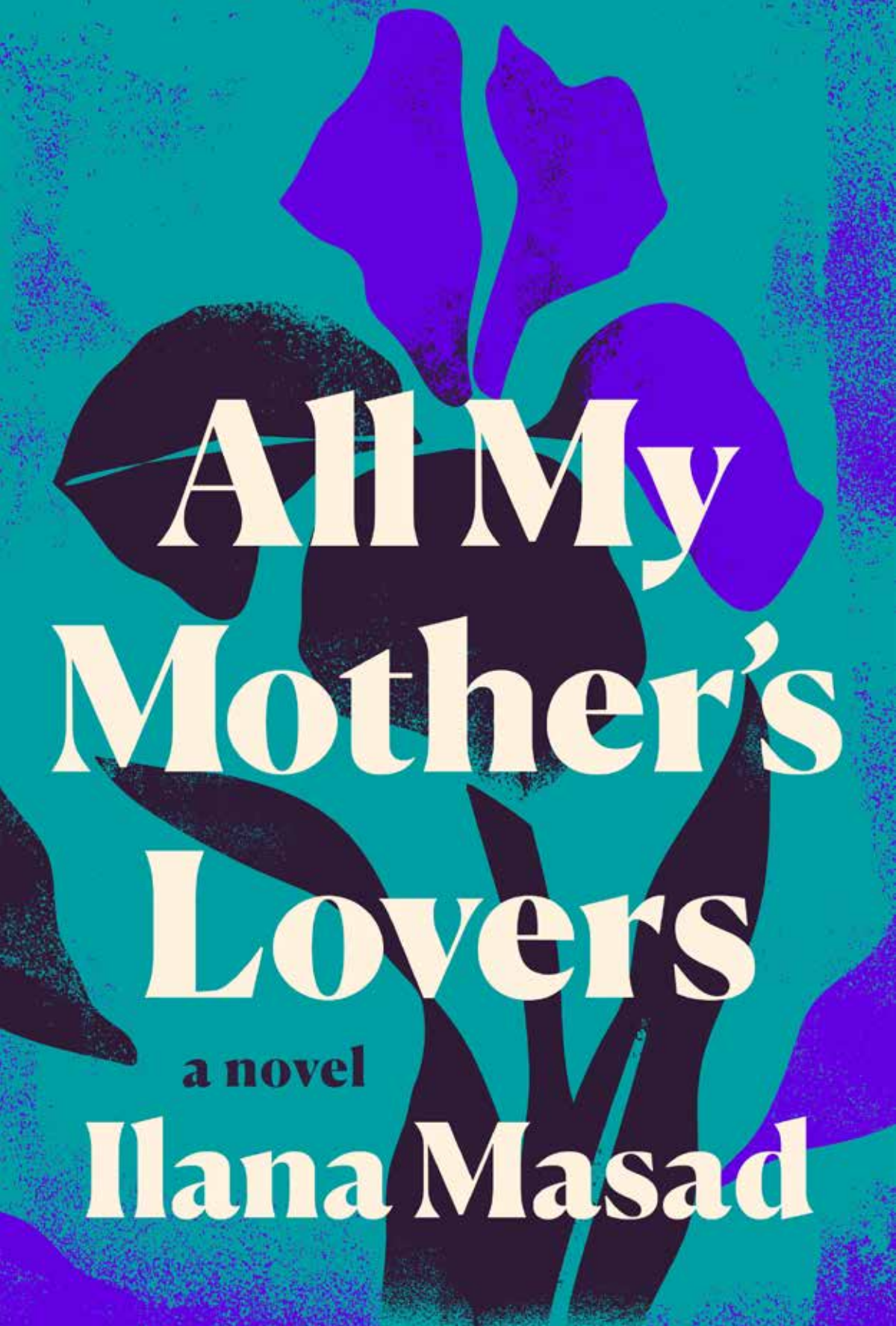
And that was when I saw it. A stroke of luck, because I'd stopped looking for it. It was shining in the light. I picked it up, and the emotion I felt ruined everything. Adrenaline wrecked my equilibrium; my heart started beating again and reclaimed its rightful portion of air. My tense muscles made a fin stroke, and my body rose up. All the same, I paused before breaking through the surface. Held one arm above the water, the ring tight in my fingers. Thought I'd impress them a little.

I don't clearly remember what went on next. The boys were so happy they wanted to celebrate. The ride back to the pier was even faster than the ride out. Félix sprang for about ten rounds of drinks, and by three in the afternoon, I was already vomiting.

Pierre has propped his head against the window and fallen asleep. Outside, the rain has stopped. I feel good. Many things come back to me in this moment. When he was little, I used to put him behind me, buckled up in the middle of the back seat. He'd stay awake the whole trip; getting him to go to sleep was impossible.

He put me through hell, that kid. The hyperactive type—no naps, no downtime. And look at him today, snoring for the past half hour.

In the end, it's never completely lost.


All My
Mother's
Lovers
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DUTTON
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Masad, Ilana, author.
Title: All my mother's lovers : a novel / Ilana Masad.
Description: [New York] : Dutton, [2020]
Identifiers: LCCN 2019031340 | ISBN 9781524745974 (hardback) | ISBN 9781524745998 (ebook)
Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.
Classification: LCC PS3613.A7926 A78 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019031340

Printed in the United States of America
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

BOOK DESIGN BY ELKE SIGAL

IRIS

JUNE 2, 2013

Iris rarely considered her death a real possibility, perhaps because she spent much of her life making sure to avoid it. It was one reason she read detective novels, crime novels, all the literature she could get her hands on that explored the bloodiness and depravity and confusion of the worst of human nature. By being aware of it, of all its infinite—if predictable, as she discovered over the years as she devoured more and more such books—possibilities, Iris was able to feel in control. In restaurants, she sat with her back against the wall or at a corner table far from the windows. During air travel, she sat behind the wing, even when she could afford the occasional business-class seat, because she'd read that you have more chance of surviving a crash in the back half of the plane. If she'd ever needed to take a long bus ride, she was sure she would have looked for the seat belts. She drove carefully, never more than five miles above the speed limit. She double-locked motel and hotel room doors, added the chain if it was there. And, because she wasn't one to dismiss harmless superstition, she wore her amber necklace, handed down from her mother, whenever she had to travel farther than a five-mile radius from her home.

But soon after Iris turned fifty-nine, she had a fall. That's all it was. A fall. She was walking along Abbot Kinney in Venice, where she'd just met a prospective client for lunch, and was pretty certain she was going to get the job. It had been a nice meal, perfectly pleasant. She and the prospect, the owner of a chain of coworking spaces, discovered they'd both gone to the same temple back when she lived in LA and might have crossed paths. He knew her friend Dena—not well, but he liked her; she'd recommended a decorator that he and his wife ended up using—and they had fun playing Jewish geography, trying to see who else they might both know, whether they'd lived near each other or had relatives who did. She wanted the assignment, even though it meant going up to Sacramento a few times, which would be sad.

When they finished, the prospective client insisted on paying, implied she'd probably be charging him expenses soon anyway, and shook her hand before handing his ticket to the valet. Iris had found parking on the street, and she walked toward her car, hoping there wouldn't be unexpected traffic on her way home.

And then she fell.

It was a tiny jut in the sidewalk that tripped her, and she only got a small run in the pantyhose she was wearing. Her hands were a little scraped, stinging without bleeding. But the moment in which the concrete rushed toward her had felt endless, and her body's reaction hadn't been instantaneous like she was certain it should be, like she was sure it once was. Instead, her body froze, her reactions slowed, and she thought she was about to die.

"Lady, are you okay?" A white guy with dreadlocks had a hold of her elbow and helped her up. He was her height, but he seemed to be gazing down at her, and she imagined how he must see her, as a middle-aged—no, probably old, if she was being honest—woman, silver-streaked hair, frail, even though she never pictured herself this way, never felt this way. "Ma'am?" he pressed, looking concerned, if stoned, and when she said she was fine

and thanked him, he nodded and said, "Well, be careful, yo," and walked away, his dreads swinging behind him as he approximated a sloped and sideways walk. She thought of Abe, of the stories he told her about his son and their bickering over things like cultural appropriation in fashion, Abe rolling his eyes and saying that there were more important things in the world than white guys wearing dreads, his son trying to tell him that wasn't the point, that many things could be important at once. She'd never mentioned it to Abe, but whenever he talked about his son, she thought the teenager would get along with Maggie. They seemed to share an indignation with the world that she couldn't muster in the same way anymore. She missed Abe. She wondered if she'd ever conveyed how grateful she was to him and how much she appreciated their time together.

She missed all of them, really, all the important ones, except Shlomo, of course. She fiercely missed Peter in that moment after the fall, and made herself start moving again so she could get to the car and back home to him. Her body was stiff, as if still seizing up on the way down. Nothing had happened to her, but she felt like something had changed, irrevocably. She was faced with the fact that her body wasn't going to be getting stronger. She should be getting more calcium. She should get a bone-density test. A physical. She'd been neglecting herself for years, thinking she was going to last forever on sheer willpower. This small fall, a stumble, an uncharacteristic slip in her never-before-clumsy life, reminded her she was mortal and aging.

In the car on the way home she tried to calm herself. After all, she'd had some existential moments when she started going through menopause years ago. But mostly she'd been worried about her sense of desire back then, concerned that with her hormonal changes she would also feel less of the lifelike substance that was her sexuality. She'd been relieved to find that while certain bodily functions worked less vividly than they used to—for the first time in her life she'd begun using lubricating substances besides condoms—her desire remained. Now, she didn't even care about her desire,

the fear coursing through her instead entirely devoted to the time she had left on earth.

On a whim, while stuck in traffic on the 101, she tried calling her daughter, but the call went to voice mail and she realized it was almost four in St. Louis and Maggie would be working. Ariel was on a weeklong trip with some buddies of his, attending an amateur Magic: The Gathering tournament, and she'd see Peter soon enough. She called Maggie again and left her a message.

"Hello darling, it's Mom," she began in her singsong phone voice. "I just wanted to see how you are." She considered telling Maggie that she'd fallen, but decided against it. What else could she say, though? "Oh, and I watched the first part of that documentary you recommended, about the West Memphis Three, and you know, those boys really were railroaded, weren't they? Imagine if someone had seen how you dressed in high school and decided that meant you'd done something terrible! Anyway, I'm rambling. Stuck in traffic. I'm sure you never miss that in Mizzerah." She slurred the word the way Maggie did when she was making fun of the local accent. "Anyway, love you, bye! It's Mom, if I didn't say before. Okay," and she hung up.

She wondered, sometimes, why talking to Ariel always seemed easier. They had more in common, she supposed, in that they were avid readers and could talk about books for hours; they read wildly different genres, usually, but would occasionally read one of the other's favorites so they could talk about it. But it wasn't just that; it was something to do with privacy, maybe. Ariel was the one with the lock on his door, but Maggie's heart and mind were closed books, and she was independent enough not to open them unless she wanted to. Iris envied her daughter, sometimes, for being able to seize at her own strength so soon, so young—she'd started insisting on wearing what she wanted to nursery school when she was four; she'd told Iris firmly that she had no interest in ballet when she was seven; she'd come out to friends at school before telling her parents. Mostly, Iris

was proud, of Maggie and a little bit of herself for managing to raise her to be this person. She wasn't sure her daughter recognized their similarities, or how lucky she was to have had her independence encouraged, but it didn't really matter. If Maggie were to ever have a child of her own, surely she'd set a good example in other ways and also not receive credit for it. Iris wasn't sure she would—as far as she knew, Maggie wasn't interested. And if she was, well . . . Iris couldn't help but worry about a child raised without a father. She could almost hear Maggie yelling at her just at the thought.

She wondered if it was too late for them. She hoped not.

When she got home, she entered Peter's office, but he was on a video call and could only glance up at her and half smile in the midst of his chatter about banner widths and necessary resolution. She went to the bedroom and rolled off her pantyhose and took off her skirt and blouse and got into her comfy home clothes, the yoga pants and overlarge T-shirt. Last of all, she removed her necklace. She fingered the raw amber in its setting, bought by her grandfather long ago and given to his youngest daughter, Iris's mother, who wore the jagged edges smooth with years of worrying it. She gave it to Iris when she married Peter, because, she said, Iris had finally given her *naches,* and she didn't have to worry about her anymore. It was only after her mother died, though, that Iris turned it into the regular companion it became—it had felt somehow like tempting the evil eye to wear it before, like stealing her mother's luck before it had run out.

Iris stared at the mirror, at her face that looked no different than it had that morning but which seemed to symbolize a whole lot more. The crow's-feet, the way her lips were grooved all over, the loose skin below her cheeks that weren't quite jowls but implied them. She had to write a will, she realized. It was time. She was sure she and Peter had some boilerplate thing, probably made when the kids were little, but she needed to write something proper. She needed her children to know she loved them. Come to think of it, she needed everyone she'd loved to know it.

AUGUST 24, 2017

Dad, Ariel,

I've gone to carry out a few of Mom's wishes. Not sure how long it'll take, but I'll update you. Hold down the fort. Be nice to people (please) and eat their food because there's going to be a lot of it. Kick them out early if you need to. Love you.

—Maggie

She leaves the note in the middle of the kitchen island, anchored by the black and red salt and pepper shakers, which, when put together, look like two vaguely humanoid blobs hugging. She deposits her suitcase in the trunk of Peter's Prius and puts the Sacramento address into her phone. If she takes the 1-5, it'll take her less than six hours. But she remembers that the scenic route, up the 101, is supposed to be much prettier, and besides, she isn't sure she wants to be back so quickly. She chooses the longer option, despite the map's dire warning of tolls—she doesn't remember there being any a decade ago when she drove up the coast with Morgan and Kyle to see a queer punk band in Oakland. If she comes across any tollbooths, she can afford to pay,

she thinks, a luxury she never really expected when younger, assuming always that she'd live a hand-to-mouth artist's life. Not because she had any artistic passion, let alone talent, but because that's what she thought being a queer millennial meant. Her friends from college all seem to be actors or artists or musicians—Allison sings and plays piano in an all-girl band called Twatter; Micah is doing a Fulbright in Nicaragua, collecting the oral histories of the Sutiava *Primitivista* painting workshop participants from the 1980s; Blair works at a coffee shop and does community theater on the weekend; Harper freelances as a technical writer and self-publishes young adult novels—and for a long time, Maggie wanted to be like them. She tried, sort of, but nothing stuck. Instead, she works in insurance and has benefits and vacation days and actual weekends, which gives her time for brunches with friends and concerts and movies and getting involved in local queer stuff.

"Let's go," she says to the empty car.

As the garage door opens in front of her, revealing shadowy six o'clock light, she has the uncanny feeling of being inside a movie again. Lone girl in search of the truth, she thinks, or child looking for her mother's secret life. Grieving woman out for revenge, maybe. Of course, she realizes, this may all be moot. These guys may turn out to be some professional contacts. Maybe they're Mafia dudes her mother owes money to. That'd be the day, she thinks; her mother was always careful with money, which is why they didn't come out of 2008 in worse shape than they did, she supposes, unlike many middle-class families they knew. Iris had a good money-manager person, some woman named Glinda, like the good witch from *The Wizard of Oz,* which Maggie always found very ironic. During high school, when she had a rudimentary obsession with Communism that mostly had to do with sticking it to the capital-M Man, Maggie had made fun of this Glinda person, saying that no good witch would ever use her powers to make money out of nothing—which was what she understood of the stock market and investments—and that Glinda must be an impostor,

that she was actually the Wicked Witch of the West and killed the Good Witch and taken over her life. It was a whole narrative she'd spun herself, and it was one of the best ways to get Iris into a fight with her. "How's Glinda the Wicked Witch?" she'd ask when her mother was doing something innocuous like heating up meat loaf in the microwave. Or "Have you stolen from the poor yet today?" when her mother was washing her bras in the sink.

Maggie fiddles with the air-conditioning setting, smiles. She can laugh at herself about it now, if sheepishly. She's not proud of it. After all, she's learned since that everything her mother hurled at her at the time was true: she and Ariel were a big part of the reason her parents invested and saved money; it was them the money was meant to protect, educate, and eventually go to, if there was anything left; her life had been incredibly easy, all things considered, her needs always met. She'd never wanted for anything necessary. She had absolutely no right to complain to her mother about her own privilege. It was naive, and it was stupid. She supposes most teenagers are, in one way or another.

How incredibly lucky she was in life had become clear to her only when she was in college already, in St. Louis. During her first year she had two roommates, all of them in a cramped triple with another triple across a dilapidated common room that held only a three-seater couch whose cushions were sky blue and stained and made of some scratchy woven fabric. The six of them shared one bathroom. The school required all freshmen to live in the dorms, and one of her roommates had needed to work two jobs to be able to afford it because her scholarship didn't cover room and board. This seemed patently unfair to Maggie, that the school would require a student who couldn't afford it to live in campus housing when, as Tiffany pointed out, there were cheaper accommodations in town. Maggie ranted about it drunkenly to some people during orientation week, and Tiffany had been there too, holding a forty and raising her eyebrows. She tossed her long,

overly straightened and dyed blond hair back and said, "You must be pretty rich to be this surprised." Then she'd walked away, and a boy wearing a flannel shirt followed her, and Maggie realized how stupid and lucky she was, had always been.

She's less stupid now, she knows that, but lucky? The last few days seem to indicate that whatever luck she's had in the past is gone now. It's bad enough that Iris . . . but then with Peter the way he is . . . "Nope, not now, drive, focus, drive," she says loudly, gripping the steering wheel hard enough to see her knuckles whiten.

Merging onto the highway is strangely liberating. It's not empty, and plenty of people are on their way to work, but traffic is moving swiftly, and she opens the front-seat windows a crack on either side so she can feel the air, which is still cool and smells just a little bit like the ocean amid the exhaust and dust. She wonders if this is why her mother liked to travel. Alone, that is. Iris liked to travel alone. She took Maggie and Ariel occasionally when they were little, but they never took a family vacation all of them together, not once, even though Maggie saw her parents' friends and her friends' parents doing exactly that. She remembers Ariel being jealous, but by the time he was old enough to be, she was a teenager and pretty relieved not to need to trek around with embarrassing parents and a geeky brother. She isn't sure whether she'd complained like he did when she was younger; if she did, she can't remember it now.

When Maggie turned thirteen, her father took her on a sorta-kinda bat mitzvah trip—they didn't celebrate it in any other fashion—to wherever Maggie chose. Ariel got to do the same thing when he turned thirteen. Maggie had asked to go to Joshua Tree and also to Disneyland's new park, Disney California. Ariel had thought much bigger—he'd chosen Vietnam, but he'd gotten a terrible stomach bug on the plane, before ever setting foot in Hanoi, and had spent three of the five days there lying in a hotel bed, running to the bathroom every so often to puke or shit whatever he'd

attempted to eat each time he thought he was feeling better. It was still a sore subject for him.

But Iris didn't do this with them. Instead, she stayed behind, first with Ariel, and then with Maggie, making sure to be home so that the house wasn't empty. But Maggie was eighteen when Ariel took his trip, about to go to college, and she had no interest in hanging out with her mom. At other times during her childhood, Iris would suggest the four of them take a short trip somewhere in the United States, somewhere kitschy like the Grand Canyon, which neither she nor Peter had ever been to, or New York, where they could see where Iris grew up. But those trips never actually happened. Everyone was busy, Maggie and Ariel had their own activities and social circles, Iris rarely refused any work that came her way, and Peter seemed perfectly content at home.

Maggie tries rolling down the window down further but the wind buffets her and makes the gelled curls on the top of her head whip stiffly sideways, so she rolls it back up. There's a knot of traffic ahead, and the GPS tells her to get off at Exit 101B to avoid some of it. She drives down what appears like a smallish back highway named San Marcos Pass Road just as the morning fog begins to lift enough to open the view of the mountains in front of her. She can see their broad bases and their not-so-high tops with a band of cloud cutting them right across. Maybe they're hills, she thinks, and not mountains. Lucia grew up in Colorado, and she's scoffed at Maggie's puny idea of what mountains are. She misses Lucia. She texted her this morning, finally, telling her about the letters and her plan, but Lucia hasn't texted back. It's Thursday, though, and Maggie reminds herself that Lucia is probably just busy, because it's the day she teaches simple claywork and pottery to kids at a summer arts camp. It's probably the last week of that, though—the school year must be starting soon.

A growl of hunger announces itself in Maggie's gut, so she pulls over to the shoulder and searches for somewhere to turn off and eat, but the

closest places are all behind her, a detour barely forty-five minutes into her journey. She considers—and decides, fuck it. She can treat this as a vacation of sorts, can't she? Just like her mother treated her trips. She makes a U-turn and heads toward a Mexican place that says it's open and where the reviews recommend the breakfast burritos, which sounds perfect just about now.

Iris used to regale them with stories of inconsequential things that happened at work. Peter never needed to tell stories like that, the type with a beginning, middle, and punchline-end, because he was always right there, right in Maggie's line of sight. She didn't know details, but she knew vaguely what he was working on at any given time because his office was basically decorated with his own ongoing work. Other than the bookcase holding his heavy, overlarge art books at the bottom and a combination of old and new well-thumbed design books above that, there was a large bulletin board on one wall and a magnetic white board on another. Here he would pin and magnetize a variety of printed and hand-drawn sketches of logos and banners and office stationery borders and doodle new ideas and notes beside them. Even though he did all the real work on his computer, his office was still a big signpost for whoever his current clients were.

But Maggie remembers how the stories Iris told always sounded so scripted, a narrative that she built carefully to pass along. One tale that Maggie remembers, because Iris liked to tell it again and again, was about her love affair with a particular out-of-the-way Mexican restaurant that she'd accidentally ended up at twice in one trip—once because she'd been driving around aimlessly, starving, after a client had missed an appointment that morning in Soledad. "There I was," Iris told them over dinner more than once, though she usually only repeated stories for company, "all alone in a place called Soledad—so fitting, right?—and I ended up finding the least solitary place imaginable."

She'd walked into the restaurant on a day that a beloved community member was retiring from the local police force, and there was a huge

celebration underway. She'd tried to leave, feeling like she was encroaching on a private party, but instead she'd been welcomed by two young servers and invited to sit right along with everyone. Iris claimed it was the only time she'd ever gotten drunk during the day, and she didn't regret a minute of it, though she'd needed to nap in her car for an hour before setting out on the road later in the afternoon.

"And the second time? You said you went there twice," someone would always prompt.

"The second time," Iris would say, smiling, "was the very next morning. The client I was supposed to meet the first day took me there. He was so sorry for missing our first meeting he said he'd take me to the best-kept secret in the whole county, which was this place. But I'd already discovered it all on my own."

Maggie wishes she knew what it was called, that place. Iris said they served the best enmoladas she'd ever tasted, the mole sauce so delectable, smooth and bitter yet fiery, that she wanted to let it sit in her mouth forever. But, of course, Maggie has no idea where exactly the restaurant was, if it's even still there. It's been ages, probably a decade, really, since she heard this story.

I'm at the age where I can remember conversations over a decade old, she thinks as she pulls into the parking lot of Papa Cantina. It's basically empty, with a bright turquoise-painted bar along one side and tables with red-and-white-checkered tablecloths on them spread neatly around a small central stage. The fliers by the door advertise a range of musical performances, including, she's tickled to see, a drag show special tomorrow. Maybe she'll make it back to see it, she thinks. Alone, though? She's not sure she's ever gone to a drag show, or any queer event really, without thirsty undertones. But Lucia and she have lasted twice as long as any former quote-relationship-unquote, and she doesn't want to screw it up. Not that she hasn't cheated before—she has. But usually as an excuse to end whatever unsatisfactory dating experience she'd found herself in.

"Hi, anywhere is fine," a young man tells her. He's sitting at a corner table along with two men wearing big white aprons, one of whom slowly raises himself up and heads into the kitchen. The other one keeps staring at his phone, and the young man gets up and picks out a menu to bring to her. They hover around each other, awkward, as she dithers between tables stupidly, wondering where would be easiest for him in terms of cleanup and delivery—she waited tables during her summers off from college and hated it, but is grateful for one thing that came out of the experience: she'll never again take for granted the servers and busboys and cooks anywhere she eats. She chooses the table closest to the kitchen, which is just to the right of where one of the cooks is still sitting, and hopes that he doesn't think she's encroaching on his space.

"Thanks," she says, taking the menu. "But I know what I want, actually. I hear you make good breakfast burritos?"

"We do. Seven kinds." He grins and leaves the menu with her. A moment later he's back with a glass of water and asks if she wants coffee.

"Omigod, please. And, um, the mushroom-and-mozzarella burrito?"

