Penguin Random House

Excerpt Sampler

FALL 2015

What Will You Read Next?

Penguin
Random
House

Excerpt Sampler

FALL 2015

What Will You Read Next?

THESE ARE UNCORRECTED PROOFS.
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
YOU CHECK YOUR COPY AGAINST THE FINISHED BOOK.

First published by Random House, Kathy Dawson Books, Riverhead, Crown, and Doubleday divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Seventh Street Books a division of Prometheus Books.

First Printing, 2015

Printed in the United States of America.

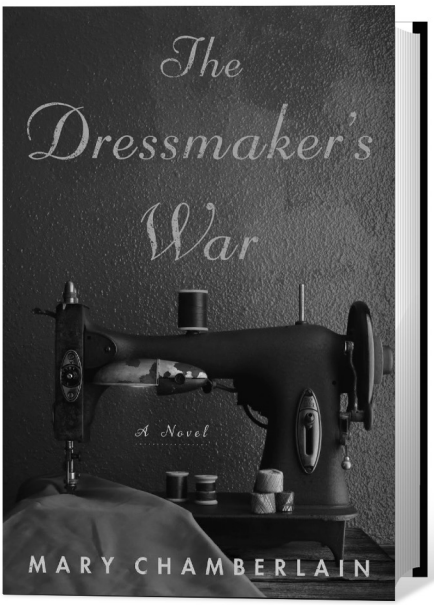
PUBLISHER'S NOTE
The Dressmaker's War, *The Accident Season*, *Fates and Furies*, *The Night Sister*, and *Hollow Man* are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Penguin Random House

What Will You Read Next?

These great new reads are coming soon to your local library!

Be sure to place your holds early for these future bestsellers!



Perfect for readers of **Sarah's Key** *and* **Those Who Save Us.**

London, 1939. Ada Vaughan is a young woman with an unusual skill for dressmaking who dreams of a better life for herself, of leaving behind her working-class roots and opening her own atelier. When she meets Stanislaus von Lieben, a Hungarian aristocrat, that new life seems to arrive. Stanislaus sweeps Ada off her feet and brings her to Paris. But when war breaks out and Stanislaus vanishes, Ada is taken prisoner by the Germans.

Ada does everything she can to survive. But after the war, her past eventually comes to light, with devastating consequences.

Available January 2016

Random House • Hardcover: 9780812997378 • eBook: 9780812997385

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

Random House and the House colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Originally published in the United Kingdom under the title *The Dressmaker of Dachau* by The Borough Press, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2015.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to The Society of Authors for permission to reprint an excerpt from "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes. Reprinted by permission of The Society of Authors as Literary Representative of the Estate of Alfred Noyes.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Chamberlain, Mary.
The dressmaker's war: a novel / Mary Chamberlain.
pages cm
ISBN 978-0-8129-9737-8
eBook ISBN 978-0-8129-9738-5
1. Women dressmakers—Fiction. 2. Women—England—Fiction. 3. Dachau (Concentration camp)—Fiction. 4. Women in war—Fiction. 5. World War, 1939–1945—Fiction. 6. Germany—History—1933–1945—Fiction. I. Title.
PR6103.H356D74 2016
823'.92—dc23 2015008154

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

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Title-page and part-title-page images:
copyright © iStock.com / © dp3010, © ivan_baranov

Book design by Victoria Wong

PROLOGUE

Holloway Prison, February 16, 1948

They had weighed Ada and measured her. She was eight stone three pounds, and five feet six in stockinged feet.

She still had the slender figure of a mannequin, and a mannequin's grace.

The wardress handed her the thick, calico knickers with drawstrings. Ada wound the tapes fast round her thighs and waist, so nothing would leak. They would leave marks on her skin, when they came off. The wardress was biting her lip, putting on a brave face, Ada could see.

Ada removed her glasses and placed them on the table.

"I won't be needing these," she said. "Or these." She handed the notebooks to the wardress.

"Do something with them. I wrote it all down, what really happened in the war. What happened to women, what happened to me. The truth. Nobody wanted to hear."

"Are you ready?" the wardress said.

"No," Ada said. "No."

ONE

London, January 1939

ADA PEERED INTO THE BROKEN MIRROR PROPPED UP ON THE kitchen dresser. Mouth open, tongue to attention, she plucked at her eyebrows with a pair of rusty tweezers. Winced and ouched until only a thin arc was left. She dabbed on the witch hazel, hoped the stinging would fade. Dunked her hair in clean, warm water in the old, cracked butler sink, patted it dry with a towel, and parted it along the left. Eighteen years old, more grown up this way. Middle finger, comb and straighten, index finger, crimp. Three waves down the left, five down the right, five each herringbone down the back, pin curls and a kirby grip tight to her skull, leave it to dry.

Ada was taking her time. She opened her handbag and fished around until she found her powder, rouge, and lipstick. Not too much, in case she looked common, but enough to make her fresh and wholesome like those young girls from the Women's League of Health and Beauty. She'd seen them in Hyde Park in their black drawers and white blouses and knew they practiced on a Saturday afternoon in the playground of Henry Fawcett's. She might think about joining them. It was good to be supple, and slender. She could make the uniform herself. After all, she was a dressmaker now, earned good money.

She rubbed her lips together to spread her lipstick, checked that the waves were holding their grip as her hair dried, picked up the mirror and carried it into the bedroom. The brown houndstooth skirt with the inverted pleats and the cream blouse with the enamel

pin at the neck—that was smart. Good tweed, too, an offcut from Isidore, the tailor in Hanover Square. Just fifteen she was when she'd started there. Gawd, she was green, picking up pins from the floor and sweeping away fabric dustings, plimsolls gray from the chalk and her hand-me-down jacket too long in the arm. Dad said it was a sweatshop, that the fat capitalist who ran it did nothing but exploit her and she should stand up for her rights and organize. But Isidore had opened her eyes. He taught her how fabric lived and breathed, how it had a personality and moods. Silk, he said, was stubborn, lawn sullen. Worsted was tough, flannel lazy. He taught her how to cut the cloth so it didn't pucker and bruise, about biases and selvages. He showed her how to make patterns and where to chalk and tack. He taught her the sewing machine, about yarns and threads, how to fit a newfangled zipper so it lay hidden in the seam and how to buttonhole and hem. *Herringbone, Ada, herringbone.* Women looking like mannequins. It was a world of enchantment. Beautiful hair and glistening gowns. Tailored knickers even. Isidore had shown Ada that world, and she wanted it for herself.

She wasn't there yet. What with Mum demanding a share for her keep and the bus to work and a tea cake in Lyons with the girls on payday, there wasn't much over at the end of the week.

"And don't think you can come into this house and lord it around," Mum raised a stained finger at Ada, knuckles creased like an old worm, "just because you pay your way." Still had to do her share of the dusting and sweeping and, now she was trained up, the family's dressmaking, too.

Ada knew this life of scrimping and nit combs and hand-me-downs was not what she was meant for. She damped her finger and thumb with her tongue, folded down her Bemberg stockings with the fitted toe and heel, and rolled them up, crease by crease, *careful you don't snag,* so the seam sat straight at the back. *Quality* shows. *Appearances* matter. So long as her top clothes looked good, nobody could touch her. Lips pinched, nose in the air, *excuse me.* Airs and

graces, like the best of them. Ada would go far, she knew, be a *somebody* too.

She propped the mirror on top of the mantelpiece and combed her hair so it settled in chestnut waves. She placed her hat, a brown felt pillbox that one of the milliners at work had made for her, on her head, nudging it forward and to the side. She slipped her feet into her new tan court shoes and, lifting the mirror and tilting it downwards, stood back to see the effect. Perfect. *Modish*. Groomed.

Ada Vaughan jumped over the threshold, still damp from the scrubbing and reddening this morning. The morning sky above was thick, chimney pots coughing sooty grouts into the air. The terrace stretched the length of the street, smuts clinging to the yellow stock and to the brown net curtains struggling free from the open windows in the city-hobbled wind. She covered her nose with her hand so the murk from the Thames and the ash from the tallow melts wouldn't fill her nostrils and leave blackened snot on the handkerchiefs she'd made for herself and embroidered in the corner, *AV.*

Clip-clop along Theed Street, front doors open so you could see inside, respectable houses these, clean as a whistle, good address, you had to be a *somebody* to rent here, Mum always said. Somebody, my foot. Mum and Dad wouldn't know a somebody if he clipped them round the ear. Somebodies didn't sell the *Daily Worker* outside Dalton's on a Saturday morning, or thumb their rosaries until their fingers grew calluses. Somebodies didn't scream at each other, or sulk in silence for days on end. If Ada had to choose between her mother and father, it would be her father every time, for all his temper and frustrations. He wasn't waiting for Heaven but salvation in the here and now, one last push and the edifice of prejudice and privilege would crumble and everyone would have the world that Ada yearned for. Her mother's salvation came after death and a lifetime of suffering and bleeding hearts. Sitting in the church on Sunday, she wondered how anyone could make a religion out of misery.

Clip-clop past the fire station and the emergency sandbags stacked

outside. Past the Old Vic, where she'd seen *Twelfth Night* on a free seat when she was eleven years old, entranced by the glossy velvet costumes and the smell of tungsten spotlights and orange peel. She knew, just knew, there was a world enclosed on this stage with its painted-on scenery and artificial lights that was as true and deep as the universe itself. Makeup and make-believe, her heart sang for Malvolio, for he, like her, yearned to be a *somebody*. She kept going, down the London Road, round St. George's Circus, and onto the Borough Road. Dad said there was going to be a war before the year was out, and Mum kept picking up leaflets and reading them out loud: *When you hear the siren, proceed in an orderly fashion . . .*

Ada clip-clopped up to the building and raised her eyes to the letters that ran in black relief along the top. BOROUGH POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE. She fidgeted with her hat, opened and shut her bag, checked her seams were straight, and walked up the stairs. She was sticky under her arms and between her thighs, the clamminess that came from nerves, not the clean damp you got from running.

The door to Room 35 had four glass panels in the top half. Ada peered through. The desks had been pushed to one side, and six women were standing in a semicircle in the middle. Their backs were to the door, and they were looking at someone in the front. Ada couldn't see who. She wiped her palm down the side of her skirt, opened the door, and stepped into the room.

A woman with large bosoms, a pearl necklace, and gray hair rolled in a bun stepped forward from the semicircle and threw open her arms. "And you are?"

Ada swallowed. "Ada Vaughan."

"From the diaphragm," the woman bellowed. "Your name?"

Ada didn't know what she meant. "Ada Vaughan." Her voice crashed against her tongue.

"Are we a mouse?" the woman boomed.

Ada blushed. She felt small, stupid. She turned and walked to the door.

"No, no," the woman cried. "Do come in." Ada was reaching for the doorknob, but the woman put her hand on Ada's. "You've come this far."

The woman's hand was warm and dry, and Ada saw her nails were manicured and painted pink. The woman led her back to the others, positioned her in the center of the semicircle.

"My name is Miss Skinner." Her words sang clear, like a melody, Ada thought, or a crystal dove. "And yours?"

Miss Skinner stood straight, all bosom, though her waist was slender. She poised her head to the side, chin forward.

"Say it clearly." She smiled, nodded. Her face was kindly, after all, even if her voice was strict. "E-nun-ci-ate."

"Ada Vaughan," Ada said, with conviction.

"You may look like a swan," Miss Skinner said, stepping back, "but if you talk like a sparrow, who will take you seriously? Welcome, Miss Vaughan."

Miss Skinner placed her hands round her waist. Ada knew she must be wearing a girdle. No woman her age had a figure like that without support. She breathed in *Mmmmm,* drummed her fingers on the cavity she made beneath her ribs, opened her mouth, *Do re mi fa so.* She held tight to the last note, blasting like a ship's funnel until it left only an echo lingering in the air. Her shoulders relaxed, and she let out the rest of the air with a *whoosh*. It's her bosoms, Ada thought, that's where she must keep the air, blow them up like balloons. No one could breathe in that deep. It wasn't natural.

"Stand straight." Miss Skinner stepped forward. "Chin up, bottom in." She threaded her way through the group, came to Ada, and pushed one hand against the small of her back and with the other lifted Ada's chin up and out.

"Unless we stand upright"—Miss Skinner rolled her shoulders back and adjusted her bosom—"we cannot project." She trilled her *rrr*'s like a Sally Army cymbal. "And if we cannot project," Miss Skinner added, "we cannot pronounce."

She turned to Ada. "Miss Vaughan, why do you wish to learn elocution?"

Ada could feel the heat crawl up her neck and prickle her ears, knew her face was turning red. She opened her mouth, but couldn't say it. Her tongue folded in a pleat. *I want to be a somebody*. Miss Skinner nodded anyway. She'd seen the likes of Ada before. Ambitious.

– – – – –

"I THOUGHT YOU were one of the customers," the Honorable Mrs. Buckley had said, "when I saw you standing there, looking so smart." Taken for one of the customers. *Imagine*. She'd been only eighteen years old when she started there last September. Ada had learned fast.

The Honorable Mrs. Buckley traded under the name Madame Duchamps. Square-hipped and tall, with painted nails and quiet earrings, she dazzled with her talk of *couture* and *atelier* and *Paris, pah!* She would flip through the pages of *Vogue* and conjure ball gowns and cocktail dresses from bolts of silk and chenille, which she draped and pinned round slender debutantes and their portly chaperones.

Ada had learned her trade from Isidore and her nerve from Mrs. B., as the other girls all called her. Where Isidore had been wise and kind and funny, *genuine,* Mrs. B. was crafted through artifice. Ada was sure the Honorable Mrs. Buckley was neither an Hon. nor a Mrs., and her complexion was as false as her name, but that didn't stop Mrs. B. What she didn't know about the female form and the lie of a fabric was not worth writing on a postage stamp.

Mrs. B. was a step up from Isidore. *Paris.* That was the city Ada aimed to conquer. She'd call her house Vaughan. It was a modish name, like Worth, or Chanel, but with British cachet. That was another word she'd learned from Mrs. B. *Cachet*. Style and class, rolled into one.

"Where did you learn all this French, madame?" The girls always had to call her "madame" to her face.

Mrs. B. had given a knowing smile, her head pivoting on the tilt of her long neck. "Here and there," she said. "Here and there."

Fair dues to Mrs. B., she recognized in Ada a hard worker, and a young woman with ambition and talent. Aitches present and correct without aspiration, *haspiration,* Ada was made front-of-house, Madame Duchamps's in-store, fresh-faced mannequin, and the young society ladies began to turn to her, rather than Mrs. B., whose complexion and waistline grew thicker by the day, to model their clothes.

"Mademoiselle," Mrs. B. would say. "Slip on the evening gown."

"The douppioni, madame?"

Midnight blue with a halter neck. Ada would lean into her hips and sway across the floor, swirl so her naked back drew the eye, and that eye would marvel at the drape of the fabric as it swallowed the curve of her figure, out and in, and fanned in a fishtail. She'd turn again and smile.

"And now the chiffon."

Veils of mystery and a taffeta lining, oyster and pearl and precious lusters. Ada loved the way the clothes transformed her. She could be fire, or water, air or earth. Elemental. Truthful. *This* was who she was. She would lift her arms as if to embrace the heavens, and the fabric would drift in the gossamer breeze; she would bend low in a curtsy, then unfold her body like a flower in bloom, each limb a sensuous, supple petal.

She was the center of adoration, a living sculpture, a work of art. A creator, too. She would smile and say, "But if you tuck it here, or pleat it there, then voilà." With a flourish of her long, slim fingers and that new, knowing *voilà,* Ada would add her own touch to one of Mrs. B.'s designs and make it altogether more modern, more desirable. Ada knew Mrs. B. saw her as an asset, recognized her skills and taste, her ability to lure the customers and charm them with an effortless eloquence, thanks to Miss Skinner's skillful tutoring.

"If you cut on the bias," Ada would say, holding up the dress length on the diagonal to a customer, "you can see how it falls, like a Grecian goddess."

She draped the fabric across the breast, a single, naked shoulder rising like a mermaid from a chiffon sea.

"Non, non, non." Mrs. B. tut-tutted, spoke in French when Ada pushed the limits of decency. "That will not do, mademoiselle. This is not for the *boudoir* but the ball. Decorum, decorum."

She'd turned to her client. "Miss Vaughan is still a little inexperienced, *naïve,* in the subtler points of social correctness."

Naïve she might be, but Ada was good publicity for Madame Duchamps, modiste, of Dover Street, and Ada had hopes that one day she could be more than an asset but a partner in the business. She had developed a respectable following. Her talent marked her out, the flow and poise of her design distinguished her. She conjured Hollywood and the glamorous world of the stars and brought them into the drawing rooms of the everyday. Ada *became* her designs, a walking advertisement for them. The floral day dress, the tailored suit, the manicured nails, and the simple court shoes; she knew she was watched as she left the shop and sauntered west down Piccadilly, past the Ritz and Green Park. She would clip-clop along, chin in the air, pretending she might live in Knightsbridge or Kensington, until she knew she was free of curious eyes. Then finally she turned south, clip-clopped over Westminster Bridge and into Lambeth and past the sniggering urchins who stuck their noses in the air and teetered behind her on imaginary heels.

April, black rain fell in torrents and drummed on the slate roofs of Dover Street. Scooped from the oceans and let loose from the heavens, it thundered down to earth and soaked deep into the cracks between the paving, fell in dark rivers along the gutters, eddied in dips in the pavements and in the areas of the tall, stuccoed houses. It splattered off the umbrellas and somber hats of the pedestrians and

soaked the trouser legs below the raincoats. It seeped into the leather of the shoes.

Ada reached for her coat, a soft camel with a tie belt, and her umbrella. She'd have to bite the bullet today, turn left right away, pick up the number 12 in Haymarket.

"Good night, madame," she said to Mrs. B. She stood under the doorframe, then set out into the sodden street. She walked towards Piccadilly, looking down, sidestepping the puddles. A gust of wind caught her umbrella and turned it inside out, whipped the sides of her coat so they billowed free, and snatched her hair in sopping tentacles. She pulled at the twisted metal spokes.

"Allow me, please," a man's voice said as a large umbrella positioned itself above her head. She turned round, almost brushed the man's face, an instant too close but long enough for Ada to know. His face was slim, punctuated by a narrow, clipped mustache. He wore small, round glasses, and behind them his eyes were soft and pale. Duck egg blue, Ada thought, airy enough to see through. They chilled and stirred her. He stepped back.

"I apologize," he said. "I was only trying to protect you. Here, you hold this." He passed over his umbrella and took hold of hers with his free hand. He sounded continental, Ada thought, a sophisticated clip to his accent. She watched as he bent it back into shape.

"Not quite as good as new," he said. "But it will take care of you today. Where do you live? Do you have far to go?"

She started to answer, but the words tangled in her mouth. Lambeth. *Lambeth.*

"No," she said. "Thank you. I'll get the bus."

"Let me walk you to the stop."

She wanted to say yes, but she was frightened he'd press her on where she lived. The number 12 went to Dulwich. That was all right. She could say Dulwich, it was respectable enough.

"You're hesitating," he said. His eyes creased in a smile. "Your mother told you never to go with strange men."

She was grateful for the excuse. His accent was formal. She couldn't place it.

"I have a better idea," he went on. "I'm sure your mother would approve of this." He pointed over the road. "Would you care to join me, miss? Tea at the Ritz. Couldn't be more English."

What would be the harm in that? If he was up to no good, he wouldn't waste money at the Ritz. Probably a week's wages. And it was in public, after all.

"I am inviting you," he said. "Please accept."

He was polite, well mannered.

"And the rain will stop in the meantime."

Ada gathered her senses. "Will? Will it? How do you know?"

"Because," he said, "I command it to." He shut his eyes, stretched his free arm up above his head, raising his umbrella, and clenched and opened his fist three times.

"Ein, zwei, drei."

Ada didn't understand a word but knew they were foreign. "Dry?" she said.

"Oh, very good," he said. "I like that. So do you accept?"

He was charming. Whimsical. She liked that word. It made her feel light and carefree. It was a diaphanous word, like a chiffon veil.

Why not? None of the boys she knew would ever dream of asking her to the Ritz.

"Thank you. I would enjoy that."

He took her elbow and guided her across the road, through the starlit arches of the Ritz, into the lobby with its crystal chandeliers and porcelain jardinières. She wanted to pause and look, take it all in, but he was walking her fast along the gallery. She could feel her feet floating along the red carpet, past vast windows festooned and ruched in velvet, through marble columns, and into a room of mirrors and fountains and gilded curves.

She had never seen anything so vast, so rich, so shiny. She smiled, as if this was something she was used to every day.

"May I take your coat?" A waiter in a black suit with a white apron had appeared.

"It's all right," Ada said, "I'll keep it. It's a bit wet."

"Are you sure?" he said. A sticky ring of heat began to creep up her neck, and Ada knew she had blundered. In this world, you handed your clothes to valets and flunkies and maids.

"No"—the words tripped out—"you're right. Please take it. Thank you." She wanted to say, *Don't lose it;* the man in Berwick Street market said it was real camel hair, though Ada'd had her doubts. She shrugged the coat off her shoulders, aware that the waiter in the apron was peeling it from her arms and draping it over his. Aware, too, that the nudge of her shoulders had been slow and graceful.

"What is your name?" the man asked.

"Ada. Ada Vaughan. And yours?"

"Stanislaus," he said. "Stanislaus von Lieben."

A foreigner. She'd never met one. It was—she struggled for the word—exotic.

"And where does that name come from, when it's at home?"

"Hungary," he said. "Austria-Hungary. When it was an empire."

Ada had only ever heard of two empires, the British one that oppressed the natives and the Roman one that killed Christ. It was news to her that there were more.

"I don't tell many people this," he said, leaning towards her. "In my own country, I am a count."

"Oh my goodness." Ada couldn't help it. A *count*. "Are you really? With a castle, and all?" She heard how common she sounded. Maybe he wouldn't notice, being a foreigner.

"No." He smiled. "Not every count lives in a castle. Some of us live in more modest circumstances."

His suit, Ada could tell, was expensive. Wool. Super 200s, she wouldn't be surprised. Gray. Well tailored. Discreet.

"What language were you talking, earlier, in the street?"

"My mother tongue," he said. "German."

"German?" Ada swallowed. Not all Germans are bad, she could hear her father say. Rosa Luxemburg. A martyr. And those who were standing up to Hitler. Still, Dad wouldn't like a German speaker in the house. *Stop it, Ada.* She was getting ahead of herself.

"And you?" he said. "What were you doing in Dover Street?"

Ada wondered for a moment whether she could say she was visiting her dressmaker, but then thought better of it.

"I work there," she said.

"How very independent," he said. "And what do you work at?"

She didn't like to say she was a tailoress, even if it was bespoke, ladies. Couldn't claim to be a modiste, like Madame Duchamps, not yet. She said the next best thing.

"I'm a mannequin, actually." She wanted to add, *An artiste*.

He leant back in the chair. She was aware of how his eyes roamed over her body, as if she was a landscape to be admired, or lost in.

"Of course," he said. "Of course." He pulled out a gold cigarette case from his inside pocket, opened it, and leant forward to Ada. "Would you like a cigarette?"

She didn't smoke. She wasn't sophisticated like that. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to take one and end up choking. That would be too humiliating. Tea at the Ritz was full of pitfalls, full of reminders of how far she had to go.

"Not just now, thank you," she said.

He tapped the cigarette on the case before he lit it. She heard him inhale and watched as the smoke furled from his nostrils. She would like to be able to do that.

"And where are you a mannequin?"

Ada was back on safer ground. "At Madame Duchamps's."

"Madame Duchamps. Of course."

"You know her?"

"My great-aunt used to be a customer of hers. She died last year. Perhaps you knew her?"

"I haven't been there very long," she said. "What was her name?"

Stanislaus laughed, and Ada noticed he had a glint of gold in his mouth. "I couldn't tell you," he said. "She was married so many times, I couldn't keep up."

"Perhaps that's what killed her," she said. "All that marrying."

It would, if *her* parents were anything to go by. She knew what they would think of Stanislaus and his great-aunt. Morals of a hyena. That was Germany for you. But Ada was intrigued by the idea. A woman, a *loose* woman. She could smell her perfumed body, see her languid gestures as her body shimmied close and purred for affection.

"You're funny," Stanislaus said. "I like that."

It had stopped raining by the time they left, but it was dark.

"I should escort you home," he said.

"There's no need, really."

"It's the least a gentleman can do."

"Another time," she said, realizing how forward that sounded. "I didn't mean that. I mean, I have to go somewhere else. I'm not going straight home."

She hoped he wouldn't follow her.

"Another time it is," he said. "Do you like cocktails, Ada Vaughan? Because the Café Royal is just round the corner and is my favorite place."

Cocktails. Ada swallowed. She was out of her depth. But she'd learn to swim, she'd pick it up fast.

"Thank you," she said, "and thank you for tea."

"I know where you work," he said. "I will drop you a line."

He clicked his heels, lifted his hat, and turned. She watched as he walked back down Piccadilly. She'd tell her parents she was working late.

Martinis, pink ladies, mint juleps. Ada grew to be at ease in the Café Royal, and the Savoy, Smith's, and the Ritz. She bought rayon in the market at trade price and made herself some dresses after work at Mrs. B.'s. Cut on the bias, the cheap synthetic fabrics emerged like butterflies from a chrysalis and hugged Ada into evening elegance. Long gloves and a cocktail hat. Ada graced the chicest establishments with confidence.

"Swept you off your feet, he has," Mrs. B. would say each Friday as Ada left work to meet Stanislaus. Mrs. B. didn't like gentlemen calling at her shop in case it gave her a bad name, but she saw that Stanislaus dressed well and had class, even if it was *foreign* class. "So be careful."

Ada twisted rings from silver paper and paraded her left hand in front of the mirror when no one was looking. She saw herself as Stanislaus's wife, Ada von Lieben. Count and *Countess* von Lieben. "I hope his intentions are honorable," Mrs. B. had said. "Because I've never known a gentleman smitten so fast."

Ada just laughed.

– – – – –

"Who is he then?" her mother said. "If he was a decent fellow, he'd want to meet your father and me."

"I'm late, Mum," Ada said. Her mother blocked the hallway, stood in the middle of the passage. She wore Dad's old socks rolled down to her ankles, and her shabby apron was stained in front.

"Bad enough you come home in no fit state on a Friday night, but now you've taken up going out in the middle of the week. Whatever next?"

"Why shouldn't I go out of an evening?"

"You'll get a name," her mother said. "That's why. He'd better not try anything on. No man wants secondhand goods." Her mouth set

in a scornful line. She nodded as if she knew the world and all its sinful ways.

You know nothing, Ada thought.

"For goodness' sake," she said. "He's not like that."

"Then why don't you bring him home? Let your father and me be the judge of that."

He'd never have set foot inside a two-up, two-down terrace that rattled when the trains went by, with a scullery tagged on the back and an outside privy. He wouldn't understand that she had to sleep in the same bed with her sisters, while her brothers lay on mattresses on the floor, the other side of the dividing curtain Dad had rigged up. He wouldn't know what to do with all those kids running about. Her mother kept the house clean enough, but sooty grouts clung to the nets and coated the furniture, and sometimes in the summer the bugs were so bad they all had to sit outside in the street.

Ada couldn't picture him here, not ever.

"I have to go," she said. "Mrs. B. will dock my wages."

Her mother snorted. "If you'd come in at a respectable time," she said, "you wouldn't be in this state now."

Ada pushed past her, out into the street.

"I hope you know what you're doing," her mother yelled for all the neighbors to hear.

She had to run to the bus stop, caught the number 12 by the skin of her teeth. She'd had no time for breakfast and her head ached. Mrs. B. would wonder what had happened. Ada had never been late for work before, never taken time off. She rushed along Piccadilly. The June day was already hot. It would be another scorcher. Mrs. B. should get a fan, cool the shop down so they weren't all picking pins with sticky fingers.

"Tell her, Ada," one of the other girls said. Poisonous little cow called Avril, common as a brown penny. "We're all sweating like pigs."

"Pigs sweat," Ada had said. "Gentlemen perspire. Ladies glow."

"Get you," Avril said, sticking her finger under her nose.

Avril could be as catty as she liked. Ada didn't care. Jealous, most likely. *Never trust a woman,* her mother used to say. Well, her mother was right on that one. Ada had never found a woman she could call her best friend.

The clock at Fortnum's began to strike the quarter hour and Ada started to run, but a figure walked out, blocking her way.

"Thought you were never coming." Stanislaus straddled the pavement in front of her, arms stretched wide like the wings of an angel. "I was about to leave."

She let out a cry, a puppy whine of surprise. He'd come to meet her, before work. She knew she was blushing, heat prickling her cheeks. She fanned her hand across her face, thankful for the cool air. "I'm late for work," she said. "I can't chat."

"I thought you could take the day off," he said. "Pretend you're sick or something."

"I'd lose my job if she ever found out."

"Get another," he said, shrugging his shoulders. Stanislaus had never had to work, couldn't understand how hard she'd struggled to get where she was. Ada Vaughan, from Lambeth, working with a modiste, in Mayfair. "How will she find out?"

He stepped forward and, cupping her chin in his hand, brushed his lips against hers. His touch was delicate as a feather, his fingers warm and dry round her face. She leant towards him, couldn't help it, as if he was a magnet and she his dainty filings.

"It's a lovely day, Ada. Too nice to be cooped up inside. You need to live a little. That's what I always say." She smelled cologne on his cheeks, tart, like lingering lemon. "You're late already. Why bother going in now?"

Mrs. B. was a stickler. Ten minutes and she'd dock half a day's wages. Ada couldn't afford to lose that much money. There was a

picnic basket on the pavement beside Stanislaus. He'd got it all planned.

"Where had you in mind?"

"Richmond Park," he said. "Make a day of it."

The whole day. Just the two of them.

"What would I say to her?" Ada said.

"Wisdom teeth," Stanislaus said. "That's always a good one. That's why there are so many dentists in Vienna."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"It's a toff's complaint."

She'd have to remember that. *Toffs* had wisdom teeth. *Somebodies* had wisdom teeth.

"Well." She hesitated. She'd lost half a day's wages already. "All right then." Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

"That's my Ada." He picked up the picnic basket with one hand, put his other round her waist.

She'd never been to Richmond Park, but she couldn't tell him that. He was sophisticated, traveled. He could have had his pick of women—well-bred, upper-class women, women like the debutantes whom she clothed and flattered and who kept Mrs. B. in business. Ahead of her the park gates rose in ornate spears. Below, the river curled through lush green woods to where the distant, dusty downs of Berkshire merged into slabs of pearl and silver against the sky. The sun was already high, its warm rays embracing her as if she was the only person in the world, the only one who mattered.

They entered the park. London was spread before them, St. Paul's and the City cast in hazy silhouette. The ground was dry, the paths cracked and uneven. Ancient oaks with blasted trunks and chestnuts with drooping catkins rose like forts from the tufted grassland and fresh, spiky bracken. The air was filled with a sweet, cloying scent. Ada crinkled her nose.

"That's the smell of trees making love," Stanislaus said.

Ada put her hand to her mouth. *Making love.* No one she knew talked about that sort of thing. Maybe her mother was right. He'd brought her here for a purpose. He was *fast*. He laughed.

"You didn't know that, did you? Chestnuts have male and female flowers. I guess it's the female that gives off the smell. What do you think?"

Ada shrugged. Best ignore it.

"I like chestnuts," he went on. "Hot chestnuts on a cold winter's day. Nothing like them."

"Yes." She was on safe ground. "I like them, too. Conkers, and all."

And all. Common.

"Different sort of chestnut," he said.

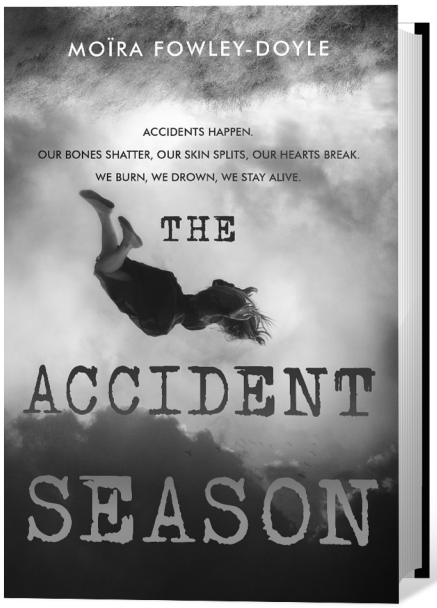
How was Ada to know? There was so much to learn. Had he noticed how ignorant she was? He didn't show it. A gentleman.

