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FALL 2016

What Will You Read Next?

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What Will You Read Next?

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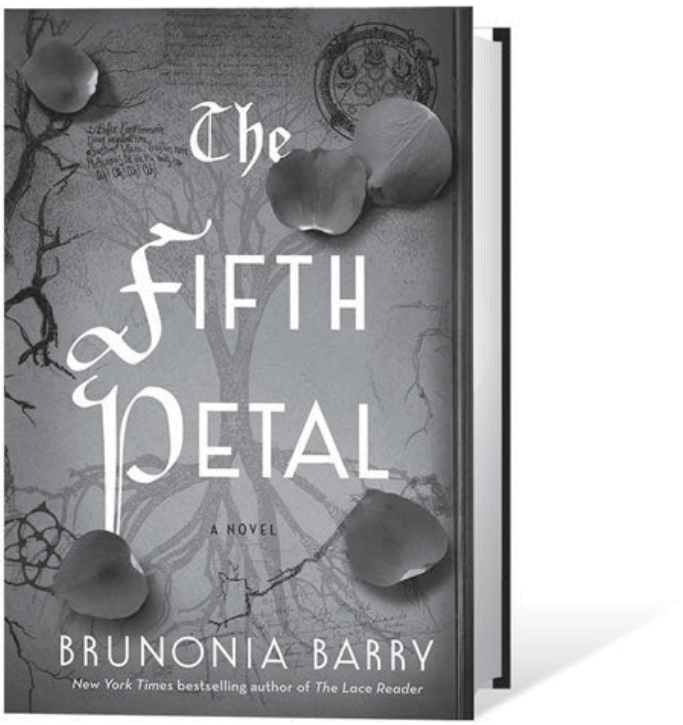

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First Edition

PROLOGUE

November 1, 1989

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

ISN'T IT A LITTLE LATE *FOR PRAYING?* TOM DAYLE THOUGHT but did not say. The child sat on a gurney just behind the privacy curtain in one of Salem Hospital's ER stalls, clutching what, to his lapsed Catholic eyes, appeared to be rosary beads.

It was an odd picture: a young girl, not more than five or six, prayer beads dangling from clenched and whitened fingers that were holding on to the crucifix part of the rosary so hard it drew blood, trails of dried reddish brown branching down her forearms and into the cracks between her fingers. Mean-looking scratches covered the child's arms and legs. If you could ignore the blood, she looked like one of Botticelli's angels: dark curls cascading down her back, alabaster skin not yet marred by tanning beds or summer sun.

The two nuns who accompanied her completed the angelic picture: the younger one sitting next to the child, holding her own rosary as she silently mouthed the prayers, the older one, whom he recognized as the mother superior from St. James's School, standing just behind, keeping watch.

It was the nuns who'd found her. He'd heard the story on his way over here. While the murders were being committed, the child had hidden in a patch of bushes, clutching the rosary and praying. The nuns, who'd admitted to hearing screams during the night, hadn't found her until the following morning, when the screaming faded to a mournful moan. They'd followed the sound along the North River and

discovered the little girl standing by the pit where the bodies of her mother and two as yet unidentified young women had been dumped.

"Maybe she should have prayed you'd called 911 sooner," Dayle said to the older nun. He didn't say it so much to be cruel as to keep his own heart from breaking at the sight of the little girl. She looked the same age as his granddaughter.

One of the officers at the scene *had* asked the older nun why she'd waited to make the 911 call when the screaming continued into the night. "It was Halloween in Salem," she said, sadly. "It would have been strange if we didn't hear screaming." Another responding officer thought he recognized one of the young women as her body was hauled from the crevasse. Upon closer examination, he changed his mind.

This morning, they had picked up a person of interest, a local woman who lived over on Daniels Street, but he wasn't about to share that information with the nuns. "At the moment, we're still trying to identify the victims."

"One of the victims was the child's mother."

"How do you know that?" he asked, as if hearing it for the first time.

"She told us. She was talking to us when we first got here," the older nun said. "She only stopped when you came in."

In all his years as a detective, Tom Dayle had never seen anything as grisly as what had happened last night on Proctor's Ledge. Three young women, throats slashed, had been dumped into a narrow crevasse, the same mass grave where Salem had unceremoniously disposed of the bodies of those accused and executed for witchcraft during the hysteria of 1692.

A nurse hurried in and began to minister to the scratches on the girl's arms and legs. The child recoiled.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I have to clean these up."

"How'd you get those scratches?" Dayle asked the child. She didn't answer but stared as if seeing right through him.

"She was hiding in the brambles most of the night," Mother Superior said to Dayle. "That's how she got those scratches."

The nurse walked over to get bandages. "She's going to need a tetanus shot," she said.

"No," the child said, snapping out of her trancelike state and acting, for the first time since he'd arrived, like a scared little girl. She started to cry.

"It's okay, honey," the nurse said. "Tetanus shots don't hurt."

The child began to cry harder, recognizing a lie when she heard it.

"Let's see what the doctor says first," the nurse said, trying to comfort her. "Maybe you won't need any shots."

"I want Rose," the child said. Rose. That was the name of the woman they'd just picked up over in Broad Street Cemetery. When they'd found her, Rose Whelan had been covered with blood and babbling incoherently. The patrolman who'd picked her up was a rental cop. Salem used a lot of them on Halloween. He'd assumed Rose was just a leftover, someone who'd partied too hard last night and needed to dry out. It was a safe assumption. When he'd realized that the blood that covered her skin and clothing wasn't the fake stuff they sold in the costume shops but real—he'd seen enough bar fights and car accidents over the years to know—he'd taken her to the station, where the woman was recognized almost immediately, which made the story even more bizarre.

Rose Whelan was a noted historian who'd written several books on the subject of Salem's history and founded the city's Center for Salem Witch Trials Research, a resource library that drew scholars from all over the world. She was a well-respected woman, who, sometime between last night and this morning, appeared to have lost her marbles.

"She keeps asking for Rose," Mother Superior said. "Rose is the woman who pushed her into the brambles and told her to pray. She gave her those rosary beads."

"The rosary beads saved her," the young nun said, holding her own set out to him, its crucified body of Christ swinging like a pendulum. "It's a miracle."

The nurse finished washing the scratches but did not tackle the

larger wound on the child's hand. "The doctor is on his way. . . . Don't open your hand, honey. We don't want you to start bleeding again. Hold it just like you're doing until he gets here." She left the stall.

With the nurse out of the way, Dayle focused on the child, pulling up a chair and sitting in an effort to be less threatening.

"What's your name?" he asked in his most gentle voice.

She didn't answer. She was clearly afraid of him.

"It's okay, he's a policeman. You can tell him," the younger nun said.

Dayle pulled his chair closer to the gurney. "How old are you?"

Again, she didn't answer but squeezed her hands tighter, fingers folded and ghostly pale, a single drop of fresh blood trailing down the inside of her forearm. Seeing the blood once again, the young nun picked up the pace of her own praying, mouthing her silent Hail Marys in rapid succession, as if a speedy invocation could erase all that was happening here.

"I have a granddaughter about your age," Dayle said, forcing a smile. "What are you, four maybe?"

"I'm five!"

"Five, huh? Five is a very grown-up age."

The child stared at him. "I want Rose," she said, starting to panic.

"Maybe I can help," he said. "Can you tell me Rose's last name?"

She nodded. "Rose Whelan."

"And do you know where I could find this Rose Whelan?" he asked, smiling at her. "If I wanted to get her for you. Do you know where she lives?"

Once again she nodded.

"Will you tell me the name of the street where she lives?" He hated to play her this way, but he had to double-check.

"I live there, too," she said, defensive.

"Can you tell me your address then?" Almost every child knew her address these days. It was one of the first things he'd made them teach his granddaughter.

As if reciting a rehearsed speech, she answered. "Sixty-two Daniels Street, Salem, Massachusetts, 01970."

The doctor came in, ending any further chance at dialogue. Annoyed, Dayle stood and moved his chair out of the way.

"Let's see this cut," the doctor said.

The little girl looked unsure.

"It's okay, you can let go now." He touched her hands gently.

One by one, she released her fingers from their prayer clutch, and then they all saw what she'd been desperately holding on to.

Upside down, embedded in her palm, was a wooden symbol Dayle didn't recognize: rounded and carved, with sharp ridges that dug deep into her hand. He didn't know what it was, but it certainly wasn't a crucifix.

Gently, using a scalpel to free the crusted edges, the doctor pried the wooden rosary free. It fell to the floor. Dayle reached down and picked it up.

It took a moment for the blood to find its way back into the girl's palm. Slowly, it pooled, turning the wound from white to red as it filled each layered level, creating a scarlet image of the medallion Dayle now held in his hand: a perfect five-petaled rose.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

October 31, 2014

SALEM

There were no witches in Salem in 1692,
but they thrive here in great numbers now.
—ROSE WHELAN, *The Witches of Salem*

RAFFERTY HAD NEVER SEEN SO MANY TRICK-OR-TREATERS on Chestnut Street. Nor had he ever been charged with escorting such a large Witches' March up to Gallows Hill. There were at least 150 of them this year—Wiccans, Druids, Celts, nature mama hippies with psychic tendencies, pantheists and polytheists all—walking slowly behind his 1980 Crown Vic cruiser, the one he'd rescued from the junk pile. For safety reasons, several streets had been blocked off. Traffic was already backed up onto Highland Avenue as visitors streamed into town for the festivities.

He'd been living in Salem for almost twenty years now. Back in the nineties only summer and early fall were filled with tourists; by midsummer you couldn't find a parking space anywhere downtown, which was a pain in the ass. But come November 1, you could park anywhere you wanted. Not so anymore. This was no longer a forgotten seaport. No longer an aging industrial city. Salem had been discovered, and not just as a tourist destination but as the new hot place to live. These days, you were lucky to get a parking space in town at any time of year, which is why Rafferty always drove the cruiser, even on his day off. As chief of police, he could double-park

anywhere. More often than not, a tourist would ask him to pose next to the cruiser so they could capture its Witch City logo: a police badge emblazoned with a flying witch on a broomstick wearing a pointed hat.

But all that was nothing compared to what happened here in October. The city had been dubbed the Halloween Capital of the World. That was no big surprise. But no one had expected it could turn into a monthlong celebration. Lately, it was even more than a month, which was great for the merchants: The population grew by at least 300,000 each October. Every year Salem imported extra police from Boston and Lynn and as far away as Connecticut, and each year they were still shorthanded.

The crowds tonight were something. Even here, in this residential neighborhood, the trick-or-treaters were waiting in long lines for their candy at the Federal mansions that were decorated for the occasion.

Rafferty drove the wrong way up Chestnut Street to the corner of Flint.

"Hey, Rafferty," yelled a man dressed as a pirate and known locally as Worms, "write yourself a ticket. This is a one-way street!"

Each year the pirate reenactors gathered at the Phillips House museum, the only historic home open to the public on Chestnut Street, to sing to the children, and maybe scare them a little, too.

"Scallywag!" his companion, Mickey Doherty, growled.

"Argh!" Rafferty shouted back at them.

"Them's fighting words, John," Mickey said, taking it as an invitation to approach the cruiser.

"*Argh* is only one word, Mickey," Rafferty said. Mickey Doherty was more entrepreneurial than almost anyone in town. He owned two haunted houses on Derby Street and the pirate shop on the wharf, where he sold a bit of weed on the side. Since possession was a misdemeanor these days, and Mickey didn't sell to kids, Rafferty looked the other way. "And if you don't know that, you should lay off the Dark 'n Stormies. Isn't this a kids' party?"

Mickey laughed and pounded the cruiser with his fist. "This kind of fortification's the only way I can stand the little demons!"

Rafferty shook his head.

"Hey, what're the streets like?" Mickey wanted to know. "I spoke to Ann earlier, and she warned me. There's a weird energy tonight."

Ann Chase. Salem's most famous present-day witch. "Well, if anyone should know . . ." Rafferty said, and Mickey laughed. "Actually, it seems pretty tame to me," Rafferty said. It was true.

Fall had come late this year, but now the air was chilling, and the darkness felt pervasive. He nodded to Mickey, turned on his siren, and pulled out, blocking incoming cars on Essex Street, so the parade could cross the road. As the candlelight vigil moved on, a driver blasted his horn, and others joined in chorus to protest the delay. The witches walked in formation, as slowly as brides.

Once the last witch had crossed the road on the way up to Gallows Hill Park, Rafferty's escort duties were over. He circled the city, checking on the rental cops and mounted police. *A weird energy.* He noticed that the Choate memorial statue at the corner of Essex and Boston Streets sported toilet paper streamers—nothing new or particularly weird there. Costumed children roamed more freely here, mostly without their parents: the little ones sugared up and bouncing, the older kids just looking for trouble. He spotted a few teens hanging out in the parking lot of an auto body shop on Boston Street. They scattered when they saw him coming—probably a drug deal. There'd been a lot of that lately in this area. He hoped the new senior center they were going to build here would turn the neighborhood around. That lot had been vacant too long.

He U-turned into the parking lot of the Dairy Witch and came back around when he got the call that there was some kind of disturbance in the Walgreens parking lot a few doors down. "I've got it," he said, thinking it was probably the same kids. But as he pulled into the lot, the kids were nowhere to be seen. He drove around back and spotted the hearse parked at the side of Proctor's Ledge. Hearse tours were big business in Salem; featured venues included everything from haunted houses to the apartment building over on Lafayette Street where the Boston Strangler had killed his only North Shore victim back in the early sixties. Salem entrepreneurs would go to any length to frighten the tourists, especially on Halloween, though the ghostly

Fright Tours logo hand-painted on the side of the hearse looked far more like Casper than Jacob Marley.

Unless the neighbors had a legitimate complaint, the police did little to discourage the fright tours or anything that made a dollar for the people who relied on Halloween to make a living. But this wasn't public property, it was private, and the manager of Walgreens as well as the neighbors up the hill resented the invasion of tourists. Especially lately, as the site of 1989's still-unsolved murders had become Salem's most popular tour.

He could see the candles from here. He recognized the voice of a local talent, someone they'd nicknamed Actor Bob, who'd made enough money with a voice-over commercial selling burials at sea to buy himself the old hearse and outfit it with cushy cutaway coffin seats lined with satin. Tonight, Actor Bob's baritone was far less comforting than his oceanic funereal voice. Tonight his voice was raspy, haunted.

"And now we come to Proctor's Ledge. Though some will tell you otherwise, many believe this place, not Gallows Hill, is where Salem executed nineteen accused witches back in 1692. This is also the place where, back on Halloween in 1989, three beautiful young women were brutally murdered: Olivia Cahill, Cheryl Cassella, and Susan Symms, whose ghostly white hair and skin were cut from her body to be used for some kind of Satanic ritual."

The crowd murmured, shocked.

