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Debut Fiction Sampler

— SPRING 2021 —

What Will You Read Next?

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These are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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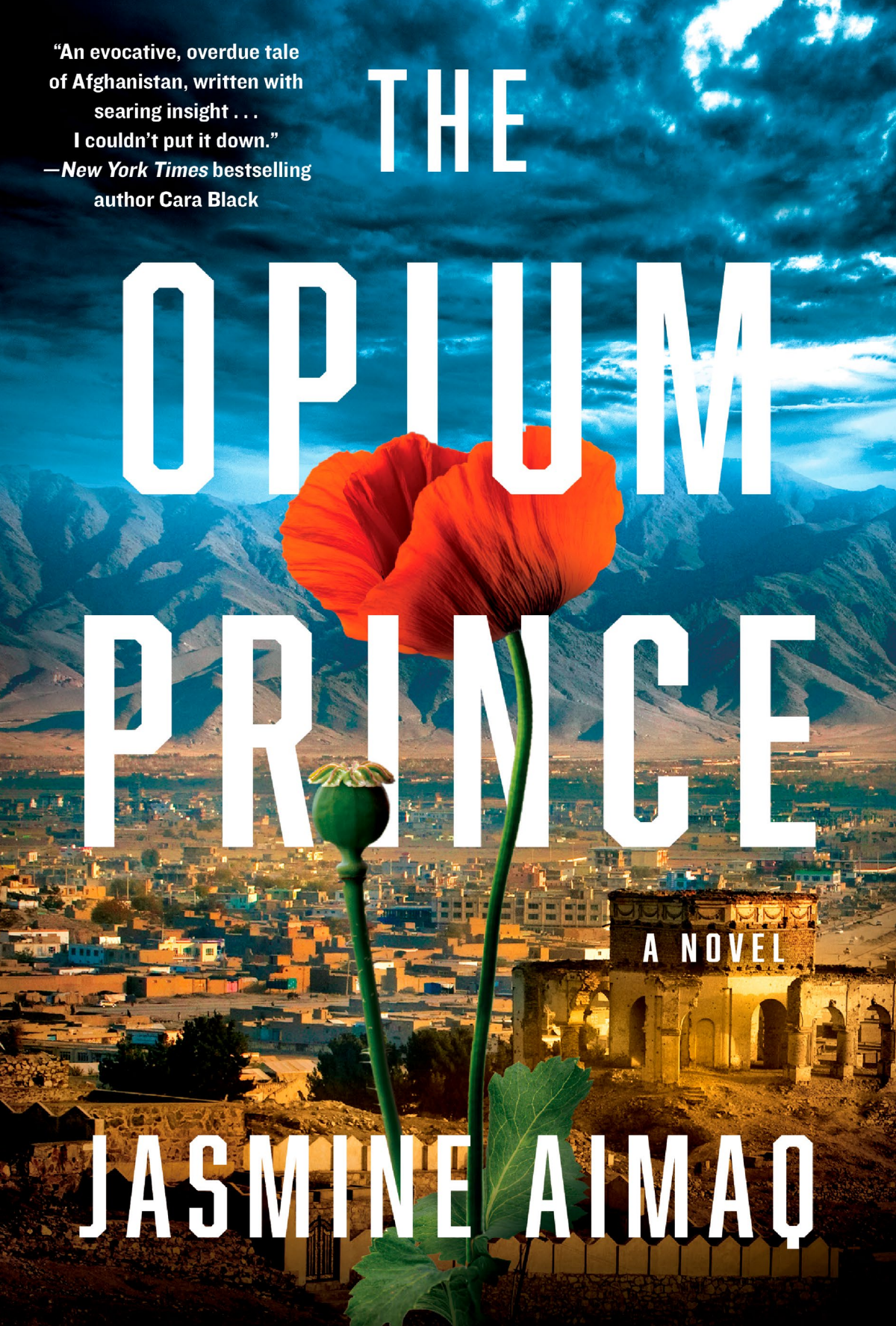
"An evocative, overdue tale of Afghanistan, written with searing insight . . . I couldn't put it down."
—*New York Times* bestselling author Cara Black
THE
OPIUM
PRINCE
A NOVEL
JASMINE AIMAQ

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PROLOGUE

THE GIRL LIES CRUMPLED AND STILL IN THE ROAD, LIKE A THING THROWN AWAY. IT CANNOT BE that I am the one who has done this to her. Just a moment ago, she ran across the road, lively, smiling, and quick. Beside me, my wife is screaming. I cannot move, but I do, my hands heavy as I take them from the steering wheel and step into the desolate road. My legs protest, but I walk. I fall to my knees and take the girl's hand. A small whimper. She is alive.

"Please, don't move. You're going to be all right." My voice breaks, sounding alien, each word between a quiver and a sob. The girl's limbs are tangled, her head tilted at an impossible angle. A bruise blackens her neck. Her red dress grows darker, blood blooming through the cotton, which rises in the breeze and settles back onto her body a shroud.

The endless desert, the Afghan sun, the silent sky. They watch. The road is the only thing in motion. The asphalt ripples in the heat, as if ready to open up and engulf us, making the sands of Kabul Province our tomb. I stroke her hair as her pain threads its way into me. Into places I didn't know existed. I let out a sob, but it sounds far away.

As she tries to sit up, blood spills from her brow, streaming down her face and throat. Her bare feet are wrapped in a film of dust and sand. I try to steady myself, but my hand slips

in something greasy and slick, a rainbow of engine oil and blood. The asphalt buckles again.

"Where are your people?" I say. "Tell me. I'll find help." I squeeze her fingers gently, afraid to break another thing.

Her lips barely move when she asks, "Am I dying?"

"No. You're going to be all right," I lie.

She starts to speak. "Don't talk anymore," I beg, fearing the words will end her, take the last energy that could keep her alive. Where are her parents? Sewn on her dress are little round mirrors, and I see a hundred fractured close-ups of my face.

She struggles again to raise her head and say something. I cradle her in my slippery hand. In the car, the music plays on. Beethoven's chords shred the air into shards. Rebecca is crying, fumbling at the buttons and dials in vain, plucking at the cassette that won't stop.

With shocking force, the girl grasps my arm and hisses, "I'm only ten. Maybe nine. It's not fair." She tries to point to something. "My doll," she says. Her eyes close.

"No. Stay awake, please. Please try. I'll find help." I say these words, but I understand for the first time what it means to be helpless. I hear what will be her last breath, air drawn in sharply as she dies. I watch her face for a single sign, wondering if maybe I believe in miracles after all. I swear to a god I don't believe in that I will be faithful if he shows his power now, just this once. I will never ask for anything else.

I wish I could say that I didn't see her at all. That she whipped into view from nowhere, an apparition out of the desert. But it isn't true. I saw her, but only as a blur of color trailed by a playful tangle of long, dark hair. The music stops at last. Then Rebecca is there, bending over the sunbaked road. She has something in her hand: a yellow-haired doll with a mirror-dotted dress. Sweat and tears trickle from my face,

salting my lips. I gather the child in my arms and hold her close, rocking her back and forth. Her form is so small, bones hollow like a bird's. Still, her weight nearly breaks me. I must find her people. I rise, afraid I might drop her.

Rebecca insists she will go with me, her tears flecking the girl's feet, and I am a mere echo when I respond, *No. Please, wait in the car and lock the doors*. I have never been so alone, the gates in my mind clicking shut, walls closing in until everything is crushed but my unbreakable guilt. I look up. No clouds, no birds, no god. Only sun, hitting the desert like acid rain.

I walk in the middle of the road, counting my steps, turning the rhythm into a two-note lullaby. One-two. Three-four. In 108 steps I reach the steep incline in the road. I climb, knowing what I will find on the other side.

At the top of the hill, the desert stretches below me. There they are. I see hundreds, maybe thousands, of Kochi nomads in reds, greens, blues, and every tone of beige and gray. This is what infinity looks like. An undulating mass of men, women, children, animals, and tents against a wall of sky. I see rifles slung across men's backs, the glint of steely blades at their hips. *Fearless*, was how my father described them. *Fearless and proud.*

I have few memories of my mother, Dorothy, but one stabs into me now. I used to run to greet the nomad caravans when they came into town because I wanted to play with the children. My father told me they lived off the land and fought for what was theirs, that even their youngest were brave as lions, and I longed for adventures with six-year-old nomads in the desert. My American mother would stop me, my hand in her iron grip until my fingers hurt as she told me about their thousand-year-old laws, by which even unintentional sins could be capital crimes.

I try to forget her words as I start down the sloping highway. I cross the line where asphalt gives way to sand. It takes me eighteen steps to be noticed and thirty to reach the first goatskin tents. It must have taken the girl less than four running steps from the side of the road to the middle of it. I try to banish the image of that blur. But a child's voice whispers, *Look at me*, from the deepest recesses of my mind.

Kochis of every age assemble to take in the curious sight of us. For years, they will talk about the stranger who walked among them wearing city clothes and carrying a dead girl. I meet the gaze of an old man, his face a study in shadow, strands of gray escaping from his turban.

"Telaya," the man says, pointing to the girl. Then he asks, "What happened?"

I cannot say, "I found her like this. Someone must have hit her." There is no phantom killer; there is only me. I tell him she was running so fast that I didn't have time to stop. He watches me in silence.

The crowd hovers, a ring of strangers coiling and uncoiling like a cobra. Staring at the corpse, people ask questions I don't answer. Others are quiet. I want them all to disappear. The accident and the girl's death are a private disaster between her and me, made profane by prying eyes and whispered speech.

"Go that way," says the old man.

He points to more tents, more sheep, and more people in bold colors lit brighter by the implacable sun. As I walk, people abandon their tasks to join the silent congregation forming behind me. I pass two men brushing strips of shorn wool. Sitting cross-legged on a rug speckled with sand, girls who would be children in America but are women here sew tea leaves into pouches. As I pass, the sounds of life and work stop, and I feel as if the silence will make me deaf or blind or mute, destroy one of my senses to match the loss of some

other indescribable thing the moment the girl died. A few feet away, several tents are wide open. They are brimming with artifacts, jewels, carpets, and mirror-dotted clothes. These are things the nomads will sell as they trek from village to village on their way to Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad. But today, I am the wanderer and the nomads are the ones who are still.

A woman sitting on the sand points a bony finger, not looking up from her lap. Two women polishing copper plates notice as I make my way toward them. One of them begins to rise, then sees what is in my arms and falls back to her knees with a stifled cry. Leaning against a younger woman, Telaya's mother sobs, terror and sorrow melding together on her face. I am not a parent, though only a few months ago, I thought I would be. When I see her fear, I think I know. I want to embrace her. I hear myself utter worthless apologies, dwarfed by the enormity of her pain and of what I have done.

"Baseer!" Telaya's mother cries out.

I turn around. The girl's father is only a few feet behind me, staring. His hands start to shake. His eyes widen. "Telaya?" He takes her in his arms, and all I had planned to say is replaced by all I do not. I am a fraud, the quixotic wizard behind the curtain who can't make anything right. I hear Baseer's fractured breath, a whispered word to his dead child. On his face, I see that same fear. Telaya's mother is crying freely now.

Then the crowd ebbs, parting for three tall men with silver beards. Word has spread to the elders, who have left their work, their tea, their wives, and come here to deliberate my crime. I meet their gaze as they approach, hoping Rebecca is still inside the car and will drive off without me if she must.

I hear one of the elders say, "Go find Taj."

There is some commotion as young boys spin this way and that, nodding and shouting, "Where's Taj Maleki? Get Taj!"

A man with thick sideburns cuts through the now-silent crowd. He reaches me and stops. One finger gleams with gold, an onyx adorns the front of his turban, and his *piran tomban* tunic and trousers are finer than the other men's, made of silk. A revolver sits in his holster, a Colt with a delicate pattern engraved on its grip. I stand before this strange man whose eyes are bereft of light, as if even the sun conceded defeat long ago.

"Who are you?" Taj asks in Farsi. I am relieved I speak the language, and that no one here could guess that I spoke more English than Farsi as a child.

"Daniel Abdullah Sajadi."

The man takes a step forward, but his face betrays nothing. The Kochis will not recognize the name Sajadi like people in the city do. Maybe this man knows who I am, maybe not. He watches me silently.

"Did you not see her?" His voice is as flat as his gaze.

"She ran straight into the road."

"And now she is dead."

"I'm sorry."

Taj nods. "Who do you work for?" he says. From his dialect, I hear that he isn't a Kochi. He's from the city.

"The American government."

A thousand eyes are on me. The only two people not looking at me are Telaya's parents, who are standing behind Taj.

It seems indecent to watch a mother and father in their grief. I stare instead at the horizon. An outsider would not know that this arid land is a great fraud of nature. Just behind these deserts are acres of vibrant opium poppies with emerald-green leaves, thriving under the sun. The great Yassaman field, with its rich bounty of flowers, is not far. Nature has

surrounded these fields with the most fallow land on earth, giving the poppies better camouflage than it has given me. It is these flowers that I have dreamed of killing since I was a boy, not the children who help harvest them, the descendants of those who followed my father into war against the British empire.

These thoughts speed through my head, but her voice slices through all of them. *Look at me*, says the dead girl. The desert has flung me at the feet of its dwellers. I am that most vulnerable of creatures: a man out of context.

I can almost smell the poppies on the wind. They seem so trivial now, when just hours ago, they weighed more than anything else in my life. I fought for months at the office to convince my colleagues to begin the Reform with Fever Valley's largest field.

Taj looks at Telaya's corpse. Paper-white bone protrudes from her arm. Something glimmers in the sun: a shard of glass, lodged above her eyebrow, nearly invisible in the curve of her hair. I feel a throbbing pain above my own eye.

Baseer sobs, his words tumbling over each other in despair. "God, why have you done this to us? I have no other daughters." His wife squeezes his hand.

"He killed her," Baseer says to Taj, pointing at me as if sentencing me to join his daughter in death. Between cries, he whispers, "She was the only thing of value in my life."

The crowd is still silent, watching them. Taj places a hand on Baseer's shoulder and says, "What a terrible day for you."

His words are compassionate, but I wonder if the others can tell that the man is not. He is probably one of the callous merchants from the city who trick nomads into parting with their wares for less than they are worth, who travel with them for days at a time, choosing the best rugs and jewels and bartering them for a little food, money, perhaps

medicine. Kochis are sophisticated tradesmen, too sharp to fall for such tricks, and yet there are exceptions. Some earn enough to become members of the country's sliver of a middle class, but Taj Maleki must be one of the tricksters taking advantage of those who do not with his expensive clothes and his cheap sympathy.

He goes on. "Your loss is a great one. She can never be replaced." He assures the parents that they must not worry. There will be restitution. The word is an escalating sequence of four notes, the final syllable a battle cry. When he moves, his gun gleams in a familiar way I cannot place. The Colt is an ordinary weapon—my father taught me to fire one when I was six—but there is something else about it that is familiar. The memory is there, but I cannot connect past and present.

The girl's mother trembles, her face contorted as she spears me with her gaze. I take a step back, walking into the person behind me. I turn around and tell the young man I'm sorry. He stares at me, unmoving. All around me, I see menace painted on men's faces. Their knives and guns fill my vision; I fight back the stories I grew up with.

"Where were you traveling to?" Taj says.

"Herat."

"From Kabul?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"I'm so sorry." A voice inside me says I should not have come into the desert among these men. I know I don't want to die here. But there is another kind of knowing, one that rests deep in my bones like fossils in shale. My father used to tell me, *The rich world has rules and regulations. The poor world has rituals and traditions. These worlds weigh the same.*

Taj raises his hand and stops me before returning to the elders. They whisper things I am not meant to hear, shaking their heads as they speak, gesturing in turn to the road and the desert and the tents. "Yes," one of the elders says loudly. "That's fine."

Taj shakes his hand and stalks toward me, grasping my arm without stopping. He jerks his chin toward the road. "We are going to the police."

I am ashamed at my relief. I want to get away from here, even if this man is the only way out. As we pass the girl's parents, Taj gestures toward the road and they fall in step with us. Baseer is still holding the corpse, but I feel the child's weight as if she is back in my arms. I know that she will always be in my arms.

The trek back to the car feels shorter than the walk into the desert. Soon, we will be at the police station, where I will again have to confess. They will know who I am. It may save me. But Taj is watching me like the wind watches the leaves, knowing it may toss them as it likes, loosen them from trees at will.

Rebecca's arms are wrapped around her, her hair whipping in the breeze, face pale and eyes swollen. Today is our anniversary, but it seems small now, too. I had hoped to see her as she used to be, to find even a trace of joy. Instead, I have added to her grief from three months ago.

She has moved the car to the edge of the road. She sees no one but me, her clouded eyes searching my face. I can scarcely glance at her, much less meet her gaze. I am crushed by the weight of Telaya's death and further by the weight of my wife's love because at this moment, I do not deserve it.

No words are exchanged, no introductions made. The girl's parents wedge into the backseat with Taj, Telaya slumped across their laps. I see Taj gently pry the shard of

glass from her face and I feel that stabbing pain above my eye again. Taj asks if I know the station north of here. I do.

I dig my hands into the scalding leather of the steering wheel. It comforts me, one pain making another recede. The radio, now warped with indentations, is mercifully silent. On the floor are ordinary tools I usually keep in the trunk.

"I had to make it stop," Rebecca whispers.

But I'm not staring at the tools. Under her seat is a mop of yellow wool. The tousled locks of the broken doll. The car is spangled with pastel rainbows cast by the mirrors on Telaya's dress. It must have been the finest one she owned. The mirrors on the doll's are making rainbows, too, smaller ones that dance across Rebecca's ankles. I turn the key and the engine comes alive. High above us, a bird of prey soars into view, shuddering against the burning blue dome.

1

ON THAT SCALDING AUGUST DAY, SERGEANT NAJIB SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, POLISHING THE barrel of his gun. He liked being a sergeant, despite the fool of a constable they had given him and the discomfort of his starchy uniform in the heat. Outside, there was nothing but a two-lane highway and the beige, boundless desert dotted with the occasional grungy bush or approaching mass of a nomad migration. Najib was proud to be king of this solitary mud box perched on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. From his station, he proudly served the young republic, proving that it was a serious entity. So serious that there were outposts of law and order even in places where the only real laws were those of nature, and the only real orders those of a warlord. Najib had loyally served the king, too, before the coup that had sent him packing four years ago.

Slipping the gun into his holster as noisily as he could, Najib stroked the cover of his well-thumbed Koran, then cast a glance at his young underling. Najib liked to think that the boy was a dedicated servant. It was an accepted fact that Kochi nomads were up to all sorts of trickery, and soon he would catch one of them in the act of something expressly forbidden, like passing off tin as silver or riding mules loaded with the remains of harvested poppies in the hope of starting their own field.

The grumble of a car interrupted his daydreams about glorious arrests and impending promotions. The constable shuffled out of his seat, turning to him for a cue. Najib might have walked to the station's only window, a cutout in the wall split by three vertical bars, but he would see no car from there. What imbecile had placed the single lookout point facing the desert instead of the road? He stalked out of the station, the younger man on his heels. A sand-colored Mercedes was slowing down by the station. It dipped onto the shoulder of the road, kicking up dust before coming to a stop. Najib's eyes fell on the hazy veil of blood on the grille, the red-streaked hood, the spider-webbed windshield. Inside the car was the strangest mix of folk. A stunning yellow-haired woman caught his eye first, then an urban type at the wheel and a cluster of Kochis in the back. It occurred to him that these might be the outlaws he had been waiting for.

He hooked his thumb into his holster and stood still. He would let them come to him. The driver stepped out. Above the man's right eye was a swollen, bloody gash. His shirt was stained, too. The blonde woman emerged, moving with a determination that reminded Najib of one of his wives. The last time this many people had turned up at once was when some hoodlums had organized a pack-beast race and a luckless camel had tried to outrun a big rig instead of the other animals, an unanticipated yet exciting twist that ended with the parched beast collapsing in a heap on the highway, making the asphalt look like it had grown a hump, and the terrified driver swerving off the road, his eighteen-wheeler belly-up like a giant bug. Luckily, there had been no deaths. Except a woman who had worn a *chaderi*, a blue burka, whose name no one knew and whose age no one could guess because they made sure she remained covered as she died.

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Daniel had passed the solitary police outpost before, paying it little mind as he drove toward the fields of Fever Valley. As he stepped out of his car, the breeze rising from the desert was like a whisper from the poppies to the north. The policeman studied him with narrowed eyes, his hands behind his back. An airplane glided over them, leaving a feathery wake in the sky. The officer tilted his head and spoke.

"Salaam, *saheb*. You have some business for the police?"

"There's been an accident."

The officer nodded at the Mercedes and called him sir again. "I see, *saheb*. Why are there Kochis in your car?"

"A girl was run over. I brought her here."

"Alive?"

Daniel shook his head.

"Are you the one who killed her?"

A psychedelically painted eighteen-wheeler downshifted as it passed, curious heads poking out of paneless windows, a dozen men sitting tailor-style on the tarp-covered cargo. It lumbered up the highway amid puffs of diesel. Daniel closed his eyes. A series of images surfaced in his mind like sepia photos in darkroom chemicals. He was driving. *You never think of how it is for me*, Rebecca had said. An accusation. She was wrong, he told her. She cried. *Sometimes I wish we hadn't come here.* He tightened his grip on the wheel. More accusations. All the while, that wretched sonata played on. He fumbled in the glove compartment, looking for a tape. A stupid Neil Diamond tape, which would lighten the mood because she thought he was corny and it would make her laugh. He looked away from the road, only for an instant. He had wanted to make her laugh, and instead he'd made her scream. A thin scream, not more than a single note, yet

so vast it could not be contained by the car, slamming against the windows and breaking right through the glass.

"Daniel." Rebecca sounded far away, and when he opened his eyes, he found that he had wandered into the road, where he stood wrapped in the lingering vapors of the vanished truck's exhaust.

"Come inside," the sergeant said.

Daniel shook his head. "We can't leave the girl in the car."

The man shrugged and went inside. Taj and Baseer lifted Telaya's body out, her toes dragging against the metal doorframe. Her dress bunched up around her knees, and Taj covered them back up as if they betrayed a lack of modesty. Daniel watched through the haze of the brightly lit day, his eyes falling on the child's mangled arm.

Many years ago, in the back of his father's car, Daniel saw a Kochi boy running along the edge of the desert, flashing a brilliant smile as he waved. Daniel waved back, mesmerized by the boy's bare feet, the way they kicked up no dust and seemed never to land at all. A rabid dog was running toward the boy, and Daniel tried to warn him, banging on the window and pointing. But the boy only kept on, chasing the car and laughing, until the dog was upon him, and at the very last second, the boy hopped to the side and produced a blade, lodging it in the animal's neck.

Daniel begged the chauffeur to stop, but his father forbade it, warning him that Kochis did not make good playmates. Later, he asked his father if everybody's feet were made the same, and Sayed answered, *Their feet yes, their heads no*. That night, Daniel dreamed of heads that floated up from bodies and small, battered heels that split open to reveal pockets of shattered glass. As he walked now, he felt that shattered glass push up through his feet and move through his body.

Something in the car drew his eye. A mirror had come loose

from Telaya's dress, gleaming in the empty backseat. It was small and solitary, sending the sun's rays back to the sky as if to say, *No, I have no more use for your light*. Daniel picked up the mirror and put it in his pocket. He wanted something of hers to remain with him.

The group filed into the station, Daniel the last to enter. Flies descended on the dead girl, nesting in her blood-matted hair, her ears, her drying wounds. Her mother waved them away, but they returned as if attached by springs.

Sergeant Najib introduced himself curtly and presented his constable as Mir. The younger man twisted his mouth into a smile that suggested both surprise and apprehension. Taj was asked to surrender his gun, which he did without quarrel. The Kochis sank to the floor against a wall, Telaya across their laps, the mother smoothing the child's dress, polishing its mirrors with her tears and a finger. The sounds of her grief played awkwardly in concert with the one-note drone of the flies and the hiss of the damaged fan doing its best from a corner. Daniel felt a quiver of nausea. The station was powered by a diesel generator that gave off a noxious odor, which blended with that of the remains of fried food peeking out from wax paper in an overflowing bin. Afraid he would buckle, Daniel leaned against a wall. Beside him was a three-legged table where a chess match stood abandoned, marble pieces darkened by a veil of dust. Najib offered Rebecca the only chair besides his own. The rusty metal screeched as he dragged it to where she stood. She lowered herself carefully and mouthed a thank-you. Daniel watched her, wishing he could wrap her in his arms and tell her that everything would be okay.

On the wall near Mir's stool hung a calendar made for Westerners and Western-minded locals. Miss August reigned over the station with a sultry eye and an outstretched hand.

Daniel recognized her as someone who had once modeled jewels made from the gemstones in his father's mines. Daniel still called those mines his father's, even though they were his now. His father had made the mines famous, raised armies of villagers and nomads throughout the country, and used his fortune to pay for weapons of war: bribes and the most modern guns in the world. Anything to help expel the English and keep the Russians at bay. Sayed Sajadi had outshone the king's own armies with his troops of Kochis. Now one of their children had died at Daniel's hands. Najib asked for his name. When he replied, the sergeant lowered his pen. "Related?"

Daniel nodded, and the sergeant's body relaxed. With a broad smile, he insisted on shaking Daniel's hand before asking Mir to bring Coca-Colas for everyone.

"We're going to drink Cokes now?" Rebecca held her arms out, palms open as if the answer to her question might trickle down from the ceiling. "Shouldn't we take this girl to a hospital?"

Najib scoffed. "For what? She's obviously dead."

"So they can make a record. Write down the cause of death."

When Najib indicated that no such thing was needed, Rebecca breathed out slowly. Daniel could hear an emotion in her exhale, though it was unclear what kind. He would tell her later that no record could be made about people who never officially existed in the first place. In America, his friends sometimes used the phrase "becoming a statistic" like it was something to be avoided. They complained about the government turning them into a number. What a luxury that would have been for Telaya, to find her name on a ledger. To be a statistic.

The now-unctuous sergeant asked excited questions about

Daniel's father and other things that had nothing to do with the accident, which he seemed to have forgotten for a moment. Then he returned to the subject, checking off boxes and filling in blanks. "What is your job?"

"My husband works for USADE," Rebecca said. "He's the director here."

"The United States Against the Drug Economy?" It was not Najib who had spoken, but Taj. With a thin smile, he added, "And what do you do there, exactly?"

"*I* ask the questions," Najib said. A sheen of sweat was visible above his lip, and Daniel heard the tremor in his voice. Mir stood in a corner, jerking his head toward whoever spoke.

"What do you do there, exactly?" Taj repeated.

"We help farmers stop growing poppies and teach them how to plant other things. Like food."

"Does that work?" Najib said.

Daniel told him four fields had already been reformed. He did not say that only a few small-scale growers had agreed to the change, nor that of the seven important fields of Fever Valley, just one would be reformed—and by force—in the hope that the great opium khans, invisible like gods, would capitulate. He did not say that a farmer had approached his agency with a message from these poppy overlords, quietly offering money in return for being left alone. USADE had, under Daniel's direction, refused the bribe.

"And you are the director? You are young for such a post," the sergeant said. "I suppose a man like you rises quickly through the ranks."

Daniel had no intention of explaining how he had come into the position he'd only held for seven months. He had even managed to avoid explaining it to his staff.

Najib asked how fast Daniel had been driving, where he'd

been heading, and where the accident happened. He sounded bored. With every answer, Daniel replayed another part of the accident in his mind, wondering what would have changed if he'd looked up just a moment sooner. Or if they had left Kabul a few minutes earlier. Or if he hadn't forgotten the suitcase and gone back to the house.

"Enough!" Taj said as if hearing his thoughts. He pointed to Baseer, who was weeping softly. "Look at the state my friend is in!"

"I'm not sure she knew what a car was," Daniel said. Sometimes, Kochi children didn't. They would watch from the side of the road, laughing, dropping whatever they held, and run dangerously toward the giant metal animals. Baseer shook his head, eyeing Daniel with contempt.

"She knew what a car was," Taj said. He was the only thing in motion in the room except for the blades of the fan and Najib's fast-moving fingers.

Daniel fought the nausea that twisted in his gut. It came not only from the stench of diesel and stale smoke, but from the crash and from Taj and his gun and a memory he was still struggling to conjure.

Through the window bars, long afternoon shadows leaned into the room. The day was slowly cooling, but Daniel only grew warmer, as if his body absorbed each degree the dead girl lost, her corpse growing rigid and cold as he burned. He slid down the wall to the floor, looking here and there, anywhere but at her. Above him, Miss August sparkled with empty promises of magic flight. He drew the back of his hand across his brow. Only when he saw the smudge on his cuff did he realize there was a cut above his eye. The insignificance of the injury struck him as obscene.