"We'll stop here, by the pond." He put down the hamper and pulled out a cloth, flicking it so it filled with air like a flying swan, before falling to the earth. If she'd known she was going to have to sit on the ground, she'd have worn her sundress with the full skirt, enough to tuck round so she didn't show anything. She lowered herself, pulled her knees together, bent them to the side, and tugged her dress down as best she could.

"Very ladylike," Stanislaus said. "But that's what you are, Ada, a real lady." He poured two beakers of ginger beer, passed one to her, and sat down. "A lovely lady."

No one had ever called her lovely before. But then, she'd never had a boy before. *Boy.* Stanislaus was a man. Mature, experienced. At least thirty, she guessed. Maybe older. He reached forward and handed her a plate and a serviette. There was a proper word for serviette, but Ada had forgotten it. They never had much use for things like that in Theed Street. He pulled out some chicken, *what a luxury,* and some fresh tomatoes, and a tiny salt and pepper set.

"Bon appétit," he said, smiling.



***Perfect for readers of* We Were Liars *and* How I Live Now.**

Every October Cara and her family become inexplicably and unavoidably accident-prone. Some years it's bad, like the season when her father died, and some years it's just a lot of cuts and scrapes. This accident season—when Cara, her ex-stepbrother, Sam, and her best friend, Bea, are 17—is going to be a bad one. But not for the reasons they think.

Cara is about to learn that not all the scars left by the accident season are physical: There's a long-hidden family secret underneath the bumps and bruises. This is the year Cara will finally fall desperately in love, when she'll start discovering the painful truth about the adults in her life, and when she'll uncover the dark origins of the accident season—whether she's ready or not.

Available August 2015

Kathy Dawson Books • Hardcover: 9780525429487 • eBook: 9780698405035

🎧 CD: 9781101926239 • 🎧 AD: 9781101926222

KATHY DAWSON BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014

USA/Canada/UK/Ireland/Australia/New Zealand/India/South Africa/China
penguin.com
A Penguin Random House Company

First published in the United States by Kathy Dawson Books
Published in Great Britain by Random House Children's Publishers UK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fowley-Doyle, Moïra.
The accident season / by Moïra Fowley-Doyle.
pages cm
Summary: "Every October Cara and her family become mysteriously and dangerously accident-prone, but this year, the year Cara, her ex-stepbrother, and her best friend are 17, is when Cara will begin to unravel the accident season's dark origins"—Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-0-525-42948-7 (hardback)
[1. Families—Fiction. 2. Accidents—Fiction. 3. Supernatural—Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.1.F68Ac 2015 [Fic]—dc23 2014047858

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

Designed by Nancy R. Leo-Kelly
Text set in Adobe Garamond Pro

1

Elsie is in all my pictures. I know this because I have looked through all the pictures of me and my family taken in the last seventeen years and she is in them all.

I only noticed this last night, clearing six months' worth of pictures off my phone. She is in the locker room at lunchtime. She hovers at the corner of the frame on school tours. She is in every school play. I thought: *What a coincidence, Elsie's in all my photos.* Then, on a hunch, I looked through the rest of the photos on my computer. And the ones glued into my diaries. And in my family photo albums. Elsie is in them all.

She turns her back to the camera at birthday parties. She is on family holidays and walks along the coast. A hint of her even appears in windows and mirrors in the zoomed-in background of pictures taken at home: an elbow here, an ankle there, a lock of her hair.

Is there really such a thing as coincidence? *This* much of a coincidence?

Elsie is not my friend. Elsie is nobody's friend, really. She's just that girl who talks too softly and stands too close, who you used to be sort of friends with when you were eight and your father'd just died but who mostly got left behind with the rag dolls and tea sets and other relics of childhood.

I've put a representative sample of seventy-two pictures taken in the last few years onto my phone to show to Bea before class. I want to ask her if she thinks there's something really strange going on or if the world really *is* so small that someone can turn up in all of another person's photographs.

I haven't shown the photos to Sam yet. I don't know why.

In the older pictures, my house looks like a cartoon house: no cars in the driveway, colored curtains framing the windows in hourglass shapes, a cloud of smoke attached to the chimney like white cotton candy. A seven-year-old me playing Steal the Bacon with Alice on the road in front of it. And there, at the side of the frame, a leg, the hem of a tartan skirt, and the heel of the type of sensible brown shoe that Elsie always wears.

Those pictures were taken a decade ago; this morning there is no cotton candy smoke coming from the chimney, and the hourglass curtains of the sitting room frame the image of my mother hopping on one leg as she tries to wrestle

a boot onto her other foot. Alice, outside, stamps her own feet impatiently. She stalks up to the window and raps on the glass, telling our mother to get a move on. Sam laughs from the hallway, invisible in the morning sun that casts everything past the front door in shadow. I push my fists deeper into my pockets and look up at the sky. There are a few wisps of cloud just hanging there mirroring me leaning against the side of the car.

Alice is my sister. She is one year older and a million years wiser than me, or so she'd like to believe (and she may be right; how should I know? I am hardly wise). Sam is my ex-stepbrother, which is a mouthful to say, but as our parents are divorced, he isn't technically my brother anymore. His father was married to my mother until he disappeared four years ago. He ran off with a biological anthropologist and spends his time studying gibbons in the rainforests of Borneo. Sam has been living with us for seven years now, so I suppose to all intents and purposes he is my brother, but mostly he's just Sam, standing tall in the shade of the hallway, dark hair falling in his eyes.

Knowing that getting everyone into the car will take some time, I take my hands out of my pockets and pull out my phone again. I flip through the photos for the third time this morning, playing Spot-the-Elsie like in those *Where's Waldo?* books.

I'd never realized that Elsie always looks worried. Frown

lines crease her forehead, and her mouth makes a little pout. Even her hair looks worried, somehow, when her head is turned. That's quite an accomplishment. I wonder what my hair looks like when my head is turned. The back of my head is not something I see very often; unlike Elsie, I pose when a photo is being taken, and smile.

When Alice's head is turned (when, for example, she is banging on the front room window for the twentieth time to hurry my mother, who has forgotten something—her phone, her bag, her head—and has gone back upstairs to fetch it), her hair looks severe. It is dyed two shades lighter than her natural blond, always right to the roots, perfectly straightened, tightly wound into one of those make-a-bun hair donuts and stuck with two sticks. Alice has don't-mess-with-me hair.

My mother's hair is purple. It tumbles down her shoulders in unbrushed waves as she drives, and swings when she shakes her head. Strands of it stick to her lip gloss; she spits them out as she speaks. Today, she has painted her nails the same color. If it were any other time of year on this drive to school, she'd be reaching across to Alice in the passenger seat or fixing her hair, licking the tip of her finger to smooth the edges of her eye makeup or drinking from a flask of coffee like some people drag on a cigarette, but it's coming up to the end of October and Alice fell down the stairs last night, so my mother grips the steering wheel with white-knuckled, purple-nailed hands and doesn't take her eyes off the road.

She wouldn't have driven us, but she's convinced walking is more dangerous.

"How's your head feeling, honey?" she asks Alice. It's the thirty-second time she's asked that this morning (the eighty-ninth since coming home from the hospital last night). Sam marks another line on his hand in red pen. Every time my mother asks this question, Alice's mouth gets smaller and smaller.

Sam leans over and whispers in my ear. "Bet you a ten Alice screams before a hundred." I hold my hand out to be shaken. Sam's grip is firm and warm. I silently urge Alice to hold on until we get to school.

"You all have your gloves, right?" my mother is saying. "And, Sam, I'll write you a note for chemistry. Are you all warm enough? You did take your vitamins this morning, didn't you?"

"Sure, Melanie," Sam says to my mother. He grins at me. Alice will never last under this onslaught. My mother chances the tiniest peek at her before hurriedly looking back at the road. Alice is carefully tying a silk scarf to hide the bandage around her head. She has darkened her eyes with kohl so the bruise on the side of her face seems less severe. She looks like a storybook Gypsy in a school uniform.

We come to the intersection before the school. My mother's hair whips around as she frantically tries to look every way at once before crossing the light traffic. We crawl

past at a snail's pace. The other drivers sound their horns.

When she has parked, my mother cracks her knuckles and shakes out her hands. She takes off her sunglasses and gives us each a packed lunch. "Now, you will be careful, won't you?" She squeezes Alice's shoulder affectionately. "How's your head feeling, honey?"

Alice's lips disappear. She gives a short, wordless scream without looking at our mother, and storms out of the car and into the main school building. I slump back in my seat.

"Cough it up, sister," Sam cackles.

When we've gotten out of the car, I reluctantly hand over a ten. We wave my mother good-bye and she drives carefully away. "I'm not your sister," I remind him.

Sam drapes an arm over my shoulders. "If you say so, *petite soeur,*" he says.

I sigh and shake my head. "I know that means *sister,* Sam. We're in the same French class."

When Sam heads for his locker to get the books for his first class, I go find my best friend in the main school building.

Bea is sitting at the back of the library, her tarot cards spread out on the desk in front of her. She likes to read the cards every morning, so she can know what kind of day she's getting into. Bea doesn't like surprises. It wouldn't surprise her to know that the small group of eighth graders sitting a few desks away from her are snickering and whispering be-

hind her back, so I don't draw her attention to them. Anyway, I'm half convinced Bea can give the evil eye to anyone who insults her.

I take one of my two pairs of gloves off my uncomfortably warm hands (it's not the weather for hats and gloves, but my mother wouldn't let us out of the house without them) and pull up the chair behind me to face Bea across the little desk. I rest my chin on the chair back in front of me.

"Elsie is in all my pictures," I tell her.

Bea and I automatically look across the library toward the window. Usually by this time in the morning Elsie will have opened up her secrets booth for the day. The youngest are always the first to come to her, before the bell rings for assembly, before the janitor opens the locker rooms and the librarian comes out of her office to tell us to get to class. They come one at a time, type up their secrets on Elsie's antique typewriter, and shuffle out of the library, heads bowed, pretending to be engrossed in the contents of their school bags. Elsie's box gets fuller and fuller with the things that can't be said. She isn't here this morning, though. Maybe she's running late.

Bea turns back to me. "What do you mean?"

I take out my phone and show it to her. I point out the mousy hair, the sensible shoes, the worry lines on the brows of every Elsie in every photograph.

Bea takes a long time over the photos. Finally she looks

up. Her eyebrows are drawn together and her mouth's a thin line. "Cara, this is . . ." She shakes her head slightly.

"A little weirder than usual?" I rest the tips of my fingers against my forehead and close my eyes. Bea reads tarot cards and lights candles for ghosts. She talks about magic being all around us and laughs when our classmates call her a witch. But this is different.

Bea goes through the photos again, scrolling, stopping, tapping the screen and peering close.

"Do you think it's real?" I say to her from behind my hands. "Or do you think I'm crazy? Please don't say both."

Bea doesn't say anything. Instead, she shuffles her cards and lays them out slowly one by one on the desk between us. She looks down at the cards, and up at me, and back at the cards again. When she finally looks back at me, she's wearing an expression I haven't seen in a long time.

She takes in my woolly hat, my remaining pair of gloves under the pair I just took off, the thick leggings I'm wearing as well as tights under my uniform skirt, the Band-Aid on my finger, the ACE bandage around my wrist, the vague aroma of echinacea and anxiety following me around like a strange sad cloud.

Bea sighs and nods; she understands.

It's the accident season, the same time every year. Bones break, skin tears, bruises bloom. Years ago my mother tried to lock us all up, pad the hard edges of things with foam and

gauze, cover us in layers of sweaters and gloves, ban sharp objects and open flames. We camped out together in the living room for eight days, until the carefully ordered takeout food—delivered on the doorstep and furtively retrieved by my mother, who hadn't thought how she would cook meals without the help of our gas oven—gave us all food poisoning and we spent the next twenty-four hours in the hospital. Now every autumn we stock up on bandages and painkillers; we buckle up, we batten down. We never leave the house without at least three protective layers. We're afraid of the accident season. We're afraid of how easily accidents turn into tragedies. We have had too many of those already.

"Alice fell down the stairs last night," I tell her. "All the way from the top. Her head cracked on the banister rail on the way down. She said it sounded like a gunshot in a film, only duller."

"Oh God."

"There was no one in the house. They said at the hospital that she had a concussion, so we had to keep her awake, walk her around and around."

Bea's eyes are wide. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine now. Mom didn't want us to come to school today, but Alice insisted." I take off my hat and shake out my hair, then try to smooth it down. Unlike Alice, I don't dye my hair (also unlike Alice, I'm not blond), and it's too short to straighten, so my perpetually-growing-out pixie

cut sticks up in fluffy brown spikes whenever I wear hats.

Bea covers my hands with hers. The pinkie of her right hand loops through the wool of the hat I'm holding. "Why didn't you call me?" she asks; then, as if to answer her own question, she looks back down at the cards. She clears her throat, as if she's hesitating before she speaks. Then she says it. "I think . . . It's going to be a bad one, Cara." She tries to look me in the eye, but I stare down at her cards instead. It takes a minute for me to answer.

"How bad?"

Bea touches my gloved hand gently. She says it softly. "One of the worst." She turns one of the cards to face me. On it there is a figure on a bed being pierced by swords. I shiver. My knee knocks into one of the desk legs and I feel a sharp pain. When I look down, I see that my leggings and tights have been ripped by a huge nail sticking out of the wood. A few drops of blood collect around the edges of the tear. I can feel my eyes start to fill.

Bea gets up and wraps her arms around me. She smells like cigarettes and incense. "It'll be okay," she whispers into my ear. "We'll make sure nothing happens to you. I promise. We can change this. And I don't think you're going crazy. We'll talk to Elsie. It doesn't look like she's in school today, but we'll talk to her together tomorrow. It'll be okay."

I squash down the panicky feeling rising in my throat and take a packet of pirate-print tissues out of my schoolbag.

I blot the blood off my leggings, trying to move my wrist as little as possible. I don't remind Bea that something's already happened to me, even if it's just cut skin from a nail and a sprained wrist getting out of the car last night. It's always like this: Things happen and things keep happening, and things get worse and worse. I look back across the library at where Elsie's secrets booth usually is. The empty desk is like a missing tooth.

2

For the rest of the morning I am careful, holding tight to banister rails, watching where I put my feet, avoiding corners and sharp edges. At lunchtime Alice follows me, Bea, and Sam down past the soccer fields to the train tracks behind the school. We like to come here and smoke sometimes (the teachers rarely walk by, and if we sit close to the tracks, we are hidden from the school's windows), but Alice, who is in the year above the three of us, usually spends her lunch hour in the cafeteria with her friends.

"I just can't take any more questions," Alice says when I ask why she has joined us today. "Or staring." I look away from her bruised face. Sam and I like to invent elaborate, nonsensical backstories for our injuries at this time of year. Nobody believes us, of course: The teachers wearily tell us to stop exaggerating and some of our classmates call us crazy under

their breaths, but at least nobody asks us too many questions.

Alice prefers never to talk about the accidents, even with her friends. It bothers her a lot more than it does us when people in school whisper about us behind our backs. A lot of things bother Alice.

"Also," she says as an afterthought, "I could use a smoke."

Bea doesn't mention the fact that Alice doesn't smoke. She also doesn't mention Alice's bruises or the bandage peeking out from underneath her scarf. Instead, she sits down on the edge of the ditch with the train tracks at her feet and takes out her ukulele and a pack of cigarettes. She takes a drag on one and hands it to Alice. She exhales as she strums her ukulele, and her face is wreathed in smoke. With her bright-dyed halo of curly red hair, it looks like she's on fire. Beside her, blond, pale Alice looks like Snow White to Bea's Rose Red. Although Alice would never describe herself as a fairy-tale girl.

Bea likes to say that Alice is like a looking-glass version of us: practical rather than poetic. I've always thought Alice's namesake would make more sense for Bea, but then, we don't get to choose our names. Bea was named for a Shakespearean heroine, Alice for a children's book. They could never swap now. Sam doesn't know why his mother chose his name, because she died just after he was born. As for me, my mother's always sworn that my full name is Caramel. Sometimes I don't even think she's joking.

Alice hands the cigarette back to Bea, who takes a couple of drags. Her lipstick leaves bright red stains on the filter.

"Some people say that sharing a cigarette is like sharing a kiss," Bea tells us as she hands me the cigarette. I grin and close my lips around the filter.

"What people?" Alice asks. Alice questions Bea more than the rest of us do. Maybe because Alice's life is anchored in the real world a little more than ours are, or so she likes to think. She tells herself (and she tells us, loudly and often) that she doesn't believe in the accident season or in tarot cards, but sometimes I wonder if she's telling the truth. She ignores my mother's pleas to dress in protective layers, but I often think that's just so the kids in school won't stare.

"All kinds of people." Bea is used to Alice's cynicism. Sometimes I think she says even more outrageous things around her because she enjoys the challenge. "There's something so intimate about putting your lips where someone else's were just a moment before, inhaling the same air."

Sam reaches across me and takes the cigarette. His fingers brush against mine.

"It's not air." Alice pulls up tufts of grass. She has one eyebrow raised as if in disapproval, but she is smiling. "It's tobacco and tar."

"Same difference," Bea says. "You inhale it anyway."

I take out my book and look across the train tracks. The day is still bright, but fading, like it's tired of holding on to

the sun and the birdsong and the green smells of the fields just outside town. Like this weird warm October weather is finally tired of pretending it's still summer and is just waiting for the rains and winds of autumn to start, to make it feel real again.

Sam leans against me and we swing our legs out over the tracks. My feet dangle over the iron and weeds: big red Docs over thick socks over small feet that could break too easily. I try to concentrate on my dog-eared copy of *Wuthering Heights,* but I keep having visions of the train arriving suddenly and crushing our fragile limbs. I try to convince myself I don't believe that for one month of every year a family can become suddenly and inexplicably accident-prone. I try to pretend I don't remember the accidents of the past—the bad ones, the big ones, the tragedies.

Involuntarily, I look over at Alice. Bea's cards said this would be one of the worst. When the worst ones happen, people die.

My heart jumps into my mouth and beats there instead of in my chest. There are too many things I'm trying not to remember and sometimes there's just no use pretending. I fold my legs underneath me and pull Sam and Alice up onto the bank of the ditch, away from the tracks. They don't ask why, only sit with me, cross-legged in the middle of the dirty grass, and Bea joins us, strumming her ukulele softly.

I put my book back in my bag and we all take out our

lunches and the cardboard cups of tea we got at the cafeteria. The tea has gone cold, but at least that means we won't scald ourselves.

Sam takes a sip of his and makes a face. "Tepid," he says. "Delicious." He looks over at Alice with a crooked smile. "So, how's your head feeling, honey?" he says in a passable imitation of my mother's voice.

"Ugh, don't." Alice tilts her head back and rolls her eyes. "She really needs to learn that sometimes *I'm fine* means *I'm fine*."

I watch Alice tear her sandwich into tiny pieces and eat them slowly, the butt of the cigarette she just smoked smoldering at her feet. I'm not sure I believe her *I'm fine* any more than my mother did.

"She's just worried about you," Bea says.

Alice brushes sandwich crumbs off her skirt. "My friends' parents worry about them applying to the right college and not getting too drunk on nights out," she says. "My mother worries when I'm not wearing more than one pair of gloves. That's not worry, that's pathological."

"No, you're right," Sam says to her with mock sincerity. "It's not like you have a serious head injury and were in the hospital last night or anything."

Alice opens her mouth to retort, but before she can, I jump in quick and change the subject. "So what kind of schools *are* your friends applying to?" I ask.

Alice is one of those people who has a fairly large group of casual friends. She usually hangs out with the popular crowd at school, without being particularly close to any of them. They have lunch together and she gets invited to all their parties, but after class she mostly spends time with her boyfriend, Nick, who is more popular than any of them.

Nick is a musician with wicked finger-picking skills and a voice like a fiery god's. His talent comes off him like a scent that every girl can smell half a mile away. I suppose that when your boyfriend writes epic love songs to you at three in the morning and pulls you up on stage after every show, you don't really need too many more close friends.

I, on the other hand, am one of those people who has a small group of very close friends. Those friends are Bea and Sam. It is, I have to admit, a rather tiny group.

Alice pops a little piece of sandwich into her mouth. "Kim wants to do nursing," she says. "And Niamh's first choice is business and French. So if I don't get into computer science in Trinity, I'll be in DCU with her. It's, like, fourth on my list, though."

Alice will end up being the only person in our family not doing something arty or literary, but I think for her that's part of the appeal. "I'm sure you'll get your first choice," I tell her.

"If I don't die of overwork first," Alice says. "Do you know Mr. Murray has us doing two hours of study a night? As well as homework?"

"It's only October," says Sam. "No wonder you're so crabby."

Alice reaches out and shoves his shoulder.

"What you need," Bea muses, taking an apple out of her bag, "is a big, crazy party to get everybody's priorities straight."

"You're right," Alice laughs. "Homework should never be a priority."

"Homework!" Sam suddenly exclaims with dismay. He starts to root through his bag for his schedule. "Please tell me that essay on the First World War wasn't due today."

"I would," Bea says, amused, taking a bite out of her apple, "but I'd be lying."

"*Shit*." Sam pulls his history book out of his bag and opens it on his lap. "Have you done this?" he asks me and Bea.

"We won't be able to copy each other's homework next year, you know," I say sadly. "Not if we want to do well in the exams. And we'll probably have to hand it in on time too."

"Never," Bea says solemnly.

"Well, I can tell you that most of my class definitely *doesn't* give their homework in on time," Alice says as Bea takes her history folder out of her bag and hands it to Sam. "Except for Toby Healy, of course."

Toby is one of the most popular boys in school. He has sandy blond hair and an inexplicable tan and small dimples when he smiles. He's one of the best players on the soccer

team and top of his year, and still spends almost every evening in supervised study. Not that I've noticed.

Bea gives me a mischievous look. "Cara thinks Toby's cute."

"Everybody thinks Toby's cute," I say.

"I don't," says Sam.

"Everybody except Sam thinks Toby's cute."

"You don't actually, though, do you?" Sam asks me.

Alice's phone buzzes. She checks her messages but puts her phone down without replying.

"Cute or not, it would never work out," Bea says blithely. I am about to protest—despite only being very vaguely interested in Toby Healy, I feel I should stand up for myself—but Bea goes on: "For one thing, there's only room for three in our Parisian loft apartment."

Sam, Bea, and I have a carefully constructed and oft-daydreamed-about plan for when we leave school. We will move to Dublin together to study literature and philosophy, which will give us the education we need to run away to Paris, where Sam will direct French art house films, I will spend my days in dusty bookshops, and Bea will pay the rent by working as an artist's model (nude, of course).

I give Bea a playful smack and correct a few lines of Sam's history essay from the notes in my own notebook. Alice's phone buzzes again.

"Doesn't that boyfriend of yours know you're in school

right now?" Bea asks as the phone starts to ring in earnest.

"Back in a sec," Alice says, getting to her feet and moving a few feet away from us to answer. Nick finished high school four years ago; who knows what you forget when you've been away that long.

Bea starts picking out a tune on her ukulele. I recognize it as one of the particularly depressing folksongs she likes to play. Ms. O'Shaughnessy, the Irish teacher, had Bea play the song in the original Irish a few weeks ago in class. Since then she and the music teacher, Mr. Duffy, won't stop raving about Bea's "new spin on traditional music," but no one in the school folk group wants a ukulele in the band. Or maybe they just don't want a Bea.

Alice returns to us with a smile on her face. "He sent me flowers," she says, sitting down to gather her things into her bag. "To the school cafeteria. He thought I'd be there now. Kim says there are a dozen roses in a big glass vase. Everybody's talking about it."

I'm about to ask Alice what the occasion is or if Nick is just being romantic and spontaneous, when the ground beneath us begins to shake. The tracks sing. We turn to face the train. It flies past us like a snaky bird, screeching and screaming. There are faces in the windows all streaming by. The station is just down the road from the school, and the train slows to let another train by, and in one of the cars I think I see a reflection of the four of us, but different, dis-

torted by the light and sky on the other side of the window.

They look like they are dressed up for a costume party. The redhead who looks like Bea could be dressed as a mermaid, scaly skin and all. I imagine there is a starfish stuck to her face and that her sequined dress ends in fins. Another girl with light brown hair as short as mine is sitting with her legs up on the table between her and the mermaid. She almost looks like she's wearing a strange, fluid dress the color of oil puddles, and silver Converse, with blue-green fairy wings attached to her shoulders. They are squashed up against the seat back behind her. The girl sitting beside the mermaid—in the same position as Alice, who's beside Bea on the grass—seems to be dressed as a forest, with leaves stuck to her face and to her mossy dress, and twigs and little flowers twined through her long blond hair. The boy of the group, sitting beside the fairy girl, looks like he's just walked out of a silent film. His skin is gray and he could be wearing a sort of vaudeville-circus-ringmaster top hat on his black hair. I'm a little disappointed when the train pulls away, because he's really quite beautiful.

"I wonder where they're off to," I say to Bea, who is also watching the train move away.

Alice, texting one-handed, stands up, slings her bag onto one shoulder, and hurries back toward the main school building.

"Where who are off to?" Bea asks distractedly, turning to

look after Alice. She starts to retune her ukulele with a series of loud twangs.

"The kids in the car right there," I say. She and Sam look after the departing train, but of course the car with the dressed-up kids in it has moved away.

"What kids?" says Sam.

Bea shrugs. "I didn't realize there was anyone in the window." She strums a couple of chords experimentally. "I just saw the four of us reflected in the glass."

I snap my head back up to look after the train, but by now it's gone. Maybe I'm just hallucinating from lack of sleep. I think of the hospital last night; the nurses who know us by name at this point, the way we had to walk Alice around and around, ask her questions, keep her awake. My knee itches around the little cut from earlier where the blood has stuck the tights to my skin.

All the rest of the day I find it hard to concentrate. When the three-o'clock bell rings, I follow Sam and Bea to the doors of the PE hall, but instead of going inside to get changed, I plead with Mrs. Smith, the PE teacher, to let me off class because of my sprained wrist until she agrees to allow me to go home. Bea, who would clearly rather not have to halfheartedly run laps in the sweaty, smelly hall, waves morosely at me as I leave to walk home alone slowly in the afternoon light.

Our house is a couple of miles outside town, down the

main road past shops and houses and housing developments, past fields and farms, and farther, down a smaller country road lined with hedges and whitewashed houses. Mostly, though, to get home from town, we follow the river. A little way off the main road, there is the river walk, which is sometimes no more than a rough track and sometimes a proper area with picnic benches and bridges to take you to the woods on the other side.

The place I like to sit is close to the smallest of the bridges—really just a wooden placeholder across the water waiting for the council to build a proper bridge of stone. Instead of going straight home, I climb down and sit on the riverbank and take out a cigarette. The ground is hard and gritty beneath me. Across the river everything is yellow and red, the fallen leaves dry and crackly and inviting. There's something about autumn leaves that just begs to be stepped on. I can hear them whispering in the breeze. I take off both pairs of gloves so the cigarette won't singe them and I sit there for a while, a splash of color on the duller bank, smoking and trying not to think about Bea's cards.

Since I was little, since long before Elsie started with the secrets booth, I've come down here when there's no one else around, to tell my secrets to the river. Sometimes I almost think I can hear it whispering them back at me.

I open my mouth to talk about what Bea said and how I'm afraid this really will be a bad one; the worst one, if

that's even possible—although I can hardly imagine what could ever be worse than the one four years ago we so often try to forget—when suddenly I think I see a shape between the trees. When I squint my eyes against the sun to look closer, it's gone. I stand up and come right down to the river, the toes of my Docs almost touching the water. I could have sworn I saw a flash of mousy brown hair moving between the trees.

I take a last drag of my cigarette, put the end in the bin by the bench, and hurry over to the bridge. I'm halfway across when it begins to creak. I stop. I've crossed this bridge a thousand times. It was built before I was born, but it's sturdy; it has weathered the years. I take a careful step. Another creak, louder this time. Then, in a rush of wood and water, the bridge collapses.

I grab the hand rail and hold on for dear life as the bridge plunges toward the river. It's a short drop. The middle section of the bridge hits the water and stops, caught between two rocks. Water whooshes over my legs to my waist, but I'm still standing, leaning against the rail in the middle of the river.

I'm shaking all over, but not from the cold. *I'm okay,* I tell myself sharply. *I'm okay*. I breathe deeply until I can move again. Carefully, hand over hand, legs heavy in the water, I make my way across the rest of the fallen bridge to the other side of the river.

I climb up onto the opposite bank. Still breathless, I

edge toward the copse of trees where I thought I caught a glimpse of Elsie. Moss and bits of twig stick to my boots. They squelch as I walk. I part a row of branches and peer into the little clearing behind them. Everything is dark here, shadowed by trees. The light is watery and weird, full of whispers.

"Hello?" I feel like that girl in the horror films, the one who makes you scream at the screen, telling her to turn and run away. My heart does a little flutter dance. "Elsie?"

I think I hear a tiny noise coming from a clump of bushes at the far side of the clearing. Everything else is strangely silent. I can't hear the leaves crunch or the river flow behind me.

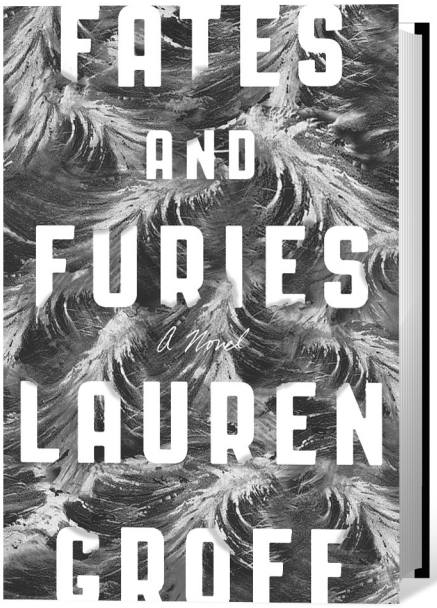
"Hello?" I say again. I tiptoe toward the bushes. The leaves rustle as I approach.

"Elsie?" I reach forward and part the branches quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. There's nothing there. Nothing except a small box squirreled away to the back of the bushes. I get down on my hands and knees and stick my head in under them. The branches catch in my hair. I blow at the leaves to get them out of my way, and that's when I see the mousetrap nestled in a pile of dusty moss.

For a minute I scan the ground, worried that I've gotten too close to a rodent's nest, but then I notice what's on top of the trap and it's not (thankfully) a dead mouse, nor is it a piece of perfectly holey cheese like in *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. What it is, is a doll.

It looks like it's been made of cardboard and wire and cloth, like the Guatemalan worry dolls my mother keeps in a little pouch hanging from the rearview mirror in her car. Only this one looks exactly like Elsie. It's got mousy brown woolen hair and pale cloth-skin and it's wearing a tartan skirt that looks like our school uniform and a shapeless red sweater of the kind Elsie always seems to wear outside of school. It even has the Peter Pan collar of a tiny shirt coming up from underneath the sweater's neck. I back away and stand up slowly.

"Elsie?" I call. "Elsie!" No one answers. A little breeze whistles through the clearing and my legs break into goose bumps underneath my wet layers. Or at least I tell myself it is the cold and the wet, and not the little cardboard doll set out like the bait in a trap.



"Dark and dazzling. . . . Taking a page from Gillian Flynn's **Gone Girl***—like view of marriage, Groff fashions a searing, multilayered portrait of a union that seems to thrive on its darkest secrets."*

—*Booklist* (starred review)

Every story has two sides. Every relationship has two perspectives. And sometimes, it turns out, the key to a great marriage is not its truths but its secrets. At the core of this rich, expansive, layered novel, Lauren Groff presents the story of one such marriage over the course of twenty-four years.

At age twenty-two, Lotto and Mathilde are tall, glamorous, madly in love, and destined for greatness. A decade later, their marriage is still the envy of their friends, but with an electric thrill we understand that things are even more complicated and remarkable than they have seemed. With stunning revelations and multiple threads, and in prose that is vibrantly alive and original, Groff delivers a deeply satisfying novel about love, art, creativity, and power that is unlike anything that has come before it. Profound, surprising, propulsive, and emotionally riveting, it stirs both the mind and the heart.