Rafferty had heard Actor Bob lead the tour on several occasions. He always played to the crowd, changing and embellishing the story for effect, but this last part had been added recently—and embellished beyond belief.

"Remember their names. And remember the nickname the townspeople gave them. These young women were so beautiful and so bewitching, everyone called them the Goddesses."

More murmurs from the crowd.

"Neighbors on Boston Street and along the North River could hear their screams that night, but no one called for help until the next morning. It was as if a spell had been cast across the entire city of

Salem, and no one could break it. For what the girls were doing that Halloween had been forbidden, way back in 1692. They were trying to consecrate the mass grave of their ancestors, five of the women who had been executed during that dark time—for signing the devil's book."

Bob paused again.

"The ritual the Goddesses were performing that Halloween night in 1989 had been against Puritan law in 1692. To consecrate the ground where one of the Salem witches was buried was once an offense punishable by death. Which, ironically, is exactly what happened to those beautiful young women in 1989. Someone, or something, decided to punish them.

"Strangely, the bodies of all those executed in 1692 had disappeared shortly after the hangings, never to be found again. This is one of Salem's greatest mysteries. But the bodies of the Goddesses were left for all to see. Their throats were slashed, their corpses pushed into the same mass grave where their ancestors had once been buried."

Another lie, Rafferty thought. The bodies of the Goddesses had never been put on display. Where did Bob come up with this nonsense?

"There were only two survivors that night in 1989, a middle-aged woman and a young girl. The woman was found in Broad Street Cemetery, covered with the blood of the victims, ranting about the unearthly creature who, she claimed, had killed the girls. Most think the woman was the guilty one. A once-respected historian and scholar, she lost her mind that night and has never recovered. To this day, you can see her wandering the streets of Salem, predicting the death of everyone she meets. She has never been charged. No one could ever prove who the guilty party really was. Some think it was the crazy woman. Others believe the killer is a far more sinister creature, a screaming spirit of ancient powers who returns every Halloween to claim new victims."

On cue, a high-pitched scream pierced the air just behind Rafferty.

The group gasped.

Rafferty spun around in time to see Actor Bob's accomplice run from the woods. "You'd better run," Rafferty said under his breath. He

pushed through the brambles, swearing as a branch snapped back, slapping him on the side of his face.

"What about the little girl?" one of the tourists asked. "What happened to her?"

"No one knows," Bob replied, pausing once more for effect. "The little girl disappeared shortly after the murders. No one has seen or heard from her since."

At the sound of Rafferty's uncontrolled groan, the now terrified tourists reeled around. Even Actor Bob held his breath until he spotted Rafferty coming through the brambles.

"Are we just about done?" Rafferty asked. "Or is there more to this ridiculous story you're trying to sell these poor people? Bob, you know you're not allowed to do this here."

Rafferty hated that the still-unsolved case had become fodder for fright tours and tourist dollars, taking on mythical and paranormal proportions and embellished with exaggerated details that simply weren't true. The murders had taken place years before he arrived in Salem, but, to Rafferty's mind, the lack of closure was a stain on the police department that he now ran.

Rafferty escorted the tourists back to the hearse, then led the car out of the parking lot and onto Boston Street, turning left at the intersection and continuing downtown to the far end of Essex Street, which was party central.

As always, the pedestrian-only walkway was full of revelers: pirates, sexy witches, monsters, and zombies. *Lots* of zombies. The undead outnumbered the pirates and witches about ten to one. From the middle of the crowd, he could hear the amplified voices of the evangelists preaching fire and brimstone to the revelers, damning their souls to Hell unless they repented and stopped partying. They had added drums this year and cymbals that clanged each time a preacher mentioned Hell. The partiers were laughing and applauding. It didn't seem like there would be any confrontations between the groups tonight.

At a gathering on the corner, Rafferty saw a family wearing homemade costumes that featured bloody stumps where their limbs should

have been. They were pulling a little red wagon full of body parts. He watched another man who stood on the sidelines dressed as an oven, complete with burners that turned off and on. A very convincing set of duct-taped Siamese twin dogs ran in front of his cruiser, nipping at each other's faces, frustrated by their unnatural confinement. The usuals were present and accounted for, too, the Frankensteins and the mummies posing for photos at their regular posts by the Peabody Essex Museum, out-of-touch vampires still sporting sparkling glitter in homage to *Twilight*. *They'll be zombies next year,* Rafferty thought. Vampires had been passé in Salem for quite a while now.

He felt sorry for some of the store owners, the ones who paid rent for shops no one could get to through these crowds. It happened every year. Dozens of fortune-tellers set up their booths on Essex Street right in front of the year-round shops that were vying for the same customers. The competition between the resident and visiting psychics had been a big problem a few years back. As a result, Salem now licensed its psychics before allowing them to set up their temporary booths in October.

"How the hell do you license a psychic?" Rafferty had asked when he'd heard about the plan. "I mean, do you have them do a reading and then just wait a few months to see if any of their predictions come true?"

"We'll follow San Francisco's lead," the town clerk had told him. "We're going to use their psychic licensing standards."

"Of course we are." Rafferty had laughed, relieved he didn't have to figure out how to do something so ridiculous. It turned out that all they had to do was check criminal backgrounds before granting licenses. Anyone without a past could now read the future.

From Essex Street, Rafferty drove over to Pickering Wharf. Traffic was bumper to bumper. Some partiers were heading out of the city before the fireworks at the end of the evening, but many were still trying to get in. He was happy to see that the group down by the harbor was fairly docile. He rolled down his window to speak to a patrolman who'd come up from Jamaica Plain.

"Just stick around long enough for the traffic to die down, then

either head home or over to the party at the Hawthorne. Best Halloween party in town."

"Will do, thanks."

The Hawthorne Hotel hosted the famous Witches Ball annually, a few nights before Halloween. Tonight would be their more traditional costume party, with prizes given for the best creations; a few years back, Rafferty and his wife, Towner, had been judges.

He parked his car by Bunghole Liquors and walked over to the wharf.

Ann Chase was locking up her Shop of Shadows early tonight.

Six feet tall with thick red hair free-falling halfway down her back, and a "grey witch" by her own admission, Ann practiced neither white nor black magic but something in between. Tonight, she was wearing her traditional black witch's robe. It moved with her stride like a flock of blackbirds, making her look even more magical than usual, if that was possible.

People claimed Ann had a magnetic charge that defied normal boundaries. Depending on your own polarity, you generally found yourself standing either too close to or too far away from Ann Chase. Rafferty intentionally placed himself into the latter category—as much as he wished it weren't true, their history meant he kept her at arm's length whenever possible.

Ann had once explained to him why it was her choice to practice grey magic instead of the more common "white magic" that most Salem witches were into. A black magic witch—the bad, menacing kind you saw on television or in *The Wizard of Oz*—was an unnuanced caricature no self-respecting Salem witch would embrace. Besides, any witch worth her salt knew that every "black" spell you performed came back to you threefold.

"So why don't you stick with the love potions and lottery ticket enhancers that most witches sell around here?" he'd asked.

"The world is too messed up to be a bliss ninny, Rafferty. Sometimes you need to fight back. You of all people should know that."

Ann normally played the good witch, selling everything from

herbal remedies to lace. But sometimes, when she got bored with the tourists, she liked to scare them. Especially on Halloween.

"Had enough of the tourists, have you?" Rafferty laughed.

"That's an understatement."

"Mickey tells me you started a rumor that there's some weird energy out there tonight." His tone was dismissive. He looked at the wharf again. Nothing seemed amiss. People were now watching the fireworks exploding over the harbor, illuminating the docked replica of the *Friendship.* Looking at the great sailing ship, he imagined himself—for an instant—back in the early 1800s, when hundreds of the huge vessels still sailed from Salem, once the richest port in the New World.

"You doubt me, do you?" Ann's expression was one of amusement.

"Wouldn't dare." He laughed again, in spite of himself.

"It's the blood moon," she insisted, "and the eclipses." She gestured to the sky. The clouds had lifted, and now the waxing quarter-moon shone with no remaining trace of red. The lunar eclipse a few weeks ago had occurred during the day and wasn't visible from the East Coast, but that night, the full "blood moon" had been the color of rust.

Rafferty knew the lore. His Irish American grandmother had called it a hunter's moon, but the Pagans had coined this more ominous phrase. It was simply October's full moon. "The blood moon rose a couple of weeks ago," Rafferty said. "So I doubt that's the culprit."

"It's the tetrad, Rafferty." Ann sighed as if explaining to a child. "Four lunar eclipses. This weird energy you don't believe in isn't going to end until September of next year."

As if to prove Ann right, a wind suddenly gusted around them, creating a screeching sound that would fit right in at the haunted houses on Derby Street. It stopped as quickly as it had started.

"You doing parlor tricks again?" Rafferty asked.

"Hey, I didn't do that. That one came from the other side."

More Pagan lore. Halloween and its Pagan predecessor, Samhain, were the time of year when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was supposed to be at its thinnest. The things Rafferty

had learned since moving here! He didn't buy any of it, of course. "You think it's some kind of warning?"

"I think it's more like a preamble." She stared at him as she spoke. She was serious.

Despite his skepticism, Rafferty shivered.

The fireworks had ended, and the witches were gone. Rose Whelan settled her cart under the only oak left standing at the top of Gallows Hill, not far from the pavilion, with its caving roof and urine stench. The banshee music was in her ears tonight, and death was everywhere. Each fall, the leaves looked exhausted before they began to reveal the true colors that lay beneath their green masks. Every year, as they felt fall's inescapable death pull, they turned the reds and oranges and yellows that drew tourists to New England. The maples, whose leaves were always the first to turn, were naked now, their webbed branches sweeping the dark sky like witches' brooms. Only the oaks still held their scarlet flames.

Rose was exhausted, too. She greeted the tree as she sat down under it. Then she spoke to the pigeons; she was simply going to join them for the one night, she explained. Soon, she was drifting off, moving in and out of consciousness, dreaming a recurring nightmare from her stay at the state hospital. In it, the witches' hanging tree was chopped down, and then its massive trunk was floated along the North River toward open ocean, like a Viking ship carrying the souls of the dead to Valhalla. The dream woke her up, as it did every time she had it. Though she'd been dozing for only a short while, it took her a moment to get her bearings. It was the cooing of the pigeons that reminded her: Gallows Hill, a misleadingly named park that had nothing to do with what really happened here.

"If it weren't for me," Rose told the birds, "historians would still claim Salem built a gallows to execute them. On this very spot." She shook her head. "You wouldn't be living here if they had. You wouldn't build your nests where any such thing had happened, would you? Of course not."

The hanging spot, on Proctor's Ledge, sat unmarked, abandoned, and overgrown next to the Walgreens parking lot just below. The hanging tree, on which the condemned had been executed, had vanished long ago, and even the crevasse that had served as their mass grave was barely visible now, but Rose could still feel it there, unsanctified and cursing the whole area with bad luck. The Great Salem Fire had started right across the street in 1914, destroying hundreds of houses and leaving half the population homeless. To this day, there was crime, violence, and a darkness the neighborhood couldn't shake. The only way to stop it was to finish the blessing they had started that night on Proctor's Ledge, the night her girls were murdered.

Rose had been wrong that night, taking the girls up there. Not because the place didn't need to be consecrated, but because the remains of the executed from 1692 were no longer there. Shortly after the hysteria ended, the bodies had begun to disappear from the crevasse into which they had been thrown. Two of the bodies had been taken by their families and buried properly, but the remains of the others executed that dark year had simply vanished. What in the world had happened to them?

"Find the hanging tree, and you will solve the mystery," the oak trees had told Rose over and over, and she had come to believe them. "Find the tree and finish the blessing. For it is not just the wrongly executed who need God's mercy, but the tree itself for the part it was forced to play."

Rose had listened carefully when the trees began to speak. The oaks had saved her that horrible night in 1989, and she owed them a debt of gratitude. Finding the hanging tree had become Rose's sole purpose in life.

The birds appeared unimpressed, and Rose closed her eyes again, sighing. "There was a hanging tree," she mumbled, her speech slowing as she grew sleepier. "That is true. Down there." She pointed toward Proctor's Ledge. Rose hadn't been back to the spot since that night. This was as close as she dared get.

"The hanging tree disappeared . . . everything disappeared. The tree, the remains of the nineteen people they executed as witches, and

even the young women I used to know." Rose began to doze. "You'll disappear one day, too," she murmured to the birds, her voice slowing even more. "You don't know that, but it's true. Everything disappears. The banshee takes them all . . ." Her head dropped to her chest, and she became silent.

"Hey, grandma, the witches all went home."

Rose's eyes snapped open. There were three boys standing too close in front of her. The one who'd spoken couldn't be more than fifteen. Low-riding baggy jeans and heavy boots made him look younger than the OG tattoo on his arm.

"I'm not a witch."

He moved even closer, smirking, his blue eyes in stark contrast to the dark look he focused on Rose. "I know exactly who you are. And I know what you did."

"Keep your distance from me," Rose warned.

"Good idea," he said, fanning his face. "You got a real stink there, grandma. When's the last time you took a shower?"

"Go home," the second kid said, shoving her.

"She doesn't have a home, do you, grandma?" OG laughed.

"Keep your hands off me," Rose said, pressing her back against the tree, hearing her pulse in her ears. "I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be," the second kid said, laughing.

"You're the one who should be afraid," Rose countered.

"Yeah? Why's that?" the second kid taunted. "You planning to kill me the same way you killed the rest of them? By screaming?"

"Screaming?" OG started to laugh. "She didn't kill them by screaming. That's just what she told the cops. She slashed their throats."

"I know," the second kid said.

"I don't want to kill anyone." Rose hoped she wouldn't have to. She thought of Olivia, Susan, and Cheryl.

"She's crazy," the third kid said. "Let's go."

Rose liked this one. His eyes were still soft. She spoke directly to him. "It's her you have to be afraid of. Not me."

"Who?" Soft Eyes asked, looking around.

She turned back to OG. "She could kill you right now and no one could stop her."

"Did you hear that? She said she could kill me." OG pulled a knife out of his pocket. "Seems like I'm the one holding the blade tonight. Be afraid, grandma. Be very afraid." With a quick slash, he drew the dull side of the blade across her neck.

Rose scrambled to her feet.

"I didn't say you could leave," OG said.

"He did." Soft Eyes turned to the second kid. "He told her to go."

"Well, I didn't," OG said. "Sit back down." He pushed hard, slamming her back against the tree, knocking the wind out of her.

"You're the one who needs to sit down," Rose choked. "If you don't, you're going to die."

OG laughed. "How's that?"

"You're in mortal danger. From the banshee."

"The What-she? Bee-she?" Soft Eyes said.

"You know the story," the second kid said. "She's the one who killed all those girls. Said a banshee did it. By screaming."

"That's right," Rose said. "She could kill you, too."