"You got it."

The coffee, when he brings it, has a hint of cinnamon in it, she's pretty sure. And it isn't too hot, so she can actually drink it without surreptitiously pouring in some cold water or waiting until after her meal. She leaves it black to better enjoy the flavor. It beats the five-dollar lattes and cold brews she's grown accustomed to drinking; it makes her mouth feel warm even after she's swallowed, the sweet bite of the spice making her think of her mother's beloved mole sauce.

Unexpectedly, tears prickle in her eyes. She takes out her phone as a distraction, to check text messages; Facebook, where she keeps up with a mix of faraway friends and acquaintances and older work buddies; and Instagram, where she mostly follows her close local friends like Allison and Micah and Harper and Blair, as well as various queer news, joy, and fashion

accounts. She takes a photo of the mural across from her, which shows a stone wall in the forefront and behind it a small square building in the middle of a broad sandy lot, which she realizes is meant to be this very restaurant before the whole area was developed—she can see the tablecloths through the painted building's windows, and the flags hanging across the window frames, and even, in a kind of mind-bending move, a corner of this very mural on the inside of the painted building. She captions it "improv road-trip mindfuck" and posts it.

A few friends from St. Louis have texted her—Simon from work, asking her if she'll be coming to Friday night happy hour tomorrow; memes and pictures in the years-long shit-posting group text she has going with Allison, Micah, Harper, and Blair; and a clearly very drunk booty call message from Jolie. Oops, Maggie thinks, she hasn't told Jolie she has a girlfriend. It all seems so far, so foreign to where she is now. Only her work crew knows she's gone, and they probably just think she's sick, because she asked her boss to keep the whole my-mom-died thing quiet. There's nothing from Peter or Ariel yet. Must still be asleep or clueless that she's left, she supposes. It's not like they're used to having her in the house anymore.

She texts Allison, the closest of her friends and also an ex, about what's going on. Just as the server puts her burrito in front of her on a plate with a blue and yellow rim that she instantly wants to find and buy for her apartment, her phone rings. It's Allison. Before she thinks too hard about it, she answers. "Hey."

"Em, I'm so *so* sorry about your mom. I can't believe it. Are you okay? Of course you're not okay. But, like, are you surviving? Is it—"

"It's okay, Ally, stop. It's okay. I mean, yeah. It blows. Super blows. But I'm surviving. Actually, I'm taking a road trip."

"Yeah, I just saw your post. What's that about?" Maggie tells Allison about the will, about the necklace, about the letters. "So, wait, your mom

just had these random letters to dudes? What, were they like waiting for her organs or something?"

The possibility of Iris's organs being placed with these men—or with anyone—never occurred to Maggie, but she doesn't think that's how it works. No one knows who they're donating to before they die, do they? Wouldn't that imply Iris knew she was going to die? The image of her mother's body cut open, her organs carefully being harvested, is horrible, even if Maggie has the box checked on her own license. She isn't actually sure if her mother did, or if there was anything salvageable. She gulps, pushes her plate away for a moment, the smell of food overwhelming her.

"Uh, I don't think so," she says.

"Shit, Em, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—I'm horrible at this, I'm really sorry. I love you. I'm sorry."

Maggie tries to shake it off, even as irritation prickles down her back. "Anyway, look, I've been stewing in my own shit for days. Tell me something about your world. What's going on with the Devon and Alexa situation?"

As Allison regales her with the latest drama going on with the couple she's dating—her being poly is one of the reasons she and Maggie didn't last long—Maggie only half listens, but the familiar voice and safe topic have their desired effect and she manages to eat the rest of her burrito. She waves her hand at the server, who's sitting across from the off-duty cook again, and mouths "Check" at him with a lift of her eyebrows that she hopes indicates a request rather than a demand.

"Wow," she says when Allison explains how they worked everything out in a two-hour conversation last night. "So that's good then?"

"Yeah. It is. I'm so emotionally exhausted, though. I think I may cancel my hookup tonight."

Maggie rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anything. She's frankly impatient sometimes with Allison's determination to live a polyamorous lifestyle, feels like it's unfair of her to keep taking all the good people. Besides, it seems

like Allison spends eighty percent of her time with her lovers just talking about their relationships rather than actually experiencing them.

"Are you really okay, though?" Allison asks after a moment of silence. "This whole road-trip thing—you're being safe?"

A surge of rage rises in Maggie's stomach and she says, much louder than she intended, "I'm not cheating on Lucia, if that's what you mean, and even if I did, you're one to talk." The server and the cook both begin turning their heads toward her but manage to keep their eyes on their newspaper and phone, respectively. She's embarrassed, and waves to the server again with her card and the curling check he put in front of her.

"Whoa. Dude. Chill. I didn't mean anything like that. I meant like, are you hitchhiking."

"Oh," Maggie says, sheepish. "No. I've got my dad's car."

"Okay. And also," Allison adds, "I know you're not in a great place, and I'm not mad, but like, I've literally never cheated, so while I know what you're implying, please don't."

"I'm sorry, Ally. I just . . . I don't know."

"It's okay," Allison says, a little too magnanimously for Maggie's taste. "Em, I love you and I'm here for you, okay?"

When they hang up, Maggie stares at her phone a bit. She decides it's time to follow Ariel's example. She takes a selfie—it's not great, but she chooses a filter that makes her look less wan, which she hadn't even realized she was looking. She posts it to Instagram and shares it to Facebook, along with her announcement:

> Hallo frands. On the night of August 20, my mother, Iris Judith Krause, died in a car accident. The funeral took place yesterday. If I'm out of it or don't answer for a while to messages that's why.

As reactions, messages, texts, and comments start flowing in, she turns off her notifications.

A novel

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

FRANCESCA MOMPLAISIR

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Momplaisir, Francesca, [date] author.
Title: My mother's house / by Francesca Momplaisir.
Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2020. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2019017546 (print) | LCCN 2019018686 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780525657163 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525657156 (hardcover)
Subjects: | GSAFD: Suspense fiction.
Classification: LCC PS3613.O5226 (ebook) |
LCC PS3613.O5226 M9 2020 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019017546

Jacket images: (details) jayk7; alvarez; bunhill; Koron, all Getty Images; Ranta Images / Alamy; (background) Rolau Elena / Shutterstock
Jacket design by Jenny Carrow

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

THE HOUSE screamed, *"Fire!"* from every orifice. *Difé!* Melting windowpanes rolled down the aluminum siding, dripping polyurethane tears. Orange, blue, and yellow flames hollered their frustration into the icicles along the struggling gutters. The two-story (three, if you counted the basement), one-family (two, again, if the basement was included) House had had enough. Fed up with the burden of Its owner's absurd hoarding, inexcusable slovenliness, and abuse of power, It spontaneously combusted everywhere a power source sprouted unkempt. The matted nest that passed for a fuse box in the basement; the half-assed hose that connected the gas stove to the wall in the upstairs kitchen; the shaved pipes that pulled natural gas from its source to the boiler and radiators throughout the House; the power strip in the upstairs bedroom that powered a tenant's hot plate, microwave, refrigerator, stereo, television, DVD player, cable box, computer, and electric shaver and toothbrush; the tangle of Christmas lights left plugged in and blinking as a deterrent to robbers over the holidays. The House blew it all up and burst into tears It had been holding back for decades.

It cried and laughed at the same time, watching the owner scurry out of the basement. When the tenant jumped out the

upstairs window, the House doubled over and shook in amusement. It nearly keeled over from being tickled by the rodents and roaches racing one another into and out of their hiding places, confused which would be best—crackle in the fire or crack in the icy January air outside while trying to make it to the safety of a neighbor's house.

The House listened for the loud cries.

"*Anmwey! Difé!*" the owner hollered as he ran Its circumference.

It tracked the movements of the owner, who ran around like a man trying to keep his pants up after having missed a belt loop while getting dressed. It watched as Its pajama-clad owner rushed from the backyard up the skinny driveway to the front stoop, then through the frozen garden in the empty parcel where another house could have been built, then around to the backyard again. The House didn't see where the tenant vanished to, but he was gone before the ambulance arrived. It had a hard time emoting and keeping eyes on the owner simultaneously, but the House continued to cry and laugh convulsively.

"*Anmwey!*" the owner shrieked as he waited for help to arrive, help the House did not want.

It tried to figure out how to drown out his cries. It screamed in different ways for different reasons until sirens overwhelmed them both. The fire trucks pulled up out front and, mercifully, the drivers silenced the blaring. But the night was far from still. The House blinked rapidly as the engines' discordant lights made a visible noise of their own. It closed Its eyes to shut out the annoying but necessary red and yellow spinning that cracked the dark freezing night. Desperate for attention, It pumped out flames with renewed vigor like a toddler in a tantrum forcing herself to cry harder.

It wished It had been built with the ability to speak, since people-talk always trumped Its performances. It huffed as the owner continued screaming in his native language: "*Pitit mwen yo!*" It wanted to shut him up. But a firefighter came across the

half-frozen man while inspecting the perimeter of the House for points of entry. The House rolled Its eyes as the owner spoke English to ensure the firefighter understood.

"Hep! *Difé!* My sheeldren!" His accent protruded like a boil through taut skin.

It looked down at the two men and easily deduced that the heavily masked rescuer was white by his blue eyes reflecting the frosty glint of aluminum siding in the January night. The firefighter chased the owner back through the rock-hard soil of the hibernating snow-covered garden and out to the front of the House. The man finally stood still, watching powerlessly as his house blazed before him. *Difé!*

The House ignored the outside entertainment and, refusing to be defeated, It tried to turn Its efforts inward. It spread flames through every corner of Itself to produce Its cry of fire for onlookers to see. It kept an eye on the owner standing outside in the subzero air bawling and mumbling to himself. It drooped to see the hydrants give more easily than expected. It recoiled as the hoses gushed against Its battalion of flames fighting for their right to be and be seen. It had earned this catharsis. It had endured and witnessed, had stood silent and been complicit. It deserved to explode publicly, to commit suicide grandly. It harnessed and funneled the flames to fight off the water like hell itself.

It followed the firefighters as they focused on the left side of the House where most of the windows were. Their hoses lined the narrow driveway that separated the opportunistic flames from the closest neighbor's house, a tacky yellow eyesore with brown trim. Ambushed on Its left, the House strained to push fire out of the singular window on Its right. Its flames stretched their fingers across the empty parcel, trying to reach the tips of the dormant leafless apple tree. That was Its only hope of spreading Its fury: extend Its fire to high-five the tree, set it ablaze, then jump to the next house just inches away. If Its flames could

reach the branch tips, they could skip to the almost-elegant pale blue cookie-cutter structure and take out half the block toward the main boulevard at least. At least.

The House longed to level all Its neighbors that should have known about Its suffering. It knew that they'd also been in pain, but they'd done nothing to help themselves or It. It would be the brave one, the one to put an end to it all. It would euthanize them, take them out of their misery, in the only way It knew how. The people were a different matter. It wanted to tear them down for putting their houses through the same suffering It had endured; the same misery that had been replicated in the various shades of brown, languages, and accents of the neighborhood's inhabitants. How could *people* want to live through all of that? What was there to live for after all It had seen and been through? Why prolong the pain? What were they trying to prove? Perseverance? Resilience? To what end? Why stand outside in paper pajamas in the middle of a blocked-off street, in the mean January air, in the middle of the goddamned night, shouting, "There are people in there!"

The House changed tactics. It retracted the flames. It inhaled and held the smoke in Its chest, tricking the firefighters into believing that they were winning. For now, It would have to settle for self-consumption. Like an unseen hell, It would devour Itself without the fanfare of sparks. *Lanfè*. It would revel in the blue and yellow hues of Its dark interior. *Hellfire*. It would swallow molten glass and metal as salves to soothe Its regret at not having destroyed other houses whose inhabitants surely should have known the hurt being heaped upon It. It held Its breath and allowed the flames to do their worst inside to make Itself forever uninhabitable. It allowed them to eviscerate all of Its wood paneling, floors, and furniture. It took one hard gulp of fuel from the kerosene heater to burn through the floorboards in the cold upstairs bedrooms. No one would ever sleep there again. *Difé!* One long lick with ten tongues through the shot-

gun first floor, blackening the foyer, living room, dining room, and kitchen. No one would ever be welcomed, invited to sit, presented with a plate, and allowed to dip a tasting spoon there again. One jagged cough through the basement, a hiccup of final fumes, skipping over and in between defunct TVs, stereo turntables, eight-track tape decks, and heaping crates of unsorted junk. No one would ever stoop through the tight tunnel to thrift shop among the owner's dusty collection again.

The House floated in and out of consciousness, waiting to die. It would no longer have to stomach wickedness, deviance, and injustice. It looked forward to the demolition that would level and free It at long last. It sighed and quietly stuttered, "*Di-di-di-di-difé*." It closed Its eyes, ignoring the embers' red glow. It didn't feel the water pounding around Its gutted insides. Even if It had given credence to the owner's incessant pleas, It wouldn't have felt the tickle of a small child or the heft of a few adults crouching in one of Its corners.

LUCIEN

Well into his sixties, Lucien was arrogant enough to wish there'd been songs written about his birth, so he would know that he had been a miracle. He remembered only being abandoned in the care of his aunt La Belle by his U.S.-bound parents before his first birthday. Newly settled into his true complexion and curly hair texture, he'd become the perfect light-skinned, silky-haired toddler that Haitian families welcomed and worshipped. As he aged, he'd retained his color that was the creamy beige of traditional flour-thickened vanilla porridge—*labouyi*—boiled slowly and sweetly, eaten from its cooled-down edges to its enticingly hot center. His light brown eyes looked hazel in sunlight, proof of the centuries spent preserving the mark of miscegenation that had produced his lineage during centuries of slavery. His last name, Louverture, was the other legacy of that epoch.

Tante La Belle had been the same color. She should have been pretty given her light skin, smooth hair, green eyes. She believed that she was, but even Lucien's merciful and grateful gaze could not make it so. Her features had come together awkwardly on her flat, round, wide face. Her eyes protruded like two egg yolks in a pan. Her bottom lip hung open, exposing

the pink inside with its blue-green and purple veins. As much as she'd tried to hide her freckles, the three-dimensional skin tags around her nose resisted the heavy face powder. Her hair should have made up for some of her ugliness, but it had been so thin that it exposed her scalp.

As downright ugly as she was, she liked to think that Lucien resembled her. But his features had come together to make him a gorgeous toddler and, later, a pretty preadolescent boy. But he didn't remember his face. Who and what he'd been between his childhood and his preteen years were murky. He couldn't recall if La Belle had been kind to him or if he had made that up. But she'd bathed him like a baby until he was nine years old, slathering lotion over his skin in a way that had made him feel awkward and aroused at the same time. She loved to touch him because of the way her hands felt again his creamy skin. He would wait with anticipation as she slid off the rings she wore on each finger. She would end by running her fingers through his curls to remove the remaining oil. He would stand in her full-length mirror to bask in the sight of his shiny naked body, taking his time to get dressed, never looking at his own face.

He had not been able to resist the way she had doted on him, reminding him how beautiful a boy he was, how he looked like a prettier male version of herself. He'd once asked her why she'd had no children of her own and she'd responded that she hated all children except him. He'd been flattered at the odd compliment that had raised him to a status just above special. Her attention had approximated love, and the responsibility she'd placed on him had resembled trust.

He vaguely remembered the deeds that she'd made him commit. But he recalled with precision his early love of counting and his giftedness at math. He still relished the calculation of money and the appraisal of the value of things. He was an intelligent boy, but by age eleven, Lucien was only sporadically attending the clean, pricey Seventh-Day Adventist seminary for

which his parents dutifully paid tuition twice a year. He'd never enjoyed time behind the doors of the pastor-led school. He'd even found the freedom of recess in the yard confining. Instead he'd wandered throughout the roughest parts of Port au Prince, daring shirtless slender boys—muscular despite days without meals, with skin as dark as the bottoms of their bare feet—to attack a well-dressed, well-fed, well-heeled cream-colored man-boy like himself. From the same dirty streets gorgeous indigo girls rose and ripened like curvaceous eggplants. With a frightening hunger in hand, he harvested the loosest ones and fucked them before bringing them to his newly adopted home, the brothel at Bar Caimite. He'd claimed the entryway to the place, which smelled of rum and frequent and corrupt sex. Leaning against the doorframe, he'd become a permanent fixture like the knob and hinges. A mature teenaged toughie, he'd installed himself as a handsome recruiter and de facto bouncer and earned his way to part ownership in only two years. He packed an old pistol and liked to watch the American and European soldiers, peacekeepers and self-proclaimed rescuers of his people. They unabashedly entered his bar to enjoy their favorite overpriced liquor and even more expensive ladies of the dawn, *bon matain*, afternoon, and evening. He'd owned these women and even some soldiers by means of blackmail and the pistol he bragged about but never brandished.

Lucien had always preferred reclining against walls to sitting in chairs or on high-backed barstools. A burgeoning narcoleptic, he needed to stand to stay awake. He remained vigilant to watch the prettiest little brown-skinned girl he'd ever seen, a precociously dressed two-year-old whose father was a rising military man in François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's personal guard. From his post in the doorway, Lucien watched the coddled Marie-Ange Calvert grow up for more than a decade beside the general who drove, carried, and held the hand of his baby-doll daughter to the elite Catholic school up the only

green hill in Port au Prince. Lucien was puzzled by his amorous feelings for such a young girl but determined to wait until she was of age to court her. For this reason, he hadn't taken any girls seriously until he was twenty-four. By then, Marie-Ange was fifteen, old enough for him not to be embarrassed by his slow chase—stalking, really—of this maturing untouchable beauty.

Why she'd married him was one of the many stories he'd rewritten upon arrival in America. He preferred to focus on how well he'd dressed back then. The sharp creases in his linen slacks. Panama shirt starched as crisp as *kassav*. The collar tips as hard and pointed as sharks' teeth that would later devour daring or stupid Haitian boat people. From his open collar, a hypnotic gold chain beckoned to passersby. He flashed new greenbacks that hid his wad of ratty Haitian *goud*. The bills tempted beggars, hungry hookers, and ambitious marriage-age schoolgirls with no acceptable suitors. Not that he was suitable. But he looked like he could get somewhere.

Yet he'd always known that calamity, not his good looks and exquisite dress, had forced Marie-Ange into his embrace for protection. Fear tightened around her waist, forced her to bend over his left forearm, allowed him to give her the most painless, pleasure-filled, doggy-style fuck any virgin had ever experienced. He had not expected the day to end that way, but, a natural opportunist, he was always ready for the unexpected. He was one of the first to see the eight armored trucks along the Palais Nacional road, carrying expendable blue-black Haitian soldiers strapped with U.S.-supplied machine guns. Behind them, an American exported tanker and a band of Union Jack–bolstered combatants stomped the dirt road smooth, ready for a fight. Many assumed that this was just another episode of grandstanding by the newly appointed president for life Jean-Claude Duvalier. But it turned out to be one of many attempts to overthrow the demon president bent on slaughtering his real and imagined enemies and terrorizing ordinary citizens. It was

merely a single song set to play over and over again on the aging record player in Bar Caimite.

Because baton blows were hard to count amid chaos, Lucien had paid less attention to the potential eruption of random beatings of innocent street peddlers and truants. Instead, he looked at the ground in front of the bar near his left foot, where he had scattered just enough sugar to draw out a line of soldier ants. These he counted obsessively while waiting for dropped treasure. He would forever advise those under his care or influence to look down when walking so they would never miss dropped coins or bills. Standing outside his own bar, having counted women, money, and ants, he would catalog the shoes of polished private schoolgirls.

Their footwear boasted water droplets from the lush wet grass of the school grounds. Sturdy English garden greenery taunted the browning tufts of weeds drying out on the lawn of the national palace. Both greens mocked the gray dust of the rest of Port au Prince's streets, where the only verdure to be seen were the plantains lounging on market tables. If Lucien had been paying attention to the landscape, he would have been counting the disappearing trees, an occupation that would have grown easier with each passing season until Haiti's trees quickly became endangered and then extinct. But he'd been more concerned with the shoes that would bring his beloved to him.

A third of the girls wore the same standard-issue Mary Janes purchased from a flabby market woman with New York ties—Buster Browns with chunky rubber soles and cutesy patent leather low block heels. Some sported the odd white Keds for the one day of mandatory physical education in which they were forced to participate. Lucien knew how many shoes each girl owned. Most of them were awarded three different pairs at the beginning of every school year. Everyday BBs, ineffective cloth-topped sneakers that sucked up street dust like a Hoover, and patent leather for church. The church pairs were so shiny

the girls could use them as mirrors for applying Vaseline to their lips. Beyond his obsessive need to count, he wasn't interested in these. He waited to spy the pair of matte leather French kitten heels better suited to a teacher than a student. But even the teachers at the most expensive Catholic school in Port au Prince couldn't afford to buy them. The shoes Marie-Ange sported were one of many pairs purchased by her father during his presidential trips through Paris en route to Switzerland.

After counting the shoes and the girls, Lucien counted the days of the week on his fingers. On this day, the day of the coup attempt, he confirmed that it was indeed Friday. Bored but patient, he even started to count the boys, scrutinizing the face of one, Marie-Ange's baby brother, to deduce if something had happened to make her late. Had their father unexpectedly sent his chauffer on this particular Friday? Did he forewarn her of what the line of soldiers had been planning? The boy's face surrendered no clues. Instead, his attire reminded Lucien of himself as a schoolboy, in a white shirt, plaid tie, and shorts too short for an adolescent boy; they exposed his legs and thighs that were more curvaceous and elegant than a girl's. As he thought back to those times, he heard someone whisper, *I am nothing*. The soft sound came from within and resonated outward. He needed to count.

He looked over his shoulder into the bar behind him, taking inventory of the patrons. Startled, he turned around fully to recount the women leaning over and chatting up men, deliberately doling out copious amounts of cleavage. He counted the ones sitting in the laps of patrons, throwing back shots of diluted rum. One of them was missing, but so was one of his regulars, a sloppy-fat gray-haired white soldier who paid a monthly retainer. Lucien heaved his relief without letting on that he had been worried. He turned back around so he would not miss Marie-Ange passing by.

Growing impatient, Lucien started walking toward Marie-

Ange as soon as he spotted her distinctive shoes amid the early-dismissed upperclassmen. She was still at least five hundred yards behind, making her way down the last green slope. His headstart allowed him to make it to the bakery, where he would watch her enter to secure the pastries for which he had prepaid. Given her status and wealth as the daughter of one of President Duvalier's most trusted generals, he didn't want her to see him handling dirty bills. He knew that she would refuse to accept a gift from him, a hang-about nearly a decade her senior with no known profession.

He would never meet her standards. He was a vagabond—a dead one, if her father ever caught a whiff of him on her uniform. The general would know. Her father had first figured out that she went to the bakery on Fridays by sniffing her imported cream cardigan. He could smell the butter, flour, and even the salt water and oven heat that was used to make her preferred patties. Papi General had spies in the area, failed ones who told him only what Lucien had paid them to say about his distant liaisons with Marie-Ange. Which is to say they told the general nothing except what she had eaten, if she had also opted for a beverage, and whether she had shared with her younger siblings. Dirty money aside, Lucien never wanted Marie-Ange to see him deep in one of his counting spells. If he'd had to pay the girl behind the counter in Marie-Ange's presence, she would have misjudged him as a penny-pincher instead of the well-dressed, mysteriously moneyed suitor she couldn't look in the eyes.

Lucien entered the bakery and leaned against a tall, skinny refrigerator that grunted as it forcibly slurped electricity from the generator like a thick milkshake through a stirrer straw. He stared at the wind chimes that would announce her arrival. When they finally tinkled, he watched as she walked in with three of her little sisters and her youngest brother. He winked at the boy to disarm his disgusted, dismissive stare.

He turned his attention to the baker, who handed Marie-Ange the same pastries she always ordered. She nodded gratefully and gracefully as she handed a bag to each of her siblings and kept one for herself. He was glad to see the children run out when they heard the sound of military trucks passing. They were hoping to glimpse their father driving by on his way home, so they wouldn't have to walk. If they saw him, they knew to make excuses for Marie-Ange, who stayed behind shamelessly pretending to avoid Lucien's stare. The trucks were headed toward the capitol instead of away from it, which was unusual. Lucien and Marie-Ange knew something was amiss when they saw her siblings freeze in the doorway. He let her walk outside alone, so he wouldn't be accosted by her father. He followed when she started to run in the direction her siblings were sprinting. Spotting confusion up ahead, he ran behind her. He was on her heels immediately and took the opportunity to hold her waist to guide her away from the dustup. They lost the children they were trying to catch up to amid the running shop owners and the army trucks that tried to speed through thick traffic. Even with the cars giving them priority passage, the envoy could go only twenty to thirty miles per hour in short sprints.