Available September 2015

Riverhead • Hardcover: 9781594634475 • eBook: 9780698405127
CD: 9781101923849 • AD: 9781101923856

RIVERHEAD BOOKS
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

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

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

Book design by Gretchen Achilles

I

A THICK DRIZZLE FROM THE SKY, like a curtain's sudden sweeping. The seabirds stopped their tuning, the ocean went mute. Houselights over the water dimmed to gray.

Two people were coming up the beach. She was fair and sharp in a green bikini, though it was May in Maine and cold. He was tall, vivid; a light flickered in him that caught the eye and held it. Their names were Lotto and Mathilde.

For a minute they watched a tide pool full of spiny creatures that sent up curls of sand in vanishing. Then he took her face in his hands, kissed her pale lips. He could die right now of happiness. In a vision, he saw the sea rising up to suck them in, tonguing off their flesh and rolling their bones over its coral molars in the deep. If she were beside him, he thought, he would float out singing.

Well, he was young, twenty-two, and they had been married that morning in secret. Extravagance, under the circumstances, could be forgiven.

Her fingers down the back of his trunks seared his skin. She pushed him backward, walking him up a dune covered in beach-pea stalks, down again to where the wall of sand blocked the wind, where they felt warmer. Under the bikini top, her gooseflesh had taken on a lunar blue, and her nipples in the cold turned inward. On their knees, now, though the sand was rough and hurt. It didn't matter. They were reduced to mouths and hands. He swept her legs to his hips, pressed

her down, blanketed her with his heat until she stopped shivering, made a dune of his back. Her raw knees were raised to the sky.

He longed for something wordless and potent: what? To wear her. He imagined living in her warmth forever. People in his life had fallen away from him one by one like dominoes; every movement pinned her further so that she could not abandon him. He imagined a lifetime of screwing on the beach until they were one of those ancient pairs speed-walking in the morning, skin like lacquered walnut meat. Even old, he would waltz her into the dunes and have his way with her sexy frail bird bones, the plastic hips, and the bionic knee. Drone lifeguards looming up in the sky, flashing their lights, booming *Fornicators! Fornicators!* to roust them guiltily out. This, for eternity. He closed his eyes and wished. Her eyelashes on his cheek, her thighs on his waist, the first consummation of this terrifying thing they'd done. Marriage meant forever.

[He'd planned for a proper bed, a sense of ceremony: he'd stolen his roommate Samuel's beach house, having spent most summers there since he was fifteen, knowing that they hid the key under the hawksbill turtle carapace in the garden. A house of tartan and Liberty print and Fiestaware, thick with dust; the guest room with the lighthouse's triple blink in the night, the craggy beach below. This was what Lotto had imagined for the first time with this gorgeous girl he'd magicked into wife. But Mathilde was right to agitate for plein-air consummation. She was always right. He would know this soon enough.]

It was over too quickly. When she shouted, the gulls hidden by the dune buckshot the low clouds. Later, she'd show him the abrasion against her eighth vertebra from a mussel shell when he dug her in and dug her in. They were pressed so close that when they laughed, his laugh rose from her belly, hers from his throat. He kissed her cheekbones, her clavicle, the pale of her wrist with its rootlike blue veins.

His terrible hunger he'd thought would be sated was not. The end apparent in the beginning.

"My wife," he said. "Mine." Perhaps instead of wearing her, he could swallow her whole.

"Oh?" she said. "Right. Because I'm chattel. Because my royal family traded me for three mules and a bucket of butter."

"I love your butter bucket," he said. "*My* butter bucket now. So salty. So sweet."

"Stop," she said. She'd lost her smile, so shy and constant that he was startled to see her up close without it. "Nobody belongs to anybody. We've done something bigger. It's new."

He looked at her thoughtfully, gently bit the tip of her nose. He had loved her with all his might these two weeks and, in so loving, had considered her transparent, a plate of glass. He could see through to the goodness at her quick. But glass is fragile, he would have to be careful. "You're right," he said; thinking, No, thinking how deeply they belonged. How surely.

Between his skin and hers, there was the smallest of spaces, barely enough for air, for this slick of sweat now chilling. Even still, a third person, their marriage, had slid in.

2

They climbed across the rocks toward the house they'd left bright in the dusk.

A unity, marriage, made of discrete parts. Lotto was loud and full of light; Mathilde, quiet, watchful. Easy to believe that his was the better half, the one that set the tone. It's true that everything he'd lived so far had steadily built toward Mathilde. That if his life had not prepared him for the moment she walked in, there would have been no *them*.

The drizzle thickened to drops. They hurried across the last stretch of beach.

[Suspend them there, in the mind's eye: skinny, young, coming through dark toward warmth, flying over the cold sand and stone. We will return to them. For now, he's the one we can't look away from. He is the shining one.]

Lotto loved the story. He'd been born, he'd always say, in the calm eye of a hurricane.

[From the first, a wicked sense of timing.]

His mother was beautiful then, and his father was still alive. Summer, late sixties. Hamlin, Florida. The plantation house so new there were tags on the furniture. The shutters hadn't been screwed down and made a terrific din in the wild first passage of the storm.

Now, briefly, sun. Rain dripped off the sour orange trees. In the pause, the bottling plant roared five acres across his family's scrubland. In the hallway, two housemaids, the cook, a landscaper, and the plant's foreman pressed their ears to the wooden door. Inside the room, Antoinette was aswim in white sheets and enormous Gawain held his wife's hot head. Lotto's aunt Sallie crouched to catch the baby.

Lotto made his entrance: goblinesque with long limbs, huge hands and feet, lungs exceeding strong. Gawain held him to the light in the window. The wind was rising again, live oaks conducting the storm with mossy arms. Gawain wept. He'd hit his apex. "Gawain Junior," he said.

But Antoinette had done all the work, after all, and already the heat she'd felt for her husband was half diverted into her son. "No," she said. She thought of her first date with Gawain, the maroon velvet in the theater and *Camelot* on screen. "Lancelot," she said. Her men would be knight-themed. She was not without humor of her own.

Before the storm hit again, the doctor arrived to sew Antoinette back together. Sallie swabbed the baby's skin with olive oil. She felt as if she were holding her own beating heart in her hands. "Lancelot," she whispered. "What a name. You'll be beat up for sure. But don't you fret. I'll make sure you're Lotto." And because she could move behind wallpaper like the mouse she resembled, Lotto is what they called him.

The baby was exigent. Antoinette's body was blasted, breasts chewed up. Nursing was not a success. But as soon as Lotto began to smile and she saw he was her tiny image with her dimples and charm, she forgave him. A relief, to find her own beauty there. Her husband's family were not a lovely people, descendants of every kind of Floridian

from original Timucua through Spanish and Scot and escaped slave and Seminole and carpetbagger; mostly they bore the look of overcooked Cracker. Sallie was sharp-faced, bony. Gawain was hairy and huge and silent; it was a joke in Hamlin that he was only half human, the spawn of a bear that had waylaid his mother on her way to the outhouse. Antoinette had historically gone for the smooth and moussed, the suave steppers, the loudly moneyed, but a year married, she found herself still so stirred by her husband that when he came in at night she followed him full-clothed into the shower as if in a trance.

Antoinette had been raised in a saltbox on the New Hampshire coast: five younger sisters, a draft so dreadful in the winter that she thought she'd die before she got her clothes on in the morning. Drawers of saved buttons and dead batteries. Baked potatoes six meals in a row. She'd had a full ride to Smith but couldn't get off the train. A magazine on the seat beside hers had opened to Florida, trees dripping golden fruit, sun, luxe. Heat. Women in fishtails undulating in mottled green. It was ordained. She went to the end of the line, the end of her cash, hitched to Weeki Wachee. When she entered the manager's office, he took in her waist-length red-gold hair, her switchback curves, murmured, *Yes*.

The paradox of being a mermaid: the lazier she looks, the harder the mermaid works. Antoinette smiled languorously and dazzled. Manatees brushed her; bluegills nibbled at her hair. But the water was a chilly seventy-four degrees, the current strong, the calibration of air in the lungs exact to regulate buoyancy or sinking. The tunnel the mermaids swam down to reach the theater was black and long and sometimes caught their hair and held them there by the scalp. She couldn't see the audience but felt the weight of their eyes through the glass. She turned on the heat for the invisible watchers; she made them believe. But sometimes, as she grinned, she thought of sirens as she knew them: not this sappy Little Mermaid she was pretending to be but the one who gave up her tongue and song and tail and home

to be immortal. The one who'd sing a ship full of men onto the rocks and watch, ferocious, while they fell lax into the deep

Of course, she went to the bungalows when summoned. She met television actors and comics and baseball players and even that swivel-hipped singer once, during the years he'd made himself over into a film star. They made promises, but not one made good. No jets would be sent for her. No tête-à-têtes with directors. She would not be installed in a house in Beverly Hills. She passed into her thirties. Thirty-two. Thirty-five. She could not be a starlet, she understood, blowing out the candles. All she had ahead of her was the cold water, the slow ballet.

Then Sallie walked into the theater set under the water. She was seventeen, sun-scorched. She'd run away; she wanted life! Something more than her silent brother who spent eighteen hours a day at his bottling plant and came home to sleep. But the mermaids' manager just laughed at her. So skinny, she was more eel than nixie. She crossed her arms and sat down on his floor. He offered her the hot dog concession to get her up. And then she came into the darkened amphitheater and stood dumbstruck at the glinting glass, where Antoinette was in mid-performance in a red bikini top and tail. She took up all the light.

Sallie's fervent attention dilated down to the size of the woman in the window and there it would stay, fixed, for good.

She made herself indispensable. She sewed sequined posing tails, learned to use a respirator to scrape algae from the spring side of the glass. One day a year later, when Antoinette was sitting slumped in the tube room, rolling the sodden tail off her legs, Sallie edged near. She handed Antoinette a flyer for Disney's new park in Orlando. "You're Cinderella," she whispered.

Antoinette had never felt so understood in her life. "I am," she said.

She was. She was fitted into the satin dress with hoops beneath, the zirconium tiara. She had an apartment in an orange grove, a new

roommate, Sallie. Antoinette was lying in the sun on the balcony in a black bikini and slash of red lipstick when Gawain came up the stairs carrying the family rocking chair.

He filled the doorway: six-foot-eight, so hairy his beard extended into his haircut, so lonely that women could taste it in his wake when he passed. He'd been thought slow, yet when his parents died in a car crash when he was twenty, leaving him with a seven-year-old sister, he was the only one to understand the value of the family's land. He used their savings as down payment to build a plant to bottle the clean, cold water from the family's source. Selling Florida's birthright back to its owners was borderline immoral, perhaps, but the American way to make money. He accumulated wealth, spent none. When his hunger for a wife got too intense, he'd built the plantation house with vast white Corinthian columns all around. Wives loved big columns, he'd heard. He waited. No wives came.

Then his sister called to demand he bring family bits and bobs up to her new apartment, and here he was, forgetting how to breathe when he saw Antoinette, curvy and pale. She could be forgiven for not understanding what she was seeing. Poor Gawain, his mat of hair, his filthy work clothes. She smiled and lay back to be adored again by the sun.

Sallie looked at her friend, her brother; felt the pieces snap together. She said, "Gawain, this is Antoinette. Antoinette, this is my brother. He's got a few million in the bank." Antoinette rose to her feet, floated across the room, set her sunglasses atop her head. Gawain was close enough to see her pupil swallow her iris, then himself reflected in the black.

The wedding was hasty. Antoinette's mermaids sat glinting in tails on the steps of the church, throwing handfuls of fish food at the newlyweds. Sour Yankees bore the heat. Sallie had sculpted a cake topper in marzipan of her brother lifting a supine Antoinette on one arm, the adagio, grand finale of the mermaid shows. Within a week,

furniture for the house was ordered, help arranged for, bulldozers gouging out dirt for the pool. Her comfort secured, Antoinette had no more imagination for how she'd spend the money; everything else was catalog quality, good enough for her.

Antoinette took the comfort as her due; she hadn't expected the love. Gawain surprised her with his clarity and gentleness. She took him in hand. When she shaved away all that hair, she found a sensitive face, a kind mouth. With the horn-rimmed glasses she'd bought him, in bespoke suits, he was distinguished if not handsome. He smiled at her across the room, transformed. At that moment, the flicker in her leapt into flame.

Ten months later came the hurricane, the baby.

It was taken for granted by this trio of adults that Lotto was special. Golden.

Gawain poured into him all the love he'd swallowed back for so long. Baby as a lump of flesh molded out of hope. Called dumb for so long, Gawain held his son and felt the weight of genius in his arms.

Sallie, for her part, steadied the household. She hired the nannies and fired them for not being her. She chewed up banana and avocado when the baby began to eat food, and put them into his mouth as if he were a chick.

And as soon as Antoinette received the reciprocal smile, she turned her energies to Lotto. She played Beethoven on the hi-fi as loudly as it would go, shouting out musical terms she'd read about. She took correspondence courses on Early American furniture, Greek myth, linguistics, and read him her papers in their entirety. Perhaps this pea-smeared child in his highchair got only a twelfth of her ideas, she thought, but no one knew how much stuck in child brains. If he was going to be a great man, which he was, she was certain, she would start his greatness now.

Lotto's formidable memory revealed itself when he was two years old, and Antoinette was gratified. [Dark gift; it would make him easy in all things, but lazy.] One night Sallie read him a children's poem before bed, and in the morning, he came down to the breakfast room and stood on a chair and bellowed it out. Gawain applauded in astonishment, and Sallie wiped her eyes on a curtain. "Bravo," Antoinette said coolly, and held up her cup for more coffee, masking the tremble in her hand. Sallie read longer poems at night; the boy nailed them by morning. A certainty grew in him with each success, a sense of an invisible staircase being scaled. When water men came to the plantation with their wives for long weekends, Lotto snuck downstairs, crawled in the dark under the long dinner table. In the cavern there, he saw feet bulging out of the tops of the men's moccasins, the damp pastel seashells of the women's panties. He came up shouting Kipling's "If—" to a roaring ovation. The pleasure of these strangers' applause was punctured by Antoinette's thin smile, her soft, "Go to bed, Lancelot," in lieu of praise. He stopped trying hard when she praised him, she had noticed. Puritans understand the value of delayed gratification.

In the humid stink of central florida, wild long-legged birds and fruit plucked from the trees, Lotto grew. From the time he could walk, his mornings were with Antoinette, his afternoons spent wandering the sandy scrub, the cold springs gurgling up out of the ground, the swamps with the alligators eyeing him from the reeds. Lotto was a tiny adult, articulate, sunny. Until first grade, he knew no other children, as Antoinette was too good for the little town of Hamlin and the foreman's daughters were knobby and wild and she knew where that would lead, no thank you. There were people in the house to silently serve him: if he threw a towel on the ground, someone would pick it up; if he wanted food at two in the morning, it would

arrive as if by magic. Everyone worked to please, and Lotto, having no other models, pleased as well. He brushed Antoinette's hair, let Sallie carry him even when he was almost her size, sat silently next to Gawain in his office all afternoon, soothed by his father's calm goodness, the way once in a while he'd let his humor flare like a sunburst and leave them all blinking. His father was made happy just by remembering Lotto existed.

One night when he was four, Antoinette took him from his bed. In the kitchen, she put cocoa powder in a cup but forgot to add the liquid. He ate the powder with a fork, licking and dipping. They sat in the dark. For a year, Antoinette had neglected her correspondence courses in favor of a preacher on television who looked like Styrofoam a child had carved into a bust and painted with watercolors. The preacher's wife wore permanent eyeliner, her hair in elaborate cathedrals that Antoinette copied. Antoinette sent away for proselytizing tapes and listened to them with huge earphones and an 8-track beside the pool. Afterward, she'd write huge checks that Sallie would burn in the sink. "Darling," she whispered that night to Lotto. "We are here to save your soul. Do you know what'll happen to nonbelievers like your father and your aunt when Judgment Day comes?" She didn't wait for the answer. Oh, she had tried to show Gawain and Sallie the light. She was desperate to share heaven with them, but they only smiled shyly and backed away. She and her son would watch in sorrow from their seats in the clouds as the other two burned below for eternity. Lotto was the one she *must* save. She lit a match and began to read Revelation in a hushed and tremulous voice. When the match went out, she lit another, kept reading. Lotto watched the fire eat down the slender wooden sticks. As the flame neared his mother's fingers, he felt the heat in his own as if he were the one being burned. [Darkness, trumpets, sea creatures, dragons, angels, horsemen, many-eyed monsters; these would fill his dreams for decades.] He watched his mother's beautiful lips move, her eyes lost in their sockets. He

woke in the morning with the conviction that he was being watched, judged at all times. Church all day long. He made innocent faces when he thought bad thoughts. Even when he was alone, he performed.

Lotto would have been bright, ordinary, if his years continued so. One more privileged kid with his ordinary kid sorrows.

But the day came when Gawain took his daily three-thirty break from work and walked up the long green lawn toward the house. His wife was asleep by the deep end of the pool, her mouth open and palms facing the sun. He put a sheet gently over her body to keep her from burning, kissed her on the pulse of her wrist. In the kitchen, Sallie was pulling cookies from the oven. Gawain went around the house, plucked a loquat, rolled the sour fruit in his mouth, and sat on the pump beside the wild roselles, looking down the dirt lane until at last there was his boy, a gnat, housefly, mantis on his bicycle. It was the last day of seventh grade. The summer was a broad, slow river before Lotto. There would be rerun orgies, the originals he'd missed because of school: *Welcome Back, Kotter*; *Charlie's Angels*. There would be gigging for frogs in the lakes at midnight. The boy's gladness filled the lane with light. The fact of his son moved Gawain, but the actual person was a miracle, big and funny and beautiful, better than the people who made him.

But all at once, the world contracted around his boy. Astonishing. It seemed to Gawain that everything was imbued with such searing clarity that he could see to the very atoms of things.

Lotto got off his bike when he saw his father on the old pump, apparently napping. Odd. Gawain never slept during the day. The boy stood still. A woodpecker clattered against a magnolia. An anole darted over his father's foot. Lotto dropped the bike and ran, and held Gawain's face and said his father's name so loudly that he looked up

to see his mother running, this woman who never ran, a screaming white swiftness like a diving bird.

The world revealed itself as it was. Threatened from below with darkness.

Lotto had once watched a sinkhole open suddenly and swallow the old family outhouse. Everywhere: sinkholes.

He would be hurrying down the sandy lanes between the pecan trees and simultaneously feel terror that the ground would break beneath his feet and he'd go tumbling into the darkness, and that it would not. The old pleasures had been sapped of color. The sixteen-foot alligator in the swamp he'd stolen whole frozen chickens from the freezer to feed was now just a lizard. The bottling plant just another big machine.

The town watched the young widow retch into the azaleas, her handsome son patting her on the back. Same high cheekbones, red-gold hair. Beauty puts a fine point on grief, shoots its bull's-eye into the heart. Hamlin cried for the widow and her boy, not for massive Gawain, their native son.

But it wasn't only grief that made her vomit. Antoinette was pregnant again, prescribed bed rest. For months, the town watched suitors come out in their fancy cars and black suits and briefcases, and speculated which she'd choose. Who wouldn't want to marry a widow so rich and lovely?

Lotto was sinking. He tried to torpedo school, but the teachers were used to considering him excellent and would not comply. He tried to sit with his mother and listen to her religious programs, holding her swollen hand, but God had soured in him. He retained only the rudiments: the stories, the moral rigidity, the mania for purity.

Antoinette kissed his palm and let him go, placid as a sea cow in

her bed. Her emotions had gone underground. She watched everything from a tremendous remove. She grew plump, plumper. Finally, like a great fruit, she split. Baby Rachel, the pip, fell out.

When Rachel woke in the night, Lotto got to her first, settled in the chair, and fed her formula, rocking. She got him through that first year, his sister, who was hungry, whom he could feed.

His face had broken out in cystic acne, hot and pulsing under the skin; he was no longer a beautiful boy. It didn't matter. Girls were falling over themselves to kiss him now, in pity or because he was rich. In the soft, silty mouths of girls, grape gum and hot tongue, he concentrated and was able to dissolve the horror that had settled on him. Make-out parties in rec rooms, in parks at night. He biked home in the Florida dark, pumping his legs as fast as he could as if to outrun his sadness, but the sadness was always swifter, easily overtook him again.

A year and a day after Gawain died, fourteen-year-old Lotto came to the breakfast room in the dawn. He was going to take a handful of hard-boiled eggs to eat on his bike ride into town, where Trixie Dean was waiting, her parents away for the weekend. He had a bottle of WD-40 in his pocket. Lube, the boys at school had told him, was important.

From the dark, his mother's voice said, "Darling. I have news." He startled and turned on the light to see her in a black suit at the far end of the table, her hair upswept, crowning her head in flames.

Poor Muvva, he thought. So undone. So fat. She thought the painkillers she didn't stop taking after Rachel was born were her secret. They were not.

Hours later, Lotto stood on the beach, blinking. The men with the briefcases had not been suitors, but attorneys. It was all gone. The servants had vanished. Who would do the work? The plantation house, his childhood, the bottling plant, the pool, Hamlin where his ancestors had lived forever, gone. His father's ghost, gone. Traded for

an obscene amount of money. The area was nice, Crescent Beach, but this house was tiny, pink, set on stilts above the dunes like a concrete Lego box on pilings. Beneath, all was palmetto tangle and pelicans canting in the hot, salted wind. This was a beach one could drive on. The pickups blaring thrasher metal were hidden by the dunes, but in the house they could hear them.

"This?" he said. "You could've bought miles of beach, Muvva. Why are we in this dinky little box? Why *here*?"

"Cheap. Foreclosure. That money's not for me, darling," his mother said. "It's yours and your sister's. It's all in trust for you." A martyr's smile.

But what did he care about money? He hated it. [All his life, he'd avoid thinking of it, leaving the worry to others, assuming he'd have enough.] It wasn't his father, his father's land.

"Betrayal," Lotto said, weeping in fury.

His mother took his face in her hands, trying not to touch the pimples. "No, darling," she said. Her smile was radiant. "Freedom."

Lotto sulked. He sat alone on the sand. He poked dead jellyfish with sticks. He drank slushies outside the convenience store down on A1A.

And then he went for a taco at the stand where the cool kids ate lunches, this mini-yuppie in his polo shirts and madras shorts and docksiders, although this was a place where girls wore bikini tops to stores and boys left their shirts at home to bronze their muscles. He was six feet tall already, fourteen tipping into fifteen at the end of July. [A Leo, which explains him entirely.] All raw elbows and knees, his hair tufted in the back. The poor blasted acned skin. Bewildered, blinking, half orphaned, one longed to hold him to one's body to soothe him. A few girls had been attracted, had asked his name, but he was too overwhelmed to be interesting, and they abandoned him.

He ate all by himself at a picnic table. A fleck of cilantro remained on his lips, which made a sleek-looking Asian boy laugh. Beside the Asian boy sat a wild-haired girl with slashes of eyeliner, red lipstick, a safety pin over her eyebrow, a fake emerald glittering in her nose. She was staring at him so intently Lotto felt his feet begin to tingle. She'd be good at sex, he understood, without knowing how. Beside the girl was a fat boy with glasses and a sly expression, clearly the girl's twin. The Asian boy was Michael; the intense girl was Gwennie. The fat boy would be the most important. His name was Chollie.

That day there was another Lancelot at the taco shack, this one called Lance. What were the odds? Lance was scrawny, pale due to a lack of vegetables, feigned a hitch in his walk, wore a hat sideways and a T-shirt so long that it bagged over the backs of his knees. He went beatboxing to the bathroom, and when he came back, he brought a stench with him. The boy behind him kicked his shirt and out fell a tiny poop.

Someone yelled, "Lance shat his shirt!" And this went around for a while until someone else remembered that there was another Lancelot, this one vulnerable, new, weird-looking, and Lotto was being asked, "Newbie, did we scare you shitless?" and "What size diaper do he wear? Depends!" He slouched miserably. He left the food, trudged off. The twins and Michael caught up to him under a date palm. "That a real Polo?" Chollie asked, fingering the sleeve of his shirt. "Those things cost eighty bucks retail." "Choll," Gwennie said. "Stop with the consumerism." Lotto said, shrugging, "A knockoff, I think," though it clearly wasn't. They looked at him for a long moment. "Interesting," Chollie said. "He's cute," Michael said. They looked at Gwennie, who narrowed her eyes at Lotto until she looked at him through mascara-clotted slits. "Oh, fine," she sighed. "We can keep him, I guess." There was a dimple in her cheek when she smiled.

They were older, in eleventh grade. They knew things he didn't. He began to live for the sand, the beer, the drugs; he stole his mother's

painkillers to share. His sorrow for losing his father went vague during the day, though at night he still woke weeping. His birthday came, and he opened a card to find a weekly allowance that was stupid for a fourteen-year-old. Summer stretched long into the school year, ninth grade, a cakewalk with his memory. The beach was the constant from after school to night.

"Huff this," the friends said. "Smoke this." He huffed, he smoked, he forgot for a little while.

Gwennie was the most interesting of the three new friends. There was something broken in her, though nobody would tell him what. She'd walk through four lanes of traffic; she'd shove whipped cream cans into her backpack at the QuickieStop. She seemed feral to him, though the twins lived in a ranch house, had two parents, and Gwennie took three AP classes as a junior. Gwennie longed for Michael, and Michael put his hands on Lotto's knees when the others weren't looking, and Lotto dreamt at night of taking off Gwennie's clothes and making her jiggle; once, late at night, he took her cold hand and she let him hold it for a moment before squeezing it and letting it go. Lotto sometimes imagined them all as if from a bird's hover in the sky: round and round, they chased one another, only Chollie separate, gloomily watching the others' endless circles, rarely trying to edge himself in.

"You know," Chollie said to Lotto once. "I don't think I've ever had a real friend before you." They were in the arcade, playing video games and talking philosophy, Chollie from a bunch of tapes he'd gotten at the Salvation Army, Lotto from a ninth-grade textbook he could summon and quote without understanding. Lotto looked over and saw Pac-Man reflected in the grease blooms on Chollie's forehead and chin. The other boy shoved his glasses up his nose, looking away. Lotto felt tender. "I like you, too," he said, and he didn't know it was true until he'd said the words aloud: Chollie, with his uncouthness, his loneliness, his innocent money hunger, reminded him of his father.

Lotto's wild life was sustainable only into October. A small handful of months, to change so much.

This would be the pivot: late afternoon, Saturday. They'd been on the beach since morning. Chollie and Gwennie and Michael asleep on the red blanket. Sunburnt, salted by ocean, beer souring their mouths. Pipers, pelicans, an angler down the beach hauling in a foot-long golden fish. Lotto watched for a long time until an image slowly gathered that he'd seen in a book: red sea with a stony pathway flicking out into it like a hummingbird's curled tongue. He picked up a shovel a child had left behind and began digging. Skin taut, as if coated in rubber glue; the burn was bad but, beneath, the muscles loved the movement. A strong body is a glory. The sea hissed and gurgled. Slowly, the other three awoke. Gwennie stood, *pop pop* of bikini flesh. Goodness, he would lick her crown to hallux. She looked at what he was doing. She understood. Tough girl, pierced, jailhouse tattooed by her own pen and pins, but her eyes overflowed the liner. She knelt and bulldozed sand with her forearms. Chollie and Michael stole shovels from the beach cop's truck bed. Michael shook a bottle of speed he'd taken from his mother into his palm and they licked the pills up. They took turns digging, popping their jaws. Four troubled kids in late September, digging through twilight deep into dark. Moon rose blowsily, pissing white on water. Michael gathered driftwood, started a fire. Gritty sandwiches long in the past. Hands blistered to blood. They didn't care. For the most internal space, the beginning of the spiral, they flipped a lifeguard's chair on its side and buried it and took care to pack the sand down hard on it. One by one, they guessed aloud about what Lotto had meant by this sculpture: nautilus, fiddlehead, galaxy. Thread running off its spindle. Forces of nature, perfect in beauty, perfectly ephemeral, they guessed. He was too shy to say *time.* He'd woken with a dry tongue and the urge to make the abstract concrete, to build his new understanding: that this was the way that time was, a spiral. He loved the uselessness of all the effort, the ephemera

of the work. The ocean encroached. It licked their feet. It pushed around the outside wall of the spiral, fingering its way in. When the water had scooped the sand from the lifeguard's chair, revealing white like bone beneath, something broke and the fragments spun into the future. [This day would bend back and shine itself into everything.]

The very next night it all ended. Chollie, grandiose in his high, had leapt in the dark from the same lifeguard's chair, upright again. For a moment he'd been outlined against the full moon, but then he'd come down on his shin with a sickening crack. Michael had sped him to the hospital, leaving just Gwennie and Lotto alone on the beach in the cold autumn wind and darkness. Gwennie took his hand. Lotto could feel the fizz in his skin—it was his moment—he was going to lose his virginity. She rode on his handlebars to a party in an abandoned house on the marsh. They drank beers, watching the older kids hook up around the enormous fire until, at last, Gwennie pulled Lotto through the house. Votives on the windowsills, mattresses with gleaming limbs, buttocks, hands in every room. [Lust! Old story renewed in young flesh.] Gwennie opened a window and they climbed through and sat on the roof of the porch. Was she crying? Her eye shadow made scary dark jags under her eyes. She moved her mouth onto his, and he, who hadn't kissed a girl since he came to the beach, felt the familiar white-hot liquid move through his bones and kissed her back. The party was loud. She pushed him back on the sandy tar paper, and he was looking up at her face in the glow, and she lifted her skirt and moved the crotch of her underwear aside, and Lotto, who was always ready, who was ready at the most abstract imaginings of a girl—footprints of a sandpiper like a crotch, gallons of milk evoking boobs—was not ready at this oh so abrupt beginning. It didn't matter. Gwennie pushed him in though she was dry. He shut his eyes and thought of mangoes, split papayas, fruits tart and sweet and dripping

with juice, and then it was off, and he groaned and his whole body turned sweet, and Gwennie looked down with a smile growing on her bitten lips, and she closed her eyes and went away from him, and the farther she went, the closer Lotto tried to come to her, as if he were chasing a nymph in the scrub. He remembered his furtive porn mags, rolled her over on her hands and knees, and she laughed over her shoulder at him, and he closed his eyes and pounded in and felt her arch her back like a cat, and he buried his fingers in her hair, and this is when he noticed the flames licking out of the window. But he couldn't stop. Couldn't. Just hoped the house would hold until he was finished. Glorious, he was made to do this. There was cracking all around and a blistering sunlike heat, and Gwennie was shuddering beneath him, and one-two-three, he burst within her.

Then he was shouting in her ear that they had to go, go, go. He didn't tuck himself in, scooted to the edge of the roof, leapt into the sago palms below. Gwennie floated down to him, her skirt up-petaling like a tulip. They crawled out of the bushes, his ween hanging out of his fly, and were greeted by firemen sardonically applauding. "Nice work, Romeo," one said.

"Lancelot," he whispered.

"Call me Don Juan," a cop said, cranking handcuffs around Lotto's wrists, then Gwennie's. The ride was short. She wouldn't look at him. He would never see her again.

Then there was the cell with its filthy troll of a toilet in the corner, Lotto scrambling for splinters he could use as a shiv, the sputtering lightbulb that finally popped in a rain of glass at dawn.

Home. Sallie's bleak face, Rachel resting on Lotto's chest, sucking her thumb. One year old and already clenched with anxiety. It had been decided: they had to get him away from those delinquents. Antoinette closed the door behind her, cracked her thumbs, picked up

the phone. Enough cash will grease any wheel. By afternoon, it was done. By evening, he was on a gangplank shuffling into a plane. He looked back. Sallie was holding Rachel, and both were bawling. Antoinette stood, arms akimbo. She wore a twisted look on her face. Anger, he thought. [Wrong.]

The hatch closed on Lotto, boy banished for his sins.

He would never remember the trip northward, only the shock. Waking in the morning to sun and Florida, going to bed that same day in cold New Hampshire gloom. A dormitory smelling of boys' feet. An ache of hunger in his gut.

At supper that evening in the dining hall, a wedge of pumpkin pie had smacked his forehead. He looked up to find the boys laughing at him. Someone yelled, *Aw, poor Punkin Pie.* Someone else said, *Poor Florida Pie*, and someone else said, *Bumblefuck Pie*, and this got the most laughs, so this was what they called him. He, who all his life had walked everywhere in the sultry heat as if he had owned the place [he'd owned the place], felt his shoulders press to his ears as he scuttled over the cold, hard ground. Bumblefuck Pie, a hick to these boys from Boston and New York. Zitty, the childhood loveliness vanished, too tall, too skinny. A Southerner, inferior. His wealth, which had once singled him out, unremarkable among the wealthy.