"I told you she was crazy," Soft Eyes said. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"No way," OG said, grinning at Rose. "I want to hear this. Tell my friend here about the banshee. It's Halloween, grandma. I want to hear a scary story." He held the point of the blade against her cheek.

She could see his life. There had already been violence in it, a lot of it. A string of brutality stretched out before him. She didn't see his death the way she could with most people. What she saw when she looked into his empty eyes was the death of everyone around him.

"Tell him, or I'll kill you right here. And no one can stop *me*. Tell him the same story you told the cops. About the banshee," OG insisted.

She turned back to the one with the soft eyes. This was the one who would need to understand one day. She swallowed hard.

"Tell him!" OG ordered. "Once upon a time . . ." he prompted, pressing the knife harder against her skin.

"All right," Rose said, taking a breath.

"When I was growing up, my Irish grandmother told me there was a sacred oak back in the old country called the Banshee Tree. It was a wild wreck of a thing struck by lightning years earlier."

Soft Eyes just stared at her.

"Some believed the Gaelic goddess of life and death was imprisoned inside that same tree for many centuries before the storm, tricked by the Christian priests who had come to Ireland to convert the Celtic tribes and would tolerate no gods but their own, and certainly no goddesses. Theirs was the one and only God, they said to justify her capture. Some say it was the Cailleach they imprisoned, but some called her by other names. You see, there were many goddesses who dealt with life and death. The imprisonment changed the nature of the goddess, diminishing her to the size of the fairies who dwelt in the mounds. It was a tragedy of great magnitude.

"But the tree loved the imprisoned goddess and took pity on her. Not yet loyal to the priests who had newly arrived, the tree hatched a plan: to free the captive goddess, the oak tree courted the strike."

The second kid snorted. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Shut up and she'll tell you," OG said.

"The storm that killed that oak was the worst in memory; the scream of the wailing wind circled the town once, twice, and then a third time, terrifying everyone. The lightning bolt vaporized the water in the wood, exploding its limbs and—some say—freeing the captive goddess. But freeing the goddess was the worst thing the tree could have done, for her imprisonment had changed her very nature, turning her from a goddess to a banshee, not the ones you've heard about, who only predict death, but one who actually kills."

"A killer banshee." The second kid laughed. "Right."

"I thought a banshee was some kind of ATV," Soft Eyes said.

"The tree should have left the goddess imprisoned, for freeing it would have consequences far beyond anything the oak could have imagined. The turning had made the goddess hate. Her size was still

diminished, and her powers were no longer strong enough to determine life and death. She needed a host. Life no longer interested her; it was only death she craved now. Her sustenance became hate and fear, and where these baser emotions dwelled, the banshee goddess would always find a willing host.

"It was the tree that, perhaps, suffered the most, for it was forced to bear witness to the carnage it had unleashed. After the lightning strike that freed the turned goddess and forevermore, the tree's sap has run red, as if it were bleeding."

"Bleeding trees?" the second kid sneered. "Goddesses turning . . ."

Rose shuddered to remember just how that goddess had turned. That night in 1989, Rose had lost them all to the creature the goddess had become: the banshee. Those young women the banshee killed had been like her own daughters. On that horrible night, after it happened, after the shrieking stopped, the world had quieted and then disappeared. Rose had found herself staring into an eternal emptiness that stretched in every direction and went on forever. When the keening began, Rose had believed that the sound was coming from her own lips. Then she'd seen the tree limbs and branches start to move with the breath of the sound itself, their last leaves burning in the black sky like crackling paper. Then the trees had begun to speak. *Come away now,* the trees had said. *Come away.* Their mournful keen had jumped from one tree to another, and Rose had followed. But something had been unleashed by their ritual. What had been meant to consecrate had instead released something else, something that had jumped into Rose.

"You're out of your mind, old lady," OG said, enjoying the flash of his knife in the moonlight as he played the blade across her cheek, this time drawing blood.

It was the last thing he saw before the unearthly screeching began.

"Cleareyed, generous-hearted, never sentimental . . . every character, however minor, comes to life in these pages. Like her fictional pianist, London is a virtuoso."

—Kirkus Reviews *(starred review)*

Thirteen-year-old Frank Gold's family, Hungarian jews, escape the perils of World War II to the safety of Australia in the 1940s. But not long after their arrival Frank is diagnosed with polio. He is sent to a sprawling children's hospital called The Golden Age, where he meets Elsa, the most beautiful girl he has ever seen, a girl who radiates pure light. Frank and Elsa fall in love, fueling one another's rehabilitation, facing the perils of polio and adolescence hand in hand, and scandalizing the prudish staff of The Golden Age.

With tenderness and humor, *The Golden Age* tells a deeply moving story about learning to navigate the unfamiliar, about embracing music, poetry, death, and, most importantly, life.

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1.
Light

One afternoon during rest-time, the new boy, Frank Gold, left his bed, lowered himself into his wheelchair and glided down the corridor. There was nobody around. It was early December, already hot, and Frank, veteran by now of hospital life, knew the nurses would be upstairs in front of their fan. The door to Sister Penny's office was closed: she'd be catching forty winks on her couch.

His first goal, as usual, was to set eyes on Elsa. He peered into Girls through the crack between the hinges of the half-open door. Elsa's bed was behind the door. He liked to see her face asleep. Even if her head was turned away into the pillow, the sight of her thick gold-brown plait somehow gave him hope. But this afternoon her bed was empty.

He rolled on, past the silent kitchen with its bare, scrubbed benches. Even the flies were sleeping. It was as if the whole place were under a spell. Only he had escaped . . .

He'd been waiting for this moment. In his pocket was a cigarette and a little sheaf of matches, stolen from his mother during her last visit. She'd slipped off to have a word with Sister Penny, leaving her handbag on his bed. Later, he thought of her standing on the station platform in the twilight, delving for her matches, dying for a smoke. Visits upset Ida. She didn't come every week.

But the act of taking them was like reclaiming something. He was turning back into his old, sneaky self. He felt suddenly at ease, in charge again. Sneakiness was a form of privacy, and

privacy here was the first loss. A resistance to the babyishness of this place, its pygmy toilets, its naps and rules, half-hospital, half-nursery school, and his feeling of demotion when he was sent here.

'We are so very glad to have you,' Sister Penny had said firmly when the ambulance delivered him. 'The younger children do look up to the older ones as examples.'

Frank searched her radiant face and knew there was nothing there for him to test. Everything had been resolved a long time ago.

He felt like a pirate landing on an island of little maimed animals. A great wave had swept them up and dumped them here. All of them, like him, stranded, wanting to go home.

Now he was gliding down the ramp of the Covered Way, past the New Treatment Block, out to the clothes lines, hidden behind a wire trellis, the only place where he wouldn't be seen. The washing had been taken in, dried stiff by lunchtime. The ceaseless rumbling and throbbing of the Netting Factory across the road was louder out here. It was like entering the territory of a huge caged animal. Even the white glare cheered him. Ever since the fever of polio had subsided, light had seemed less bright to him, older, sadder.

Moments of solitude were rare and must be grasped with both hands. He put the cigarette into his mouth and struck and struck the row of flimsy matches, one after another. Sweat trickled into his eyes, his hands shook, he wanted, unreasonably, to curse Ida.

A man's shadow blocked out the glare. A huge pair of red hands was cupping a lick of flame. 'Light?' Norm Whitehouse growled. Frank inhaled, his head spun, his heart surged with love. He knew now why everyone loved Norm, the gardener, who just as silently ambled off. As if to say: a man has a right to a smoke in peace.

The next moment the cigarette was stubbed out on the post

of the washing line and thrown across the fence. Frank thought he might be sick. Dizzy, blinded, he veered back down the dark corridor, heaved himself onto the bed. His body was not a normal boy's any more.

He wasn't a little kid either, smelling of soap, asleep like those around him. Yet after a while, as his heart slowed, a smile spread across his face. He could still hear the rumble of Norm's voice.

'Light?'

He may as well have said: 'Life?'

But where was Elsa?

2.
The Golden Age

Because he was so small and undeveloped for his age, Frank Gold, though nearly thirteen, had been admitted as a patient at the Golden Age. It was agreed, unanimously, at the IDB (Infectious Diseases Branch of the Royal Perth Hospital) that it really wasn't suitable for him to stay amongst adult patients. Also, his parents were New Australians who both worked, and had no other family members to help with his care. He needed the nurturing atmosphere of the Golden Age, and supervision with schoolwork. Arrangements were made almost immediately, and he was delivered there by ambulance that same afternoon.

Elsa Briggs was twelve and a half, but her mother had a little baby and couldn't look after her at home. The other patients were younger, from all over the state: from Wiluna in the desert, from Broome up the coast, from Rawlinna, a siding on the Trans-Australia line. Nowhere, it seemed, was too remote for the polio virus to find you.

The Golden Age had been built as a pub at the turn of the century, in Leederville, five minutes' walk from the railway station, two stops out from the city centre. It stood alone, bounded by four flat roads, like an island, which in its present incarnation seemed to symbolise its apartness, a natural quarantine. Three of the roads were lined with modest suburban houses, each one drawn back behind a stretch of dry lawn, a porch and front windows sealed by venetian blinds. Along the fourth road the two-storey WA Wire Netting Factory pounded

and throbbed twenty-four hours a day. Some considered that this wasn't a suitable location for a hospital. But the children found the noise soothing and loved the lights shining all night through their windows.

The pub had been bought by the Health Department in 1949 and converted into the Golden Age Children's Polio Convalescent Home, to service the years of the great epidemics. Inside, with its ramps and bars and walkways, its schoolteacher, trained nurses and full-time physiotherapist, it was a modern treatment centre, which could accommodate up to fourteen children, some from the country, some who could not be cared for at home.

Outside, rearing up above the dusty, treeless crossroads, it still looked like a country pub. Brick, two-storey, the wide upstairs balcony shaded the verandah beneath. It had thick walls for coolness, long alcoved windows, a sheltering iron roof like a hat pulled down low. Wheelchairs rolled easily along the wide, shadowy passageways, over the old polished jarrah boards. The very plainness and familiarity of its exterior seemed to proclaim its function, to give fair shelter and homely comfort. A watering hole.

The name, inherited, could be considered tactless by some, even cruelly ironic. These children were impaired as no one could ever wish a child to be. But perhaps because of its former role, its solid and generous air, it was a cheerful place. The children were no longer sick, but in need of help to find their way back into the world.

The staff and parents were well pleased with the Golden Age. Its rooms were spacious, cool and high-ceilinged. The children were surrounded by faces shining with hope and encouragement. Even Ida Gold (known as Princess Ida to the staff), though never slow to find fault, had to admit that she was grateful for the haven it provided.

The children enjoyed the benevolence of the attention.

Here, they were not a worry or a burden to make their mothers sigh with weariness. They felt different—exclusive, like a family—from the day kids, who lived at home and arrived by ambulance for schoolwork and therapy. All through the morning, children came and went between the schoolroom and the New Treatment Centre.

As for Frank, he was a new boy again, working out how to be himself. He was desperate to be normal. Finding his feet, this time, meant learning how to walk. He resolved to behave well because he didn't want another expulsion.

Also, in bed at night, and sometimes in the day when it was quiet, he could hear the distant whistle and hooting of the trains pulling in and out of the Leederville station, which always reassured him.

Above all, he didn't want to leave Elsa.

A line ran through his head, which might be the start of a poem.

Your bed was empty today
when I looked for you.
Why?

Polio had taken his legs, but given him his vocation: poet.

3.
Elsa

Elsa was with Rayma Colley in the Babies Room. The thin wail had wafted across the corridor in the afternoon stillness and seeped into Elsa's head. Finally she'd left her bed and wheeled her way to Rayma's cot.

'Stop that,' she whispered to Rayma, peering through the bars of the cot. Her tone was firm. Elsa was not sentimental about babies. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't had a younger sister to look after. The first thing to do was to stop the crying. She put a finger in her own mouth, puffed her cheeks and pulled the finger out with a pop. Rayma paused, mid-wail. Her little dark face was wet, her eyes swollen.

You had to make them think of something else.

'Come on,' Elsa said. She lowered the bars at the side of the cot, reached across and undid Rayma's splints. By leaning onto the mattress for support, she was able to drag the little girl to her and pull her onto her lap. Hiccups juddered the tiny body.

Tucking her chin over Rayma's shoulder to hold her, Elsa rolled over to the window. She lifted one of the long white curtains and pulled it around the wheelchair so that she and Rayma were screened off from the rest of the room. All their world now was the view, shaded by the verandah, the slice of empty road and the houses along it, a scene as remote to them as the other side of the world.

'Look,' she instructed Rayma, pointing upwards. The afternoon whiteness had taken on a steely cast, a thin, ragged cloud flitted across their view. The sea breeze must be in. During the

long days in hospital, the sky passing across the high window in the Isolation Ward had become Elsa's backyard, her freedom, her picture show. Watched, the sky slowed itself to a silent, endless semaphore of shapes and colours, as if it were signalling a message. She was amazed at how she had neglected it in all her years free to roam, with the sun on her face, the wind past her ears.

'Your mother looks at the sky and she thinks of you,' she said to Rayma. She spoke firmly, looking into Rayma's big, frightened eyes. For of course it was her mother whom Rayma cried for. It always was. In the Isolation Ward, Elsa had listened all day for her mother's cloppity footsteps down the corridor, hurrying in her old orthopaedic shoes to find her, waving to her through the glass panel, smiling, trying not to look sad.

And because the sky had become so important, the two—mother and sky—grew to be entwined in Elsa's thoughts. When she looked at the sky she thought of her mother, and it seemed to be telling her that some feelings would never change and never die. If her mother didn't come, the sky also told her that each person was alone and the world went on, no matter what was happening to you.

When at last she'd left the Isolation Ward and her parents were allowed to sit by her bed, they looked smaller to her, aged by the terror they had suffered, old, shrunken, ill-at-ease.

Something had happened to her which she didn't yet understand. As if she'd gone away and come back distant from everybody.

Rayma had to learn to be alone. Without your mother, you had to think.

It was like letting go of a hand, jumping off the high board, walking by yourself to school. Once you'd done it, you were never afraid of it again.

All the kids could identify their mothers' footsteps. They all

longed for their mothers, except Frank Gold, who said he'd rather his father came.

Sometimes even now in the Golden Age, after her mother visited, Elsa had the funny feeling that there was another mother waiting for her, blurred, gentle, beautiful as an angel, with an angel's perfect understanding.

4.
Cockatoos

Black cockatoos flew over the stout brick chimneys of the Golden Age as the children ate their dinners—macaroni cheese—on trays, in their beds. They heard their cries and looked towards the windows but could not see the large black birds swirling and dispersing over the Netting Factory and across the railway line. Bathed and combed, the children were content to eat in silence. Whether they came from the suburbs or the country, they knew the sound as homely, comforting, a good omen, predicting rain.