With one swift movement Lucien swooped Marie-Ange up and over his shoulder and accelerated in the opposite direction to get her to safety. Although she would never learn how, she would eventually admit to herself that, in the years she'd grown from girl to near woman, Lucien had followed her even to the safe place her father had chosen for such an occasion as this. She fell asleep in the crook of his arm, in the most secure place she'd ever known, a place so far outside Port au Prince it could have been another country.

In the morning, Lucien woke Marie-Ange and handed her the traditional remedy for extreme shock: equally traumatizing bitter black coffee in a covered *emaillé* cup. He watched her

eyes flicker as she tried to recognize the squat hut where she'd slept. The countryside that buffered Port au Prince was equally unfamiliar. He could see that she recognized two people—him and her godmother, Nen-nen, who was safety itself. The newly bound couple would spend nearly a year hiding there, too afraid to let anyone know where the general's daughter was after he had been "disappeared" or assassinated. There were rumors of both and one equaled the other. Lucien and Marie-Ange assumed that her siblings had met the same fate, gorged on by the indiscriminately lustful vampiric militia who fed on the blood of children and adults alike.

When Lucien recounted the story of his immigration to New York, he liked to say that his parents had rescued him from an economically declining dictatorship. He'd left Haiti right after Papa Doc had died, making his vicious nineteen-year-old son president. In less than a decade Lucien would opine on the sensationalism of America's six o'clock news that dubbed the juvenile president "Baby Doc," trivializing the experience of those brutalized, erased, or massacred throughout Haiti. Lucien's parents had really rescued their grandchildren from the trouble they'd known Lucien had gotten himself into back home. In fact, he'd immigrated when Haiti was still a country much like other Caribbean islands—pretty beaches cradling neat hotels that rose like champagne glasses on glittering trays. Behind the paradise, mean dirt roads, hungry hovels, squat donkeys, and skinny cows held themselves together as sturdily and desperately as the proud, undernourished dark waiters serving maraschino-cherry-laden Shirley Temples to the bratty children of French and American tourists.

He'd never bothered to analyze why his parents had left him behind. It was common for immigrating parents to leave their kids while establishing themselves unencumbered in a new and unfamiliar place. Mothers and fathers would promise to send for their children when they reached school age and ex-

pensive all-day American childcare was no longer necessary. They would excuse themselves for leaving the children a little bit longer while they amassed enough to rent a proper apartment or even buy a house. By that time, it was too late to try to integrate an adolescent into such a new environment. Sometimes they decided to spare themselves the embarrassment of a rebellious teenager's behavior. They still sent hefty remittances to the relatives caring for and putting up with lost, resentful, and recalcitrant children. They absolved themselves of the sin of abandonment that left their children with oozing wounds that would never close.

I am nothing.

Lucien had opted to become what he'd believed his parents had seen in him even as an infant—a wild, soiled boy whose insides would never be as clean as his perfect light skin. He'd grown up thinking of them as the source of the countless luxuries he'd enjoyed all his life, and becoming the child his parents had written off as a worthless and shameless embarrassment. It was too late to make him into the son they would have liked to bring to the United States much earlier for schooling. Instead, by the time he'd gotten his passport and plane ticket, he'd been living as deep in rural Haiti's soil as the mahogany tree roots surrounding the cement-block hut. His pregnant wife was still nursing their first child. He didn't see anything wrong with his circumstances and was comfortable with the fact that he had squandered his elite seminary education to pimp hopeless women at a brothel watering hole. Earning nothing but dust in Bois Droit, he manipulated his parents into listening to well-crafted recorded messages. The cassette tape missives did not require the flawless French and impeccable penmanship of handwritten letters. He was capable of both, but the tapes and photographs messaged the intimacy and urgency he wanted to convey.

He'd choreographed poses for the photos of him and Marie-

Ange under an emaciated almond tree with their dusty bare legs evidencing their desperation. They were holding hands, her head on his chest, his free hand on her belly. He knew that these would scare his parents into rushing him to the States. They were nearly as incensed at the sight of their high-yellow son with a beautiful brown country dweller as they were at the story of her escape from Port au Prince amid a failed coup d'état. That her father was one of Duvalier's closest generals was nearly as frightening as the fact that he had been disappeared. Lucien knew the things that would tug at his parents' hearts as they weighed their decision to bring him to America. Entire families had been known to vanish in the wake of a patriarch's assassination. To add to their fear and worry, he'd considered counting coins in the background while Marie-Ange recorded the section of the message he'd scripted for her. But her succinct explanation of what had happened to her father sufficed. He preferred to count in private and in his head anyway. He had learned to dismiss the breath at the back of his neck eschewing the foreign yet familiar words, *I am nothing. Nothing—until I count*.

Zero, un, deux, trois . . . He always started at zero. He'd counted the many coins and then the soiled wrinkled bills that resisted his attempts to smooth them out. "This is enough to get me into town to pick up the money transfer."

"Are you sure they sent the papers as well?"

"Guaranteed. With this belly"—he ran his hand along the width of her stomach—"they would be cruel not to. I'm going and soon so will you."

"And my children. I am not leaving them behind." Marie-Ange cast a glance at Veille, their first daughter who had not yet turned one.

"We'll all be together. I won't let them leave my girls behind. Or my boy." He patted her stomach again.

"Girls. I can feel it. This one is a girl too. Nen-nen also said—"

"You listen to that old woman."

"Yes, I do. Do you have any idea how much magic is keeping us safe here?"

"Ezili. I know, I know." He was tired of hearing about deities masked as saints. He especially despised Ezili, the goddess who exerted her dominance over men.

"You know, but you don't believe. Someday you will. Mark my words."

"I believe. I just don't worship. I won't submit."

"You sound like my father," she said for him to hear. Under her breath she whispered, "But you'll never be the man he was." She didn't articulate the rest of what she was thinking, that she was pregnant with a baby in her arms only because he was her ticket out of hell's hunger and the devil's danger.

"I couldn't bow down to anyone, even at the seminary."

"Anyone except me."

"Precisely."

"To do that, you must love her too."

"As long as she gets me to New York, I'll do whatever she requires."

"Go then."

"I'm not leaving yet. I have to take a bag with me in case I can't get a bus to come back tonight." He silently enumerated everything that would be needed.

LUCIEN COULD tell that his parents did not recognize him as he came down the Jetway at JFK Airport, despite having seen the carefully orchestrated photos he'd sent. He barely recognized them in their heavy coats, wool hats pulled down over their eyebrows, and scarves wrapped up to their bottom lips. Rather than hug him, they helped him put on his coat, each one holding a sleeve as an excuse to touch him. But he felt nothing even when skin met skin. Especially then. What he felt were the

tears that arose from nowhere inside him. He swallowed them with the words he didn't acknowledge, *I am nothing*.

Within a week of his arrival, he was rolling coins into long bank-issued paper tubes. He licked his lips as he counted over and over the tips he'd earned as a newspaper delivery boy. He contemplated how he would miss them when he started working his manly job as a steelworker at a plant in New Jersey that was too far to get to by bus and train. Only two months later, a week before he started work, he made a trip back to Haiti to hold his first child again and to have reassuring sex with Marie-Ange. He stayed long enough to rub the sides of her stomach and the small of her back when she went into labor with what neither of them knew at the time would be twins. A year later, he imported her and their three baby daughters to New York.

He loved that there were four of them, four women specifically, enough to count and to manage. A lot to feed, but Marie-Ange would start working as soon as they could find childcare for their girls. They agreed that they would not depend on his parents. They didn't even want to continue cramming their family of five into the small apartment. They could not have predicted that the upper Manhattan tenement would someday be turned into luxury housing for Columbia University professors. Anxious to be out from under the strangers who were his parents, Lucien made the right connections with the lower Mob loan sharks who ran the union at the steel plant where he worked. From them he secured a loan for the down payment on a house in South Ozone Park, Queens. Once established, he and Marie-Ange inadvertently helped transform the once Italian neighborhood into a mixed immigrant community of primarily Caribbeans.

Through word of mouth about the compassionate and savvy young couple, newly arrived Haitians—mostly distant family members at first—flocked to SOP as they tried to find their way in their new country. Lucien had been the first to call

the house Kay Manman Mwen, "my mother's house," KAM for short. The name stuck, and over the years he capitalized on what it had become: a welcome center, restaurant, motel, halfway house, off-the-books job brokerage, legal office, and casino. Veille, Clair, and Dor, born in that order, were Lucien's motivation to hustle and secure his foothold in New York. He never liked the city. He always longed to return home to Port au Prince, where he could stretch his legs while leaning against the doorframe of Bar Caimite, counting ill- and easily gotten gains from gambling and pimping. But his girls, which included Marie-Ange, were different. They were enough. They would always be enough to keep him in America, to make him happy in a hostile place. For them and his precious house he'd sweat in 150-degree steam at the plant. He would lose all of them, his three daughters, Marie-Ange, and his house, one decade at a time. He knew because he'd counted the time to the day.

The house was the last to be taken from him.

"A charming, compulsively readable, romantically suspenseful novel about . . . the courage it takes to start over."—**TOM PERROTTA**

Super Host

a novel

Kate Russo

PUTNAM
EST. 1838
G. P. Putnam's Sons
Publishers Since 1838
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[CIP TK]

Printed in the United States of America
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

BOOK DESIGN BY KRISTIN DEL ROSARIO

Interior art: House pattern by name/Shutterstock.com

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THE DEMONS YOU'RE STUCK WITH

In the hierarchy of linen stains, blood is at the top. Everyone thinks semen is the worst, but they're wrong. They only think this because of that popular TV show where inspectors take a black light to a hotel room and it lights up neon yellow, indicating bodily fluids all over the bedding. Since that report, people automatically throw off the bedspread in hotel rooms, assuming it's drenched in some stranger's spunk. It probably is; that's why Bennett Driscoll prefers to use duvet covers in his rentable four-bed house. Soap, hot water, and a rigorous spin cycle will scrub all the manhood out of a duvet cover. It's the stains you can detect with the naked eye that are the real problem. When Bennett throws back the duvets on checkout day, it's the sight of blood he fears most.

Fuck.

And there they are, halfway down the fitted sheet. Only a couple drops' worth, but on Bennett's bright white sheets they stand out like

a red scarf discarded in snow. Their removal will require bleach and a lot of scrubbing. Recently he bought a nailbrush or, for his purposes, a blood brush, to combat the really stubborn stains. In the beginning, he would just throw away the visibly soiled sheets and buy new ones, but now a year into renting out his suburban London house on AirBed, he has thrown away five sets of perfectly good sheets. Bleach is cheaper. He pulls the fitted sheet up from the corners, wadding it into a ball in the center of the bed. If the blood has transferred onto the mattress pad, that's double the work.

Dammit.

Recently, Bennett was awarded the status of "Super Host" on the AirBed website—an honor he earned for having a quick response rate and excellent reviews. Though it's never been his aspiration to become a host, he'd be lying if he said that the little medal next to his picture didn't fill him with pride. Until two years ago, Bennett was a full-time artist who never stuttered over answering the question, "What do you do?" In fact, nobody ever needed to ask him. He was the well-known painter, Bennett Driscoll. Everyone knew that. Okay, maybe not everyone, but enough people that he didn't have to worry about renting out his house to tourists. Unfortunately, things change, tastes change. It used to be that anything he painted would sell. In 2002, there was a waiting list. Now, sixteen years later, there are more than a hundred of his paintings in storage. His last solo show was in 2013. The critic for the *Guardian* wrote, "Driscoll cares so little for the current trends in painting that one wonders if he concerns himself with the contemporary art world at all." That pissed Bennett off, mostly because it was true. But a bad review is better than no review, he realizes that now. Since art critics don't review his work anymore, Bennett pores over each AirBed review as though it's the *Sunday*

Times, scouring each for a new and nuanced understanding of his hosting skills. More often than not, they go like this: "Bennett was a welcoming and gracious host," "Bennett was very helpful," "Bennett has a beautiful home," and "Looking forward to staying at Bennett's house again the next time we're in London." They're not exactly *Times* quality, but nevertheless, it's nice to be reviewed favorably. Hey, it's nice to be reviewed, full stop. Sometimes he wonders if his ex-wife, Eliza, ever goes on AirBed to read his reviews. Probably not. She left a year ago to live in America with a hedge fund manager named Jeff, taking with her the steady salary from her publishing job that, until the divorce, had been paying their bills. That's when Bennett decided to move into the studio at the end of the garden and rent out the family home on AirBed. He doesn't think his Super Host status would impress Eliza. Almost nothing impressed her. He wishes someone would write, "Bennett has a beautiful home. He was the perfect host. No, the perfect man—exciting, interesting, and handsome in equal measure. He would make an excellent husband. I even bought several of his paintings because I believe they are the pinnacle of contemporary art." No such luck yet.

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

As he rounds the corner from the bedroom to the hallway, hip-hop is quietly thumping in the distance from the other side of the house. He carries the big wad of sheets down the wide staircase, careful to peer ahead of him from the side of the load. Walking through the large, open-plan living space, the music grows louder. Bennett sings along confidently, although he can't quite bring himself to rap the lyrics. Instead, the words always come out melodically, each one dragging on a millisecond longer than it should. He discovered rap music around

the same time he started letting the house, around the same time Eliza moved out. Though unable to name a single song, she claimed to hate hip-hop.

On the night he discovered the rapper Roots Manuva, he'd been out to dinner with his daughter. They were at some trendy Shoreditch restaurant, the kind of place that claims to sell street food, but in the comfort of the indoors. The music was, of course, too loud—he knew that even without Eliza there to point it out. He had to shout to be heard, which was difficult considering the task at hand was explaining to Mia why her mother had just fucked off to New York. At one point, Mia, needing to collect herself, went to the ladies' room. He hated the idea of his daughter crying alone in a stall, but he sat patiently, fighting the urge to follow her into the women's loo and check on her. At the time he was one of the few people on earth for whom the mobile phone wasn't an obvious distraction. Why pull out your phone unless you needed to make a phone call? Instead, in need of entertainment, he started listening intently to the restaurant's music:

Taskmaster burst the bionic zit-splitter
Breakneck speed we drown ten pints of bitter
We lean all day and some say that ain't productive
But that depend upon the demons that you're stuck with

He had no idea what a "bionic zit-splitter" was (he still doesn't), but something about how we "lean all day," and "the demons that you're stuck with" resonated.

"I can't stand still with you anymore," Eliza had said two weeks previously. Divorce papers had since been served. He was now doing his best to explain to his eighteen-year-old daughter something even

he couldn't understand himself. Had he been standing still for the last twenty years and not realized it? Their whole marriage, he thought he was being reliable—a good father and husband. That's what women wanted, right? Reliability? *Wait*. He should be *asking* women what they want, not *assuming*. Eliza was forever pointing that out. His own father was anything but reliable. Well, that's not strictly true, he was reliably drunk all the time—a miserable man who was only happy when he was listing all the ways you'd wronged him. Bennett *was* happy, or so he thought. He loved being an artist. He loved Eliza and Mia with all his heart. Why not stand still? Where else would he want to go? Eliza thought he was stuck. "The demons that you're stuck with . . ." What were these demons that destroyed his marriage and why hadn't he noticed them? This was what he was pondering when Mia returned to the table.

"What is this song?" he asked her.

A die-hard Father John Misty fan, she just shrugged in ignorance as she sat down.

"Excuse me?" Bennett stopped a server moving quickly by with a plate of Mexican grilled corncobs. "Can you tell me what this song is?"

Mia, embarrassed, put her face in her hands.

"Roots Manuva, 'Witness,'" the girl said, her tone implying *Duh*.

Bennett pulled out the little black notebook he kept in his blazer pocket and wrote down "Routes Maneuver. Witness." He had no idea which was the artist and which was the song title, but he'd figure that out later on Google.

At the end of the night, Mia burst into tears as they hugged good night. Though she'd only moved away from home the previous month, she told him she'd move back to keep him company.

"No, I won't let you do that," he said, holding her tight. "Besides,

without your mum's income, I'm going to have to put the house on AirBed."

She cried even harder at this. The guilt weighed heavily on him. He might be stuck, but he wasn't going to let Mia be stuck with him.

He went home that night and bought Roots Manuva's "Witness" on iTunes. He played it twenty times on repeat before finally going to bed.

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

The music fades out as he reaches the laundry room—an annex off the kitchen with a large, American-style washer and dryer. When Eliza ordered the appliances from John Lewis ten years ago, he thought she was crazy. The environmental impact *alone* of these fucking things! Eliza loved to live like an American in London. Big house. Big car. Big fuckin' washer and dryer. "They understand convenience in America," she liked to say. "They don't *enjoy* suffering over there." It had long been Eliza's belief that misery was Bennett's preferred mode. And not just him, but all British men. All that floppy-haired, self-deprecating, Hugh Grant nonsense from the nineties had penetrated their psyches and they were all irreparably damaged. But, eventually, the car, the house, and the washer/dryer were no longer enough. Eliza needed an actual American man.

Bennett spreads the fitted sheet over the top of the dryer. After pulling down a bottle of bleach from the shelf overhead, he pours a little over the stain. Grabbing the blood brush, he braces himself by stepping back on one leg to get more traction. The dryer rocks back and forth as he scrubs, a few strands of hair falling down in front of his eyes. He's been lucky to keep a lot of his hair, though it's thinning on top. His solution is to brush it back. A little product usually holds

it in place. Eliza found the product sticky. Bennett finds satisfaction in the fact that her new bloke, Jeff, is completely bald with a shiny dome to match his shiny, fitted suits. *Twat.*

Bennett stops scrubbing and regards his progress. Barely a dent. He goes back at it, bending his front knee more to bring himself closer to enemy number one. Engaged with the task in hand, it startles him when his phone, in the front pocket of his jeans, starts to ring.

"Mia! Hi, darling." It's particularly difficult to control his heart swells, these days.

"You're coming tonight, right?" She chirps, skipping the pleasantries.

"Of course, I am." He starts working at the stain again with his free hand. "I've just got to get the new guest checked in, then I'll be on my way."

"Ugh. Okay." Mia makes no secret of her disapproval regarding her childhood home being on AirBed.

"She'll be here at four. I'll give her the keys and then catch the Tube. Should be there about half-five. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"I can't wait to see your paintings."

"I had a good crit this morning."

"Great!" He can't help but beam with pride.

"But the tutor told everyone in the crit that Bennett Driscoll is my dad. Cunt."

"Is that so bad?"

"I don't want to ride your coattails."

"I'm currently scrubbing blood out of bedsheets. Those coattails?"

"Eww, Dad! I'll kill you if you tell any of my classmates about that."

He smiles wide. Horrifying his daughter has long been one of his

greatest pleasures. At nineteen, it is easier than ever to send her into frothy outrage. Why would Bennett Driscoll confide to a bunch of art school pricks that he's letting his house on AirBed? Is there anything worse than admitting that his paintings no longer sell? He'd rather watch Eliza and Jeff have sex. On second thought, no he wouldn't.

"Can I take you out for dinner after?" he asks.

"Can I bring Gemma and Richard?"

No. No. No. No.

"Of course, darling, whoever you want to bring."

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

His next guest is Alicia, a young woman from New York. Originally, she said she'd be traveling with a group of friends, which gave Bennett pause. He prefers families, but there is something trustworthy, maybe even a little naive, about Alicia in her smiley profile picture in front of the Brooklyn Bridge. When she booked the house a month back, she said there could be anywhere between three to five friends with her, she wasn't yet sure of the numbers. Bennett had explained that the house slept six comfortably, but please don't exceed eight people. **That won't be a problem**, she wrote back two days ago, explaining that it would be only her staying after all. He didn't want to pry, but what was a twentysomething young woman going to do in his big, suburban house all alone? It had been a good size house for three people. It's an enormous house for one, as he knows all too well.

That first day, when it came to him that Eliza and Mia were gone for good, the silence had been unbearable. Hip-hop now constantly follows him around the house like an entourage, sweeping the solitude under the carpet. He felt kind of silly the morning after he listened to "Witness" twenty times in a row. Bennett suspected that what Roots

Manuva was rapping about probably had to do with racial injustice and that he shouldn't equate those "demons" with his own, but he couldn't help it. He loved the song's sense of urgency and before long he owned the entire Roots Manuva catalog. The old Bennett was a Billy Bragg kind of guy. A Jeff Buckley fan. All that "depressing, nostalgic wallowing," Eliza called it. Musical evidence that he'd never change. He'd spent his whole life avoiding the things that weren't "meant for him," diligently adhering to the middle-class white man's algorithm for taste and respectability. But staying the course is rubbish, he's decided. He's trying not to "give any fucks" (a phrase Mia taught him) but in reality, he gives so many fucks. Like, a truly debilitating number of fucks. He can't even work up the courage to tell anyone besides Mia (is there anyone besides Mia?) about his recent obsession with the rapper. What would they think? Is his newfound love of hip-hop a "fuck you" to Eliza? He tells himself, no, it's more than that . . . but yeah, sort of.

The older he gets, the more impossible it becomes to live in the present as Eliza wanted him to. The past is too vast to ignore and the present is too close, like staring at your pores in a magnified mirror. Last year, even his gallery of thirty years suggested that he'd be more valuable to them when he's dead. Libby Foster Gallery began representing him 1988, right after he graduated from the Royal College of Art, but over the last decade, his sales had waned. Libby insisted that it wasn't just him. Lots of artists were suffering from the economic downturn. Just before Eliza left, a letter from Libby had come through the post. "Dear Bennett," it read, "We regret to inform you that, after much thought, the gallery has decided to no longer represent living artists. Given rising rents in London, the time has come for us to give up our formal exhibition space and redirect our focus on representing

the estates of William Warren, Christopher Gray, and Tyson Allen Stewart in the art fair market."

He called Libby, immediately.

"You got the letter," she answered. "I love your work, Bennett. You know I do. But it's not selling, not right now. If interest piques in the future, the gallery would be very interested in representing your estate."

"You'll be interested in representing me when I'm dead?" he clarified.

"We no longer represent living artists, so, yes."

Fuck the present.

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

Alicia arrives right at four o'clock as planned, pulling her suitcase behind her. She has a thin frame and her straight, sandy-blond hair is in a ponytail. Her eyes are visibly tired through her thick tortoiseshell rimmed glasses. Bennett watches her approach through the front window of the living room. He likes to observe his guests as they arrive, hoping to catch some glimpse of their true selves before he greets them. Bundled up in a double-breasted navy blue wool coat, Alicia hunches over, dragging her suitcase up the pebbled drive. She bites her lower lip as though she intends to confess something when he opens the door. Since becoming profoundly lonely himself, Bennett now feels he can spot it easily in others. Alicia is lonely. Halfway to the door, she stops to tighten her ponytail by taking a section of hair in each hand and tugging. He remembers both Eliza and Mia would do this, too. He adored all their strange habits, all their alien feminine rituals. He can't help smiling to himself as he opens the front door.

Noticing his smile, she smiles back, relieved.

"You must be Alicia."

"Bennett?"

He nods. "Please, come in." Despite inviting her in, it takes him a moment to move out of the way. He's struck by her tired eyes, glazed and a bit dark. He's always been attracted to heavy eyes. Eliza, he thought, was always at her most beautiful at the end of a long day. Alicia steps forward with one foot, looking at him expectantly. He gestures grandly when he finally moves out of the way, revealing the large entryway and contemporary, open-plan living space.

She looks behind her and hoists her heavy suitcase over the front step.

Take the suitcase, you knob.

"Let me get that." Reaching for the handle, he grazes her hand; it's soft, but cold from the winter air. Uncomfortable with the sensual thoughts that are now suddenly and unwelcomely flooding his brain, he clears this throat. "I'll put this upstairs in the master bedroom. I assume that's where you'll want to sleep?" And now he's thinking about her lying naked in his bed.

Pervert.

He runs his hand over his hair, a nervous habit he's had since he can remember.

"I guess," she says, looking around the house. "This place is huge."

He smiles back from the bottom of the stairs, not quite sure how to respond.

"Where do you live now?" she asks.

Bennett points to the window behind her. Through the glass there's small building at the end of the garden, not much larger than a shed, though certainly more solid.

"Oh."

"You won't notice I'm there, I promise. I'm an artist. That's my live/work space."

Her eyes are drawn to the paintings on the walls around them. "Are these yours?"

"That one is." He points to large red and blue painting of an intricate pattern, not unlike a Persian carpet.