He woke before dawn and sat shivering at the edge of the bed, watching the window lighten. *DOOM-doom, DOOM-doom* went his heart. The cafeteria with the cold pancakes and half-cooked eggs, the walk over frozen ground to the chapel.

He called every Sunday at six PM, but Sallie was not much for small talk, and Antoinette went nowhere these days and had little to report beyond her television programs, and Rachel was too tiny to put together sentences. His call was over in five minutes. A dark sea to swim until the next call. Nothing in New Hampshire was warm. Even the sky bore an amphibian chill. Lotto went to the hot tub by the pool as soon as the gym opened at five-thirty, trying to boil ice

out of his bones. He'd float, imagining his friends doing whippets in the sun. If he were near Gwennie, they'd already have exhausted every mode of intercourse he knew of, even the apocryphal. Only Chollie sent mail, though it was little more than jokes on pornographic postcards.

Lotto fantasized about the gym's beams, which were at least fifty feet high. A swan dive into the shallow end would put an end to it all. No, he'd climb to the top of the observatory, tie a rope around his neck, jump. No. He'd steal into the physical plant and take some of the white powders used to clean the bathrooms and eat them like ice cream until his innards frothed out. An element of the theatrical already in his imaginings. He wasn't allowed to come home for Thanksgiving, for Christmas. "Am I still being punished?" he asked. He tried to keep his voice manly, but it wobbled. "Oh, honey," Sallie said. "It's not punishment. Your mama wants you to have a better life." Better life? He was Bumblefuck Pie here; he didn't ever swear, so he couldn't even complain of his own nickname. His loneliness howled louder. All boys did sports and he was forced to row in the novice eight and his hands grew blisters that grew calluses, their own shells.

The dean summoned him. He'd heard that Lancelot was troubled. His grades were perfect; he was no dummy. Was he unhappy? The dean's eyebrows were caterpillars that chew down apple trees overnight. Yes, Lotto said, he was unhappy. Hm, the dean said. Lotto was tall, smart, rich. [White.] Boys like him were meant to be leaders. Perhaps, the dean hazarded, if he bought facial soap, he might find a higher perch on the totem pole? He had a friend who could write a prescription; he searched for a notepad to write the number down. In the open drawer, Lotto caught a glimpse of the familiar oily gleam of a pistol [Gawain's nightstand, leather holster]. It was all Lotto could

see before him as he stumbled through his days afterward, that brief glimpse of gun, the weight he could feel in his hands.

In February, the door of his English class opened and a toad in a red cape walked in. Grublike face. Pasty sheen, sparse hair. A round of snickers. The little man swirled the cape off his shoulders, wrote *Denton Thrasher* on the chalkboard. He shut his eyes, and when he opened them, his face was wracked with pain, his arms extended as if holding something heavy.

Howl, howl, howl, howl! he whispered. O, you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

Silence. No scoffing. The boys were still.

An unknown room in Lotto illuminated. Here, the answer to everything. You could leave yourself behind, transform into someone you weren't. You could strike the most frightening thing in the world—a roomful of boys—silent. Lotto had gone vague in the year and a half since his father died. In this moment, his sharpness snapped back.

The man heaved a sigh and became himself again. "Your teacher has been stricken with some disease. Pleurisy. Dropsy? I shall be taking his place. I am Denton Thrasher. Now," he said. "Tell me, striplings, what are you reading?"

"*To Kill a Mockingbird*," Arnold Cabot whispered.

"Lord save us," Denton Thrasher said, and took the wastepaper basket and swept up and down the rows, tossing the boys' paperbacks in. "One mustn't concern oneself with lesser mortals when one has barely breached the Bard. Before I am through with you, you will be sweating Shakespeare. And they call this a fine education. The Japanese will be our imperial masters in twenty years." He sat on the edge of the desk, buttressing himself before the groin with his arms. He said, "Firstly. Tell me the difference between tragedy and comedy."

Francisco Rodriguez said, "Solemnity versus humor. Gravity versus lightness."

"False," Denton Thrasher said. "A trick. There's no difference. It's a question of perspective. Storytelling is a landscape, and tragedy is comedy is drama. It simply depends on how you frame what you're seeing. Look here," he said, and made his hands into a box, which he moved across the room until it settled on Jelly Roll, the sad boy whose neck gooped out over his collar. Denton swallowed what he was about to say, moved the box of his hands on to Samuel Harris, a quick, popular, brown boy, the cox of Lotto's boat, and said "Tragedy." The boys laughed, Samuel loudest of all; his confidence was a wall of wind. Denton Thrasher moved the frame until it alighted with Lotto's face, and Lotto could see the man's beady eyes on him. "Comedy," he said. Lotto laughed with the others, not because he was a punch line, but because he was grateful to Denton Thrasher for revealing theater to him. The one way, Lotto found, he could live in this world.

He was Falstaff in the spring play; but out of makeup, his own miserable self slid back into him. "Bravo!" said Denton Thrasher in class when Lotto delivered a monologue from *Othello*, but Lotto only gave a half smile, returned to his seat. In rowing, his novice eight beat the varsity in practice and he was promoted to stroke, setting the

rhythm. Still, all was drear, even when the buds tipped the trees and the birds returned.

In April, Sallie called, weeping. Lotto couldn't come home for the summer. "There are . . . dangers," she said, and he knew she meant his friends were still hanging around. He imagined Sallie seeing them walking up the highway, her hands of their own accord veering the car to smush them. Oh, he longed to hold his sister; she was growing, she wouldn't remember him. To taste Sallie's food. To smell his mother's perfume, to let her tell him in her dreamy voice about Moses or Job as if they were people she'd known. Please, please, he wouldn't even leave the house, he whispered, and Sallie had said, in consolation, that the three of them would visit him in Boston in the summer. Florida had gone sun-bright in his mind. He felt he might go blind if he looked directly at it. His childhood was obscured in the blaze, impossible to see.

He hung up the phone, hopeless. Friendless. Abandoned. Hysterical with self-pity.

A plan solidified at dinner, after a food fight with mint brownies.

When it was dark, flowers on the trees like pale moths, he went out.

The administrative building held the dean's office; the office held the drawer that held the gun. He pictured the dean opening the door in the morning to find the splatter, his shuddering backward step.

Sallie and his mother would explode from grief. Good! He wanted them to cry for the rest of their lives. He wanted them to die crying for what they'd done to him. He felt wobbly only when he thought of his sister. Oh, but she was so little. She wouldn't know what she'd lost.

The building was a lightless chunk. He felt for the door—unlocked—it slid open under his hand. Luck was on his side. [Someone was.] He couldn't risk turning on the lights. He felt along the wall: bulletin board, coat rack, bulletin board, door, wall, door, cor-

ner. The edge of a great black space that was the enormous hall. He saw it in his mind's eye as if it were daylit: double curved staircase at the far end. Second floor catwalk lined with oils of fleshy white men. Antique boat hanging from the rafters. During the day, high clerestory windows shifted light one to the next. Tonight they were pits of dark.

He closed his eyes. He would walk bravely toward the end. He took one step, another. Loving the swishy feel of the carpet, the giddy blankness before him, he took three joyous running steps.

He was smacked in the face.

He'd fallen to his knees, was scrabbling on the carpet. It hit him again in the nose. He reached up but it had gone, but here it was again, and he fell back, felt it graze over him. His hands flailed, touched cloth. Cloth over wood, no, not wood, foam with a steel core, no, not foam, pudding with a tough skin? Felt down. Felt leather. Laces? Shoe? He was dabbed in the teeth.

He crabwalked backward, a high-pitched keening noise coming from somewhere, and moved wildly down the walls, and after an eternity, found the light switch, and in the horrible bright, found himself looking at the boat suspended from the ceiling, tipped down on one side, dangling the worst Christmas ornament ever. A boy. Dead boy. Blue-faced. Tongue out. Glasses cocked. In a moment came the recognition: oh, poor Jelly Roll, hanging from the bowball of a sweep eight. He'd climbed up, tied the noose. Leapt. Mint brownie from dinner all over his shirt. The sound died out of Lotto's chest. He ran.

After the police, the ambulance, came the dean. He brought Lotto doughnuts and a cup of cocoa. His eyebrows danced all over his face, chewing on lawsuits, copycat suicides, leaks to newspapers. He dropped Lotto at his dorm, but when the taillights winked away, Lotto came out again. He couldn't be near all the other boys, who were, just

then, dreaming innocent anxiety dreams of girl bits and summer internships.

He found himself sitting in the auditorium on the stage when the chapel bell chimed three AM.

The long sweep of seats held the memory of bodies. He pulled out the joint he'd been intending to smoke just before he touched the barrel to his teeth.

Nothing made sense. There was an airy whistling off stage right. Denton Thrasher, sans glasses and in frayed plaid pajamas, crossed the stage, dopp kit in hand.

"Denton?" Lotto said.

The man peered into the shadows, clutching the bag to his chest. "Who's there?" he asked.

"Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself," Lotto said.

Denton padded upstage. "Oh, Lancelot. You startled the sap out of me." He gave a cough and said, "Do I scent the sultry waft of cannabis?"

Lotto put the joint into his outstretched fingers, and Denton took a drag.

"What are you doing in your pajamas?" Lotto said.

"The question is, my dear, what you are doing here." He sat next to Lotto, then said, with a sideways grin, "Or were you looking for me?"

"No," Lotto said.

"Oh," Denton said.

"But here you are," Lotto said.

When there was no more joint to smoke, Denton said, "Saving my pennies. Crashing in the costume room. I'm resigned to a destitute old age. It's not the worst. No bedbugs. And I like the constant bells."

On cue, the three-thirty bell chimed, and they laughed.

Lotto said, "Tonight I found a boy who hanged himself. Hung himself. Hanged himself."

Denton went still. "Oh, child," he said.

"I didn't really know him. They called him Jelly Roll."

"Harold," Denton said. "That boy. I tried to get him to talk to me, but he was so sad. You boys were terrible. Savages. Oh, not you, Lotto. I never meant you. I'm so sorry you had to be the one to find him."

Something filled Lotto's throat, and he saw himself swinging from the scull until the door opened, the light flicked on. It came over him that even had he crept up the stairs and found the dean's office unlocked and opened the drawer and felt the weight of the gun in his hand that something in him would have resisted. It would never have ended that way. [True. It was not his time.]

Denton Thrasher gathered Lotto in his arms and wiped his face with the hem of his pajama top, revealing a furry white belly, and Lotto was rocked on the edge of the stage, smelling witch hazel and Listerine and pajamas worn too many times between washes.

This Lancelot child in Denton's lap. So young, crying past the point of immediate sorrow into something deeper. It frightened Denton. Four o'clock. Sweet Lancelot, so talented, but this was a little much, even if Denton saw in him the rare spark. His looks were both promising and as if some essential promise had fled and left wreckage in its wake, which was odd, the boy being fourteen at most. Well, beauty could come back, perhaps. In ten years he might be ravishing, grow into his great goofy body, into his charm: already, there was the bigness of a real actor on the stage. Alas, Denton knew, the world was full of real actors. Christ, the bells of four-thirty, he was about to go out of his skull. Denton could not hold this sorrow. He was too weak. [Grief is for the strong, who use it as fuel for burning.] He thought, I'll be stuck here with this boy forever. He knew only one thing that could shut off this flow of tears, and in a panic, he pushed the child upright and scrabbled in his lap and took the surprised pale worm out

of his jeans, and it grew impressively in his mouth, thank god, and this alone was enough to stop the sobs. Baton of youth! Youthfully swift, too. O, that this too too solid flesh was now melting, thawing, resolving itself into a spunky dew. Denton Thrasher wiped his mouth and sat up. What had he done? The boy's eyes vanished in shadow: "Going to bed," he whispered, and he ran down the aisles, through the doors, out. Shame, Denton thought. Dramatic, to be forced to flee in the night. He would miss this place. He would regret not watching Lancelot grow. He stood and took a bow. "Be blessed," he said to the great empty theater and went off to the costume room to pack.

Samuel Harris, up early for crew, was watching out the window when he saw poor Bumblefuck Pie run across the dark quad, weeping. Since the other boy arrived halfway through the fall semester, he'd been so blue he was practically iridescent with sadness. Samuel was the cox of Bumblefuck's boat, practically nestled every day in his lap, and despite the fact that the other kid was kind of a pariah, Samuel worried about him, six-foot-three and only a hundred fifty pounds, frozen-looking, cheeks like slabs of beaten tenderloin. It seemed clear he was going to hurt himself. When Samuel heard Lotto rushing up the stairs, he opened his door and manhandled him into the room, fed him oatmeal cookies that his mother sent from home and this way got the whole story. Oh god, Jelly Roll! Lotto said that after the police came, he'd sat in the theater for hours to calm down. He seemed to want to say something more, considered it, packed it away. Samuel wondered. He thought of what his father the senator would do and drew a man's stern face over his own. He reached out a hand to Lotto's shoulder and patted the other boy until he calmed. It felt as if they'd crossed a bridge a second before it collapsed.

For a month, Samuel watched Lotto drag himself around the campus. And when school let out, Samuel took the other boy with him to

his summerhouse in Maine. There, with the senator father and Samuel's whippet mother, star debutante of Atlanta's highest black society, Lotto experienced sailboats and clambakes and friends in Lilly Pulitzer and Brooks Brothers knitwear, champagne, pies cooling on the windowsill, Labrador retrievers. Samuel's mother had bought him facial soap and good clothes, had made him eat and stand tall. He grew into himself. He found success with a forty-year-old cousin of Samuel's who cornered him in the boathouse; brown skin tasted the same as pinkish, Lotto found to his delight. When they returned to school for sophomore year, Lotto had tanned so golden it was easy to overlook the zit scars on his cheeks. He was blonder, looser. He smiled, made jokes, learned to expand himself on the stage and off. By never swearing, he showed his cool. By Christmas, Samuel's friend had become more popular than even Samuel was, he of the dust-devil confidence, of the shining great brown eyes, but it was too late to mind. Every time Samuel looked at his friend, all those many years of their friendship, he saw how he, himself, was a miracle worker, how he had brought Lotto back to life again.

Then, just before Thanksgiving of sophomore year, Lotto, coming home after math study one day, found Chollie, waxy and smelly, slumped in the hallway outside his door. "Gwennie," Chollie said, and groaned, folded himself in half. Lotto dragged him into the room. Lotto got a garbled story; Gwennie had overdosed. She couldn't have died, dangerous Gwennie, vibrating with life. But she had. Chollie had found her. He'd run away. He had nowhere to go but to Lotto. The beige linoleum floor turned into the ocean, crashed and crashed against Lotto's shins. He sat down. How swiftly things spun. Two minutes ago, he'd been a kid, thinking about his Nintendo system, worried about asymptotes and sines. Now he was heavy, adult. Later, when the boys had calmed and they went for pizza in the little town, Lotto said

to Chollie what he'd wanted to say to Gwennie since the night of the fire: "I'll take care of you." He felt brave. Lotto let Chollie sleep in his bed for the rest of the term; he didn't mind the floor. [Through the rest of high school, through college, Chollie would take the money Lotto would give him gladly, go out into the world, eventually return. He sat in on every class he could; he had no degrees, but he learned more than enough. If nobody reported Lotto, it was because they loved Lotto, not because they cared a whit about Chollie, who was a person only Lotto could stand.]

The world was precarious, Lotto had learned. People could be subtracted from it with swift bad math. If one might die at any moment, one must live!

Thus began the era of women. Trips to the city, sweating through polo shirts at the nightclubs, lines of coke on midcentury-modern coffee tables, parents out of town. *It's okay, man, don't freak, the housekeeper doesn't care.* Threeway with two girls in someone's bathroom. "Maybe you could come home this summer," Antoinette said. "Oh, *now* you want me," Lotto said sarcastically, refusing. Headmaster's daughter on the lacrosse field. Hickeys. Maine again, forty-one-year-old cousin at a seedy motel, neighbor girl in a hammock, tourist girl swimming out to the sailboat at night. Samuel rolling his eyes with envy. Volvo station wagon bought with Lotto's fat allowance. Three inches by September, six-foot-six. Othello in eponymous same, and a Desdemona from town, seventeen, shaved down there like a prepube, Lotto discovered. Thanksgiving at Samuel's New York house. Christmas, Sallie took him and Rachel to Montreal. "No Muvva?" he said, trying to not show his hurt. Sallie blushed. "She's ashamed of the way she looks," she said, gently. "She's fat now, hushpuppy. She never leaves the house." Early admission to Vassar, the only school he applied to, overconfident; an excellent party there, a party to end all parties, no reason for his choice but that. Celebration with Samuel's fifteen-year-old sister up for the weekend in a handicapped

bathroom. Never, never tell Samuel. Searing glare. What am I, an idiot? Surprise! Samuel was going to Vassar, too, had gotten in everywhere but would have died before he missed Lotto's fun. Only skinny Sallie and four-year-old Rachel, who wouldn't let him put her down, came up for his graduation. No Muvva. To offset the sadness, Lotto imagined his mother as the mermaid she'd once been, not the obese woman who'd swallowed her. In Maine, Samuel's forty-two-year-old cousin in Switzerland, alas. Samuel's sister in an orange bikini, with a mop-haired boyfriend mooning behind her, thank god. Only one girl that whole summer, adder-tongued ballerina: what she could do with her legs! Games of croquet. Fireworks. Keg on the beach. Sailing regatta.

Then it was the last week of the summer. Samuel's parents getting misty, untangling the new Labrador puppy from the table. "Our boys," the mother said at the lobster restaurant, weepy. "They're growing up." Boys, considering themselves grown up lo! these four years, were kind to her and kept straight faces.

From the airless campus of the boys' prep school to the wonderland of college. Coed bathrooms: soapy breasts. Dining hall: girls tonguing soft-serve ice creams. Within two months, Lotto was called Master of the Hogs. Hoagmeister. It's not true that he had no standards, it's simply that he saw the stun in every woman. Earlobes like drupes. Soft golden down edging the temples. Such things outshone the less savory rest. Lotto imagined his life as an antipriest, devoting his soul to sex. He'd die an ancient satyr, a houseful of sleek nymphs gamboling him to the grave. What if his greatest gifts were the ones he employed in bed? [Delusion! Tall men have such miles of limbs that it strains the heart to pump blood to the nether bits. He charmed others into believing him better than he was.]

His roommates couldn't believe the parade of girls. Fleabitten women's studies major with nip rings; townie with a roll cresting out of her acid-washed jeans; neuroscience major, prim part, thick glasses,

who specialized in the reverse cowgirl. The roommates would watch the trek through the common room, and when Lotto and the girl disappeared into Lotto's room, they would fetch the book they kept with taxonomies.

Australianopithecus: floppy-haired Aussie, later a famous jazz violinist.

Virago stridenticus: ambiguously gendered punkette Lotto had picked up downtown.

Sirena ungulatica: valedictorian, velvety face atop a three-hundred-pound body.

The girls would never know. The roommates didn't think they were cruel. But when, two months in, they showed the book to Lotto, he was furious. He bellowed, called them misogynists. They shrugged. Women who screwed deserved the scorn they got. Lotto was doing what men do. They didn't make up the rules.

And Lotto never brought home the men. They didn't get put in any book. They remained unseen, these ghosts of hungers in his bed, out of it.

It was the last night of Lotto's college play. Hamlet. The theatergoers who came in after the circuit of the cowbell were soaked; clouds that had oppressed the valley all day had split. Ophelia was played naked, her tremendous boobs blue-veined like Stilton cheeses. Hamlet was Lotto and vice versa. Every performance, he'd gotten a standing ovation.

In the dark wings, he cracked his neck and took a breath into his stomach. Someone was sobbing, someone lit a cigarette. Shuffling of a barn at dusk. Whispers. *Yeah, I got a job in banking . . . She stood upon the balcony, inimically mimicking him hiccupping while amicably welcoming him in . . . Break a leg. Break both!*

Reverberating hush. Curtain opened. Watchmen clomped out.

"Who's there?" Inside Lotto the switch flipped on, and his life receded. Relief.

Husk of Lotto watched in the wings as he, Hamlet, sauntered on.

He came to himself again when his doublet was sweat-soaked and he was bowing, and the noise of the audience rose until his final standing ovation. Professor Murgatroyd in the front row, supported between his lover and his lover's lover, shouting in his Victorian bluestocking's voice, "Bravo, bravo." Armful of flowers. Girls he'd slept with, one after the other, hugging him, oily slicks of lip gloss on his tongue. Who's this? Bridget with the spaniel's face, oh dear, clutching him. They'd hooked up what, two times? [Eight.] He'd heard she was calling herself his girlfriend, poor thing. "See you at the afterparty, Bridge," he said gently, extricating himself. The audience faded into the rain. Ophelia squeezed his arm. See him later? He'd enjoyed the two times they'd met up in the handicapped bathroom during rehearsals. Indeed, he *would* be seeing her, he murmured, and she carried her mad-girl's body away.

He closed himself into a bathroom stall. The building emptied out, front doors locked. When he emerged, the dressing rooms were swept. All was dark. He took his greasepaint off slowly, watching himself in the low wattage. He reapplied foundation, smoothing the pits in his face, and left the eyeliner on, liking how vivid it made his blue. It was good to be the last person in this sacred place. Anywhere else, he hated being left with himself. But tonight, the last glory of his youth, everything he'd lived so far filled him up: his steaming lost Florida, the ache where his father had been, his mother's fervent belief in him, God who watched, the gorgeous bodies he'd temporarily forgotten himself inside. He let it all wash over him in waves. He took the blaze of feeling through the dark rain toward the cast party, which he could hear from a half mile away, and walked in to applause, someone putting a beer in his hand. Minutes or aeons later, he stood on a window ledge while the world behind him flashed with lightning.

Trees turned to sparked neurons in silhouette. The campus quick ember, slow ash.

At his feet the party roiled with cutting-edge early nineties fashions, midriffs and piercings and ball caps to hide receding hairlines, teeth empurpled by the black light, brown lipstick with brown liner and cartilage cuffs and biker boots and exposed boxers and bump and grind and Salt-N-Pepa and green-glowing dandruff and deodorant streaks and cheekbones highlighted to shine.

Somehow he'd acquired an empty jug of water that someone had Ace-bandaged to his head. There was shouting: "All Hail the Water Princeling." Oy: this was bad. His friends had found out where his money came from. He had hidden it, drove a beat-up Volvo for goodness sakes. He was shirtless, he found, better to show off his muscles. He was aware of how he appeared at every angle in the room, and what the jug stole in dignity, it returned in militaristic jauntiness. He puffed his chest. Now he had a bottle of gin in his hand and his friends were shouting "Lotto! Lotto! Lotto!" as he tilted it to his lips and took in a long draught, which would turn to soldering flux in his brain by morning and make his thoughts impenetrable, impossible to part.

"The world is ending," he bellowed. "Why not hump?"

A cheer from the dancers at his feet.

He raised his arms. [The fatal look up.]

In the doorway, suddenly, her.

Tall, in silhouette, wet hair casting the hall light into a halo, stream of bodies on the stairs behind her. She was looking at him, though he couldn't see her face.

She moved her head and there was half of it, strong and bright. High cheekbones, plush lips. Tiny ears. She was dripping from walking through the rain. He loved her first for the stun of her across this thump and dance.

He had seen her before, he knew who she was. Mathilde, whatser-

name. Beauty like hers cast glimmers on the walls even across campus, phosphorescence on the things she touched. She'd been so far above Lotto—so far above every person at the school—she had become mythological. Friendless. Icy. She went weekends to the city; she was a model, hence the fancy clothes. She never partied. Olympian, elegant on her mount. Yes—Mathilde Yoder. But his victory had made him ready for her tonight. Here she was for him.

Behind him in the crashing storm, or maybe within him, a sizzle. He leapt into the grind of bodies, kneeing Samuel in the eye, crushing some poor small girl to the ground.

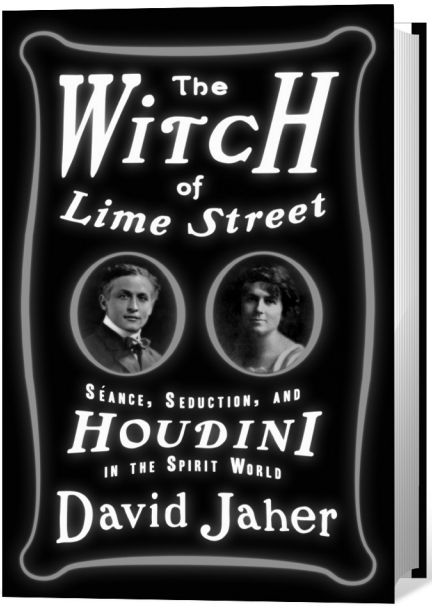
Lotto swam up out of the crowd and crossed the floor to Mathilde. She was six feet tall in bobby socks. In heels, her eyes were at his lip line. She looked up at him coolly. Already he loved the laugh she held in her, which nobody else would see.

He felt the drama of the scene. Also, how many people were watching them, how beautiful he and Mathilde looked together.

In a moment, he'd been made new. His past was gone. He fell to his knees and took Mathilde's hands to press them on his heart. He shouted up at her, "Marry me!"

She threw back her head, baring her white snaky neck and laughed and said something, her voice drowned. Lotto read those gorgeous lips as saying, "Yes." He'd tell this story dozens of times, invoking the black light, the instant love. All the friends over all the years, leaning in, secret romantics, grinning. Mathilde watching him from across the table, unreadable. Every time he told the story, he would say that she'd said, "Sure."

Sure. Yes. One door closed behind him. Another, better, flung open.



Perfect for readers of meticulously researched, historical, character-driven nonfiction like that of Erik Larson, Tom Reiss, Karen Abbott, Kai Bird, and Gary Krist.

In 1924, the pretty wife of a distinguished Boston surgeon came to embody the raging national debate over Spiritualism, a movement devoted to communication with the dead. Reporters dubbed her the blonde Witch of Lime Street, but she was known to her followers simply as Margery.

Her most vocal advocate was none other than Sherlock Holmes' creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who believed so thoroughly in Margery's powers that he urged her to enter a controversial contest, sponsored by *Scientific American* and offering a large cash prize to the first medium declared authentic by its impressive five-man investigative committee. Admired for both her exceptional charm and her dazzling effects, Margery was the best hope for the psychic practice to be empirically verified. Her supernatural gifts beguiled four of the judges. There was only one left to convince . . . the acclaimed escape artist, Harry Houdini.

Available October 2015

Crown • Hardcover: 9780307451064 • eBook: 9780307451088

🎧 CD: 9781101924327 • 🎧 AD: 9781101924334

Published in the United States by Crown Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.
www.crownpublishing.com

CROWN is a registered trademark and the Crown colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-307-45106-4
eBook ISBN 978-0-307-45108-8

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Jacket design by Elena Giavaldi
*Jacket photographs: (*Harry Houdini*) Corbis; (*Mina Stinson*) Mary Evans Picture Library/ Everett Collection*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

A Jaunt with Kitty

Mrs. Crandon excelled at no sport, though she loved a bracing horse ride along the Back Bay Fens. How wonderful it was to own and take out a horse again. On her mount she kept a pace that her husband found dangerous. For that matter, he always felt she drove her car too fast. During the War she had been a volunteer ambulance driver. In that capacity she was sent to the New London naval base that he commanded. After their marriage, Mina usually drove him around and too often he had to remind her there was no one dying in their automobile.

One day early in March, Mina went for a horse ride with her good friend Kitty Brown. They discussed Dr. Crandon's improbable interest in spirit mediumship, which was hard for either of them to take seriously yet. Her husband was a gynecologist, Mina joked; naturally he was interested in exploring the netherworld. But she told Kitty that a séance sounded like great fun. And she decided on a lark that she wanted one that day.

The minister of the First Spiritualist Church had been highly recommended by her friend Mrs. Richardson. "So entirely in search of amusement, I went with [Kitty] in order to gather some good laughing material with which to tweet the doctor." They showed up at their clairvoyant's door, still wearing their boots and riding breeches, and expecting that he would "try to put them off to a later date, or that they would meet some other easily recognized variety of mediumistic chicanery." Instead the minister seemed forthright and kept his ritual short and sweet.

Welcoming them into his study, he promptly went into a trance. Within minutes he was sensing spirits, among them a strapping, good-humored blond boy claiming to be Mina's brother. Her first thought was to wonder what was this medium's method? How could he know of her dead brother in heaven? "If this is so," she said to the ghost, "give me some evidence that will identify you." She noticed that Kitty was staring over her shoulder, as

if trying to picture the spirit that the medium saw behind her. Resisting the urge to look back, Mina glanced at her boots. Perhaps the medium caught that gesture. He said that her brother was reminding her of some trouble she had with her boots when they once went riding. Mina recalled her pony mired in a swamp as a child. When she dismounted she too became stuck, and her brother, always resourceful, had used a knife to cut open her boot and free her. She suspected that this is what happens with mediums. They make a hit and you fill in the rest of it. What the minister told her next, though, was even more surprising: Mina was being called to "The Work."

He said that she had rare powers and soon all would know it.

Thinking about the séance on her way home, it made perfect sense to Mina that her brother should be the one to come through to her, since they'd had a special bond—growing up together "in relative isolation from the other children." When he was a child, Walter was believed to have psychic gifts. He played at "table turning and spirit rapping"—the occult arts he had witnessed on his first trip to Boston. That is, until her father, pious Isaac Stinson, "set his foot down and firmly forbade it." The séance had been sacrilege in their home.

Since marrying Roy Crandon she had adopted the agnosticism of his enlightened circle. But while he considered mediumistic research a science, it was to her a curious trifle. "Many things were far from my mind, but few farther than spiritism," she later said. "I was interested in my home, my boy, in music and dancing, very much like any normal woman. And when the doctor my husband—began to read about psychical phenomena and tell me of it I rather disliked the subject."

Still bewildered, Mina told the doctor what had happened at the séance. His dismissive reaction surprised her. Dr. Crandon had been corresponding with respected professors and scientists. He declared himself "intellectually convinced" now of an afterlife. But he trusted no professional medium. No Spiritualist church. And no message dispensed by oracular ministers. "It's all a fake," he told her. She too decided that she had been hoodwinked. It was preposterous to think that the dead could come back, and that she might produce them. For a time she forgot what the medium told her.

A Square Deal for the Psychics

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE SEES EVIL IN REWARD OF $5,000 FOR SPIRIT
—*New York Times*

Malcolm Bird believed in no God, spirit, or discarnate voice. He saw his contest as purely a scientific enterprise, an investigation into a mysterious mental—yet natural—force. With all the talk of miracles, he believed that he and his colleagues at the *Scientific American* were the ones to use modern equipment and methods to answer the age-old question concerning the supposed powers that mediums possess. Let DeMille have the prophet Moses for his movie. What Bird invoked, when presenting Munn's contest to the *Scientific American* reader, was the most exalted psychic in the ancient world, the Priestess of Apollo.

For fourteen centuries a woman was chosen to be the Sun God's oracle, and pilgrims flocked to Delphi from as far as Asia to receive her counsel. The Oracle at Delphi inhaled magical vapors thought to emanate from the Earth's navel and then delivered her intoxicated forecasts from atop a cauldron in Apollo's Temple. Her words were incomprehensible and required a Delphic priest to interpret: men were rational; women psychic and ecstatic. There came a time, however, when one of her monastic men, the historian Plutarch, noticed the gases from the chasm were losing their aroma. Christianity had begun to flourish in Rome, and with the waft of the new religion the seeress's day was over.

♦

Even during the Oracle's reign there was debate, Bird claimed, as to whether she was "inspired or drunk or merely canny." So in 1923, with psychics once again conducting the rites of a religion, the argument resumed: one man's quack was another's Cassandra. "The controversy of today," he observed, "is essentially the controversy of 1000 B.C. translated into modern terms and given a modern setting." The difference, as the *Scientific American*

saw it, was that the modern clairvoyant worked in a rational rather than superstitious world. If she wanted Munn's purse, she would have to face twentieth-century music, a score to be composed by some of the top psychic researchers and experts of the time—Prince, McDougall, Comstock, Carrington, and Houdini.