The Golds heard them as they passed over the roof of their house in North Perth, two stops by train from the Golden Age and a mile's walk up Fitzgerald Street. Meyer was in his tiny front yard, smoking and watering his vegetable patch. The cockatoos were heading for the park opposite and the nuts in the pine trees. They sounded like a hundred little wheels that needed oiling, Meyer thought.

At the kitchen table, Ida, also smoking, thought the cries were melancholy, harsh, echoing into emptiness, an Australian sound.

She and Meyer had wanted to go to America. They waited for months in Vienna to hear from a cousin of Meyer's father who'd migrated to New York in his youth. Finally, at the end of '46, a sponsorship was offered from Western Australia. In Vienna they were living in a dormitory with only a curtain between them and fifty other people. Some had been there for years. So they accepted. When

at last they landed in Fremantle, Ida wanted to get straight back onto the ship.

Every day, Ida found something that proved their voyage had been ill-fated. If she missed a bus, it was because they should never have come here. Once, after a visit to see Frank, they'd sat at the kitchen table drinking brandy. Ida talked of the old days, when she used to catch the train and bribe the commandant of the work camp to give Meyer a food parcel. One day in a street in Buda, dressed like an old peasant woman with a scarf across her face, holding Frank by the hand, she had come across Meyer's brother, Gyuri, a butcher, who was carving up the carcass of a frozen horse surrounded by a silent waiting crowd. He told her he'd had word that Meyer was alive.

But here they were, in a free, democratic country, and they were gutted, feeble, shell-shocked. Frank had been a resilient little fellow, he'd survived cellars, ceilings, bombing, near starvation. Then they came here.

'Ida,' Meyer said. 'Polio is in every country in the world.'

'Play the piano,' he said. She didn't answer. The reason they'd rented this little half-house was the piano in the dining room. They'd paid for the piano tuner themselves. But ever since Frank fell sick, Ida hadn't touched it.

'Why, Ida?' Meyer asked. He never dreamt how much he'd miss the driven sound of Ida's scales, daily, over and over, a morning carillon.

She shook her head.

He knew the reason. Once, before they were engaged, flushed and heightened after her final, stunning performance at the Academy, she'd admitted to him shyly that although she was anti-religion, she sometimes believed that her gift, in its insistence, its surprisingness, came from God. Playing was a sort of conversation, she said, embarrassed.

It was what was most mysterious about her, most alluring, and, in her daily struggle to be equal to it, most endearing.

Now she was a bird who refused to sing.

'Go to bed,' he said. 'You are tired.'

But she shook her head. If she was tired, the dreams were worse. She poured herself another glass of brandy.

5.
Frank's Vocation

Frank was very happy with his vocation. He'd always sensed that he had one, but he hadn't known what it was. It wasn't music, though Ida's dream had been to produce a prodigy. He hadn't inherited Meyer's hand-eye co-ordination either.

But there'd always been something that accompanied him, ever since he could remember. A secret longing. He'd felt it as a lack more than anything else.

Now that he knew he was a poet, he felt stronger. His future had been restored to him. He felt adult, solid, the equal of anyone on earth. He could overcome any hardship because he had a vocation.

Though, like his past in Hungary, it was something he didn't talk about.

There was one reliable gap in the Golden Age routine, between dinner and lights out, into which Frank could disappear. After the trays were taken, before the splints were put on, for twenty minutes or so the patients were left to themselves. Sometimes the boys read—much-handled Spider-Man comics, Enid Blyton, Biggles, *Treasure Island*—sometimes they fooled about with spitball fights. Recently Malcolm Poole had been taking himself over to Warren Barrett's bed—they had a craze for Monopoly. Lewis took out his stamp collection.

It was late twilight. Sounds of laughter drifted down the stairs from the staff quarters, where the nurses were eating their dinner. Soon, in a bright swarm they would descend on

the children and leave them splinted, smoothed, kissed, the curtains drawn against the dark.

At this hour, just after sunset, Frank always felt the need to go outside. It was a habit inherited from his parents. Before dinner, unless it was very cold or wet, Ida and Meyer always went out onto their small front porch to smoke and drink an aperitif. Nobody said much. Meyer, cigarette in one hand, glass in the other, stepped into the little front yard, checking out his plants. The streetlights came on with a blink and lit up the last home-going workers passing down Fitzgerald Street. Birds were calling out goodnight as they flew over the treetops in the park.

His parents had stood like this at the railing on the deck of the ship to Australia, backs turned to him, their slender drifts of smoke curling up above the horizon like the thread of their own thoughts. There was something lonely yet resolute about the way they stood there. It was not quite hope.

This evening, unobserved, he left his bed and rolled silently out through the open front door, along the verandah. The last streaks of pink and orange cloud were fading over the roof of the Netting Factory. The air smelt of warm dust, with a whiff of Norm's full-blown roses. Tiny birds hunched like a row of knots along the power lines. The first star had appeared.

His poem came back to him out here.

Your bed was empty today
when I looked for you.
Why?

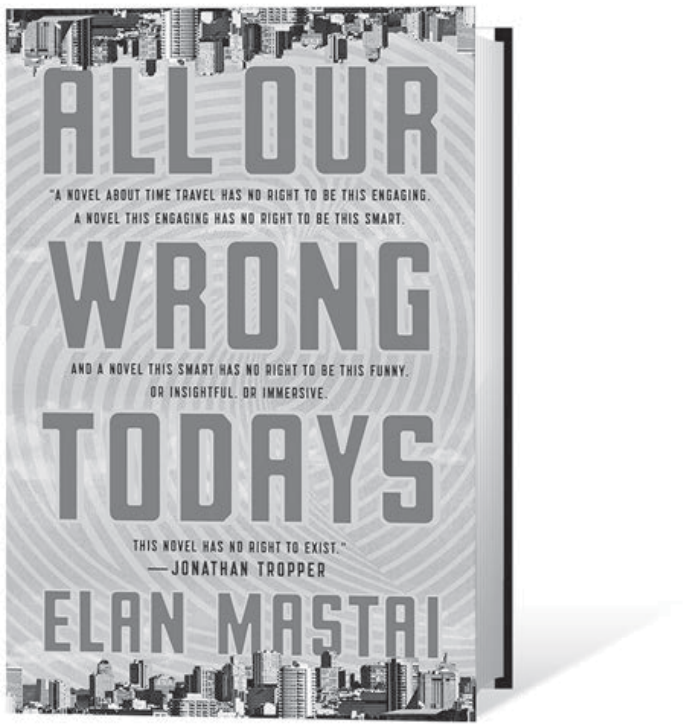
He took his pencil and the half-used prescription pad out of his dressing-gown pocket. It was important to hold on to your words in the way they were given to you. Sullivan had told him that. A notebook was essential. Frank had found the prescription pad in the car park at IDB. A doctor must have dropped it.

It was the perfect size for a pocket, and when he pulled it out he felt a little thrill: each blank slip waiting for its instruction, each just the right size for a poem, or the first lines of a poem. For the words of your thoughts.

It occurred to him that this poem could just as easily be about Sullivan, the poet at IDB who had introduced him to his vocation. In fact, as he wrote he realised it was *for* Sullivan, as perhaps all his poems were.

Coming to terms with death is a necessary element in any great poem, Sullivan once said.

And in this matter, Gold, he'd said, rolling his eyes towards Frank, we have had an early advantage.



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1

So, the thing is, I come from the world we were supposed to have. That means nothing to you, obviously, because you live here, in the crappy world we *do* have. But it never should've turned out like this. And it's all my fault—well, me and to a lesser extent my father and, yeah, I guess a little bit Penelope.

It's hard to know how to start telling this story. But, okay, you know the future that people in the 1950s imagined we'd have? Flying cars, robot maids, food pills, teleportation, jet packs, moving sidewalks, ray guns, hover boards, space vacations, and moon bases. All that dazzling, transformative technology our grandparents were certain was right around the corner. The stuff of world's fairs and pulp science-fiction magazines with titles like *Fantastic Future Tales* and *The Amazing World of Tomorrow*. Can you picture it?

Well, it happened.

It all happened, more or less exactly as envisioned. I'm not talking about the future. I'm talking about the *present*. Today, in the year 2016, humanity lives in a techno-utopian paradise of abundance, purpose, and wonder.

Except we don't. Of course we don't. We live in a world where, sure, there are iPhones and 3D printers and, I don't know, drone strikes or whatever. But it hardly looks like *The Jetsons*. Except it should. And it did. Until it didn't. But it would have, if I hadn't done what I did. Or, no, hold on, what I *will* have done.

I'm sorry, despite receiving the best education available to a citizen

of the World of Tomorrow, the grammar of this situation is a bit complicated.

Maybe the first person is the wrong way to tell this story. Maybe if I take refuge in the third person I'll find some sort of distance or insight or at least peace of mind. It's worth a try.

2

Tom Barren wakes up into his own dream.

Every night, neural scanners map his dreams while he sleeps so that both his conscious and unconscious thought patterns can be effectively modeled. Every morning, the neural scanners transmit the current dream-state data into a program that generates a real-time virtual projection into which he seamlessly rouses. The dream's scattershot plot is made increasingly linear and lucid until a psychologically pleasing resolution is achieved at the moment of full consciousness . . .

I'm sorry—I can't write like this. It's fake. It's safe.

The third person is comforting because it's in control, which feels really nice when relating events that were often so out of control. It's like a scientist describing a biological sample seen through a microscope. But I'm not the microscope. I'm the thing on the slide. And I'm not writing this to make myself comfortable. If I wanted comfort, I'd write fiction.

In fiction, you cohere all these evocative, telling details into a portrait of the world. But in everyday life, you hardly notice any of the little things. You can't. Your brain swoops past it all, especially when it's your own home, a place that feels barely separate from the inside of your mind or the outside of your body.

When you wake up from a real dream into a virtual one, it's like you're on a raft darting this way and that according to the blurry, impenetrable currents of your unconscious, until you find yourself

gliding onto a wide, calm, shallow lake, and the slippery, fraught weirdness dissolves into serene, reassuring clarity. The story wraps up the way it feels like it must, and no matter how unsettling the content, you wake with the rejuvenating solidity of order restored. And that's when you realize you're lying in bed, ready to start the day, with none of that sticky subconscious gristle caught in the cramped folds of your mind.

It might be what I miss most about where I come from. Because in this world waking up sucks.

Here, it's like nobody has considered using even the most rudimentary technology to improve the process. Mattresses don't subtly vibrate to keep your muscles loose. Targeted steam valves don't clean your body in slumber. I mean, blankets are made from tufts of plant fiber spun into thread and occasionally stuffed with feathers. Feathers. Like from actual birds. Waking up should be the best moment of your day, your unconscious and conscious minds synchronized and harmonious.

Getting dressed involves an automated device that cuts and stitches a new outfit every morning, indexed to your personal style and body type. The fabric is made from laser-hardened strands of a light-sensitive liquid polymer that's recycled nightly for daily reuse. For breakfast, a similar system outputs whatever meal you feel like from a nutrient gel mixed with color, flavor, and texture protocols. And if that sounds gross to you, in practice it's indistinguishable from what you think of as real food, except that it's uniquely gauged to your tongue's sensory receptors so it tastes and feels ideal every time. You know that sinking feeling you get when you cut into an avocado, only to find that it's either hard and underripe or brown and bruised under its skin? Well, I didn't know that could even happen until I came here. Every avocado I ever ate was perfect.

It's weird to be nostalgic for experiences that both did and didn't exist. Like waking up every morning completely refreshed. Some-

thing I didn't even realize I *could* take for granted because it was simply the way things were. But that's the point, of course—the way things were . . . never was.

What I'm not nostalgic for is that every morning when I woke up and got dressed and ate breakfast in this glittering technological utopia, I was alone.

3

On July 11, 1965, Lionel Goettreider invented the future.

Obviously you've never heard of him. But where I come from, Lionel Goettreider is the most famous, beloved, and respected human on the planet. Every city has dozens of things named after him: streets, buildings, parks, whatever. Every kid knows how to spell his name using the catchy mnemonic tune that goes *G-O-E-T-T-R-E-I-D-E-R*.

You have no idea what I'm talking about. But if you were from where I'm from, it'd be as familiar to you as *A-B-C*.

Fifty-one years ago, Lionel Goettreider invented a revolutionary way to generate unlimited, robust, absolutely clean energy. His device came to be called the Goettreider Engine. July 11, 1965, was the day he turned it on for the very first time. It made everything possible.

Imagine that the last five decades happened with no restrictions on energy. No need to dig deeper and deeper into the ground and make the skies dirtier and dirtier. Nuclear became unnecessarily tempestuous. Coal and oil pointlessly murky. Solar and wind and even hydropower became quaint low-fidelity alternatives that nobody bothered with unless they were peculiarly determined to live off the main grid.

So, how did the Goettreider Engine work?

How does electricity work? How does a microwave oven work? How does your cell phone or television or remote control work? Do you actually understand on, like, a concrete technical level? If those technologies disappeared, could you reconceive, redesign, and rebuild

them from scratch? And, if not, why not? You only use these things pretty much every single day.

But of course you don't know. Because unless your job's in a related field you don't need to know. They just *work*, effortlessly, as they were intended to.

Where I come from, that's how it is with the Goettreider Engine. It was important enough to make Goettreider as recognizable a name as Einstein or Newton or Darwin. But how it functioned, like, technically? I really couldn't tell you.

Basically, you know how a dam produces energy? Turbines harness the natural propulsion of water flowing downward via gravity to generate electricity. To be clear, that's more or less *all* I understand about hydroelectric power. Gravity pulls water down, so if you stick a turbine in its path, the water spins it around and somehow makes energy.

The Goettreider Engine does that with the planet. You know that the Earth spins on its axis and also revolves around the Sun, while the Sun itself moves endlessly through the solar system. Like water through a turbine, the Goettreider Engine harnesses the constant rotation of the planet to create boundless energy. It has something to do with magnetism and gravity and . . . honestly, I don't know—any more than I genuinely understand an alkaline battery or a combustion engine or an incandescent light bulb. They just work.

So does the Goettreider Engine. It just works.

Or it did. Before, you know, *me*.

4

I am not a genius. If you've read this far, you're already aware of that fact.

But my father is a legitimate full-blown genius of the highest order. After finishing his third PhD, Victor Barren spent a few crucial years working in long-range teleportation before founding his own lab to pursue his specific niche field—time travel.

Even where I come from, time travel was considered more or less impossible. Not because of time, actually, but because of space.

Here's why every time-travel movie you've ever seen is total bullshit: because the Earth moves.

You know this. Plus I mentioned it last chapter. The Earth spins all the way around once a day, revolves around the Sun once a year, while the Sun is on its own cosmic route through the solar system, which is itself hurtling through a galaxy that's wandering an epic path through the universe.