"Wow. Beautiful." She seems unsure of what else to say. "I feel bad taking up your house all by myself."

"You shouldn't. You paid for it." He starts up the stairs with the suitcase. Was that curt? he wonders. He turns to face her again. "Make yourself at home."

"All my friends backed out after I booked the place," she explains. "Nobody has any money at the moment."

He nods, understanding. "Any plans while you're here?"

"Hoping to see some old friends. I did my masters at LSE a few years ago."

Nostalgia, Bennett thinks. Everyone chases it. He can see that Alicia already knows her mistake: you can't go back.

"I'll get this upstairs," he says, pointing to the suitcase. "Then, I'll leave you to it. Obviously, you'll know where I am if you need anything."

"Great. Thanks," she says, wandering into the large kitchen.

He watches her as she aimlessly opens the cutlery drawer. When she looks up at him again, he grabs the bag's handle and hoists it up the remaining stairs.

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

Bennett opens the back gate of his garden onto Blenheim Road at 4:30. He tucks his white earbuds into his ears and spins the dial on his iPod.

He still uses the now-antiquated device that Eliza and Mia bought him for Christmas in 2006. "You can get rid of it, Dad. It won't hurt my feelings," Mia's told him many times. He can't throw away anything she's given him. In his studio, he still has the first little clay sculpture that she made him when she was four: a little bust of a man on a pedestal. He thinks it's supposed to be him, but he's never been quite sure. It's been sitting on the same windowsill for fifteen years, too brittle to move. "You can put all of your music on your phone now," she'd added, sounding more like the parent than the child. "It's easier." He hadn't used the iPod much when Eliza was around, mainly because they traveled most places together and he didn't need the distraction. Now that he is traveling everywhere solo, it's become his closest companion.

Turning onto Priory Ave., Bennett makes his way to the Tube. Bennett and Eliza bought the house in 1994. One of the few detached houses in Chiswick, Eliza's heart was set on it. It was the same year Bennett was nominated for the Turner Prize. He didn't win, but sales still skyrocketed. His series of life-size nudes reclining on intricate fabrics that reflected the rich history of textile design in London's Spitalfields neighborhood were an instant hit. He hadn't even needed a mortgage. When the crash of 2007 happened, they'd lost a lot of money, both in investments and paintings sales. Eliza's salary from publishing was thankfully steady, but the financial stress, Bennett now believes, was the beginning of the end. He was willing to forgo the nice dinners and shopping sprees at Selfridges, the giant appliances, and the fancy car so long as they were able to keep the home he'd made with his family. Maybe it would even be romantic. It wasn't that Eliza loved money more than she loved Bennett, but she felt he lacked the ambition it would take to get back on top. She was worried that he'd run out of good ideas. He was worried she was right. He still is.

He taps his Oyster card to the reader at the station and the gates open. Truth is, if he could have lived anywhere, he would have bought one of the old Victorian terraced houses in London's East End. Whitechapel, maybe, with all its history, its old shops, and the dark pubs. He'd grown up nearby in Hammersmith, and was desperate to leave the suburban feel of West London behind. During the nineties, he watched with jealousy as his artist friends cultivated a creative hub in the East End. Back then, he would travel the length of the District Line—west to east—at least three times a week, visiting studios and exhibitions. Once Mia was born, the journeys to Whitechapel felt impossible. Even his own studio in Ealing was difficult to get to. Eliza wanted him to spend more time with his daughter, but at the same time, was frustrated by his lack of productivity. And this was just one of many mind-fuck conundrums of their twenty-five-year marriage. When he suggested that they build him a studio in the back garden, Eliza was initially against it.

"It'll be an eyesore," she protested. "It will devalue the house."

"But we're not planning to sell the house," he'd replied. "Who cares about the value?"

She frowned at that. God knows why. He had thought she loved the house.

"You're constantly throwing up roadblocks," he said. "You have to help me solve problems, my love." He'd always called her "my love," thinking it was endearing. He was deeply wounded when, in the middle of a row last year, she told him she found it patronizing.

Lately, it's been hard to remember the good times with Eliza, but like a swift kick to the gut, those memories come flooding back every time he takes a seat on the Underground. From day one of their relationship, whenever they rode the Tube together, Eliza would slip her

arm through his and rest her head on his shoulder. He'd smooth her hair back and kiss her on the top of the head. Eliza always wore her hair down in long, thick, wavy brown curls. She never cut it, like so many women do when they get older. It always smelled of sweet pea blossoms. God, he loved that about her. She'd nuzzle into him and kiss him on the arm. Every damn time. These days, when he sits down on the train he looks like a lunatic entertaining an imaginary friend. Without Eliza to lean into, he sits awkwardly, shifting in his seat, unable to find the sweet spot. Today, he fiddles with the dial on his iPod, hoping to find the ideal volume to drown it all out.

He changes lines for King's Cross, the relatively new location for Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design, where Mia is in her first year studying painting. King's Cross would never have housed an art school when he was nineteen. Thirty-five years ago it was one of London's dirtiest, most transient neighborhoods, a gaping wound between Bloomsbury and Islington, filled with seedy pubs and even seedier hotels harboring tramps, drug dealers, and prostitutes. As a boy growing up in the leafy suburbs, hearing stories about King's Cross was like hearing stories about Vietnam: atrocities happened there, true, but at least it was far away. As he and his friends got older and started taking the Underground by themselves, trips to King's Cross became a rite of passage. It was so easy to tell your parents you were going to see a film in Leicester Square. King's Cross was only another four stops. He remembers the first time he and his friends—all of them fifteen—went there. Bennett was such a wimp that his mates didn't even tell him beforehand where they were going. He still remembers standing up when the speakers announced, "Leicester Square," and his sniggering friends remaining in their seats. He didn't have to ask where they were actually going. He already knew.

IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII

His mate Stuart nudged him as they rode up the escalator at King's Cross Station. "How much money you got?"

"I don't know. Thirty quid, maybe." He knew it was exactly that much. His neighbor, Mrs. Garvey, paid him thirty pounds to clean out her pet budgie's cage while she was on holiday.

"Bennett's got thirty," Stuart shouted down the escalator. "What can he get for that?"

The other boys, farther down the escalator, started laughing. Owen and Jay—idiots—were the masterminds of this mission. Stuart was the middleman, the one that communicated Owen and Jay's plans to Bennett. It was also Stuart's job to convince Bennett of everything they had in mind. The other three boys had tried going places without him before this, but as it turned out, Bennett Driscoll brought credibility to any scheme. Their parents were far more apt to give permission if they knew do-gooder Bennett was going, as well. "Such a lovely lad," they all said.

"He can get a blow job from that, I bet," Owen shouted up the escalator. No need to whisper. Nothing to be ashamed of.

"Wait, what?" Really, he shouldn't have been surprised. They'd been talking about prostitutes for weeks, ever since that night at Jay's house, when his brother, Neil, bought them beers and told them they were stupid to wait for the girls at Godolphin to put out. "Fifty quid will buy you everything you need," he'd assured them.

"My brother said his mate Jeremy got his finger up a girl's cunt for twenty," Jay said, adding a handy visual demonstration that involved sliding his index finger through a hole in his fist.

"Yeah, I brought the full fifty," Owen said, proudly.

"I don't want anything," Bennett said, regretting the statement immediately.

"Don't be a poof," Jay shouted loud enough for people on the down escalator to turn around, though he knew Bennett was anything but. He'd watched Bennett pine for Beatrice Calvert, the blue-eyed brunette whose dad taught English at their all-boys school. Bennett had worked out that she came to meet her dad after school on Mondays and Thursdays, so he joined the Shakespeare Society, which met then, and he'd have a reason to stick around. The problem was he hated Shakespeare. Hated him even more when Beatrice ultimately started going out with Jay a year later.

They exited the station into hot, thick summer air that smelled of cigarettes, vomit, and piss. At first glance, there seemed to be more tramps than prostitutes around, not that Bennett could tell the difference. According to Jay's brother, Neil, the prostitutes approached you. That was extent of their plan—wait for a prostitute to approach. They'd heard Caledonian Road was the best place, so that's where they went and stood around awkwardly—four teenage boys in Chelsea football gear, sticking out like dolphins on safari.

A woman in high heels and trench coat came toward them. Owen, confident, stepped forward. "She looks like a prossie," he said to his mates over his shoulder.

She looked him over without even breaking stride and walked straight past them. "Eat shit, you little twat."

This, Bennett thought, was probably the best outcome he could have hoped for. "We can probably still make the film, if we leave now," he suggested, hoping to capitalize on Owen's bruised ego.

"No fuckin' way, mate. I came here for pussy, not abuse."

They stood in silence for another fifteen minutes before a young woman in a tight black dress, clearly high as a kite, approached them. As she got closer, Bennett thought she couldn't be much older than they were. She looked bizarre, like a little girl playing fancy dress with her mother's makeup.

"You got money?" she asked Owen, her eyes straining for focus.

"I got fifty."

"Alright." She looked at the other three. "Wait. I'm not doin' all of you for fifty."

"We've got one hundred and eighty total," Jay chimed in.

Her eyes lit up. "Yeah, alright then." She led them toward Pentonville Road. She walked fast, both cold and jittery.

Bennett grabbed Stuart's arm and they lagged behind. He pulled out his wallet. "You can have my money. I'm not doing this."

"We know, mate. We need you to keep watch for coppers or angry pimps."

"You're serious?" There was really no worse task to assign Bennett, a scrawny kid with a reputation for being skittish, except for maybe fucking a prostitute.

"'Fraid so."

Owen already had his hand on the prostitute's bum as she led them down a dank mews with a metal door at the end of it. On the other side of the door was a dark hallway and an even darker staircase. The four boys followed her up the stairs, single file and silent, Bennett, of course, bringing up the rear. At the very top, four stories up, she opened another door where a skinhead stood. Bennett suspected he was the only person thinking about fire exits. The skinhead looked at Owen, then at the other three boys. To judge by his expression, he'd seen this a million times before.

The skinhead held out his hand for Owen's money. "Fifty quid. You pay first. You go in one at a time."

The prostitute was already in the room. Was it *her* room? It would be nice, Bennett thought, if she had her own room, at least. Jay and Stuart leaned up against the wall in the dingy hallway, so Bennett followed suit. A strip of flowery wallpaper came cascading down on his head when his back made contact with the wall. He was careful to keep his hands in front of him. Even though this was long before he learned about black light technology, he suspected these walls were covered in semen. The hallway reeked of weed, BO, and another smell that Bennett would now identify as sex, though he couldn't at the time. The three boys didn't say a word to each other. It wasn't long before they could hear a bed creaking. Then some moaning. It had to be Owen. The girl hadn't made so much as peep since she'd picked them up. In the hallway they looked at their feet. It was possible, Bennett hoped, that the other two were chickening out.

The creaking and moaning stopped and the skinhead asked, "Who's next?"

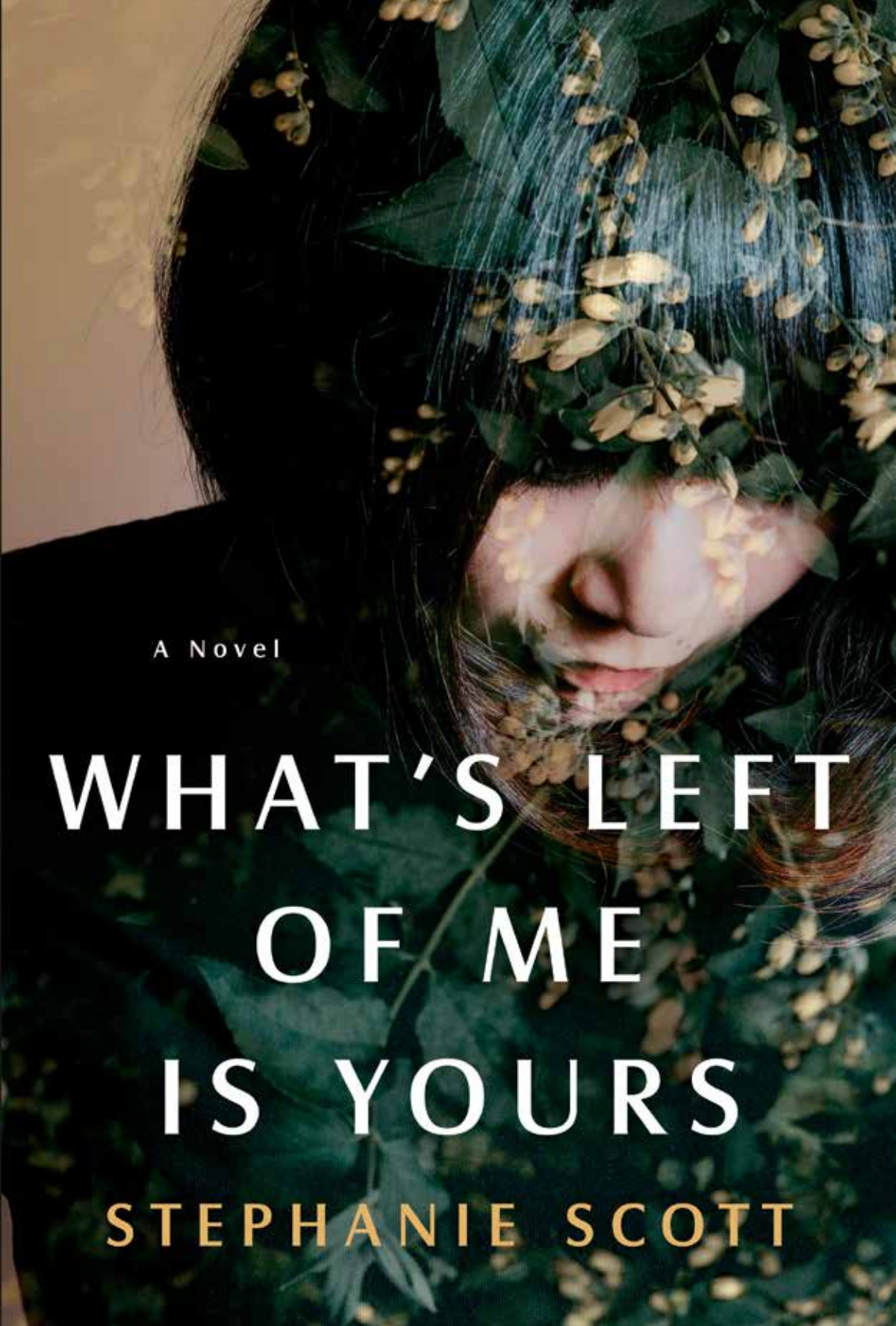
They all look at each other. The color had drained from Jay's and Stuart's faces.

Owen opened the door, buttoning his trousers. He didn't even look at his friends, just headed straight down the stairs.

Bennett immediately went after him—partly to check on his friend, but mostly to get the fuck out of there.

"If you're not going to pay, piss off," he heard the skinhead say to the other two. Seconds later, Jay's and Stuart's footsteps clattered down the stairs behind them.

Outside in the mews, Owen just kept walking, picking up enough speed that Bennett had to run to catch up.


A Novel
WHAT'S LEFT OF ME IS YOURS
STEPHANIE SCOTT

Book design by Maria Carella
Jacket photograph TK
Jacket design TK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Scott, Stephanie, 1983– author.
Title: What's left of me is yours : a novel / by Stephanie Scott.
Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, [2020]
Identifiers: LCCN 2019022477 (print) | LCCN 2019022478 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780385544702 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780385544719 (ebook) |
ISBN: 9780385546331 (open market)
Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.
Classification: LCC PR6119.C683 W47 2020 (print) | LCC PR6119.C683 (ebook) |
DDC 823/.92—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019022477
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019022478

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition

Prologue

Sarashima is a beautiful name; a name that now belongs only to me. I was not born with it, this name, but I have chosen to take it, because once it belonged to my mother.

It is customary upon meeting someone to explain who you are and where you come from, but whether you realize it or not, you already know me and you know my story. Look closely. Reach into the far corners of your mind and sift through the news clippings, bulletins, tabloid crimes, tucked away there. You will see me. I am the line at the end of an article; I am the final sentence ending with a full stop.

WAKARESASEYA AGENT GOES TOO FAR?
By Yu Yamada. Published: 6:30 p.m., 05/16/1994

The trial of Kaitarō Nakamura, the man accused of murdering Rina Satō, began today at the Tokyo District Court.

The case has attracted international attention due to the fact that the defendant, Nakamura, is an agent in the wakaresaseya or so-called "marriage breakup" industry, and has admitted that he was hired by the victim's husband, Osamu Satō, to seduce his wife, Rina Satō, and provide grounds for divorce.

Nakamura claims that he and the deceased fell in love and were planning to start a new life together. If convicted of murder, Nakamura faces a minimum 20-year prison sentence; the judges may even consider the death penalty.

Rina Satō's father, Yoshitake Sarashima, told reporters: "A business such as this which destroys peoples' lives should

not be allowed to operate in Tokyo. Rina was my only child and the heart of our family. I shall never get over her loss, nor forgive it."

Rina Satō is survived by a daughter of seven years old.

Can you remember when you first read this? Were you at home at your breakfast table or in the office, scanning the morning news? I can see your face as you read about my family; your brows drew together in a slight frown, a crinkle formed above your nose. Perhaps the smell of coffee was strong and reassuring in the air, for eventually you shook your head and turned the page. The world is full of strange things.

Wakaresaseya was not common in Japan when Kaitarō was drawn into my mother's life. The industry emerged out of a demand for its services, a demand that exists all over the world today. Look at the people around you: those you love, those who love you, those who want what you have. They can enter your life as easily as he entered mine.

Do you know now when we first met or where? Was it in the *Telegraph, New York Times, Le Monde, Sydney Morning Herald?* My story stopped there in the foreign press. Later articles focused on the marriage break-up industry itself and the agents who populate it, but none of them mentioned me. Lives to be rebuilt are always less interesting than lives destroyed. Even in Japan, I disappeared from the page.

Part One

When you look at the world with knowledge,
you realize that things are unchangeable and at the
same time are constantly being transformed.

—MISHIMA

Sumiko

WHAT I KNOW

- I was raised by my grandfather, Yoshi Sarashima.
- I lived with him in a white house in Meguro, Tokyo.
- In the evenings he would read to me.
- He told me every story but my own.

My grandfather was a lawyer; he was careful in his speech. Even when we were alone together in his study and I would perch on his lap tracing the creases in his leather armchair, or later, when I sat on a stool by his side, even then, he had a precision with words. I have kept faith with that precision to this day.

Grandpa read everything to me—Mishima, Sartre, Dumas, Tolstoy, Bashō, tales of his youth and duck hunting in Shimoda, and one book, *The Trial,* that became my favorite. The story begins like this: "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K."

When we read that line for the first time, Grandpa explained that the story was a translation. I was twelve years old, stretching out my fingers for a world beyond my own, and I reached out then to the yellowed page, stroking the written characters that spoke of something new. I read the opening aloud, summoning the figure of Josef K.: a lonely man, a man people would tell lies about.

As I grew older, I began to argue with Grandpa about *The Trial.* He told me other people fought over it too, that they fight about it even today—over the translation of one word in particular—*verleumdet.* To tell a lie. In some versions of the story, this word is

translated as "slander." Slander speaks of courts and accusations, of public reckoning; it has none of the childhood resonance of "telling lies." And yet, when I read this story for the first time, it was the translator's use of "telling lies" that fascinated me.

Lies, when they are first told, have a shadow quality to them, a gossamer texture that can wrap around a life. They have that feather-light essence of childhood, and my childhood was built on lies.

═

The summer before my mother died, we went to the sea. When I look back on that time, those months hold a sense of finality for me, not because that was the last holiday my mother and I would take together, but because it is the site of my last true memory.

Every year, as the August heat engulfed Tokyo, my family piled their suitcases onto a local train and headed for the coast. We went to Shimoda. Father remained in the city to work, but Grandpa Sarashima always came with us. Each time, he stopped at the same kiosk in the station to buy frozen clementines for the train, and in the metallic heat of the carriage Mama and I would wait impatiently for the fruit to soften so we could get at the pockets of sorbet within. Finally, when our chins were sticky with juice, Mama would turn to me in our little row of two and ask what I would like to do by the sea, just she and I, alone.

Our house on the peninsula was old, its wooden gateposts warped by the winds that peeled off the Pacific. As we climbed towards the rocky promontory at the top of the hill, the gates, dark and encrusted with salt, signaled that my home was near: Washikura—Eagle's Nest, the house overlooking the bay, between Mount Fuji and the sea.

Our country is built around mountains; people are piled up in concrete boxes, cages. To have land is rare, but the house in Shimoda had belonged to my family since before the war, and afterward my grandfather fought to keep it when everything else was lost.

Forest sweeps over the hills above the house. I was not allowed up there alone as a child, so when I looked at my mother on the train that summer she knew immediately what I would ask to do.

In the afternoons, Mama and I climbed high on the wooded slopes above Washikura. We watched the tea fields as they darkened before autumn. We lay back on the rocky black soil and breathed in the sharp resin of the pines. Some days, we heard the call of a sea eagle as it circled overhead.

Grandpa knew the forest but he never found us there. At four o'clock each afternoon, he would venture to the base of the hillside and call to us through the trees. He shouted our names: "Rina!" "Sumi!" Together, we nestled among the pines, giggling, as grandfather's voice wavered and fell.

I often heard Grandpa calling before Mama did, but I always waited for her signal to be quiet. On our last afternoon in the forest, I lay still, feeling the soft and steady puff of my mother's breath against my face. She pulled me against her and her breathing quieted and slowed. I opened my eyes and stared at her, at the dark lashes against her cheeks. I took in her pallor, her stillness. I heard my grandfather begin to call, his voice thin and distant. I snuggled closer, kissing her face, pushing through the coldness with my breath. Suddenly she smiled, her eyes still closed, and pressed a finger to her lips.

We no longer own our home, Washikura, on the outskirts of Shimoda; Grandpa sold it years ago. But when I go there today, climbing up through the undergrowth, I can feel my mother there beneath the trees. When I lie down on the ground, the pine needles sharp under my cheek, I imagine that the chill of the breeze is the stroke of her finger.

Rina

ATAMI

Rina stood in the garden of Washikura and looked out across the slopes and mountains stretching towards Mount Fuji, at the deep shadows forming on the forested hills. She thought of how the plates that created this peninsula had converged at Fuji-san millions of years ago, causing a land of volcanoes, earthquakes, and hot springs to rise from the sea.

The volcano was still active, she knew. On a clear day one could see vapor and smoke curling above the snow-covered peak, hinting at the new islands, plateaus, and peninsulas waiting within. But that summer, as Rina watched the slopes before her turn gradually from lime green to pomegranate to rust, she did not think of what was to come; she thought about her daughter kneeling beside Grandpa Yoshi in the garden, digging into the dark soil of the azaleas with her trowel, her face turned sullenly away from her mother. Rina looked up at the mountains watching over them, and beneath their quiet gaze she climbed into her red Nissan and drove to Atami.

At the crowded beachfront Rina stopped and looked for a space to park. Atami had become a place for pleasure-seekers. Salarymen flocked to its beaches, eager to supplement their existence in Tokyo with summer condos, shopping malls, and karaoke. Hotels capitalized on the natural hot springs, and buildings long ago replaced the trees. The forests of camphor and ferns that once surrounded the town were all cut back until little trace of them remained. Rina

left her car at the end of the beach and walked along the waterfront, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun as it glanced off the concrete.

"You came!"

At the sound of his voice, Rina turned. Kaitarō was walking across the beach towards her, barefoot in the sand. She smiled and watched his slow, loping stride.

"I was afraid you'd stood me up," he said as he reached her.

"You weren't afraid."

"I am when you're not with me," he replied.

Rina laughed and they began to walk towards the yachts bobbing against the blue of the sea. She stopped by an ice-cream stall advertising azuki, red bean flavor. At her side, Kaitarō passed his sandals from one hand to the other and reached into his pocket for some change.

"Just one, please."

Rina smiled at him. "My daughter loves these," she said as she bit into the ice cream, savoring the caramel sweetness of the beans. She felt Kaitarō's eyes on her and lowered her gaze.

"We can bring Sumiko here," he said.

"Impossible." Rina shifted as he stepped behind her. She felt the warmth of him at her back, his breath at her ear.

"Yoshi will not notice if we take her out for an afternoon."

"What will I tell her when this ends?"

"It won't end, Rina."

He drew her back against his chest and she dug her toes deep into the white sand, feeling the tiny grains sift between her red sandals and her skin.

"I shouldn't be here," she said, but her sentence ended in a shriek as he lifted her up into the air and over his shoulder.