Bird admitted that it might be too ambitious to hope to solve the psychic riddle once and for all, but he explained that the contest's mandate was to answer the question for the present generation—many of whom were seeking mediumistic guidance as none had since the heyday of the oracle. Accordingly, the New York–based judges—Carrington, Houdini, and Prince—and the *Scientific American* representatives—Bird, Munn, and Lescarboura—gathered in the magazine's editorial room. While Houdini paced the floor or fingered a deck of cards, and Bird smoked Old Golds, the men exchanged views on psychics and framed the rules for the contest. Houdini wanted to employ thorough restraint to ensure no possibility of fraud. To his annoyance, Carrington insisted his control methods were too extreme, and the other judges agreed. Clairvoyants would be searched and rope could be used to bind them, it was decided, but not in the draconian fashion Houdini had in mind. "We do not wish to draw any picture of a medium trussed up like a roast fowl," said Bird.

But who and where were the great modern psychics? The first medium Bird wanted to bring to New York was Ada Bessinet, an Ohio seeress whom Doyle called the most outstanding physical medium in the States. In a sitting for him, she had produced the spectral face of his mother, wrinkles and all. Mrs. Bessinet summarily refused to sit with Houdini, however, and there was no immediate alternative. The contest needed Doyle's sanction, all felt, for the worthy psychics in Europe and America to step forward. "I place the announcement in your hands," Lescarboura wrote Doyle. "First, because your challenge has been instrumental in our making it; and second in the hope that you may influence some of the more prominent British mediums to come to this country for the good of the psychic cause."

It was "a square deal" they were offering the psychics. The mediums could work in complete darkness, Bird announced, and in a sympathetic circle. "We do not accuse the photographer of chicanery because he shuns the light, and insists that what light be present be red. We know also, if we

will but admit it, that a hostile atmosphere does make more difficult the exercise of the mental faculties." As Bird had hoped, many psychics were assured by his statements. They were eager to win the endorsement of the prestigious *Scientific American;* the problem was that no credible mediums were in the ranks of those showing up at the Woolworth.

Among the first aspirants was a male medium who asked the magazine officials to lock the door to the room in which he was to be interviewed. Only then, in a low voice, did he confide to Bird that a spirit had channeled him the secrets to a marvelous machine for which he wanted Munn & Co. to pay him $25,000 to develop. He was dismissed without further questions.

The next candidate, an Italian barber from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, said that when it came to producing ghosts, turning tables, and talking with famous dead men—Shakespeare, Caesar, and Ben Franklin—he was better at the dark sport than any queen of ectoplasm. His offer was also rejected.

It was a parade, Bird felt, of crackpots, queens of mystery, and charlatans. An older female psychic who visited the *Scientific American* office told her interviewers that after many years studying the news sheets she had observed that citizens who got their faces in the papers resembled certain animals, a phenomenon that she believed Mr. Aristotle of ancient Greece had discovered about famous persons in general. To exhibit her case, the medium brought with her a bulging valise containing thousands of cut-out faces from the newspapers, each with an animal counterpart attached to it. Unfortunately, as she sat down her suitcase opened, strewing pictures over the floor and under desks. It took the office staff practically an hour, Bird reported, to retrieve them all for the distressed psychic. Her bid to compete for Munn's prize was, to her great disappointment, declined. One did not summon men like Comstock and McDougall from Boston or pull Houdini from whatever skyscraper he was hanging from or movie he was making to test some quack just off the train from Lily Dale or Cassadega.*

Doyle had warned them this would happen. Responding to the an-

---

* The two Spiritualist communities in the USA.

nouncement of the *Scientific American* contest, Sir Arthur—in a letter dispatched to Munn & Co. and published in the New York dailies—maligned the psychic tournament as "a very dangerous thing. A large money reward will stir up every rascal in the country." The more gifted psychic, he promised, would be wary of a prize contest. "For the sake of the cause and their own reputations they would help you," he conceded, but only "if you got the personal support and endorsement of leaders of the movement."

As it happened, to involve *him* would not be an impossible task. Despite an aversion to the crasser elements of the contest, Sir Arthur was pleased "to see a journal of the standing of the *Scientific American* taking an interest in psychic matters." He had this in mind: that Orson Munn should fund an international search to be conducted by a savvy but fair individual. This man would scour both Europe and the United States for talented mediums. If the *Scientific American* were to send such a representative to him, Sir Arthur promised to give him entrée to the best clairvoyants in England, to essentially take him under his wing. Above all, Munn's agent had to be,someone who was courteous and receptive—not the least antagonistic in the séance.

"Everything," he told them, "depends on your man."

One month later, in early February, Malcolm Bird crossed the Brooklyn Bridge with two reporters who lived in the outer borough. Their conversation concerned in large part the preparations for the psychic contest taking up Bird's every working hour. Maybe it was the effect of the visit they had just made to a Broadway speakeasy, but there was something otherworldly to the twilight view from the bridge promenade. The clusters of yellow light beneath hazy domes and spires made the city seem a fairyland on opalescent water.

The evening's drinks notwithstanding, Bird's companions were sober materialists who gave little credence to the psychic revival. As for Bird, he liked to claim that he spoke "neither as believer nor as disbeliever" and would not make up his mind until better acquainted with the spirit medium. This was soon to happen; pursuant to Doyle's plan, Bird had recently

booked passage across the Atlantic—where he intended to investigate the best clairvoyants in Europe.

Actually, Bird had reserved two possible crossings in order to ensure, depending on which mediums were available, the most opportune arrival. He also hoped to see something of London during his visit, but as it would turn out, he'd only get a glimpse of Westminster and Parliament, and not see the Tower at all, so busy was he with Doyle's psychics.

The first medium he met was John Sloan, a meek Scotchman whom Bird judged to have an intelligence "comfortably below the mean." This was the first séance the producer of the *Scientific American* contest had ever attended, and what struck him straightaway was his utter blindness when hands were clasped and the candles extinguished. A proper séance, as Bird was experiencing, is a sphere into which no light leaks, no human eyes adjust—as they might to a bedroom at night or to starlight. "One can stay there till kingdom come," he vouched, "and visibility will remain at the zero mark. One who has never attended a dark séance has in all probability never been in this sort of darkness."

Soon after the sitting commenced, voices came in a hushed whisper through the spirit trumpet sitting on the table and most assuredly not, Bird was certain, from the mouth of the medium seated next to him. When an invisible entity calling itself Captain Morgan took over the trumpet, things got "pretty thick." And what happened next stunned the visiting American.

Although Bird had come to the séance incognito, the voice described him strolling across the Brooklyn Bridge with two companions three weeks prior! Captain Morgan claimed to have followed Bird's movements ever since the editor had made plans to visit Europe for work that the spirits deemed important.* Bird had reserved two tickets for his passage, the Captain revealed. The editor could not fathom how this wraith could utter things known only to a few colleagues with the magazine.

Wracking his brain afterward, Bird could not determine any means of trickery; he later wired the friends with whom he had tramped to Brook-

---

* The spirit misidentified one of Bird's friends on the Brooklyn Bridge as a woman and was off by one day as far as the precise date of the shadowed excursion.

lyn, but neither could solve the mystery. How many blank séances had Houdini endured in his quest for spiritist proofs? Yet Bird, from the start, had something eerie to report under the credible masthead of the *Scientific American*.

Next, Sir Arthur directed Bird's European talent search to one of the most revered psychics in England. It was Gladys Osborne Leonard who first reunited Sir Oliver Lodge with his dead son Raymond; and Doyle said she was the best trance medium he knew of. The pleasant Mrs. Leonard would not be the star, however, of the *Scientific American* tests. Mr. Bird expected more for his thirty shillings. When the medium was possessed by the girlish spirit Feda, a number of discarnate voices were introduced to him—all murmuring that they had known him in life while cascading him with general information. Almost none of these personalities were the least recognizable to Bird—and a spirit channeled by Mrs. Leonard was way off in describing him. "I pause here," noted Bird, "to remark that this picture of me as a shrinking violet, highly sensitive to all sorts of delicate conditions is just about as whole-hearted a miss as any spirit ever made."

Whether wrong or right, these spectral voices were not what the *Scientific American* was seeking; theirs wasn't a contest of mental mediumship or second sight. Evan Powell, the Welsh channel through whom Sir Arthur first received communications from Kingsley, was more the model for their tests, as he produced not only messages from the dead but glowing forms and unambiguous physical effects. During an early-afternoon séance in London, Powell caused flowers to rise from a vase and caress each sitter's hand and face. While Bird suspected that Powell had slipped a hand free of his bonds, he was nonetheless impressed with the demonstration. "It is not inconsistent to speak of a given psychic performance as partly genuine and partly fraudulent," he explained. Regardless, Powell, whose gifts were being studied by the sympathetic British College of Psychic Science, would not commit to coming to America for more stringent tests.

On to the Continent, where Bird sat in Berlin with the mystifying Frau Vollhard. This dramatic medium, while kept under strict control, instantly materialized branches and large stones that struck the séance table. In their post-séance interview, Frau Vollhard's vivid blue eyes became even brighter when Bird converted the contest's prize stakes for her at 20,000 inflated

marks per dollar. "But even for the purpose of winning such a colossal sum," he informed the *Scientific American* reader, "she would not sit in other than her own clothes and would not submit to more than a perfunctory search."

Just as he was ready to leave the Berlin apartment, and then Europe altogether, something else, rather terrifying, occurred when Frau Vollhard abruptly shrieked then revealed on the back of her hand spontaneous stigmata—deep bleeding punctures, as if she had just been bitten by a demonic creature. But the *Scientific American* committee would never examine such phenomena; the special conditions the medium insisted on—that her baggy clothing be allowed, her person remain uninspected—had marked her, like all other candidates presented to Bird, as unsuitable for further consideration.

The New Sherlock Holmes

During the 1920s, Sigmund Freud advanced the idea that the death drive, what he called *Todestrieb*, is intrinsic to our nature. As if to prove it, the Great Houdini leaped, while others peered, into the abyss. While not one to dabble in the new psychology, Sir Arthur wondered whether the magician had an unconscious urge to join his mother in the next life. After their Atlantic City séance a trusted medium warned the Doyles that their friend's life was in danger. And how awful it is when a superhero lies broken on the pavement.

In New York a daredevil known as the Human Fly lost his grip while scaling the façade of a skyscraper. With the words SAFETY LAST—the title of the Harold Lloyd picture he was promoting—painted on the back of his iridescent white garment, the superhero seemed to hang lighter than air for a moment, then plummeted ten stories to the asphalt. The Human Fly died in front of 20,000 aghast spectators at Greeley Square—among them his twenty-year-old bob-haired wife, who would receive for her loss the $100 he was supposed to have been paid for the caper. "For goodness sake take care of those dangerous stunts of yours," Sir Arthur wrote Houdini. "You have done enough of them. I speak because I have just read of the death of the Human Fly. Is it worth it?"

Indeed, it was worth it! All of Houdini's wealth and notoriety came from performing dangerous feats; it would be far worse to walk the streets unrecognized than to fall ten stories. Yet he appreciated Sir Arthur's paternal concern for his welfare, especially since the relationship between the two was practically ruptured.

♦

He is "just as nice and sweet as any mortal I have ever been near," Houdini said of Sir Arthur shortly after their first encounter at Windlesham. Then

came the marvelous times in New York and the culminating séance in Atlantic City. Soon, though, there were dark clouds in paradise: a rift had begun over exactly what had happened that afternoon in the Doyles' hotel room.

After returning to England, the novelist insisted that Houdini was transformed by the reunion with his mother, and that he had finally recognized his own power as a spirit medium: "Dear Houdini—Is there any truth in the story of Doyle that you got an evidential message from your mother through Lady Doyle?" wrote Eric Dingwall. "Also that you have become an automatic writer?"

The answer from Houdini was no, and he essentially said so publicly. On the day before the Halloween of 1922, he told the New York *Sun* that Spiritualism was nothing more than spook tricks, and mediums either crooked or hysterical. What prompted his statement was a challenge issued by psychics to their greatest foes: the magic order. It appeared that mediums foresaw the announcement of the *Scientific American* contest—for the General Assembly of Spiritualists made the reverse offer and put up $5,000 to any stage wizard who could produce eight psychic manifestations by deception.

Houdini accepted the challenge; it was becoming apparent that he considered the whole cult of spiritism to be his opponents and that he had never played it straight with the Doyles. His competitive juices flowing, he made headlines that infuriated Sir Arthur: DISAPPOINTED INVESTIGATOR SAYS SPIRITUALISM IS BASED ON TRICKERY AND THAT ALL MEDIUMS CHEAT AT TIMES—BELIEVERS SELF-DELUDED. Houdini was now slandering his religion, Sir Arthur felt, and by imputation his wife.

The press wanted a rejoinder from Doyle. "They sent me the New York *Sun*, with your article," he wrote Houdini, "and no doubt wanted me to answer it, but I have no fancy for sparring with a friend in public." Sir Arthur thought it undignified to reveal what had happened in Atlantic City, but he could not shake the vision of an awestruck Houdini receiving Jean's gift to him. He recalled his friend blissfully leaving the hotel room, clutching in his hand, after a decade of blank séances and disappointing results, the scrolls of automatic writing. "When you say that you have had no evidence of survival, you say what I cannot reconcile with my own eyes," Sir Arthur

wrote him. "I know by many examples the purity of my wife's mediumship, and I saw what you got and what the effect was upon you at the time."

The spirits that had brought them together were precipitating their clash, and Houdini implied that his friend was not handling their disagreement sportingly. "You write that you are very sore," he answered Doyle. "I trust it is not with me, because you, having been truthful and manly all your life, naturally must admire the same traits in other human beings."

He then expressed the doubts—"The letter was written entirely in English, and my sainted mother could not read, write, or speak the English language"—that led him to reject Lady Doyle's communication. Houdini expected a genuine message from his mother to be in her native tongue—which Sir Arthur, who knew few Jews, assumed was Hebrew. Doyle explained to him that there was no language in the next life: psychics like his wife received transmissions in "a rush of thought." Trance mediums "might get the Hebrew through," he told him. "I don't think a normal automatic writer ever would."

Truly, their religious views were incompatible. "By the way," Doyle continued "Mr. Bird told me that, in the very complete test given you by your mother, you found it incredible that she, a Jewish lady, should put a Cross at the top. The Cross is put by my wife above the first page of all she writes, as we guard against lower influences, and find it protective." Sadly, the escape artist was proving himself reluctant to make his greatest leap of all, thought Doyle.

After being asked to participate in Munn's spirit hunt, Houdini backed down from the challenge to produce by trickery the Eight Feats of Mediumistic Power. As one of the five chosen judges for the contest, he could not do open battle with the Spiritualists and claim to be impartial. Nevertheless, Sir Arthur complained that with Houdini's inclusion the *Scientific American* committee "becomes biased at once. What I wanted was five good, clear-headed men who would stick to it without any prejudice at all." But if Doyle had lost Houdini, he seemed to bond with Bird—the man upon whom everything depended.

They arrived from England together on April 4: the crusading Spiritualist and the *Scientific American* agent. The newsmen called Doyle's latest mission to America—his tour of '23—"The Second Coming of Sir Arthur."

However, judging from the reception that Malcolm Bird received, they were as interested in this "new psychic sleuth" and his international spirit hunt. "At a time when half of Europe seems to be dabbling in spiritualism and when there are thousands of converts to the idea in the United States," Bird's reports struck a chord.

He had seen a thing or two in the dark room. "Tables did jump off the floor, lights did appear, voices did issue from trumpets and mediums, vases did move through the air, all apparently because of some mysterious force the source of which has not been discovered. Mr. Bird said he saw everything which Sir Arthur said he would see, except ectoplasm, the strange substance which issues from the body of a medium."

Even so, Bird was surprised by the attention he received at New York Harbor. Just a few years earlier he had been a capable but obscure professor at Columbia University. Presently the reporters, of their own accord, had promoted him from secretary to "Chairman" of the *Scientific American* contest; they failed to realize that, rather than an expert and judge, he was only the coordinator of the psychic challenge. But having returned on the *Olympic* with Doyle, he was perceived as an important new player in the Quest Eternal. "I suggested to Mr. Bird that he come to me and place himself in my hands," Sir Arthur told the press. Having created one ingenious detective, he was seemingly molding another.

Bedfellows are rarely stranger than those made in the séance. Part of Bird's appeal to Sir Arthur had to do with something the European mediums had sensed: his presence was a boon to the harmonics of the gathering. One of Mrs. Leonard's spirits had prophesied that Bird was "eventually to do much work in the spiritist movement"; other spooks averred that he himself was a medium.

Malcolm Bird was making a name for himself and acquiring so much supernatural experience "that if he should criticize our movement, he is a critic whom we will be obliged to listen to with respect," said Sir Arthur. Conversely, Doyle warned that Houdini would "keep away every decent medium—for they are human beings, not machines, and resent insult . . . they do not go into an atmosphere which is antagonistic."

To reassure the psychics, Sir Arthur intended to sit in on the séances

Bird was organizing for May. He also told reporters that he would assist in the *Scientific American* search for that still-elusive prize-worthy medium.

Accordingly, Sir Arthur and Bird sat in a dark room in a rustic home near Lake Erie. The sleeping Ada Bessinet was slumped in the chair next to them, her breathing heavy and portentous. The room, however, was alive with her Odic energy. Spirit lights of yellow with a reddish tint darted over and around the heads of sitters. Then came a steam of grayish and transparent faces—thirty? forty?—that Sir Arthur strained to recognize before they faded. "I think that is Oscar," [his dead nephew] he exclaimed; another face with closed eyes he identified as his mother. Bird himself saw no familiar form—but then, he had lost no one close to him. This made him, he felt, a model observer: "I am unemotional in the presence of these phenomena," he wrote, "to what I conceive to be an extraordinarily cold-blooded degree."

Secretary Bird did have an impulse, though, for hyperbole. Convinced of the sincerity of a grandmotherly slate-writing medium Doyle had recommended in Indiana, Bird reported, "If she is a fraud, then there is absolutely no sense in believing anything creditable about any member of the human race . . . my whole sense of fitness rebels at the idea of this lady being a swindler." The committee judges were increasingly put off by such statements. Sometime earlier Walter Prince had sat with that same Indiana spook and found her work suspect. By commending psychics before any were tested, Bird sparked the fear in Prince that the *Scientific American* endeavor was becoming more journalism than science. The official experts in the contest—Prince, Carrington, Comstock, McDougall, and Houdini—worried that Bird's findings might be confused with their own. The editor was a greenhorn, muttered Houdini, an easy mark for spook fraud.

With each of Bird's reports, the *Scientific American* reminded its readers that his informal sittings were not to be confused with the committee's scientific examination of mediums. The New York press did not always grasp the distinction, though, between his preliminary survey and the rigorous tests to follow. Bird had sat in England for a spirit photograph with William Hope, who Prince and Houdini suspected was a faker. To their chagrin, Bird commented favorably on Hope's spectral pictures.

"It seems most extraordinary and it casts doubt upon all the forthcoming proceedings that Mr. Bird should announce himself as already convinced of the genuineness of spirit photography," editorialized the *Tribune.* They called for the truly scientific inquiry the contest had promised. Walter Prince, who did credit some of Bird's observations, issued his own shrewd reproof: "Mr. Bird, if he wishes to achieve the authority in psychical research which I invoke for him, must hereafter avoid falling in love with the medium."

The Crawford Experiment

The Crandons gave a party with an unusual purpose that May. The dinner guests took their cue from Roy, who behaved more as a sober physician that night than convivial host. The butler, Noguchi, served but one glass of wine to each of the Crandons' friends, yet there was a feeling of anticipation, of electricity, in the air. For it was a pretty ghoulish activity that the doctor had planned. The weather, Mrs. Crandon commented, could not have been more cooperative. It was raining lightly outside.

Mina recognized that this evening would see the culmination of months of preparation by Roy. Before Sir Oliver Lodge had entered his life, her husband was as staunch an atheist, she felt, as her father had been a man of faith. He had once relieved her of her own religious baggage and pointed out to her the folly in worshipping a God conceived by primitive minds. Lately he'd begun saying there was more superstition in the Bible than in séance research. And he no longer dismissed what the medium had told her—that she possessed second sight. The doctor had visited that same Spiritualist minister, apparently giving no intimation of who he was, or that his wife had been by for a sitting. Again a spirit claiming to be Mrs. Crandon's dead brother had come through. Here, though, was the problem with mental phenomena—it was not suited to empirical proof. Chance, intuition, or deceit could explain the hits. Physical displays of mediumship were easier to test; they were either demonstrably real, Dr. Crandon reasoned, or brazenly false.

Of special interest to him were the séance experiments conducted in Ireland by Dr. William Jackson Crawford—a professor of mechanical engineering with a consuming interest in psychic effects. Dr. Crawford had sat with Kathleen Goligher, a nonprofessional clairvoyant, for a series of 170 séances in the attic of her family's Belfast house. Ectoplasmic rods that shot forth, he believed, from her genitals suspended a table high off the

floor. He observed it rocking in the air as though borne on a choppy sea. He saw it suddenly turn sideways and revolve until upside down. All by the force of spirit operators who had chosen as their instrument this fey Irish girl. There was something called contact phenomena, which the Goligher circle had tried. They placed their hands on a table and collectively channeled a spirit that caused it to vibrate, move, and communicate by means of knocking or rapping. In effect, Dr. Crawford believed, they had brought the table to life.

With his technical tools—spring scales, pressure sensors, electroscopes—and discussion of reductions and force magnitudes, Crawford was the sort of skilled investigator who interested Roy. As was his penchant, he attempted to contact the scientist directly to elicit further information on his work. Alas, such an exchange was no longer possible. Dr. Crawford had drowned himself in a lake near Belfast. In a letter to his family, he did not blame the spirits for his suicide. "I have been struck down mentally . . . It is not the psychic work, I enjoyed it too well."

♦

Dr. Crandon's objective that May evening was to reproduce the Belfast experiment. "Contact phenomena are quite common," Crawford had said. "Nearly every family contains one member at least who is capable of producing them." Dr. Crawford had left behind a guidebook—to tilting and turning tables using psychic force—that Roy adhered to while planning his own venture into the unknown. He constructed a seventeen-pound table of rough wood according to the Crawford design. It was important that no nails were used, as the wrought iron was said to somehow interfere with the psychic magnetism. He had also purchased a red lantern to illuminate his library, as ectoplasm was most effectively formed in red light.

Dr. Crandon then invited a few close friends for dinner and a séance. By undertaking the experiment with his trusted circle, he felt that he eliminated the possibility of psychic fraud. Trooping up to the fourth-floor Book Room—one of two libraries in his spacious home—were guests with varying degrees of skepticism. Among them were Mina's friend Kitty and her

husband, Dr. Edison Brown—two of the Crandon milieu of accomplished physicians and their wives. Curiously, the Browns were the two sitters that evening most disposed to accept the possibility of spirit communication. Less inclined to believe, but as game to try, was an old friend, Frederick Adler, who ran the building on Commonwealth Avenue where Dr. Crandon kept his medical office. Also present was Alexander W. Cross, whose diffidence seemed out of place among this usually lively crowd.

Cross was a troubled and easily rattled man. An Englishman from Canterbury, he carried with him a past that only the Crandons knew about. Aleck, as they called him, had worked for British customs in Shanghai for so long that he had virtually ceased to identify himself as a Westerner. It was during the Great War that his troubles began. While steaming back to England his liner had been intercepted by a German raider that held him captive for six months. When the vessel was sunk, Aleck escaped to the Danish coast. Somehow he made it to England and was given command of 10,000 Chinese coolies bound for labor at the French front. There he suffered trauma which made him unfit for civilian life. He was obese and in ill health when he made his way to Boston after the War. Dr. Crandon, his acquaintance from a previous visit there, did all he could to help. The doctor attempted to find Aleck work, and when this proved unfeasible he hired the poor fellow himself. Cross had a room in Cambridge but as often spent nights at Lime Street on the Book Room couch. Ostensibly he was Dr. Crandon's librarian, but Mina said that his true function was to keep their yellow cat out of mischief. Next to her, Aleck was the youngest of this séance circle. Tragically, he was also the closest to the grave.

The six friends linked hands and rested them lightly on the Crawford table, just as the late scientist had advised. Crawford had also suggested that the ritual should begin with a prayer. Dr. Crandon left that part out. Mrs. Crandon voiced the flippant hope, however, that Crawford or some other spirit might find their way to the red lantern on Roy's desk. Clearly she regarded this activity as spooky fun. Her previous séance experience had

not swayed her. Even Kitty, who had accompanied her to that post-ride fling with a ghost, doubted that anything extraordinary had happened that afternoon.

"By this time I was again pretty well unconvinced," Mrs. Crandon remembered. "But my friends, who had unconvinced me, now became very serious. Perhaps the red light sobered them. But to tell the truth they were all so solemn about it that I couldn't help laughing. They reproved me severely, and my husband informed me gravely that 'this is a serious matter.' "

An indefinite period of silence followed, heightened by the ticking of Roy's Quare clock. It was mysterious enough, linking hands in the dark with friends one rarely touched. The red glow gave Aleck's sanctuary the aura of an opium den, though nothing illicit was planned. Aleck shifted his bulk and drew a hard stare from Roy. These probes into the netherworld were not for the impatient. No ghosts were heard. None were really expected by the group hunched over the table. Something inexplicable was happening, though. Breathing and linking as one, it appeared the intention of the sitters had become an imperceptible force as much as a thought, and as the séance progressed—a quiver. The table gradually became animate. Dr. Crandon felt it was like putting his hand on the back of a dog. Suddenly the table slid slightly, then rose on two legs and crashed to the floor! In order to determine if one of their circle was a medium, each of the sitters took turns leaving the room. With Mrs. Crandon's departure the vibrations died. Her friends applauded when she reentered the study. The medium had been right about her. It was Mina, of all people, who had the supernormal gift; she who was the powerful instrument of some discarnate mind.

The Eve of the Hunt

With the *Scientific American* contest just a few weeks away, the New York press was blowing the spirit trumpet in anticipation. It was to be "the most thorough, scientific, and far-reaching spook hunt ever undertaken," announced the *Herald.* The *Times* called it "the Acid Test of Spiritualism." The *Tribune* christened the tests "The Great Spirit Hunt" and observed that "every open-minded person has been looking forward with interest to the investigations," for here at last was the "promise of truly expert and unbiased testing of the claims put forward in behalf of spirit photographs, ectoplasm and the rest of the current crop of spiritualistic doings."

There was still, however, no mention of a candidate. Even with Sir Arthur's support, "the well-known mediums—mediums who are reputed to possess the kind of powers which we desire to study—have not as yet come forward to aid us in our quest," the *Scientific American* reported in May. Despite receiving hundreds of applicants, Malcolm Bird worried that psychics were intimidated by the event at 233 Broadway, since shrouded back parlors were their accustomed stages.

While touring Europe Bird had encountered in Berlin a scientist with "the finest psychic laboratory in the world—and he can induce no medium to work in it with him." Envisioning the sensitive seated in her spirit cabinet while strapped to fifty-seven varieties of technical apparatus, Bird could well understand her absence. By now he wondered if the *Scientific American* had a similar predicament.

The committee's methods were as elaborate as any ever used to verify supernormal power. Aside from the vigilant jury, the candidate would encounter an array of modern monitors, gauntlets, and detectors. To ensure she was not concealing any earthly means for producing ectoplasm, the medium was to be thoroughly searched and then required to wear—rather than the white alb of her Delphic ancestor—a black bathing suit or potato sack (exactly

which garment hadn't been decided yet) before entering her cabinet. Jury members would then tie her with rope to prevent her from using her limbs to aid the disembodied powers, and if the bonds were insufficient, there was a mosquito-net cloth to further restrain her. Light was anathema to the formation of ectoplasm—the *Scientific American* had conceded that—but the psychic's arms and legs would be marked with luminous radium spots so that the judges could track any suspicious maneuvers in the darkness.

These tests would not be compromised, as Bird felt some European studies were, by the faulty senses of bereaved sitters and aging researchers. If the *Scientific American* were to affirm the presence of disincarnate beings, it would be on a body of incontrovertible evidence. Walter Prince thought it unwise for Bird to reveal all their methods—what Austin Lescarboura and other technicians had devised would only cool the feet of the sought-after mediums. But if she were a true clairvoyant, why be afraid of benign scientific instruments? The induction coils, galvanometers, and electroscopes were for testing her electric field when the forces were active and also to determine if these so-called spirits were actually composed of physical matter. Munn & Co. revered new technology, and Bird seemed to take pride in describing the gadgetry their investigators employed.

All furnishings, he reported, had electric contacts to monitor any floating vase or levitating table. A phonograph with a directional microphone would be automatically activated should the phantoms cause a rap or whisper. And if any apparition formed, a camera with a powerful electric flash—in lieu of noxious powder—would not fail to capture it. Nothing was left out as *Scientific American* converted its law library into a psychic laboratory. A chronograph was installed to register the readings of the instruments that were in turn monitoring the medium. Ready for use were kymographs, a sphygmomanometer, and other tools for measuring the respiration, temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure of the psychic—for the spirits were said to drain the vital forces from her abandoned body.

Such were the instruments when scientists had free rein in the séance. And with the apparent success of psychic experiments in Europe, it seemed just a matter of time before an American clairvoyant produced effects that registered on every dial while spectral orbs were photographed and a table floated over the upturned heads of five bewildered experts.

Part V

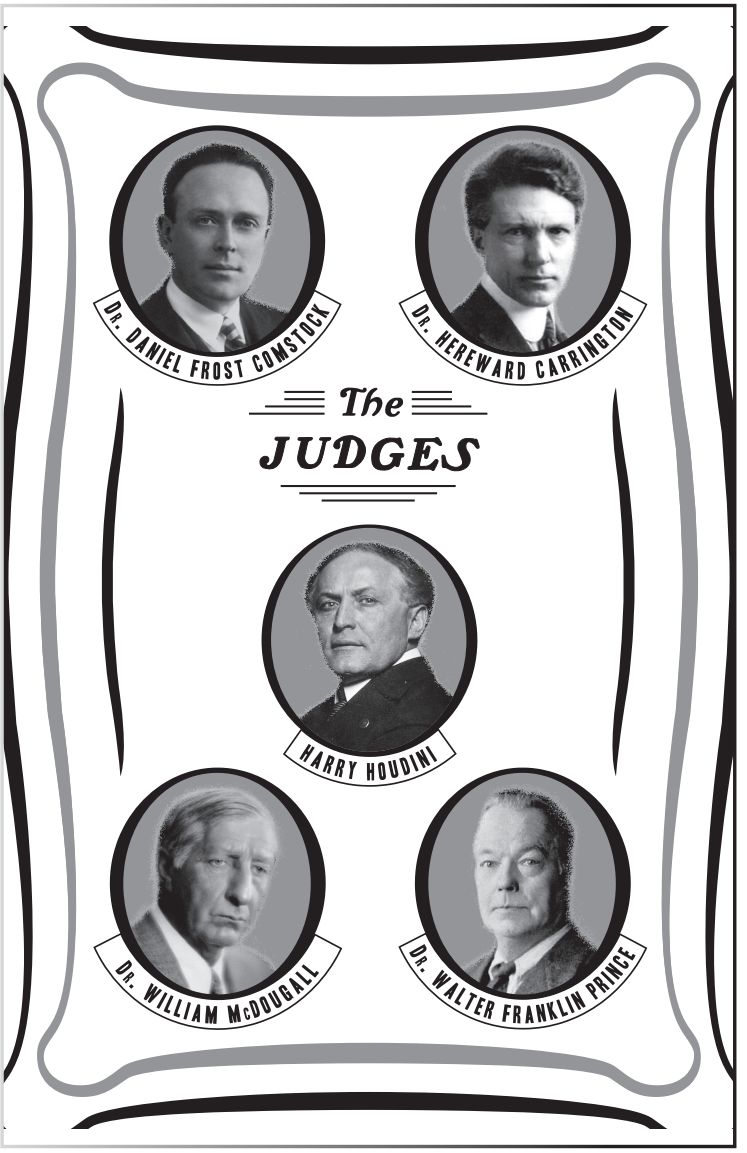
THE GREAT SPIRIT HUNT

. . . that it were possible
For one short hour to see
The souls we loved, that they might tell us
What and where they be.

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.

—DANTE ALIGHIERI



(Dr. William McDougall) Harvard University Department of Psychology;
(Harry Houdini) John C. Hinson

The Wizards of Sound

To placate the psychics, the Great Houdini said that he would embrace Spiritualism if any medium should prove its claims. Having not yet given up on converting him, Sir Arthur suggested they visit the birthplace of his religion, the tiny town of Hydesville, New York—the sight of the phenomena that launched the first American séance craze: the famous spirit raps of 1848. The two men never made the pilgrimage, though Houdini was familiar with what had happened in Hydesville and said it was easily explained.