The ground under you is moving, really fast. Along the equator, the Earth rotates at over 1,000 miles per hour, twenty-four hours a day, while orbiting the Sun at a little over 67,000 miles per hour. That's 1,600,000 miles per day. Meanwhile our solar system is in motion relative to the Milky Way galaxy at more than 1,300,000 miles per hour, covering just shy of 32,000,000 miles per day. And so on.

If you were to travel back in time to yesterday, the Earth would be in a different place in space. Even if you travel back in time one second, the Earth below your feet can move nearly half a kilometer. In one second.

The reason every movie about time travel is nonsense is that the Earth moves, constantly, always. You travel back one day, you don't end up in the same location—you end up in the gaping vacuum of outer space.

Marty McFly didn't appear thirty years earlier in his hometown of Hill Valley, California. His tricked-out DeLorean materialized in the endless empty blackness of the cosmos with the Earth approximately 350,000,000,000 miles away. Assuming he didn't immediately lose consciousness from the lack of oxygen, the absence of air pressure would cause all the fluids in his body to bubble, partially evaporate, and freeze. He would be dead in less than a minute.

The Terminator would probably survive in space because it's an unstoppable robot killing machine, but traveling from 2029 to 1984 would've given Sarah Connor a 525,000,000,000-mile head start.

Time travel doesn't just require traveling back in time. It also requires traveling back to a pinpoint-specific location in space. Otherwise, just like with regular old everyday teleportation, you could end up stuck *inside* something.

Think about where you're sitting right now. Let's say on an olive-green couch. A white ceramic bowl of fake green pears and real brown pinecones propped next to your feet on the teak coffee table. A brushed-steel floor lamp glows over your shoulder. A coarse rug over reclaimed barn-board elm floors that cost too much but look pretty great . . .

If you were to teleport even a few inches in any direction, your body would be embedded in a solid object. One inch, you're wounded. Two inches, you're maimed. Three inches, you're dead.

Every second of the day, we're all three inches from being dead.

Which is why teleportation is safe and effective only if it's between dedicated sites on an exactingly calibrated system.

My father's early work in teleportation was so important because it helped him understand the mechanics of disincorporating and reincorporating a human body between discrete locations. It's what

stymied all previous time-travel initiatives. Reversing the flow of time isn't even that complex. What's outrageously complex is instantaneous space travel with absolute accuracy across potentially billions of miles.

My father's genius wasn't just about solving both the theoretical and logistic challenges of time travel. It was about recognizing that in this, as in so many other aspects of everyday life, our savior was Lionel Goettreider.

5

The first Goettreider Engine was turned on once and never turned off—it's been running without interruption since 2:03 P.M. on Sunday, July 11, 1965.

Goettreider's original device wasn't designed to harness and emit large-scale amounts of energy. It was an experimental prototype that performed beyond its inventor's most grandiose expectations. But the whole point of a Goettreider Engine is that it never has to be deactivated, just as the planet never stops moving. So, the prototype was left running in the same spot where it was first switched on, in front of a small crowd of sixteen observers in a basement laboratory in section B7 of the San Francisco State Science and Technology Center.

Where I come from, every schoolkid knows the names and faces of the Sixteen Witnesses. Numerous books have been written about every single one of them, with their presence at this ultimate hinge in history shoved into the chronology of their individual lives as the defining event, whether or not it was factually true.

Countless works of art have depicted *The Activation of the Goettreider Engine*. It's *The Last Supper* of the modern world, those sixteen faces, each with its own codified reaction. Skeptical. Awed. Distracted. Amused. Jealous. Angry. Thoughtful. Frightened. Detached. Concerned. Excited. Nonchalant. Harried. There's three more. Damn it, I should know this . . .

When the prototype Engine was first turned on, Goettreider just wanted to verify his calculations and prove his theory wasn't completely

misguided—all it had to do was actually *work*. And it did work, but it had a major defect. It emitted a unique radiation signature, what was later called *tau radiation,* a nod to how physics uses the Greek capital letter T to represent *proper time* in relativity equations.

As the Engine's miraculous energy-generating capacities expanded to power the whole world, the tau radiation signature was eliminated from the large-scale industrial models. But the prototype was left to run, theoretically forever, in Goettreider's lab in San Francisco—now among the most visited museums on the planet—out of respect, nostalgia, and a legally rigid clause in Goettreider's last will and testament.

My father's idea was to use the original device's tau radiation signature as a bread-crumb trail through space and time, each crumb the size of an atom, a knotted thread to the past, looping through the cosmos with an anchor fixed at the most important moment in history—Sunday, July 11, 1965, 2:03:48 P.M., the exact second Lionel Goettreider started the future. It meant that not only could my father send someone back in time to a very specific moment, the tau radiation trail would lead them to a very specific location—Lionel Goettreider's lab, right before the world changed forever.

With this realization, my father had almost every piece of the time-travel puzzle. There was only one last thing, minor compared to transporting a sentient human being into the past, but major in terms of not accidentally shredding the present—a way to ensure the time traveler can't affect the past in any tangible way. There were several crucial safeguards in my father's design, but the only one I care about is the *defusion sphere*. Because that's how Penelope Weschler's life collided with mine.

6

Nearly every object of art and entertainment is different in this world. Early on, the variations aren't that significant. But as the late 1960s gave way to the vast technological and social leaps of the 1970s, almost everything changed, generating decades of pop culture that never existed—fifty years of writers and artists and musicians creating an entirely *other* body of work. Sometimes there are fascinating parallels, a loose story point in one version that's the climax in another, a line of dialogue in the wrong character's mouth, a striking visual composition framed in a new context, a familiar chord progression with radically altered lyrics.

July 11, 1965, was the pivot of history even if nobody knew it yet.

Fortunately, Lionel Goettreider's favorite novel was published in 1963—*Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Vonnegut's writing is different where I come from. Here, despite his wit and insight, you get the impression he felt a novelist could have no real effect on the world. He was compelled to write, but with little faith that writing might change anything.

Because *Cat's Cradle* influenced Lionel Goettreider so deeply, in my world Vonnegut was considered among the most significant philosophers of the late twentieth century. This was probably great for Vonnegut personally but less so for his novels, which became increasingly homiletic.

I won't summarize *Cat's Cradle* for you. It's short and much better

written than this book, so just go read it. It's weary, cheeky, and wise, which are my three favorite qualities in people and art.

Tangentially—Weary, Cheeky, and Wise are the three codified reactions I couldn't remember from the Sixteen Witnesses to the Activation.

Cat's Cradle is about a lot of things, but a major plot thread involves the invention of ice-nine, a substance that freezes everything it touches, which falls out of its creator's control and destroys all life on the planet.

Lionel Goettreider read *Cat's Cradle* and had a crucial realization, what he called the "Accident"—when you invent a new technology, you also invent the accident of that technology.

When you invent the car, you also invent the car accident. When you invent the plane, you also invent the plane crash. When you invent nuclear fission, you also invent the nuclear meltdown. When you invent ice-nine, you also invent unintentionally freezing the planet solid.

When Lionel Goettreider invented the Goettreider Engine, he knew he couldn't turn it on until he figured out its accident—and how to prevent it.

My favorite exhibit at the Goettreider Museum is the simulation of what *could've* happened if the Engine had somehow malfunctioned when Goettreider first turned it on. In the worst-case scenario, the unprecedented amounts of energy pulled in by the Engine overwhelm its intake core, triggering an explosion that melts San Francisco into a smoldering crater, poisons the Pacific Ocean with tau radiation, corrodes 10,000 square miles of arable land into a stew of pain, and renders an impressive swath of North America uninhabitable for decades. Parents would occasionally complain to the museum's curatorial staff that the simulation's nightmarish imagery was too graphic for children and, since the experiment obviously *didn't* fail, why draw attention away from Goettreider's majestic contributions to human civilization with grotesque speculation about imaginary global disasters? The simulation was eventually moved to an

out-of-the-way corner of the museum, where generations of teenagers on high school field trips would huddle in the darkness and watch the world fall apart on a continuous loop.

I'm not a genius like Lionel Goettreider or Kurt Vonnegut or my father. But I have a theory too: The Accident doesn't just apply to technology, it also applies to people. Every person you meet introduces the accident of that person to you. What can go right and what can go wrong. There is no intimacy without consequence.

Which brings me back to Penelope Weschler and the accident of us. Of all of us.

7

Penelope Weschler was supposed to be an astronaut. In early-age evaluation matrices, she indicated the necessary mental aptitude, physical capability, and unwavering ambition. Even as a child, Penelope immediately knew this was the correct path for her and wanted nothing else. She trained nonstop, both in and out of school. Not to walk on the moon. Anybody could walk on the moon. Anybody could go for a monthlong orbital cruise. Penelope would cross the next frontier—deep-space exploration.

It wasn't just the studying, the training, the constant testing. It was social. Or, really, antisocial. For long-term space operations, the recruiting agencies want you to grow up with parents and siblings so you have empathy models to apply to fellow astronauts on missions that last years, sometimes decades. They want you capable of caring about other people. But they don't want you to actually miss anyone back home *too* much, so you don't have a breakdown six months into a six-year mission. It's a sliding psychological scale—self-assured loners whose parents never divorced are good, shark-eyed sociopaths less so.

From junior high on, Penelope maintained amicable but purposefully limited personal relationships, so she wouldn't have anybody tethering her to Earth.

And she was utterly kick-ass. Top of her cohort across all categories. Universally recognized as a natural mission leader. She'd be a pioneer. She'd see the storms of Jupiter with her own eyes and surf

the rings of Saturn on a space walk. And that was worth not having close friends or romantic relationships or a loyal dog.

Everything was going according to plan. Until the first time she went to space.

The launch was flawless. Penelope performed her functions with such precision they would've used it to teach incoming recruits how gloriously capable an astronaut can be. She was prepared. She was ready. She was perfect.

Until she passed through the top layer of Earth's atmosphere and her mind went completely blank.

There's a small subset of people whose cognitive functions get scrambled in outer space. Something about how the pressure change of the vacuum affects the bonds between molecules in the neurons of their brains. No one's even sure why it happens. But Penelope was one of that subset. Somehow this fact eluded the years of rigorous screening. One moment she's deftly guiding the launch vehicle through the final atmospheric layers, seeing the gaping expanse of space for the first time, her heart beating in measured but ecstatic bursts, the happiest she's ever felt. And then . . . nothing.

She doesn't know who she is. She doesn't know where she is. She doesn't know what to do. Something in her basic constitution keeps her from having a panic attack, as most people would if they suddenly woke up piloting a goddamn spacecraft with the planet receding behind them. But she can't remember anything. The instrument panel she'd spent years mastering means nothing to her, inscrutable acronyms printed over lights flashing in seemingly random patterns. She stares out the viewing dome at the radiant vapor of stars smeared across the black canvas of space, like the pollen clouds that would rise from the cedar trees in her grandparents' backyard when the squirrels jumped from branch to branch, although she can't understand why she's thinking about something she hasn't seen since she was eight years old when there are these *voices* in her earpiece getting loud and insistent.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I'm not really sure where I am right now."

Her copilots, just as well trained and keening with tiny flames of envy at how far ahead of them she'd always ranked, relieved Penelope of her duties. They had to abort the mission, at no small expense, because her unpredictable presence endangered everyone. Just like that, Penelope, the best of the best of the best, became a threat.

Strapped into an observation seat for the abrupt return home, she watched the Earth loom below her, lacquered blue and swirled with meteorological haze. Her eyes burned with tears. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen and she would never see it again, even if she didn't know it yet.

Back on Earth, her mental capacities returned to normal, she understood her career as an astronaut was over. She'd planned to spend decades off planet. Instead, she got to experience less time in space than a tourist who splurged for a Sunday afternoon jaunt through the thermosphere on a discount shuttle. The same brain that made her the perfect astronaut made it impossible for her to do the job.

This would've crushed most people. But Penelope wasn't most people. After a few months swimming deep into a gravity well of spiraling depression, and refusing any pharmaceutical intervention in case it affected medical qualification for another endeavor, she found a new ambition to fuel her talent for punishing rigor.

If she couldn't be an astronaut, she'd be a chrononaut.

8

I leave my condo on the 184th floor of a 270-floor tower connected to seven other towers by a lattice of walkways, with a transport hub at the base of the octagonal complex. My father pulled some strings because the building is owned by the same property conglomerate that manages my parents' housing unit, so at least my place faces away from Toronto's densest building clusters and I have a decent view of Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment biosphere preserve in the distance, the spires of downtown Buffalo glinting morning sunlight along the arced horizon.

A lot of people take their own vehicles to work but, seriously, three-dimensional traffic sucks. Whatever the cool factor of a flying car, it's mitigated by the gridlock hovering twenty stories above every street.

I prefer to catch a transit capsule on one of the layered tracks that run through the city. Each capsule is a sleek metallic pod that opens like a clamshell, and inside is a padded bench, with screens and speakers to jack in your entertainment interface. The capsule takes you wherever you need to go on the citywide transport system, although each capsule also has a retractable hover engine to travel short distances off grid.

I get to work twelve minutes late, which is typical for me. My boss is too soured on pretty much every aspect of my life to get worked up about chronic tardiness. Because my boss is my father.

The sign outside the building says THE CHRONONAUT INSTITUTE. I

find this unbearably cheesy but, since all my father's employees revere him, I'm clearly in the minority. Nobody else would even consider rolling their eyes at that stupid sign when they come to work at the lab. They're way too busy rolling their eyes at me.

One thing I should make clear—just because I work at a lab, that doesn't make me smart. Where I come from, everybody works at a lab.

All the banal functions of daily life are taken care of by technology. There are no grocery stores or gas stations or fast-food joints. Nobody collects garbage from a bin at the curb or fixes your car with, like, tools in a garage. The menial and manual jobs that dominated the global workforce in past eras are now automated and mechanized, and the international conglomerates that maintain those technologies keep busy tinkering with minor refinements. If your organic waste disposal module malfunctions, you wouldn't call a plumber, even if plumbers still existed, because your building has repair drones at the ready. A lamplighter with a jug of kerosene and a wick on a pole has as much relevance to contemporary life as tailors and janitors and gardeners and carpenters.

Places like bookstores and cafés still *exist,* but they're specialized niche businesses aimed at nostalgia fetishists. You can go to an actual restaurant and have a chef prepare your meal by hand. But the waiter who serves you is essentially an actor playing a role on a set in which you're also a performer, an immersive live-action narrative spooling out around you in real time.

In the absence of material want, the world economy transitioned almost exclusively to entertainment—entertainment is both the foundation and the fuel of modern civilization. Most of us now work in labs imagining, designing, and building the next cool innovation in entertainment. It's the only thing you really need in a world where almost nothing is asked of you. Other than *paying* for that entertainment. The newer and shinier and wilder it is, the more it costs.