"Oh my god!" she hissed, hitting at him with her fists. "What are you doing?" Rina gasped as her ice cream fell into the sand.

"There are too many people here," he said. "We can't talk."

"What are you, a child?"

Kaitarō grinned against her hip. "You bring out the worst in me."

"People are staring."

"I don't care," he said. And it was true, she thought, he really didn't.

They reached his car and he put her down. Rina could feel the blush rising in her cheeks; people were still looking at them. Kaitarō placed his palms on either side of her face. "Rina," he said, "you're with me today. Try to concentrate."

She took a deep breath and looked up at him. "I don't have long."

Rina caught glimpses of the view as they drove up into the hills above the town, following a narrow road that wove between the pines. The sea was a deep blue against the concrete of the bay, and along the slopes she could see the cypresses and cedars settling along the fringes of Atami, as though they would one day reclaim it.

They drove to a parking spot where a stone path led up onto the hillside. Rina tied her bobbed hair back with a handkerchief to protect it from the wind and then she joined Kaitarō on the slope. Together they climbed up to an orchard of natsumikan trees; the summer oranges hung low and heavy against the dark green shells of their leaves. Kaitarō found a spot for them in the grass and spread out the raincoat he had brought from the car. It was beige in the style of New York detectives, and Rina smiled; she liked to tease him about it. A few minutes later, however, as the cool of the breeze settled against the back of her neck, she felt a thread of unease. She had committed herself by coming with him. He wanted more from her, a great deal more, of that she was sure. Rina shifted away from him, pulling her skirt down over her knees. She sat farther back on the coat as he dug into his satchel.

Kaitarō looked up at her; he must have seen the nerves on her face but he just smiled, his right hand reaching to the bottom of the bag while Rina pressed her nails into the flesh of her palm.

"I brought this for you," he said.

She turned towards him to look at what he held in his hands: a Canon EOS 3500. Surprise pushed through her anxiety. She'd seen one in the back streets of Akihabara, looked at it in catalogs, but she had never held one.

"Go on," he said. "Take it. I thought we could do some work while we're up here."

"Work?"

"Don't you think it's time?"

Rina turned away. He brought this up persistently—the possibility that she might return to the photography career she'd once planned. But she was afraid: if you neglected something for long enough didn't it die?

"I found your essay, Rina," he said. "The one you published in *Exposure?*"

Rina bit her lip. "That was experimenting."

"It doesn't read that way."

"I wrote it just before I left the law program at Tōdai. Dad threw every copy out of the house."

"I can get you a copy."

"No need," she said, and she looked at him then. "I remember it."

Silently, he handed her the camera.

They moved through the orchard and lay down on the sheets of leaves. Rina watched him, her eyes following the speed of his movements, his fingers nimble as they slid across the bevel of the lens, selecting apertures to accentuate the natural palette of the hillside. For half an hour she remained still beside him, enjoying the rapid click of the shutter, feeling the weight of the camera in her palm. Then, slowly, she lifted the viewfinder of her Canon to see what he could see.

They finished photographing in color and then, gauging the light and shadows of the afternoon, switched to monochrome film, drawing the shapes of the leaves out through the filters of black and white. She turned to find Kaitarō propped up on his elbow watching her; he was waiting for her to take her shot. Rina narrowed her eyes at him and he grinned as he twisted the lens off his camera. She leaned towards him, watching as he reached into his satchel and drew out a new lens, holding it out to her, describing how he could capture the light drifting down to them.

Later, sitting barefoot on the grass, Rina reached out and plucked an orange from a branch. Kaitarō settled beside her as she

split the bright skin and pith of the fruit open with her thumbnail, releasing tiny droplets of zest into the air. She pulled it apart and handed half to him, sucking the sour liquid off her palm. As the sun sank lower on the horizon, Rina leaned back against his shoulder. She rested her cheek on the ridge of his collarbone and watched the light flickering between the trees.

A droplet of water fell onto Rina's hair followed by two more. It was not until the shower broke through the leaves that she rose to her feet. The storm had crept up on them. It was that way in the mountains; the undergrowth beckoned to the moisture in the air. Kaitarō threw his coat over both of them and she grabbed her sandals as they scrambled down the slope, awash with wet leaves, to his car. Streams of water cascaded down the windows and a white fog materialized over the hills, flattening the mountains into two dimensions before rendering them invisible. Neither of them turned the radio on; they sat in the silence as Kaitarō took her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers.

"I came third in the Fukase-Isono Photography Prize," he said. "They're going to feature one of my pieces in an exhibition. Will you come?"

"Where is it?" Rina asked, turning her head to look at him.

"A warehouse in Akihabara. If the art isn't to your taste I can always take you to Yabu Soba."

Rina smiled; he was so cunningly aware of her obsession with food.

"Don't mention the duck soba," she said, with mock severity.

"It would mean a lot to me if you would come."

She looked at him and the laughter faded from her eyes. "Then I will."

The rain slowed to a drizzle and stopped as the evening drew on. They got out of the car and approached the rails lining the road; they could see the sea emerging through the wisps of mist that lingered on the hillside.

Kaitarō put his arms around her and rubbed her shoulders to ward off the chill. "I should go," she said, but now she was reluctant to leave. "Kai"—she turned towards him—"about today . . ."

"You don't have to say anything."

"Thank you."

He brushed her hair away from her face and untied the damp handkerchief that held it in place. Rina watched as he put it in his pocket and she let him take it.

"I love you," he said.

Rina shifted in his arms. She tried to say something, but he shook his head, placing his fingers over her lips; his skin was rough where it touched her mouth.

"I do."

TOKYO

My mother was a photographer, before she became a wife. Each year when we went to the sea, Mama would play with me on the beach, taking roll after roll of film. Grandpa sent these off to Kodak to be made into Kodachrome slides, and in the autumn, as the leaves darkened and we returned to Tokyo, my mother would open a bottle of Coca-Cola at Grandpa's home in Meguro and we would watch the slides all at once on the projector.

I still have them, these home movies of sorts; they are in the basement of the Meguro house, filed away in narrow leather boxes. Sometimes I go down there to look at the slides. They are beautiful, each one a rectangular jewel encased in white card. I can see my mother in miniature biting the cone of an ice cream; me in the sand with my red bucket, my swimsuit damp from the sea; Grandpa sheltering under an umbrella, even though he is already in the shade.

I have other memories too, but they are not of Shimoda. These appear to me as glimpses and flashes. In my mind's eye, the line of the coast straightens, the rocky inlets of Shimoda are replaced by an open harbor, and I hear the slap of my feet on concrete as I run and run. There are moments of clarity, liquid scenes: I see a yacht on the waves, its sails stretched taut; I feel strong arms lifting me into the air; I turn away from the bright sun glinting off a camera lens; a man's hand offers me a cone of red bean ice cream, a man with long elegant fingers that do not belong to my father.

Sumiko

I have never found these images in my grandfather's basement, nor have I seen that harbor in any of our photographs. But sometimes, I wake in the night to the caramel scent of red beans. A breeze lingers in the air and there is an echo of people talking in the distance, but perhaps it is only the whir of the ceiling fan and the scent of buns left to cool in the kitchen, which Hannae, Grandpa's housekeeper, taught me to make.

I asked Grandpa once about these memories of mine. He said I was remembering our summers in Shimoda. When I continued to look at him, he laughed and motioned for me to sit beside him on the stool by his chair. He reached for a pile of books stacked on the edge of his shelves, his fingers tracing the hardbacks, paperbacks, and volumes of poetry. "Which one will it be today?" he asked.

Years later, I was standing in my grandfather's study when the lies that wrapped around my life finally began to unravel. I was due to give a talk to the final-year law students at Tōdai, and I was dressed in a navy suit, my hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail, immaculate but late, for I had lost my notes.

I remember that I was leaning over Grandpa's desk, casting the papers into disorder. I had passed the Japanese bar a year before and my legal apprenticeship with the Supreme Court in Wakō City was drawing to a close. I had just completed the final exams, so all my cases from the long months of rotations with judges, public prosecutors, and attorneys were stacked across every surface. Grandpa had gone to stay at an onsen with friends, but long before that he had ceded his office to me, too delighted by my professional choices and the job offer from Nomura & Higashino to question the invasion.

Crossing to the leather armchair in the corner of the room, I leafed through the files I'd left on the seat. Following my long daily commute home from Wakō, I often fell asleep reading there. In the past year I had taken on extra cases in an effort to stand out from the other trainees, and I'd worked hard to build up my network among the attorneys and prosecutors, but the lack of sleep was catching up with me.

I was kneeling on the floor, my hand outstretched towards a sheaf of papers that might have been my notes, when the phone started to ring. My life was in that room: certificates from childhood

and university, the framed newspaper article on Grandpa's most famous case, the folder on current events that he kept for me. Each morning before work, Grandpa would sit at the breakfast table, sipping his favorite cold noodles and cutting clippings from the day's news so I would not get caught out. I had read every article, every story in that room, except mine. I was so caught up in the paraphernalia of my life that I almost didn't hear it.

"Hello?" I said, picking up the phone.

"Good afternoon," the voice said. It was hesitant, female. "May I speak to Mr. Sarashima?"

I was distracted, so I mumbled into the receiver, glancing around the room. "I'm afraid he's in Hakone at the moment. What is this regarding?"

"Is this the home of Mr. Yoshitake Sarashima?"

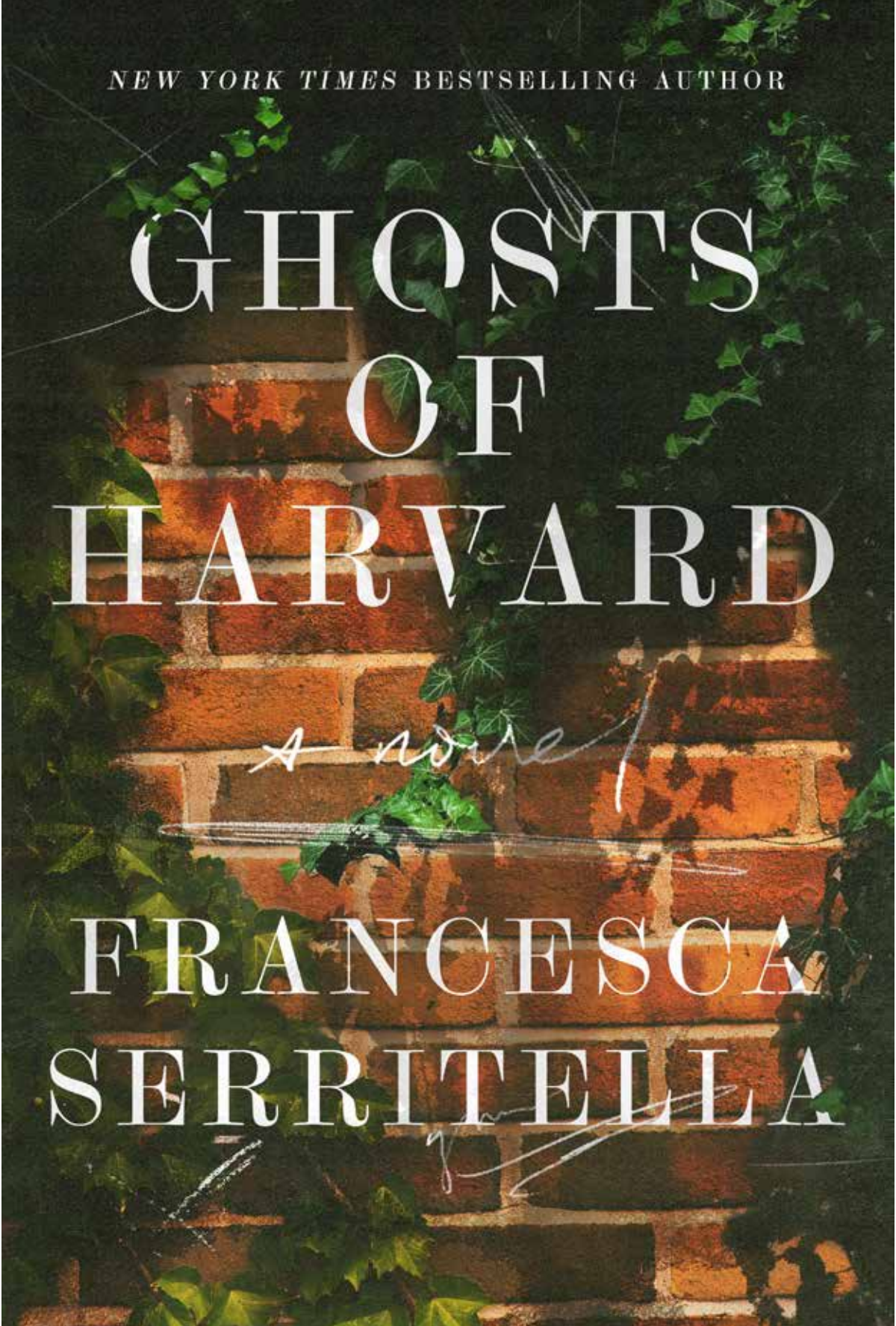
"Yes," I repeated. "I am his granddaughter, Sumiko. How can I help?"

"Is this the household and family of Mrs. Rina Satō?"

"My mother is dead," I replied, focusing on the phone and the person at the other end of the line. There was silence. For a moment I thought that the girl with the hesitant voice had hung up, but then I heard her take a breath. Over the earpiece she said, "I am calling from the Ministry of Justice, on behalf of the Prison Service. I am very sorry to disturb you, Miss Satō, but my call is regarding Kaitarō Nakamura."

"Who is that?" I asked.

As my voice traveled into the silence, the line went dead.


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
GHOSTS OF HARVARD
A novel
FRANCESCA SERRITELLA

Ghosts of Harvard is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published in the United States by Random House,
an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Serritella, Francesca Scottoline, author.
Title: Ghosts of Harvard: a novel / Francesca Serritella.
Description: First edition. | New York: Random House, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019040833 (print) | LCCN 2019040834 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780525510369 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780525510376 (ebook)
Subjects: GSAFD: Ghost stories.
Classification: LCC PS3619.E79 G48 2020 (print) | LCC PS3619.E79 (ebook) |
DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019040833
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019040834

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Book design by Patrice Sheridan

PROLOGUE

IT WAS SILLY to be afraid of falling, considering her intent, but Cady hadn't anticipated how windy it would be on the bridge. She crouched on the balustrade, her hands gripping it so tightly that white crescent moons shone in her fingernails. A gust blew her hair into her face, but she didn't dare lift her hand to move it aside.

She didn't want to fall, she wanted to jump.

After a moment of screwing up her courage, she commanded her legs to straighten and rose slowly to a standing position. She felt a shiver down her back, although the night was warm, or as warm as Cambridge in springtime could be. Across the river, she could see Harvard's campus, the familiar dormitories lit to perfection—but it wasn't perfect, Cady knew that. A glance downward at the black, lapping water of the Charles triggered a jolt of fear, but not enough to deter her. She had promised herself she'd go through with it and she would.

It was easier once she was standing tall. Her jelly legs felt stronger, her balance solid. The night air swept over her body in a caress. She breathed deeply, taking in the scent of the river and this campus in all its bitterness and beauty. She had never imagined she would end up in this place, feeling this way, but here she stood with a lump in her throat, preparing to say goodbye.

Cady closed her eyes and listened to the voices egging her on; they wouldn't let her turn back now. She wished she could slow this moment, but they were counting down—her time was almost up. She raised her chin, pulled her arms away from her sides, and wiggled her fingers in the air, reaching in the dark.

She poised, knees bent, and counted down the final seconds:

"Three, two, one—"

1

CADY HADN'T SET foot on Harvard's campus since her older brother's suicide. It was the place where Eric had eaten his last meal, dreamed his last dream, taken his last breath. The sight of the red brick dormitories, a picture postcard of collegiate perfection to so many, made her heart pound. For her, it wasn't a college, it was a haunted house.

And today she was moving in.

Cady couldn't let her doubts show as they drove into Harvard Yard. The sun-dappled quadrangle and its ancient elms were festooned with red balloons and a big crimson banner reading WELCOME HARVARD MMXXIII. She reminded herself that she'd wanted this, insisted on it, sworn that she could handle it, bet everything on it. Yet her knee bounced in the backseat as her father parked right outside her freshman dormitory, Weld Hall. She spied his face in the rearview mirror, his eyes weary, his jowls gray and unshaven. His sister, Cady's aunt Laura, sat in the front passenger seat. Cady's mother remained home in Pennsylvania, too angry at her daughter to come today. Maybe that was for the best; seeing her mother's face would've made Cady lose her nerve.

"Look at this parking spot, I told you I was good for something," Aunt Laura said with a wink. A car accident in her twenties had left

her paraplegic and she used a wheelchair, hence the parking privileges, although Cady never thought of her as handicapped. Laura possessed an irrepressibly positive outlook, a trait to be tested today. She had come ostensibly to lend the use of her giant van, but Cady knew it was to fill in for her mother, and she was grateful.

Her father yanked up the emergency brake and took a heavy breath. "Ready?"

Cady got out and helped Laura into her wheelchair as her father went around to the back of the van, their solemn mood at odds with everyone around them. On the front steps of her new dorm, she noticed a boy posing for a photograph with six smiling relatives. A blond girl standing in the bed of a pickup laughed as she pushed a boxed futon toward her father, who waited on the ground wearing a Harvard T-shirt with his cowboy boots and Stetson. A tall boy in a Lakers jersey wiped his mother's happy tears from her cheeks.

Cady envied them. They didn't have to fake it.

She joined her father at the rear of the van and saw him hauling out her green duffel bag. "Oh, I'll take that one," she said, she hoped not too eagerly.

"I got it, you get the roller suitcase."

"No, Dad, seriously." Cady grabbed hold of the nylon straps and he looked at her, puzzled. Then she deployed the head tilt and tone her mother had perfected. "Your *back*."

He held tight for a moment before he relented and let her have it. "All right, but only because I haven't been doing my exercises."

"When did my little bro get so old?" Laura teased. "You know, some people say back pain can be psychological."

"Then I blame you two," he said.

Cady's dorm room was Weld 23, only the second floor—*only,* she caught herself—she couldn't help but think of the height. The elevator was crowded, so her father decided to wait, but people made room for Aunt Laura to wheel on and Cady to squeeze in after her, hugging the duffel close to her chest. Laura held a laundry hamper filled with linens on her lap.

"Nice that they have an elevator," she said to Cady. It was her official duty to point out every good thing that day.

A middle-aged man overheard. "You know what was in this space before it was an elevator? JFK's freshman dorm room. He went from Weld to the White House." He slapped the back of his reed-thin son. "Might have the next president right here! Right, Max?"

His son's face reddened, and Cady's heart went out to him.

The elevator doors pinged open. Cady and Laura exited, and Laura broke into a grin. "God, can you imagine being here with a young JFK living down the hall? He must have been dreamy. He was probably a horn-dog even then, though."

The first image Cady could conjure of JFK was the last moment of his life, the grainy footage of him waving from that car. She tried to imagine him as a young man her age, full of the nerves and excitement she saw on every face around her. If someone had told him he would be president, would he have blushed like that boy in the elevator, or would he have owned it? Did he sense he was bound for greatness? If someone had told him he would be assassinated, would he still have wanted that future?

"Although," Laura continued, "if you were looking for sexy Kennedy ghosts, you should've gone to Brown. That's where John-John went. He was the best-looking of them all. I had such a crush on him."

Oh, right, Cady remembered, *his son, too*. And his brother. And his other brother sort of killed that girl—maybe that was what started it. A lot of ghosts in that cursed family. So far only one ghost in the Archers. Were they cursed, too?

They found the door to her room and Cady reached into the manila envelope to pull out her key, the metal so freshly cut that it felt sharp. She hesitated. It was real now. This place had already marked a turning point in her family's history, and her decision to come here marked another. She knew the pain she was causing her parents. It would either be worth it, or it would be another mistake she couldn't undo.

"You okay, honey?" Laura asked.

"Definitely." *Show no weakness,* she told herself.

Cady opened the door to an empty room. It had a funny layout, the sort that comes from retrofitting a larger space to become multiple rooms; the common room was long and narrow, with an off-center window on one end and the two bedrooms off the side. She crossed to the window and looked out.

"How's the view?" Laura asked, joining her.

"That's Grays over there, that was Eric's freshman dorm. I remember from when we moved him in."

"How does that make you feel?" Laura asked, sounding like a therapist.

"Good, close to him, in a way." Cady was surprised to hear the truth coming out of her mouth. "Is that weird?"

"No, it's nice to remember him." Laura put a hand on her arm. "Just keep in mind, life is for the living."

Cady nodded. She knew it was a common saying, but it sounded so harsh to her ears now. Life was for Eric, too, even if he'd lost sight of that. Maybe they'd lost sight of him.

There was a knock at the door, and Laura went to let Cady's father in. "Is it just you?" he asked, and for a split second, Cady didn't know what he meant. She flashed ahead to a lifetime of not being enough for her parents. *Just you?*

He set the box down with a grunt. "Are you the first to arrive?"

"Yeah. We're first." Cady readjusted the duffel bag in her arms, still holding it close to her chest. "I know we have more to get from the van, but I want to pick my room before anyone else gets here. Do you mind if I unpack a little to claim my space? I promise I'll be right down." It was a lie, one of Cady's two roommates had already requested the single room over the summer, leaving her with the double.

Laura waved her hand. "Of course, call dibs."

"Don't be long. We have to move the car," her father said.

Cady watched them leave and waited a few beats to be sure. Then she darted into the larger bedroom and dumped the green duffel on a bare mattress. She unzipped it and dug under the layer of bras and

panties, the final Dad-barrier, to uncover the two items she couldn't let her family see. She'd taken them from the box of personal effects her family had received from Harvard after Eric's death. They'd kept the box in his bedroom at home, but Cady had secretly visited it so often, she had its contents memorized. Most was junk, he'd gotten so messy toward the end, but these two items spoke to her more than the others. As souvenirs or as protective talismans, she needed these relics close to her, especially here.

The first was sentimental: Eric's rumpled gray Harvard hoodie. She lifted it to her face; it still smelled like him, a blend of fresh soap and warm toast. Her parents might've given her this if she'd asked for it, but she couldn't risk their thinking she was emotionally fragile, they'd barely let her come here as it was. Around them, Cady had to hide that crumbly feeling whenever it threatened the corners of her mouth or crept up the front of her throat, and Eric's scent triggered it. But sometimes she needed that feeling, liked it even, to release the pressure. She hugged the sweatshirt to her chest before pushing it to the back of the bottom drawer of one of the dressers.

The second buried item was a clue: a blue spiral-bound notebook labeled lab notes at the top. Lab notes were as close as Eric would've ever come to keeping a journal, so it was the closest she could get to a window into his mind. Cady opened it, flipping through pages soft with wear. She ran her fingers over her brother's familiar handwriting, the ballpoint-embossed lettering speaking to her heart like Braille. The earlier pages were vintage Eric: organized and neat, with logical headings and experimental diagrams, tidy as a textbook. As she flipped farther ahead, however, the notes grew more disorganized and illegible; the math devolved into wobbly columns of numbers and slanted, incomplete equations. These scribblings didn't look like advanced physics, they looked like nonsense. Toward the end, the commentary appeared unrelated to the calculations: misgivings about food in the dining hall, perceived slights from "M"—Cady guessed Matt, his old roommate—and jottings of random people's appearance or behavior, likely those deemed suspicious. His paranoia had taken over by then.

Cady hid the notebook in the same drawer as the sweatshirt. She would look more closely at it later, when she felt stronger.

With those items safely out of sight, she could relax enough to get a look at her new room. She didn't mind having a bunkmate—sharing a room was such a normal misfortune, she found it comforting—and the double was the corner bedroom, large and sunny. She sidled around the haphazard arrangement of metal bunk beds, desks, dressers, and bookshelves. The boxy, light wood modular furniture looked as if it had been built in the nineties; the desks bore decades of pen marks, the dressers were dinged at every corner. She could smell the fresh paint of the white walls, and Cady stuck her fingernail into a soft glob, wondering how many lives in this room had been painted over. Judging by the sloping hardwood floors, the deep windowsills, and the massive trees outside, she guessed about a century's worth. Someone was moving into Eric's old room in Leverett Tower right now, probably finding it as clean and white as this one; they wouldn't know what had happened in it just last year. Cady wasn't here to paint over anything. She was here to chip away.

The bedroom window was open, and Cady pressed her fingertips to the screen, but it didn't give. Eric had removed the screws from his window screen in advance, the police found them and the screwdriver tucked neatly in his desk drawer, that was how they knew it wasn't an accident. Though she supposed that no one really thought it was an accident.