In the beginning was the rap. Rap—rap—rap! *The late-night knockings woke the Foxes, ordinary farmers who had never before sensed ghosts in their house. The concerned mother, candle in hand, found her young daughters—Maggie and Kate Fox—in bed, conversing with the phantom that had caused the eerie sounds. Frightened and perplexed, she summoned other Hydesville residents, who were just as astounded by knocks that seemed prompted by the girls' questions to their invisible friend. An alphabet code was deciphered by a neighbor and from there on communications are said to have been established between the living and the dead.*

With ghost seekers trespassing on the Fox farm, the mother sent her daughters to a Quaker home in Rochester. The spirit followed them there. Leah Fox, who lived nearby, became a leader of the budding spiritist cult by managing her little sisters' occult gifts. And when they visited New York City in 1850, the influential publisher Horace Greeley put the sisters up at his estate and gave them entrée to people of means; for them Maggie and Kate began to channel disembodied voices as well as knocks on furniture and walls.

As adults the sisters traveled many years later to England, where a venerable scientist, Sir William Crookes, was eager to study the case. According to Crookes, Katie produced raps on a plane of glass, a tambourine, and on his hands and shoulders. The noises were heard while she was suspended in a swing, enclosed in a wire cage, and after she fell fainting on his sofa. The raps

were made on the roof of Crookes's carriage, inside a tree, and on the floor of the Lyceum Theater. "I have tested [the raps] every way that I could devise," Sir William stated, "until there has been no escape from the conviction that they were true objective occurrences not produced by trickery or mechanical means."

Even then, however, the Fox sisters were seen as relics of a superstitious craze. It was no longer the Civil War era, when séances were held in the White House and the dead haunted the nation. Unfortunately for Maggie and Kate, who seemed lost in a void, this was also well before the twentieth-century Spiritualist revival. Star-crossed in love, exploited by their older sister, abandoned by patrons, they both took to the bottle. A shunned vagrant, Maggie was eventually paid to reveal the mystery behind the Hydesville sensation. The raps were heard at the New York Academy of Music, where her confession—that she caused the effects by the cracking of her toes—appeared to be the death blow to a movement already on the wane. And that was all Houdini needed to know about the Fox sisters, who launched a religion with their pranks and were buried in paupers' graves.

♦

Sir Arthur describes the Rochester Rappers as operating a "spiritual telegraph." Their powers were discovered just as commercial lines for Samuel Morse's receivers were being laid in all directions; and Rochester, home to Western Union, was then the hub of electric wire communications. In 1848 there was a mysterious link between the new technology and spiritistic phenomena—as if for every tap of the telegraph there was a corresponding rap from the shadowland.

Seventy-five years later there was renewed interest in establishing communications between two worlds. A telegraph operator in his youth, Thomas Edison was still touched daily by the pulse of Morse code. Since he was practically deaf, his young wife tapped it on his hand so that he could keep up with parlor conversation; if they attended a play she tapped the dialogue on his leg; and when they walked the Great White Way the din was barely audible to him. And yet, Edison was a wizard of sound. When Alexander Bell first presented the telephone, no one could hear

through it—until Edison improvised the carbon transmitter that made voices louder. Now he hoped to construct an apparatus—a valve, he called it—that would amplify transmissions through the ether.

The inventor said that "the time will come when science will be able to prove all the essentials of what faith has asserted." Nevertheless, he abhorred occultism. Contrary to Lodge, he experienced no psychic breakthrough or transformation. "From my experiments with Sir Oliver Lodge and other scientists who believe that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of life beyond the grave, I cannot say that men live after death," he admitted. "Our experiments brought no results that convinced me of the presence of the departed."

For this reason, Sir Oliver advocated contacting the dead through the spirit medium, the mental radio, rather than by any mechanical invention. Although no Morse code operator, Lodge heard his own odd tempo. As a youngster he had learned a five-finger piano exercise that became an obsessive tic in later years. While with company or alone he tapped lightly on the table—a habit he would take to his grave and hopefully beyond it. He sealed the melodic code in an envelope and deposited it with the SPR, with the idea that after his death a spirit medium would rap it on the séance table. In this way proving, after the envelope was opened and the notes revealed, that the human mind was the most powerful receiver.

By 1923, radio was the latest communications wonder. Marconi's wireless receivers would carry discarnate signals to the living, Doyle predicted. There was a curious parallel, he said, between spirit manifestations and the wireless: for were not both Hertzian waves and psychic transmissions carried through the ether?

Unlike religions inspired by a prophet's holy vision, Spiritualism owes its genesis—and revival—to spectral sounds. A signal was received in the last year of the World War by George Valiantine—a down-and-out forty-three-year-old razor manufacturer who was startled by three peculiar raps at the door of his New York hotel room. No one was there when he answered the knock. Moments later, the disturbances were heard again, this time resounding through the empty corridor. A Spiritualist friend later told Valiantine that the knocks were the sign of a disembodied presence. She

held a séance and the intrusions returned. The befuddled Valiantine, a man with no mystical tendencies, had "the gift" and was meant to develop it, according to a message from a dead relative. The small-time businessman suspected that the spirits had always been trying to reach him, for he had been hearing raps intermittently throughout his life, or so he later told the committee that invited him to seek the *Scientific American* prize.

The Jolly Medium

Malcolm Bird often found that the mediums he investigated, no matter how gifted, were simpletons and rubes. In that class was George Valiantine of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, who was semi-illiterate, provincial, and inexpressive, yet channeled voluble spirit voices in eleven different languages. Like a human radio, Valiantine became known for his direct-voice mediumship—that is, he transmitted messages that seemed to manifest from space rather than by means of his own voice organ. To amplify the communications, two spirit trumpets were always placed on the table and in the course of the séance both megaphones might float above the heads of the sitters while emitting a spectral pulse.

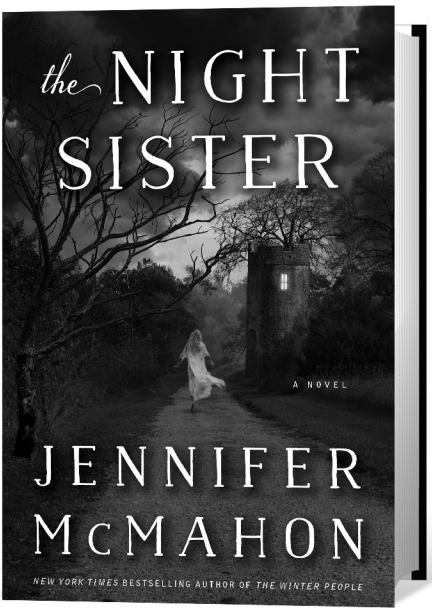
Since the days of the Fox sisters, gifted mediums had attracted patrons to help them materially while they performed the Good Work. Valiantine's benefactor was Joseph DeWyckoff, a magnate more mysterious than the psychic himself—and a figure, despite his Spiritualist beliefs, as worldly and shrewd as Valiantine was folksy and jocund. Though he lived in New Jersey and was born a Russian Jew, DeWyckoff did not appear to belong to any particular place. He dropped hints of an adventurous past and was rumored to have done clandestine work in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. At present a lawyer, and a director of Vanadium Steel, he was one of the world's wealthiest believers in Summerland. He resided on an estate of over two hundred acres known as Arlena Towers—a pleasure ground with a nine-hole golf course and a private lake, where his discovery, Valiantine, liked to catch the pickerel and bass served up for breakfast. A lifetime associate member of both the SPR and ASPR, DeWyckoff, while neither bereaved nor a researcher, was on his own spirit hunt. The steel tycoon sat with many of the great mediums of the day both in Europe and the United States.

After hearing about the Wilkes-Barre seer, DeWyckoff invited him to

Arlena Towers for an exhibition of his work. Between séances Valiantine appeared to enjoy his taste of the high life and the felicity of his fascinating host. He stayed at the estate for seven weeks and like few clairvoyants who have sung for their supper, he produced a Babel of tunes. During his visit the medium amazed DeWyckoff, as well as his European servants and guests, with multilingual communications from their dead. "Xenoglossy" is a word Charles Richet invented to describe the phenomenon of spirits speaking in languages unknown to the medium who channels them, and not since the first Pentecost had a mystic manifested such a confusion of tongues.

George Valiantine was discovered by DeWyckoff around the time that the *Scientific American* was searching the world for psychic talent. Before long the medium was visited in Wilkes-Barre by two men seeking a demonstration of his effects: Dr. Gardner Murphy, head of the Psychology Department at Columbia University, and his companion, a reporter for the New York *World*. During their test séance, spirit trumpets rose and sailed about the room, disembodied voices were heard while blue and red lights bobbed about in space, and a ghostly hand touched the reporter's head then vanished as suddenly as it came. The two visitors were impressed, and both gave positive reports: the newsman to readers of the *World,* and Dr. Murphy, who was an alternate judge in the *Scientific American* contest, to Walter Prince.

Soon thereafter George Valiantine became the first official candidate to extend a spirit hand toward Munn's purse. The contestant was well liked; Valiantine, whom Houdini called "the jolly medium," appeared to be as sweet and guileless as a child. He often looked baffled by what he produced.



Perfect for readers of Gillian Flynn, Stephen King, Lauren Beukes, David Bell, and Tana French, and for fans of Alfred Hitchcock's films.

Once the thriving attraction of rural Vermont, the Tower Motel now stands in disrepair, alive only in the memories of Amy, Piper, and Piper's kid sister, Margot. The three played there as girls until the day that their games uncovered something dark and twisted in the motel's past, something that ruined their friendship forever.

Now adult, Piper and Margot have tried to forget what they found that fateful summer, but their lives are upended when Piper receives a panicked midnight call from Margot, with news of a horrific crime for which Amy stands accused. As Margot and Piper investigate, a cleverly woven plot unfolds—revealing the story of Sylvie and Rose, two other sisters who lived at the motel during its 1950s heyday. Each believed the other to be something truly monstrous, but only one carries the secret that would haunt the generations to come.

Available August 2015

Doubleday • Hardcover: 9780385538510 • eBook: 9780385538527
🎧 CD: 9780804165211 • 🎧 AD: 9780804165228

www.doubleday.com

DOUBLEDAY and the portrayal of an anchor with a dolphin are registered
trademarks of Penguin Random House, Inc.

Jacket design by [TK]
Jacket illustration © [TK]

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
[TK]

ISBN 978-0-385-53851-0

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition

2013

Amy

Amy's heart hammers, and her skin is slick with sweat.

Focus, she tells herself.

Don't think about the thing in the tower.

Amy knows that if she thinks too hard about it she won't be able to do what needs to be done.

She looks down at the photo, the old black-and-white print she's kept all these years, hidden away in the drawer of her bedside table. It's been handled so much that it's cracked and faded, one of the corners torn.

In it, her mother, Rose, and her aunt Sylvie are young girls, wearing crisp summer dresses as they stand in front of a sign that says *World Famous London Chicken Circus.* Each girl clutches a worried-looking hen, but that's where the similarities end. Amy's mother is wearing a scowl beneath tired eyes, her hair dark and unkempt; Sylvie is radiant, the one who was going to grow up and go to Hollywood. Her blond hair is movie-star perfect; her eyes are shining.

Someone had scrawled a date on the back: June 1955. If only Amy could travel back in time, talk to those two girls, warn them what was coming. Warn them that one day it would all lead to this moment: Amy alone and out of options, on the verge of doing something terrible.

She bites her lip and wonders what people will say about her once she's gone.

That she was broken inside, a woman with a screw loose. (Aren't all women like that, really? Little time bombs waiting? Especially women like her—surviving on monthly boxes from the food pantry, dressing her children in ragged, secondhand clothes that never quite fit.)

What went wrong? they will whisper to each other while fondling artichokes and avocados in the produce aisle of the grocery store.

What kind of monster was she? they might ask after a few glasses of wine, as they sit in tidy living rooms, gathered for book club.

But these people know nothing of true monsters. They will never have to make the choices Amy has made.

The fluorescent lights in the kitchen buzz and flicker. Amy takes a deep breath, looks out the kitchen window. Beyond the gravel driveway, past the two ruined motel buildings with their sagging, swaybacked roofs, the tower leans precariously. Made of cement and stone, it was built by her grandfather all those years ago as a gift for her grandmother Charlotte. Her own Tower of London.

Amy thinks, as she often does, of that long-ago summer when she was twelve. Of Piper and Margot and the day they found the suitcase; of how, after that, nothing was ever the same.

Where was Piper now? Out in California somewhere, surrounded by palm trees and glamorous people, living a life Amy couldn't even imagine. Amy suddenly longs to talk to her, to confide in her and ask for forgiveness, to say, "Don't you see this is what I have to do?"

She thinks that Piper and Margot might understand if she could tell them the whole story, starting with the suitcase and working forward.

But mostly what she wishes is that she could find a way to warn them.

She glances at the old photo in her hand, takes a black marker from a kitchen drawer, and hastily writes a message along the bottom, over the chickens and patterned summer dresses. Then she tucks the photograph into her back pocket and goes to the window.

The clock on the stove says 12:15 a.m.

Down at the tower, a shadow lurches from the open doorway.

She's out of time.

Moving into the hallway, she latches the deadbolt on the front door (silly, really—a locked door will do no good), then stops at the closet and grabs her grandfather's old Winchester. Rifle in hand, she climbs the stairs, the same stairs she's climbed her whole life. She thinks she can hear young Piper and Margot following behind her, whispering, warning her, telling her—as they did all those years ago—to forget all about it, that there is no twenty-ninth room.

Amy takes each step slowly, willing herself not to run, to stay calm and not wake her family. What would Mark think if he woke up and

found his wife creeping up the steps with a gun? Poor, sweet, clueless Mark—perhaps she should have told him the motel's secrets? But no. It was better to protect him from it all as best she could.

The scarred wood beneath her feet creaks, and she thinks of the rhyme her grandmother taught her:

When Death comes knocking on your door,
you'll think you've seen his face before.
When he comes creeping up your stairs,
you'll know him from your dark nightmares.
If you hold up a mirror, you shall see
that he is you and you are he.

Jason

The call came in at 12:34 a.m.: a woman reporting that gunshots and screams were coming from the old Tower Motel.

Jason was putting on his coat, but froze as he listened, dread creeping into his chest and squeezing his heart like an icy hand.

Amy.

Even though he'd already punched out, and even though he heard Rainier and McLellan were on their way to check it out, Jason decided to swing by on his way home. It couldn't hurt to take a look, he told himself. He knew he should leave it, should just get in his truck, drive home, and crawl in bed beside Margot. He should put his arm around her, rest his hand on her belly, and feel the baby kick and turn in her sleep.

But there was what he *should* do and there was what he *needed* to do. And as soon as the call came in, he knew he needed to go out to the motel. He needed to see if Amy was okay.

He was at the motel in ten minutes, his headlights illuminating the faded and rotting old sign: *Tower Motel, 28 Rooms, Pool, No Vacancy.* As he turned up the gravel driveway and drove past the crooked tower and decrepit motel rooms where, as a boy, he used to hide out, he felt strangely faint; then he realized he wasn't letting himself breathe.

Idiot.

Amy's house was at the top of the driveway, perhaps twenty yards beyond the low-slung buildings of motel rooms. Rainier and McLellan's cruiser was parked in front of it, and the front door of the house stood open. Every light in the house was on, making it look too bright and all wrong somehow—like something you weren't supposed to stare directly at, something dangerous, like an eclipse.

He'd been here just a week ago. Amy had called him at the station, out of the blue, saying she really needed someone to talk to, and would he come? He was taken aback; other than saying a quick, impersonal hello when they ran into each other around town, they hadn't talked, *really talked,* since high school.

"I can come on my lunch break," he'd answered without hesitation.

Some part of him knew it was wrong, how eager he was to see her, how he had lit up like a Christmas tree because he was the one she'd turned to. He'd thought of how disappointed Margot would be when he told her, so he decided he wouldn't tell her. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her, and it wasn't so terrible, was it? He was just going to see an old friend, to help out—where was the harm in that? Still, guilt whined around his head like a nagging, persistent mosquito. *You have a wife you love and a baby on the way,* it said. *What do you think you're doing?*

Now, as he stood in the open doorway, he heard what sounded like a low groan. His skin prickled. Unholstering his gun, he stepped into the front hall; a closet door stood open, revealing a row of shiny rain slickers and grubby sweatshirts hanging over a jumble of shoes. Jason spotted small, sparkly pink sneakers; a large pair of worn work boots that had to belong to Amy's husband, Mark; the leather flip-flops Amy had been wearing last week when she met him at the door. "Jay Jay," she had said as she embraced him, somewhat clumsily, sloshing coffee out of her mug. "I'm so happy you're here."

Now he looked around the house. The living room was to the right, the kitchen to the left, and a staircase directly in front of him. Everything smelled musty, vaguely ruined. Wallpaper hung off the walls like torn pieces of skin. The dull brown carpet (had it been white once?) was full of stains and burns, worn through to the floorboards in places.

He hadn't noticed any of this last week.

Jason's radio squawked. Doug Rainier was upstairs—Jason heard his shaking voice both in the house and, a split second later, as a mechanical echo over the radio. "Three victims," he was saying. "All dead." Then, quietly, "Oh God. Oh, shit."

Adrenaline flooded through him, even before his brain fully understood Rainier's words. He ascended the stairs two at a time, right hand on his gun.

Amy.

Where was Amy?

The scene at the top of the stairs nearly brought him to his knees. He had to grab hold of the wall to keep from going down.

He'd never seen anything like it.

Never seen so much blood.

A gunshot hadn't done this.

There were gory red tracks everywhere in the hall. Doug Rainier was on his knees near one of the victims, retching violently. Jason staggered toward them. The victim was facedown, her long blond hair splayed out around her head. There was a rifle beside her, and she lay in what looked like a small lake of blood. The smell of it, sharp and metallic, hit him hard, filling his nose and mouth.

"Oh Jesus." Jason breathed out the words and let himself sag against the wall.

She was facedown, but he knew it was her and he knew that she was dead. Her right arm was tucked beneath her chest, but her left was outstretched. A piece of paper rested near her elbow. He leaned in a bit—no, not paper, an old photograph. It was a black-and-white image of two little girls, and written across it in black marker was the phrase "29 Rooms." He blinked; a part of him knew it must mean something, must be a clue, but what he found himself focusing on instead was Amy's hand, pale and waxy. Her engagement ring and wedding band glinted up at him, just as they had last week, when she'd reached across the kitchen table to take his hand.

"There's no one else I can tell all this to, Jay Jay," she'd said through tears. "I swear, I think I'm going crazy."

"Hawke?" a voice called. Jason looked up and saw Bruce McLellan looming in the doorway of the bedroom at the opposite end of the hall. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Jason couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, couldn't take his eyes off Amy.

"Do you remember, Jay Jay, back when we were kids, how you used to write me notes in secret code?" she'd asked, and he'd nodded. Of course he remembered. He remembered everything.

"Sometimes I'd pretend not to understand them," Amy said. "But I always did. I always knew just what you wrote."

"Hawke, I need you in here—now!" McLellan barked, and Jason turned from Amy at last, to walk down the hallway like a ghost version of himself, there and yet not.

As Jason entered the bedroom, he realized this was Amy's old room. He remembered standing in the shadows of the driveway as a boy, looking up at her dormer window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

Now Jason did a quick sweep of the room's contents: a fluffy pink throw rug in the middle of the wide, white-painted floorboards; a dresser with a small collection of glass and plastic jungle animals displayed on top; a disheveled bed with a twisted polka-dotted pink-and-purple comforter, its pillows and stuffed animals spilling onto the floor.

McLellan was standing in the center of the room, his gun clenched in both hands. He nodded down at the floor. A trail of small, bloody prints led to an open window.

"Out there," he whispered, his face red and sweaty. He sounded boyish, frightened. "On the roof."

Jason nodded and walked slowly across the room with his gun in front of him, hands trembling.

He put his back against wall on the left side of the open window, and listened. He heard a low moaning. A whimper. From out on the roof.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Backup would be here soon. He could wait. But what if someone was out there, hurt?

"London Police Department!" Jason shouted. "We know you're out there. I need you to come inside and keep your hands where I can see them."

There was scrabbling, a scuttling noise, but no one appeared.

"I'm going out," he mouthed without sound. McLellan nodded and stayed where he was, his gun locked on the open window.

Holding his gun, Jason ducked through the opening and stepped out onto the roof. Immediately he dropped into a crouch and swiveled right, then left, scanning the rooftop.

A pair of eyes glinted in the dark. A flash of blond hair.

He felt the gun slip from his grasp, heard it hit the roof and slide off with a clatter. Amy? It couldn't be, but there she was, looking just like she had when he first met her, all skinny legs and wild hair.

Suddenly he was twelve years old again: a gangly, awkward boy staring at a girl who held all the secrets he'd ever dreamed about.

"Hawke?" McLellan called from inside. "What's going on out there?"

Jason blinked and looked at the little girl again, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Like Amy, but not Amy. Amy's daughter. She was squatting down next to the crooked chimney with crumbling mortar, one hand

resting on it for balance. Her blond hair was in tangles; her lips were trembling, eyes wild with fear. She had on pale pajamas that shimmered in the moonlight.

"Remember me? I'm Jason," he said, holding out his hand. "And I'm going to get you out of here."

Piper

Piper was frowning at the giant sinkhole that had appeared in her tiny backyard.

She had put a lot of work into this yard, pulling up the sickly grass and relandscaping with drought-tolerant plants: sedum, purple sage, sheep fescue, deer grass, desert mallow. A crushed stone path led to a small patio shaded by an avocado tree, where she sometimes sat with a good book and a glass of sauvignon blanc.

Now it was all falling into the earth. The neighbors were there, gawking and expressing alarm (how big could the sinkhole get? would it swallow the neighborhood?). Her sister, Margot, was there, too, so hugely pregnant she waddled around off balance, like a drunk penguin.

Jason was not there, a fact that irked Piper but did not surprise her.

"Be careful," Piper warned her sister as the avocado tree was swallowed up, and knew right away that she shouldn't have spoken; thoughts and words have power, and if you allow your worst fears to form fully, you run the danger of bringing them to life.

As if on cue, Margot stumbled too close to the edge. Piper reached for her, but it was too late. The hole, which had been growing ever wider, threatening to swallow everything, took her sister deep down into the earth, so deep that they couldn't even hear her scream.

In the distance, alarms rang. But they sounded funny. More like music.

Piper opened her eyes, found herself in her own bed.

She rolled over, looked at the clock: 4:32 a.m. Across the room, her phone was playing Madonna's "Like a Prayer"—Margot's ringtone.

"Oh my God," Piper gasped, jumping out of bed—the baby. It was seven-thirty in Vermont, and Margot wouldn't call this early unless something was really, truly wrong.

Piper snatched up the phone she'd left on the dresser.

"Margot?" Piper said, half expecting it to be Jason on the other end with terrible news. The worst news of all, even—*we've lost them both*. She shuddered as she recalled her sister slipping into the sinkhole, felt herself reaching for her, her hands grabbing nothing but air.

"Piper," Margot said, and Piper felt a weight lift from her chest. But she felt it return when she heard the strain in her sister's voice as she continued: "I'm sorry to wake you. Something's happened."

"The baby?"

Margot was eight and a half months pregnant. It was her third pregnancy. The first had ended in a miscarriage at sixteen weeks, and the second in a stillbirth at thirty weeks—a baby boy they had named Alex. Margot and Jason were trying again, though Margot had said that if she lost this baby, that was it. No more. She simply couldn't bear it.

"No, no. The baby's fine."

"Jason?"

"No, not Jason. It's Amy. She . . . Oh God, Piper, it's awful." Margot was crying.

"Jesus, what happened?" Piper asked. She flipped on the light and blinked at the sudden brightness. The room around her came to life—the queen-sized bed with its snowy duvet, the old rocking chair in the corner, the maple dresser with the mirror hanging above it. She caught sight of her own reflection; her face was pale and panicked, and her white nightgown made her seem like an apparition, gauzy and ethereal, not quite there.

Her sister snuffled and sobbed, and at last was able to speak in partial sentences, voice shaking.

"Last night . . . they're saying Amy shot and killed Mark and their little boy, Levi, and then herself out at the motel. Lou—that's her daughter?—she's alive. The police found her crouched on the roof. She climbed out a window and hid there. . . . I can't imagine how she . . . what she . . ." Margot trailed off.

Piper said nothing. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

After a moment, Margot went on:

"She didn't just shoot them, Piper. They were . . . all cut up. Butchered."

Margot started to cry and gulp again. Piper forced herself to take deep breaths. Behind the shock and gut punch of loss, another feeling was there, worming its way to the surface: fear.

Piper looked over at the framed photo she kept on her dresser: Amy, freckle-faced and smiling as she stood between Piper and Margot, her arms draped heavily over each of their shoulders. They all looked impossibly happy, grinning up from the bottom of the empty swimming pool, white roller skates with bright laces on their feet. This photo had been in her bedroom at home when she was growing up, in her dorm room at college, and in every apartment and house she'd lived in since.

"When was the last time you talked to Amy?" Margot asked at last, the phone crackling, her voice staticky, like it was coming in from a far-off radio station.

"It's been a while," Piper said, feeling light-headed, queasy. And guilty. Margot had urged her, over the years, to reach out to Amy, to try harder. But Amy had made it clear after that summer that she didn't want to remain friends. They hadn't lost touch completely—she and Amy sent each other occasional Christmas cards with impersonal messages and, in Amy's case, stiff-looking school photos of her kids posed against colored backdrops. They were friends on Facebook, and now and then promised each other that they'd get together soon. But when Piper made it back to London to visit Margot every couple of years, the time always seemed to fly by—Amy had to work, or the kids were sick, or Piper was just there for a couple of days to help paint the nursery. Whatever the excuse, she and Amy never got together. *Next time,* they promised each other. *Next time.*

Maybe Margot was right—she should have made more of an effort. She should have called Amy to check in from time to time, to ask how the kids were, how Mark's job was going, to talk the way women talked. After all, she'd let herself imagine it often enough. She had an ongoing imaginary conversation with Amy that had gone on for years. In her mind, Amy was the first person to get all the big news: each of Piper's relationships and breakups; the steady rise of the video-production studio she and her friend Helen had started six years ago; her scare last year with the lump in her breast that turned out to be benign. But the reality was, Piper never actually picked up the phone. It was easier, more comforting, to go on talking to the Amy in her head—the Amy of her childhood, not the adult version with two children whose names she could never quite remember and a husband that Piper knew only through Facebook photos.

She stared harder at the photo on the dresser, tried to remember that

particular day, but all that came back was the sound the wheels of their roller skates had made on the bottom of the pool, the smell of Amy's Love's Baby Soft, and the way Amy's arm around her made her feel invincible. Who had taken the picture? Amy's grandmother, most likely. The image was tilted at an awkward angle, as though the earth were off its axis that day.

"There's something else," Margot breathed into the phone, voice low and shaky. "Something that Jason said." Jason was one of the half-dozen officers in the tiny London Police Department. In a town where the biggest crimes were deer jacking and the occasional break-in, Piper could imagine how they were handling a gruesome murder-suicide.

"What was it?" Piper said.

"He said they found an old photo with . . . at the scene."

"A photo?" For a crazy second, Piper imagined that Margot was talking about her photo, the photo on the dresser.

"Yeah. It sounds like the one we found that summer. Remember?"

"Yes," Piper breathed. She remembered it too well. Amy's mom and her aunt Sylvie as kids, in old-fashioned dresses, cradling fat chickens against their chests. It had been taken years before Sylvie disappeared. So—a different photo, of different girls; a different innocent childhood.

"Well, someone had *written* something on it. None of this is being talked about on the news," Margot went on. "Not yet. No one in the department can figure out what it means. The theory is that Amy was just crazy. Jason asked me if I had any idea what it was about, and I said I didn't. But I think he knows I was lying."

Piper felt her throat getting tighter. She swallowed hard, and made herself ask the question. "What did it say?"

There was a long pause. At last, her sister spoke.

"'29 Rooms.'"

"Oh Jesus," said Piper. She took in a breath, felt the room tilting around her. Suddenly she was twelve again and skating around at the bottom of that old pool with the cracked cement and peeling paint. Up above, Margot was going in backward circles around the edge, and Amy was whispering a secret in Piper's ear—breath hot, words desperate.

"I'll be on the next plane," promised Piper. "Don't do anything. Don't say a word to anyone. Not even to Jason. Not until I get there. Promise?"

"I promise," Margot said, her voice sounding far off, a kite bobbing at the end of a long string Piper was barely able to hold on to.

1955

Mr. Alfred Hitchcock
Paramount Pictures
Hollywood, California

June 3, 1955
Dear Mr. Hitchcock,

My name is Sylvia Slater, and I am eleven years old. I live in London, Vermont, where my family runs the Tower Motel on Route 6. I get top marks in my class and my teacher, Mrs. Olson, says I am already reading and writing at a high school level. Daddy is teaching me to help with the bookkeeping, and sometimes he even lets me write the daily tallies in our big ledger.

I want to be an actress when I grow up. Or maybe even a movie director, like you. Are there any girl directors? My sister Rose, she says she doesn't think there are, but she's only eight.

I don't mind telling you, Rose is a little odd. She watches me all the time and it's starting to bother me. Mama says Rose is just jealous. My father says Rose has an overactive imagination. I honestly can't imagine what goes on in her head. She runs around the motel in torn dresses, tangles in her hair, and her best friend on earth is a sad old cow we have named Lucy. And yet she has the nerve to tell me I'm silly for wanting to be an actress one day.

I've started keeping a movie scrapbook filled with pictures I've cut out of famous actors and actresses. Sometimes I show my uncle Fenton what I've pasted in my book. You're his favorite director. He's seen every single one of your pictures. It was his idea that I write to you, because I have an idea for a movie. But I have to warn you, it's really scary.

My Oma, she's my mama's mother, came to visit last year all the way from England. Oma told me and Rose terrible, frightening stories. Rose loved the stories, but I hated them. They gave me nightmares.

She told one story that I'll never forget, because she swore it was true. It's the scariest thing I ever heard.

Mr. Hitchcock, before I tell you any more, there is something I need to know:

Do you believe in monsters?

Sincerely yours,

Miss Sylvia A. Slater
The Tower Motel
328 Route 6
London, Vermont

Rose

Rose watched her sister, Sylvie, pull back the curtain that they'd strung up along the clothesline at the side of the house before stepping out onto the stage. "Ladies and gentlemen," Sylvie announced in a booming voice. "Welcome to the one and only World Famous London Chicken Circus!"

She dropped the needle onto the phonograph, and "Sh-Boom, Sh-Boom" by the Crew Cuts began to play. As Sylvie began to sway back and forth, with each graceful step, her blond curls bounced. They were pulled back from her face with simple white barrettes. She'd put her hair in curlers before the circus, because she thought it made her look like Doris Day.

Rose wiped the sweat from her forehead and hauled back the curtain to reveal their audience: Mama and Daddy, Uncle Fenton, Bill Novak the fish man, a shy young couple driving up to Nova Scotia for their honeymoon, and a New Jersey family of four—two parents, one boy, and one girl—who were all on their way to a week of camping in Maine. It wasn't the largest crowd they'd performed for, but not the smallest, either. It certainly wasn't bad for a Thursday—tomorrow and Saturday, when the motel was full, they'd have their biggest crowds. The size of the crowd didn't matter, though: she and Sylvie would do the circus for even a single guest. Daddy said to make every performance count, even if there was just one man watching.

"You never know who that one man might be," he told them. "Maybe he's a talent scout. Or a reporter. Maybe he has a hundred friends back home who he'll tell all about the show and motel."

Daddy was sitting in the very front row, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, watching intently through his one good eye, the other squint-

ing at them, able to discern only their shadows. He wore his buttoned white shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and kept a pack of Lucky Strikes in his pocket, along with a pen and pencil and little notepad. His hair was cut short and slicked back with Brylcreem.

Daddy was the most handsome man Rose knew. Sylvie said he looked just like Cary Grant, who she loved to read about in the papers and magazines guests left behind. She'd talked Daddy into getting a subscription to *Life* and studied each issue cover to cover as soon as it arrived in the mailbox each week. This week's issue had Henry Fonda on the cover.