Najib tore the wrapper off a packet of Winstons, tapping the bottom and sliding out a cigarette. When Daniel had been

in college, Winston had sponsored *The Flintstones*. On the rare days Rebecca took a break from the piano and before she'd sworn off substances that dulled her senses, they'd spent afternoons smoking cigarettes and weed in her apartment and giggling at the Stone Age family.

"She is an unregistered person, so the compensation to the parents will be low." The sergeant spoke as if the words left a bad taste in his mouth, not because he objected to Telaya being described as unregistered, but because he objected to her being described as a person. He wrote something on the form, taking his time before bringing it to Daniel with a pen.

The page was sparse, a few vacant rectangles with captions in Farsi and English, and in bold print across the top Daniel read the English version: CONFESSION OF PERSONS MAKING ACCIDENTS BY ANIMAL OR AUTO. Underneath was the option to check off WITH DEAD or WITHOUT DEAD. At the bottom was a space for the sergeant's comments. Najib had described the event in Farsi, and closed with his version in English: *With car, Daniel Sajadi killed the girl. Moneys are 10,000 afghanis*.

So that was it. Telaya's parents were due just over one hundred dollars. Daniel's gaze dissolved into the word that spelled his deed: *killed*. He felt the sharpness of the *k*, one of its arms angling diagonally toward the sky, the other downward toward hell. *K* for kid, Kochi, Kabul, and Keystone Cop. Between the two *l*'s, he saw the road.

The Kochis couldn't write, so it fell to Daniel to provide details about the victim. What was Telaya's last name? Her family had none. Her age? She had said ten, or maybe nine. Her parents weren't sure either.

"Where do we send the money?" Rebecca said, her voice quiet and hoarse.

"You pay before you go," Najib replied, tightening his

lips as if suppressing a chuckle before adding, "Kochis do not keep postal boxes, madam."

She fetched her handbag from the car and gave Baseer a clip of bills. There had been more than ten thousand afghanis in the wallet, and Daniel wondered if she had offered it all, too embarrassed to count. He hoped she had. Baseer studied the money like it posed a problem to which he had no solution. It occurred to Daniel that if the Kochis could not read or write, maybe they could not count, either. Baseer passed the money to Taj, who leafed through the bills, counting out loud as he went. He nodded. Telaya's parents thanked Taj for his kindness, tears trickling down their faces. Safeguarding the bills in his holster, Taj gathered Telaya in his arms, leading the parents to the door.

"You can't bury the girl near my station." Sergeant Najib waved dismissively at the corpse. "Take her back where she belongs."

Daniel wished he could bury her on a gentle green hill. Instead, her time on earth would end with terse last rites in a desert with no shade and no name, an unmarked grave no one would visit, and kin who would return incidentally, if at all. In the world of cities, buildings, and streets, people's memories of those they loved were framed by places and times. When no place was different from any other, only deserts and fields that looked alike, and there was no measure of time other than sunup and sundown, what frame preserved the dimming faces of the dead? Nomads did not have photos to remember them by, nor a home to return to and say, *This is where she walked, this is where she played*. But Daniel would always know exactly where she'd died, and he thought the burden of honoring her memory would fall partly on him, her killer.

Outside, Mir was walking back to the station with a bucket of water in his hand. A wet rag was flung over his arm as pink

droplets vanished into the earth. The blood was gone from the car. Baseer and his wife climbed in the back. Taj loaded the girl onto their laps.

Rebecca stood by the car, bracing herself for a second ride in a confined space with a corpse, grieving parents, and a man whose flat eyes she'd avoided all afternoon. The bills bulged awkwardly in Taj's holster, drawing Daniel's attention again to the gun. It was familiar, like a song that Daniel knew the words to when all that mattered was its name.

"Do you know what happens next, Daniel Sajadi?" Taj said.

Daniel heard an echo in his mind, something from long ago.

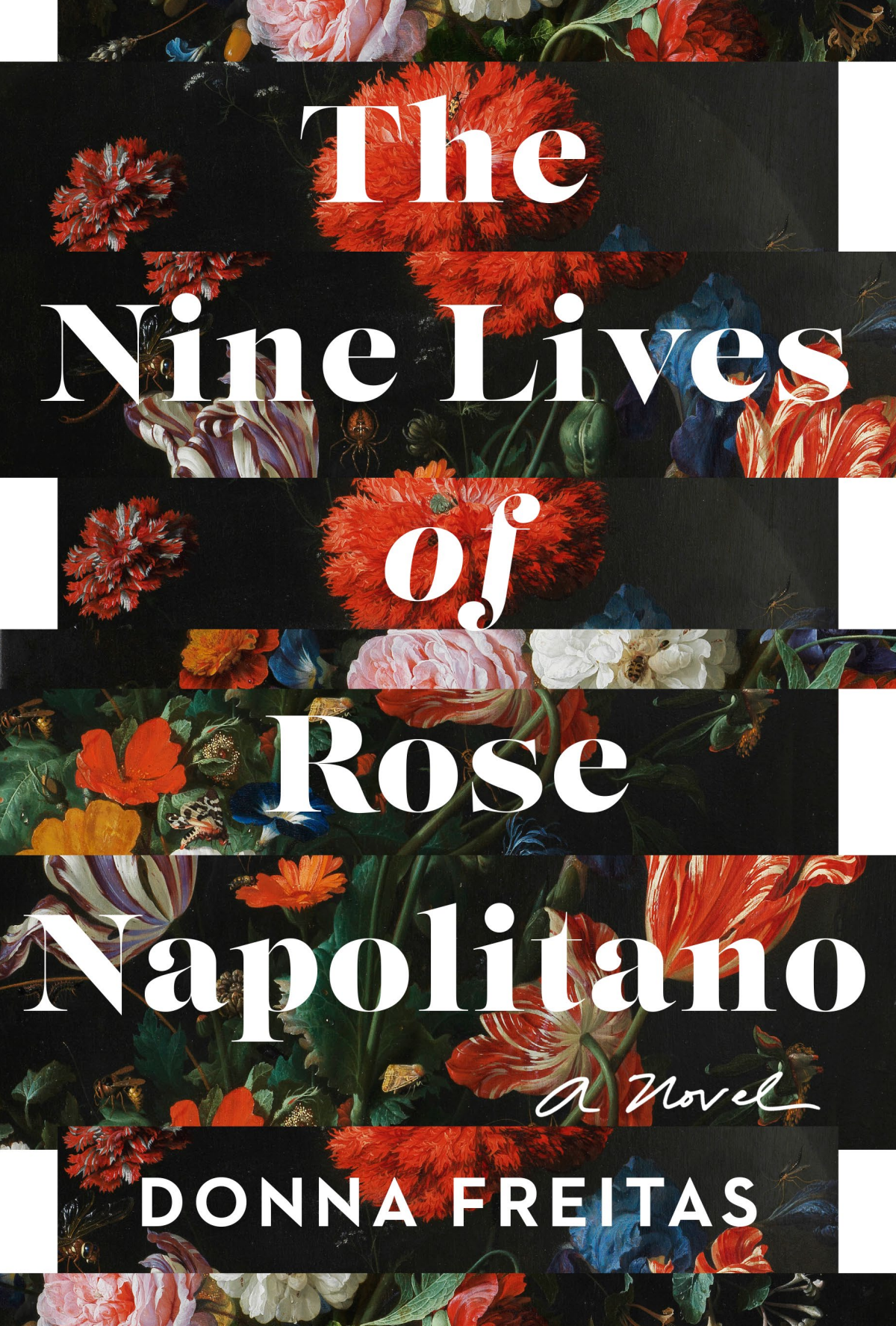
What do you see?

It was a line from a game he used to play after his mother walked out. He would sit behind his father's desk after Sayed had gone to bed and pick an object: a jewel, a glove, or a comb. He made himself guess if it belonged to his mother or to the woman his father was married to now. With a flashlight and magnifying glass, he would examine the piece, turn it over, weigh it in his palm like he'd seen antique dealers do. Then he would render his verdict, declaring if the object was "Mother" or "Other." He would make it his mission to find out without asking his father, checking instead with the housekeeper. When he was right, it was like remembering something he wasn't sure he had ever really known, a haze of memory hardening into fact.

Taj had retrieved his gun and began polishing it with a handkerchief.

What do you see?

And now Daniel saw. The flower carved into the Colt was a poppy. The corpse and the accident and the station receded, and the flowers grew until they filled his vision. Daniel wondered why he had not seen it before. It was the second time today his sight had failed him. Taj Maleki was an opium khan.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Rose, Life 3

She is beautiful.

I am awed by her perfection. The heady scent of her skin.

"Addie," I sigh. "Adelaide," I try again, a faint whisper in the sterile air. "Adelaide Luz."

I raise her little head to my nose and inhale, long and needy, ignoring the sharp pain in my abdomen. I smile as I admire the soft fuzz of her hair.

How I resisted having this little being in my arms! Before the pregnancy and the birth, I would rage about the pressure to have a child—to Luke, to Mom, to Jill, to whoever would listen. The stranger next to me on the subway, the unsuspecting man on the sidewalk. I was just. So. Angry.

But now?

The snow falls in wet clumps against the windowpanes of the hospital room, everything around me shades of gray in dim light. I inch to the left, shift into a better position. The temperature drops and the snow turns papery, thick and dry like paste. She sleeps.

My eyes are hers.

"How could I not have wanted you?" I whisper into her tiny, curling

ear, a pearly shell. "How could there be a life where you and I never met? If there is such a life, I wouldn't want to live it."

Her eyelids twitch, pale, veined, transparent, her nose and mouth and forehead scrunching.

"Did you hear what I said, sweet girl? You should only listen to the second part, about how your mother wouldn't want a life without you. That's all you need to know."

One

AUGUST 15, 2006

Rose, Life 1

Luke is standing on my side of the bed. He never goes to my side of the bed. In his hand is a bottle of prenatal vitamins. He holds it up.

He shakes it, a plastic rattle.

The sound is heavy and dull because it is full.

This is the problem.

"You promised," he says, even and slow.

Uh-oh. I am in trouble.

"Sometimes I forget to take them," I admit.

He shakes the bottle again, a maraca in a minor key. "Sometimes?" The light through the curtains forms a halo around Luke's upper body, the hand held high with the offending object outlined by the sun and glowing.

I am in the doorway of our room, on my way to pull clothes from the drawers and the closet. Mundane things. Underwear. Socks. A top and a pair of jeans. Like any other morning. I would have folded the clothing across one arm and carried it to the bathroom so I could

shower and change. Instead I stop, cross my arms over my chest, the heart inside it mangled with hurt and anger. "Did you count them, Luke?" My question is a cold snap in the humid August air.

"So what if I did, Rose? What if I did count them? Can you blame me?"

I turn my back on him, go to open the long drawer that contains underwear, bras, slips, camisoles, riffle through my things, disrupting the order of my clothing, everything growing more and more out of control. My heart starts pounding.

"You promised me," Luke says.

I grab a pair of my granniest underwear. I want to scream. "Like promises mean anything in this marriage."

"That's not fair."

"It's perfectly fair."

"Rose—"

"So I didn't take the pills! I don't want a baby. I never wanted a baby and I don't want one now and I won't want one ever and you knew that before we got engaged! I told you a thousand times! I've told you a million times since!"

"You said you'd take the vitamins."

"I said it to stop you from tormenting me." Tears sting my eyes even as the blood inside me pulses with fury. "I said it so we could have a little peace in this apartment."

"So you lied."

I turn. The underwear falls from my hand as I march my way to the other side of the bed to confront my husband. "You swore you didn't want a baby."

"I changed my mind."

"Right. Sure. No big deal." I am tumbling down a hill, we are tumbling, and I don't know how to stop us from crashing. "You 'changed your mind,' but I'm the liar."

"You said you'd try."

"I said I'd take the vitamins. That's all I said."

"You didn't take them."

"I took some."

"How many?"

"I don't know. Unlike you, I didn't count."

Luke lowers the bottle, grips it between both hands, palm pressing down on the top, twisting, removing. He peers into the opening. "This bottle is full, Rose." He looks up at me again, head shaking left, right, his disapproval pouring over me.

Who is this man before me, this man I love, this man I married?

I can barely see a resemblance between this person and the one who used to look at me like I was the only woman in the universe, like I was the meaning of his entire existence. I loved being that for Luke. I loved being his everything. He has always been my everything, this man with the soft, thoughtful gaze, with the friendliest, most open of smiles, this man I was certain I would love for the rest of my days on this earth.

The words *But I love you, Luke* are trapped moths banging around inside me, unable to find their way out.

Instead of disarming the bomb between us, in one swift motion I explode, swiping the bottle from Luke's hand, my arm like a club, knocking it hard and high, the huge, oval pills becoming an arc of ugly green Skittles flung across the wood floor, scattering across the white sheets on the bed.

This action freezes both of us.

Luke's lips are slightly parted, the sharp, clean edges of his front teeth visible. His eyes follow the trail of pills that have come to represent the success or failure of this marriage, tiny buoys I was meant to ingest to keep our marriage afloat. I've spilled them, so now we are sinking. The only sound in the room is our breathing. Luke's eyes are wide. Betrayed.

He thinks I am the one to betray him, that the proof lies in that stupid bottle of vitamins.

Why doesn't he see that he is the one who betrayed me? That by changing his mind about children he's only shown me that I am not worthy enough on my own?

Luke returns to life, walks to the corner of the room where the rolling bottle came to a stop. He bends down and picks it up. He plucks one vitamin from the floor, then another, pinching them between his fingers before dropping them back inside. The pills clatter to the bottom of the bottle.

I stand there, watching as Luke bends and straightens, bends and straightens until every last prenatal vitamin is back in its rightful home, even those that went skittering under the bed. Luke has to lift the edge of the comforter to see them, has to lie down on the floor to retrieve them, arm straining.

When he's finished, he looks at me, eyes full of accusation. "Why did I have to marry the one woman in the world who doesn't want a baby?"

I inhale sharply.

There.

There it is. The thing that Luke's been thinking forever, finally out

in the open. Not the part about me not wanting a baby—that he's known since the very beginning. It's the clear ring of regret in his voice that makes me wince, the way he singles me out as unique and only in the worst of ways.

We stare at each other. I wait for an apology that doesn't come. My heart is pounding, my mind is racing from Luke's question, piling my own on top of his. Why can't I be just like every other woman who wants a baby? Why am I not? Why was I made this way?

Will this be the summary of my life at its end?

Rose Napolitano: *Never a mother.*

Rose Napolitano: *She didn't want a baby.*

Luke looks down at his feet. He picks up the bottle cap, closes it with a hard snap of the lid.

I reach for it—I reach for him.

Two

MARCH 14, 1998

Rose, Lives 1–9

I don't like having my picture taken.

"Can you look up from your lap?"

My eyes, my head, my chin all refuse this request.

I'm the kind of person who runs from a camera, who hides behind whoever is next to me. Who puts up my hand to a lens if one shows up in my face. All the more reason I should not be here right now, having a portrait done in my cap and gown. What was I thinking?

"Um, Rose?"

I hear footsteps. A pair of navy-blue sneakers, worn at the toe, laces ragged, appear on the floor in front of me. I take a big breath, let it out, and look up. The photographer is youngish, maybe my age, maybe a year or two older. His eyes blink, he bites his lip, his brow gathers.

"Sorry," I say, hands fidgeting in my lap, fingers clasping and unclasping. "I must be your worst subject ever." I look away, off to the side, into the dim space beyond this bright, portrait setup where I sit, a gray background scrolled behind me. A row of boxes, the kind you

buy if you are moving apartments, is stacked against the wall. A blue jacket is draped over the top, and a hockey stick lies on the floor along the baseboard. "This was a dumb idea," I go on. "I just thought . . . I mean, I wanted . . . but then . . ."

"You wanted?" the photographer asks.

I don't answer, I guess because I don't really want to talk to this stranger about the inner workings of my heart. Besides, I'm still taking in the junk piled everywhere. This must be the photographer's house. He called it his "studio," but it looks like he lives here. Or maybe just moved in.

"You wanted what?" he presses.

There's something about the sound of his voice—gentle, patient—that makes me want to cry. This whole situation makes me want to cry. "I shouldn't be here, I'm not good at this." Now I do start to cry. "This is so embarrassing, I don't like getting my picture taken. I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry." I cry harder, even as my inner feminist scolds me for so much apologizing.

The photographer—I can't remember his name (Larry? No. Lou? Maybe.)—squats down next to my chair so we are almost at eye level. "Don't worry. Lots of people hate having their picture taken. But are you crying because of the portrait, or because of something else?"

I study this man, the way his right knee presses through the rip in his jeans, the way his body sways ever so slightly in his crouch. How does he know that my reason for crying isn't because of the picture? Has he also sensed that this is really about my parents, who sometimes have a hard time understanding my choices? The woman I've become as an adult?

I cross my arms, press them into my body. This black gown with

the velvet trim is thick and stiff. I bet it would stand on its own if I propped it just right. I pull the puffy beanie from my head and shake my hair out. It probably looks awful after sitting under the weight of this thing. The beanie is also velvet, the same blue as the gown. I was so excited when it came in the mail, the symbol of so many years of hard work, of the doctorate I am about to receive officially on graduation day in May. My PhD in sociology, the one that will turn me from just Rose into Professor Napolitano. Doctor Napolitano.

"Who's that picture of, over there?" I ask the photographer instead of answering his question. I point at it, extending my arm to the right.

Hanging on the wall above the stack of boxes is a large framed photo. It seems out of place, given the transitional state of everything else—fixed and permanent. Two people, a man and a woman, are sitting side by side on a porch, each one with a book open in front of them. The expressions on their faces are so alive, so engaged, like the words before them are the most exciting words ever written.

The photographer turns in the direction I point and chuckles. "Those are my parents. I took that when I was ten. I'd gotten my first real camera for my birthday that year. I was taking pictures of everything around me—flowers, blades of grass, the grain of the floorboards in the living room—very artsy."

He turns back, looks at me and shrugs. Rolls his eyes at himself.

They are green, with flecks of brown.

"I took a lot of excellent shots of the dog, too."

I laugh a little. Some of the tension in me releases. "And so . . . ?"

"Yeah, right." This time he doesn't turn away. He keeps his gaze on me. "Well, that photo—I was just arriving home. There was this

monarch flying above the tall grass and I went running after it, trying to get the perfect shot." He covers his eyes with his hands.

I find myself wanting to reach for them, to pull them away from his face, touch his smooth, olive skin. I don't want him to be embarrassed.

His hands fall back to his knees. He bobbles a little. "I was such a nerd. So there I was, grass plastered all over my jeans, tired, sweaty, and suddenly I looked up and saw my parents reading on the porch. And I could see something on their faces—something I had to capture. I stopped, lifted my camera, and snapped a single photograph." He smiles.

"That photograph?"

He stands again. He's so tall. "Yup. It was the picture that made me want to become a photographer. When I saw it, I just knew. My mother had it framed, so I could always remember who I am and what I want to do, even when times get hard. It's not easy starting out in this business." He pats the camera that's next to him on the floor with affection, and he shrugs again.

My head tilts, studying him. "Thank you for telling me that story."

He nods. "Thank you for asking about that photograph." He taps his foot. "Now it's your turn."

"My turn?"

"Tell me what the deal is. I told you a story, so now you have to tell me one, about why you're really here."

"Um."

"Um, yes, well?"

"Um, okay. Fine."

He crosses the room and retrieves a chair, parks it next to mine,

and sits. Leans forward. "I've got plenty of time. You're my only appointment."

I breathe deeply. "Before I tell you, I have one more question."

"Sure, go ahead."

My cheeks grow hot. I stand up, unzip my graduation robe before sitting back down. This thing is melting me. "It's embarrassing."

His eyebrows arch.

"I forgot your name, and since we are telling each other life stories, I figure we should probably be on a first-name basis. I know it's not Larry. But is it—Lou, maybe?"

He smiles again, laughs again—he has such a nice laugh, low, but rich, like he enjoys laughing, like he is easy to laugh. "Well, Rose Napolitano, my only appointment of the day, I agree that we should know each other's names, and since I already know yours, you should also know mine." He sticks out his hand and I take it.

I feel it across my skin, everywhere, a rush.

"My name is Luke."

Three

AUGUST 15, 2006

Rose, Life 1

My hand hangs in the air, reaching, empty.

Instead of giving the bottle to me, instead of taking my hand, Luke returns the vitamins to the bedside stand where I usually keep them, hidden behind the stack of novels that makes its home next to my pillow. He is quiet.

I speak in my defense. "I have been trying, Luke. Really." I let my arm drop, let my husband's question go unanswered. I want to bury it from view, erase it by piling other words on top of it until we can no longer see it. "But sometimes those pills make my stomach hurt, and you know I can't work while I'm sick. I can't present at conferences, I can't do my research interviews. . . ." I wait for my husband to join in, help me paddle away from the dangerous place where this fight has taken us.

We can fix this. My eyes are pleading.

Luke hesitates, only for a second, and I hang my hope on this single breath.

But then his eyes narrow. "I don't want to hear about your work

anymore, Rose. I'm tired of hearing about your work and how, because of it, we can't have a baby."

There it is again. Exposed. The problem we cannot solve.

My impulse to try to fix this turns to ash. I glare back. "It's not just because of my work that I don't want a baby and you know it. I don't want a baby because I've never wanted a baby and it's my right not to want a baby! But Jesus, Luke, what's so wrong about loving my work? What's so wrong with making it my priority? What's so wrong with *me*?"

"What's wrong is that you love your academic career more than you'd love a baby even if we did have one! What matters is that the baby would always come second. I don't know why I ever thought it might be otherwise."

"Oh, and like you don't love being a photographer. But you get to be as happy and obsessed with your work as you want because you're a man."

Luke presses his hands into the sides of his head, elbows all sharp angles. "Stop spouting the feminist crap. I'm sick of hearing it."

"Well, you stop spouting your parents' words!"

His hands fall back to his side, ball into fists. "Fine. I'm tired of defending you to them anyway."

I grit my teeth.

Luke's parents wish he'd married someone else, someone traditional, someone who would give up everything to become a mother. Someone who would put a baby over her career. It's a fight Luke and his parents keep having about me—which means it's a fight he and I keep having about us.

Last year when I found out I got tenure, I called Luke from my

office and he said all the right things, like how we would go out for drinks and dinner to celebrate. But when I got home, Luke was on the phone with his father. He didn't hear me come in.

"Yeah, Dad, I know, I know," Luke was saying. "But Rose . . ."

I stopped moving, the front door not quite shut. I held it open so it wouldn't make a noise and Luke would continue to think he was alone.

"Yes, I know, but Rose is coming around. She'll be fine once she has a baby."

There was a long pause.

My chest hurt, my rib cage hurt, the heart behind it hurt. If there was a glass nearby, a plate, anything breakable, I would have picked it up and smashed it to the ground. I wanted to scream.

Finally, Luke spoke again. "I know you think work will always come first, but I think a baby will change that." Pause. "I know you disagree, but I wish you'd give her more of a chance." Pause. "Dad, she gets tired of talking about it." Another pause, then a heavy, frustrated sigh from Luke, followed by an angry outburst of, "Dad, stop, please!"

A book fell from the lip of my overstuffed bag, hitting the floor with a heavy *clunk*.

"Rose?" Luke called out. "Is that you?"

I shut the door with a loud slam, tried to make it seem like I was just arriving. "Yup, I'm home! Ready for cocktails!"

"I've got to go, Dad," he said. By the time I was one step into the living room, Luke had hung up and his phone was resting on the table.

He studied my face.

I studied his. Luke's cheeks were red.

"Hi." I tried for a happy smile, to muster the excitement that had been bubbling through me all afternoon since I'd gotten my news. I wanted those feelings back. I felt cheated, my moment ruined by Luke's conversation with his father.

"How much of that call did you hear?" Luke asked.

I stopped with the false smile. "Enough. Too much."

"What do you think you heard?"

I set my bag on a chair. "Don't do that to me, Luke. I know what you guys were talking about."

"Tell me."

"It was yet another version of the conversation you keep having with your parents. That because I don't want a baby I'm a bad, deficient woman and always will be."

"That is not what we were saying."

"Right."

"I also heard how my husband refuses to stand up to his parents and tell them to butt out of his marriage and stop maligning his wife!"

"I defended you."

"Yeah, but why do you even need to? Why do your parents have a place in a conversation that has to do with our marriage? It's none of their business!"

"I'm doing my best! You know how strongly they feel and they're my parents and I love them!"

"Well, you know how strongly I feel and I'm your wife and I love *you*!" I yanked at the scarf around my neck and tossed it on the table.

Luke took a breath, let it out. "You know I love you, too."

I kicked off my heels and they went clattering across the floor. "You also told your parents that I changed my mind about having a baby."

Luke picked up the scarf and began to fold it, pressing his hand along the delicate fabric. He'd given it to me as a gift the year before and it was my favorite. He held it out to me now. "I was just trying to get them to back off," he said quietly.

I didn't take it. Didn't move.

"Rose, please," Luke said. "Let's not do this tonight. We're supposed to be celebrating this amazing accomplishment in your life. Let's just go out."

My eyes turned hard, everything about me grew harder and harder. My muscles, my cells, my limbs, my cheeks especially, calcifying as I stood there looking at my husband with something like hatred. Maybe it was hatred. The first ugly seeds of it. Seeds that would grow and grow like vines until we both suffocated. "Somehow I don't feel like celebrating anymore, Luke."

"Don't be like that."

"What—a bad woman? A difficult woman? An *angry* woman?"

My voice, my tone, it rose until I was shrieking. What I wanted to do was stand there yelling. An endless cry of anger that would release the trapped feeling that imprisoned everything about my life. I wanted to let it out, exorcise it, but I didn't.

Instead, I stomped off to the bedroom like a petulant child, opening and slamming closet doors and drawers as I changed from my work clothes into sweats and those thick, ugly socks that are like slippers.

Congratulations to me, I raged.

This is impossible," Luke says now, breaking our silence. "You're impossible."

I watch as he passes me on his way out of the bedroom, hear his footsteps cross the living room, bare feet pattering against wooden planks. I listen as he opens the coat closet at the front of the apartment. On his way back his steps are trailed by the sound of wheels, low and constant. A suitcase.

He passes me a second time, suitcase dragging behind him, the biggest one we own, big enough for a dead body, we've always joked. He stops in front of the drawers where he keeps his clothing, folded, neat, organized, so unlike my drawers, which are overflowing, pajamas and bras balled up and mixed, a cocktail of silk and satin. He hoists the suitcase onto the bed, the rich sound of the zipper circling, followed by the slide and *thunk* of his hands pulling out a wooden drawer, hands that I once loved all over my skin but not in a long while, hands that are lifting tall stacks of T-shirts, jeans, boxers into the open roller bag. He empties a second drawer, then a third, socks, more boxers, followed by the closet full of shirts and sweaters, until there is no room left for any more clothing, for another piece of Luke. He has taken all that he can carry.

His gaze never meets mine.

My eyes drift to the photograph of me on Luke's bedside table. My head is thrown back, my mouth is open, and I am laughing. Snow sparkles across my thick gray sweater and throughout my dark hair—Luke had just surprised me with a snowball. He took that picture the day we got engaged. It's his favorite photo of me.

He doesn't touch it now, doesn't look at it.

I think about the other photos he's taken of me, of us, how he turned me from a person who hated having her picture taken into one who is capable of enjoying it—well, as long as the picture is taken by him. I think about the very first time he took my photograph, how a photography session meant to last half an hour turned into an entire day spent together, a single day that extended into a lifetime of days. My rage, my anger, begins to melt.

I'd wanted a special gift for my parents for my graduation, something physical, something they could hang on the wall of the house, something that would create a conversation about my doctorate. I'd chosen Luke as the photographer because he was cheap, because he was close by my apartment. During our session, he and I got to talking. He was trying to make me relax for the camera, and eventually convinced me to tell him the real reason I started crying during our session.

So I told him.

I told Luke how, after defending my dissertation and having it bound, I'd presented my parents with a copy and they looked at it, read the title on the cover, and stopped there. How my mother said the right thing. "Well, Rose, congratulations on such a big accomplishment! We have a doctor in the family!" But underneath her words, I could tell she wasn't sure what to make of the kind of doctor I'd become. How my parents struggled to understand why I'd wanted my PhD so badly when a college degree should have been plenty, especially since my carpenter father wasn't lucky enough to get even this. How even though my parents and I were close and even though we talked and saw each other regularly, grad school was something

we didn't much discuss. Whenever I brought up what I was studying, especially with my mother, she would listen with interest at first, but then her attention would fade and she would say something like, "I don't even understand half of the words you're using, Rose"—embarrassment in her tone. I told Luke how much I loved my parents and how much they loved me back and how much I wanted us to connect on this thing that had become such an important part of who I am, and yet this connection had remained elusive. I wanted to bridge the distance between us, so here I was at his studio, getting pictures taken as though this would somehow erase the gap.