Cady looked out at the busy Yard below. Every new student was acting happy, but no one was at ease. There was all the normal first-day-of-college stuff, living away from home, meeting roommates, and the rest, but Harvard was more than a school. It was validation. It was history. It was expectation. The place crackled with potential energy. She could see the crowd around the John Harvard statue, a reminder that the college was founded in 1636, before the country itself. The legacy of the past and the onus of the future freighted the present moment, like time collapsing inward. It was saying, *This is the launch pad for your extraordinary future, if only you don't blow it.* Behind the smiles

and hugs and introductions, the self-doubt: Am I smart enough, talented enough, driven enough to deserve my place here? Will I make good on this golden ticket, or will I crack under the pressure? They were questions for every student here, but only Cady knew the stakes: If I crack, will I survive?

Only the parents seemed unequivocally happy, basking in the proof of their parenting job well done, a sharp contrast to the pall over Cady's family. She thought of her mother with a twinge; Cady missed her today, but didn't blame her for not coming. She knew how her going to Harvard so soon after Eric's death looked from the outside: bizarre, callous, unhealthy, morbid. And the last thing she wanted to do was hurt her parents. They had been through too much, she knew that. But she wished they could see she had her reasons.

Cady thought back to the weeks following Eric's death, when college admissions had been the last thing on her mind. It had been impossible for her to think of her future when he no longer had one. If he was going to stay a twenty-year-old college junior forever, then it seemed that she should stay a seventeen-year-old high school senior for the rest of her life. She and her brother were three years apart, she was never supposed to catch up to him. But when the letter of acceptance arrived, it was as though the decision had been made for her. To go anywhere but Harvard was to willfully *not know,* to stick her head in the sand. She had done plenty of that when Eric was alive, and she regretted it keenly. She had learned that unasked questions were more dangerous than unanswered ones.

Cady had tried keeping the *why* questions locked away, but most of the time, not thinking about Eric was like pushing a beach ball underwater. She had trained herself to run through a series of questions with very specific and unchanging answers—a pilot's checklist against emotional nosedive. Why did Eric change? Because he was schizophrenic. Why did Eric choose to die? It wasn't a choice, it was his mental illness. Was it because she, his only sibling, had let him down? It was nobody's fault.

But did she believe that?

Every single day she woke with the same questions, and every night she struggled to fall asleep in the misery of not knowing. If any answers existed, they would be here, at Harvard.

It would be cowardly not to go, and she had been a coward long enough. She owed it to Eric. It was the least she could do.

She didn't want to be here. She needed to.

Cady looked again at Eric's freshman dorm, catercorner across the green. He had been happy that first year, so excited and hopeful. Cady recalled helping him move in three years ago with fondness. She tried to recall his exact room, her eyes traced the building's facade to find it—*there*, the fourth floor, leftmost room on the center section, his bedroom faced the Yard. Now the window was dark, save for the places where the panes of glass reflected the bright green, yellow, and orange elm leaves, dancing back and forth in the wind. A gust blew, and the colors swept aside to reveal a figure behind the glass.

Cady felt a shiver down her spine.

She had thought she'd seen his red hair, but it was only a reflection from another tree.

Cady stood there looking, wanting it to happen again.

2

FIVE MONTHS EARLIER, Cady was sitting between her parents at Eric's funeral. It had been four days since Eric's death, and she was still in shock. He had been at college when it happened, so she hadn't seen him in person since that January, and it was April. He should've been coming home soon for spring break, she'd have seen him again then. But he wasn't, and she wouldn't. It seemed impossible. Only the surroundings made a convincing case: the church she hadn't been inside since she was a girl, now filled with familiar people dressed in uncharacteristic black, the scent of white lilies, the murmuring of sadness. Perhaps this was the purpose of funeral ceremonies, to signal to those minds numbed by grief that this was for real.

Still, her brain rebelled against that reality and bounced everywhere but the present. Cady's parents hadn't called her right away when Eric died, and she held that against them. She had spent the weekend in Myrtle Beach for a choral competition. The drive was so long, the buses didn't get them back until Monday after the school day was over. Cady drove herself home from the parking lot, thinking only of how lucky she was to have missed class. She should have known something was wrong when her father greeted her at the door, but he said he was working from home that day. He should have told her the

truth right then. Instead, he let her sit and babble for fifteen minutes about the crazy bus driver and Liz's graduation party. And that was after he let Cady make her usual after-school snack, a package of Top Ramen, so add five minutes for the water to boil and three minutes to cook.

Not once did Cady think to ask where her mother was, she assumed she was out showing a house. She didn't know her mother was in bed upstairs, having been there since the campus police called at four in the morning. Later, the medical examiner said Eric died at 3:17 a.m. It was already 4:36 in the afternoon when the hot soup burned Cady's tongue and her father broke down and told her everything. Thirteen hours and nineteen minutes went by that Cady still thought she had a big brother, but didn't.

She dwelled on this as she sat in the pew. It disturbed her that she hadn't known the instant he passed. He was her only brother, after all. It didn't make logical sense that she would know; she was in a hotel room in South Carolina, he was on the ground outside his dormitory in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But still, she thought, she should have felt the earth shift or the sky crack, at the very least a tiny sting or snap or click, even a hiccup, some signal that he had died, that she had lost someone irreplaceable.

But even knowing that instant would have been too late. She'd have to retrace her steps farther back to find the moment when their paths diverged and she could no longer pull him back. She had lost him sooner than that.

Cady had never known life without Eric. It was one of her family's favorite stories that the surefire way to get Cady to stop crying when she was a baby was to bring in Eric. Growing up, she wanted to be just like him, to the point that when Eric came home with lice in fourth grade, she scratched at her head until her mother agreed to use the smelly shampoo on her, too. There was an old photo from one Halloween in which both Eric and Cady were dressed as the purple Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle because Cady couldn't bear to be a different color Turtle than Eric. She must have been an awful nuisance, but

Eric was always patient with her, happy to be her hero. He had been happy once.

She remembered when they went to see an exhibit on King Tut and the ancient Egyptians at the museum. The golden sarcophagi, the sculpture of Queen Nefertiti's egg-shaped head, at once elegant and alien, the scale model of the Sphinx, or "Spinks" as she said then—she felt she was meeting history for the first time, and it was love at first sight. Eric's favorite part of the exhibit was the hieroglyphics, which gave birth to one of their favorite games. Eric created an alphabet code with symbols for each letter, and he taught it to Cady so that they could leave each other secret notes. Cady would take a flashlight under her covers and try to memorize their new alphabet, but still she had to carry with her the crumpled cheat sheet he had made her. Eric memorized it right away. She would leave him stupid, short little notes that translated into minor revelations such as "Halloween candy behind coffee can," or "Dad farted at breakfast." But Eric would leave her long ones with real missions, complicated step-by-step directions for childhood adventures, and without fail, when she had completed the final step, Eric would be there waiting for her with a proud smile.

Cady's favorite was the one he titled "Mission: Mantis Mommy Revenge." The week before, Cady had found a praying mantis in the driveway whose abdomen was hugely swollen, and Eric told her it was pregnant. Deciding that the driveway was no place to raise a family, they constructed a praying mantis birthing suite out of a cardboard box, complete with a twig jungle gym, a bowl of water, and a bed of grass and leaves. Eric went around back to catch some grasshoppers for the mantis to eat, while Cady watched it explore its new home. She liked the way the green bug held its hands, as if she was knitting hundreds of tiny socks for her hundred tiny babies. While Cady was alone, their next door neighbor Jeremy and his friend walked over.

"What the hell are you doing?" was his greeting. Jeremy was a sour, pimply thirteen-year-old, with dark curly hair that was tamped down on his sweaty temples. He scared Cady. She looked around without answering to see if Eric was coming back.

"Speak English, dummy?" Jeremy asked. His friend snickered.

Cady leaned protectively over the box. "We found a praying mantis, and she's going to have babies, so we're making her a house."

Jeremy's expression softened. "Shit, really? That's awesome, can I see it?"

The next second, Jeremy was stomping his foot into the box. Cady screamed as the insect skittered from corner to corner before being crushed beneath his dirty sneaker. When Eric ran around to the front yard, the older boys bolted and left Cady crying, the poor praying mantis curling slowly into its death pose, like a clenching fist.

That memory swirled so vividly—a more palatable, childhood trauma to mix with the grief and anguish she felt now. At this moment, like that one, she felt ashamed that this had happened on her watch, ashamed by her helplessness, and most of all, ashamed that she had let her brother down. Surely, Cady thought, she had disappointed him as a sister, or else he would still be here. But that day with the mantis, Eric didn't blame her; when he reached her, he hugged her tight until she stopped crying. He was always too good to her. They buried the praying mantis in the flowerbed with a smooth rock as a headstone.

Eric wasn't having a headstone; he wasn't being buried at all.

A small sound escaped from her mother's mouth before she covered it with a tissue, which brought Cady's attention back to the funeral. She watched as her mother pulled the tissue from her mouth, leaving small particles of white paper on her wet lips, before cramming the tissue back into the crumpled ball. Cady had never seen her mother look so stricken. Her face looked wet with some amalgamation of tears, sweat, saliva, and snot. Her chin-length blond hair looked greasy at the roots and disheveled, a result of her compulsively raking her fingers through it, her eye makeup was smeared around her red-rimmed eyes like bruising, and her cheeks were red, from rubbing or embarrassment. Cady had learned that the family of a suicide victim doesn't get straight sympathy. Every "I'm sorry for your loss" that

they received came with a look of curious judgment, the unsaid "How could you let this happen?"

Cady wanted to touch her mother, rub her back, do something to help, but she felt frozen. She was afraid that anything she tried to do to comfort her would be so inadequate, she would only make things worse. Eric had been her mother's favorite, but Cady couldn't hold it against her—Eric was her favorite, too. When Cady didn't get as much attention from her mother, Eric made up for it through his secret eye-rolls and exaggerated obliging smiles that he knew only she would catch. They were the co-conspirators, and their parents were the marks.

While Cady and her mother were still in shock, her father stepped in and took over the business of her brother's death—notifying their relatives, contacting the funeral home, making arrangements for Eric's cremation. Her mother was upset about the cremation, and Cady privately felt the same but didn't want to come between her parents. There was a horror in imagining Eric being burned in some oven and then pulverized, especially because it was so difficult for Cady to imagine him as a dead person.

Cady was upstairs in her bedroom when her father told her mother the decision to cremate had been made; she heard her mother in the kitchen banging pots and slamming cabinet doors and shouting at her father, "How could you? I wanted to see him, I wanted to kiss his face one last time, one last time, to kiss him goodbye. Wasn't that my right as his mother, or did I have to give that up, too? Was that my punishment?" Cady couldn't make out her father's muffled responses, but she could tell he had remained calm, enraging her mother further. Cady normally took her father's side when eavesdropping on her parents' arguments, but even she hated him a little that night.

She imagined her father had set his mouth that day much the way he was now, his bottom lip pulled up and inward, creating little craggy dimples on his chin. His temples had long since gone gray, but now cold glints of silver shone throughout his dark hair. The slack skin on

his neck pressed against his shirt collar, and a plum-colored bubble of blood had dried where he must have cut himself shaving. He was only fifty-six years old, but today it seemed everything on him was graying, aging, drying out. Whereas her mother's grief rendered her preternaturally vivified, her father's did the opposite. He had turned to stone.

The regular rhythm of the preacher's monotone speech broke, and Cady looked up in time to see him drop his head and say "Let us pray."

Her mind reverted again to the praying mantis. In the aftermath of its cruel death, Eric produced his longest coded note to Cady, a plot for vengeance he titled "Mission: Mantis Mommy Revenge." The directions, translated, ordered her to first cut open all of their old cat Bootie's toys and empty the catnip into a Ziploc bag, then wait until three in the morning (she had to set her Shark watch alarm), sneak down to the basement to get the ladder, and, without waking anyone up, take it to Jeremy's house and climb on top of his garage. Cady never felt as nervous and important as she did that night. Sure enough, when she had completed everything and reached the top rung of the ladder, there on the garage roof was Eric, sitting Indian-style, waiting for her. Cady remembered that he was pleased to see her, but not surprised—that was the best part about Eric, he was always confident his little sister would come through for him.

She was frozen, crouching on her hands and knees on the roof of the garage; she could see the cedar shingles shine in the moonlight, slick from a recent rainfall. Eric walked on the slanted roof as if it were nothing. He told her not to worry, he had seen Jeremy sneak out on the roof plenty of times, but Cady yelped when his Converse sneaker squeaked and slipped an inch. She watched as he quickly scaled the incline to the roof's apex, then walked along the ridgeline until he reached the wall of the main house. There he bent down and pulled on the last shingle before the wall. It lifted easily, and he revealed a hidden plastic baggie whose contents looked identical to the catnip. When Eric asked her if she knew what it was, she nodded so as not to disappoint him. He laughed and switched the two bags.

Cady could still hear Eric's laughter in her ears, and it joined with

the sounds filling the church—Jenny Park chuckled sadly as she stood at the lectern, giving the rest of the mourners permission to follow suit. She had been Eric's high school girlfriend. They had been the academic power couple of Dixon Porter High, valedictorian and salutatorian, nerd royalty—until she dumped him the summer before they went to college, after she didn't get into Harvard but Stanford instead and he wouldn't go to Caltech to stay close to her. Cady had been sad when they broke up, but now she was glad Jenny had known Eric only at his best, before his mind turned on him.

Jenny's silky hair, blue-black like a raven's wing, fell forward as she read from a crumpled sheet of notebook paper. "Eric was the sweetest, smartest guy I'd ever met, but romance was never his best subject," Jenny said—more gentle laughter from the audience. "I told him months before prom that my dress was red, and I kept reminding him that he was going to have to get me flowers, a corsage or a bouquet or something that would match. So the big day rolls around, and there's Eric standing in my doorway with . . . nothing. But he has this big grin on his face, and he leads me to his old VW Golf parked out front, runs around the back of it, and *ta-da!* 'Here are your flowers!' he says. And inside the car were three large clay pots with green, leafy, shrub-type things in each of them. Not a bloom in sight."

Cady remembered this well. Their mother had warned him it was a terrible idea, but he was stubborn.

"And he goes, 'They're hydrangeas! Blue hydrangeas. Or they should be. By mid-June, at least one of them will be the perfect color.' I remember looking at his face all bright-eyed with excitement and then watching it slowly fall as he registered my less-than-ideal reaction. I was furious. What was I going to do with three huge potted plants? I practically threw his perfect red rose boutonnière at him. The entire vehicle smelled like peat moss, and we drove to the prom in silence."

Jenny looked at Cady and smiled. "Regretfully, I didn't realize at the time the effort and heartfelt intention behind Eric's gesture. I found out later, through various unnamed sources, that Eric was hell-

bent on getting me a blue corsage because blue is my favorite color. But true blue flowers are very hard to find, so Eric decided to make some. He learned that the color of a hydrangea is determined by the pH balance in the soil, and specifically that a high acid content yields blue blossoms. He bought three hydrangea plants, repotted them in peat moss and conifer needles, and watered them daily with a special solution of aluminum sulfate and iron sulfate. To make sure he got the balance right, he made three attempts, hence the three pots. He had to have been planning it for over a month." Jenny took a long breath before continuing. She wiped her eyes and tucked her hair behind her ears. Her voice was trembling, but she was smiling. "So, I didn't have any flowers on my prom night. But right now, on our back patio, I have three glorious hydrangea plants, and they flower every June. And Eric, I hope you can see that each one blooms the perfect blue. Thank you."

Jenny stepped down from the lectern. As she passed their pew, Cady's mother stood to hug her. When Jenny broke from the embrace, she surprised Cady by bending down and putting her arms around Cady's neck. "I'm so sorry," Jenny said, sniffling. Cady nodded and touched her back but couldn't form the words to answer. All she could think of was how cool Jenny's hair felt against her cheek, like water.

The sound of the organ burst out from the front of the church, and Cady closed her eyes. After the last key was released, the sound lingered before escaping into the air beyond. Cady opened her eyes upward to the vaulted roof of the church.

She remembered looking up at Eric as he stood tall at the garage roof's peak, silhouetted against the moonlight like a wolf on a mountaintop. He motioned for her to climb up to the top with him, then reached out his arm to help her. Eric pointed out their parents' bedroom windows toward the back of the house and his own bedroom window—the one from which he watched Jeremy sneak out to smoke on the roof. He said he saw Bootie sitting in his window, but Cady couldn't, so he held her shoulders to position her in his perspective. Straining to see, she raised her heels from the roof. Suddenly, the light

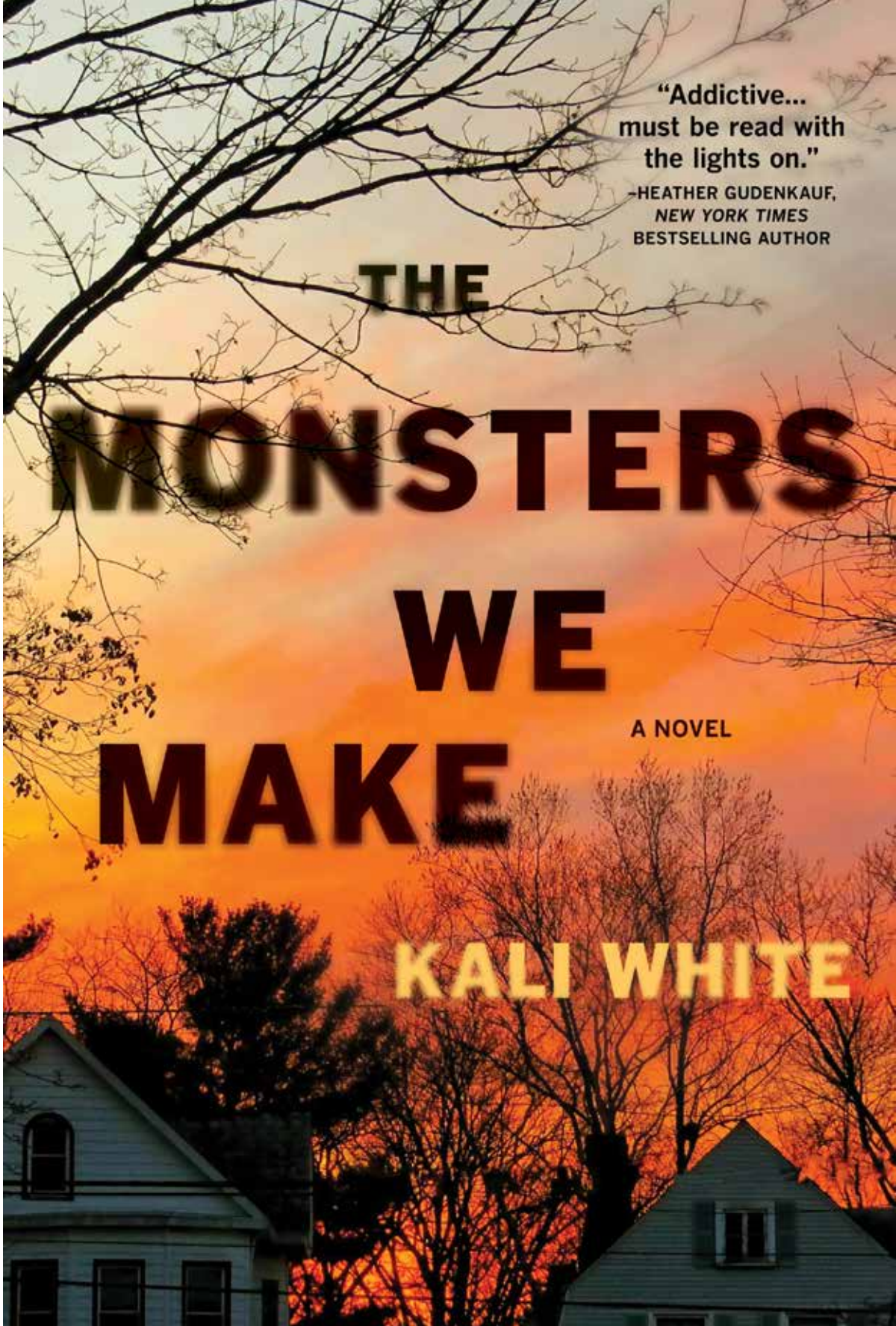
went on in their parents' room. Eric dropped down to hide, tipping Cady off balance. Her feet slipped out from under her.

She slid down the roof face-first, moving too fast to feel the shingles push past her outstretched arms, scrape her cheek, snag her nightshirt, hit her knees. But just before she ran out of roof, a hand closed tight around her ankle and then another yanked on the back of her shirt; Eric was grabbing her wherever he could catch hold. His feet were scrambling to slow their slide until he shoved his heels into the rain gutter. The metal pipe bowed out under the force, but Cady could see that it would hold. He had saved her.

Who would save her now that he was gone? Cady looked at her parents, her inscrutable father, her trembling mother, but neither of them was able to feel her gaze. Eric had always been the center of the family; when he was healthy, they were loving, celebrating, and planning for him, and when he became mentally ill, they were treating, arguing, and worrying over him. She felt they were floating away from one another, clinging to their memories of Eric like pieces of a sunken ship. She wanted to reach out to them, but to let go would be to drown.

Eric always considered Mantis Mommy Revenge their greatest mission, because they got the pleasure of watching Jeremy pretend to get high on catnip for the rest of the summer. He had retold the story to friends many times over the years, but in every instance Cady had to add that Eric saved her life that night, and every time he shrugged it off. She could still hear him give his standard reply: "Would *you* have let *me* fall?"

But in the end, Cady hadn't been there to stop him. She had let him fall. So had they all.


"Addictive... must be read with the lights on."
–HEATHER GUDENKAUF, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
THE MONSTERS WE MAKE
A NOVEL
KALI WHITE

Published in the United States by Crooked Lane Books, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

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Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-64385-388-8
ISBN (ebook): 978-1-64385-389-5

Cover design by Melanie Sun

Printed in the United States.

www.crookedlanebooks.com

Crooked Lane Books
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: June 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SUNDAY, JULY 18, 1982

It started with a boy, and a wagon.

He left his spacious white brick home shortly before sunrise, in darkness. A humid Iowa morning. Dewdrops clung to blades of grass. Condensation ran down windowpanes in watery rivulets. The manicured West Des Moines neighborhood was still drowsy, quiet.

He towed an empty red Radio Flyer wagon with his faithful corgi, Lucy, trotting alongside him. He walked at an easy pace, occasionally passing through the pale-yellow circles of dimming streetlights. Sleepiness tugged at his eyelids.

Shortly before six AM, he reached the corner where he waited for his newspaper bundles to be dropped off. He was only twelve years old but took his paper route seriously. In a sales contest the year before, he'd finished second and won the red wagon. This year he wanted the grand prize: an eight-track tape player.

Within a few minutes the delivery van arrived, and the driver unloaded the boy's bundles of the *Des Moines Register*. The van pulled away and the boy started rolling and binding the papers with rubber bands.

As he worked, a dark-blue car stopped at the corner. A man, asking how to get to the mall. Strange, the boy thought, because the mall wouldn't open for several hours. But he did his best to give directions.

It's that way. He pointed. *On Valley West Drive.* The exchange lasted mere minutes, and the man in the blue car left. The boy returned to his task and finished rolling. He set out on his route pulling his now-full wagon, Lucy at his side.

Streetlights sputtered out against the rising sun. A car door slammed. An engine revved. Lucy barked for a few moments, then stopped.

The neighborhood returned to silence.

As the tip of the sun peeked above the horizon, the boy was gone.

In the blink of an eye. A brief turn of the head.

Only his red wagon remained, just a block away from the corner, where his father found it still full of rolled newspapers an hour and forty-five minutes later, after Lucy returned home, alone.

Matthew Michael Klein
"Matt"
Case #82–2745

By Sunday, August 12, 1984, when another boy disappeared under identical circumstances, Matthew Klein had been missing for seven hundred and fifty-six days.

CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 1984

One hour missing

In the early-morning darkness of a South Side Des Moines neighborhood, twelve-year-old Sammy Cox ran down Clark Avenue as fast as his short, thick legs would take him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that no one was following him anymore but continued running anyway. He clutched his empty canvas newspaper delivery bag to his side, and the keys hanging around his neck on a string bounced wildly off his chest. His heart hammered until it felt as if it were going to punch a hole right through his ribs, but he kept running. If he stopped, he might get caught again.

At the New Hope Baptist Church on the corner of Clark and Tenth Street he crossed the yard, the dry grass crunching beneath his sneakers, and ran straight to the east door of the church. The east door was always left unlocked on Sunday mornings by the pastor, who arrived without fail by eight AM to sit in his office and practice his sermon.