Rose knew that if it came to London—and if the picture was approved by Mama and Daddy—Sylvie would persuade Uncle Fenton to take her to the Saturday matinee. Fenton loved the movies, too, and went as often as he could. He and Sylvie would have long, animated conversations about directors and stars, and sometimes he'd describe the movies she hadn't been allowed to see to her, scene by scene. It was Fenton's idea that Sylvie start a movie scrapbook, and she spent hours going through magazines and newspapers, cutting out pictures of her favorite stars and pasting them into her book. She also took notes—making lists of movies she'd seen, movies she wanted to see, and even ideas she had for making movies of her own.

Sometimes Rose got to go to the Saturday matinees with Sylvie and Fenton, but most of the time, she was pronounced too young and was left behind to help Mama with cleaning and mending. To be honest, Rose didn't mind much. Sometimes Mama would tell her the story of how she met Daddy, and that was kind of like a movie, too.

Rose liked to imagine it. There they were, her parents, up on the big screen. Daddy was in an English hospital bed, rumpled and wounded but still handsome after his plane had been shot down, and Mama looked like an angel in her stiff white nurse's uniform as she changed the bandages over his injured eye.

"I'd all but given up on myself," he'd tell the girls when they asked for his version of the story. "The last thing I wanted to do was go back home and be a half-blind farmer. I was feeling like my life was just about over until your mother came along. Charlotte, your mama, was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen."

Rose would always smile at this part, imagining her mama young and pretty, drifting onto the scene, and changing everything—Mama, who

was what Daddy called a rare beauty. When he said this, Rose would picture him off in the jungle, coming upon a one-of-a-kind orchid high up on the edge of a waterfall, carefully uprooting it, putting it in a pot, and carrying it home, hoping he had what it took to help it flourish.

"I asked your mama where she was from. 'Here in London,' she said. And I laughed and said, 'Wouldn't you know it? I'm from London, too.'"

"I think it's so romantic," Sylvie would say. "The boy from London meets the girl from London. Like it was meant to be."

"Life could be a dream, if I could take you up in paradise up above," the Crew Cuts doo-wopped now, as the record spun on the little portable player Sylvie had brought out from their bedroom.

"Introducing Miss Matilda, the star of the show," said Sylvie, and she led the plump Rhode Island Red onstage with her handful of raisins. Matilda followed Sylvie over to the wooden structure they'd built with two poles placed four feet apart, each with a platform and a ladder leading up to it. This was the high-wire act, although instead of a wire they had a narrow board, because they hadn't been able to teach a chicken to walk across rope.

With Sylvie's encouragement, Matilda climbed the ladder on the left, made her way across the narrow top board, then to the other platform, and down the ladder. When she reached the bottom, she rang the little bell that hung there by hitting it with her beak.

The crowd applauded, smiling. Sylvie had Matilda do her bow, which got more applause. Sylvie looked up and smiled, her hair coming loose from her right barrette, a few wisps falling into her eyes. The boy guest was at the edge of his seat, his eyes dreamy, the way people's eyes often got when they watched Sylvie. She had the same effect on people that she did on chickens: they watched her intently, eager to do whatever she asked them next.

Sylvie might be able to entrance the chickens and the whole rest of the world, but Rose Slater was immune to her sister's charms. That didn't mean Sylvie didn't try.

Uncle Fenton had given Sylvie a book—*Mastering the Art and Science of Hypnotism*—for Christmas, and she'd studied it cover to cover, underlining passages and making notes in the margins. Fenton had thought that she could use some of the techniques on the birds, but Sylvie had taken it further, insisting on practicing on Rose.

"Keep your eyes on my finger; feel yourself getting sleepier, sleepier still. I'm going to count backward from ten; when I get to one, you'll be fast asleep, but you'll hear every word I say."

It never worked, really, but Rose pretended. She followed Sylvie's finger, lowered her eyelids, spoke and moved as if she was in a trance state. She said goofy things, clucked like a chicken, did whatever Sylvie commanded. It was great fun, fooling her sister, letting Sylvie think she was in control. Rose loved knowing that she had the power to ruin the game, to pop open her eyes and confess that she'd been faking all along. And there would be Sylvie, the clever daughter, the beautiful, graceful girl, waving her dumb finger through the air for nothing.

Rose herself was just the opposite of Sylvie: awkward and thick-limbed, with dark, easily tangled hair. She was the kind of kid people glanced right over, a short and clumsy shadow lurking behind Sylvie and occasionally sticking out her tongue when she was sure no one could see.

As Sylvie and Matilda hammed it up for the audience, Rose busied herself setting up the next act: Petunia was a Barred Rock who Rose had taught to balance on a metal roller skate as it was pulled across the stage on a string. The best part was her costume—a little gingham dress and a pillbox hat that Rose bobby-pinned to her feathers.

"We're on, girl," Rose whispered to the hen, giving her a good-luck stroke. She grabbed a handful of raisins from the Sun-Maid box and went to work, leading Petunia across the stage as the skate's metal wheels rattled.

Uncle Fenton whistled appreciatively. He was not actually their uncle, but a distant cousin of Daddy's and much younger: he'd just turned nineteen. He was wearing his usual outfit—a stained white T-shirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve, blue work pants and heavy black boots. In his back pocket he always kept a thin paperback book, something he'd picked up at the five-and-dime: science fiction or crime, sometimes a Western. Uncle Fenton was Daddy's helper, the fix-it man at the motel, and he lived in a trailer behind the house that Daddy helped him pay for. When Fenton wasn't reading, repairing something, or cutting the grass, he was building himself a motorcycle out of parts he'd been collecting. Sometimes the girls would go help him, and he'd promise that once he got it running he'd take them for a ride—maybe even add on a sidecar, so they could all three go.

Now they got Sunshine, a big, glossy black hen, from the cage behind

the back curtain, and all three birds were dancing, moving back and forth, spinning in carefully choreographed circles, banging into each other clumsily, while the girls led them on with raisins; all the chickens wore hats and silk scarves.

"And now for the grand finale," Sylvie announced. "I will use the power of hypnosis to put all three chickens to sleep. I need absolute quiet from the audience. Watch, and you will be amazed."

Rose held Matilda and Petunia firmly in place next to one another. Sylvie held Sunshine down with her left hand; with her right, she used a white stick (she called it her "magic chicken wand") to twirl circles in the air in front of them, then drew lines on the ground, a straight line drawn again and again in front of each hen. The birds watched the white stick, eyes focused on the line it made in the dirt, and gradually relaxed, holding perfectly still. One by one, Sylvie picked the birds up and flipped them onto their backs, where they lay with their eyes closed, feet in the air. The crowd oohed and aahed. Sylvie gave a proud smile, then snapped her fingers and said in a loud voice, "Awaken!" All three birds jumped up, righted themselves, and ran wild.

"Tah-dah," she said, taking a long, deep bow, chicken wand still clutched in her right hand.

Mama looked down and picked at the hem of her dress, pulling a thread loose. But Daddy banged his hands together and gave the girls an enthusiastic grin. Uncle Fenton laughed out loud, slapping his knees. The young newlyweds applauded politely, then headed back down to their room. The housewife from New Jersey reached over and took her husband's hand, and he looked at her and smiled a *can-you-believe-this* smile. Their wedding rings glinted in the sun. The little girl turned to her brother and said, "We need to get some chickens when we get home." The parents laughed.

"Good show, girls," Daddy said. He pulled the little notebook from his pocket and jotted down something. Daddy was always getting wonderful ideas—ideas that would make money, make the motel bigger and better and more efficient; ideas that could change the world.

"I'll go start dinner," said Mama, her wary eye on the hen in Sylvie's arms. Mama was not a big fan of the chickens. She thought they were dirty and not all that bright, and sometimes worried out loud about the diseases the girls might catch from them, like salmonella. Secretly, Rose wondered how you could get a sickness from a chicken that would turn

you into a fish, and what exactly would happen—would you grow gills? Scales? Not be able to breathe on land?

"It's my paper night," Mama reminded them. Every Thursday, after dinner, the girls had to clean up the kitchen and get their own selves off to bed, so Daddy could watch the office while Mama had her newspaper meeting. She and some of the members of the Ladies Club of London put out a weekly paper—*The London Town Crier*—full of news, recipes, and advertisements. Mama was the editor, and each Thursday night they planned the next week's issue.

Sylvie wandered over to Lucy the cow's pen, and let the guest kids pet Petunia while Daddy talked to their father, the two men huddled close, smoking. They were talking about the highways being built all over, how soon there would be one running right by London, going from White River Junction all the way up to the Canadian border. Daddy shook his head, said in a low voice, "It's no good for this town. No one will come through on Route 6 anymore."

The boy who was petting Petunia moved closer, so that the toes of his Keds were practically touching Sylvie's sandals. His hand brushed hers, and she smiled.

"How do you do it?" he asked. "Hypnotize the chickens?"

"It takes a lot of practice," Sylvie told him.

"Can you hypnotize people?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "I do it to my sister all the time."

"Will you do me?" His eyes glistened, his whole body thrumming with excitement at the possibility.

"I don't know," Sylvie said. "Maybe."

The boy's little sister was reaching through the cedar fence rails to pet Lucy. Nailed to the fence was a sign Daddy had painted:

LUCY, THE STATE COW, WAS BORN IN THE FALL OF 1943.
IF YOU LOOK ON HER LEFT SIDE, YOU WILL SEE SHE HAS A SPOT
IN THE SHAPE OF THE GREAT STATE OF VERMONT.

Now Lucy gave the little girl's hand a lick with her enormous tongue. The girl laughed.

"She was born the same day as my sister, September 16, 1943," Rose said. "Sylvie and that cow are as good as twins." Rose leaned in to rub

Lucy's lucky spot, her hand covering the whole state of Vermont. "Daddy says when Lucy was born he had a vision. He saw the motel, the tower, the pen for Lucy. He knew people would come. And he was right. Because here you are."

"Did your daddy build that big tower?" the girl asked, turning from the cow to look down the driveway. The tower was thirty feet tall, twelve feet across, built of stone and cement.

"He built it the year I was born," Rose said. "He did everything himself: mixing the concrete, batch after batch, in a wheelbarrow, hauling rocks down from the hillside."

"It was a gift for our mama," Sylvie explained. "She's English, and he wanted to give her her own Tower of London so she wouldn't be homesick."

The boy smiled at this. "This place is amazing. I can't believe you get to live here. You've got the tower, the pool, the whole motel."

"And Lucy," Rose added.

"She's soft," the girl said, rubbing her hand over the cow's fur.

"If I lived here, I'd never want to leave," the boy said.

"I know," Rose said. "We're real lucky."

"I'm going to leave one day," Sylvie said, bending to set Petunia down. The chicken began to peck at the dusty ground. "I'm going to go to Hollywood when I grow up."

"Hollywood?" Rose snorted. "You're going to *Hollywood*?"

"What for?" the boy asked.

"To be in the movies," Sylvie said.

The boy smiled. "I'll bet you'll be a big star," he told her.

Above them, a monarch butterfly fluttered through the air. No one seemed to notice it but Rose. She stepped away from the fenced cow pen and toward the butterfly. It hovered over Sylvie, then landed lightly on her shoulder.

The boy smiled. Sylvie caught sight of it and laughed. "Isn't it lovely?" she said.

"Yes," the boy answered, not looking at the monarch.

Rose reached out her finger, willing the monarch to her. *Choose me,* she thought with all her might.

When the butterfly didn't come, Rose made an impatient grab for it, tearing one of its paper-thin wings.

"Rose!" Sylvie hissed. "Look what you've done! How could you be so careless?"

Sylvie ran off toward the house, cradling the wounded butterfly, calling for Mama. But Rose knew that, for all Mama's healing powers, there was nothing she could do for the ruined wing.

The boy from New Jersey turned away in disgust, his chance with Sylvie lost, probably forever. He took his little sister by the hand and dragged her off toward Room 12, ignoring her protests that she wasn't done petting the cow. Now Rose was alone with Lucy. She stroked the cow, her fingers making circles in her familiar, dusty fur.

"She's wrong," Rose told Lucy, glancing over her shoulder to watch her sister bang through the front door of the house. Rose wasn't careless. She cared too much, that was all. She cared so much that sometimes she was sure her heart might explode from the pressing ache of it.

Rose

The next evening, the motel was nearly full. Only one room was still vacant: Room 28, all the way at the end of the new building.

Rose was sitting with Mama in the office. Daddy had run out to do an errand after dinner and wasn't back yet. When Rose asked Mama where Daddy had gone, Mama's lips tightened and she said, "He's just out, Rose. He'll be back when he gets back."

Rose didn't mind. She loved these times, when it was just her and Mama, alone. Sometimes Mama would read to her from the paper, or tell her stories about when she was growing up back in England. Rose tried to picture Mama as a little girl; she imagined a neat, stern-faced child who ran the neighborhood doll hospital and never once broke any rules.

Rose was tired. Her eyelids kept drifting closed as she stared at the bright office light. The screen door was closed, June bugs and moths thumping into it. *The sign said* Vacancy, they seemed to say. *Can we come in?*

It was well past bedtime now, but Mama said Rose could stay up a little while longer, just in case another guest showed up. Rose wanted to be the one to run down to the road and flip the sign to *No Vacancy.*

She loved to be there when people checked in, road-weary, blurry-eyed. She'd slide the little manila registration card across the desk to them, watch as they wrote down their names, addresses, number of people in their party, car make and model, license number. Rose loved to see where they were from: Staten Island, New York; Portage, Pennsylvania; once, they had an older couple from Christmas, Florida. Imagine, a town called Christmas!

Sometimes they'd mention where they were traveling to: New Hampshire, Maine, all the way up into Canada. There were even people

going to see the ocean, which Rose had only seen once, when Mama and Daddy took the girls to Hampton Beach a few years ago. They'd gone in the winter, because when you're motel people you can't go anywhere during the busy season. Sylvie had run up and down the shore, collecting rocks, shells, and bits of driftwood, oohing and aahing about how beautiful it was, how lovely it was to lick your lips and taste the salt of the ocean. Rose stood shivering on the beach, thinking only that the ocean looked cold and dark and seemed to go on forever. She tried to imagine the beach crowded with swimmers and sunbathers stretched out on towels, the smell of hot dogs and candy apples in the air, but it was no good. It was like standing on the empty stage long after the school play was over and all the costumes and sets had been packed away.

Rose loved the names of the cars people arrived at the motel in—Dodge Coronet, Hudson Hornet, Studebaker Starliner—the heavy steel bodies, the sparkling chrome grilles, the tires spinning through the gravel of their driveway, tires that had been turning for hundreds of miles, been to places Rose could only imagine.

The cars, Daddy said, got bigger and faster each year. Rose imagined one day cars would be more like rocket ships, like in one of Uncle Fenton's science-fiction books. You'd be able to blast off and go from London, Vermont, to Christmas, Florida, in less than an hour. Maybe even all the way across the ocean, to London, England, where Mama was from.

Down at the road now, a car went by. Rose could see the taillights fading away. They turned the corner and were gone, moving toward downtown London. Soon they'd be passing the Texaco, Woolworth's, London Town Library, Congregational church—everything shut down, locked up tight this time of night.

There was talk, lots of talk, about how the interstate highways were coming. Her teacher, Miss Marshall, said that President Eisenhower was promising bigger, better roads that would connect the whole country. Rose liked the sound of this (though she would never tell her father, who got red in the face whenever the word "highway" was mentioned), of being able to follow a highway from here all the way to the other side of the country. A highway built for all those beautiful cars to rumble along, engines purring, tires spinning so fast they were just a blur. Not quite like rocket ships, but a step closer.

Sometimes she dreamed of machines. Of cars and rockets. Of the big machines that would build highways: of bulldozers and graders, mechan-

ical shovels and steamrollers. She dreamed they were coming this way, tearing up the land, dynamiting rocks, making a smooth blacktop surface for cars to race along. Coming closer. Closer. Rumbling, chugging.

"Where's your sister?" Mama asked, and Rose looked up and rubbed her eyes.

"Up in our room. She's got a headache."

"Poor thing," Mama said, and Rose nodded sympathetically.

"Maybe this butterfly isn't just a butterfly," Sylvie had said to Rose just after dinner, when they were alone in their room, looking at the broken winged butterfly on Sylvie's nightstand.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember Oma's stories?" Sylvie had asked, her eyes growing wide.

Rose nodded. She did remember. She remembered that Sylvie had been frightened to death by Oma's stories, so she'd stopped telling them to her and shared them only with Rose.

Oma had come to visit last year. They'd spent weeks getting ready: cleaning the house from top to bottom, setting up a cot in Mama's sewing room, asking excited questions about what she was like, this grandmother they'd never met, coming all the way from England.

"This is your grandmother," Mama had announced as the old woman climbed out of the back seat of Daddy's car, shouldering a large patent-leather pocketbook, wearing loose white gloves stained yellow at the fingertips.

She took the girls in, studying them from head to toe, turning them, touching their faces and hair. Then, apparently finding them acceptable, she gave them each a kiss on both cheeks. "You call me Oma," she said, her accent different from Mama's. When Rose asked Mama about it later, she explained that her mother was German but she'd married a Londoner.

"How come we've never met her before?" Rose had asked.

"Because she's a busy woman. And crossing the Atlantic is no small feat. Especially since Oma hates to fly. She came in a boat."

Oma sucked on horehound candy, wore sweaters she'd knitted herself, and taught the girls to make apple cake.

One morning, Rose woke up with her hair in tangles. Oma clucked her tongue and went to work brushing it out.

"Perhaps you've been visited by a mare," she said.

"A mare? Like a girl horse?" Rose asked.

Oma shook her head. "Your mother hasn't told you girls about mares?"

Rose and Sylvie shook their heads.

"Mares are human during the day, but at night, they change into all different creatures. One minute, they're a person; the next, they can be a cat, a bird, or a butterfly."

Sylvie, listening from her own bed, said, "That's made up. It's another of your fairy tales."

"You think so?" Oma said, continuing gently to work the tangles out of Rose's hair.

"Are they good?" Rose asked.

"Sometimes. But sometimes they turn into terrible monsters with teeth and claws. They come to you in the night, give you bad dreams, tie knots in your hair, suck your breath away. If you're not careful, they'll swallow you whole."

Later, Rose wished Oma hadn't told them about mares. Not because she was scared, but because of Sylvie. Her sister had been so frightened that she started having nightmares.

One morning, when Mama was comforting Sylvie after one of her bad dreams, Sylvie told her about Oma's stories, about how, ever since, she couldn't stop thinking that every person she met, every animal she saw, might secretly be a mare.

"Even though I know it can't be true," Sylvie said, sniffling. "It couldn't be true, right, Mama?"

Mama was furious with Oma.

"I will not have you poisoning the minds of my children," Mama had hissed at Oma. She said it had been a mistake to invite Oma at all. Rose tried to eavesdrop on the argument from the top of the stairs after she and Sylvie had been sent to bed early, but caught very little of it. Oma left the next day and went back to England.

Rose was mad at her mother for sending Oma away, but mostly she blamed Sylvie—if Sylvie hadn't been such a scaredy-cat tattletale, Mama would never even have known.

Oma sent Rose a few cheerful letters from England, letters Mama always opened and read before giving them to Rose. Oma told Rose she was knitting her a sweater for Christmas and asked what color she

would like. Rose wrote back, "Red, please," and told her how much she missed her.

But Rose never got the sweater. Just before Christmas, Mama got a call from a cousin in England. Oma had been killed in an accident.

Rose was devastated. Oma was the only adult who had ever seemed to prefer her to Sylvie, who had ever thought she was the special one. It just wasn't fair.

She thought of Oma often—of the stories she told when they were alone together, the walks they had taken through the woods behind the motel. "Everything out here is alive, Rose," she had said, her hand wrapped around Rose's. "Can't you feel it?"

Rose thought about that still: how everything seemed to have a life of its own, not just the trees and mushrooms in the forest, but things like highways and buildings and cars. A car was coming up the driveway now, its headlights winking in the dark. At first, Rose thought it was Daddy in their Chevy Bel Air. But the shape of the car and the sound of the engine were all wrong.

"Looks like we might have a full house after all," Mama said as the car pulled up and parked outside the office. A man got out and stood up, stretching. (They almost always stretched.) A woman with a pale kerchief over her hair waited in the car.

The car was a Nash Rambler. Rose could tell, even from in here. Rambler. Rambling. Rambling Rose, like in the song Perry Como sang: "She's a beauty growing wild." Mama and Daddy had the record. Sometimes Daddy sang it to her, his own little Rambling Rose.

The man came into the office, shuffling a little, blinking at the shock of bright lights. His white shirt was wrinkled; his eyes were bloodshot from driving too long.

"Good evening. My wife and I need a room for the night," he said.

"You're in luck," Mama said. "We have one room left. Four dollars a night."

"Perfect," the man said. Rose slid him the registration card, then slipped out from behind the desk.

"I'll go flip the sign, Mama," she said.

"Good girl," Mama said. "Then head on up to bed."

"Yes, ma'am," she said, giving Mama and the man a little curtsy as she left, because she knew she had to be especially good, especially polite,

in front of guests. No matter what was happening, they had to play the perfect family, Rose had to be a perfect child.

"Turn on the charm, girls," Daddy always said. "Make them want to come back and see us again."

"Cute kid," the man said, as he leaned against the desk to fill out the form.

"Yes," Mama said. "She's a good girl."

Good girl. Good girl. Good girl.

Rose skipped down the driveway (she was right—the man did drive a Rambler) and to the sign, where she stepped forward, into the light, and flipped it so that the *No* showed. She stood for a minute, bathed in light, as if onstage with the Tower Motel backdrop behind her. She did a little dance, a few ballet moves Oma had taught her—slide, step, slide, pirouette, curtsy. She thought of Sylvie saying that she was going to leave one day and run off to Hollywood to be a star. *Not me,* Rose thought as she danced. *I'm going to stay right here forever.*

Mr. Alfred Hitchcock
Paramount Pictures
Hollywood, California

August 11, 1955
Dear Mr. Hitchcock,

Sometimes a butterfly is not just a butterfly.
This is what Oma taught me.
You know the worst thing I learned from her?
You can be a monster and not even know you are one.
They look like us.
They think they are us.
But really, they've got a monster hiding inside.
If that's not a good idea for a movie, I don't know what is.

Sincerely Yours,

Miss Sylvia A. Slater
The Tower Motel
328 Route 6
London, Vermont

Rose

Rose was having the dream again. A dark, formless beast had overtaken her, pinned her, crushed her from all sides until she got smaller and smaller—the size of a doll, then as tiny as a teardrop. She did her best to fight it, but in the end she was powerless.

Wake up, she told herself. *Time to wake up now.*

She opened her eyes. The broken-winged butterfly was in an old canning jar on Sylvie's bedside table. It banged silently against the glass, a shadow in front of the curtained window. Rose watched it struggle in the dim light of early dawn, her heart pounding, her lungs unable to draw a breath.

She was sure she was awake, and yet her body was completely paralyzed. The air was heavy with a rank, wild-animal smell.

Rose listened hard. She was sure she could hear something breathing nearby—a rasping, grunting, guttural sound—but there was nothing there.

Or was there? Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flicker of movement, a shift in the darkness. And there was the feeling she had, this deep sense that something else was in the room, something evil that meant to do her harm.

Her eyes darted around, but found only the familiar landscape of the small bedroom she shared with Sylvie. And yet, it was also terribly unfamiliar, off-kilter, bathed in a greenish glow, as if the moonlight itself was somehow the wrong color. Rose opened her mouth to scream, to call for help, but she couldn't make a sound.

Am I dead? she wondered.

Concentrating with all her might, Rose tried to sit up—just to wiggle her pinkie—but the only thing she could move was her eyes.

She looked past the butterfly in the jar to Sylvie's twin bed. She willed her sister to wake up, open her eyes, and save her, but she realized now that Sylvie's bed was empty. The covers were thrown back, the pillow indented where Sylvie's head should be.

A horrible thought came over Rose: A mare had come. And it had gotten Sylvie first.

There it was again—the rotten, wheezing stink of rancid meat breath and damp fur, so strong she could taste it in the back of her throat. She heard a low, quiet sound, almost like a growl; felt it vibrate through her whole body. She still couldn't see anything—it was hiding in the shadows, under her own bed, maybe even. She was sure that, whatever this was, it had rows of sharp teeth—and if she was able to look in those teeth, she would find shreds of her sister's white nightgown.

Please, Rose thought. *Please, go away. Spare me. Please.* And then she thought of part of the little prayer Mama had both girls say each night before bed: "Angels watch me with the night, and wake me with the morning light."

And just like that, she could move again. She gasped, and air rushed into her lungs. The foul animal smell dissipated. She sprang from her bed without daring to look underneath, scampered down the hall to her parents' room, and flung open the paneled wooden door.

"What on earth?" asked Mama, squinting into the moonlight spilling from the hallway.

"Something was in my room," Rose said, panting. The windows were shut, the shades drawn. The air in her parents' room was dusty and still, and smelled of Daddy's cigarettes and Mama's Jean Naté. Daddy's work shirt was hung up on the back of a chair, its arms limp at its sides; in the dark, this made the chair look strangely human, as if it would start walking across the wooden floorboards on its four legs.

"Another bat?" asked Mama, sitting up in bed, her pale nightgown glowing. Beside her, Daddy stirred, sat up, and groaned—they'd had a bat in their room in the early spring, and he'd had to chase it out with the broom. He reached for the clock. It was a little before 5:00 a.m.

"No. Not a bat. I . . . I don't know what it was," Rose admitted.

A monster. A monster who followed me from my dreams. One of Oma's mares.

"I could hear it, smell it, but I couldn't see it. I couldn't get up, couldn't move at all. I think . . ." Did she dare say it? "I think maybe whatever it was got Sylvie."

Her father made a dismissive chuffing sound.

"Shhh," Mama soothed. "You're all right now."

"Go back to bed," Daddy said, voice gruff and sleepy. "It's too early for any of your stories, Rose."

Daddy always said Rose had quite an imagination, which was his kind way of saying that she liked to exaggerate, to make things up just to see if she could get away with it.

"I can't," Rose said. "Didn't you hear me? There was something there. Something in the room with me. And Sylvie is gone!"

"There was nothing in your room," Daddy said, turning over. "You had a bad dream, that's all."

Rose shook her head. She wasn't a scaredy-cat like Sylvie with her nightmares.

"But it wasn't a dream," Rose insisted. "And I'm not making it up. It was real."

"I'm sure your sister's in her bed," said Mama, voice low and calm.

"But she *isn't.* I think a mare got her."

Mama turned on the bedside light with an irritated snap.

"A *mare*? How many times must I tell you girls? Oma's stories were just that: stories." She jumped out of bed, pulled on her robe, and marched down the hall. She returned in less than a minute and reported, "Sylvie is right in her bed, where she should be." She slipped off her robe and climbed back into her own bed. "And, I might add, where we all should be. Off you go."

"But she wasn't there a minute ago, I swear," Rose said.

"Oh, for God's sake," Daddy said with a groan, sitting up. "I'm going to go put some coffee on."

He thumped out of the room in his striped pajamas, hair rumpled. *Be careful,* Rose wanted to call after him. *It's out there still.*

Rose crawled in beside her mother; Daddy's spot was still warm. She snuggled up next to Mama, laid her head on Mama's shoulder.

"Ah, my poor girl," Mama sighed. "You really are scared silly. I wish to God Mother hadn't filled your head with all that nonsense."

Rose heard water running in the kitchen, and the sound of her father

flipping on the old wooden Philco radio. Daddy hummed along to the tune. The door of the new Frigidaire opened, then closed.

While Mama stroked her hair, Rose recalled a conversation she'd had with Oma.

"Does Mama know about the mares? Does she believe?"

Oma smiled. "Indeed she does. But she would never admit to it. For some people, Rose, it's easier to pretend the things that frighten us most don't exist at all."

"It's dead," Sylvie said, plunking the glass jar with the butterfly on the coffee table, right in front of Rose.

Rose was sitting on the couch, hugging a pillow tight against her chest. The monarch's body lay on top of the bed of leaves, perfectly still. Rose gazed at it through the glass, which magnified the monarch's wings, brilliantly orange and veined with black. They reminded her of the stained-glass windows at church. Rose imagined a church of the butterflies where they worshipped metamorphosis. Caterpillar, cocoon, pupae, butterfly.

"You killed it. I hope you're happy," Sylvie said, hands on her hips as she glared down at Rose.

Rose bit her lip and hugged the pillow tighter. She remembered how much she'd wanted the butterfly to come to her, to choose her. If Oma was here, she would understand. "I didn't mean to."

Sylvie looked at her a minute. "Maybe you did and maybe you didn't. Maybe you meant to and didn't even realize it."

"That makes no sense." Rose picked up the jar and looked inside, willing the broken creature to move, to flutter its wings.

"Neither does killing a butterfly."

Sylvie sat in their father's wingback chair, not taking her eyes off Rose.

"Where were you, anyway?" Rose asked accusingly, watching her sister through the glass jar.

"Where was I when?" Sylvie snapped. Her face was distorted by the glass, all mixed up with the bright-orange colors of the butterfly. For once, she was not the beautiful one, but something strange and hideous—an orange-faced monster.

"Earlier this morning, just before five," Rose said, putting the jar back down on the coffee table; Sylvie looked normal again, her hair neatly combed, tangle-free. "I woke up and you weren't in bed."

"Of course I was in bed, Rose." For half a second, Sylvie looked worried, panicked almost, but then her expression changed into her best poor-crazy-little-sister look. "Where else would I be?"

"But your bed was empty. Your pillow . . ."

Sylvie held up a finger and waved it back and forth the way she'd learned in her hypnosis book. When she spoke, it was in her slow, wavering hypnotist voice. "Follow my eyes with your finger. That's right, good. Now feel your eyelids getting heavy, heavier still; it's a struggle to keep them open."

Rose played along, following her sister's finger with her eyes.

"Go ahead and close them, Rose. That's right. Let yourself go deeper. Deeper still. The only thing you're aware of is the sound of my voice. You're going to listen to what I tell you. You're going to understand that each word I speak is the absolute truth. Nod if you understand."

Rose nodded.

"My bed was not empty," Sylvie told her. "I was there the whole time."

Rose slumped her shoulders forward, tried to look relaxed and like she was at her sister's mercy.

"Now tell me what you saw this morning," Sylvie commanded, her voice low and soothing.

"Your bed was not empty," Rose repeated, voice dull and robotic. "You were there the whole time."

"Very good," Sylvie said. "And that's the way you'll remember it from this moment on. Do you understand?"

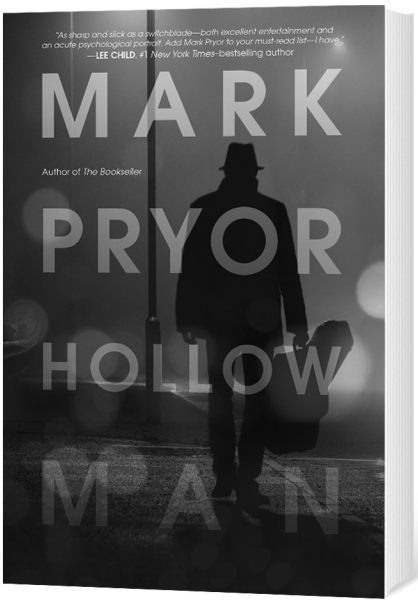
"Yes," Rose said.

"Good girl. On the count of three, you will open your eyes. One, two, three."

Rose opened her eyes. Sylvie sat in the chair across from her, curling her hand into a tight fist and smiling. The butterfly lay in the jar on the coffee table between them, its orange color seeming impossibly bright for something dead.

"Do you think Mama will put blueberries in the pancakes this morning?" Sylvie asked brightly, glancing toward the kitchen, as though nothing unusual had happened.

Rose's heart began to thump madly. She was surer than ever now that her sister had been out of bed last night; for some reason, Sylvie really didn't want Rose to know it. This was the first time Rose could ever remember Sylvie keeping a secret from her, and Rose didn't like it. Not one little bit.



Perfect for fans of crime fiction, villain protagonists, and unreliable narrators.

Dominic is a prosecutor, a musician, and an Englishman living in Texas. He's also a psychopath.

His main goal is to hide his condition and lead a seemingly normal life in hopes to pay off his debts and become a full-time musician in Austin's club scene. But on one lousy day his carefully-controlled world starts to shatter: he's demoted at work and accused of stealing a fellow musician's song.