"I have an idea," Luke said, when I arrived at the end of my story.

He took my doctoral gown and hung it up in a closet, set my cap on the chair, and asked me to take him to the university where I attended graduate school.

"Okay," I said, thinking, *Why not?*

It was a fine afternoon, not great, a bit chilly and gray, but dry. Luke told me that clouds offered better lighting for photographs than sunlight. When we arrived on campus, I felt awkward taking him around.

"I want you to show me everything," he assured me. "Every classroom, your favorite spot in the library, your favorite bench on the quad, the room where you defended your dissertation. I want you to give me Rose's grand tour of her graduate experience and why she loved it so much."

The longer we were there and the more we talked, the more I was able to forget that Luke was taking photographs. Our session lasted four hours and turned into dinner afterward—my treat. I insisted.

There are photographs from that day of me walking down the hallway of my department, eyes glancing at the bookshelf that holds the faculty's monographs, of me hugging my dissertation inside the room where I defended it, of me searching for books in the sociology section of the library, talking to a few of my beloved professors, and a beautiful, happy photo of me and my dissertation director. They are goofy and fun and totally me. I couldn't even believe it when I saw them. Luke compiled the best ones into an album with an inscription that read: *To my parents, with love, Rose Napolitano, PhD* on the cover.

My mother and father sat down on the couch with the book perched between them. They asked me about every single photograph and I told them.

"Sweetheart, this one is my favorite," my father said, pointing to the picture of me and my director. "Maybe we can pull this one out and I can make a frame for it, so we can hang it in the living room."

I took Luke out to dinner a second time to thank him for his hard work, for making something so special, for helping my parents better understand who their daughter had become. And because, well, I wanted to see him again. When I explained how much my parents loved the album, how they'd asked me so many questions about graduate school, Luke nodded.

"I've never been the biggest fan of portraits," he said. "I think the best photographs are the ones where we are just living and being in the places where we're most ourselves. And you are most yourself at your university, Rose."

I looked at Luke right then. I loved him already.

Luke puts one last pair of jeans on top of everything else and zips the bag.

"Where are you going?" I manage. The words are dry and dusty in my throat. My body sags, everything hunching over toward the floor, shoulders curving, neck bent.

He is staring at his suitcase, at the shine of navy-blue vinyl. "I can't, Rose. I just can't."

"You can't what?"

"I can't stay. In this marriage."

I straighten then, the movement sudden, knees, shoulders, the knobs of vertebrae along my spine, elbows tightening, wrists, fingers. "You're leaving me over a bottle of vitamins?"

He turns to me, eyes sharp. I've seen this look many times in the last year. The look of righteousness, of determination, of tragedy for marrying a woman who refuses to have a child at all costs.

The cost, I see now, is him.

"No. I'm leaving you because I want a baby and you don't and I don't know how to fix this."

"We used to understand each other," I say, voice hollow. Defeated. "You used to understand me."

Luke swallows. Followed by a nearly imperceptible bob of his head.

He hefts the bag from the bed to the floor with a loud thud. Then he takes the handle, tips the suitcase, and wheels it past me and out of the bedroom.

I follow behind him, or I float, I'm not sure, my body, my brain, detached from each other. But I move, of this I am certain. I move as

Luke moves, across the living room, past the long kitchen island we had built two years before because I love to cook, because I needed more room to chop and to prep.

Eventually Luke reaches the short hallway by the front door. He slips his feet into his shoes, reaches for the lock, turns it, a loud sharp note.

"Bye, Rose," he says, his back to me, the light blue of his long-sleeved shirt the flag of surrender, signaling that this is the end. The battle over.

"Where are you going?" I ask one more time.

"It doesn't matter," is all he says.

Then I watch as Luke walks out the tall metal door of our apartment and it swings closed. I hear the sound of the latch clicking shut, listen to the elevator as it rises to our floor, the slide of it opening, Luke's footsteps entering it, the whirring of its descent to the lobby, followed by the quiet, by the unending silence. No more footsteps, no more whirring, no more suitcase wheels sliding along wooden planks and concrete hallways. This is the noise of being alone, of being left by one's husband, of being left to one's work. This is the sound of not being a mother, of refusing motherhood, the antinoise of my life to come. It is a long time before I am used to it.

THE MUSIC OF BEES

a novel

EILEEN GARVIN

DUTTON

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Chapter Two

Twelve Queens

The queen bee is the only perfect female in the hive, and all the eggs are laid by her.

—L. L. Langstroth

Alice Holtzman would have rated her mood below average even before she hit the wall of traffic creeping down Interstate 84 back to Hood River. She blamed the young imbeciles at Sunnyvale Bee Company in Portland who had mixed up her order, which had delayed her departure and landed her in this late-afternoon sea of cars and trucks. To be more precise, they had lost her order, which was frustrating because Alice was a regular customer at Sunnyvale and also because, as a point of personal pride, she tried hard to be conscientious.

Things were always crazy on Bee Day, an annual event in April, and she acknowledged that. After all, the Sunnyvale Bee Company saw hundreds of millions of bees move through their yard on that single day. When Alice arrived, she saw hundreds of bee packages awaiting pickup. Each small, screened crate held ten thousand bees, all buzzing with confusion at their recent sorting in the bee yards of southern Oregon from whence they came. The precious cargo, trucked in before dawn, had to be picked up, transported, and hived within twenty-four hours. Hundreds of beekeepers would descend on Sunnyvale to claim their bees on an average Bee Day, so things could get hectic.

The car in front of her crept forward and slammed on its brakes. Alice exhaled through her nose with impatience. She looked at her watch and sighed. Yes, Alice knew Bee Day would be crazy. That was why she had taken the day off. It was a Thursday. You could never count on the bees arriving on a weekend.

They came, like babies, unpredictably and often inconveniently. Alice and other expectant beekeepers had to wait until those southern hives grew strong with populations of young bees and the early-spring showers tapered off. Pickups were rescheduled all the time. A betting man wouldn't put money on Bee Day, as intransigent as it was. Alice knew that. That was why she had called two days before, like she always did, to reconfirm her order with Tim, the cheerful shop manager who'd been there, she knew, for more than twenty years. It was impossible to tell how old Tim was. He was one of those men who'd looked old at twenty, probably, losing his hair right after high school, and now seemed ageless. Unflappable Tim. Alice didn't even know his last name, but for the past several years, Tim had been a regular part of her life. Not a friend, exactly. More like a friendly milepost, a happy marker that said it was spring, Oregon's winter was finally over, and it was time for fresh life in the apiary. For all its inconvenience, Alice usually loved Bee Day.

But this year Tim hadn't answered the phone when she called. Instead a young woman picked up and identified herself as Joyful.

"How can I help make your day amazing?" she'd asked.

Alice gave her name and order number while wondering if Joyful could possibly be her real name. Joyful had assured her that all orders would be filled as usual and that they would be thrilled to see her in two days. She hadn't actually refused to look up Alice's order, but she hadn't looked it up either.

"Be well!" she'd said, and hung up before Alice could say anything else.

So as Alice stood watching Joyful with her blond dreadlocks hanging in her face as she pawed through the stack of orders and failed to find Alice's, she had wanted to say, I told you so. She had wanted to say other things—things that would have disappointed her mother. Alice folded her arms over her chest, took a deep breath, and leaned on the counter.

"Miss, I called you two days ago. My name is Holtzman. Alice Holtzman. Hood River. I ordered twelve Russian nucs. Twelve nucleus hives."

She tried to sound calm and shifted back slightly when she noticed she was tapping a blunt finger on the counter.

“No extra queens and no packages. Tim usually sets my stuff aside in the overflow yard.” Alice pointed to a gated area on the left. For years now, Tim had separated the orders of experienced beekeepers, like her, from those of the beginners who were more inclined to linger with questions, thereby creating their own buzzing confusion on Bee Day.

“Why don’t you just let me have a look over there? I’m sure I can find them myself.”

But Joyful, with her brows in a crease and her dreads in her face and who was not having an amazing day, would not be moved. She looked up from the mess of papers and fixed Alice with a stern gaze.

“Ma’am, I hear you saying that you are a longtime customer, and I do respect that. But we have a system in place here, and you are just going to have to wait your turn like everyone else.”

Alice flushed with embarrassment and drew back, pressing her lips together and feeling like a chastised child. She felt her breath catch and thought about Dr. Zimmerman, who asked her to note such moments. Alice hitched up her overalls and joined the clutch of other beekeepers milling around and chatting as they waited for their orders. Alice did not chat.

The spring sun grew warm on her head. She took off her sunhat and pulled her hair off her neck, which was damp with sweat. She glanced at her hands, her nails chewed to the quick, and shoved them in her back pockets. She shifted her weight from one foot to another, her feet swelling in her work boots. She glanced up and saw herself on the security monitor and looked away, tugging on the straps of her overalls. Being motionless made her nuts. Half an hour later, her order was discovered on the floor under Joyful’s Birkenstocked feet.

“Alice Holtzman, Hood River. 12 Russian nucs. No extra queens. Side yard. ***VIP!!!” was scrawled in red across the page.

Joyful looked miffed but didn’t apologize. She handed Alice the crumpled paper and pointed toward the overflow area.

This situation was nothing new to Alice. She was a Holtzman, after all. German-American, rational, she always planned ahead and thought things through like her parents had taught her. She tried to anticipate what might go awry and work in advance to avoid hiccups. She knew most other people were not as

conscientious. She often found herself waiting for others to catch up with her thinking, having fallen short before they even started. So how did she account for this feeling now, this impatience, the childish urge to reach across the counter and yank Joyful's dreadlocks? She took the paper and walked to the side yard.

A couple of regular staff, Nick and Steve, helped Alice duct-tape the tops of the cardboard boxes and carefully load each one into the back of her small pickup. She tightened a tie-down strap around the bases of the boxes to keep them from sliding around.

"Sorry, Alice," Nick said, rolling his eyes toward Joyful. He was a nice guy about her age with a handlebar mustache.

"New management while Tim's in Arizona. Family stuff, I guess."

Alice shrugged, tried to smile, and failed. She shut the gate of the truck harder than she needed to. It wasn't Nick's fault that she'd wasted more than an hour on what was meant to be a fifteen-minute stop, but she wasn't going to stand around making small talk.

"Thanks, Nick," she said. "Tell Tim to give me a holler about that honey extractor when he gets back."

Now on the clogged highway, Alice huffed with annoyance. She reached across the seat and grabbed the bag of mini Chips Ahoy! cookies she knew she shouldn't have bought at Costco earlier that day. She pulled out a handful of cookies and tossed them into her mouth.

She hated to admit it, but she'd been running late long before she got to Sunnyvale. She stopped at Tillicum Lumberyard and then at Costco, that great behemoth of retail they didn't have in little Hood River. People shoved past her, and one harassed-looking mother of two banged her cart into Alice's heels and didn't even apologize. Alice waited forever in the checkout line, which made her stressed. Then she'd lost an hour waiting for her bees and was now smack in the middle of the afternoon traffic she'd tried so hard to avoid. It was why she'd called ahead two days ago. It was why she'd taken the day off and gotten up early. She tried so hard to have everything organized. It was other people who fouled things up. She felt a bloom of anxiety then. The line of traffic inched along, and her chest felt tight. She cracked the window, but the hot smell of asphalt stung her nostrils, so she shut it again. She looked at the cars on either side of her. Nobody else seemed to mind sitting here. They were all looking at their phones. She gripped the steering

wheel, feeling the tightness creep up into her throat. Then she heard Dr. Zimmerman's calm voice in her head: "Do you know where that feeling comes from, Alice? Can you follow the thread?"

Alice inhaled deeply and flexed her hands. Being still was so hard for her these days. If she stayed focused, kept working, her thoughts couldn't blindside her. No, Dr. Zimmerman, she thought, she couldn't follow the thread. Not with 120,000 Russian honeybees in the back of the pickup.

She ate another handful of dusty cookies and glanced in the rearview mirror at the nucleus hives wedged together in the back of the truck. The spring sunshine was mild enough, so she wasn't worried about the bees getting overheated on the ride home, slow as it was. Once there, she intended to get them hived before sunset. She could do it quickly, all twelve on her own, she was sure. She was efficient and had laid out her tools in the shop the night before, all cleaned and polished. Remembering that made her anxiety rise again. She stayed up late to set things up so she could get back early and install her hives before dark. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her thudding heart. She tossed the cookie bag into the back seat, where she couldn't reach it.

At the exit for Multnomah Falls, which marked the halfway point to Hood River, Alice saw two cars pulled over on the shoulder—a fender bender, from the looks of it. The lane was cleared by the time she reached it, but everyone was still rubbernecking. Two men stood next to their dinged-up cars talking on their cell phones. Probably some tourist trying to take a photo without the inconvenience of stopping. It happened all the time—people leaning out the window to snap a photo of the 611-foot waterfall.

After the wreck, the highway opened up, and soon she was doing eighty, heading east as the sun dropped behind her. The freedom of movement made her feel calmer. Alice took off her hat and sunglasses. She unhooked one strap of her overalls, an admission that they didn't really fit anymore, but she didn't care. She turned up the music—Springsteen's "Born to Run."

Alice disliked Portland, with its confusing network of bridges, snarls of traffic, and aggressive panhandlers. But the open road leading away from it, she loved. Basalt cliffs overlapped each other in a view that unfolded mile after mile along the Columbia River. She knew the distinct monoliths by heart—Rooster Rock, Wind Mountain, Beacon Rock. In the early sunset, the green hills and rocky crags were cast

in a pink veil. It looked like a painting, like a dream. Alice never grew tired of looking at it, this impossible beauty that she had lived within for forty-four years. She passed a semi and glanced at the wide river on her left. The dark green water was frothy from the wind, whitecaps whipped-up and pushing against the current. She saw a mass of white pelicans resting on a gleaming sandbar and towering Douglas fir trees leaning out over the water. An osprey circled the river, keening. On the right, she saw the headlight of an oncoming train. It passed her, and she heard the whistle blow and recede. The setting sun threw a gauzy light over the water, and Alice felt her body relax.

She took exit 62, slowed, and stopped at the top of the ramp. She rolled down the window, and the cool wind off the Columbia River blew through the truck and teased strands of hair around her face. She could smell the water, the pines along the road, and the faint scent of woodsmoke. She could smell the distinct green breath of spring. She passed the Red Carpet Tavern, its roof sagging sadly, and noted that the parking lot, as usual, was full of pickup trucks of guys stopping for a beer on their way home from work. She smiled to recall her father so often in their midst—slender and reticent, but drawing others to him with the force of his kindness under his cutting sense of humor. The road past the bar would take her south to her little house outside of town down in a dell at the end of Reed Road. There was orchard on one side and forest on the other. It was the perfect spot for honeybees—sheltered from the wind and with Susan Creek running down off the hillside providing water for her girls, as she liked to call them. Beside the irrigation ditches were tangled miles of clover, blackberry, and dandelion. Bee heaven.

The dell was perfect for Alice too, because she hardly ever saw anyone out there. Other than Doug Ransom, whose large orchard sprawled pleasantly to the west of her, she had no real neighbors unless you counted Strawberry Hollow, a messy collection of trailers at the foot of Anson Road. She didn't know anyone who lived there and kept her distance. Meth heads and pit bulls, she imagined. Rapists and creeps of all sorts, she thought. She started making up headlines.

"Ten Arrested in Trailer Park Drug Bust."

"Shallow Grave Discovered at Strawberry Hollow."

Then she stopped herself. Like the anxiety, this was also new—making up ugly stories about people

she didn't know.

"They are just thoughts, Alice, and the pattern promotes a negative outlook," Dr. Zimmerman had said to her. "But you can shift those patterns and rewire your thinking. It just takes practice."

Dr. Zimmerman was obviously very smart. She had diplomas from Harvard and Stanford on her wall. She had worked in Palo Alto, ostensibly fixing the tech crazies, before moving to Hood River for semi-retirement. Despite the diplomas and her chic looks, which were unusual in this rural outpost, she wasn't arrogant. Just confident. And kind. Still, the fact that she, Alice Holtzman, was seeing a therapist was absurd. You had to laugh, she thought. Only it wasn't funny, was it?

Alice steered the truck south toward Mount Hood, toward the home she had bought with the help of her mom and dad. They were third-generation orchardists, both of them. It was hard work, but they had loved it.

"Never be afraid of hard work, Alice," her mother would say.

"Or I'll come back from the grave and kick you in the rear, my dear," her dad would say with a wicked grin.

A life lived outside, they always said, was a good life.

"A good life," she said aloud, glancing into the rearview mirror at the twelve nucleus hives, each holding a queen and her workers and so much promise.

"Almost home girls. You'll have a good life. I promise."

Though it was no longer the quiet backwater it had been when Alice was born, Hood River was still a great place to live. The 1980s brought the windsurfers with their vans and long hair. There were some fights between them and local loggers and farmers, like the ones who hung out at the Red Carpet. But the hippies who caused trouble ultimately left. The ones who stayed started families, fixed up the town's old houses, and opened businesses—cafés, pizza places, and windsurfing stores. The town grew. The last decade had seen an explosion of wineries, fancy boutiques, breweries, and restaurants. It wasn't the same town anymore, but for locals like the Holtzmans, who lived outside all that, it didn't matter. Their lives kept chugging along the same tracks. The sunburned tourists who plodded through downtown clutching iced

coffees had no idea that the heart of this place was far from Oak Street, up the valley, and out in the orchards. Those long rows of trees were far more than a postcard backdrop for their scenic drives. They were history, part of a tradition that was more than one hundred years old.

Alice's family was part of that history. The Holtzman orchards were small, but they were all heirloom stock from the 1900s—Gravensteins, Pippins, and Winesaps—nothing like the mushy Red Delicious apples from your average school lunch. This was fine, flavorful fruit. Al and Marina Holtzman had taken over the orchard from Al's parents, who had taken it over from his grandparents—German immigrants who'd arrived in the valley before World War I. Al and Marina had made a living for themselves and Alice, their only child. They'd been happy there.

Alice rolled to a stop at Country Club Road, signaled right, and glanced left, alert for the plodding tractor one was apt to see on a spring evening like this. The quiet lane was empty. She hung a right and continued toward home.

Alice had been planning to take over the orchard from her parents since she was ten years old. When the time came, she knew she'd have to work hard and keep her job at the county to make ends meet. But to her shock, Al and Marina had decided to sell eight years ago. Her dad had become disheartened by changes in the industry. The big producers had forced spray laws on the county that the smaller farmers couldn't stomach. Not that the Holtzman operation had ever been fully organic. Al Holtzman was too much of a libertarian to let those words cross his lips. But he was German, after all. Sensible. He sprayed minimally and by hand. The county regulations were too much, he said, and went too far.

"It's poison, Alice," he said, shaking his head. "The fools are cutting off their noses to spite their own faces."

She hated to see her parents pushed aside by the demands of the larger orchardists, who were too stubborn, busy, or just plain wrongheaded to consider different options. As for the county, well, Alice worked in the county planning department. She knew how backward things could be. It could take years to change a simple mailbox ordinance. Alice had later wished she'd argued with him about it, wished she'd told him how much she wanted it. But she didn't want to make him feel worse. Her eyes prickled with tears

remembering. She wiped them away with the back of her wrist.

Al and Marina gave Alice some money from the sale of the orchard, which she used to buy her place in the quiet dell—a single-story rancher on a couple of acres. She thought they might eventually move in with her. But they had wanted to be independent, and they'd moved into a townhouse. They died within six months of each other—Al first. Alice missed them.

She talked to Dr. Zimmerman about them too. She mentioned she seemed to hear their voices in her head and sometimes she talked back to them, though that might sound nuts. Dr. Zimmerman looked at Alice over the tops of her glasses. Alice blushed. She supposed it wasn't polite to say "nuts."

But Dr. Zimmerman simply nodded. "It must be a comfort to you," she said.

But they both knew the reason Alice went to see the nice lady doctor was not because she missed her folks.

Alice slowed for a large fruit packing truck barreling through the intersection near the road to Kingsley Reservoir. She glanced south to find Mount Hood on the horizon, kissed with sunset. She turned up the stereo, which was now playing one of her favorite Springsteen songs, "Thunder Road."

Alice had started seeing Dr. Zimmerman after she'd had what felt like a heart attack in the middle of the produce section in Little Bit Grocery and Ranch Supply three months earlier. She'd been standing next to Carlos, the friendly, handsome clerk, the one who always called her "Madame" or "Miss Alice" and always had a story to share about his kids or the news. For the first time she had felt that invisible band ratchetting down across her chest, and she couldn't catch her breath. She slid to the floor, pulling down a pile of kale with her. Carlos eased her into a sitting position against a rack of absurd, uncut Brussel stalks. She could see his lips moving but couldn't hear any sound. She was close enough to see that he had a tiny bit of shaving cream on the smooth brown skin behind his ear. She felt she needed to tell him and wanted to laugh at that urge. The paramedics came, and then it seemed like half of Hood River County was standing around looking down at Alice Holtzman sitting on the floor, her chest heaving and red in the face. Her face flamed now, remembering.

She knew almost everyone at the small ER too. Jim Verk, who she'd known since second grade, was

on duty that night and told her she'd had a panic attack. She went to see Dr. Zimmerman at his recommendation. Nobody in the history of the Holtzman family had ever been to a therapist, but the experience at Little Bit had embarrassed Alice so much that she was willing to try anything to avoid a repeat episode.

Alice stared at the road and realized she was gripping the steering wheel as she remembered. She willed herself to relax. The sunset was winning their race when she reached the Oak Grove Schoolhouse. She sped up the hill, which was shadowed by tall Douglas firs that marked the boundary of county forest land. Through the window, she felt the cool air at the top of the rise and glanced at the bees again in the rearview mirror. The new nucs were the root of her anxiety, she realized. Every step of her carefully planned day was bent toward successful hive installment. These bees depended on her. But at this hour, the temperature would be even colder down in her shady ravine, and she didn't want to stress the girls with exposure to the cold, dark air and the artificial light of the shop. They would have wait until tomorrow, she told herself. They had honey in their combs to eat and would be fine for one night in their nuc boxes. Better for her to make the transfers when she was fresh to avoid any silly mistakes.

"Be sensible now and pull yourself together," her mother's voice said.

Alice sighed and surrendered the idea of that chore.

"Tomorrow morning before work, then," she said aloud.

Alice relaxed back into the seat and palmed the wheel as she followed the familiar curves of Reed Road. She let her mind drift, trusting her thoughts to behave, expecting her customary self-discipline to keep any worrisome memories rounded up like obedient sheep by a collie. But then she recalled her last session with Dr. Zimmerman. The therapist had been leading Alice toward the forbidden topic for some time, but they hadn't ever quite arrived. Alice kept certain thoughts behind a firmly closed door in her mind and had resisted Dr. Zimmerman's gentle prodding. Now, without warning, the door opened a crack. Later she would blame fatigue for her careless bargaining with herself. I'll just think of his face, she thought. Just that. Then the door burst open and the memories flooded her.

Bud laughing as he stood behind the counter at the John Deere store. A photo of Bud in his parks

department uniform on the front page of the *Hood River News*. Bud looking so serious that she thought he was breaking up with her, but he asked her to marry him instead. That day at the courthouse, the day he moved in, the day they brought the baby chicks home from Little Bit and sat on the floor watching them peep and hop around under the heat lamp. Buddy waltzing his laughing mother around the living room after Sunday dinner to Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon." Buddy loading the little nephews in the truck to go fishing and running back to the house to kiss Alice goodbye.

Alice didn't realize she was speeding when she hit the curve at the top of the hill. She was thinking about her husband, Robert Ryan, who everyone knew as Buddy. Buddy, who had arrived so suddenly in her quiet life, bringing such unexpected happiness. Buddy, who was now gone.

The pressure ballooned in her chest, and her throat caught. Her breath grew ragged and shallow and then exploded into hot sobs. Her vision blurred as her eyes filled. Triggered, her grief loosened like a load of big timbers from one of the logging trucks she had passed on the highway.

Alice wiped an arm across her streaming eyes as she swerved toward the edge of the road. In the twin arms of her headlights, she saw a shape in the shoulder. She slammed on the brakes, swerved, and banged to a stop against a fence post.

Alice felt 120,000 Russian honeybees crash together in the back of her truck. Her head bounced as the seat belt arrested her. Time slowed. Her head rang. She saw spots of white and blue zipping around her field of vision. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw a wheelchair on its side, one wheel spinning like a runaway Ferris wheel.

Alice scrambled out of the truck and ran across the road. She could not move fast enough and felt like she was swimming through the cool air. She began to pray, her eyes searching the tall grass in the waning light. She saw a person on the ground next to the chair. Was he hurt? Alice crouched, her hands on her knees, and peered down. The figure rolled onto its back. Alice expected to see some confused old person, a little guy in his bathrobe and slippers doing a runner from Riverdale Retirement Center up the road. But she saw a boy—a teenage boy with crazy hair and a tangle of earbuds and sunglasses on his face. Holy shit! She'd hit a damn kid!

The boy pushed his sunglasses off his face and looked up at her. He smiled. Relief surged through her, and she wanted to cry. Instead she yelled.

"Christ on a crutch, kid! What in hell are you trying to do? Get yourself killed?"

HIGHWAY BLUE

A NOVEL

AILSA McFARLANE

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2

The next day I went to the house of a woman named Mrs. da Silva to walk her dog. I went there twice a week during the afternoon, before my evening shift began at the bar.

It was easy money, and Mrs. da Silva paid well.

Her house was just off Enansa Street, set back behind a tall row of palms. It was big and white and the front lawn was wide. All the houses on this street had wide front lawns. It was a slow area where rich people with kids liked to live. The sound and smell of the ocean drifted to their windows from the boulevard onto which the street fed at one end.

And the cars that drove down this street and parked outside its houses were slick and black and low. On this afternoon they were hot in the sun.

The gardener was working on Mrs. da Silva's lawn, moving slowly around the beds at its edge. He wore a white T-shirt and he was sweating so that it clung to him in places and hung down in others.

Mrs. da Silva opened the door and said, "How are you?" emptily, the way she always did, while the big dog ran out, barking and flailing drool around the front lawn.

"This dog, this dog," she said, and then called out, "Gunner! Gunner, come here! Oh, he always listened to Frank but not to me."

I called, "Gunner!" He came over and dropped a plastic chicken on the grass beside my feet. Mrs. da Silva had never liked him much, I felt. He was her late husband's dog and I don't think she had ever really wanted him. I liked him and I think he liked me. Animals didn't usually like me much. They could feel that I didn't trust them or something like that, but not him, stupid lumbering dog.

Too big for himself.

The dog and I walked down the boulevard and over the concrete under the palms onto the sand, which was hot when I took my shoes off. Here and there people were lying on brightly colored towels, and kids were running about with plastic buckets, and girls in cheap swimsuits walked in twos along the fringes of the surf, looking surreptitiously at the people they passed.

And the water lay beyond them, blue and bright in the late sun, flecked with white reflected light, the lines of surf rolling in and crumpling on the sand.

I stood watching it for a long time and tried to follow the movements of the light on the surface of the ocean.

It stayed blue on the inside of my closed eyes.

Late that night I sat on the floor in the dark beside the refrigerator, leaning back against the kitchen cupboards. The lights in the apartment were off for once and the refrigerator drone had got into my head.

There was a bottle of whiskey on the floor beside me which was almost empty.

The place was an old peeling heap, an ugly dump, with the leak in the ceiling and the spiders in the corners and the stains on the walls and the hammering pipes. Two lousy years' backdrop, two years of squalling sprawling drunks outside the window, of broken glass, of lights and wailing sirens, the sounds of the sea and late-night street laughter.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I took it out and looked at the little blue light of its screen shining flatly on the skin of my hand. *Tricia*.

Tricia was the cousin I was raised with. She lived down

south of La Maya now, with a husband and two sons. Those kids were crazy. I had been to visit her only once and the kids had charged around the house screaming and screaming and then the older boy had bitten my arm, hard. I had had to flush it out with iodine.

I put the phone on the floor beside me and let it ring out, watching the screen. She would be sitting at home now waiting for her husband to get back from work, and the kids were probably still running around out of bed even at this hour, screaming, breaking furniture, biting things. They loved to bite things. Tricia said that one of them had bitten a neighbor's dog recently. The dog was now agoraphobic and would not go outside.

The phone kept ringing. I turned it off.

Cal was in my head tonight. He was there most nights but there were times when he was more there than others, more insistent.

It was all this bad thinking, it brought him out, made it hard to sleep.