Sammy had hidden in the church before. He knew it would be safe.

He opened the door and soundlessly entered the hallway, tiptoeing by the pale shaft of light illuminating the bottom of the pastor's office door, and let himself into the dark fellowship hall. There, he crawled beneath one of the linen-covered tables and waited.

He tried to make himself invisible. Stinging beads of sweat dripped into his eyes.

The fleshy skin of his upper arm was already starting to hurt where fingers had squeezed and pinched. Sammy gently brushed his fingertips over the tender spots, just below the sleeve hem of his shirt, and winced. He'd barely escaped this time by wrenching his arm free and making a run for it.

Sammy touched the fabric at the crotch of his shorts. He'd wet his pants again during the struggle.

He knew he was never supposed to run away, that he'd probably be punished for it later, but he didn't care. Sammy hated Sundays, and he hated the Sunday paper route. He constantly begged his mother to let him quit, but she'd gently remind him that he needed the exercise to lose the weight he'd put on recently, that some extra responsibility one morning a week was good for him, that he should be grateful to even have the job.

She would just repeat what someone else had told her.

A door banged in the hallway, and Sammy tensed. He removed a pair of his mother's orange-handled scissors from the bottom of his canvas bag and gripped the blades, ready.

He held his breath, straining to listen. A cough. It was only the pastor, moving around. The office door closed, and Sammy exhaled. He slipped the scissors back into the bag.

Sammy crawled out from beneath the table. The fellowship hall was still empty. He scanned the trays of cellophane-covered cookies the church ladies usually put out the night before Sunday services. The choices today: Fig Newtons, generic vanilla-cream sandwiches, and an assortment of homemade chocolate-chip cookies. A small platter of Keebler Fudge Stripes caught his eye. He lifted a corner of the clear plastic and grabbed a handful. He then artfully rearranged the remaining cookies to cover the bare spots.

Back beneath the table, he slipped his index finger through a center hole and began to nibble bits around the edges, the best way to eat a Fudge Stripe. He would eat his cookies and then go.

On several of the Sunday mornings before he'd begun to hide in the church, he'd considered trying to make a run for home but knew he couldn't make it. He got winded easily and barely ran fast enough to make it to the church. His house was still several blocks away, and the streets on the South Side were hilly. His older sister Crystal was a pretty good runner, but Sammy was chubby and weak and slow. It wasn't fair.

Sammy rubbed the tender marks on his arm once more. For a brief moment, he thought about knocking on the office door and asking the pastor for help. Telling him what had been happening since last fall.

He imagined the pastor calling the police. Or maybe even the FBI. There would be questions, *interrogations*, and Sammy would have to talk about it. He'd be forced to tell all the terrible details that made his stomach feel slimy just thinking about them.

Sammy wiped cookie crumbs from his chin and wrapped his arms around his belly.

No. He could never tell anyone again. It was a secret. He'd promised. Crossed his heart and hoped to die. And he didn't want to die.

And besides, when he'd tried telling before, nothing had happened, nothing had changed. So, he would keep trying to get away whenever he could. He would keep carrying the scissors on Sunday mornings. Maybe one day he would finally be brave enough to use them.

Sammy slid another cookie over his finger and peeked beneath the tablecloth to check if the coast was clear. When he emerged, he noticed a long chocolate-milk stain bisecting the front of his white *I'm a Pepper* T-shirt from drinking out of the carton earlier that morning. His father used to drink out of the carton. He said chocolate milk somehow tasted better that way. Sammy agreed.

He missed his father. Florida was so far away.

He pulled his white-and-red-striped tube socks up to his knees and left the fellowship hall as quietly as he'd entered. He needed to get home, or he would be late. And if he was too late, his mother would notice and scold him for dawdling and taking too long on his route.

Outside, the full sun crested the horizon. The streets were busier at this hour than normal. Passing cars, several people out walking, calling

to each other. Sammy clutched his canvas bag in front of the wet spot on his crotch and dashed across the churchyard to the sidewalk. As he was about to cross the street, he stopped and waited for two speeding motorcycles to pass. They slowed at the top of the hill, then stopped. A group of people crowded around the corner of Tenth and Hillcrest, where one of the other paperboys had his bundles delivered.

Sammy started running again to make up time. But instead of turning right on Tenth and walking just one block north to Cutler Avenue where he lived, the shortest and most direct path home, he crossed Tenth and continued west on Clark. It took him in a wide, circular route to his street.

His safety route.

A route where no one would think to look for him. Where he would be a little safer.

CHAPTER 2

One and a half hours missing

Crystal Cox hunched over the kitchen table reading the *Des Moines Register* about the latest news from the Olympics in Los Angeles. Everyone was stewing over a big controversy the day before when an American runner got tripped by a barefoot South African and fell, losing the race she was favored to win. The ensuing debate was whether the South African had run a dirty race. Crystal slid a pen from behind her ear and opened a red spiral notebook. She jotted down a possible article idea for her school paper on cheating in the Olympics. Or maybe an article on spectators' need for heroes and villains in competitive sports. When she started her senior year in a few weeks, she would be editor of both the yearbook and her high school newspaper, *The Railsplitter*, with a weekly column and regular feature stories, so she was always on the lookout for good story ideas.

With no new article ideas gelling, Crystal closed the newspaper and shuffled to the sink. The basin was still full of cold, stagnant water, dirty plates, and tumbler cups. She was supposed to have done the dishes last night but had forgotten. She reached into the water, her hand breaking the greasy layer floating atop, and fished around for the dishrag. She'd get them cleaned up quickly, before her mother awoke.

As she washed, Crystal switched on the police scanner sitting on a shelf above the sink set to the Des Moines frequency. Her father had left

the scanner behind when he moved out after the divorce three years ago, and listening to it was her favorite pastime. An odd interest for an eighteen-year-old girl, but it was a great source of local breaking news. Whenever Crystal was in the kitchen, the scanner was on. She was so used to its chatter filling the background of the house that she'd learned most of the police ten-codes. Ten-eleven, dog case. Ten-seventy, fire alarm. Ten-fifteen, civil disturbance.

Crystal clamped a pair of pliers around the hot-water valve of the sink and pulled until the water ran. The handle had broken months ago, but as usual her mother didn't have the money to fix it.

As Crystal rinsed dishes under the tap, she yawned again. She'd been unable to sleep in late because her bedroom was too hot and uncomfortable, even with the box fan blasting on high three inches from her head. A dispatcher's voice crackled through the speaker, her voice hurried, urgent.

"Ten–thirty-five, major crime alert. Suspected ten–forty-one A at corner of Hillcrest Drive and Tenth Street. Available officer in the area, please respond."

Ten–forty-one A . . . Crystal didn't recognize the code. She turned up the volume.

"APB thirteen-year-old male, brown hair, brown eyes, five feet two inches, one hundred and five pounds, last seen at corner of Hillcrest Drive and Tenth Street on paper route between five forty-five and six AM wearing blue jeans and gray tank top. Name is Christopher Thomas Stewart. Father just called it in."

The frequency squealed and clicked. A male voice now. "Unit 22 responding."

"BOLO silver or gray Camaro reported in vicinity of Tenth and Hillcrest where child was last seen."

Crystal pulled the faucet off and tapped the pliers head against her chin, thinking.

They were looking for vehicles. *Child last seen . . . 10-41A . . .*

They were looking for a missing paperboy.

Hillcrest and Tenth was just three blocks away.

She dropped the pliers on the counter and stepped outside onto the damp, seeping pavement of the driveway. Dewy air blanketed her.

The corner of Hillcrest and Tenth was just blocks from Sammy's paper route, too. He should've been finished with his route and home by now.

Multiple police sirens wailed in the distance. Crystal squinted her eyes behind the thick lenses of her glasses, trying to make out a pair of blurry figures at the end of the street. It was two uniformed cops, stopping and searching every passing car.

Several neighbors had also noticed the commotion and peeked out between curtains or poked their heads through the cracks of front doors. Crystal walked farther down the driveway. Next door, old Mrs. Murley was standing in the middle of her yard in her floral housecoat and curlers, shading her eyes against the sunrise as she watched the police work.

This missing-kid thing was for real. A current of worry for Sammy rippled through Crystal's gut but was quickly replaced by excitement. This could possibly be a topic for her YJWA scholarship application. The Young Journalists Writing Award was a national essay-writing contest for journalism majors with a $2,000-a-year renewable college scholarship, and Crystal desperately needed that money if she had any hope of going to college next fall. This year, the topic for the journalistic essay was "Issues of Contemporary Societies," and this missing kid could be a promising lead. All good journalists had to follow promising leads, and Crystal was serious about becoming a journalist. She wasn't some lookie-loo or rubbernecker like all her gawking neighbors.

Crystal rushed back into the house and grabbed a pad of paper and a pen from the junk drawer and hastily scribbled down what she'd heard on the scanner moments ago.

She stuffed the notebook and pen into her back pocket and ran up the stairs two at a time, leaping over piles of clothes and discarded shoes, and pushed open the door to her mother's bedroom. Tina lay sprawled on her stomach across her queen-size water bed, a thin top sheet tangled around her body.

"Mom," Crystal whispered, nudging Tina's shoulder. "There's something on the police scanner."

Tina didn't move. She'd worked late again last night at her second job: waitressing at a Chi-Chi's restaurant on weekends. During the week she cut and permed hair at a Haircrafters Salon in the mall, so Sundays were her only morning to sleep in.

"Mom! I just heard something on the police scanner," Crystal repeated.

"Ten more minutes," Tina murmured, and pulled the sheet over her head.

"No, listen to me." Crystal peeled the sheet back. "A kid went missing. I heard it on the scanner. I'm going to go look for Sammy and check out what's going on."

The old family cat, Mr. Tibbs, who often slept curled in a ball on her pillow, stirred and stretched, burying his claws in Tina's long, ratted hair that still smelled like fried food from the restaurant.

"Did you do the dishes yet?" Tina asked, her eyes still closed.

"I'll finish them when I get back. This could be a breaking story."

"Seriously, Chrissie?" Tina cracked one eye open. "Give the reporter shit a rest. It's barely seven in the morning." She rolled onto her side away from Crystal, sending waves rippling through the mattress. Mr. Tibbs meowed and irritably flicked his tail.

Crystal dropped the sheet and left the room. Despite her mother's stinging words, she went back downstairs and slipped on a pair of flip-flops. She wasn't going to miss this chance to chase a story. And, she guiltily checked herself, to find her brother.

In the carport, she mounted her red Schwinn bicycle and pedaled down their uneven driveway to Cutler Avenue, past the police barricade, where she turned onto Tenth. She stopped one block away from Hillcrest where a large group of people milled about the corner. No sign of Sammy yet.

Crystal straddled her bike and pulled out her notebook and pen to write down a few notes about the scene. She even attempted to ask a passing police officer what was going on, but he blew her off, telling her

to go home and stay out of the way. She ignored the order and kept writing. Good reporters weren't scared off that easy.

"Hello, Cree-*stahl* Cox."

Her heart instantly pulsed at the familiar accented voice behind her. She twisted around to see Mr. Kovacs, or Mr. K they called him, Sammy's weekly math tutor, walking up the Tenth Street sidewalk. She'd been so focused on getting a piece of the action that she hadn't realized she was sitting on the corner of Tenth and Southlawn right in front of his house.

She instinctively touched her short, bobbed hair to make sure it was smooth and that no childish cowlicks were sticking up anywhere.

"Hi, Mr. K." She pulled her shoulders back to make herself look taller and, hopefully, to make her breasts look bigger.

He stopped in front of her bike and touched the handles. "What are you doing out here so early in the morning?"

"I'm looking for Sammy," Crystal said. "Have you seen him?"

Mr. K gestured to the fat roll lying on his front stoop. "No. But I see he already delivered my paper." He wore dark jogging pants, a dark hooded sweat shirt, and, Crystal now noticed in the rising sunlight, a pair of binoculars hung around his neck. Strapped over his shoulders was a black backpack.

"What are *you* doing out here so early in the morning?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound playful, but it only came out weird and awkward.

Mr. K swiped the back of his hand over his perspiring brow. "Oh, I, uh, walk the neighborhood every morning, for the exercise. And I like to bird-watch." He lifted the binoculars. "At the park."

"Bird-watching. That's cool." Crystal nodded and touched her own forehead to make sure it wasn't sweaty and shiny.

While Crystal would rather die before admitting her crush out loud, she privately thought Sebastian Kovacs was the smartest, most interesting man she'd ever met. He was only twenty-four, so he wasn't *that* much older than her. She'd been eighteen since the first of August, as she'd pointed out to him a few weeks ago.

A trio of paperboys passed, talking excitedly, but no Sammy.

Mr. K's gaze continually darted to the corner a block away, and he shifted from one foot to another, seeming fidgety.

"What's going on up there?" he asked.

"A paperboy went missing this morning," Crystal said. "From that corner, I think."

He wiped his brown again, still perspiring, and Crystal wondered why he'd worn heavy sweats in the humidity. "What's the boy's name?"

"Christopher Stewart. Do you know him?"

Mr. K shook his head. "That's terrible," he said quietly.

"I know." Crystal rolled her bike a few inches closer. "I'm trying to find Sammy, but I'm also trying to get some information for a possible story. You know, taking notes and stuff." She held out her notebook.

"Mm-hmm." Mr. K's eyes drifted over her head to the corner again. He didn't appear to be listening, and didn't even glance at the notebook.

Crystal tucked it back into her pocket, grappling for another topic to keep him talking to her a while longer.

"Are—are you going to the State Fair next weekend?" she asked. "Because we're going. On Saturday. Well, Saturday night. After my mom gets off work at the restaurant. She has to work the day shift." She dug her nails into her palm. She hated it when she babbled.

"I don't know yet," Mr. K said. "I might go to the concert on Saturday."

"Maybe we'll see you there!" She dug her nails in harder. She'd sounded too excited.

As a police cruiser approached the corner, Mr. K abruptly turned and hurried toward his house.

"I have to go," he said, jogging across the lawn. "See you later."

"Oh, okay," Crystal said. "See you tomorrow for Sammy's tutoring!" But he'd already gone inside and closed the door.

Crystal wanted to kick herself. She'd sounded like a desperate idiot.

The police cruiser bleeped its siren, and the cop gestured for her to keep moving away from the corner. Officers were now staking out yellow crime-scene tape. They weren't going to let her get any closer.

Disappointed that she hadn't gotten anything significant on the missing paperboy, Crystal mounted her bike to look for Sammy. She pushed off in the opposite direction, pedaling faster toward Clark Avenue. Sammy always walked home from Clark to Tenth to Cutler, so they should cross paths at any moment. As she coasted down the hill, warm wind caught her hair and lifted it off her neck, cooling her flushed skin.

At the corner of Clark, she squeezed the brake handles and did a quick glance in both directions without stopping. Just as her front tire rolled onto the street, car tires squealed behind her on the right and a horn blared, startling her. She wobbled and nearly lost her balance.

"Hey! Pay attention, kid! I damn near hit you!" the driver shouted at her.

Safely across on the other side, she stopped and planted her feet on the ground, her heart racing. She hadn't seen the car, even though she'd looked. She removed her large, clear, square-framed eyeglasses—her expensive new ones with the gold, low-temple earpieces—and cleaned the lenses with shaking hands on the hem of her shirt.

She should've come to a full stop and looked more carefully. She knew better.

Crystal had been born with colobomas in each eye, a condition that caused small sections of her pupils to leak downward into her irises, giving them a tadpole shape and seriously impairing her vision. Legally, she was considered blind and couldn't even pass the eye exam to get a driver's license. Her only means of transportation was her bicycle, and even that was dangerous sometimes.

Crystal slipped her glasses back on and caught a flutter of movement on Clark Street in her peripheral vision. She squinted harder, and the flutter came into focus. A short, round figure, running west on the sidewalk. It was Sammy, going in the opposite direction of home. She frowned.

"Sammy!" she called. "Hey! Sammy!"

He kept running.

She pedaled after him, yelling, "Sammy! Stop, you dumbass!"

Sammy glanced over his shoulder. When he saw it was her, he finally stopped, breathing hard.

Crystal dumped her bike next to him and flopped onto a lawn, also panting.

"Why were you running so fast?"

"I don't know. Exercise, I guess."

"Why didn't you stop when I yelled at you?"

"I didn't hear you." He tried to discreetly slip a pair of their mother's scissors into his canvas bag, but Crystal saw them in his hand.

She narrowed her eyes at him, but he wouldn't look at her. Instead, he kept glancing up and down the street.

"What's with the scissors?" Crystal asked. "Why are you going home this way? Why are you so late this morning?"

"Just . . . I was . . . I don't know. Stop asking me so many questions!" He fidgeted with his canvas bag, holding it awkwardly in front of him. "Why are *you* out here?"

Crystal stood and brushed off her backside. "Haven't you heard? Cops are looking for a missing paperboy."

Sammy stopped fidgeting and stared at her. "Who?"

"A kid named Christopher Stewart. He lives on Sheridan, I think."

Sammy watched another car speed by. "Why is he missing?"

"Who knows. Maybe he was kidnapped. Like that Klein kid."

Sammy's eyes grew wide. "What Klein kid?" he whispered.

She swatted a biting fly off her leg. "That West Des Moines paperboy from two years ago."

Sammy shifted his gaze away from her. "Oh, yeah," he said slowly. "I remember now."

"Did you notice anything this morning while you were on your route? There's cops all over the place. Up on the corner of Tenth and Hillcrest."

"Why are they up there?"

"That's where he was kidnapped, dummy!"

"Oh."

"So, did you see anything this morning? Your route goes right by his."

Sammy stared down the street in the direction of Hillcrest. He didn't respond for a long moment, his expression blank and glassy.

"Hello?" Crystal said, snapping her fingers in front of his unblinking eyes.

Sammy jerked his head back to her. "I didn't see . . . I just . . . I saw a lot of cars and stuff. A few people yelling, but that's it." He averted his eyes once more and lifted his arm to scratch the top of his head. The sleeve of his shirt slid up to reveal a series of angry red circles on his upper arm.

"What happened?" Crystal started to touch the marks, but he slapped her hand away.

"Nothing," he said. "I bumped into a door."

"Why are you acting so weird?"

"I'm not," he said, and ground his fists into his red, puffy eyes.

She took a step toward him, but he recoiled from her.

"If you saw something," she said carefully, "don't be scared to say so."

"I didn't see anything!" he yelled, and a nearby dog started barking from a backyard.

Sammy jostled the bag again, and Crystal caught a glimpse of a wet spot on the crotch of his shorts.

He was lying about something, she could tell.

"Let's go," he said, his gaze darting up and down the street once more. "I wanna get home."

Before she could respond, he started jogging again.

Crystal stood her bike up and mounted the seat.

He was definitely lying.

Something had happened this morning that he didn't want to tell her. Something that scared him.

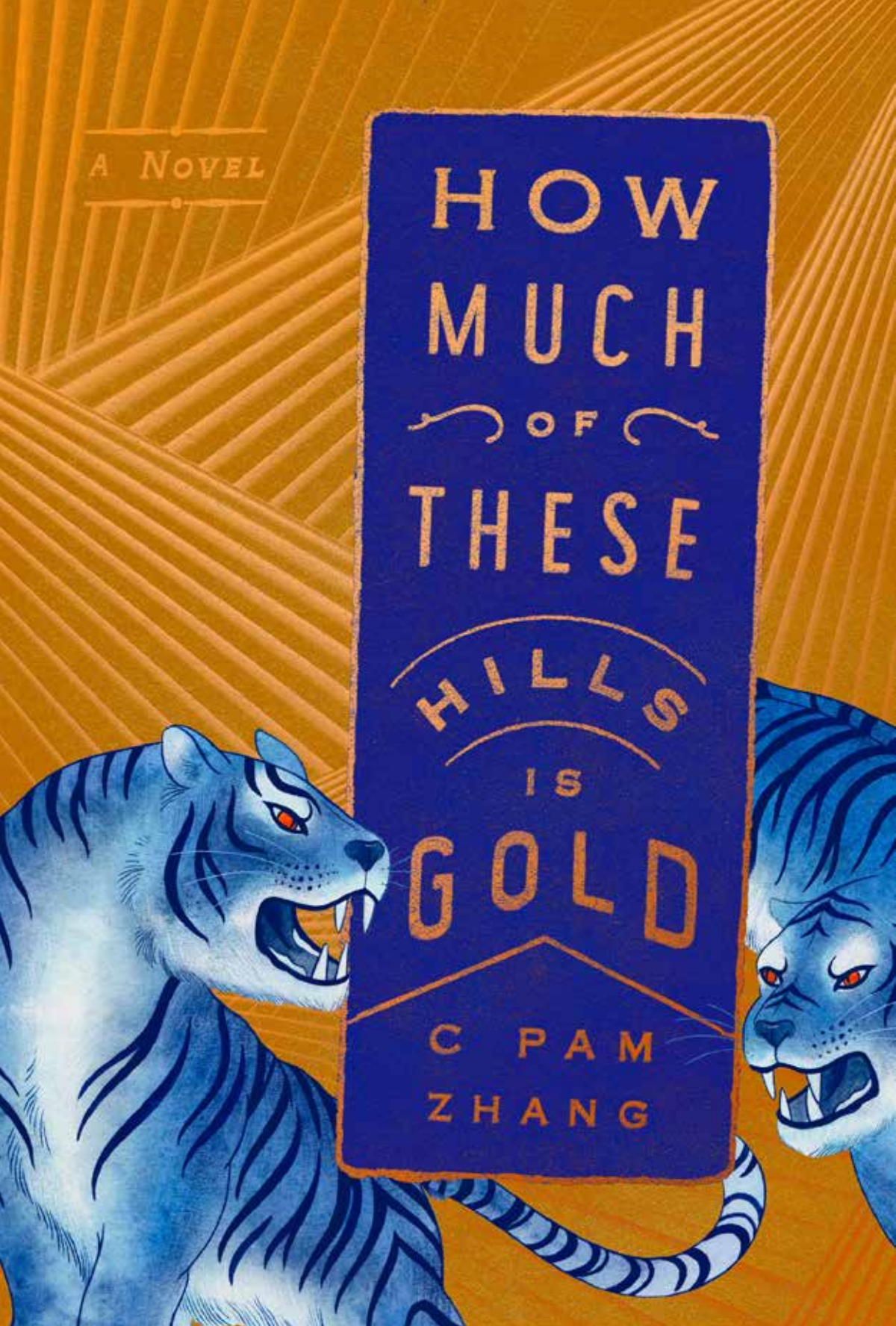
Or someone.

As she started to pedal, she glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was following them.

A Novel

How Much of These Hills is Gold

C Pam Zhang



Riverhead Books
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Zhang, C Pam, author.
Title: How much of these hills is gold / C Pam Zhang.
Description: New York : Riverhead Books, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019003016 (print) | LCCN 2019006982 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780525537229 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525537205 (hardcover)
Subjects: | GSAFD: Western stories.
Classification: LCC PS3626.H35 (ebook) | LCC PS3626.H35 H69 2020 (print) |
DDC 813/.6--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019003016

Printed in the United States of America
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Book design by Cassandra Garruzzo

Gold

Ba dies in the night, prompting them to seek two silver dollars.

Sam's tapping an angry beat come morning, but Lucy, before they go, feels a need to speak. Silence weighs harder on her, pushes till she gives way.

"Sorry," she says to Ba in his bed. The sheet that tucks him is the only clean stretch in this dim and dusty shack, every surface black with coal. Ba didn't heed the mess while living and in death his mean squint goes right past it. Past Lucy. Straight to Sam. Sam the favorite, round bundle of impatience circling the doorway in too-big boots. Sam clung to Ba's every word while living and now won't meet the man's gaze. That's when it hits Lucy: Ba really is gone.

She digs a bare toe into dirt floor, rooting for words to make Sam listen. To spread benediction over years of hurt. Dust hangs ghostly in the light from the lone window. No wind to stir it.

Something prods Lucy's spine.

"Pow," Sam says. Eleven to Lucy's twelve, wood to her water as Ma liked to say, Sam is nonetheless shorter by a full foot. Looks young, deceptively soft. "Too slow. You're dead." Sam cocks fingers back on pudgy fists and blows on the muzzle of an imagined gun. The way Ba used to. Proper way to do things, Ba said, and when Lucy said Teacher Leigh said these new guns didn't clog

and didn't need blowing, Ba judged the proper way was to slap her. Stars burst behind her eyes, a flint of pain sharp in her nose.