If you're a scientist driven to crack uncrackable codes and break unbreakable ground, nobody beyond a few chronically underfunded

government agencies is all that motivated to finance that code cracking and ground breaking. But if you can somehow frame it as the newest, shiniest, wildest entertainment around—there's no limit to the financing you can rake in.

Which is why my father, widely considered one of the world's top-tier geniuses, has devoted his career and reputation to, basically, time-travel tourism.

"Time travel" is not an investment draw. But you add the word *tourism* to it, the promise of a ceaseless flow of customers lining up to pay to visit whatever era of life on planet Earth they want to see with their own eyes, well, then the money pours in. And so—*chrononauts.*

9

My father's experiment, set for July 11, 2016, will send the first human beings back in time to witness the moment the original Goettreider Engine was switched on, using the Engine itself as an anchor in time, its tau radiation signature tracing the Earth's trajectory through space to July 11, 1965, fifty-one years earlier.

The year 2015 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Activation of the Goettreider Engine, which was obviously a big deal—every city on the planet competed to outdo the others with their local celebrations. The collective blood pressure of the Danish people ratcheted dangerously high as they seized the opportunity to remind the world that even though his great scientific discoveries were made in the United States of America, Lionel Goettreider was born in Denmark. But the marquee event happened at the Goettreider Museum, built up around the original San Francisco State Science and Technology Center, its drab cement walls and squat windows preserved inside a modern edifice—a spectacular crystalline whorl that refracts sunlight in the day and moonlight at night.

On the morning of Saturday, July 11, 2015, standing on a dais with the Goettreider Museum perfectly poised behind him for every media report, Victor Barren kicked off the semicentennial celebration by publicly announcing that the world's first time-travel experiment would occur *exactly* one year from that moment—at 10:00:00 A.M. on Monday, July 11, 2016. He gestured to a large clock on the dais and began the countdown: 31,622,400 seconds, 527,040 minutes,

8,784 hours, 366 days. It would be the greatest experiment since, well, the Activation of the Goettreider Engine. And once the appropriate government safeguards had been satisfied, the technology would become commercially available to the public, with licensed chrononaut facilities allowing anyone and everyone the chance to safely travel in time. People *freaked out* in anticipation. My father's time machine was assured to be among the most successful products ever launched.

This is how Victor Barren made himself the star of the Goettreider Engine's fiftieth anniversary.

Transported to the Chrononaut Institute in Toronto, the big clock continued its countdown, as if the precise moment my father would take his place among the giants of science was a mathematical inevitability. All that was required was for that clock to run out of numbers.

By the way, the fiftieth-anniversary thing had no scientific significance. It was a bit of theatrical razzle-dazzle to build public anticipation and impress the financiers who bought into my father's supposedly game-changing new form of high-end entertainment.

But for it to be a viable business, my father had to actually *prove* people can safely time travel. Enter the chrononauts.

For security and safety purposes, the prototype time machine is programmed for a single, fixed destination: Lionel Goettreider's basement laboratory in San Francisco, California, on July 11, 1965. The tau radiation trail leads there and only there. This *should* prevent a miscalculation that sends the chrononauts to the wrong era. The prototype is like a gondola strung between two alpine peaks—you can't just use it to go wherever or whenever you want. Once the experiment is successful and the path between 2016 and 1965 is accurately mapped both in space and in time, further exploration will be possible. But until mission launch, it's still just a very expensive untested theory—so the chrononauts need to be ready for anything.

It's a six-person team, apparently the ideal number for this kind of mission. Psychologically, it's large enough to feel like a unit but

small enough to cultivate reasonably intimate individual bonds. Each of the six is painstakingly trained in multifaceted survival. Not just physical, but cultural. Let's say something does go wrong and instead of five decades in the past, they travel back five centuries, or five millennia. The whole team needs to be acutely familiar with the on-the-ground conditions of whatever era they may find themselves in.

There's an abort protocol to slingshot them back to the present, but it takes crucial seconds to engage regardless of mortal threat. There is of course an automatic rebound function that activates in the event of a catastrophic systems failure so, even if the whole team dies, the technology itself isn't lost in the past, wreaking unknowable consequences on history.

Obviously it makes more scientific sense to send back an inanimate object or a trained animal. But there are two problems with a more cautious approach. First, my father wants to knock everyone's socks off right out of the gate, and sending a team of people back in time is way cooler than, like, a robot drone or a bunny rabbit. Second, the margin of error is so minute when you're mucking about in space-time that you want nimble human minds making considered decisions, so if anything unexpected happens nobody accidentally triggers a calamitous change to the timeline. That would be bad.

Almost anything could go wrong. You need people who are resolutely calm under pressure and can survive in unpredictably lethal situations. Six chrononauts, each among the most impressive individuals alive.

Which is why it was totally absurd that I was involved in this mission.

10

I guess now is as good a time as any to mention that my mother, Rebecca Barren, died four months ago in a freak accident.

Yes, despite the many technological marvels of my world, people still got killed for no good reason. People also acted like assholes for no good reason. But, sorry, I'm trying to tell you about my mother, not my father.

Like a lot of high-impact thinkers, my father needed everything that didn't involve his big brain managed for him. Of course, most of these functions could be automated, but my mother embraced a handmade quality to our family life that could be seen as tactile and quaint and also could be seen as neurotic and sad. Like, if she didn't personally fold my father's clothes, clean his study, serve his food, he wouldn't be able to unlock the mysteries of time travel. And it's entirely possible she was correct. Because he *did* unlock the mysteries of time travel, and within a few months of her sudden death, everything was a total disaster.

They met at the University of Toronto. My father's parents had emigrated from Vienna to Toronto when he was nine years old, and he never lost an Austrian clip to his vowels. My mother came from Leeds on an international exchange program to continue her undergraduate degree in literature and never lost her British ability to reflexively vector herself within rigid class dynamics.

My father was a graduate student in physics and my mother noticed him around campus, always wearing mismatched socks. She wanted

to know if it was a fashion choice above her station or the mark of someone with more important things on his mind. One day, she walked up and handed him a gift—a box of one hundred identical socks. He had no idea who she was. They were married within a year and slotted themselves into their respective lifelong roles—my father was the lighthouse, my mother the keeper who wound the clockwork, polished the lenses, and swept all those rocky steps.

My father had a wife who was more like a mother. And I had a mother who was more like a sister. My father's reputation propelled him up through the scientific community, but it cocooned my mother from any honest, vulnerable friendships. She had a role to play—midwife to my father's genius—and she couldn't admit to anyone that she felt hollow, lonely, full of dread.

Except me. My mother would tell me everything. I was her confidant, her simpleton therapist, a forever ready ear to her bottomless reservoir of anxious chitter-chatter. My father's job was to change the world. My mother's job was to create a warm, soft nest for him to preen in. My job was to listen to my mother talk, endlessly, so she didn't have a nervous breakdown while suppressing anything consequential about herself in case it spoiled my father's expansive mood of cosmic contemplation.

My mother's comfort was books. Not the immersive virtual storytelling modules the rest of us enjoyed—actual books, the paper-and-ink kind that nobody made, let alone wrote, anymore. Her leisure time was spent reading words written in a previous era. Before she met my father, she'd imagined a career surrounded by books, teaching them, editing them, maybe even writing them.

I should clarify that my father never *requested* any of this. Part of his blissfully unaware state of grandiose self-importance is that he noticed none of it. He somehow found a spouse who would naturally wear herself down into a ball of gray wool. She became the comfortably downy socks that were always clean and ready in his

drawer whenever his feet felt cold. As far as he knew, the house just made them to order.

And then, four months ago, while she sipped a coffee and read a novel on a patch of grass outside my parents' housing unit, a malfunctioning navigation system caused a hover car to break formation, careen out of control, and smear half of my mother across the lawn in a wet streak of blood and bone and skin and the end of everything.

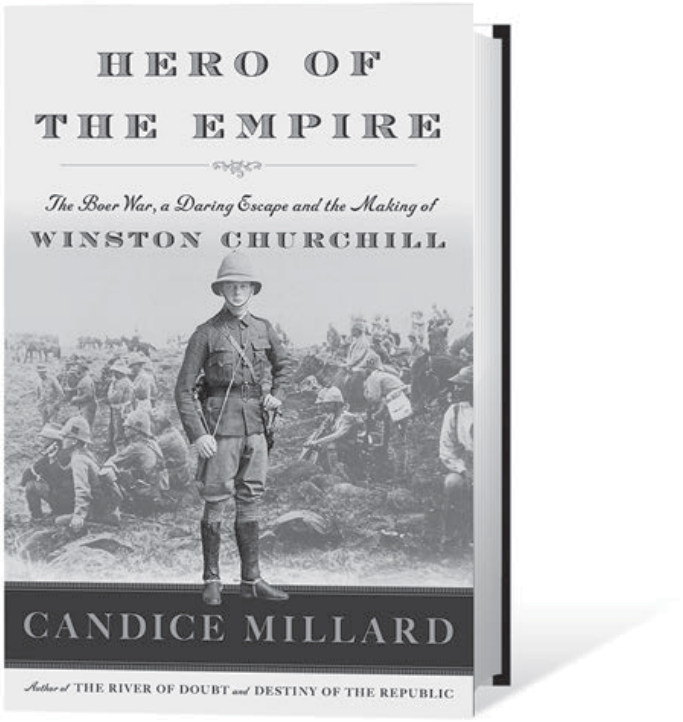
When someone dies they get very cold and very still. That probably sounds obvious, but when it's your mother it doesn't feel obvious—it feels shocking. You watch, winded and reeling, as the medical technicians neutralize the stasis field and power down the synthetic organ metabolizer. But the sentimental gesture of kissing her forehead makes you recoil because the moment your lips touch her skin you realize just how cold and just how still she is, just how permanent that coldness and that stillness feel. Your body lurches like it's been plunged into boiling water and for the first time in your life you understand death as a biological state, an organism ceasing to function. Unless you've touched a corpse before, you can't comprehend the visceral wrongness of inert flesh wrapped around an inanimate object that wears your mother's face. You feel sick with guilt and regret and sadness about every time you rolled your eyes in annoyance or brushed off a needy request or let your mind wander when she told some inconsequential anecdote. You can't remember anything thoughtful or sweet or tender that you ever did even though logically you know you must have. All you can recall is how often you were small and petty and false. She was your mother and she loved you in a way nobody ever has and nobody ever will and now she's gone.

When I was born, my mother planted a lemon tree on their property and once a year she would make lemon tarts, her grandmother's recipe, for my birthday. That tree, thirty-two years old, same as me, was just strong enough to stop the hover car from smashing right through the large window of my father's study, where he was considering

matters of lofty import and absentmindedly eating the grilled cheese sandwich that my mother had prepared for him as she made herself a mug of coffee to drink while sitting out in the sunshine to read a chapter of *Great Expectations* before it was time to do some other incredibly thoughtful routine thing that made my father's life so pleasant and that he would realize she'd done for him for more than thirty years only once she was gone.

Without that tree, my father would be dead too. I would be an orphan. And everything would be much, much better for everyone.

I remember, as a kid, when I first understood that only half of every tree is visible, that the roots in the soil are equal to the branches in the sky, that a whole other half is underground. It took me a lot longer, well into adulthood, to realize people are like that too.



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PROLOGUE

Crouching in darkness outside the prison fence in wartime southern Africa, Winston Churchill could still hear the voices of the guards on the other side. Seizing his chance an hour earlier, the twenty-five-year-old had scaled the high, corrugated-iron paling that enclosed the prison yard. But now he was trapped in a new dilemma. He could not remain where he was. At any moment, he could be discovered and shot by the guards or by the soldiers who patrolled the dark, surrounding streets of Pretoria, the capital of the enemy Boer republic. Yet neither could he run. His hopes for survival depended on two other prisoners, who were still inside the wall. In the long minutes since he had dropped down into the darkness, they had not appeared.

From the moment he had been taken as a prisoner of war, Churchill had dreamed of reclaiming his freedom, hatching scheme after scheme, each more elaborate than the last. In the end, however, the plan that had actually brought him over the fence was not his own. The two other English prisoners had plotted the escape, and agreed only with great reluctance to bring him along. They also carried the provisions that were supposed to sustain all three of them as they tried to cross nearly three hundred miles of enemy territory. Unable even to climb back into his hated captivity, Churchill found

himself alone, hiding in the low, ragged shrubs that lined the fence, with no idea what to do next.

Although he was still a very young man, Churchill was no stranger to situations of great personal peril. He had already taken part in four wars on three different continents, and had come close to death in each one. He had felt bullets whistling by his head in Cuba, seen friends hacked to death in British India, been separated from his regiment in the deserts of the Sudan and, just a month earlier, in November 1899, at the start of the Boer War, led the resistance against a devastating attack on an armored train. Several men had died in that attack, blown to pieces by shells and a deafening barrage of bullets, many more had been horribly wounded, and Churchill had barely escaped with his life. To his fury and deep frustration, however, he had not eluded capture. He, along with dozens of British officers and soldiers, had been taken prisoner by the Boers—the tough, largely Dutch-speaking settlers who had been living in southern Africa for centuries and were not about to let the British Empire take their land without a fight.

When the Boers had realized that they had captured the son of Lord Randolph Churchill, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer and a member of the highest ranks of the British aristocracy, they had been thrilled. Churchill had been quickly transported to a POW camp in Pretoria, the Boer capital, where he had been imprisoned with about a hundred other men. Since that day, he had been able to think of nothing but escape, and returning to the war.

The Boer War had turned out to be far more difficult and more devastating than the amusing colonial war the British had expected. Their army, one of the most admired and feared fighting forces in the world, was astonished to find itself struggling to hold its own against a little-known republic on a continent that most Europeans considered to be theirs for the taking. Already, the British had learned more from this war than almost any other. Slowly, they were real-

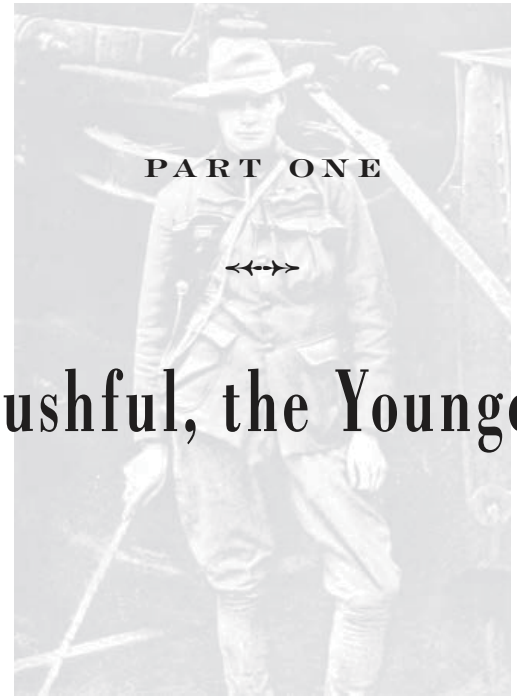
izing that they had entered a new age of warfare. The days of gallant young soldiers wearing bright red coats had suddenly disappeared, leaving the vaunted British army to face an invisible enemy with weapons so powerful they could wreak carnage without ever getting close enough to look their victims in the eye.