When I married him I was nineteen and it was a burning day in the middle of August. The summer was hot and long. We had gone to a little wooden shack church down in Tana Beach. I'd worn a white sundress borrowed from a friend, and it was a little too big so one strap kept falling off my shoulder all through the ceremony, and I had seen

myself in the reflection of the glass window behind the altar, standing in this dress which was slightly too big and holding these blue flowers which cost two livra from the shop on the corner, holding them a little awkwardly, and Cal standing there beside me also a little awkward and a little drunk, and I'd had the sudden urge to laugh.

Those words we said.

Even the old minister didn't sound like he believed them. One other body to have and to hold until death do us part, one sweating, swearing, beautiful, clever, lazy, apathetic bunch of cells to keep you until the bitter end. And if you said the right words you got to walk out of that little church with a piece of paper to prove it, and then one day that piece of paper would become one of the pieces of paper that they stack together and put in a box when you die, all ready to give away to your family while they fight out the scraps left around the negative space that used to contain you.

Afterward on our wedding night, buzzed with beer and adrenaline, Cal and I broke into an old house just off Tana Beach.

It was an abandoned place, I think, or at least semi-abandoned, somebody must have still owned it because there had been a For Sale sign nailed to one of the front windows for as long as I could remember, and we were

walking past it arm in arm or hand in hand or whatever we used to do back then. And there was this old place and I said to Cal, "I wonder who used to live there."

He said, "Nobody for a long time." Then he said, "Some bored housewife. Some bored husband."

I looked at him. "You don't know that. Maybe they were happy."

He shrugged, said, "I posthumously wish them every happiness." And he said it and there was evening light on his face and I remember the feeling of something I used to sense in him, a rawness under the surface.

At the time I mistook it for freedom.

So Cal went over and looked up and down the street and rattled at the bolt on the door, which was old and just a kind of sliding bolt and not a real lock, and he said, "It's loose," and he said, "Shall we go in?"

And I laughed and felt a little giddy and said, "Yes, quick, yes," and he rattled about with that lock for a moment and put a plank against it and twisted and it came away from the wood of the frame, and the door swung open and he disappeared inside.

I followed him.

The place stank of must and dust. It was dark apart from a few long red slit shapes which were made by the last of the setting sunlight coming in through the gaps between window boards, and there was sand everywhere

which must have come in over the years and heaped up in drifts, heaped up against the walls and the staircase and all the furniture.

Together we walked through old rooms full of red and dark.

Outside the sun went down into the sea.

Much later after it was completely gone we sat in the deep seat of an upstairs window and looked out over the ocean which was navy and the full night sky and the heavy moon which sat copper between the two, and the air was thick with the smell of old dust and the sounds of the settling house and the old roar of the waves.

I ran my fingertips over Cal's hands and found the ridges of calluses over the tops of his palms and on the inside of his fingers, and found the small creases on the ball of his thumb and his bitten nails.

His hands were warm and dry and his skin was paper.

He left me a year after we married, a year to the day.

I woke up one morning and he wasn't there. He wasn't in bed. His jeans weren't on the floor and his coat wasn't on the door, but that was normal. At first I wasn't worried. I thought he had gone down to the beach to smoke and watch the sun come up because he sometimes did that, and he always did it alone. He would leave the room and

close the door behind him without making a sound and then come back an hour or so later and the cold on his skin would wake me in the hazed-out light after dawn.

Or he had gone to buy fried fish for breakfast from the stall on the street corner by the beach. I thought he would come back within the hour, and I sat on the end of the bed and watched the wall clock, and it got later and I had to go to work, and at work they saw that something was off and said *everything all right, Anne Marie,* and I said *yes.* And I held the empty cold somewhere away from my body, held it on the edge of my mind and didn't let it in yet because he might still come back, I might still go home at the day's end and find him there smelling of salt water and sweat, which were the things he smelled of.

And I didn't.

I came home and he wasn't there.

He had left almost all of his clothes behind and so one afternoon I went down to the beach and put them in an oil drum and burned them because someone had told me to do it. I think they had got the idea from a film or something; it was a concept much touted in pop culture. They said they had done it themselves once and it had made them feel better. It didn't make me feel better. I watched the light die on the ocean through greasy black smog and got drunk and fell asleep on the sand.

Bent and broken pit of a man.

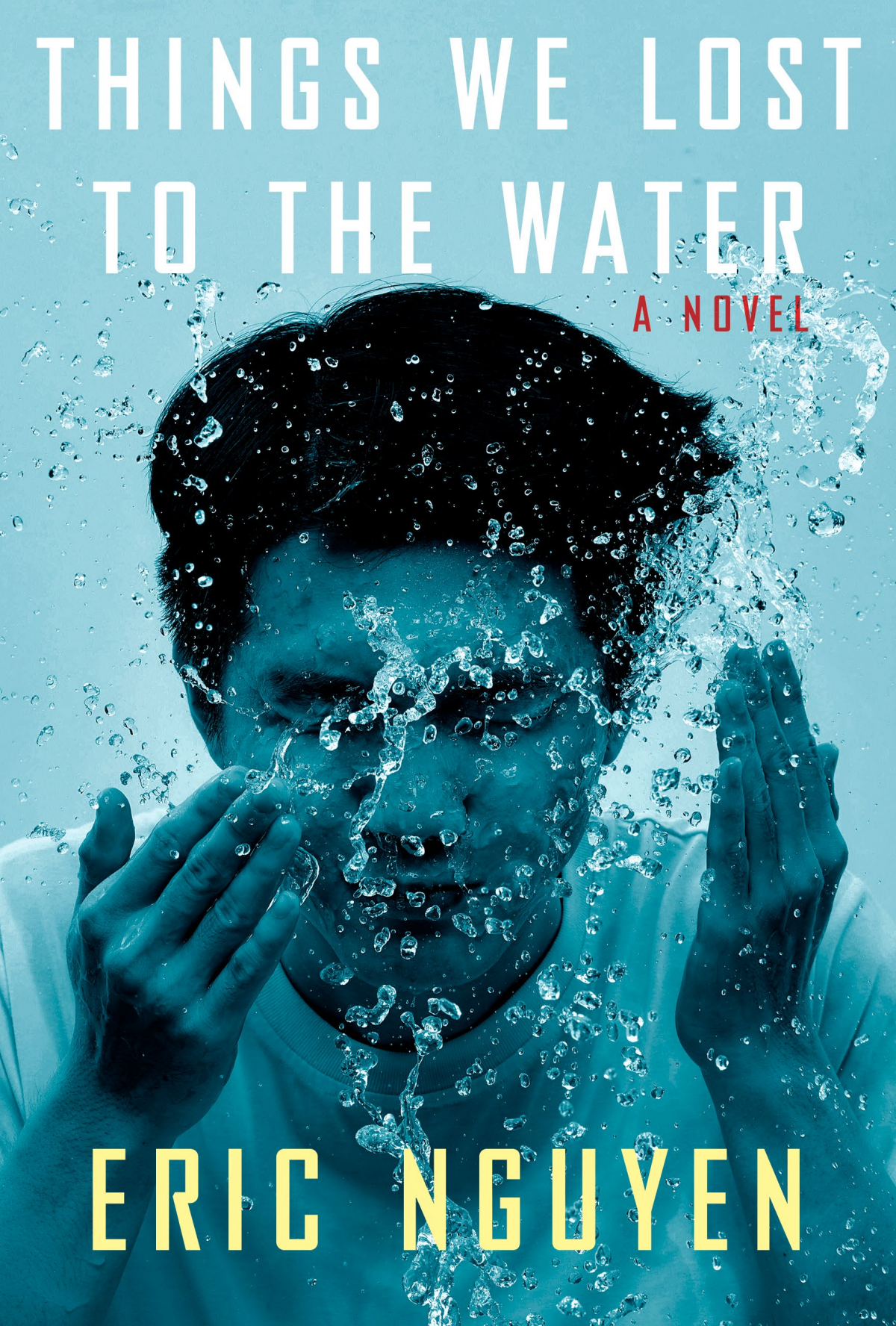
Cal. Jesus.

For a long time after he left I could remember his hands better than I could remember his face.

I leaned back against the kitchen cupboards and sank down into the smoke.

THINGS WE LOST TO THE WATER

A NOVEL



ERIC NGUYEN

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New Orleans is at war. The long howl in the sky; what else can it mean?

Hương drops the dishes into the sink and grabs the baby before he starts crying. She begins running toward the door—but then remembers: this time, another son. She forgets his name temporarily, the howl is so loud. What's important is to find him.

Is he under the bed? No, he is not under the bed. Is he hiding in the closet? No, he is not in the closet. Is he in the bathroom, then, behind the plastic curtains, sitting scared in the tub? He is not in the bathroom, behind the plastic curtains, sitting scared in the tub. And as she turns around he's at the door, holding on to the frame, his eyes watering, his cheeks red.

"Mẹ," he cries. *Mom.* The word reminds Hương of everything she needs to know. In the next moment she grabs his hand and pulls him toward her chest.

With this precious cargo, these two sons, she darts across the

apartment, an arrow flying away from its bow, a bullet away from its gun. She's racing toward the door and leaping down the steps—but she can't move fast enough. The air is like water, it's like running through water. Through an ocean. She feels the wetness on her legs and the water rising. And the sky, the early evening sky, with its spotting of stars already, is streaked red and orange like a fire, like an explosion suspended midair in that moment before the crush, the shattering, the death she's always imagined until someone yells *Stop,* someone tells her to *Stop.*

And just like that, the sirens hush and the silence is violent: it slices, it cuts.

"Hurricane alarm," Bà Giang says. The old woman drops her cigarette. "Just a hurricane alarm. A test. Nothing to be afraid of." She reaches over and cups Hương's cheek.

"What do you mean?" Hương asks.

"A test. They're doing a test. In case something happens," Bà Giang says. "Go home now, cưng ơi. Go home. Get some rest. It's getting late."

Home.

Late.

Getting.

There.

"Late." Hương understands, or maybe she does not. A thousand thoughts are still settling in her mind. Where were the sounds from before? Not the alarm, but the grating calls of the grackles in the trees, the whistling breeze, a car speeding past—where are they now?

She notices Tuấn at the gates. Her eyes light up.

"Tuấn ơi," she calls.

Tuấn holds on to the bars of the gate and watches three boys riding past on bicycles. One stands on his pedals. Another rides

without hands but only for a second before grabbing—in a panicked motion—the handlebars. A younger one tries to keep up on training wheels. Three boys. Three brothers.

"Tuấn ơi," Hương calls again.

Tuấn waves as the boys ride leisurely past. When they're gone, he returns, and Hương feels a mixture of pure happiness, comfort, and relief.

Up the dirt road. A mother and her sons. Hand in hand.

Hương 1978

Hương and her sons had been in the country for only a month, but already they were having problems.

Their sponsor, a white Catholic priest, paired them with the Minhs. "Both thirty-two," he said while driving. "You will like them."

The priest—she never remembered his name—was old and serious and restrained. He walked with his hands behind his back as he took long, sweeping strides and had a habit of keeping his head slightly bent forward as if he were listening to something everyone else could not hear, giving him a look of arrogant superiority. He reminded her of the priests who came to her childhood village with hard European candies and boxes of Bibles in hopes of converting someone in their bad Vietnamese. She remembered one priest who couldn't pronounce bạn and instead said bàn and they made fun of him behind his back, calling him Father Table. Still, Hương did not not like this New Orleans priest. She was lucky, she told herself. She was alive. She made it to America.

The priest took an exit onto another highway. He didn't use his blinker.

They had been on and off highways all morning, dropping off other refugees—the word still felt strange in her mouth, in her mind—at temporary homes. Earlier that morning, the priest dropped off a couple from Vũng Tàu at a tall building. Then a single Saigonese girl at a short house painted pink. Another family of three was given to an American fisherman and his wife, and they greeted each other with hugs as if they had known each other all their lives; the wife gave their son a pink stuffed elephant. Hương and her boys were the last to be dropped off.

Bình slept in an infant seat as Tuấn kneeled by the window and watched as the world slipped by, pointing and calling out the names of everything he saw: xe hơi, xe đạp, cây, nhà. What Hương noticed the most was the concrete—the buildings, the roads, the sidewalks, the fountains, the statues. *So much concrete,* she thought. She imagined them rubbing against her, scraping her knees and hands, leaving bruises and scrapes and marks. She was thinking that way nowadays: what can hurt her, what can leave a scar.

The priest turned onto a road, and just like that, the hardness of the city disappeared, replaced by flat plots of parched grass and a traffic light. Beyond that, a billboard advertised a deep red sausage with rice grains inside.

As they waited, the priest glanced up into his rearview mirror and smiled. "Gần tới," he said, *Almost there,* in an accent Hương found oddly charming, like the way the Australian English teachers at the refugee camp spoke, and that gave her something to latch on to, a type of comfort. The van continued down the long stretch of road for another five minutes before slowing down into a turn. In front of a house, a fat Vietnamese man waited.

"Mr. Minh!" the priest chuckled. Mr. Minh waved when he saw them.

"Welcome to America!" Mr. Minh shouted as the priest parked

the car. He pulled the door open and bowed extravagantly, making a show of the gesture. His large hands came at her next and grabbed her wrists. He shook them furiously. "Chị will like it here very much!" he said. "It's America! We're all friends here!" His face glowed red. How unlike her husband he was. Công was thin and suave, bookish and reserved, and, above all, neat; this man was chubby and rude, drunk and loud—above all, loud. She could have pictured Mr. Minh spending his time at bars and his poor wife coming to get him at three in the morning. She thought, not without bitterness, that they never would have been friends in Vietnam. They were two different types of people; a friendship had little chance.

"We're all friends here!" Mr. Minh repeated, confidently, caressing her sloppily, stupidly. It made Hương feel little, like a bug waiting to be squashed. She held on to her baby boy and motioned for her other son to stand closer. The wife—Hương noticed her now—stood aside as if this were the regular order of things.

"He used to be a police officer," the wife said in her scratchy voice. "Now, he drinks!" She laughed and Hương didn't know if she was supposed to laugh out of courtesy or just nod sadly in agreement. She decided on doing neither and stayed silent and stiff.

"Very well," the wife said. Then, in English, she said something to the priest, shook his hand, and grabbed Hương's suitcase. The priest drove away.

"This way," she said.

Hương walked up the porch steps and crossed the threshold. Right away, she smelled the rotting wood, disarming at first but only because it came so suddenly. The lights were off, and in the darkness, the room felt vast and empty. As her eyes adjusted, she realized the room was small and arranged at its center were a floral fabric sofa, a white plastic chair, and a small television. A fan spun lazily above.

The wife told Hương it was called a "shotgun house." A nhà súng, she clarified. "See?" she said. She placed the suitcase down and mimed the shape of a gun with one hand. With her other, she held her wrist. Closing one eye, she looked through an invisible scope and the appearance of intense concentration fell onto her face. For a few seconds, she stood silently, so focused on something in the distance that Hương looked toward where the wife stared, too. Then "Psssh!"—the imitated sound of gunfire. It was so unexpected but also so childish, Hương jumped back and felt stupid for doing so. Like a child tricked in a schoolyard, she immediately hated the Minhs, their poverty, their obnoxiousness, their immaturity.

"See?" the wife said. "A house for guns." She made the motion of dusting off her hands. "But you don't have to worry about that here. No war, not here, not ever."

"Of course," said Hương, composing herself.

"That's all in the past now," the wife said.

"Yes," said Hương, "the past."

"Just stay out of the doorways to be on the safe side." She broke out into a cackle, though Hương didn't find any of it funny. Nothing in America was funny. Mrs. Minh's tricks weren't funny, their situation as người Việt wasn't funny, and Hương felt outraged that people like the Minhs should even think about laughing.

"Let me show you more," said the wife. She led Hương through the doorways and into the kitchen and the couple's bedroom in the back. "You'll sleep up front. The phòng khách," said Mrs. Minh.

The next morning, the priest arrived to take Hương downtown, dropping her off at the church. Before coming to America, Hương had never been inside a church. In Mỹ Tho there was none. In Saigon, only a handful. But here they were everywhere, and all the other Vietnamese seemed grateful for that. The first few weeks, as they slept in the pews, they seemed at peace. Hương, for her part, slept uneasily under the watch of the statue of Jesus on the cross.

His sad, pleading eyes made her want to cross herself like all the other Catholics did. She knew Công would have laughed at her for it, so she didn't.

"Here," the priest said before letting her go. He tore out a sheet of yellow paper from a legal pad he carried everywhere. For the last week they had been finding her a job. "Because you need money to survive in New Orleans," he said as if he thought life in other countries were any different. They had often gone out in groups, but today was her first day alone. *Franklin's Seafood,* said one line, followed by an address. *Poydras Street Dry Cleaners,* said another.

"Franklin's looking for cashiers," he said, "and Poydras a clothes folder. Oh, and . . ." He wrote something else down and gave another sheet to Hương. "Be on the lookout for signs that say HIRING." She held the loose sheet of paper and sounded out the word with her lips.

"Hi-Ring," she whispered.

"Hi-er-ing," he said.

"Hi-yering."

"Hi-er-ing." Hương mouthed the words and folded the paper away. The priest gave her directions and she was on her way, pushing the stroller she'd borrowed from the church for Bình with one hand and leading Tuấn with the other. By the time she was on Magazine Street, she looked up and wondered how a city could be so empty. Down one way, a driver had parked his school bus and was reading the newspaper and eating a doughnut. Down another, two women talked to each other in smart business skirts.

As she walked, Hương reached into her purse for a pocket-sized notebook, a gift from the church. Từ vựng căn bản, she had written at the top of the first page, followed by the phrases she had remembered from her English lessons:

Hello.

How are you?

I am fine.

Thank you.

She practiced the words aloud, repeating them in whispers, analyzing the pronunciation, the tones. English was such a strange language. Whereas in Vietnamese, the words told you how they wanted to be pronounced, in English the words remained shrouded in mystery.

She scanned the priest's list, then returned to the notebook. So many words, so many ideas, so many meanings. If only Công could see her now! She imagined that she spoke English the way he spoke French, like he was born there. She saw them sitting together on a porch looking out on a garden—maybe like one of the gardens she'd passed here in New Orleans, with immaculate flower beds and sprinklers and birdbaths—and she's holding up the words, helping him pronounce them. What she would tell him then, when they were settled, successful, American, reminiscing of all that life threw at them, the improbability of their survival, and yet nonetheless . . .

Suddenly, Tuấn pulled her arm.

"Look!" he said. "A cat!"

"Tuấn!" Hương grabbed him before he stepped into the street. A car passed by. A horn sounded.

"But it was a cat," her son said, "and it wasn't like any other cat. Didn't you see it?"

"Stay with mẹ," she said.

They walked two more blocks before finding the first address on the list. A cartoon fish with huge eyes stared back at her from a tin sign. Leaning her forehead against the glass, she peered inside and imagined herself holding a tray of drinks and chatting with customers.

A girl at the front counter waved at Hương to get her attention. When Hương didn't come in, the girl came to the door and asked her something she couldn't understand. Hương reached for the notebook in her purse then, but it was gone. A sense of panic came

over her. After emptying everything into her hands, she realized she must have dropped it while Tuấn was running into the street. She found the note the priest gave her—there at the bottom of her purse, a piece of shining gold—and handed it over.

"*Please,*" Hương said in an almost whisper, unsure if it meant làm ơn. Surely, it meant làm ơn! She forced a smile and hoped it didn't appear too eager. Then she stopped smiling altogether to avoid any possibility of looking desperate. She remembered the women in their business suits. How confident they were. How successful.

The girl looked at the word, then at Hương. She did this several times, confused. "No," the girl said. "No," she said again, this time more forceful, like the word was a pebble and she was flicking it toward what must have been a strange Vietnamese woman, a woman who did not belong here, a foreigner. "Do you want to *eat*?" the girl continued, slow and loud. "We serve *food.* Do you want to *eat*?"

"*Eat?*" Hương asked. She didn't know what that meant. It sounded like a hiccup, one that you tried to suppress. *Eat! Eat! Eat!* What was the girl talking about?

The girl became impatient, angry even, pointing inside, where people were enjoying their grotesquely large meals.

"*I am sorry,*" Hương said, giving up, using the phrase she knew by heart: *I am sorry.* It was a good phrase to know. This was what the Australian English teachers taught her at the refugee camp. *I am sorry for what happened.*

Before the girl could say anything else, Hương turned around and walked away with a steady stride. She didn't know what had just happened, but she felt, in the pit of her stomach, that she had done something wrong. The last thing she saw on the girl's face was a grimace. She was being told, she was sure, that she had done something rude, against the country's laws. They would arrest her. They would arrest a woman and her children for not knowing the

rules. Would they even let her stay because she was arrested? What would happen to them all then? They crossed the street and took another corner. She walked faster.

"Mẹ, what's wrong?" Tuấn asked. He looked back toward where they had come from.

"Don't look back," said Hương. She pushed the stroller and led Tuấn away. "Don't you look."

Suddenly, she noticed, all around her people were talking. There were couples talking, groups talking, children talking, a woman held a dog in her arms and she, too, was talking to that small animal. Yet the words they were saying didn't make any sense. She repeated the words she knew in her head, a chaotic mantra of foreign sounds that contorted her mouth comically, strangely, like a puppet's—*Yes, no, thank you, please, yes, no, sorry, hello, goodbye, no, sorry.* The important part was to keep moving. She knew that much. She saw a fenced-in and empty park across the street and without looking ran toward it, but before she reached the gate, a man with beads around his neck and oversized sunglasses bumped into her. She could smell the alcohol on him. All of a sudden, the whole city smelled of alcohol and everyone everywhere was drinking and smiling and laughing. What was wrong with these people? What was wrong with this place?

She turned back and was stepping into the street, pushing the stroller with both hands, when a car slammed its brakes and the driver pressed down on his horn. It stopped before hitting her or the stroller. She looked down at her shaking hands: she had let go. In the surprise of the car coming and its horn sounding, so suddenly and so loudly—she had let go. The first sign of danger and her first instinct was to let go and she'd nearly killed her son and the man pressed down on his horn again and she realized she was still in the middle of the street and she felt ashamed, the most shame she'd ever felt in her life. She held back tears, but Bình cried. She clasped the handlebar of the stroller more tightly.

"Stupid fucking lady!" the driver screamed.

"What did he say?" Tuấn asked.

"Let's go home," she replied. "He said we should go home." They crossed the street and headed down another.

"But home is so far away," said her son. "I'm tired."

"What?" She had forgotten what she told him. She looked around for anything that might have been familiar.

"Home is far away," her son repeated.

"I know," she said, more to herself than to him. "I know."

The Minhs were home when Hương returned. After dinner, Mrs. Minh left for a job cleaning at a university. Hương's sons slept peacefully. She kept a watchful eye on Bình. Did he understand that he'd nearly died today? Did he know he had a horrible, reckless mother? She would have to tell Công, wouldn't she, about all that had happened? She would confess it to him, everything she'd ever done—if only she were given the chance, an opportunity to talk to him, to learn what had happened, to get him to America and plan a way forward. For that she would confess it all.

At the camp, she had written him and mailed the letter to their home in Mỹ Tho. When she received no answer, she wrote to their old home in Saigon. She wrote as soon as she was able to. She must have sent a letter every day. Noticing how many letters she had been sending off, another woman at the camp reprimanded her.

"Are you so stupid?" the woman asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The Communists, when they see the letters, they'll know you escaped and they'll know who to punish: your husband!" Hương stopped writing then.

As the sun rose, Mrs. Minh arrived home, smelling of detergent and rubber gloves. Without a word, she joined Hương on the couch and watched TV, which Hương had turned on for its soft glow. From her seat, Mrs. Minh would glance at her temporary guest every few minutes as if to say something important but

ended up talking only about the shows. In this show, a witch causes havoc by her misunderstandings but her husband loves her anyway. In this one, there's a magical talking horse. Here, a group of Americans are shipwrecked.

They settled on the shipwreck show, or at least Mrs. Minh did. In black and white, it looked far away, a different place, a different time. Even if it was a different language, it was easy to laugh at, easily understood.

Except Hương wasn't laughing. It didn't even look like she was paying attention. The light on the screen bounced off her eyes.

This would happen multiple nights: Hương staring blankly at the screen in the dark while Mrs. Minh sat on the edge of the couch in contemplation. It made the air heavy, both of them knew, but neither one knew how to fix it.

Then one night Mrs. Minh asked, "What do you think of America?"

"Dạ thích," Hương said. "It's not Vietnam, but it's not bad, either." She coughed to clear her throat. All day she hadn't been talking to anyone in Vietnamese except her sons. It felt so strange after so much silence, and the words came out muddy and sticky.

"The priest said you left on a boat," the wife continued. "Is that true?"

"Vâng." Hương wanted to tell the wife about the way the water moved, how you never got used to it, about the men on the boat and their constant fighting, about the uneasy sense of knowing only water, knowing that it connected the entire world—one shore to another—yet not knowing when you might see land. There were so many things to say, and finally she decided to ask a question, the most important question she could ask, the only one that mattered—"Do you know how to get a message back to Vietnam? I have a husband. He was left behind . . ."—but Hương stopped short of finishing when there was shuffling noise in the bedroom, the rustling of sheets, the bouncing of bedsprings.

She bit her lips and held her breath. Something was coming; she could feel it. Mrs. Minh's eyes wandered to the back of the house. Then came a scream and the sound of glass hitting wall, one clash of impact followed by the rainlike sound of hundreds of shards falling. The baby woke with a cry and Hương got up to calm him. Tuấn stirred from his corner of the couch and asked what was going on.

"Nothing," she told him. "Nothing to be afraid of." She bounced the baby as footsteps made their way across the hardwood floor and the bathroom door closed and the shower turned on. The baby leaned his head on her chest and quieted.

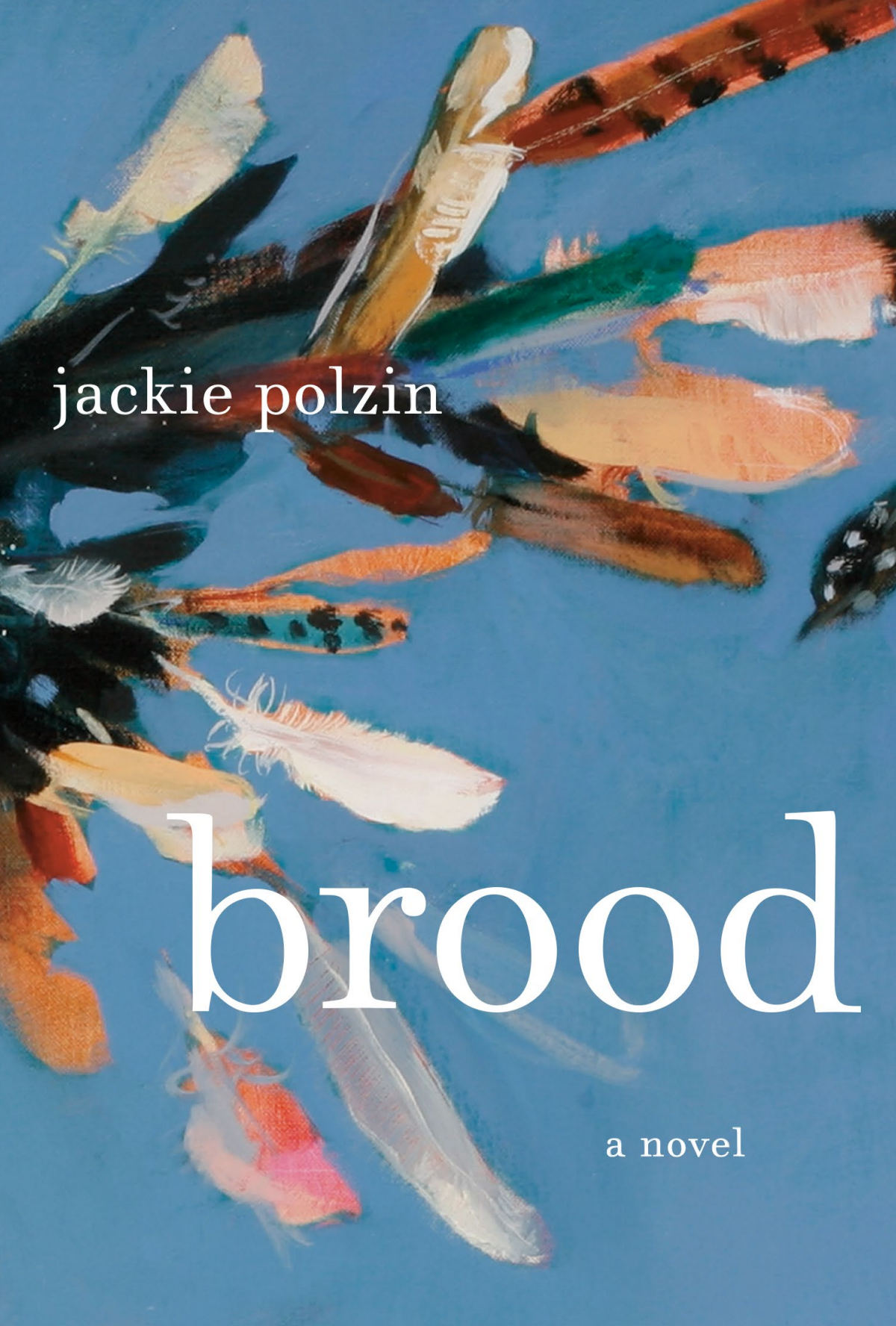
"I'll go check on him," Mrs. Minh said, standing up. "Yes. I'll go do that."