Lucy's nose never did grow back straight. She thumbs it, thinking. Proper way, Ba said, was to let it heal itself. When he looked at Lucy's face after the bloom of bruise faded, he nodded right quick. Like he'd planned it all along. *Proper that you should have something to rememory you for sassing.*

There's dirt on Sam's brown face, sure, and gunpowder rubbed on to look (Sam thinks) like Indian war paint, but beneath it all, Sam's face is unblemished.

Just this once, because Ba's fists are helpless and stiff under the blanket—and maybe she *is* good, *is* smart, thinks in some small part that riling Ba might make him rise to swing at her—Lucy does what she never does. She cocks *her* hands, points *her* fingers. Prods Sam's chin where paint gives way to baby fat. The jaw another might call delicate, if not for Sam's way of jutting it.

"Pow yourself," Lucy says. She pushes Sam like an outlaw to the door.

Sun sucks them dry. Middle of the dry season, rain by now a distant memory. Their valley is bare dirt, halved by a wriggle of creek. On this side are the miners' flimsy shacks, on the other the moneyed buildings with proper walls, glass windows. And all around, circumscribing, the endless hills seared gold; and hidden within their tall, dry grasses, ragtag camps of prospectors and Indians, knots of vaqueros and travelers and outlaws, and the mine, and more mines, and beyond, and beyond.

Sam squares small shoulders and sets out across the creek, red shirt a shout against the barrenness.

When they first arrived there was still long yellow grass in this valley, and scrub oaks on the ridge, and poppies after rain. The flood three and a half years back rooted up those oaks, drowned or chased away half the people. Yet their family stayed, set alone at the valley's far edge. Ba like one of those lightning-split trees: dead down the center, roots still gripping on.

And now that Ba's gone?

Lucy fits her bare feet to Sam's prints and keeps quiet, saving spit. The water's long gone, the world after the flood left somehow thirstier.

And long gone, Ma.

Across the creek the main street stretches wide, shimmering and dusty as snakeskin. False fronts loom: saloon and blacksmith, trading post and bank and hotel. People lounge in the shadows like dragon lizards.

Jim sits in the general store, scritching in his ledger. It's wide as him and half as heavy. They say he keeps accounts of what's owed from every man in the territory.

"Excuse us," Lucy murmurs, weaving through the kids who loiter near the candy, eyes hungering for a solution to their boredom. "Sorry. Pardon me." She shrinks herself small. The kids part lazily, arms knocking her shoulders. At least today they don't reach out to pinch.

Jim's still fixed on his ledger.

Louder now: "Excuse me, sir?"

A dozen eyes prick Lucy, but still Jim ignores her. Knowing already that the idea's a bad one, Lucy edges her hand onto the counter to flag his attention.

Jim's eyes snap up. Red eyes, flesh raw at the rims. "Off," he says. His voice flicks, steel wire. His hands go on writing. "Washed that counter this morning."

Jagged laughter from behind. That doesn't bother Lucy, who after years lived in towns like this has no more tender parts to tear. What scoops her stomach hollow, the way it was when Ma died, is the look in Sam's eyes. Sam squints mean as Ba.

Ha! Lucy says because Sam won't. *Ha! Ha!* Her laughter shields them, makes them part of the pack.

"Only whole chickens today," Jim says. "No feet for you. Come back tomorrow."

"We don't need provisions," Lucy lies, already tasting the melt of chicken skin on her tongue. She forces herself taller, clenches hands at her sides. And she speaks her need.

I'll tell you the only magic words that matter, Ba said when he threw Ma's books in the storm-born lake. He slapped Lucy to stop her crying, but his hand was slow. Almost gentle. He squatted to watch Lucy wipe snot across her face. *Ting wo, Lucy girl: On credit.*

Ba's words work some sort of magic, sure enough. Jim pauses his pen.

"Say that again, girl?"

"Two silver dollars. On credit." Ba's voice booming at her back, in her ear. Lucy can smell his whiskey breath. Daren't turn. Should his shovel hands clap her shoulders, she doesn't know if she'll scream or laugh, run or hug him round the neck so hard she won't come loose no matter how he cusses. Ba's words tumble out the tunnel of her throat like a ghost clambering from the dark: "Payday's Monday. All we need's a little stretch. Honest."

She spits on her hand and extends it.

Jim's no doubt heard this refrain from miners, from their dry wives and hollow children. Poor like Lucy. Dirty like Lucy. Jim's been known to grunt, push the needed item over, and charge double interest come payday. Didn't he once give out bandages on credit after a mine accident? To people desperate like Lucy.

But none of them quite like Lucy. Jim's gaze measures her. Bare feet. Sweat-stained dress in ill-fitting navy, made from scraps of Ba's shirt fabric. Gangly arms, hair rough as chicken wire. And her face.

"Grain I'll give your pa on credit," Jim says. "And whatever animal parts you find fit to eat." His lip curls up, flashes a strip of wet gum. On someone else it might be called a smile. "For money, get him to the bank."

The spit dries tight on Lucy's untouched palm. "Sir—"

Louder than Lucy's fading voice, Sam's boot heel hits the floor. Sam marches, straight-shouldered, out of the store.

Small, Sam is. But capable of a man's strides in those calfskin boots. Sam's shadow licks back at Lucy's toes; in Sam's mind the shadow is the true height, the body a temporary inconvenience. *When I'm a cowboy*, Sam says. *When I'm an adventurer.* More recently: *When I'm a famous outlaw. When I'm grown*. Young enough to think desire alone shapes the world.

"Bank won't help the likes of us," Lucy says.

She might as well have said nothing. Dust tickles her nose and she stops to cough. Her throat ripples. She retches last night's dinner into the street.

Straightaway come the strays, licking at her leavings. For a moment Lucy hesitates, though Sam's boots beat an impatient tattoo. She imagines abandoning her lone relation to crouch among the dogs, fight them for every drop that's hers. Theirs is a life of belly and legs, run and feed. Simple life.

She makes herself straighten and walk two-legged.

"Ready, pardner?" Sam says. This one's a real question, not a chewed-out spit-up line. For the first time today Sam's dark eyes aren't squinted. Under protection of Lucy's shadow, they've opened wide, something there half-melting. Lucy moves to touch that short black hair where the red bandana's come askew. Remembering the smell of Sam's baby scalp: yeasty, honest with oil and sun.

But by moving she lets sun hit. Sam's eyes squeeze shut. Sam steps away. Lucy can tell from the bulge of Sam's pockets that those hands are cocked again.

"I'm ready," Lucy says.

The floor of the bank is gleaming board. Blond as the hair on the lady teller's head. So smooth no splinters catch Lucy's feet. The tap of Sam's boots acquires a raw edge, like gunshot. Sam's neck reddens under the war paint.

Ta-tap, they go across the bank. The teller staring.

Ta-TAP. The teller leans back. A man appears from behind her. A chain swings from his vest.

TA-TAP TA-TAP TA-TAP. Sam stretches up to the counter on tiptoe, creasing boot leather. Sam's always stepped so careful before.

"Two silver dollars," Sam says.

The teller's mouth twitches. "Do you have an—"

"They don't have an account." It's the man who speaks, looking at Sam as one might a rat.

Sam gone quiet.

"On credit," Lucy says. "Please."

"I've seen you two around. Did your father send you to beg?"

In a way, he did.

"Payday's Monday. We only need a little stretch." Lucy doesn't say, *Honest*. Doesn't think this man would hear it.

"This isn't a charity. Run on home, you little—" The man's lips keep moving for a moment after his voice has stopped, like the woman Lucy once saw speaking in tongues, a force other than her own pushing between her lips. "—beggars. Run on before I call the sheriff."

Terror walks cold fingers down Lucy's spine. Not fear of the banker. Fear of Sam. She recognizes the look in Sam's eyes. Thinks of Ba stiff in the bed, eyes slitted open. She was the first to wake this morning. She found the body and sat vigil those hours before Sam woke, and she closed the eyes as best she could. She figured Ba died angry. Now she knows different: his was the measuring squint of a hunter tracking prey. Already she sees the signs of possession. Ba's squint in Sam's eyes. Ba's anger in Sam's body. And that's besides the other holds Ba has on Sam: the boots, the place on Sam's shoulder where

Ba rested his hand. Lucy sees how it'll go. Ba will rot day by day in that bed, his spirit spilling from his body and moving into Sam till Lucy wakes to see Ba looking out from behind Sam's eyes. Sam lost forever.

They need to bury Ba once and for all, lock his eyes with the weight of silver. Lucy must make this banker understand. She readies herself to beg.

Sam says,

"Pow."

Lucy is about to tell Sam to quit fooling. She reaches for those chubby brown fingers, but they've gone curiously shiny. Black. Sam is holding Ba's pistol.

The teller falls in a faint.

"Two silver dollars," Sam says, voice pitched lower. A shadow of Ba's voice.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Lucy says. Her lips go up. *Ha! Ha!* "You know how kids are with their games, please excuse my little—"

"Run on before I have you lynched," the man says. Looking straight at Sam. "Run on, you filthy. Little. Chink."

Sam squeezes the trigger.

A roar. A bang. A rush. The sense of something enormous passing Lucy's ear. Stroking her with rough palms. When she opens her eyes the air is gray with smoke and Sam has staggered back, hand clapped to a cheek bruised by the pistol's recoil. The man lies on the ground. For once in her life Lucy resists the tears on Sam's face, puts Sam second. She crawls away from Sam. Ears ringing. Her fingers find the man's ankle. His thigh. His chest. His whole, unblemished, beating chest. There's a welt on his temple from where he leapt back and banged his head on a shelf. Apart from that the man is unharmed. The gun misfired.

From the cloud of smoke and powder, Lucy hears Ba laughing.

"Sam." She resists the urge to cry too. Needing to be stronger than herself, now. "Sam, you idiot, bao bei, you little shit." Mixing the sweet and the sour, the caress and the cuss. Like Ba. "We gotta go."

What could almost make a girl laugh is how Ba came to these hills to be a prospector. Like thousands of others he thought the yellow grass of this land, its coin-bright gleam in the sun, promised even brighter rewards. But none of those who came to dig the West reckoned on the land's parched thirst, on how it drank their sweat and strength. None of them reckoned on its stinginess. Most came too late. The riches had been dug up, dried out. The streams bore no gold. The soil bore no crops. Instead they found a far duller prize locked within the hills: coal. A man couldn't grow rich on coal, or use it to feed his eyes and imagination. Though it could feed his family, in a way, weeviled meal and scraps of meat, until his wife, wearied out by dreaming, died delivering a son. Then the cost of her feed could be diverted into a man's drink. Months of hope and savings amounting to this: a bottle of whiskey, two graves dug where they wouldn't be found. What could almost make a girl laugh—*ha! ha!*—is that Ba brought them here to strike it rich and now they'd kill for two silver dollars.

So they steal. Take what they need to flee town. Sam resists at first, stubborn as ever.

"We didn't hurt nobody," Sam insists.

Didn't you mean to, though? Lucy thinks. She says, "They'll make anything a crime for the likes of us. Make it law if they have to. Don't you remember?"

Sam's chin lifts, but Lucy sees Sam hesitate. On this cloudless day they both feel the lash of rain. Remembering when storm howled inside and even Ba could do nothing.

"We can't wait around," Lucy says. "Not even to bury."

Finally, Sam nods.

They crawl to the schoolhouse, bellies in the dirt. Too easy by half to become what others call them: animals, low-down thieves. Lucy sneaks around the building to a spot she knows is blocked from view by the chalkboard. Voices rise inside. Recitation has a rhythm near to holiness, the boom of Teacher Leigh calling and the chorus of students in answer. Almost, almost, Lucy lifts her voice to join.

But it's been years since she was allowed inside. The desk she occupied holds two new students. Lucy bites her cheek till blood comes and unties Teacher Leigh's familiar gray mare, Nellie. At the last moment she takes Nellie's saddlebags too, heavy with horse oats.

Back at their place, Lucy instructs Sam to pack what's needed from inside. She herself keeps outside, probing the shed and garden. Within: thumps, clangs, the sounds of grief and fury. Lucy doesn't enter; Sam doesn't ask for help. An invisible wall came up between them in the bank, when Lucy crawled past Sam to touch the banker with gentle fingers.

Lucy leaves a note on the door for Teacher Leigh. She strains for the grand phrases he taught her years back, as if they could be a proof stronger than the proof of her thievery. She doesn't manage it. Her paper is filled end to end with *Sorry*s.

Sam emerges with bedrolls, scant provisions, a pot and pan, and Ma's old trunk. It drags in the dirt, near as long as a man is tall, those leather latches straining. Lucy can't guess what mementos Sam packed inside, and they shouldn't tax the horse—but what's between them makes her hair prickle. She says nothing. Only hands Sam a wizened carrot, their last bit of sweetness for a while. A peace offering. Sam puts half in Nellie's mouth, half in a pocket. That kindness heartens Lucy, even if its recipient is a horse.

"Did you say goodbye?" Lucy asks as Sam throws rope over Nellie's back, ties some slipknots. Sam only grunts, putting a shoulder under the trunk to heave it up. Sam's brown face goes red, then purple from effort. Lucy lends her

shoulder too. The trunk slips into a loop of rope, and Lucy fancies she hears from within a banging.

Beside her, Sam's face whips round. Dark face, and in it, white-bared teeth. Fear shivers through Lucy. She steps back. She lets Sam tighten the rope alone.

Lucy doesn't go in to bid farewell to the body. She had her hours beside it this morning. And truth be told, Ba died when Ma did. That body is three and a half years empty of the man it once held. At long last, they'll be going far enough to outrun his haint.

Lucy girl, Ba says, limping into her dream, *ben dan*.

He's in rare good humor. Employing his fondest cuss, the one she was weaned on. She tries to turn and see him, but her neck won't move.

What'd I teach you?

She starts on multiplication tables. Her mouth won't move, either.

Don't remember, d'you? Always making a mess. Luan qi ba zao. There's the splat of Ba spitting in disgust. The uneven thump of his bad leg, then his good. *Can't get nothing right.* As she grew older, Ba shrank. Eating rarely. What he consumed seemed only to feed his temper, which stuck to his side like a faithful old cur. *Dui. Thasright.* More splats, growing farther from her. He's starting to slur with drink. *Yaliddletraitor.* Given up on math, he filled their shack with language. A rich vocabulary that Ma wouldn't have approved. *You lazy sackash—gou shi.*

Lucy wakes up to gold all around her. The dry yellow grass of the hills grows jackrabbit-high a few miles outside town. Wind imparts a shimmer like sun off soft metal. Her neck throbs from a night on the ground.

The water. That's what Ba taught her. She forgot to boil the water.

She tilts the flask: empty. Maybe she dreamed of filling it. But no—Sam whimpered from thirst in the night, and Lucy went down to the stream.

Soft and stupid, Ba whispers. *Where d'you keep those brains you prize so much?* The sun's unforgiving; he fades with a parting shot. *Why, they melt clean away when you're scared.*

Lucy finds the first splatter of vomit flickering like dark mirage. The mass of flies shifts lazily. More splatters lead her to the stream, which in daylight reveals itself as muddy. Brown. Like every other stream in mining country, it's filthy with runoff. She forgot to boil the water. Farther down she finds Sam collapsed. Sam's eyes closed, Sam's fingers unfisted. Clothes a foul, buzzing mess.

This time Lucy boils the water, builds a fire so fierce it makes her head swim. When the water is as cool as it'll get she washes Sam's fevered body.

Sam's eyes waver open. "No."

"Shh. You're sick. Let me help."

"No." Sam's bathed alone for years, but surely this is different.

Sam's legs kick without strength. Lucy peels back crusted fabric, holding her breath against the stench. Sam's eyes burn so shiny with fever it looks like hate. Ba's hand-me-down pants, bunched with rope, come away easy. At the join of Sam's legs, tucked into a fold of the underdrawers, Lucy bumps something. A hard, gnarled protrusion.

Lucy draws half a carrot from the indent between her little sister's legs: a poor replacement for the parts Ba wanted Sam to have.

Lucy finishes the job she started, hand shaking so that the washcloth scrapes harder than she means it to. Sam doesn't whimper. Doesn't look. Eyes turned toward the horizon. Pretending, as Sam always does when the truth can't be avoided, that she has nothing to do with this body of hers, a child's body, androgynous still, prized by a father who wanted a son.

Lucy knows she should speak. But how to explain this pact between Sam

and Ba that never made sense to her? A mountain's risen in Lucy's throat, one she can't cross. Sam's eyes follow the ruined carrot as Lucy flings it away.

For a day Sam retches up dirty water, and for three more lies in fever. Eyes closed when Lucy brings oats cooked to porridge, twigs to feed the fire. In these slow hours Lucy studies a sister she almost forgot: the budded lips, the dark fern lashes. Illness sharpens Sam's round face, making it more like Lucy's: horsier, gaunter, the skin sallower, more yellow than brown. A face that shows its weakness.

Lucy fans Sam's hair out. Chopped short three and a half years back, it now reaches just under Sam's ears. Silk-fine and sun-hot.

The ways Sam hid herself seemed innocent. Childish. Hair and dirt and war paint. Ba's old clothes and Ba's adopted swagger. But even when Sam resisted Ma's manners, insisted on working and riding out of town with Ba, Lucy figured those for the old games of dress-up. Never this far. Never this carrot, this trying to push and change something deep inside.

It's a clever job. Loose fabric in the underdrawers, sewn to form a hidden pocket. Well-done for a girl who refused girl's chores.

The stench of sickness clings to camp, though Sam's shits have stopped and she's strong enough to bathe alone. Clouds of flies persist and Nellie's tail won't quit its switching. Sam's suffered enough blows to her pride, so Lucy doesn't mention the stink.

One night Lucy comes back dangling a squirrel, Sam's favorite. It was trying to scramble up a tree with a broken paw. Sam's nowhere to be found. Nor Nellie. Lucy spins, hands bloody, heart ticking and ticking. To match its rhythm she sings a song about two tigers playing hide-and-seek. It's been years since any stream in this territory ran deep enough to support a creature bigger than a jackal; the song comes from a lusher time. This is a song that Sam, if

Sam is scared and hiding, won't mistake. Twice Lucy thinks she sees a stripe in the brush. *Little tiger, little tiger,* she sings. Footfalls behind her. *Lai.*

A shadow swallows Lucy's feet. A pressure between her shoulders.

This time Sam does not say, *Pow.*

In the silence Lucy's thoughts circle and come down slow, almost peaceful, the way vultures drift without hurry—nothing to hurry once the deed's been done. Where did Sam stash the gun after they fled the bank? How many of its chambers are still loaded?

She speaks Sam's name.

"Shaddup." This is Sam's first word since *No*. "We shoot traitors in these parts."

She reminds Sam of what they are. *Pardners.*

The pressure slides down to rest on the small of Lucy's back. The natural height of Sam's arm, as if Sam grows weary.

"Don't move." The pressure lifts. "I've got my sights on you." Lucy should turn. She should. But. *Know what you are?* Ba snarled at Lucy the day Sam came back from school, left eye a plum. Lucy's clothes damningly clean. *A coward. A lily-livered girl.* The truth is Lucy didn't know that day, watching Sam face the kids who taunted, if it was bravery that made Sam yell. Was it braver to move loud or to stand quiet as Lucy did, letting spittle run down her lowered face? She didn't know and doesn't know now. She hears reins slap, hears Nellie's whicker. Hooves hit the ground, each step trembling through her bare feet.

She says, "I'm looking for my little sister."

High noon at a settlement that's little more than two streets and crossroads. Every soul naps through the heat save two brothers who kick a can till the cheap metal ruptures. For a while now they've been eyeing a dog, a stray,

trying to lure it with their rucksack of groceries. The dog hungry but wary, remembering old blows.

And then they look up at her, an apparition blown in to end their boredom.

"You seen her?"

Spooked at first, the boys peer closer. A tall girl with a long face, crooked nose, strange eyes over high, broad cheeks. A face made stranger by an altogether awkward body. Patched dress, old bruises slipping shadows under the skin. The boys see a child even less loved than they.

The plumper boy starts to say no. The skinny one jabs him.

"Maybe we did and maybe we didn't. What's she look like, huh? She got hair like yours?" A hand jerks out and grips a black braid. The other hand twists the bumpy nose. "An ugly nose like yours?" Now both pairs of hands are grabbing wrist and ankle, pulling narrower her narrow eyes, pinching hard at the skin stretched tight over her cheeks. "Funny eyes like yours, huh?"

The dog watches from a distance, with relief.

Her quiet perplexes them. The fat one grabs her throat, as if to milk her of words. She's seen his kind. Not those bullies who ran toward the task but the others, slow or lazy-eyed or stuttering, who trailed, reluctant. Those with gratitude mixed into their hate—because her strangeness let them into the pack.

For now the fat one holds her gaze, wondering, holds her throat, longer perhaps than he means to. She starts to choke. Who knows how long he would have held if a round brown body didn't come barreling into his back. The fat boy falls, gasping from the impact.

"Geroff," says the newcomer who hit him. Furious eyes, cut narrow.

"You and what army?" says the skinnier boy, sneering.

And Lucy, breath reentering in one shuddering whoosh, looks up at Sam.

Sam whistles, summoning Nellie from behind an oak. Sam reaches for a bundle on the horse's back. What Sam means to grab, none of the others will

know. Lucy fancies she sees a gleam, hard and black as purest coal. But first, a fat white something plops from the trunk and lands in the dust.

Lucy, head spinning, thinks: *Rice.*

They are white grains, like rice, but they wriggle, and crawl, and split outward as if lost and seeking. Sam's face is impassive. A breeze insinuates itself among them, bringing the churning smell of rot.

The skinny brother skitters, shrieks: Maggots!

Nellie, good-natured well-bred mare, but shuddering, wild-eyed, barely contained, carrying fear on her back for five full days now, takes this voice as a message and finally decides to bolt.

She doesn't go far with Sam holding the reins. Nellie jerks, the load of pots clanging alarm. A knot loosens, the trunk slides, the lid bangs open. Spilling an arm. Part of what was once a face.

Ba is half jerky and half swamp. His skinny limbs dried to brown rope. While his softer parts—groin, stomach, eyes—swim with greenish-white pools of maggots. The boys don't see it, not truly. They run at the first suggestion of the face. Only Lucy and Sam look full on. He's theirs, after all. And Lucy thinks—why, this is no worse than his face in a dozen other permutations, monstrous with drink or rage. She steps closer, Sam's gaze a weight on her back. Gently, she lowers the trunk from the ropes that hold it. Pushes the body back inside.

But she'll remember.

More than drink and more than rage, Ba's face reminds her of that once she saw him crying and didn't dare go up, his features so melted by grief she feared her well-meant touch would dissolve his flesh. Expose the skull beneath. Now there it is, that peek of bone, and it is not so fearful. She shuts the lid and reties the latches. Turns.

"Sam," she says, and in that moment, with eyes full of Ba, Lucy sees that same melting on Sam's face.

"What," Sam says.

Lucy remembers, then, tenderness, a thing she thought dead three and a half years back with Ma.

"You were right. I should have listened to you. We've got to bury."

She saw more than she thought she could, bore it while those boys cowered. They ran, and their imaginings will follow all their lives at their heels. For her, who didn't turn away, the haunting may begin to be done. She feels a swell of gratitude for Sam.

"I aimed to miss," Sam says. "That banker. I only meant to scare him."

Lucy looks down, always down, into Sam's sweat-shiny face. A face brown as mud and just as malleable, a face on which Lucy has seen emotions take shape with an ease she envies. Many emotions but never fear. Yet there is fear now. For the first time Lucy sees herself reflected in her sister. And this, Lucy realizes, this more than the schoolyard taunts or the press of the gun's cold snout, is her moment of courage. She closes her eyes. She sits, face in her arms. She judges the proper way is quiet.

A shadow cools her. She feels rather than sees Sam bending, hovering, sitting too.

"We still need two silver dollars," Sam says.

Nellie chews a tangle of grass, calmed now that the burden's off her back. Soon the weight will return, but for now. For now. Lucy reaches for Sam's hand. She brushes something rough in the dirt. It's the boys' rucksack, abandoned. Slowly, Lucy swings it. Remembers the clank of it hitting her. She reaches in.

"Sam."

A hunk of salt pork, the greasy leak of cheese or lard. Hard candy. And waaay beneath, knotted in the fabric, hidden if her fingers didn't know where to look, if she weren't a prospector's daughter, one whose ba said, *Why, Lucy girl, you feel where it's buried. You just feel it,* she touches on coins. Copper pennies. Nickels etched with beasts. And silver dollars to lay over two white-swimming eyes, close them the proper way, sending the soul to its final good sleep.

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