He also meets a beautiful woman in a lime green dress—perhaps the biggest threat to his safety of all. At her urging, Dominic hatches the perfect crime. But when cracks start to show in the conspiracy and, with no allegiance to anyone but himself, Dominic has to decide whether to stick by his partners in crime, or let his true nature come out to play.

Available September 2015

Seventh Street Books • Trade Paperback: 9781633880863 • eBook: 9781633880870

Published 2015 by Seventh Street Books®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Cover image © Matthew Heptinstall
Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

Permission pending for "The Hollow Men," by T. S. Eliot

This is a work of fiction. Characters, organizations, products, locales, and events portrayed in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Inquiries should be addressed to
Seventh Street Books
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228
VOICE: 716–691–0133
FAX: 716–691–0137
WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pryor, Mark, 1967-
Hollow man / by Mark Pryor.
pages ; cm
ISBN 978-1-63388-086-3 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-1-63388-087-0 (e-book)
1. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3616.R976H65 2015
813'.6—dc23

2015011552

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

CACTUS LAND

My parents' lawyer called with the news as I climbed out of my car, our conversation a hesitant hopscotch of words until we caught up to the slight delay that comes with international calls. His voice seemed thinned out by the distance between us, me in a downtown garage in Austin, Texas, him in his small village in England.

Or perhaps the quaver in his voice came from what he had to tell me. The news, of course, wasn't good. People don't make long-distance calls to strangers for anything but the bad, and so he cleared his plummy little throat and told me that my parents were dead. Killed yesterday, on the family farm.

"I'm frightfully sorry," he said.

I thought at first he must be joking, or mistaken. But English solicitors don't play cruel practical jokes, and they certainly don't make mistakes like this. Which meant that my mum and dad, both of them, were really dead and had been since yesterday. Dead when I went to bed last night, dead when I got up this morning, dead when I was deciding how many tacos I wanted for breakfast. I didn't know what to say, and when I tried to speak, nothing but a croaking came out, so I stayed silent.

"There was a big storm," he explained. "The next morning your parents went for a walk to see if there was any damage, trees blown over, that sort of thing. Your father stepped on a downed power line." My mum, he said, raced over to help without realizing what had happened, and reached for her husband's hand one last time.

"I'm sorry," he said again, "I'm sure this is quite a . . ." He couldn't very well say *shock*, but it was the right word.

"Thank you for letting me know," I said. I closed my car door behind me and kept the phone to my ear.

"You're probably wondering about . . . the farm, all the practical stuff."

I wasn't, of course. I was struggling to bring up a clear picture of my parents. It's a funny thing that when you've not seen people for a decade, even people you love and who love you, their faces seem to quiver in your mind, blurring in and out. I stood there in the garage, a block of sunlight creeping toward my toes, and I simply couldn't bring up a clear image of them.

But Craig Whitfield, Esquire, didn't know that. He was like so many English people of his generation and class: welcoming the busy necessities so they could blanket those awkward emotions that one was supposed to experience weakly, and express not at all.

"Not the best news there, either, I'm afraid," he was saying. "You see, farming isn't what it was twenty years ago. The new, open Europe has been good for everyone except farmers—can't compete, and the subsidies are a fraction of what they used to be. As a result, I'm afraid your father picked up a spot of debt along the way. More than a spot, quite frankly. The land is worth something, but some of the larger fields he'd already sold off and was leasing back."

"Oh, I didn't know that." I didn't know that because I hadn't spoken to my parents in many years.

"I'm the executor of the will, so I'll have more information in a week or so, once everything's tallied up."

"What about the funeral arrangements?"

"They didn't want one. You know them—they weren't religious in any way and didn't believe in making a fuss over the dead. They have identical wills, which say they want to be cremated and their ashes spread in the back meadow. No service, no memorial."

Just gone.

My mind held a picture of them now, a little fuzzy but safely created and tucked away, high on a shelf but visible for when I wanted to see it. My father thin and weathered, an unruly flop of hair his only departure from a life of order and logic. My mother just as wiry, a pretty lady when she made the effort, but a woman of the country, just as hardy and ready to work as her husband.

I struggled for something to say, wondering what I *ought* to say to a stuffy English solicitor bearing bad tidings. I didn't really know even though my mind was working overtime, processing all he'd told me, but I knew that I didn't want this call to end, not yet. It couldn't end because then I'd be left holding a phone in the gathering heat of a Texas summer morning, and everything would be the same as yesterday, except my parents would be dead. This moment, this call, it was too brief to herald the obliteration of the people who'd conceived, raised, and eventually exiled me.

But I had nothing to ask. I knew how they'd died, and I knew the farm would disappear into the debt hole they'd created; and with them and it gone, all connections were severed. Just a final "tally up" from Craig Whitfield, Esquire, probably no more than an e-mail letting me know precisely how worthless my inheritance was.

"Right," I said. "No funeral. That makes sense for them, I guess. Do I need to come over there for anything?"

"No," he said, a little too hurriedly. "I'll spread their ashes, it's what they wanted. I'll take care of all the paperwork, the legal mumbo-jumbo, and send you a copy of the wills. Like I said, I don't know that there'll be much—we'll have to have an estate sale to take care of the bills. There's a guitar, though, your dad's old one that he wanted you to have. You play?"

"I do. Prosecutor by day, musician by night."

"Splendid. You'll appreciate the guitar, then."

"Absolutely. Thanks again." I stood there in the shadows of the garage, the stale smell of urine and dust coming into focus as Mr. Whitfield's presence receded.

"Yes, you're very welcome." His voice softened, as if emotion was allowed after all, or a measure of sympathy anyway. "And my condolences, Dominic, it's all quite a shame."

Indeed. My parents had been electrocuted to death, and even though I'd not seen them in a long time, they'd finally abandoned me permanently, irrevocably, taking into oblivion with them the house I'd been born in, the fields I'd played in, and the woods I'd explored for my most formative years. So yes, at that moment I tended to agree with Craig Whitfield, Esquire, that it was all quite a shame.

○

I put the phone in my pocket and stared out into the sunlight, perched on the hood of my car, wondering whether to go home, go to England, or do what my parents would have done: carry on with a stiff upper lip. They'd done that after I left, got on with their lives while allowing for the occasional parental exploit, a Christmas or birthday card. Eventually, like the missives from a senile grandparent, the cards stopped arriving. I didn't mind as much as I ought to have, just because I knew what my parents were like and I knew that day would come. It wasn't born of callousness, either, just practicality. Logic. What would an estranged son want with a birthday card from someone he's not seen in years? Exiling me wasn't an act of callousness, either, though it's easy to see it that way, pitch it as one. As much as anything, it was a way of saving me from something I'd done, something that could have had much worse consequences than a new life in America.

It happened when I was sixteen years old, on a foggy morning in the English village of Weston, when I mistook the florid features of a local man for a rising pheasant and shot him in the face.

The man died the next day, and as usual I thought I could atone for my misdeed by writing a song. My family called me cold-blooded, and when I tried to explain some of the things the man had

done, they wouldn't listen, they didn't care, as if death erased the man's own misdeeds. It wasn't the first time they'd failed to believe me, but it was the most serious, and the last. Instead of writing my song, I was shipped to wealthy and disinterested relatives in Texas. There, I lived out my youth in a military school where I hung on to my accent for dear life and carried a guitar everywhere I went. I stayed in Texas when I graduated and my most prized possession remained my guitar, but I quickly bought a gun and loved it enough to make my guitar sing with jealousy. It was a semiautomatic Smith & Wesson, sexy but not as beautiful as the antique Purdey shotguns I'd left behind in England. The shotguns. When I was on the phone with the lawyer, I'd wanted to ask for them, ask him what would become of them. But the thought seemed crass. Hell, maybe my father already sold them, after what happened.

In all other ways, and as I've done ever since I came to America and came to know myself, I donned the local camouflage and learned to fit in: I kicked my car door closed with a cowboy boot every day and strolled into work with a breakfast taco in each hand. After a few years, I thought I was free and clear of my tragic past but, as they say, accidents happen in threes.

The first one came with that pull of a trigger and exiled me to Texas. The second one was a slower kind of disaster that hid itself inside a normal Thursday, a day that started out like any other. A slow-burn disaster that, step by step, twisted my future out of trajectory. Not as quickly as the blast of a gun but in a way that, much later, made me think I should have seen it coming.

A car passed me, adding its fumes to the rancid air in the garage, and I wanted out of there. Not to go home, I didn't need to spend the day in maudlin reverie. Nor was I needed in England. I'd do what I could to honor my parents and behave the way they'd hope for, the way they'd behave and expect me to. I'd go to work.

I opened the front door and retrieved my 9mm from the glove compartment and tucked it into its cloth bag. A second wave of oil

and piss hit me, and I held my breath while I locked my gun and guitar in the trunk, as I did every day. This garage was for county employees only, but defendants at the neighboring courthouse used it without compunction, which should have surprised no one, but seemed to. As a result, I threw furtive looks over my shoulder as I stashed the guitar case and felt that daily twinge of hope it'd be there when I finished work. I'd asked to have cameras put up in the garage (I had a thing for cameras and surveillance, having won some of my biggest trials because critical moments were caught on tape), but neither the county nor the city wanted to pay for them.

They went everywhere with me, the gun and the guitar, everywhere except the office. Even though I prosecuted murderers and rapists for a living, my boss had seen fit to ban us from packing heat while at work. Our offices were in the same building as the courts, so he was right that the place was stuffed to the gills with cops and sheriffs but, for an Englishman living in Texas, not being allowed to carry my sidearm was a grave disappointment.

I took the stairs to exit the parking deck, having learned my lesson about the unreliable lift on two separate occasions. To my right sat a small park, a hollow of dead grass and bare earth with a surrounding ribbon of sidewalk that guided men and women in suits toward the criminal courthouse. Sitting catty-corner to the courts, the park was littered with the unmoving bodies of the homeless, a dozen or more lying still in the gathering heat. It was the first of July, and soon these men, and a few women, would rise like zombies to begin the daily ritual of plodding across the worn, brown grass to their favorite tree to bag space for the day. As the sun rose and normal people sought shelter in air-conditioned offices and malls, these people shuffled their packs and ragged bodies, creeping in tiny circles like the shadows of a sundial in their attempts to stay cool.

I stood in the shade of the parking lot and watched, something I often did. Had always done. My best friend back home had once come across me—I think I was about nine years old—sitting in a

tree in the school playground. My back to the trunk, legs dangling as I watched my classmates roam around beneath me. He'd likened me to a leopard, alert, solitary, a cat of prey sitting high on my branch while the world passed by.

A chorus of voices drew my attention to a row of colorful media trucks that lined the curb around the courthouse plaza, their engines humming in anticipation of action, antennas spiking from their roofs and wires spilling from their sides. The reporters, called *talent* for no reason I could figure out, were getting ready for the morning's live broadcast, coiffing their hair and powdering their noses. A quick scan showed they were all male.

I moved toward the news vans, and when I got close, I spotted Patrick Stephens. He'd covered my last murder trial and given me some airtime when the jury came back with a guilty verdict. I liked him more than the other reporters who, with their serious faces and fake importance, were like car salesmen always looking for an angle. Not Patrick. He was like a friendly Irishman who'd buy you pints at the pub and expect nothing in return except a joke or two. He was red-haired, roly-poly, twinkly-eyed, and the only person I knew who looked ten pounds lighter on camera.

"Hey, it's Dominic, the musical British prosecutor," he said. "You look frowny, what's wrong?"

"You know, the usual. Shitty news arrives early in the morning just so it can screw up your whole day."

"That's why we have a morning show," he grinned. "Care to unload on a friend?"

"When I find one, I will." My smile was supposed to be friendly, to show I was joking, but I expect it looked as insincere as it felt. "Also, I'm a musician, not musical. And I'm English, not British. How would you like me to call you Canadian?"

"Just fine. I'm from Ottawa."

"I feel like I should know that. Eh?"

"Hilarious. But I've been in Texas ten years, so don't sweat it."

He interrupted a stroke of his comb to look over at the growing crowd.

"Why are you chaps here?" I asked.

"Covering the Wilbert trial," he said. "Closing arguments today. Should be good."

"Yeah, any time a kid gets stabbed it's awesome."

The Wilbert trial. The man looked like a librarian but had stabbed his ex-girlfriend thirty-six times with a knife he took from her kitchen. When her five-year-old ran screaming to his momma's side, Wilbert stabbed him four times. Momma died at the scene, but the boy lived, which, if nothing else, seemed like poor planning. Leaving a witness, and all.

"You know what I mean." He poked me in the chest with his comb. "And don't act all high and mighty—we both make money from other people's tragedies."

"Except I do something positive about them, whereas you guys turn them into gossip."

"I'll remember that next time you ask for some airtime."

"*Touché*." I looked toward the courthouse but the main entrance was out of view. The building was U-shaped, the left wing being the jail, the right wing housing the admin buildings, and the entrance at the end of a walkway that ran between them. The protestors filled the walkway that led to the main doors. "So, not here to report on the protest?"

"We'll cover it," he said. "Your office rarely seeks the death penalty, so this lot doesn't usually come out."

"Well, have fun. I have a boss waiting for me."

Before I could move off, a chorus of shouts exploded from the courthouse entrance. We couldn't see what was happening, but the shouting got louder and several deputies dropped their cigarettes and started running toward the noise. The reporters finished patting their noses in double-time, and the cameramen hoisted their equipment onto their shoulders and headed into battle.

By the time I got there a line of brown-shirted sheriff's deputies had blocked the passageway to the front doors. Behind them, eight more deputies knelt on the wriggling bodies of four men. The TV cameras were trained on the melee but it wasn't the subdued protestors that had their attention.

The glass front of the courthouse, including its two enormous doors, dripped red, the crimson liquid pooling on the sidewalk and creeping out toward the crowd. On the ground, a dozen Mason jars lay cracked or broken, glinting on the white concrete like busted teeth lying amid unfurling tongues of red.

I walked up to the line of officers, aiming for one I recognized from the courtroom. I covertly checked the tag on his chest.

"Hey, Bateman, what the hell's going on?"

"Protestors," he said.

"No shit. I hope that's paint."

"Nope, it's blood."

"Delightful. Cow or pig?"

"I wish." He looked over his shoulder at the mess. "Theirs."

"The protestors'?"

"Yep." Bateman nodded. "One of the assholes said they've been storing it up since the beginning of the trial, about twenty of them. Taking a pint here and there, sticking it in the fridge. They showed up with jars of it, just started flinging the stuff all over the front."

"Jesus. That's disgusting."

"It's a friggin' health hazard, is what it is. We got the ones who did the actual throwing, though." He grinned and thumbed toward the four in custody. "The stupid fuckers were too weak to run."

More bad planning. "Anti–death penalty nuts?"

"Right." He mimicked them while pulling a pouty face. "If the state can spill blood in our name, we can spill our own."

I could smell it now, a metallic odor that clung to the air and started to coat the inside of my nostrils. It was 9:15 a.m. on the first day of July, and every day of June had been over ninety degrees. I

could almost hear the flies swarming toward us, rising up from the dumpsters and roadkill, passing word to each other about the delicacy that soaked the courthouse like gravy, human blood ready to simmer and bake in the heat, a once-in-a-lifetime treat not to be missed.

"Who's cleaning that mess up?" I asked.

"They're sending a hazmat team. Who knows how many of those fuckers have HIV or hep-C or some shit."

"So the courthouse is shut down?" My voice rose with hope.

"Closed to the public. They're letting the lawyers in through the judge's entrance. No day off for you."

"Great. Any chance some others will come back and splatter the judge's entrance before I get there?"

Bateman laughed, the cracking sound in his throat telling me he was due for his morning cigarette. "They're guarding it pretty good, so I'm guessing you're out of luck."

I moved away, pushing through the crowd. As I reached its outer edge, I noticed several people looking back and forth from the scene to the bus stop across the street. Two women stood there, apparently disinterested in the chaos and confusion, which told me they were probably involved. One of them was Hispanic, and she'd squeezed herself into jeans and a T-shirt several sizes too small, giving her a bulge of fat that surrounded her waist like a ship's life preserver.

The other girl turned to face me, and my throat closed up. She was strikingly pale, with wide-spaced eyes that returned my gaze without blinking. She wore no makeup that I could see, but her brown hair tumbled onto her shoulders with perfect Lauren Bacall elegance. Best of all, she wore a tight, lime-green dress that shimmered as it hugged her figure, catching the light and my eye like a hypnotist's crystal. China-white legs curved out from the hem of her dress, down to delicate ankles and a pair of red heels that were brighter, and even more startling, than the pools of blood she'd just left behind.

With everything that had happened that morning, she was something glorious to hold on to, a beautiful flash of lightning in a doom-laden sky, and I couldn't tear my eyes away. I stood and stared until a bus came between us, breaking the spell and taking her away in a roar of hot diesel fumes. I couldn't see her through the tinted windows of the bus, but I stared at each one just in case, and I hoped like a teenager that she was peering back at me.

When the bus had gone, I stood in the quiet street for a full minute, wondering what had just happened. Not love at first sight, I wasn't capable of that, but nonetheless a childlike rush of excitement that I waited to analyze, that I let myself enjoy before dissecting it into rationalities that made sense to me, labeling it with worlds like *curiosity*, *surprise*, *interest*, and the more carnal and justifiable *lust*.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRICKLY PEAR

Puzzled and oddly chastened, I made my way to the judge's entrance, punching numbers and swiping my way through three security doors. As they thumped shut behind me, they pushed the girl in green from my mind and I made mental adjustments to begin the routine of the day.

My job at the DA's office wasn't always the most exhilarating, but the pay was decent and at least kept my head and budget above water, though barely. Today I was going to cross swords with a recalcitrant witness, the kind of thug I took great pleasure in putting behind bars. Normally this idiot would be the one holding the gun, but for this case he'd been one of the victims. He was recalcitrant in that he didn't want to testify in the upcoming trial, and I needed him to.

That was the one part of my job I did relish, the part that fed the performer in me and made my day-to-day acting a benefit, not a burden: the theater of a jury trial. It began with the drama of opening statements, when the story of the crime was first revealed to the jurors, twelve men and women twitchy with anticipation, eager to soak up my words. Then came the witness examinations, the orchestrated reinforcement of my opening statements, when the jurors would nod along and think to themselves, *Yes, the prosecutor said it happened that way, we should believe him*.

Occasionally there would be cross-examination, when a half-witted defendant would take the stand and try to lie his way out of

a conviction, and those moments, not just for me but for any prosecutor, could be sublime. The gentle questions that would begin to unravel his story, without him even knowing, then the flourish of a question, asked with eyes on the jury, not the dirtbag defendant, and a slow turn to watch him squirm in his seat as he realized the game was over. A game for me, of course, not so much for him.

And finally, the closing arguments. Most lawyers claim that jurors are decided on a verdict by the time we stand to close. But I never believed that, and anyway I had more than persuasion in mind when I argued my case. I was handing those who agreed with me the tools, weapons even, to challenge any jurors who wanted to acquit. In Austin at least, criminal juries were more than willing to set free an obviously-guilty man on some meaningless, mindless argument made by a desperate defense attorney. So I shot those down the first chance I got, and always reminded the jury that a victim, as well as a defendant, awaited their verdict. *Remember the victim*, echoing in my softest, most heartfelt voice, the moment when, if I could cry, tears would prick at my eyes and spread to the weakest, most feeling of the jurors. It was a badge of honor to make a juror cry, and I did it whenever I could.

Ah, yes, each trial was a play in three acts, with the requisite tears and histrionics, and just occasionally a courtroom fistfight. Usually an unhappy defendant punching out his lawyer, and no one much minded that.

The sight of Michael Cherry standing outside my office captured and clarified my drifting mind, the look on his face hauling me into the present and telling me all was not well.

I called the man "Cherry," everyone here did, and I suspected his mother had done the same. Each of the seven courts had four prosecutors assigned, and he was the most experienced attorney in ours, which made him our chief and my immediate boss. He was a longtime prosecutor who dressed like a 1950s model, tailored in his tweeds and double-breasted worsted suits. He was about four inches

taller than the next tallest prosecutor, which was me at six feet, and he had the stooping, stalking gait of a giant heron. Everyone liked the guy, me included. He was unfailingly polite to all of us, and when you talked to him, his hooded eyes would settle patiently on your face, absorbing everything, following your logic with gentle nods, his tongue flicking his lips when he spotted a flaw in your thinking. With me, he knew there was something a little off but he couldn't quite figure out what, and so, as some sort of coping mechanism, he liked to practice his sarcasm.

"Good of you to show up," he said.

"You're welcome. How's Vicky this morning?"

He'd been talking to our secretary, Vicky, when I came in. We all did it, despite the fact that she was a one-armed and entirely legless mannequin taped to a swivel chair. Our previous secretary, Adrianna, quit in a huff about something, and because we work for a governmental agency we got tired of waiting for a replacement to be hired. Truthfully, Vicky's attitude was something of an improvement on the chair's previous occupant, as was her productivity level. Some joker had covered her mouth in bright-red lipstick and then drawn a thick red line from her nostril, bleeding it artistically down her chin and into her blouse. She was, after all, originally purchased as a prop for our trials, the poor girl having been raped, robbed, and murdered more often than the gypsies under Stalin. Hence her missing limbs and her name, which was short for Victim.

"She's fine, I think. No complaints from her, anyway."

"Good. Where's our hero?"

Maurice Darrell Griffiths, aka "Stuttering Mo," was an eyewitness to a murder. Not one of the cool ones you see on TV, no, this was one of the classics we get in this business, a killing that warranted news coverage until someone figured out that drugs and gangs were involved. At that point it all seemed rather seedy, and pretty quickly no one gave a shit anymore. Except the family and friends of the dead guy, of course.

So it was with this case. Mo and a few other worthless members of his crowd were drinking and smoking PCP on a quiet street in East Austin when a rival moron drove up and shot one of them. I'd brought Mo in to interview him here because when I went to his house he slammed the door in my face. I figured that was for show and he might actually want to help, as long as the prying eyes of his neighbors weren't watching.

"He's not here. Let's talk in your office," Cherry said.

"That doesn't sound good. Someone bump him off overnight?"

I followed him into my office and sat behind my desk. Cherry sat opposite me in one of the chairs usually reserved for files.

"Some bad news, I'm afraid. I've had to reassign the case."

Something told me that wasn't the extent of the bad news. "Why?"

"Because someone reassigned you."

"Seriously?"

"Yes." Cherry held up a warning finger. "Now remember, you've been in this court more than three years, which is very unusual. Hardly anyone gets to stay in the same spot that long."

"Where am I going?"

"Juvenile."

"Fuck."

"Yes, I thought you'd say that."

"Did you stick up for me? Try to get me out of it?" I was annoyed, not just because of the transfer but because he didn't seem bothered enough.

"Sure. But what can I do?"

"Jesus, Cherry, I just won a friggin' cold case. One of the hardest cases we've had here for years." And by "hard" I meant a twenty-five-year-old murder case with no forensic evidence or eyewitnesses, just strands of circumstantial evidence that I connected tightly enough to get a conviction. Some in the office weren't convinced the guy was even guilty, the case was that weak. I didn't much care either way, but as I said to them, *How good am I if I can convict an innocent*

man with shitty evidence? Of course, they laughed and walked off as if I was joking.

"Yes, you did." The way he said it switched on a light in my head.

"Shit, does that trial have something to do with my reassignment?"

Cherry held up a placating hand. "Not that I know of. It's true that you've been in the news and on the TV more in the last month than our dear leader has in a year, and I'm sure he doesn't like that, but I'm also pretty sure he doesn't do revenge reassignments."

"Bullshit." I felt my hackles rising.

"Look, you think you're immune from the way this place works? You think your floppy hair and pretty accent mean you can stay wherever you like for as long as you like?"

"No, Cherry, I think I'm one of the better trial lawyers in this office, and I think that it makes no fucking sense to take me away from prosecuting murder, rape, and robbery so I can give probation to wannabe gangbangers who smoke weed and steal sneakers from Wal-Mart."

"Hey, corporations are people, too. Apparently."

"Shut up, Cherry, it's not funny. I'm better than that, I don't want to be doing that."

"My, we do have a high opinion of ourselves."

"And I deserve to, don't you think?"

"As I keep explaining, my opinion doesn't matter."

I knew he was right, and I liked him enough not to cuss him out anyway. "When does this move happen?" It being Thursday, I had a pretty good idea of the answer.

"Monday. Maureen Barcinski is the chief down there. I told her you'd stop by this afternoon to say hello, meet some people, and then move over by Monday."

"Can't wait."

"Hey, you'll be sharing an office with Brian McNulty. He's a musician like you, so take your guitar."

"OK, stop right there. First of all, Brian illegally downloads music off the Internet and burns CDs for people. That makes him a thief, not a musician. Second, I'm *sharing* an office?"

"Yes, everyone does except the chief. They don't have much room down there." Cherry shifted in his seat, like he wanted out of there. "One more thing, too. You're not going to like it."

"That surprises me. So far it's been nothing but good news."

"Yeah, well. Part of your docket will be handling drug cases, where the kids are sent to in-patient treatment here from other counties. Sort of an inter-county liaison."

"Sounds awesome."

"Thing is, that's a state position." He sucked in his cheeks, clearly uncomfortable. "Paid for with a state grant, rather than a regular county position like you have now."

I sat up. "Oh, no. No. Don't tell me—"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"A fucking pay cut?"

"A little less of the green stuff, yes."

A vision of the girl in green popped into my head, but right then I wanted to be annoyed and didn't appreciate the comfort, or distraction, she offered. With the stress of this conversation, of her, I barely noticed the hum that set into my hands, the twitch that on weekends made me grab my guitar just to feel the strings against my fingertips. I'd written a song about that feeling, comparing it to the shivering skin of a "cutter" or to the cold gasp of a drug user's desperate veins. I needed the sweet relief of my guitar, but instead Cherry was still talking.

"You'll keep your current benefit package," he said, "including healthcare and retirement. Vacations and sick time will remain as is, too."

"Cherry, look. I know every prosecutor has to do their bit, and these moves happen." I leaned forward over the desk. I wanted him to know that the joking was over, that this mattered to me. "But I

just moved into a new apartment, with a roommate no less, but I have more than forty grand in school loans. I have credit-card debt and a car lease I can't get out of."

He held up placating hands. "It not that much of a pay cut. Couple hundred a month."

I clenched my fists and worked hard not to punch the desk, the wall, him. "I'm on the edge as it is. I don't have leeway to give up a couple hundred a month."

"You have your music gigs. Don't they pay?"

"No, Cherry, they don't. The going rate is a couple of free beers and a waitress passing around the tip jar."

Austin, the Live Music Capital of the world, was chock-full of musicians like me, part-timers who could play well enough but who competed for time at the smaller joints and had no hope playing at the big ones, except as an opening act. Which took luck and a crapload more exposure than a part-time soloist like me could manage. Meanwhile, the pubs and small clubs gave us stage time for tips while they cleaned up with the sale of booze. Win-win for the bars and customers, not so much for the free help, the hopeful, the dreamers like me.

"Ah, I didn't realize," Cherry said. "I'm sorry about the money thing—all of it really—but there's nothing I can do at this point."

I sat back and loosened my tie, wondering whether it was for moments like this we weren't allowed guns in the building. It crossed my mind to tell him about the phone call this morning, make him feel like a weasel for doing this to me on the day I heard my parents were dead, but I knew it wouldn't make any difference. He and I were cogs in the machine, and the machine had been pre-programmed to spit me out into juvie and didn't have the capacity to care.

"How long is this for?" I asked.

"They're trying to keep these rotations to a year, give or take a few months. A year is the goal, though." He scratched the back of his

head and squinted. "I'm not being facetious, but technically this is a promotion. As far as your résumé goes, that is. You'll be second in command over there, under Maureen but senior to the three other juvenile prosecutors."

"A promotion." I needed deep breaths to stop myself from throttling the messenger. "I'll be handling shoplifting, weed-smoking, car-breaking little punks instead of real criminals. I'll get a pay cut and will share an office with a dork. How the fuck do I apply for a demotion?"

"Yeah, I know. Sorry." He looked up, like a hopeful child. "I gather the workload is much lighter. Less stress and all."

"I know this isn't your fault, Cherry, but that won't stop me plotting your miserable death as I stare out of my window on those interminable, but low-stress, days."

"Yes, well." He stood and smoothed down his trousers, a tiny smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "I suppose my demise is far from imminent then."

"Meaning?"

"Funny thing, really. They're all interior offices down there. You won't have a window."

○

There's a coldness that settles around my heart when my life starts to slide in the wrong direction. It's a physical sensation, not an emotional one. I don't really do emotions, you see, not like most people. I can feel some of them, ones like anger, disappointment, and lust. Emotions that begin and end with me, those I can feel, but my life is generally governed by logic, reason, and manipulation. Emotions that tie me to others, like compassion, love, or even fear, those I don't feel. I pretend to, of course, I've been pretending since I was a kid, and my success in life depends on me wearing the right mask at the right time.

So when Cherry walked out of my office, I wore the hangdog, poor-me face that he expected, lowering my eyes so he couldn't see the dead space in them that held visions of a knife slicing through the wrinkled skin in his neck, covering his crisp, white shirt with blood, and severing his exposed windpipe. I wanted to release that inner demon that I kept locked up and hidden away, to look the other way and feel nothing as he sought revenge for trashing the one part of my life I'd made something of, my job.

I wanted to be, just for once, the psychopath that I am.

More Great Books
from Penguin Random House

COMING THIS FALL

SEPTEMBER

The Heart Goes Last: A Novel *by Margaret Atwood*

Make Me: A Jack Reacher Novel *by Lee Child*

Why Not Me? *by Mindy Kaling*

The Girl in the Spider's Web: A Lisbeth Salander novel, continuing Stieg Larsson's Millennium Series *by David Lagercrantz*

My Kitchen Year: 136 Recipes That Saved My Life *by Ruth Reichl*

Library of Souls: The Third Novel of Miss Peregrine's Peculiar Children *by Ransom Riggs*

Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights: A Novel *by Salman Rushdie*

OCTOBER

Rogue Lawyer *by John Grisham*

City on Fire: A Novel *by Garth Risk Hallberg*

The Tsar of Love and Techno: Stories *by Anthony Marra*

Slade House: A Novel *by David Mitchell*

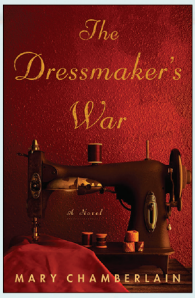
Golden Age: A Novel *by Jane Smiley*

The Gap of Time: A Novel *by Jeanette Winterson*

To learn more about these, and other, Penguin Random House books, sign up for our monthly enewsletter:
TinyURL.com/PatronSignUp

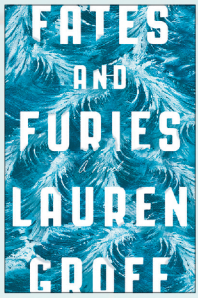
What Will You Read Next?

Take a look inside for a taste of these wonderful new books.

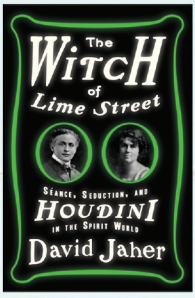


The Dressmaker's War:
A Novel
by Mary Chamberlain
Random House | January 2016

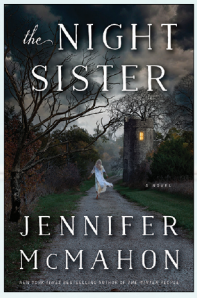
The Accident Season
by Moïra Fowley-Doyle
Kathy Dawson Books | August 2015



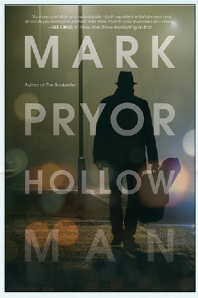
Fates and Furies: A Novel
by Lauren Groff
Riverhead | September 2015



The Witch of Lime Street:
Séance, Seduction, and
Houdini in the Spirit World
by David Jaher
Crown | October 2015



The Night Sister:
A Novel
by Jennifer McMahon
Doubleday | August 2015



Hollow Man
by Mark Pryor
Seventh Street Books
September 2015

For more great suggestions from the stacks, like us at:

Facebook.com/LibraryCheckMeOut

To sign up for our enewsletter, visit:
TinyURL.com/PatronSignUp

Penguin Random House

COMPLIMENTARY COPY