The couple would fight into the morning. Something else would break. At one point, Hương thought she heard a smack on skin but she wasn't sure.

By eight, Mr. Minh had left, slamming the door so hard Hương was sure the house would fall down. Mrs. Minh mumbled as she prepared breakfast, "Damn that man. Worthless . . ."

The next afternoon, Hương left the Minhs. With Bình in her arms and Tuấn following behind, she walked several blocks until she saw a *motel.* The word, she remembered, meant *place to stay.* She would stay at the motel for a week, find a way to get in touch with Công, and get him here to New Orleans. No one told her how to, but, she decided, no more waiting. It was time for action. She paid in cash. The room was twenty-five dollars. She put the thirty dollars she had left in her front pocket, holding her hand over it to make sure it was secure.

After she called him, the priest arrived the next morning. He sat in his van as Hương led the boys out. The radio played gospel hymns, but he turned it off as they made their journey downtown.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brood
a novel

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First Edition

In our first week of owning chickens, four years ago, Helen stopped by to see the quaintness of the operation with her own eyes. I show the coop to any visitor who expresses interest in the chickens. Helen is an exception. She is my friend and thus shows an interest in my life. She does not otherwise care about the chickens.

Her visit took place in the brief interval before the grime of chickens had been established. The paint was fresh, the mice had not yet located the stockpile of various grains, and our garden had begun to sprout fairy greens and delicate purple stems of a plant whose identity I never confirmed.

Helen's questions were predictable, but my limited knowledge of chickens did not include the predictable questions or the answers to them.

"Do the chickens know their names?" she had asked. The chickens have never answered to a particular name but answer to any upbeat tone, names included, hoping for whatever treat may accompany the sound.

"Do the chickens like to be pet?" She took a step back

to indicate the question was not a request. "Are they upset when you take away their eggs?"

I didn't know the answers to any of these questions.

"Has a chicken ever laid an egg in your hand?" she asked.

"No," I said. And still, a chicken has never laid an egg in my hand.

I had not yet collected the eggs from early morning. Two brown eggs lay in a bowl of spun straw, one fair like milk tea, the other dark and a bit orange. At the time I did not know which chickens laid which eggs.

"Here." I placed the fair egg, which was also the smaller of the two, in Helen's palm. Her fingers did not soften to the shape.

"What should I do?" she asked.

"Cook it, eat it," I said.

"I mean now. What should I do now?" She did not hold the egg, but allowed the egg to rest on her flat hand, was only tolerating the egg for, I suppose, my benefit. The egg was not especially clean. The cleaner an egg looks, the more likely a visitor will accept the egg with grace and hold it in a manner befitting an egg, a force equal but opposite to the weight of the egg applied by a cupped hand, creating perfect balance and suspension in midair.

"Is it cooked?" she asked. "It's warm." She had seen me retrieve the egg from the straw, the straw worried down

and out and up at the sides in the precise counter-shape of a nesting chicken, a bed of straw so primitive as to predate fire, and yet she wondered out loud.

"It's fresh," I said. "It's warm because it's fresh."

"Has an egg ever hatched in your hand?"

EVERYONE WONDERS if an egg, warm from a chicken, will hatch into a chick. The warmth of the egg prompts the retrieval of this otherwise remote idea. Among other triumphs of our generation, we have nearly extinguished the idea of an egg as a source of life. The confusion does not arise from the fact that people are no longer eating eggs or even that people are no longer cooking eggs. On the contrary, eggs are being eaten at a furious rate, and while the most adventurous preparations of eggs are crafted at the hands of professionals, in home kitchens the world over eggs are being prepared in more adventurous forms than ever before. The problem is not that eggs are bad for us or that eggs will make us fat. Rather, eggs are not as bad for us as we thought they were and eggs will not make us fatter than we already are. The problem is that people do not see the connection between an egg placed in their hand, fresh from a chicken, and the egg bought in the store. An egg that derives its warmth from existence inside the body of a chicken is far too fantastic to proceed as usual. If a

fresh egg is placed straight into a carton versus an open palm, the confusion over what to do with an egg ceases to exist.

WEEKS AFTER Helen's first visit to the chickens, she returned with her boyfriend. He was a new boyfriend (and soon enough an ex-boyfriend) and she was trying to impress him. She had deemed her previous visit with the chickens sufficiently novel and called to warn me.

"I'm bringing Jack," she said. "Do you still have the half bottle of gin from last summer?"

"Of course," I said. "Percy doesn't drink gin and I'm trying to hate the same things as him." This last part was to make Helen laugh, but she only hummed, which meant she was snacking, most likely on one of the soft-baked cookies she's so fond of, which she buys in a paper sleeve and stores in the vegetable drawer behind a bag of carrots. The snacking, and therefore the humming, meant she was alone.

"Oh, good. Place it in the freezer, and could you do me a favor? Offer the gin early on."

Helen wanted and expected the whole experience to play out in the same fashion as her previous visit. She did not say it but I knew. Helen is a realtor, and realtors of all people should understand the disappointment of a second

viewing. A realtor never makes a sale on a second look. If the first merits a second, the second requires a third. From surprise to disappointment to qualified relief. Helen's visit would be a disappointment.

I COULD NOT REPRODUCE or even approximate the experience. The chickens had stopped laying. The two brown eggs had been their last. If Helen had not called to suggest gin, I might have suggested it myself. The chickens would easily entertain from behind the curtain of midday gin. In the event I was wrong about the entertainment value of chickens or the power of gin, Percy suggested I give them eggs.

"There hasn't been an egg in two weeks."

Percy walked to the refrigerator and returned with a carton full of extra-large white eggs. "Give them these."

"No chicken of ours lays white eggs," I said. "And these eggs are cold."

"Helen won't notice and she wouldn't care. She'd prefer white," he said, which was likely true, though I would not give him the satisfaction of saying so. Percy took a small pot from beneath the stove, filled it with water, and set the pot to boil. I had forgotten to mention I was also morally opposed to his suggestion.

By the time Helen's leased BMW turned into the back

alley, three eggs sat steaming in a shadowed corner of the nest box.

"How do I grow a chicken from this egg?" Jack asked, the egg in his hand hot and gleaming. Helen admires confidence, falls often for the type, and I could see it was a flaw in Jack, preventing him from asking even such basic questions as "Why does the egg burn my hand?"

The timer ticks away in the chicken shed. Each tick is bound to a counter-tick, like the one-two of a maraca, and behind that noise and counter-noise exists a faint buzzing of the electronics. The timer is programmed to turn on the heat lamp at 06:00, 12:00, 18:00, and 24:00. The coldest hour of the night is the last hour of complete darkness, but the lamp does not turn on at that hour. By six o'clock in the morning, the temperature has already begun to creep upward to its still frozen high. The chickens get by on thirty minutes of warm light every sixth hour because every moment of light increases the risk of fire in the coop. Helen has asked how we keep the chickens warm and I told her, "We have a heat lamp in the winter." I did not tell her the light shines for only one half hour every sixth hour and the first ten minutes of that warmth in the form of infrared light is absorbed by the frost caked on the hanging bulb. I do not want Helen to lose sleep over our chickens.

Do the chickens think of warmer times? They do not.

By the time a snowflake has landed, snowflakes are all a chicken has ever known. Theirs is a world of only snowflakes or only not.

At minus twenty degrees, the chickens refuse to leave the roost to eat the pellet blend I pour into the tin box feeder. The box hangs from chicken wire on two slim metal hooks extending up and back, attached to the sides of the metal box by a rivet that allows the hooks to swivel, but in the cold the hooks are frozen and the rivets are frozen and the box is frozen in an unnatural position, as if a spell has been suddenly cast upon it. In the spring I move the feed box to the outdoor run connected to the coop, but in the winter months, when a cold snap settles in, the chickens do not leave the coop for days on end.

Inside the coop, the temperature hovers between five and twenty degrees, but the water in the plastic jug exists as water, not ice, because of the small boost of heat provided by a sturdy jug-heating plate purchased for fifteen dollars at Farm and Fleet four years ago. Simple truths govern the care of chickens. Food and water must be clean and plentiful. Also, the chickens must not freeze to death, though it is unclear at what temperature this would occur.

Gloria sits in the nest box, unmoving, as the other chickens busy themselves around her. For two days she has not strayed from the stagnant whorl of straw and dust and feathers tacked together here and there with bits of manure hardened into mortar. The last two mornings, she has made no motion toward the food or water as the other chickens gathered round in the usual melee, announcing themselves and jockeying for the choicest morsels. Unless she has eaten at night in the dark, she has not eaten. Chickens do not eat or drink at night because they cannot see well in the dark and the night is full of predators. The coop houses no predators, but the chickens do not know this. A chicken knows only what it can see. A chicken's life is full of magic. Lo and behold.

In the kitchen, the bottom drawer holds the most obscure utensils. Taking up a great volume of space inside the drawer is a device to core and peel apples: a three-pronged spire that holds the apple centered in a sharp-edged metal ring to extract the core, alongside a blade positioned at

an angle to peel the skin from the curved surface. The machine functions exactly as intended, a perfect machine, if only a paring knife did not execute the same task with such grace and simplicity. The entire drawer is populated as such, by some false sense of necessity, though offhand I cannot think of a simpler tool than a turkey baster for watering a broody hen.

A chicken needs water, is like every other living thing in this respect, cannot live two days without it. In addition to a hen's need for water, the egg inside her needs water. Without water, an egg is just a piece of chalk.

Gloria's whole body bristles with the approach of the baster full of water. Her wings beat a dry knock against the walls of the nest box. She hisses the hoarse, pressed air of a snake and drinks one quivering drop.

BENEATH GLORIA IS AN EGG, large and cocoa brown. She does not lay eggs of this color. She lays eggs the color of a peach crayon and much smaller in size. Gloria has taken to sitting on all the eggs as if they were her own. Gloria sits with a crazy gleam in her eye, but that is just a chicken's eye. The eye of a chicken is all that's left of the dinosaurs, a little portal into the era of nut-size brains. Meaning cannot be derived from a chicken's eye because meaning does

not exist there. But, also, the craziness of the eye obscures everything.

I shield my hand with a dustpan as I grope beneath her tail for the egg. She cracks at the aluminum with her beak. *Crack, crack,* despite no visible return. Who knows what she is feeling? A beak is not the same as a tooth, but I have several times chimed my tooth with a metal spoon and cannot imagine the aluminum, vibrating in my hand as it does, punctuated by sharp thwacks of her beak, is not sending an unpleasant message in the opposite direction, from beak to bone to bone, rattling the small cage that is a chicken.

Gloria triples in size when I reach in close, the way a pillow expands when you plump its sides. She executes the maneuver without thought. The movement of her feathers—the contraction of her skin and the corresponding bulk—precedes thought or takes the place of thought altogether. Gloria is wedded to the egg, not the idea of the egg. If the egg is removed, her memory of the egg goes with it.

The warmth of the egg is an original warmth and never fails to surprise me. Until we had chickens I never marveled at an egg, though I would expect it to have been the other way around: the incredible edible egg wooing me in the direction of chickens. Now that I have held this small

warm place in the palm of my hand, I cannot help but wonder.

Gloria is curious about me. On an ordinary day, I don't dally. I pour the food, check for dead mice in the traps—the mice are too smart for this now, but I keep checking in the hopes of, I don't know what, a simple mouse—and make sure the jug of water isn't dry or tainted. But today I linger in the coop, tending to my tasks in the slowest possible manner. I miss the chickens now, even as they are still here.

I SHOULD HAVE SEEN this coming: missing the chickens. The same thing happened to our neighbor girl, Katherine, last year. She moved away and proceeded to miss the chickens in excess of caring about them in the first place, which is to say, she had taken them for granted.

Katherine was five then and still white-haired, and has always been a clumsy girl, prone to slow, premeditated movements. She had spent countless hours of her childhood lumbering after the chickens with her arms open wide. Chickens don't take lightly to broad wingspans. Whatever they saw in Katherine, they were right to flee her outstretched arms, held such for the very purpose of alighting on a chicken. I would have been so happy for them all, for the long-lasting diversion, if not for the chickens' abject terror.

Perhaps inevitably, Katherine's gait resembled a chicken's as much as possible. The running of the chickens was likely the only running she had ever seen, her mother being too big to run and her father too serious. Of course

it isn't practical to move like a chicken. To move like a chicken benefits no one, least of all chickens, whose movement is a byproduct of breast-heavy breeding and can be neatly summed up as a failure to fly. Katherine must have been mercilessly teased by her classmates. The family up and left without warning six months ago, after school let out for summer.

NOT LONG BEFORE CHRISTMAS, a rumpled painting arrived in the mail. I would have thought Katherine had forgotten the chickens entirely—her enthusiasm had dwindled to almost nothing in the year prior to their move—were it not for the painting, the subject of which is a white chicken in a pink castle. On the back, in meticulous black marker, someone has transcribed the words "Princess Gam Gam." Here is a young girl who, in all her life, has known only two red chickens, a black chicken, and a gray chicken, yet she paints a picture of a grade-A white chicken in a princess castle. I hate to think of Katherine painting chickens so poorly so long after leaving, not to mention the failure of attention. The painting hangs in the coop, held fast to the wire by a clothespin, and the clotted tempera gathers dust.

JESSE Q. SUTANTO

DIAL A FOR AUNTIES

a novel

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Prologue

Eight Years Ago

There is a curse in my family. It's followed us all the way from China, where it took my great-grandfather (freak accident on the farm that involved a pregnant sow and an unfortunately placed rake), to Indonesia, where it claimed my grandfather (a stroke at the age of thirty, nothing quite so dramatic as great-grandfather's demise, but still rather upsetting). My mom and aunts figured that a Chinese curse wouldn't follow them to the West, so after they all got married, they moved to San Gabriel, California. But not only did the curse find them, it mutated. Instead of killing the men in my family, it made them leave, which is so much worse. At least Yeye died loving my Nainai. The first one who left was Big Uncle. Then Second Uncle, and then—then it was my dad, who left without a word in the dead of night. Just up and disappeared like a ghost. I woke up one morning, asked where he was, and Ma slapped down a bowl of congee and said, "Eat." That was when I knew the curse had claimed him. When my male cousins graduated, they left too, opting for schools like NYU and Penn State instead of any of the perfectly fine colleges in California.

"Ah, Nat, you sooo lucky," Big Aunt says, the day my mom announces that I've applied to eight schools, all of them in California. The farthest one is Berkeley, and we've had countless arguments over *that.* Ma thinks anything farther than UC Irvine is too far; she won't be able to drop by randomly and clean my dorm and nag at my roommate to go to sleep early and drink lots of water. Big Aunt's son, Hendra, is at Boston College and ignores 99.999 percent of her calls. The other 0.0001 percent of the time is when he runs out of money and has to ask her for more.

"Oh, so lucky," Second Aunt says, patting her chest and smiling sadly, probably thinking of my cousin Nikky in Philly, who never calls and only comes back once a year. Her other son, Axel, is in New York. I last saw him

two years ago, when he moved out. *Finally,* he'd said. *When it's your turn, Meddy, fly far and don't look back.* "Daughters never leave you. Girl is such blessing," Second Aunt says. She reaches out and pinches my cheek.

Fourth Aunt grunts and continues shelling roasted, salted pumpkin seeds. Ma is her biggest nemesis, and she'd rather choke on a pumpkin seed than agree that Ma's the lucky one out of all of them. But when Ma isn't looking, she glances over at me and gives me a wink. *I'm proud of you, kid.*

I smile weakly. Because I sort of kind of totally lied to Ma. I did apply to eight schools in California, but I also applied to a ninth school. Columbia. I don't know why I did; it's not like I'd ever get in, and plus, how would we even pay the exorbitant tuition?

Months later, I hold the acceptance letter in my hand and stare, and stare, and—

I crumple it. Throw it in the trash. I'm not like my boy cousins. I'm not like my father and my uncles. I can't just abandon my family. Especially not my mom. I'm not stupid enough to think that the curse will skip me. Years later, after my future husband leaves me, all I'll have left are Ma and my aunties. So I tell them I'm going to UCLA. Ma cries. My aunts (even Fourth Aunt) whoop and gather around, hugging me, patting my cheeks, and bemoaning the fact that they don't have daughters.

"You so lucky," Big Aunt says, for the millionth time, to Ma. "She stay with you forever. You always have companion."

Is it true? Am I doomed to stay with them forever, just because I'm the only one not heartless enough to leave? I force a smile and nod benignly as they fuss about me, and I try to look forward to the rest of my life, living here in the same house with my mom and aunts.

Part One

Girl Meets Boy

(There might be insta-love and also someone might die. We'll see.)

Chapter 1

Present Day

I take a deep breath before pushing open the swinging doors. Noise spills out, a cacophony of Mandarin and Cantonese, and I step aside so Ma can walk inside before me. It's not that I'm being nice—I mean, I am, but I'm also being sensible. Ma grew up in Jakarta's Chinatown, a place heaving with people, and she knows how to make her way through a crowd. Any crowd. If I'm the one leading the way, I'd be squeaking, "Excuse me—oh, sorry, Ah Yi—um, could I just—I have a reservation—" My voice would never be heard above the din, and we'd be stuck outside the restaurant forever. Or at least until the dim sum rush died down, sometime around 2 p.m.

As it is, people surge behind Ma as she scythes a path through the throng of families waiting for their tables, and I would've lost her if I wasn't keeping a death grip on her arm as if I'm all of three years old. She doesn't bother stopping at the front desk. She strides in as if she owns the place, eagle eyes scanning the large dining hall.

How can I describe the chaos that is a dim sum restaurant in the heart of the San Gabriel Valley at 11 a.m.? The place is filled with close to a hundred round tables, each one occupied by a different family, many of them with three to four generations of people present—there are gray-haired, prune-faced Ah Mas holding chubby babies on their laps. Steaming carts are pushed by the waitresses, though if you called them "Waitress" they'd never stop for you. You must call them Ah Yi—Auntie—and wave frantically as they

walk by to get them to stop. And once they do, customers descend like vultures and fight over the bamboo steamers inside the cart. People shout, asking if they've got siu mai, or har gow, or lo mai gai, and the Ah Yis locate the right dishes somewhere in the depths of their carts.

My Mandarin is awful, and my Cantonese nonexistent. Ma and the aunts often try to help me improve by speaking to me in either Mandarin or Indonesian, but then give up and switch to English because I only get about 50 percent of what they're saying. Their grasp of the English language is a bit wobbly, but it's a heck of a lot better than my Mandarin or Indonesian. It's yet another reason why I find it extra hard to order food at dim sum. More often than not, everything good is gone by the time the Ah Yi notices me and understands my order. Then all that's left is the lame stuff like the doughy vegetarian dumplings or the steamed bok choy.

But today, ah, today is a good day. I manage to get my hands on two lots of har gow, something that Big Aunt will certainly appreciate, and I even get hold of lop cheung bao—Chinese sausage rolls. Almost makes the whole ordeal of coming to weekly dim sum worth my while.

Big Aunt nods her approval when the Ah Yi puts the bamboo steamers down in the center of our table, and I feel an almost overwhelming need to beat my chest and crow. I got those shrimp dumplings! Me!

"Eat more, Meddy. You should keep your strength up for tomorrow," Big Aunt says in Mandarin, plopping two pieces of braised pork ribs on my plate, while I carefully place dumplings on everyone else's plates and pour them tea. Second Aunt cuts the char siu baos into two each and places one half on everyone's plate. The table being round means all the dishes are equally within reach of everyone, but Chinese family meals aren't complete without everyone serving food to everyone else, because doing so shows love and respect, which means we all need to do it in the most attention-seeking way possible. What's the point of giving Big Aunt the biggest siu mai if nobody else notices?

"Thank you, Big Aunt," I say, dutifully, placing a fat har gow on her plate. I always reply in English no matter which language my family is speaking because Second Aunt says listening to me struggle through Indonesian or Mandarin makes her blood pressure rise. "You eat more too. We're all counting on you tomorrow. And you, Second Aunt." The second-biggest har gow goes on Second Aunt's plate. Third biggest

goes to Fourth Aunt, and the last remaining one goes on Ma's plate. That shows that Ma has brought me up well, to look out for others before ourselves.

Big Aunt waves off my platitudes with a heavily jeweled hand. "We are all counting on each other." Heads of big, coiffed hair nod. Fourth Aunt has the biggest hair, something that Ma is always complaining to me about in private.

"Always such an attention hole," Ma said once, which was equal parts horrifying and hilarious. I asked her where she heard "attention hole," and she claimed that she heard it from our neighbor Auntie Liying, which is such a lie, but I've had twenty-six years of living with Ma and I know better than to argue with her. I simply told her it's "attention ho," not "hole," and she nodded and muttered "ho, like ho ho ho" before going back to chopping scallions.

"Okay," Big Aunt says, clapping once. Everyone sits up straighter. Big Aunt is older than Second Aunt by ten years, and she basically raised her sisters while Nainai went to work. "Hair and makeup?"

Second Aunt nods, bringing out her phone and putting on her glasses. She uses her index finger to tap on it, muttering, *"*Apa ya*,* the name of that app—Meddy make me use for hairstyle. Pin-something."

"Pinterest," I pipe up. "I can help you find it—"

Big Aunt shoots me a stern look, and I wilt. "No, Meddy. You mustn't help. If Second Aunt can't find the app tomorrow when she's with the bride, we will lose face for sure. We're supposed to be professionals," she says. Or at least I think that's what she says. She's speaking so fast I find it hard to follow, but I definitely caught the Mandarin words for "lose face"—a favorite phrase of hers.

Second Aunt's mouth purses, and her left cheek twitches a little. Just as Fourth Aunt irritates the crap out of Ma, Second Aunt and Big Aunt have a lot of friction between them. Don't ask me why; maybe it has to do with being the two oldest. Maybe it's something in their complicated pasts. There's been a lot of drama with my mom's family, especially back in Jakarta. I've heard bits and pieces over the years, mostly from Ma.

"Ha!" Second Aunt crows, brandishing Pinterest on her phone as if it's a sword she's just managed to pull out of a stone. "I got it. This is the style that the bride chose. I practiced on Meddy's hair and it looked

wonderful." She turns to me and switches to English. "Meddy, you got photo I take of your hair?"

"I do," I say, quickly taking out my phone. I call up the picture and Second Aunt holds it side by side with her phone, showing off the two pictures to everyone.

"Wah," Ma says. "It's so similar to the model's! Very good, Er Jie."

Second Aunt gives her a warm smile.

Fourth Aunt nods and replies in English, "Yes, they're nearly identical. How impressive." Her English is the best of all of theirs, yet another thing Ma will never forgive her for even though Ma's English is better than her older sisters'. Ma insists that Fourth Aunt has a penchant for using big words (i.e., anything with more than two syllables) just to needle Ma. I think Ma might have a point there, but it's just one of the many truths we will never know.

"The curl not show up well with Asian hair," Big Aunt says. The fact that she's speaking English means she's half-directing the admonishment at me. My insides writhe with guilt, even though this is very definitely not my fault. "Why you choose blonde hairstyle?"

Second Aunt glowers. "I didn't choose. The bride choose. Customer always right, remember?" She stabs her har gow and bites it angrily.

"Hmm." Big Aunt sighs. "Should have tell her it look different on Asian hair than on blonde hair. But—" she adds, when Second Aunt looks about ready to burst, "never mind. Too late now. Moving in—"

"On," Fourth Aunt says.

"Eh?" Big Aunt says.

"On. It's moving on, not moving in. Moving in is what you do when you move houses."

"Moving on. Okay." Big Aunt smiles at Fourth Aunt and Fourth Aunt beams back so hard, she might as well be a kid again. Ma says Fourth Aunt is Big Aunt's favorite because she's the baby of the family, and she was such a needy baby that she stole Big Aunt's heart right out of her chest.

"She snatch it right out," Ma has grumbled many times. I didn't bother asking if Ma, as the second-youngest sister, had been Big Aunt's favorite right up until Fourth Aunt was born.

"Flowers?" Big Aunt says in Mandarin once more. I relax a little.

Ma's back straightens. "All taken care of. Lilies, roses, peonies. Ah Guan will take everything to the island in the morning."

The island she's talking about is Santa Lucia, a large, privately owned island off the coast of Southern California that boasts pristine golden beaches, dramatic cliffs, and as of a month ago, one of the most luxurious, exclusive resorts in the world—the Ayana Lucia. Tomorrow is the start of a two-day wedding weekend extravaganza for Jacqueline Wijaya, daughter of Indonesia's largest textiles company, and—I kid you not—Tom Cruise.

Sutopo, that is. Yeah, the groom's name really is Tom Cruise Sutopo. I checked. It's exactly the kind of thing Chinese-Indonesians love naming their kids after—famous people and/or brand names (I have a cousin named Gucci, who moved very far away as soon as he was legally able to), or some form of misspelling of a popular Western name. Also case in point: Meddelin. My parents were aiming for Madeleine. Growing up, my cousins called me Meddlin' Meddelin, which is why I never, ever meddle in anyone's business, ever. Well, that and also the fact that my mother and aunts meddle enough for the whole family.

Anyway, Tom Cruise Sutopo's parents own . . . something. Something large. Palm oil plantations, coal mines, that kind of thing. So it's a wedding between two billionaire families in a newly built resort, which is why Big Aunt and all the rest of us are understandably nervous. How we managed to land these people as clients, I have no idea. Well, I do. Fourth Aunt's husband is—let me get this straight—Jacqueline's cousin's father-in-law's brother. So we're practically relatives. Everything in Chinese-Indo culture is like that; everybody is somehow related to everybody else, and deals happen because somebody's in-law knows someone else's friend's cousin.

I thought that our cheesy-as-hell company motto, which Big Aunt is supremely proud of—*Don't leave your big day to chance, leave it to the Chans!*—would've scared away the bride and groom, but they actually found it funny. Said it made them even more certain that they wanted to hire us to cater their big day.

Ma rattles on about how she's managed to get the rarest flowers. "The arrangements are going to look—what do you say in English, Meddy? Exsqueezed?"

"You mean exquisite?" Fourth Aunt says, and Ma gives her the deadliest side-eye in the history of all side-eyes.

"Very good," Big Aunt says hurriedly, breaking the radioactive glares between Ma and Fourth Aunt. "And last one, songs, all okay?"

Fourth Aunt's face goes from icy glare to satisfied smirk. "Of course, the band and I have been practicing night and day. People keep coming by the studio to listen to me sing, you know." There are two versions of Fourth Aunt's life story. Version one has to do with her being a celebrated child prodigy with a voice that newspapers described as "angelic" and "a national treasure." She was well on her way to stardom, but chose to leave it all behind when all her sisters decided to move to California. Version two has her as a so-so singer who cunningly convinced her entire family to uproot themselves and move to California so she could pursue her pipe dreams of breaking out in Hollywood. One version is Fourth Aunt's; the other is Ma's.

"And the cake?" Second Aunt says, side-eyeing Big Aunt. "Our centerpiece needs to be perfect, unlike that unfortunate thing you made for Mochtar Halim's daughter's wedding." She gives a dramatic sigh. "Nobody has a face anymore." Hmm, that can't be right. I parse through the words slowly in my head. I think she's saying Big Aunt has made all of us lose face. I really need to brush up on my Mandarin.

Anyway, the point is, Second Aunt has made a really low blow. Cheriss Halim's wedding is her favorite topic, because Cheriss had requested a fiendishly tricky cake—a five-layer upside-down tower with the bottom layer as the smallest one and the top as the biggest. Big Aunt, with years and years under her belt as head pastry chef for Ritz-Carlton Jakarta, was confident she could do it. But something went wrong. I don't know what, maybe she didn't build enough structural support, or maybe it was just an impossible task for a beach wedding in the middle of a SoCal summer. Whatever it was, amid the guests' horrified gasps, the humongous tower had leaned over in slow motion before collapsing on one of the flower girls. It was the only time we'd ever gone viral, and Second Aunt hasn't let Big Aunt forget about the incident since.

Big Aunt's nostrils flare. "I'm just here to buy soy sauce."

Okay, that definitely can't be right. I lean toward Ma and whisper, "Why's Big Aunt talking about

buying soy sauce?"