Long before it was over, the war would also change the empire in another, equally indelible way: It would bring to the attention of a rapt British public a young man named Winston Churchill. Although he had tried again and again, in war after war, to win glory, Churchill had returned home every time without the medals that mattered, no more distinguished or famous than he had been when he set out. The Boer War, he believed, was his best chance to change that, to prove that he was not just the son of a famous man. He was special, even extraordinary, and he was meant not just to fight for his country but one day lead it. Although he believed this without question, he still had to convince everyone else, something he would never be able to do from a POW camp in Pretoria.

When Churchill had scrambled over the prison fence, seizing his chance after a nearby guard had turned his back, he felt elated. Now, as he kneeled in the shrubs just outside, waiting helplessly for the other men, his desperation mounted with each passing minute. Finally, he heard a British voice. Churchill realized with a surge of relief that it was one of his co-conspirators. "It's all up," the man whispered. The guard was suspicious, watching their every move. They could not get out. "Can you get back in?" the other prisoner asked.

Both men knew the answer. As they stood on opposite sides of the fence, one still in captivity, the other achingly close to freedom, it was painfully apparent that Churchill could not undo what had already been done. It would have been impossible for him to climb back into the prison enclosure without being caught, and the punishment for his escape would have been immediate and possibly fatal.

In all the time he had spent thinking about his escape since arriving in Pretoria, the one scenario that Churchill had not envisioned was crossing enemy territory alone without companions or provisions of any kind. He didn't have a weapon, a map, a compass, or, aside from a few bars of chocolate in his pocket, any food. He didn't speak the language, either that of the Boers or that of the Africans. Beyond the vaguest of outlines, he didn't even have a plan—just the unshakable conviction that he was destined for greatness.



PART ONE

Pushful, the Younger

CHAPTER 1

DEATH BY INCHES

From earliest childhood, Churchill had been fascinated by war, and dreamed of gallantry in battle. "There is no ambition I cherish so keenly," he had confided to his younger brother, Jack, "as to gain a reputation for personal courage."

As a boy, he had collected a miniature army of fifteen hundred toy soldiers and spent hours sending them into combat. "From very early youth I had brooded about soldiers and war, and often I had imagined in dreams and day-dreams the sensations attendant upon being for the first time under fire," he wrote. "It seemed to my youthful mind that it must be a thrilling and immense experience to hear the whistle of bullets all around and to play at hazard from moment to moment with death and wounds." At Sandhurst, the Royal Military College, from which he had graduated in 1894, Churchill had loved nothing more than to participate in war games, regretting only "that it all had to be make-believe."

To be an aristocratic Englishman in the late nineteenth century meant being surrounded not merely by the lavish benefits of imperial power but by its equally vast responsibilities. Covering more than a fifth of the world's land surface, the British Empire had come to rule about a quarter of the human race—more than 450 million people

living on every continent and on the islands of every ocean. It was the largest empire ever known, easily outranking the once mighty Spanish Empire, which had been the original object of the awe-filled description "the empire on which the sun never sets." It was five times the size of the Roman Empire at its zenith, and its influence—over people, language, money, even time, for the clocks in every time zone were set to Greenwich mean time—was unrivaled.

By the time Churchill reached adulthood, the greatest threat to the empire no longer came from the other major powers—Spain, Portugal, Germany or France—but from the ever-expanding burden of ruling its own colonies. Although long the object of admiration, envy and fear, the British army had been stretched impossibly thin as it struggled to keep the empire intact, crisscrossing continents and oceans to put down revolts everywhere from Egypt to Ireland.

To Churchill, such far-flung conflicts offered an irresistible opportunity for personal glory and advancement. When he entered the British army and finally became a soldier, with the real possibility of dying in combat, Churchill's enthusiasm for war did not waver. On the contrary, he had written to his mother that he looked forward to battle "not so much *in spite* of as *because* of the risks I run." What he wanted most from his life as a soldier was not adventure or even battlefield experience but a chance to prove himself. He wanted not simply to fight but to be noticed while fighting.

For a member of Churchill's high social class, such bold, unabashed ambition was a novelty, if not an outright scandal. He had been born a British aristocrat, a direct descendant of John Churchill, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, his parents personal friends of the Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria's oldest son and heir. Yet in his open pursuit of fame and popular favor, Churchill seemed far less Victorian than Rooseveltian. "The immortal Barnum himself had not a greater gift for making himself and his affairs the talk of the world," his first biographer, Alexander MacCallum Scott, would write just a few years later. "Winston advertises himself as simply and unconsciously as he breathes."

In a world in which men were praised not just for their stiff

upper lip but for extreme modesty when it came to their own achievements, Churchill was widely criticized for being that most offensive of creatures, the medal hunter. He was called a "self-advertiser," a "young whippersnapper," even, by a reporter for the *Daily Chronicle,* "Pushful, the Younger." He was not unaware of these criticisms and even years later, bewildered by the viciousness with which he was attacked, would admit that it was "melancholy to be forced to record these less amiable aspects of human nature, which by a most curious and indeed unaccountable coincidence have always seemed to present themselves in the wake of my innocent footsteps." He was not, however, about to let them slow him down.

Churchill knew that the surest and quickest route to recognition, success and perhaps, if he was lucky, fame was a military medal. It was "the swift road to promotion and advancement in every arm," he wrote, "the glittering gateway to distinction." Distinction, in turn, could be parlayed into political clout, opening a door onto the kind of public life that he longed for, and which he believed was his destiny. So while the military was not, for Churchill, an end in itself, it was certainly a very useful means to an end. What he needed was a battle, a serious battle, one that would be talked about, would be remembered, and, with a good dose of courage and a little showmanship on his part, might propel him to the forefront of the military stage. For that, he was willing to risk anything, even his life.

Churchill had seen real fighting for the first time in 1895. Instead of spending his leave playing polo or foxhunting like most young officers, he had gone to Cuba as a military observer, joining a fighting column of the Spanish army during an uprising that was a prelude to the Spanish-American War. It was here that he began smoking cigars, giving birth to a lifelong habit and a distinct preference for Cubanos. It was also here that on his twenty-first birthday he heard for the first time "bullets strike flesh." In fact, he had very nearly been killed by a bullet that, by the capriciousness of fate, had

sailed just a foot past his head, striking and killing the horse standing next to him. In Cuba, however, he had been only an observer, not an active participant, and for Churchill that would never be enough.

Churchill's true education in the harsh realities of Britain's colonial wars began the next year, in the remote mountains of British India's North-West Frontier, modern-day Pakistan, whose sweeping vistas, unforgiving beauty and lethal conflicts would later suggest powerful parallels to those of southern Africa. For the British army, few territories had been as difficult to subdue as India, the jewel in the empire's crown, and no part of India had proved more deadly for British soldiers than the tribal lands of the Pashtun, an ethnic group renowned for their military skill and unyielding resistance to outside control.

It was, in fact, the Pashtun's unmatched ferocity in battle that drew Churchill to India, and to the Pashtun heartland known as Malakand. In October 1896, Churchill had arrived in India with his regiment, the Fourth Queen's Own Hussars. He had come hoping to find himself quickly at the center of action. Instead, he had spent month after frustrating month in Bangalore, which he irritably described to his mother as a "3rd rate watering place."

The incredible luxury in which he lived had made little difference. Left to find their own lodgings, Churchill and two fellow officers had chosen what Churchill described to his mother as "a magnificent pink and white stucco palace in the middle of a large and beautiful garden." They paid for this lavish abode by combining their salaries, given to them in silver rupees poured into a string net bag "as big as a prize turnip," with any allowance they managed to pry from dwindling family fortunes.

Like some of his fellow officers, Churchill came from a family that was rich in titles and grand estates, but little else. The Churchill family palace, Blenheim, was, like most great houses in England at the end of the nineteenth century, hovering on the brink of collapse. The 5th and 6th Dukes of Marlborough had lived lives of such extravagance that when Churchill's grandfather inherited the title and the palace, he had been forced to sell not just land but

some of the treasures that the family held most dear. In 1875, when Churchill was not yet a year old, the 7th Duke sold the Marlborough Gems, a stunning assortment of more than 730 carved gemstones, for more than £36,000. A few years later, despite the protestations of his family, he sold the Sunderland Library, a vast and historically significant collection.

The most effective means the Churchills had found of keeping the palace from going under, however, had been to marry the successive dukes off to "dollar princesses," enormously wealthy heiresses whose families longed for an old British title to burnish their new American money. Soon after becoming the 8th Duke, Churchill's uncle George Spencer-Churchill, whose first wife divorced him in the wake of an affair, married a wealthy New York widow named Lillian Warren Hamersley. His son, now the 9th Duke, dutifully followed in his footsteps, marrying a dollar princess of his own, the American railroad heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt, in 1895.

Despite his family's financial failings, Churchill was accustomed to a lavish lifestyle, and he hired a veritable army of servants while in India. "We each have a 'Butler' whose duties are to wait at table—to manage the household and to supervise the stables: A First Dressing Boy or valet who is assisted by a second DB: and a sais [syce] to every horse or pony," Churchill had coolly explained to his mother. "Besides this we share the services of 2 gardeners—3 Bhistis or water carriers—4 Dhobies or washermen & 1 watchman. Such is our ménage."

When a Pashtun revolt began in the mountains of Malakand the next year, Churchill, bored and restless, had been on leave in London, at the world-famous Goodwood Racecourse. It was a perfect day, the racecourse was so beautiful that the Prince of Wales referred to it as a "garden party with racing tacked on," and Churchill was "winning my money." As soon as he learned of the revolt, however, Churchill knew that this was the opportunity he had been waiting for, and he was not about to waste a moment or wait for an invitation.

Quickly scouring the newspapers, Churchill had learned that the military had formed a field force of three brigades to send to

the front, and as luck would have it, its commander was a friend of his mother: the Dickensian-named Sir Bindon Blood. Having anticipated just such a turn of events, Churchill had, a year earlier, cultivated a friendship with Blood himself and had extracted from the major general a promise to take him along if he were ever in command of a regiment on the Indian frontier.

Churchill had never had any qualms about pulling every string he had. "I am certainly not one of those who need to be prodded," he would admit years later in a speech to the House of Commons. "In fact, if anything, I am a prod." Over the years, he would often turn to his American mother, a renowned beauty who had many admirers in high-ranking positions, to help him get appointments. "In my interest she left no wire unpulled," Churchill wrote, "no stone unturned, no cutlet uncooked."

Racing to the nearest telegraph, Churchill had sent Blood a telegram, reminding him of his promise, and then, without waiting to hear back, set sail for India. "Having realized, that if a British cavalry officer waits till he is ordered on active service, he is likely to wait a considerable time," he later wrote, "I obtained six weeks' leave of absence from my regiment . . . in the hope of being sooner or later attached to the force in a military capacity."

Churchill had not heard back from Blood until he reached Bombay, where he found waiting for him a less than encouraging telegram. "Very difficult; no vacancies," Blood had written hastily. "Come up as a correspondent; will try to fit you in." Churchill, however, did not need encouragement. He only needed a chance. After swiftly securing assignments as a journalist with the *Pioneer* newspaper and the *Daily Telegraph,* he had made his way by rail across the two thousand miles that stretched between Bangalore and Malakand in just five days.

On September 15, 1897, as the mountain sky darkened and the cold night fell, Churchill lowered himself into a makeshift trench

he had dug in the rocky soil of Malakand. The trench was a critical defense against enemy snipers in the surrounding mountainsides, but as the dry gray dust sifted onto Churchill's khaki uniform, leather boots and pale hands, it seemed as though he were not settling in for the night but fitting himself for his own shallow grave. The fact that he was wrapped in a dead man's blanket—bought just weeks earlier from the possessions of a British soldier killed in these same mountains—only seemed to complete the ominous tableau.

Everywhere Churchill looked, death, or the imminent threat of it, pressed in on him from the frigid, dark peaks of the Hindu Kush. Malakand, he would later write, was like an enormous cup, with his camp, Inayat Kila, at the bottom and a jagged rim of rocks looming above. The giant black walls of the mountains closed around him, glittering with the menacing campfires of hundreds of enemy Pashtun tribesmen—the "hell fiends" he had come to fight.

Crouching silently in their twisted turbans and pale, loose shirts, with heavy bandoliers of ammunition across their shoulders, the Pashtun themselves were invisible in the dark. The largest and most feared tribal group in Afghanistan, they had for centuries dominated not just Malakand but the entire Hindu Kush, a massive, five-hundred-mile-long mountain system that separated central and south Asia. They knew every jagged, rain-carved crevice, every barren hillock, every bullet-pocked boulder. This was their land, and ever since it had been divided by the separation of Afghanistan and British India four years earlier, they had held a particular hatred for the British Empire and its soldiers. As a Pashtun proverb put it, "You should always kill an Englishman."

Now, in the midst of their rebellion, the Pashtun warriors prepared to do just that, gripping their long, elaborately decorated rifles, training their sights on anyone brave or foolish enough to light a match or lift his head above the sanctuary of a trench. Even before the percussion of the Pashtun weapons reached them across the thin night air, the British could hear the bullets striking around them, ringing against rocks, kicking up geysers of dust and, too often, drawing a shriek of agony. The night before, the Pashtun had killed

forty men in a nearby camp with astonishing accuracy, shooting one man through the heart and another through the head, dropping him like a stone as the bullet shattered his skull.

Even more frightening than the Pashtun's long-range marksmanship was the ferocity with which they fought hand to hand, face-to-face. To British soldiers, who were themselves renowned for their courage, the Pashtun seemed terrifyingly heedless of their own safety, or even survival. They fought when they had no chance of winning, when they were alone on the battlefield, when they had been shot and speared and bayoneted. "Careless of what injury they may receive," Churchill observed in awe, "they devote themselves to the destruction of their opponent."

Unflinching in the face of their own suffering, the Pashtun were merciless when it came to the enemy's. They did not just kill but slaughtered, slicing men's bodies to ribbons with their long, curved swords. "Death by inches and hideous mutilation," Churchill wrote, "are the invariable measure meted out to all who fall in battle into the hands of the Pathan tribesmen." Just a few days later, he would watch, shocked and sickened, as the body of one of his friends was carried away after it had been "literally cut to pieces" by the Pashtun.

Long after night had descended completely, obscuring everything before him but watch fires and the occasional dull gleam of a bayonet, Churchill, unable to sleep, peered intently at the stars overhead. As he listened to nearby soldiers tensely coughing and shifting in their trenches, yearning for the night to end, he contemplated "those impartial stars, which shine as calmly on Piccadilly Circus as on Inayat Kila." Bindon Blood had ordered the men to march into the mountains the next morning, burning homes and crops and destroying water reservoirs. Reveille would sound at 5:30, and the Pashtun, they knew, would be waiting.