"Tch," Ma says. "This is why I always say to you: pay attention in Chinese class! Big Aunt is saying to Second Aunt to mind her own business."

"Thank you for being sooo caring, Meimei," Big Aunt is saying. Phew, she's really mad now. She only refers to the rest as meimei—little sister—when she wants to remind them who's the eldest. "Of course everything is ready. The cake will be perfectly fine; please don't worry about me." She gives Second Aunt a smile that I can only describe as "so sweet it's deadly" and then turns her attention to me.

I shift in my seat. Big Aunt, like her title, is larger than all her sisters. I guess twenty years as a pastry chef will do that to you. She wears her size well, and it makes her more majestic, more convincing. There's a reason she's the one who meets with potential clients. I hate the thought of disappointing Ma, but the thought of disappointing Big Aunt actually keeps me up some nights. Maybe it's the result of spending most of my life in the same house as my mom and her sisters. Ma and I only got to move into our own place a year ago, after the family business started turning a steady profit. We all still live in the same neighborhood, a mere ten-minute walk away from one another, and I feel the weight of their expectations, as if I have four mothers and all of their hopes and dreams have been placed on my shoulders. I'm basically driven by a mixture of caffeine and familial guilt.

Big Aunt turns to face me, and my spine straightens instinctively. Maybe she senses how nervous I am about tomorrow, because she gives me an encouraging smile and switches to English for my sake. "Meddy, everything okay with camera, ya? You ready for big day?"

I nod. I've checked and rechecked my camera, my backup camera, and all five of my lenses yesterday. They'd all been sent for a maintenance and proper cleanup weeks ago, in preparation for this wedding. I hate that the documenting of my family's hard work—Big Aunt's towering cakes, Second Aunt's complicated hairstyles and flawless makeup artistry, Ma's gorgeous flower arrangements, and Fourth Aunt's dynamic performances—all falls on my shoulders. Every wedding, I try to capture everything, and every wedding, I miss something. Last wedding, I forgot to take pictures of Fourth Aunt from her "good side, the one that makes me look twenty again," and the wedding before that, I failed to capture the

centerpiece at table 17, which was apparently significantly different from all the other centerpieces.

"My gear's in perfect condition," I assure them, "and I've memorized the list of pictures I need to take for our social media."

"You good, filial girl, Meddy," Big Aunt says, and I force a smile. Ah, filial piety, the foundation of Asian parenting. From ever since I can remember, I've been taught to put my elders—that is, Ma and the aunties—above everything. It's the reason why I, out of seven kids in my generation, am the only one involved in the family business, even though I desperately want out. For their sake, I pretend to love all of it—the fuss and the huge production and everything—but it's slowly eroding what I love about photography. For months now, I've toyed with the idea of leaving the wedding business, of going back to what I love about photography—to be able to take my time, play around with different lenses and lighting and angles instead of rushing to take photo after photo of the same stuff. Not that I can ever reveal any of this to my family.

"Yes, you are a good, filial girl," Ma chirps in Indonesian. Ma and the aunties are equally fluent in Mandarin and Indonesian and switch seamlessly from one language to the other. She's smiling really wide. Uh-oh. Why is she smiling? "That's why we have a surprise for you."

Now all of my aunts are grinning down at me. I shrink back in my seat, the siu mai in my mouth turning to stone. "What's going on?" I say, my voice coming out even smaller than usual with my family.

Ma says, "I found the perfect husband for you!" At the same time, all of my aunts say, "Surprise!"

I blink. "Sorry, you found what now?"

"Perfect husband!" Ma crows.

I look over my shoulder, half-expecting some guy Ma has probably ambushed at the Ranch 99 market to come up behind me.

"Aiya, he's not here, silly girl," Ma says.

"Is he tied up in the trunk of your car?"

"Don't joke, Meddy," Big Aunt tuts. "Your mama is doing all of this so that you can have a good life."

I nod, contrite. I'm an adult and yet all it takes is a single admonishment from Big Aunt to make me

feel all of three years old again. “Sorry, Ma. But I don’t—”

“Don’t but this but that,” Ma says. “Why is it so difficult to get you to date? I tried setting you up with Uncle Awai’s son, but no, you didn’t let me. I tried setting you up with my lily supplier Ah Guan—Ah Guan is very handsome, you know—but you refused that too. Didn’t even want to meet him.”

“Meddy is probably cautious because last time when you tried to set her up with Wang Zhixiang’s son, he turned out to be, you know,” Fourth Aunt says.

Ma waves an irritated hand. “Why do you keep bringing up Zhixiang’s son? So he turned out to be some maniac. How was I supposed to know?”

“Kleptomaniac,” I mumble. By the time our date was over, he’d stolen my makeup bag from my purse and, somehow, one of my shoes. I mean, the guy’s an asshole, but you’ve gotta give it to him. Or let him steal it.

“Anyway, sayangku,” Ma says, using the Indonesian term of endearment she saves for really special occasions, like the day I graduated from UCLA, “this guy is so good. I’m telling you, no one is better than him. He is so handsome, so kind, and so smart! Aaand . . .”

Oh god, here it comes. The final nail in the coffin. What is it going to be this time? With my luck, he’ll turn out to be a second cousin or something.

“He’s the hotel owner!” Fourth Aunt cries.

Ma glares at her. “I was just going to say that. You stole my thunder!”

“You were taking too long,” Fourth Aunt says.

They all turn back to me, grinning expectantly.

“Uh.” I put down my chopsticks. “I mean. Am I supposed to be happy about that? It sounds like a huge liability. Do I have to give you guys a refresher course on how bad I am at dating? What part of this is a good idea, exactly?”

“Ah,” Ma says, smiling smugly. “I know you’re not so good at dating—”

“It’s because you’re such good girl,” Big Aunt says, loyally.

Second Aunt nods. “Yes, you’re not a whore, that’s why you’re so bad at dating.”

"Auntie! Can we not slut-shame women, please?"

She shrugs, not contrite in the least.

"Anyway," Ma says, "it doesn't matter. It's okay that you're terrible at dating, because this boy, oh, he is so in love with you, Meddy. He knows all your flaws and how awkward you are in person and everything, but he says it makes him like you even more!"

"Whoa, whoa," I raise my hands. "Hold up. Okay." I take a deep breath. "There is so much here. Can we please switch back to English? Because I'm pretty sure I'm misinterpreting everything. First of all, he knows all my flaws? What the f—what gives, Ma? How does he know any of this stuff about me?"

"She met him online!" Fourth Aunt cries, triumphantly. I guess she's been bursting with the secret this whole time, because her entire face is shining with excitement. "Your mother went online, to a dating site, and has been chatting with him for weeks!"

"What?!" Oh my god, so it's not a loss in translation. She really did go and find me a random guy to go out on a date with. "Ma, is this for real?"

"Yes, very good idea, right? This way, you and him get to know each other before the date, which is tonight."

"Tonight?" I squawk. "But I *don't* know him! I know nothing about him, aside that he's been chatting with my mother for weeks. I mean, good grief, that is some messed-up shit, Ma."

"That why I tell you now," Ma says, completely unfazed. Meanwhile, my cheeks are so hot they're practically melting off my face. "Oh, he is such a good boy, so respectful of his elders."

"How would you know?" I realize how loud my voice is when heads at the next table swivel round. To be loud enough to attract attention in a dim sum restaurant during the lunch rush is damn near impossible, which just goes to show how fucking pissed I am.

"He buy his parents house! A mansion in San Marino, very good location."

My three aunties nod solemnly. San Marino is basically my family's holy Grail—close enough to SGV for those late-night Taiwanese bubble teas, far enough to be surrounded by non-immigrants. Ma and her sisters have had their eye on San Marino ever since they immigrated here.

"And he loves cooking," Ma says, with a pointed glare at me, "very good because no matter how many times I teach you, you still don't know how. How can you be good wife, you can't even cook rice?"

"Stay on the topic," Fourth Aunt says.

For once, Ma listens to her. "He has two dogs. You always want dog. Now you can have two! They are so well-groom. Look!" She brandishes a photo of two glossy golden retrievers that are so golden and so perfectly shaped they look like they could be some pet magazine models.

"I tell him, I say, 'I'm wedding photographer,' and he say, 'Wow, so impressive!' and I say—"

"Wait." I have to take a second to let the words sink in. "Did you just—Ma. Did you—go on a dating site as ME?" I sit there with my mouth open, not breathing or blinking or anything.

"Of course she did!" Second Aunt says. "How else can she meet the boy? If she say her real age, fifty-six—"

"Fifty-three," Ma interjects.

Fourth Aunt snorts.

"If she say her real age, then she will matching with men her age," Second Aunt explains very slowly, nodding and smiling at me encouragingly. "You see? Is why she has to pretend she is you."

I can't even right now. What is my life? While my mind sputters to catch up with the situation, Ma regales me with more of the deep, soulful messages that Jake the hotel owner has sent me. He's seen my pictures and apparently finds me "breathtaking."

"Do you have any photos of him, at least?"

"I ask him, but I think maybe he a bit shy," Ma says.

"You realize that means he's a complete troll?" Fourth Aunt says.

Ma waves her off. "I think is because he so handsome, he don't want show off photo, he wants to make sure you falling in love with him, not his face."

"Also, he's Taiwanese, so his Mandarin very good," Second Aunt says. "Maybe you can improve your Mandarin with him. Whenever you speak Mandarin, aduh, give me headache."

"Sorry," I mumble. I'm so flustered by everything they're throwing at me that I don't know how to

react. “I need to—can I see these chat messages?”

“Aduh, no time for that,” Ma says. “You trust me, okay, this one is very good boy. Very good. If you don’t go, you miss out.”

And, to my horror, despite the awfulness of everything, part of me is being won over, which clearly means I have lost my damn mind.

But the last time I went on a date was . . .

Last summer? Last fall? Christ on a cracker. Has it really been that long? And don’t even get started on the last time I got laid. As my best friend Selena likes to remind me, “Girl, you need to get some before that thing closes up shop for good.” I look down on my lap, at that “thing.” Why can’t Selena just say “vagina”? *You’re not gonna close up shop for good, are you?*

Okay, I have just started talking to my vagina. Maybe Ma’s right. I desperately need to go out on a date. And so what if it’s been set up in the weirdest, most awkward way ever?

“Must go, ya,” Ma is saying, unaware that I’ve quietly talked myself—and my vagina—into agreeing.

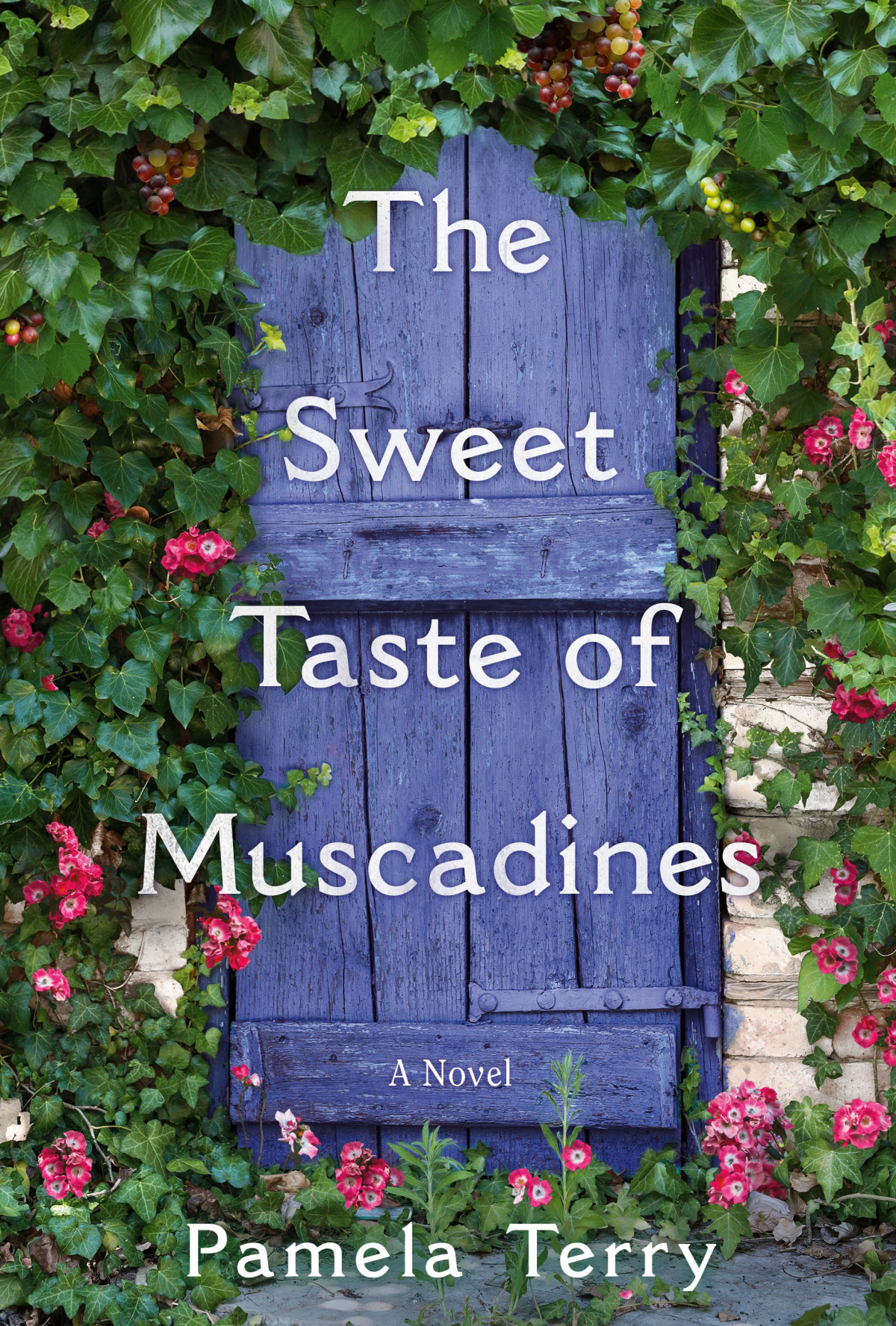
“Must not cancel,” Big Aunt says. “If you cancel last minute it so offensive, you know.”

“*So* offensive,” Second Aunt says. “But we know you not do that. You are nice girl.”

“You’ll jeopardize the wedding weekend,” Fourth Aunt says. “You must go, be your lovely, sweet self. He’ll fall in love for sure.”

I stare at my mother and my aunts. They stare back at me, smiling and nodding in that way cats do when they’ve cornered a mouse.

“Fine,” I sigh. “Tell me everything I’m supposed to know about my date tonight.”


The Sweet Taste of Muscadines
A Novel
Pamela Terry

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PROLOGUE

The first time Mama died, I ran off to hide in the muscadine arbor. She'd been coming around the corner of the swimming pool with a tray of iced tea in her hands when Abigail stuck her leg out and tripped her. I don't think Abby really gave it much thought before she did it; it was just an impulse, like a sneeze, over before she even knew what happened. Mama should've just fallen into the pool. She would have been mad, and Abby would have been in for it, but that's about all. Might even have turned out to be a funny story to tell company. But no, Mama split her head open on the concrete before she fell into the water, sinking like a stone to the bottom while we all just sat there staring. Red blood floated up like Easter-egg dye. The world counted to three, and then everybody started screaming. I think it was Uncle Audie who fished her out, but I was running flat out by then. They told me later she'd died, just like I thought. She wasn't breathing at all for a minute or more, until Aunt Jo pushed everybody out of the way and started pounding on her chest like you do on a round steak, and Mama woke up spitting out mouthfuls of chlorinated water. But by that

time I was deep in the middle of the muscadine arbor, hidden by the vines, getting used to the idea that my mother was dead.

When my brother, Henry, finally found me, the afternoon sun was turning pink behind the pine trees and I had pretty much written a brand-new narrative for my future. I could almost see myself, handling Mama's funeral with a dignity far beyond my years, moving serenely through the crowd of grieving relations in an unwrinkled black dress. Then the letter would arrive. The letter telling us the army was sending Daddy straight home from the war because they'd never allow Henry, Abigail, and me to be left all alone now that Mama was gone.

Of course it didn't work out that way. Mama was only dead for about as long as it takes to fry an egg, but three weeks later when a bullet found Daddy's left temple on that road in the jungle, he was dead for good. The principal came to get me from English class just as Miss Hester was telling us the meaning of the adjective "capricious." It became a word I would forever associate with God.

I dreamed about the muscadine arbor last night. It must have been August, because the lime-green leaves were so thick the summer sun couldn't find a way in. I sat in the middle of the arbor, cross-legged in the shade, like I used to when I was little, with my bare toes dug down deep in the brown velvet dirt. What I didn't see was Mama lying there beside me, facedown with her legs stuck out the end of the arbor, her fuzzy blue slippers all gummy with pollen and dew, dead for the second and very last time. But that's exactly where Abigail said she was when Abby found her this morning at dawn.

ONE

As a child I was afraid of tornadoes. Actually, "afraid" is a puny word to describe how I felt when an unusual stillness would thread the air of a late-spring afternoon, weaving a blanket of quiet that silenced birdsong and suspended the breeze. The skies over Wesleyan would darken to horror green, and the wind would awaken with the soul of a dervish, causing the pines and poplars to wring themselves into fraying, flailing knots. Though meant for good, the sound of the tornado siren was as welcome as a scream. As the witchy webs of lace curtains reached out for me in the wind, I would run through the house in blind panic, grabbing up my diaries and favorite photos, all the books I could carry, all the while herding a grumbling Henry before me like a wayward sheep. Into our dark rabbit hole of a cellar I would vanish like Alice to wait it out, nervous and shaking, while in my mind's eye I could clearly see the swirling evil coming right down my street, like the dark finger of God, casually tracing a line on the earth. The world was always unchanged when I reemerged, and the next hour or so was spent putting back the treasured items I'd saved from threatened

obliteration while enduring the teasing of my family for my oversize, misplaced fear. Then came the afternoon of Lolly Carmichael's seventh-birthday party.

Any party at the Carmichaels' was a dress-up affair, even seventh-birthday ones, so I found myself sitting in the back of our family's green Pontiac in a pink, full-skirted dress with my feet trapped in black patent-leather shoes, riding to the event in a sulk, on a beautiful day in May. As we neared Lolly's house, I felt a bit vindicated when I spied dark clouds rolling in, threatening rain. At least we wouldn't have to endure outside games trussed up in these clothes. But my glee was waning as we pulled up the drive to a giant's footfall of thunder. Egg-size drops of rain spattered my pink shoulders as I ran up the stairs, my beribboned present tucked underneath my arm. The front door flew open, and Mrs. Carmichael, face white-tight, called past me to my mother.

"Geneva! Get in here! There's a tornado!"

My worst fear in the world, and I was away from home in a pink dress. Mama ran inside, and we scrambled to join the rest of the party all huddled together in the center of the family room, away from the windows. A rainbow of balloons floated near the ceiling, a big number 7 written on each one in gold. A stack of presents teetered on the dining-room table, pink punch waveless in a cut-glass bowl. The tornado siren blared just then, sending shivers up our bare legs and causing Mary Ann Archer's mother to blurt out, "Oh, Jesus!" in a voice as shrill as the siren itself.

"Hush up, Jessie," my mother hissed.

Just then, as one, every balloon in the room popped, a sound that shattered our stoicism and uncorked Jessie Archer's full-throated pleas to the heavens. We scattered like frilly buckshot into every nook and cranny of that house. I grabbed Lolly, who'd frozen to the spot, wailing, and made for the basement along with the more sensible members of the crowd, my mother included. We left Mrs. Archer standing right in front of the window, hands raised in either terror or supplication, I never knew which.

If you stick a microphone in the face of someone who's been through a tornado, you can bet money they'll say the familiar line, "It sounded like a freight train." It almost seems a scripted description. But I can empirically say there's a reason for that. From my hiding place that afternoon in Lolly Carmichael's basement, that is precisely the sound I heard as I sat with my head down and my hands clasped around my knees as though bound to a railroad track with no hope of escape. I could hear it coming, hear it hit like a battering ram, hear it continue on, leaving the Carmichael house totally, eerily silent as we waited to breathe again.

Mama was the first one back up the stairs. Throwing open the basement door, she gasped when she saw the trunk of a tree sticking like a tongue depressor through the gaping mouth of the living-room wall. The air smelled sickly strong of pine, and looking up, I could see a nonchalant blue sky already pushing the darkness away to the east.

We found Mrs. Archer sprawled across the hooked rug of the family room, her right leg twisted behind her like a strand of spaghetti, her hands still raised to the ceiling, loudly praising God for her salvation, to which Mama replied as she picked up the phone to call for help, "God nothing, Jessie. If you'd been listening to God, you'd have been downstairs with the rest of us with not even a run in your stocking." Mrs. Archer had a slight limp for the rest of her days.

Maybe once you've faced down something so frightening, it loses its power over you. I've never been afraid of tornadoes again. And my reaction to the news of my mother's death this morning was not as dramatic as it probably should have been. After all, at eight years old I'd spent an endless afternoon believing her dead. I'd already experienced the shock, the hideous fascination, of her passing. The fact that her death had ended up false didn't lessen all I'd felt that day. Those same feelings now returned to meet Abigail's news, squeezing themselves through telephone wires to grab me around the throat, but being somewhat familiar, their power

was lessened. So I didn't sway; I didn't gasp. Instead I asked Abby for the answer to what was, for me at least, the strangest part of the story. What on earth was my mother doing out in the muscadine arbor? In rapid-fire fashion, Abby told me that's exactly what *she* wanted to know. She delivered her account with an urgency undiluted by the drawl of her words, which shot through the phone like honey-coated bullets.

"I don't have a clue, Lila. I mean, I thought at first maybe she'd gotten hot and stepped outside to get some fresh air. It's been pretty sticky, though there was a nice breeze last night. But Lord, that air conditioner was running full blast when I got here this morning, so I know she couldn't have been hot. It was cold as a meat locker in this house. And I swear, I don't even know if her bed's been slept in. I mean, it's hard to tell, 'cause she won't make it up every day anymore. Not unless Jackie's coming over to clean. You know how Mama never wants anybody, not even her cleaning lady, to think she needs a cleaning lady, so she always straightens things up before Jackie gets here. They said she'd been dead for about four hours, which means it had to have happened around two in the morning, 'cause I got here at six. I called her before I went to bed to remind her about her hair appointment at eight—she likes to get it done real early so the heat won't make it fall before she gets back home—and to tell her I'd be picking her up at the crack of dawn so we could have breakfast out like usual. You know how she loves to eat breakfast out."

"Yes. What *happened*, Abby?" I was trying to hurry this story along even though I knew I hadn't a hope of succeeding.

"Well. Everything seemed fine on the phone. She sounded a little peevish, but I'd interrupted a rerun of that John Wayne movie she likes so much, so I figured that was why. You know, the one where he's out looking for that little girl the whole time and when he finds her, she turns out to be an Indian? So anyway, I drove on over this morning real early so we could go to the Pancake Parlor like she likes to. The coffee wasn't on, and the house was as quiet

as the grave. Sorry. Wrong choice of words. I'm still upset. Well, you can imagine.

"It was when I was coming back down the stairs from her room that I noticed the door to the pool wasn't shut all the way. Now, you know Mama locks this house up like Fort Knox every night before she goes to bed, always has done, so this hit me weird. I went outside and looked around the pool, but she wasn't there, so I went on through the hedge to the garden. I didn't see her, but there was her housecoat, you know that satiny one she wears on Sunday afternoons when she takes her nap? Well, that housecoat was hanging on the garden fence, right by the gate. And you know how Mr. Plackett keeps the grass a little longer out past there? Well, I could see what looked like a line heading straight out across the field where the grass was all pressed down like somebody'd been walking through it. I just started following—I was calling her the whole time—until I got down to the creek. I could see the arbor from where I was then, but I thought, *Well, she's not out here after all*, and that's when I saw her feet sticking out like in *Wizard of Oz* or something. Lila, I haven't shook like this—you should see my hands—since Aunt Jo up and died on that cruise that she and Uncle Audie won in that raffle down at the mall. Same sort of thing, just like Aunt Jo. Sudden death. Course, we know that Aunt Jo died of food poisoning. Food on those cruises just sits out all day, you know, and I don't suppose those doctors on those boats are all that good or they'd have a real office and not be working out in the ocean in the middle of nowhere."

I couldn't muffle my sigh. "Aunt Jo had a heart attack on that cruise, Abigail. There was an autopsy. Remember?"

"Yes, well, it had to have been brought on by all that bad food. Anyway, we're all going to have to wait on another autopsy now to find out what happened to Mama. I'm just going to go on home till you and Henry get here. News'll be getting out, and I can't face having to tell this story over again and again without y'all with me. How soon can you get here?"

"It'll have to be tomorrow, Abby. I've already missed the morning ferry, so I'll have to catch the afternoon one. But I'll drive into Portland tonight and be on the first flight out in the morning. I'll be there by early afternoon."

"Well, okay. I'll never understand why you still live way up there on that island. Mama didn't get it either." I heard a loud sniff. "I don't know what I'll do without Mama. She was my best friend, Lila. You know that, don't you?"

Abigail's voice still swam through my head a good while after I'd hung up the phone, its sugary tones as southern as a Savannah praline. Though I had absolutely no doubt that she would be the one to miss our mother the most (she'd been correct when she said they were best friends), I couldn't help but recoil from that part of her that so obviously relished the drama of the situation. Every primary-colored sentence had screeched to a halt at an exclamation point that, given the bare facts of the situation, was at least unnecessary if not a little distasteful.

As with so many of the women in my family, there were no subtleties in my sister's life; all her choices, from adjectives to earrings, were outsized and theatrical. It's possible that the seeds of this behavior were planted by maternal ancestors desperate to be heard, otherwise mutely invisible women in hoop skirts who learned early to manipulate by drama, exaggerating whatever means of communication they could grab in their lily-white fists in order to solidify their gauzy shadows and prove that they mattered. I'd spent my childhood observing this particular brand of femininity, unable and unwilling to participate. Now I found it almost profane.

The cloth from which I'd been cut was as wildly divergent from the one that had produced my mother and sister as satin was from tweed. I find it funny now to remember how hard Mama worked to fashion my personality into something she could more easily recognize. Henry was given a pass, one of the perks of being a son. But southern daughters are supposed to take after their mothers, and when I was little, mine watched me like a hawk watches an

unaware rabbit, alert for any similarities in our natures on which she could pounce—no matter how trivial or superficial they might be—just some little something that could, perhaps, connect us with the same silken thread that tied her so closely to Abby. Did we like the same movie stars? Or eat the same thing for breakfast? Was I ever going to laugh at the same things that she did?

But I wasn't my sister; my eyes were not blue. I never wanted to wear what Mama chose for me; I hated my hair in a ponytail; I preferred saddle shoes to the shiny patent-leather Mary Janes she was convinced every little girl should want to wear. What an effort she made to change me, and when it was clear those surface alterations would never occur, she began to mistake my solitary nature for sullenness, my laughter for mockery, my silence for a judgment I didn't start to feel until much later. I'm not sure exactly when she gave up, probably around the time Daddy died. I don't remember her telling me what to wear to the funeral. I do remember my baby sister looking a picture all that hot afternoon, in a brand-new dress the same color as Mama's.

I suppose Abigail's own identity card was permanently stamped that day Mama died the first time. I'd felt awful for Abby about that. Every retelling of that fateful afternoon at the pool naturally included the part where she'd stuck her leg out to send Mama right off into eternity and I was afraid she'd feel bad listening to it over and over again. But it was soon apparent that Abigail had inherited not only my mother's cowlick and loathing of the color green but the familial penchant for drama as well. Mama and Abigail loved the spotlight, and a story in which one of them actually died at the hand, or the leg in this case, of the other and lived to tell the tale was a crowd pleaser, and they both knew it. It was obvious Abigail liked playing the pivotal role in the story. She beamed every time it was told.

Of course, it didn't take long for Mama's first death to become as much a part of her biography as her two semesters at Georgia Southern and her double-jointed pinkie finger. That story singled

her out, and Lord knows she liked to be singled out. She never let anyone forget that she had been to the other side and back again, and what began as about forty seconds of floating facedown in a backyard swimming pool with her blue shirtwaist billowing up over her head like a cartoon thought eventually became a journey down a long white tunnel full of all the people she'd ever known who'd gone on before, each one waving her back down the way she'd come.

"'Go back, Geneva!' I swear to goodness that's what I heard them say. 'Your work here isn't over.'" Like an underpaid thespian, Mama would add a little dose of pathos each time the story was told, and as she told it every chance she got, it should be easy to imagine how operatic it soon became. I can't help but wonder what all those people were telling her this time out. I guess they were waving her in.

THE ELEPHANT OF BELFAST

A Novel

S. KIRK WALSH

THE ELEPHANT OF BELFAST

First hardcover edition: 2021

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events is unintended and entirely coincidental.

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One

On that morning of October 3, 1940, Hettie Quin knew she was lucky to be there, at the docks of Belfast, assisting with the elephant's arrival. One of the other zookeepers had come down with a fever, and Ferris Poole had enlisted her help at the last minute. As she stood next to Ferris at the edge of the crowd, Hettie steadied herself after having sprinted down to the docks from the nearby tram stop; her mother had made her tardy by requesting multiple chores around the house before Hettie finally managed to slip out the door. As she pushed sweaty strands of hair from her eyes, she took in the stunning sight overhead—a young elephant being maneuvered through the air. A crane and a system of chains and pulleys elevated the animal from the deck of the moored steamship. The elephant's trunk coiled up and then unfurled like an opening fist. There was a hollow trumpet call. The crowd—women, men, children, sailors, dockworkers—let out a collective gasp, their gazes following the orchestrated movements of the hoisting operation. Hettie had never seen so many people at the docks: it was as if British royalty or a famous screen actress were among the steamer's passengers arriving that morning. The atmosphere felt festive, bright with expectation.

Here was the three-year-old elephant. Here was her potential new charge at the zoo. Here was Violet. A local poacher had killed the animal's mother with poisoned arrows on a savanna in faraway Ceylon, and Mr. Christie, the owner of the Bellevue Zoo & Gardens, had bought the orphaned elephant for a good price from another animal trader in southern India. Standing next to Hettie, Ferris dropped his half-finished cigarette onto the ground and squared his shoulders for Violet's arrival. Mr. Wright, the head zookeeper, stood at the foot of the gangplank. Two reporters appeared by his side and scribbled in their notepads as Mr. Wright kept his gaze fixed on Violet. The elephant hovered, her feet hanging in midair, her flap-like ears pinned against her head. There was another collective sigh as she lifted her trunk and produced a high-pitched whistle. The elephant's cry tumbled over the crowd.

With his ramrod-straight posture and a subtle theatrical swing to his gait, Mr. Wright looked like a cross between a military general and a ringmaster. He wore a pair of jodhpurs, a brilliant red jacket, a fedora, and a pair of polished knee-high riding boots. Two rows of shiny brass buttons trailed down the front of his double-breasted coat, and a golden braid was threaded through the epaulets that rested on his shoulders. Several medals decorated the right side of his chest. Hettie had heard from one of the other zookeepers that Mr. Wright had fought at the Battle of Arras during World War I and saved more than a dozen men's lives. Mr. Wright was always dressed in this outfit, Hettie had noticed, regardless of whether he was training Wallace the lion with a crack of his whip or tossing silver-scaled herrings for the sea lions or greeting visitors at the zoo's front entrance.

The winch raised Violet higher. The machinery rasped and whined. The crowd grew silent. Gulls wheeled overhead. Violet uncoiled her trunk again and released another cry. A commotion stirred on the deck. Several men yelled at one another. The chain attached to the crane's

neck tightened. Slowly the crane swiveled to one side and then began to rise. The air turned electric.

Mr. Christie stood at the top of the walkway, looking something like a campaigning politician, in a three-piece suit with a brilliant yellow scarf around his neck, its tasseled ends flying up in the breeze. He fervently shook hands with one of the ship's officers on deck, signed several sheets of paper, and walked down the ramp to greet Mr. Wright and his new elephant. Mr. Wright cleared away the crowd to make more room for Violet's imminent landing on the dock.

"Ferris," Mr. Wright yelled. "Miss Quin. Over here!"

"Yes, sir," she said, walking over to him and positioning herself next to Mr. Wright.

"Where have you been?" he asked curtly.

"My mum—" Hettie started to say, and then stopped.

"Take this," instructed Mr. Wright, handing her a metal bucket of carrots, the feathery tops brushing her hand. "Here she comes."

"Look," Ferris said, glancing over at Hettie. There was that familiar clear blue flash of Ferris's eyes, the dimple in the center of his left cheek, and Hettie's hands pricked with perspiration. Ferris turned his attention to Violet. The crane groaned and wheezed as it continued lowering Violet to the ground. Hettie stood mesmerized by the strange sight of the elephant suspended, like an enormous anvil, in midair. The cranking of the winch was paused while the sailors on deck adjusted the controls and yelled at one another.

For a moment, Hettie was afraid the mechanism would fail and the elephant would come crashing onto the dock. Violet would break through the weathered planks, and multiple civilians would be injured, some might even drown. TRAGEDY STRIKES BELFAST DOCKS, the *Telegraph*'s headlines would read the following day. COUNTLESS INNOCENT CIVILIANS AND CHILDREN KILLED. The chains tightened and creaked. Two men cranked the winch on the ship's deck—and

finally the animal's feet touched down onto the dock to a thunderous cheer. Violet shook her torso, sending a nimbus of dust and dirt from her skin. Mr. Christie walked over to Mr. Wright, his scarf fluttering as he took in the eager crowd.

A girl stood at her mother's knee, gaping up at the elephant, her small face open with wonder. A young couple in matching school uniforms tittered, the boy's lanky arm draped around the girl's shoulder. The crew on the neighboring oil tanker paused to take in the unusual sight. On the other adjacent vessel, a Royal Navy ship, the captain prematurely ended his drill instructions and allowed the men to peer over the ship's railing at the spectacle of Violet and the rest of the city below.

Belfast was alive with activity that morning. The hum of life and industry was everywhere. The docks, the streets, the factories. Lorries, cars, and buses streamed through major arteries of the city. Pedestrians hurried along the pavements to their jobs. At the York Street Flax Spinning Company, pairs of rubber-aproned women oversaw the electricity generators in the engine house, which drove the shafts of the machines that powered the spindles and looms that spun and wove the threads into cheap utility clothing and fabric for airplanes and other myriad purposes. Armies of men sat at their drafting desks at Short & Harland, sketching designs of Sunderland flying boats and Stirling bombers. The Linfield Football Club had begun its morning practice on its pitted playing field at Windsor Park, not far from the Lisburn Road. Dozens of Poor Clare nuns sang "How Great Is Our God" at their convent's chapel on the Cliftonville Road, their voices coalescing into one celestial sound that drifted beyond the chapel's stained-glass windows. To Hettie, it felt as if the entire city were awake and ready for Violet—and her auspicious arrival in Belfast. There was a freshness. An opportunity. Something was about to happen.

The crowd clapped and cheered for Violet as passengers filed down the ship's ramp. Hettie noticed the rolling dollies of luggage, steamer trunks, and bags being ferried down another plank that extended

from the ship's belly. One man carried a terrarium with a hooded cobra pressed against the box's translucent sides, its thin tongue flicking against the glass. An elderly woman held a wired cage with a pair of chickens; a few loose feathers floated up like rings of smoke.

"Carrots, Miss Quin," Mr. Wright ordered. "Now."

Hettie handed him a pair of carrots, and he held them out for the elephant. Violet grabbed the carrots with the fingerlike end of her trunk and swung them into her mouth. Bits and pieces fell to the ground. Violet suctioned them up, thrusting the tip of her trunk against the uneven boards of the dock.

Mr. Christie held a stick with a long handle, like a bullwhip, with a note tied to one end. He inspected the handwritten message more closely. "'Lead me with this,'" he read aloud to the crowd. "Did you hear that, everyone? 'Lead me with this.'"

The cameras flashed again. Mr. Christie handed the stick to Mr. Wright, who offered another carrot to Violet in the palm of his hand. The elephant deftly picked it up. Behind her, Hettie felt the heat and crush of the swelling crowd. She looked around for Ferris. He stood on the other side of Violet, awaiting further instructions.

"Let's see her do a trick," called a boy from somewhere.

"Don't be an eejit," Ferris yelled. "Poor animal has been on a ship for almost a month."

"Where did she come from?" asked another young boy.

"From the wilds of southern India," Mr. Christie said proudly. "I'm lucky I got her."

"How much does she weigh?" an older man asked. "Looks like she could crush someone to death."

"Three thousand pounds," Mr. Christie responded, "and she isn't going to hurt anyone. Remember, our animals are about entertainment, not stirring up fear."

"According to the paperwork, she weighs three thousand four hundred and eleven pounds," Mr. Wright added. "A little below average."

Hettie took a few steps closer and stared at Violet. Her circular feet were bordered with half-moon nails. The elephant's tail, with a paintbrush-like tuft of hair, swished from side to side, and her large-lidded sepia eyes popped a bit wider. Mr. Wright lifted the stick in front of Violet, and Hettie noticed the elephant's eyes following the end of it. Hettie imagined her older sister, Anna, standing beside her, whispering into her ear, *She's your elephant. She's the one for you.* Violet was about five feet tall, smaller than the Clydesdale horses Hettie used to ride with her father along the rolling knolls of the Cavehill in north Belfast.

"Steady feet," Mr. Wright said in a neutral voice. "Steady."

He raised the stick higher, and Violet slowly started to lift her front feet from the ground. Soon, she stood only on her hind legs, strong and unmoving like the columns of an ancient building. Her broad torso cast a shadow. The faction of reporters positioned themselves in front of the crowd and aimed their lenses up at Violet. Light bulbs went off again.

"That's my girl," Mr. Christie said, revealing a wide smile. "My number one girl."

He clasped his hands together as if in prayer.

"You can visit Violet at the Bellevue Zoo on the Antrim Road," Mr. Christie declared. "We're open every weekday. Rain or shine."

"There, there, Violet," Mr. Wright said as the elephant shifted on her hind legs.

He lowered the stick, and Violet returned to all four feet. The crowd whistled and clapped.

"Show us the way, Wright," Mr. Christie said, tipping his hat.

"Up the Antrim Road?" Mr. Wright asked, patting Violet on her side.

A cloud of dust rose from the deep folds of her skin. With the end of her tail the elephant swatted the spot that Mr. Wright had just touched.

"Up the Antrim Road," Mr. Christie repeated with zeal.

He shook hands with Mr. Wright and the ship's officer. Then Mr. Christie gave a wave to the layers of enthusiastic spectators before making his way around to the rear door of the polished Ford Prefect Saloon

that Hettie now noticed had been waiting for him all along. The driver closed Mr. Christie's door and seated himself behind the large steering wheel. With a mechanical sputter, the car disappeared into the thrum of the dockyards. Violet raised her ears and unfolded them like two large fans. She released another trumpet call and nudged her forehead into Mr. Wright's chest.

"Easy, lovely," he said softly, patting her side again. During her time at the zoo, Hettie had noted this about Mr. Wright: He often spoke with more kindness to the animals than he did to people. "We're gonna take you home."

Mr. Wright lifted the stick in front of Violet's trunk and guided it forward. Violet stomped her feet against the dock, flurries of dust flying up around her legs. Then she lowered her head and proceeded to follow the curled end of the stick. Her movements were slow and gentle. Hettie walked to the right of Violet while Mr. Wright and Ferris stayed on the left of the elephant.

"Everyone, give Violet some room," said Mr. Wright.

The crowd parted as Mr. Wright led Violet away from the steamship. Ahead, the cranes of Harland & Wolff were visible amid the sprawl of warehouse hangars and buildings now devoted to producing military vessels, aircraft, and tanks at an ever-increasing rate. Before Hettie's father, Thomas, enlisted in the Merchant Navy, he had worked in the assembly shops of Harland & Wolff for more than a decade. One afternoon, seven years ago, when Hettie was thirteen, Thomas had brought her to the shop where he had worked as a joiner. He gave her a tour of a gantry, where one of the larger ships was under construction. What she remembered most vividly of that afternoon was the deafening sound of the countless machines in persistent motion and how the vibrations shook the concrete floor, traveling up into her legs. It felt as if her entire body were rattling along at the same clip as the propulsive machines. Then her father led her into one of the gantries where the colossal skeleton of a hull in progress was obscured by a high tower of scaffolding;

a dozen men stood at varying heights, welding, which sent up sprays of sparks into their faces.

Violet whistled, the high-pitched sound returning Hettie to the important task in front of her. She positioned herself behind Ferris, to the left of the elephant, with the buckets clutched in both hands. Violet's forehead was flecked with pale spots, like a scattering of petals. A fine coat of dust veiled the bony curve of her broad back. Whiskers peppered her chin. She swung her trunk like the needle of a metronome.

"People, let this girl through," Mr. Wright said in a booming voice.

The crowd stepped aside, creating a wider path for Violet as she walked by. Mr. Wright directed her along the Sydenham Road, which intersected the dockyards and munitions and shipbuilding factories. Clouds of smoke spilled from the redbrick chimney stacks. A young boy pushed a wooden handcart piled with onions, eggs, vegetables, and burlap bags of rice and flour, and three dockworkers hauled oversize pieces of lumber. A half dozen Royal Navy officers, clad in their distinctive mess dress uniforms and dazzlingly white waistcoats, paused to take in the curiosity of Violet and the small parade that followed her. Hettie felt the cold, briny air flush her cheeks.

Together they crossed over the Queen's Bridge. The morning sun brightened, creating a carpet of reflections on the river's uneven waters. As the procession neared the middle of the bridge, Violet veered toward the right; then the elephant lowered her head and trotted into a knot of pedestrians heading in the opposite direction.

"Oh, Mummy," cried a young girl.

The mother whisked the child up into her arms and stepped out of Violet's path.

"Don't let him bite me," said the girl, tears trailing down her cheeks.

The mother glared at Mr. Wright who blew into the brass whistle that hung around his neck.

"Ferris! Hettie!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

Hettie dropped the buckets onto the bridge, ran to Violet's side,

and pushed her foreleg with both hands. Her skin was rubbery and rough to the touch, and she smelled of manure and rotten eggs. Hettie shoved the elephant with all the weight and strength that she could summon. Ferris positioned himself near the elephant's rear, pressing against her hind leg. Hettie could see the sinewy bulge in Ferris's forearms as he attempted to guide Violet toward the middle of the bridge.

"Come on, Hettie," he said, his breath ragged. "Help me."

Violet trumpeted, and Hettie felt the vibrations of her call through her fingertips, up the length of her arms, and into the center of her chest. Hettie pushed harder against Violet. The elephant's acrid smell made her feel momentarily nauseated and weak. Hettie gathered herself—and pushed again.

"Violet," Mr. Wright said in a calm voice. "We're crossing the bridge, not jumping off of it."

The elephant stretched her trunk over the bridge's railing, and for a moment Hettie was nervous that Violet would somehow step over it and plunge into the strong currents below. She leaned farther into the elephant. The flash of a photographer's camera blinded Hettie. Sweat collected along her hairline.

"Will you bloody stop it," she whispered.

"Come on, Hettie," Ferris yelled again. "One, two, three."

Hettie closed her eyes tight and heaved the entire mass of her body against Violet's. She was tall for a young woman, five foot seven, and slender and long-legged, like her sister. Hettie was even a little taller than Ferris, but she wasn't muscular and compact like him. Hettie pushed with more force, and Violet trumpeted loudly again, but she didn't budge. The salty air stung Hettie's eyes. She thought of her father and what he'd say: *You hear me. Give it all ya got, girl*. Suddenly the elephant turned away from the railing and trotted toward the center of the bridge.

"Excellent, Miss Quin and Mr. Poole," Mr. Wright said. "Brilliant, my friends."

He waved the stick in front of Violet's eyes and she followed him across the bridge, her trunk swinging like a velvet rope.

"Miss Quin, the buckets," Mr. Wright barked. "Don't forget the buckets."

Hettie turned to see that the buckets had rolled across the wide expanse of the bridge, carrots spilling over the rims. Pedestrians kicked them farther to the side, sending the bundles into the river. Hettie ran to the railing and spotted several carrots floating, like miniature buoys, on the metallic-gray surface. Anxiety pinched her chest. She grabbed the buckets and caught up with Mr. Wright, Ferris, and Violet, who were now walking along Oxford Street, passing the familiar pumping station that sat on the banks of the river Lagan. Hettie marched right behind them, keeping her attention on Violet and her swaying tail.

At the northern end of Oxford Street, they walked diagonally across the bustling square that fronted the Customs House. Near the stairs of the imposing Victorian building, two men, dressed in dark suits and wool scarves, stood on short wooden boxes and debated the prospects of a German invasion: One fervently supported the war against the Fascists and proclaimed Churchill as "our great leader"; the other man, who had an unruly beard, declared that he would welcome the Nazi troops with open arms, that they would drive the British out of Ireland for good and dump the Unionist junta out of Stormont. During the last few years, Hettie had heard many versions of this argument from her father and others. It was challenging to follow all the different opinions except that it was clear no one could agree about what might happen.

"The working-class people of Belfast would be better off if the Germans came. We have nothing to lose," the man with the beard yelled. "The Germans would end discrimination, give us justice. Get rid of the Brits and unite Ireland."

The speaker's cheeks turned roseate. His forehead glistened.

"This war is against the Germans and no one else," the other man

yelled, shaking his fist in the air. "They'll enslave us all. Will you please listen to me! We are ill-prepared."

Strangers booed, hissed, and cheered. As soon as the men noticed Violet, though, they suspended their arguments, united for once in their astonishment at the unusual spectacle of an elephant lumbering across the square. Ahead, on the other side, a band of musicians was performing a folk tune at the foot of the Albert Clock on Victoria Street, the crowned tower leaning vaguely to the left on its sandstone foundation. The whimsical notes of a melodeon, an upright piano, a fiddle, and a double bass stitched the air. A young couple swirled in circles among the parting strangers, their feet moving in synchronized motion on the cobblestoned walkway. Pedestrians clapped along with the music. A ship's horn sounded in the distance. The smells of tobacco, leather, and petrol drifted through the air, scents that reminded Hettie of home and her father.

"Follow me," Mr. Wright repeated to Violet. "Follow me."

Near the end of Victoria Street, Hettie caught sight of the manicured greens and familiar domes of city hall pressed against the dull pewter sky. Usually when she traveled through this neighborhood Hettie was on her father's bike and rarely took in the sights and sounds of street life, but walking along with Violet meant noticing details that often rushed past her in a blur. As they moved farther up the avenue, they passed a congregation of silver-haired men throwing horseshoes on a parcel of dead grass next to a pub. Next, they traversed North Street, which gave way to the Shankill Road, which was bordered with the linen mills that, along with the shipyards across the river, employed many of the men of the predominantly working-class Loyalist neighborhood.

"Steady," Mr. Wright said to Violet as they started up the gradual incline of the Antrim Road. "Steady there, me girl."

Strangers opened the doors and windows of their houses and flats, and gazed down at Violet's slow locomotion. Random sticks and

branches snapped under her weight. Some people waved; others stared on in silent awe.

"Miss Quin, the carrots," Mr. Wright said.

Her palms grew clammy.

"They fell into the river, sir," Hettie said.

"Here, Mr. Wright," Ferris said, handing him two carrots. "I have a few."

Hettie glanced over at Ferris, who tipped his cap in her direction.

"Thank you, Ferris," Mr. Wright said, not looking at Hettie.

She forced a smile. As she often did, Hettie felt a complicated mix of gratitude, betrayal, and jealousy toward Ferris. He was always prepared for Mr. Wright's every demand or request, but his diligence and readiness often left Hettie feeling flat-footed and ineffectual—and that Mr. Wright would never see her for who she truly was. She pushed these thoughts away, though; she couldn't afford these distractions this morning.

"Come on, Violet," Mr. Wright said in a gentle voice again.

As they traveled farther up the Antrim Road, Hettie relaxed into her stride. The buildings became less dense, with many of the homes hidden behind walls or wrought-iron fences. A mother shelled peas into a bucket on a stoop. She looked up from the repetitive movement of her hands and smiled at the unexpected marvel of Violet. Schoolgirls played a game of hopscotch on the white-chalk squares drawn on the pavement and sang rounds of "Three Blind Mice": *See how they run. See how they run.* The refrains overlapped one other until they saw Violet and paused their song, openmouthed with amazement and glee. Up ahead, a police officer stood at the next intersection. As soon as he spotted Violet, he blew into his whistle—and the elephant started to run.

"Violet," Mr. Wright yelled. "Violet!"

The elephant ran up the Cliftonville Road and then toward the storefront of a greengrocer, and Mr. Wright, Ferris, and Hettie dashed

after her. Modest pyramid-shaped piles of cabbages, potatoes, and turnips were arranged on either side of the doorway. Violet trotted up to the vegetables, looped her trunk around one of the turnips, and lifted it into her mouth. Then another. The rest of the vegetables tumbled onto the street, like a stampede of lawn bowls. The police officer blew his whistle again, and the grocer stepped outside his store. His complexion paled.

"What on—" he exclaimed.

Hettie tried to shove Violet away from the produce, but the animal merely swatted her tail into Hettie's face. Then Violet dropped several piles of manure onto the cobblestones. The pungent aroma made Hettie feel queasy. She took a deep breath and tried again, and Violet reared into her, kicking her squarely in the thigh. The elephant's sheer strength pushed her backward into the street as if she weighed absolutely nothing. Pebbles and dirt pressed into her palms. A cold shudder moved through her system. Heat seared her thigh.

Hettie closed her eyes for a second. Starbursts erupted against the dark theater of her eyelids. Violet reared her hind leg again and Hettie rolled out of the way. If she hadn't, the elephant would have stepped on her. The grocer yelled at Mr. Wright, who was on his hands and knees, picking up an armful of potatoes. Hettie held on to her thigh with both hands. The ache in her leg radiated like a beam of a light. Ferris picked up the curled stick and attempted to distract Violet from the bundle of carrots that she now snapped into her soft pink mouth.

"Come on, Violet," Ferris said. "Let's go home."

The elephant's gaze softened and she stepped away from the storefront. Her feet crushed several beets, carrots, and turnips that had tumbled onto the street, the smashed vegetables looking something like a child's finger painting. Hettie stood up gingerly, relieved to find that she still could.

"Brilliant job, Ferris. Take Violet to Bellevue," Mr. Wright said. "Hettie, find a shovel. Clean this mess up!"

Hettie felt her cheeks redden. She shook out her hands as the putrid smell of manure filled her nostrils. Mr. Wright disappeared inside the store and returned with a shovel. He handed it to her without saying a word. Resigned, Hettie scooped up the elephant's manure and deposited it into a trash bin. In vain, she attempted to spit out the foul taste that was forming in her mouth from the persistent smell. Inside the store, she noticed Mr. Wright trying to calm the owner down. The man gesticulated wildly toward the door.

"That elephant," he yelled. "He destroyed my precious produce."

Mr. Wright took out his spiral notebook and began to take notes. He glanced up at Hettie and then nodded his head, indicating that she should go ahead. She ran to catch up with Ferris and Violet as the pair continued north on the Antrim Road in the direction of the zoo. Her thigh ached and throbbed, but she knew that she needed to keep up with Ferris and Violet, or Mr. Wright might use this as a reason to fire her. After all, if she couldn't do more than shovel shit, what good was she?

"Hettie," Ferris said with a smile. "I thought I lost you. Where's Mr. Wright?"

"Still talking to the owner of the shop," Hettie said, struggling for breath. "That man is not pleased."

"He should be honored that Violet made an appearance at his store during her very first day in Belfast."

Hettie gave a laugh, and Ferris smiled. Hettie quickly realized that it had been a long time since she'd laughed. The past three months had been dulled by the regular visits from extended family, friends, neighbors, and church members. The days and weeks had blurred into each other, and a silent grief seemed to shape most of Hettie's waking hours. With each condolence visit, Hettie sat quietly with her hands folded in the pleats of her woolen skirt, listening to her mother and the other women as their conversation migrated from recipes for fish pie to how challenging it was to manage with the rationing to Mrs. Fitzsimmons's daughter and how she had recently given birth to twins before circling

back to the sudden loss of Anna. How much she had accomplished during her brief life—a brilliant student of modern and classical languages, a talented tennis player and winner of many local tournaments, and later a wife and a mother. Even a few months after her sister's death, it still felt baffling and sad to Hettie that Anna wasn't any of these things now; she was merely a memory, an ephemeral apparition that came and went at unexpected moments, both when Hettie was awake and asleep. That morning, Hettie kept expecting to spot Anna in the crowd, calling out her name and releasing a sharp whistle with two fingers pressed against her bottom lip, just how Thomas had taught them when they were children.

"Look, Mama," a young boy said, pointing toward Violet and pulling Hettie out of her reverie.

Mr. Wright appeared at their side, sweat streaking his rosy cheeks.

"I convinced the man not to press charges," explained Mr. Wright, wiping his white linen handkerchief against his forehead. "I'll find a way to cover the damages. I'll bet you that he forgets the whole thing by the end of the day. Once he gets a few pints in him, it will be a good story that he'll be telling his chums at the pub."

"He didn't seem like a laughing sort of fella," Hettie said.

"We don't want Mr. Christie to find out about this," Mr. Wright said, glancing over at Ferris and ignoring Hettie entirely. "He wouldn't like to hear that one of his animals is running wild on the streets of Belfast."

"Yes, sir," Ferris said as he guided Violet up the winding street.

Within thirty minutes, they were more than halfway up the Antrim Road. The broken views of the river Lagan and the docks were visible through the overlapping rooftops of the rows of houses. Around the bend, there was the silhouette of the Cavehill with its familiar hump along its forested ridge, looking like the crooked nose of a sleeping man.

Hettie was relieved when the raised letters of BELLEVUE appeared

around a corner, stretched across the face of the low concrete wall. They had finally arrived at the zoo. A dozen employees—young and middle-aged men dressed in dull green coveralls and caps—were assembled there. Still wearing his dapper top hat, white gloves, and yellow scarf, Mr. Christie stood at the foot of the grand staircase, a series of fifty steps that led into the heart of the zoo.

"Welcome, Violet," Mr. Christie said, removing his hat and tipping it in the elephant's direction. The small crowd of onlookers snickered.

"I'll take her through the rear entrance," said Mr. Wright.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Christie said, replacing his hat. "Of course."

Violet released another nasally trumpet call. A large flock of songbirds lifted up from the autumnal treetops, the fast beats of their wings sounding like a collective whisper in the morning breeze.

"I hope you enjoy your new home at Bellevue," Mr. Christie said to Violet as he rubbed her speckled forehead. "We are happy to have you here."

The zoo staff gave a polite round of applause as Mr. Wright guided Violet onto the narrow dirt path that traversed the hillside to the zoo's rear entrance. Ferris and Hettie followed. Mr. Wright unlatched the rear gate and together they walked in the direction of the Elephant House. Bellevue had already been open for a few hours, and a handful of visitors—mostly mothers with young children—lingered on the pavements. A volley of shrieks rose up from the monkey enclosure. A dense cluster of pale pink flamingos stood along the border of the lily pond. Up ahead, Hettie saw Wallace the lion stretching his forelegs out and arching his back. Wallace yawned, his tongue lolling from his mouth like a soft pink ribbon. His majestic head swayed with each step he took across the sandy ground. On the far side of the enclosure, Victoria, the lioness, slept along with her two cubs in the shifting shadows.

Farther down the path, Rajan, the elderly bull elephant, and Maggie, a ten-year-old elephant, stood like watchful guards near the edge of the giraffe exhibition, where the pair had been moved a few days

ago. Rajan swung his long trunk high in the air and released a rolling roar. Two of the giraffes poked up their necks, stiff as pipe cleaners, above the trimmed hedges. Since Hettie had started working at the zoo six months ago, Rajan had always been her favorite: He maintained a formidable presence as the largest mammal of the zoo. A sort of king of Bellevue, with all the other animals bowing to him. Rajan trumpeted another cry and this time Maggie joined in his bellowing refrain. Violet flicked her ears up like a pair of small sails.

"What a darling," said Helen McAlister, one of the women who worked at the ticket kiosk. "She's a beauty."

Eliza Crowley, a young woman about Hettie's age who worked in the canteen, stood next to Helen. Eliza wore a soiled apron and her shirtsleeves were pushed up to her bony elbows. Her auburn hair was tied back with a red paisley bandanna, looking like a wild spray of flames. She had a narrow nose and pointy chin.

"Where's she going to sleep?" Eliza asked.

"Violet is going to live alone for now," Mr. Wright said, lifting the stick a little higher, "until she gets used to her new life here at Bellevue."

Ferris had already explained to Hettie this temporary arrangement: Violet's home was going to be in the Elephant House, a simple twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot structure, with a fenced-in yard and a three-foot empty moat surrounding its enclosure. Rajan and Maggie would reside with the giraffes until Mr. Wright thought it was prudent to bring the animals together. He said it could take up to a year before this might happen, that one had to be careful about timing, or the elephants might not get along and end up attacking each other.

"Won't she get lonely?" Eliza asked.

"Violet will have lots of visitors," Mr. Wright said. "I assure you, Miss Crowley, she'll never be lonely at Bellevue." He unlatched the gate to the Elephant House. "Here you go, Violet."

Violet lumbered through and Mr. Wright followed her, securing the gate behind him. Ferris and Hettie looked on, completely absorbed

in Violet until a sound at Hettie's elbow startled her. Hettie spun round and saw that Eliza was still standing next to her, also gazing at the elephant.

During her time at the zoo, Hettie had exchanged a few monosyllabic greetings with Eliza—and not much else. She had heard from one of the other zookeepers that Eliza had left school at age fourteen because her family needed her to work to keep her younger sisters and brothers fed. Hettie glanced at Eliza for a second and noticed that dirt smudged her pale forehead. Freckles sprayed across the thin bridge of her nose. Eliza popped a pear drop into her mouth.

"Bloody hell," Ferris said, his eyes widening. "Where'd you get that?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, Ferris Poole," Eliza said. "Want one?"

"Of course I want one."

Eliza reached into her pocket and tossed a boiled sweet to Ferris and then another one to Hettie. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten a pear drop. The fruity flavor burst in her mouth. It tasted like the sun and the ocean at once. With the tip of her tongue, Hettie tucked the sweet into the warm pocket of her cheek.

"Thanks, Eliza," Ferris said.

"My brother—"

"That's all right," Ferris said, winking at Eliza. "I'd rather not know."

Eliza smiled a sly smile. The pale yellow of the boiled sweet stained the tight corners of her mouth.

"Back to work, everyone," Mr. Wright said. "We have a zoo to run here."

"See you, girls," Ferris said, tipping his cap. "Thanks again, Eliza."

"He's a handsome fella, don't you think," Eliza said to Hettie as they watched him walk away.

It was the first time Eliza had ever spoken directly to her.

"He's all right, I guess," Hettie said, sucking on the pear drop.

"He likes you, you know."

Hettie defiantly crossed her arms over her chest.

"Why do you think Mr. Wright hired you," Eliza said sharply. "Ferris wouldn't quit asking him. He wouldn't give up."

Despite the delightful taste of the sweet, Hettie wanted to spit it out onto the dusty ground before Eliza's feet. She felt flattered by the notion of Ferris's potential affections, but wanted to believe that Mr. Wright had hired her based on her own merits and promise. Despite not having a significant amount of experience with large animals, she had groomed and fed her uncle's farm animals—the goats, pigs, chickens, and horses. Ever since she could remember, Hettie had preferred animals to people. They were always happy to see her, grateful to be fed and given some attention, whenever Hettie made her weekly visits. The life at her uncle's farm provided a reprieve from her own household, which had revolved around her sister, all her success and brightness. Violet whinnied and lifted her trunk into the air.

"You're the lucky one, you know, being the only female zookeeper," Eliza continued. "I'm stuck washing dishes in the canteen. At least I can still say that I work at the zoo. Men like that, don't you think?"

"It's not something I've considered," Hettie said loftily, even though she had, on more than one occasion since being hired part-time by Mr. Wright. Her fictional conversations with young men always went better when she mentioned her responsibilities for and care of her animal charges. The young man would pepper her with questions and compliments, marveling at how unusual it was for a woman to be a zookeeper, how most girls worked in offices as secretaries or typists, longing to get married, or didn't work at all. In her mind, her future boyfriend frequently visited her at the zoo, told his friends about her, and around Belfast, she would become known as the zookeeper at Bellevue rather than merely Anna Quin's younger sister.

"If I were you, I'd go on a date with dear Ferris," Eliza said. "If you let him touch your private place, I bet he could get you the job of taking care of that elephant."

Hettie spluttered and coughed. Gray spots flickered along the margins of her vision. The ground tipped slightly and then snapped back.

"I'm just telling you how it is," Eliza said. "You need to apply your ambition in the right way. That's the only way you're going to get ahead."

Hettie took the pear drop out of her mouth, holding it between her finger and thumb. Suddenly it no longer tasted sweet.

"I'll take that if you don't want it."

Wordlessly, Hettie handed the sweet to Eliza.

"Thank you very much," Eliza said, popping it into her own mouth.

As Eliza walked away, Hettie clenched her damp fists. What did Eliza know about Ferris? And what did she know about Mr. Wright? Hettie noticed that her shoulders were scrunched up and tried to release them. The pain in her thigh pulsed again. Violet paced across the yard.

"Is there something I can help you with, Miss Quin?" Mr. Wright asked, offering a fistful of hay to Violet.

"No, sir."

"Well, then, attend to your morning assignments, please."

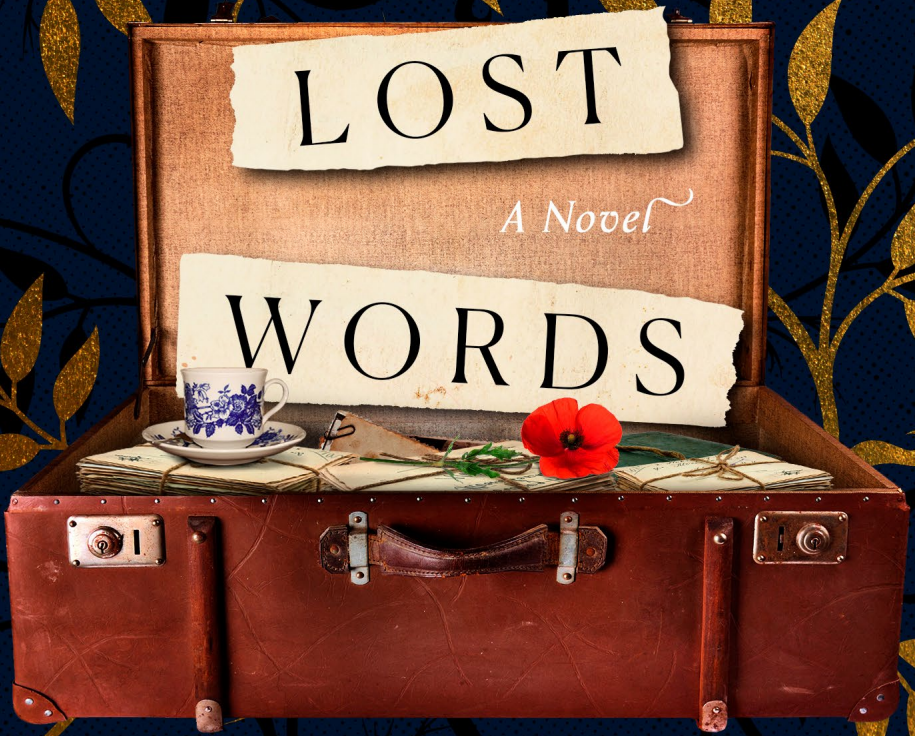
"Yes, sir. I'm going, sir."

Hettie headed toward the aviary where she would fill the assorted feeders with seed and refresh the water troughs for the finches, thrushes, parrots, and macaws. Before she turned onto the pathway, she glanced back at Violet one more time: The elephant was now lying down, her gray legs folded underneath the furrows of her body. Mr. Wright carried a bucket of water in one hand and a leafy bundle of celery in the other. Violet lifted her head as Mr. Wright walked toward her. He broke off a stalk of celery and the elephant raised her trunk, gingerly curling it around the pale green stick. Mr. Wright looked up again.

"Miss Quin," he said. "Have you suddenly become deaf? Return to your work."

THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS

A Novel



PIP WILLIAMS

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Prologue | *February 1886*

Before the lost word, there was another. It arrived at the Scriptorium in a second-hand envelope, the old address crossed out and *Dr. Murray, Sunnyside, Oxford,* written in its place.

It was Da's job to open the post and mine to sit on his lap, like a queen on her throne, and help him ease each word out of its folded cradle. He'd tell me what pile to put it on and sometimes he'd pause, cover my hand with his, and guide my finger up and down and around the letters, sounding them into my ear. He'd say the word, and I would echo it, then he'd tell me what it meant.

This word was written on a scrap of brown paper, its edges rough where it had been torn to match Dr. Murray's preferred dimensions. Da paused, and I readied myself to learn it. But his hand didn't cover mine, and when I turned to hurry him, the look on his face made me stop; as close as we were, he looked far away.

I turned back to the word and tried to understand. Without his hand to guide me, I traced each letter.

"What does it say?" I asked.

"*Lily,*" he said.

"Like Mamma?"

"Like Mamma."

"Does that mean she'll be in the Dictionary?"

"In a way, yes."

"Will we all be in the Dictionary?"

"No."

"Why?"

I felt myself rise and fall on the movement of his breath.

"A name must mean something to be in the Dictionary."

I looked at the word again. "Was Mamma like a flower?" I asked.

Da nodded. "The most beautiful flower."

He picked up the word and read the sentence beneath it. Then he

turned it over, looking for more. "It's incomplete," he said. But he read it again, his eyes flicking back and forth as if he might find what was missing. He put the word down on the smallest pile.

Da pushed his chair back from the sorting table. I climbed off his lap and readied myself to hold the first pile of slips. This was another job I could help with, and I loved to see each word find its place among the pigeon-holes. He picked up the smallest pile, and I tried to guess where Mamma would go. "Not too high and not too low," I sang to myself. But instead of putting the words in my hand, Da took three long steps towards the fire grate and threw them into the flames.

There were three slips. When they left his hand, each was danced by the draft of heat to a different resting place. Before it had even landed, I saw *lily* begin to curl.

I heard myself scream as I ran towards the grate. I heard Da bellow my name. The slip was writhing.

I reached in to rescue it, even as the brown paper charred and the letters written on it turned to shadows. I thought I might hold it like an oak leaf, faded and winter-crisp, but when I wrapped my fingers around the word, it shattered.

I might have stayed in that moment forever, but Da yanked me away with a force that winded. He ran with me out of the Scriptorium and plunged my hand into the snow. His face was ashen, so I told him it didn't hurt, but when I unfurled my hand, the blackened shards of the word were stuck to my melted skin.

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Some words are more important than others—I learned this, growing up in the Scriptorium. But it took me a long time to understand why.

May 1887

Scriptorium. It sounds as if it might have been a grand building, where the lightest footstep would echo between marble floor and gilded dome. But it was just a shed, in the back garden of a house in Oxford.

Instead of storing shovels and rakes, the shed stored words. Every word in the English language was written on a slip of paper the size of a postcard. Volunteers posted them from all over the world, and they were kept in bundles in the hundreds of pigeon-holes that lined the shed walls. Dr. Murray was the one who named it the Scriptorium—he must have thought it an indignity for the English language to be stored in a garden shed—but everyone who worked there called it the Scrippy. Everyone but me. I liked the feel of *Scriptorium* as it moved around my mouth and landed softly between my lips. It took me a long time to learn to say it, and when I finally did nothing else would do.

Da once helped me search the pigeon-holes for *scriptorium*. We found five slips with examples of how the word had been used, each quotation dating back little more than a hundred years. All of them were more or less the same, and none of them referred to a shed in the back garden of a house in Oxford. A scriptorium, the slips told me, was a writing room in a monastery.

But I understood why Dr. Murray had chosen it. He and his assistants were a little like monks, and when I was five it was easy to imagine the Dictionary as their holy book. When Dr. Murray told me it would take a lifetime to compile all the words, I wondered whose. His hair was already as grey as ash, and they were only halfway through B.

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Da and Dr. Murray had been teachers together in Scotland long before there was a scriptorium. And because they were friends, and because I had no mother to care for me, and because Da was one of Dr. Murray's most trusted lexicographers, everyone turned a blind eye when I was in the Scriptorium.

The Scriptorium felt magical, like everything that ever was and ever could be had been stored within its walls. Books were piled on every surface. Old dictionaries, histories and tales from long ago filled the shelves that separated one desk from another, or created a nook for a chair. Pigeon-holes rose from the floor to the ceiling. They were crammed full of slips, and Da once said that if I read every one, I'd understand the meaning of everything.

In the middle of it all was the sorting table. Da sat at one end, and three assistants could fit along either side. At the other end was Dr. Murray's high desk, facing all the words and all the men who helped him define them.

We always arrived before the other lexicographers, and for that little while I would have Da and the words all to myself. I'd sit on Da's lap at the sorting table and help him sort the slips. Whenever we came across a word I didn't know, he would read the quotation it came with and help me work out what it meant. If I asked the right questions, he would try to find the book the quotation came from and read me more. It was like a treasure hunt, and sometimes I found gold.

"*This boy had been a scatter-brained scapegrace from his birth.*" Da read the quotation from a slip he had just pulled out of an envelope.

"Am I a scatter-brained scapegrace?" I asked.

"Sometimes," Da said, tickling me.

Then I asked who the boy was, and Da showed me where it was written at the top of the slip.

"*Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp,*" he read.

When the other assistants arrived I slipped under the sorting table.

"Be quiet as a mouse and stay out of the way," Da said.

It was easy to stay hidden.

At the end of the day I sat on Da's lap by the warmth of the grate and we read "Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp." It was an old

story, Da said. About a boy from China. When I asked if there were others, he said there were a thousand more. The story was like nothing I had heard, nowhere I had been, and no one I knew of. I looked around the Scriptorium and imagined it as a genie's lamp. It was so ordinary on the outside, but on the inside full of wonder. And some things weren't always what they seemed.

The next day, after helping with the slips, I pestered Da for another story. In my enthusiasm I forgot to be as quiet as a mouse; I was getting in his way.

"A scapegrace will not be allowed to stay," Da warned, and I imagined being banished to Ala-ed-Din's cave. I spent the rest of the day beneath the sorting table, where a little bit of treasure found me.

It was a word, and it slipped off the end of the table. When it lands, I thought, I'll rescue it, and hand it to Dr. Murray myself.

I watched it. For a thousand moments I watched it ride some unseen current of air. I expected it to land on the unswept floor, but it didn't. It glided like a bird, almost landing, then rose up to somersault as if bidden by a genie. I never imagined that it might land in my lap, that it could possibly travel so far. But it did.

The word sat in the folds of my dress like a bright thing fallen from heaven. I dared not touch it. It was only with Da that I was allowed to hold the words. I thought to call out to him, but something caught my tongue. I sat with the word for a long time, wanting to touch it, but not. What word? I wondered. Whose? No one bent down to claim it.

After a long while I scooped the word up, careful not to crush its silvery wings, and brought it close to my face. It was difficult to read in the gloom of my hiding spot. I shuffled along to where a curtain of sparkling dust hung between two chairs.

I held the word up to the light. Black ink on white paper. Eight letters; the first, a butterfly B. I moved my mouth around the rest as Da had taught me: O for orange, N for naughty, D for dog, M for Murray, A for apple, I for ink, D for dog, again. I sounded them out in a whisper. The first part was easy: *bond*. The second part took a little longer, but then I remembered how the A and I went together. *Maid*.

The word was *bondmaid*. Below it were other words that ran to-

gether like a tangle of thread. I couldn't tell if they made up a quotation sent in by a volunteer or a definition written by one of Dr. Murray's assistants. Da said that all the hours he spent in the Scriptorium were to make sense of the words sent in by volunteers, so that those words could be defined in the Dictionary. It was important, and it meant I would get a schooling and three hot meals and grow up to be a fine young lady. The words, he said, were for me.

"Will they all get defined?" I once asked.

"Some will be left out," Da said.

"Why?"

He paused. "They're just not solid enough." I frowned, and he said, "Not enough people have written them down."

"What happens to the words that are left out?"

"They go back in the pigeon-holes. If there isn't enough information about them, they're discarded."

"But they might be forgotten if they're not in the Dictionary."

He'd tilted his head to one side and looked at me, as if I'd said something important. "Yes, they might."

I knew what happened when a word was discarded. I folded *bondmaid* carefully and put it in the pocket of my pinny.

A moment later, Da's face appeared under the sorting table. "Run along now, Esme. Lizzie's waiting for you."

I peered between all the legs—chairs', table's, men's—and saw the Murrays' young maid standing beyond the open door, her pinafore tied tight around her waist, too much fabric above and too much fabric below. She was still growing into it, she told me, but from under the sorting table she reminded me of someone playing at dress up. I crawled between the pairs of legs and scampered out to her.

"Next time you should come in and find me; it would be more fun," I said, when I got to Lizzie.

"It's not me place." She took my hand and walked me to the shade of the ash tree.

"Where is your place?"

She frowned, then shrugged. "The room at the top of the stairs, I s'pose. The kitchen when I'm helping Mrs. Ballard, but definitely not when I ain't. St. Mary Magdalen on a Sunday."

"Is that all?"

"The garden, when I'm caring for you—so we don't get under Mrs. B's feet. And more and more the Covered Market, 'cos of her cranky knees."

"Has Sunnyside always been your place?" I asked.

"Not always." She looked down at me, and I wondered where her smile had gone.

"Where did it used to be?"

She hesitated. "With me ma and all our littluns."

"What are littluns?"

"Children."

"Like me?"

"Like you, Essymay."

"Are they dead?"

"Just me ma. The littluns was taken away, I don't know where. They was too young for service."

"What's *service*?"

"Will you never stop asking questions?" Lizzie picked me up under the arms and swung me round and round until we were both so dizzy we collapsed on the grass.

"Where's my place?" I asked as the dizziness faded.

"The Scrippy, I guess, with your father. The garden, my room, and the kitchen stool."

"My house?"

"'Course your house, though you seem to spend more time here than there."

"I don't have a Sunday place like you do," I said.

Lizzie frowned. "Yes, you do, St. Barnabas church."

"We only go sometimes. When we do, Da brings a book. He holds it in front of the hymns and reads instead of singing." I laughed, thinking of Da's mouth opening and closing in imitation of the congregation, but not a sound coming out.

"That's nothing to laugh at, Essymay." Lizzie held her hand against the crucifix I knew rested beneath her clothes. I worried she would think badly of Da.

"It's because Lily died," I said.

Lizzie's frown turned sad, which wasn't what I wanted either.

"But he says I should make up my own mind. About God and Heaven. That's why we go to church." Her face relaxed, and I decided to get back to an easier conversation. "My best place is Sunnyside," I said. "In the Scriptorium. Then in your room, then in the kitchen when Mrs. Ballard is baking, especially when she's baking spotted scones."

"You're a funny little thing, Essymay—they're called fruit scones; the spots are raisins."

Da said Lizzie was no more than a child herself. When he was talking to her, I could see it. She stood as still as she could, holding her hands so they wouldn't fidget, and nodding at everything with barely a word. She must have been scared of him, I thought, the way I was scared of Dr. Murray. But when Da was gone, she'd look at me sideways and wink.

As we lay on the grass with the world spinning above our heads, she suddenly leaned over and pulled a flower from behind my ear. Like a magician.

"I have a secret," I told her.

"And what would that be, me little cabbage?"

"I can't tell you here. It might blow away."

We tip-toed through the kitchen towards the narrow stairs that led to Lizzie's room. Mrs. Ballard was bent over a flour bin in the pantry and all I saw of her was her very large behind, draped in folds of navy gingham. If she saw us, she'd find something for Lizzie to do and my secret would have to wait. I put a finger to my lips but a giggle rose in my throat. Lizzie saw it coming, so she scooped me into her bony arms and trotted up the stairs.

The room was cold. Lizzie took the coverlet off her bed and laid it on the bare floor like a rug. I wondered if there were any Murray children in the room on the other side of Lizzie's wall. It was the nursery, and we sometimes heard little Jowett crying, but not for long. Mrs. Murray would come soon enough, or one of the older children. I tilted my ear towards the wall and heard the baby's waking noises, little sounds that were not quite words. I imagined him opening his eyes and realising he was alone. He whimpered for a while, then

cried. This time it was Hilda who came. When the crying stopped, I recognised the tinkle of her voice. She was thirteen, like Lizzie, and her littlest sisters, Elsie and Rosfrith, were never far behind her. When I sat on the rug with Lizzie, I imagined them all doing the same on the other side of the wall. I wondered what game they might play.

Lizzie and I sat opposite each other, legs crossed, knees just touching. I raised both hands to begin a clapping game, but Lizzie paused at the sight of my funny fingers. They were puckered and pink.

"They don't hurt anymore," I said.

"You sure?"

I nodded, and we began to clap, though she was too soft with my funny fingers to make the right sound.

"So, what's your big secret, Essymay?" she asked.

I'd almost forgotten. I stopped clapping, reached into the pocket of my pinny and pulled out the slip that had landed in my lap earlier that morning.

"What kind of secret is that?" asked Lizzie, taking the slip in her hand and turning it over.

"It's a word, but I can only read this bit." I pointed to *bondmaid*. "Can you read the rest for me?"

She moved a finger across the words, just as I had done. After a while, she handed it back.

"Where did you find it?" she asked.

"It found me," I said. And when I saw that wasn't enough, "One of the assistants threw it away."

"Threw it away, did they?"

"Yes," I said, without looking down, even a little bit. "Some words just don't make sense and they throw them away."

"Well, what will you do with your secret?" Lizzie asked.

I hadn't thought. All I'd wanted was to show it to Lizzie. I knew not to ask Da to keep it safe, and it couldn't stay in my pinny forever.

"Can you keep it for me?" I asked.

"I s'pose I can, if you want me to. Though I don't know what's so special about it."

It was special because it had come to me. It was almost nothing, but not quite. It was small and fragile and it might not mean anything

important, but I needed to keep it from the fire grate. I didn't know how to say any of this to Lizzie, and she didn't insist. Instead, she got to her hands and knees, reached under her bed and pulled out a small wooden trunk.

I watched as she drew a finger through the thin film of dust that covered the scarred top. She wasn't in a hurry to open it.

"What's inside?" I asked.

"Nothing. Everything I came with has gone into that wardrobe."

"Won't you need it to go on journeys?"

"I won't be needing it," she said, and released the latch.

I placed my secret in the bottom of the trunk and sat back on my haunches. It looked small and lonely. I moved it to one side, and then to the other. Finally, I retrieved it and cradled it in both hands.

Lizzie stroked my hair. "You'll have to find more treasures to keep it company."

I stood, held the slip of paper as high as I could above the trunk and let go, then I watched it float down, swaying from side to side until it came to rest in one corner of the trunk.

"This is where it wants to be," I said, bending down to smooth it flat. But it wouldn't flatten. There was a lump under the paper lining that covered the bottom of the trunk. The edge had already lifted, so I peeled it back a little more.

"It's not empty, Lizzie," I said, as the head of a pin revealed itself.

Lizzie leaned over me to see what I was talking about.

"It's a hat pin," she said, reaching down to pick it up. On its head were three small beads, one on top of the other, each a kaleidoscope of colour. Lizzie turned it between her thumb and finger. As it spun, I could see her remembering it. She brought it to her chest, kissed me on the forehead then placed the pin carefully on her bedside table, next to the small photograph of her mother.

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Our walk home to Jericho took longer than it should, because I was small and Da liked to meander while he smoked his pipe. I loved the smell of it.

We crossed the wide Banbury Road and started down St. Margaret's, past tall houses standing in pairs with pretty gardens and trees shading the path. Then I led us on a zigzagging route through narrow streets where the houses were tightly packed, one against the other, just like slips in their pigeon-holes. When we turned into Observatory Street, Da tapped his pipe clean against a wall and put it in his pocket. Then he lifted me onto his shoulders.

"You'll be too big for this soon," he said.

"Will I stop being a littlun when I get too big?"

"Is that what Lizzie calls you?"

"It's one of the things she calls me. She also calls me *cabbage* and *Essymay*."

"*Littlun* I understand, and *Essymay,* but why does she call you *cabbage*?"

Cabbage always came with a cuddle or a kind smile. It made perfect sense, but I couldn't explain why.

Our house was halfway down Observatory Street, just past Adelaide Street. When we got to the corner, I counted out loud: "One, two, three, four, stop right here for our front door."

We had an old brass knocker shaped like a hand. Lily had found it at a bric-a-brac stall in the Covered Market—Da said it had been tarnished and scratched, and there'd been river sand between the fingers, but he'd cleaned it up and attached it to the door on the day they were married. Now, he took his key from his pocket and I leaned down and covered Lily's hand with mine. I knocked it four times.

"No one's home," I said.

"They will be soon." He opened the door and I ducked as he stepped into the hall.

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Da set me down, put his satchel on the sideboard and bent to pick the letters off the floor. I followed him down the hall and into the kitchen and sat at the table while he cooked our dinner. We had an occasional maid come three times a week to cook and clean and wash our clothes, but this wasn't one of her days.

"Will I go into service when I stop being a littlun?"

Da jiggled the pan to turn the sausages then looked across to where I sat at the kitchen table.

"No, you won't."

"Why not?"

He jiggled the sausages again. "It's hard to explain."

I waited. He took a deep breath and the thinking lines between his eyebrows got deeper. "Lizzie is fortunate to be in service, but for you it would be *un*fortunate."

"I don't understand."

"No, I don't suppose you do." He drained the peas and mashed the potatoes, and put them on our plates with the sausages. When he finally sat at the table, he said, "Service means different things to different people, Essy, depending on their position in society."

"Will all the different meanings be in the Dictionary?"

His thinking lines relaxed. "We'll search the pigeon-holes tomorrow, shall we?"

"Would Lily have been able to explain *service*?" I asked.

"Your mother would have had the words to explain the world to you, Essy," Da said. "But without her, we must rely on the Scrippy."

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The next morning, before we sorted the post, Da held me up and let me search the pigeon-holes containing S words.

"Now, let's see what we can find."

Da pointed to a pigeon-hole that was almost too high, but not quite. I pulled out a bundle of slips. *Service* was written on a top-slip, and beneath that: *Multiple senses*. We sat at the sorting table, and Da let me loosen the string that bound the slips. They were separated into four smaller bundles of quotations, each with its own top-slip and a definition suggested by one of Dr. Murray's more trusted volunteers.

"Edith sorted these," Da said, arranging the piles on the sorting table.

"You mean Aunty Ditte?"

"The very same."

"Is she a lexi—, lexiographa, like you?"

"Lexicographer. No. But she is a very learned lady and we are lucky she has taken on the Dictionary as her hobby. There's not a week goes by without a letter from Ditte to Dr. Murray with a word, or copy for the next section."

Not a week went by when we didn't get our own letter from Ditte. When Da read them aloud, they were mostly about me.

"Am I her hobby too?"

"You are her goddaughter, which is much more important than a hobby."

Although Ditte's real name was Edith, when I was very small I struggled to say it. There were other ways to say her name, she'd said, and she let me choose my favourite. In Denmark she would be called Ditte. Ditte is sweeter, I sometimes thought, enjoying the rhyme. I never called her Edith again.

"Now, let's see how Ditte has defined *service,*" Da said.

A lot of the definitions described Lizzie, but none of them explained why *service* might mean something different for her and for me. The last pile we looked at had no top-slip.

"They're duplicates," Da said. He helped me read them.

"What will happen to them?" I asked. But before Da could answer, the Scriptorium door opened and one of the assistants came in, knotting his tie as if he had only just put it on. When he was done it sat crooked, and he forgot to tuck it into his waistcoat.

Mr. Mitchell looked over my shoulder at the piles of slips laid out on the sorting table. A wave of dark hair fell across his face. He smoothed it back but there wasn't enough oil to hold it.

"*Service,*" he said.

"Lizzie's in service," I said.

"So she is."

"But Da says it would be unfortunate for me to be in service."

Mr. Mitchell looked at Da, who shrugged and smiled.

"When you grow up, Esme, I think you could do whatever you wanted to do," Mr. Mitchell said.

"I want to be a lexicographer."

"Well, this is a good start," he said, pointing to all the slips.

Mr. Maling and Mr. Balk came into the Scriptorium, discussing a word they had been arguing about the day before. Then Dr. Murray came in, his black gown billowing. I looked from one man to another and wondered if I could tell how old they were from the length and colour of their beards. Da's and Mr. Mitchell's were the shortest and darkest. Dr. Murray's was turning white and reached all the way to the top button of his waistcoat. Mr. Maling's and Mr. Balk's were somewhere in-between. Now they were all there, it was time for me to disappear. I crawled beneath the sorting table and watched for stray slips. I wanted more than anything for another word to find me. None did, but when Da told me to run along with Lizzie my pockets were not completely empty.

I showed Lizzie the slip. "Another secret," I said.

"Should I be letting you bring secrets out of the Scrippy?"

"Da said this one is a duplicate. There's another one that says exactly the same thing."

"What does it say?"

"That you should be in service and I should do needlepoint until a gentleman wants to marry me."

"Really? It says that?"

"I think so."

"Well, I could teach you needlepoint," Lizzie said.

I thought about it. "No thank you, Lizzie. Mr. Mitchell said I could be a lexicographer."

For the next few mornings, after helping Da with the post, I'd crawl to one end of the sorting table to wait for falling words. But when they fell, they were always quickly retrieved by an assistant. After a few days I forgot to keep an eye out for words, and after a few months I forgot about the trunk under Lizzie's bed.

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