When the soldiers and officers of Blood's brigade climbed out of their trenches on the morning of September 16, not one of them

could be sure he would live to nightfall. Whatever unspoken thoughts they might have harbored of home or even the relative safety of their trenches, however, they had little choice but to face the Pashtun. Among them, only Churchill could have turned around and left at any moment, and he had no intention of going anywhere but into battle.

Buttoning a padded cloth onto the back of his uniform to protect his spine, straightening the chain-mail epaulets on his jacket, meant to shield him against the slash of a sword, and adjusting his khaki-covered cork pith helmet, Churchill knew that many of the young men surrounding him would perform acts of striking heroism on the battlefield that day. He also knew that very few of them would be seen or, if seen, remembered. Where his own future was at stake, he was determined to even the odds.

As Blood divided his thousand men into three columns, Churchill quickly attached himself to the center column, a squadron of Bengal Lancers that was headed deep into the valley on a mission of destruction guaranteed to provoke the Pashtun, and to give Churchill plenty of opportunity for conspicuous bravery. The squadron, however, also appealed to him for another reason: It was part of a cavalry regiment, which allowed him to do something that, although it stunned every man in the brigade, would guarantee that he, at least, would not be forgotten. Gripping the side of his saddle, he swung a leg, wrapped in leather from his riding breeches to his boot, over the back of a gray pony.

Churchill had acquired the pony on his way to Malakand, at the same auction in which he had bought his blanket from the effects of a young soldier killed in battle. His plan, he would later tell his brother, was to ride "about trying to attract attention when things looked a little dangerous," hoping that his "good grey pony" would catch someone's eye. Although it was much more likely to catch the eye of a Pashtun tribesman who would kill him before anyone had an opportunity to admire his courage, Churchill was willing to take that chance. "The boy seemed to look out for danger," an article in *Harper's* magazine would later marvel. "He rode on a white pony, the

most conspicuous of all marks, and all the prayers of his friends could not make him give it up for a safer beast."

Churchill understood that he could very easily be killed in the battle that lay before him, but he did not for a moment believe that he would be. "I have faith in my star," he had written to his mother just days earlier. "That I am intended to do something in the world." In fact, soon after arriving in India, he had told a fellow officer that not only did he plan to leave the military soon for a seat in Parliament but he expected to be prime minister one day.

As he rode out with the cavalry on his gray charger, like a bright fish in a sea of khaki and brown, Churchill took great satisfaction in the knowledge that, if nothing else, he would be impossible to miss.

What struck Churchill most forcefully that morning as he entered the valley, cloaked in the mountains' deep shadows, was the pervading silence. Every village the cavalry passed was deserted, all the plains empty. The men knew that thousands of Pashtun were watching as they rode farther and farther from camp, but they could neither see nor hear them. It was not until Churchill pulled out his telescope and scanned the mountains where the watch fires had burned the night before that he could see, covering the terraced sides, long white rows of Pashtun.

As the cavalry came closer, the tribesmen silently turned and began to scale the mountainside. Stopping at a small cemetery, the British dismounted and, unable to bear the tension any longer, opened fire. The response was immediate. Puffs of white smoke erupted on the mountain, and the sound of bullets whistling through the air filled the cemetery. While the rest of the men dived behind trees and rough tombstones, however, Churchill, sensing an opportunity and the eyes of the other officers, refused even to dismount. "I rode on my grey pony all along the front of the skirmish line where everyone else was lying down in cover," he would later confess. "Foolish perhaps,

but given an audience there is no act too daring or too noble. Without the gallery things are different."

The skirmish, which was relatively brief and bloodless, seemed to make the men in Churchill's unit forget who they were fighting. Before climbing deeper into the mountains, on the trail of the Pashtun, therefore, they divided again. Reluctantly leaving his pony behind, Churchill joined a group of just ninety men who were headed toward an isolated village, which, when they reached its small collection of mud houses, they found, like all the others, completely deserted.

On the way up, Churchill had stopped to squint through his telescope, scanning the mountains and plains for the rest of the army. Memories of his days at Sandhurst and the repeated warnings of his professors about the danger of "dispersion of forces" slipped through his mind as he searched without luck for the thousand men with whom he had left camp that morning. "Mud villages and castles here and there, the deep-cut water-courses, the gleam of reservoirs, occasional belts of cultivation, isolated groves of trees," he wrote, "but of a British-Indian brigade, no sign." The entire region, in fact, was unnaturally, almost eerily still, with neither friend nor enemy in sight.

Although Churchill had spent much of his young life thinking about war, until this moment it had all been supposition. He had never been the intended target of a sword or bayonet, and he did not know what it felt like to try to kill another man. Young, eager and desperate for adventure and opportunity, it all seemed to him little more than a game. "This kind of war was full of fascinating thrills," he would later admit. "Nobody expected to be killed." This, at last, was a real battle, and he wanted nothing more than to charge into it, launching his own thin body, fresh from childhood, into the knives and swords, rocks and bullets of the enemies of the empire.

As Churchill stared intently at the silent, apparently empty hills around him, it seemed as though the chance he had been waiting for might not come after all. The captain of his small unit, however, sensed something different. Realizing that he and his men were

"rather in the air here," and as such extraordinarily vulnerable, he ordered them to withdraw. Before they could even begin to retrace their steps, the mountainside, in Churchill's words, "sprang to life."

"Now suddenly," Churchill wrote, "black tragedy burst upon the scene." Seemingly materializing from the stones of the mountain, Pashtun tribesmen descended on the tiny village from all directions. Everywhere the stunned British soldiers looked, Pashtun were leaping from cover, letting out sharp, shrill cries as they raced in a terrifying frenzy toward their enemy. "From high up on the crag, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand feet above us," Churchill would later recall, "white or blue figures appeared, dropping down the mountainside from ledge to ledge."

Before Churchill could fully understand what was happening, young men, friends and fellow soldiers, were dying all around him. It was a scene that, even after a long and war-strewn life, he would never forget. "One man was shot through the breast and pouring with blood, another lay on his back kicking and twisting," he would write years later. "The British officer was spinning round just behind me, his face a mass of blood, his right eye cut out." The war cries of the Pashtun were punctuated by the high-pitched screams of even the bravest young soldiers as they were butchered beyond recognition.

Turning, Churchill watched in outrage and fury as a dozen Pashtun fell upon a wounded British soldier when the men who had been desperately trying to rescue him dropped him in their frantic race to cover. The man who Churchill believed was the leader of the tribesmen stood over the fallen soldier and repeatedly slashed at him with his sword. "I forgot everything else at this moment," Churchill would write, "except a desire to kill this man." Pulling out his revolver, he fired into the melee—again and again and again. "It was a horrible business. For there was no help for the man that went down. I felt no excitement and very little fear," he would later write home. "I cannot be certain, but I think I hit 4 men. At any rate they fell."

Churchill would never know how many men he killed that day before help came in the form of a relief column, or if any had fallen by his hand, but even as he looked down on the mutilated bodies all

around him, the bodies of men he knew, men very much like him, he knew that he would not share their fate. He was meant to live, of that he was certain. More than that, he was meant to do something great with his life, and he was eager to take the next step in what he was confident would be a remarkable and dizzyingly fast ascension. "Bullets—to a philosopher my dear Mamma—are not worth considering," he would assure his mother in a pencil-written letter from Bangalore two months later, after the siege of Malakand had been lifted and the Pashtun forced to retreat. "I do not believe the Gods would create so potent a being as myself for so prosaic an ending."

CHAPTER 2

THE GRAVEN PALM

For Churchill, it was not enough to believe that power and fame would come eventually. As soon as the New Year, 1898, began, he set his sights on realizing not one daunting ambition but three, daring the world to ignore him. He published his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force,* began agitating for an assignment to fight in the Sudan, and made it clear to anyone who would listen that despite his youth he was not only eager to begin his political career but eminently qualified to do so. "I am somewhat impatient of advice as to my beginning in politics," he complained to his mother soon after returning from Malakand. "If I am not good enough—others are welcome to take my place. . . . Of course—as you have known for some time—I believe in myself. If I did not I might perhaps take other views."

Convinced that another war, and another opportunity for heroism, would be of use in his political life, Churchill recruited no less than the prime minister of Great Britain to help him win an assignment in the Sudan, where the British were trying to wrest power from the Mahdists, followers of the Muslim leader Al-Mahdī. He set sail for Africa before the Indian army had even granted his leave. What he witnessed there would leave a lasting mark. He described the

campaign in *The River War,* the book he would publish the following year. Even years later he described a nightmarish scene of death and dismemberment, with "horses spouting blood, struggling on three legs, men staggering on foot . . . fish-hook spears stuck right through them, arms and faces cut to pieces, bowels protruding, men gasping, crying, collapsing, expiring." Churchill himself shot and likely killed half a dozen men, one of whom was so close to him that the pistol itself struck the man as Churchill galloped by. In fact, although the British ultimately prevailed, so horrific was the campaign that even for Churchill war was finally beginning to lose a little of its gallant gleam. "You cannot gild it," he wrote to his mother from Khartoum. "The raw comes through."

As sobering as Churchill had found the carnage he witnessed in the Sudan, his faith in himself and his future had not for a moment been shaken. On the contrary, he was acutely aware of the fact that once again he had forced his way into the deadliest colonial battle the British Empire had to offer, watched as men all around him were killed and horribly wounded, and emerged not just alive but whole. "Nothing touched me," he calmly wrote just two days after the Battle of Omdurman, in which the British had lost five hundred men to death and injury and the Mahdists twenty thousand. "I destroyed those who molested me and so passed out without any disturbance of body or mind."

Churchill believed that, whatever had kept him alive on the battlefield, whether divine intervention or simply good fortune, his luck had been "set fair," and he was eager to test its indulgence. "On what do these things depend," he mused as a train carried him home. "Chance-Providence-God-the-Devil—call it what you will. . . . Whatever it may be—I do not complain."

Nor did he hesitate. As 1898 came to an end, so did Churchill's career as a soldier. Although he was in considerable debt, had not been trained for any other occupation and had been warned against leaving the army by everyone from his formidable grandmother, the Duchess of Marlborough, to the Prince of Wales, he resigned his commission in the British army early in the New Year. "I have sent

my papers in and in three months more I shall not be a soldier," he wrote to his cousin Sunny Marlborough in the first weeks of 1899, confessing, in a rare admission of uncertainty, that he knew he was taking a very great risk. "It is not without some misgivings that I let go of my tow rope," he wrote, "and commit myself unaided to the waves of life's oceans, propelled only by my own machinery." He would not have to tread water for long.

In early April, when the spring rains lashing London's cobblestoned streets still had the bite of winter, Churchill approached the entrance to the House of Commons, a wide, Gothic archway cut into the imposing stone face of the Palace of Westminster. Looming hundreds of feet above him, its reflection wavering in the ruffled surface of the river Thames, was the Clock Tower, one of the most immediately recognizable architectural structures in the world. The tower, which was only fifteen years older than Churchill himself, was famous not just for its Great Clock but for its nearly fourteen-ton bell, nicknamed Big Ben, most likely in honor of Ben Caunt, a six-foot-two-inch, two-hundred-pound bare-knuckle boxer who had been the heavyweight champion of England in 1841.

As Churchill stepped into the shadow of Big Ben, he knew that waiting for him in the cool, hushed interior of the House of Commons was a man who could open the doors to this iconic seat of political power. One of two members of Parliament for the town of Oldham in the northwest of England, Robert Ascroft, with his graying hair, full, dark mustache, and fine features, not only looked more substantial and respectable than his young visitor but seemed to be the embodiment of old-world dignity. As he led Churchill through the dimly lit halls and down the narrow stairs to the members-only smoking room, Ascroft had a gravitas that Churchill, with his feverish ambition and blatant self-promotion, did not yet have, but that they both hoped he could do without.

Despite Churchill's youthful energy and awkwardness, when he

stepped through the heavy doors that led into the smoking room, he easily slipped into a world that most Britons not only would never see but could not even fully imagine. Although this was the House of Commons, more than half its members came from the British aristocracy. To most young men, the room alone, with its soaring ceilings, paneled walls, casually scattered chess tables and curved wooden chairs upholstered in rich leather and tarnished brass tacks, would be imposing, even awe inspiring. For Churchill, it was, in reputation at least, as familiar as his own childhood. Although this was not yet his world, it had long been his father's.

Lord Randolph Churchill, the brilliant, talented and arrogant third son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough, had had an extraordinary political career, made even more remarkable by the fact that he had lived to be only forty-five years old. He had won his first seat in Parliament in 1874, the same year in which he had married an American beauty named Jennie Jerome and his first child, Winston, had been born. By the time he was thirty-six, he was secretary of state for India. A year later, the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, appointed him leader of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer, just one position below Salisbury himself.

Although Churchill had never had the close relationship with his father that he longed for, he had been fiercely proud of Lord Randolph's public position and had dreamed of one day becoming, if not a trusted adviser, at least a help to him in his meteoric career. "To me," Churchill would write years later, "he seemed to own the key to everything or almost everything worth having." He would never forget walking down the street as a child and watching as men doffed their hats in respect as his father passed by. He scanned the papers, hungrily reading every mention of Lord Randolph's name, every quotation from his speeches, every word of criticism or admiration. "Everything he said even at the tiniest bazaar was reported verbatim in all the newspapers," Churchill would proudly recall, "every phrase

being scrutinized and weighed." When at Harrow, the public school he attended as a boy, Churchill had repeatedly begged his mother to send him not just his father's autographs but even her own so that he could give, or perhaps sell, them to his classmates.

Lord Randolph's career, however, had been as brief as it was blazing. "The darling of democracy," one contemporary writer called him, "a wayward genius who flashed across the political firmament like a dazzling meteor burning himself out too soon." Famously outspoken and sharp-tongued, he had, from the beginning of his tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer, publicly and unapologetically disagreed with many of the other members of Lord Salisbury's administration. When his first budget was rejected, Randolph, in a cold rage, had written Salisbury a letter of resignation, confident that it would not be accepted. It was.

Years later, Churchill's mother could still vividly recall her own horror and that of Randolph's private secretary, A. W. Moore, when they realized what he had done. "Mr. Moore, who was devoted to Randolph, rushed in, pale and anxious," she wrote, "and with a faltering voice said to me, 'He has thrown himself from the top of the ladder.' " Not only would Randolph never rise again, he would die eight years later following a long, frightening and excruciatingly public mental decline.

Although the memory of Lord Randolph still haunted the House of Commons, lingering in every spiral of smoke, scribbled note and murmured comment, it was his son who now had Ascroft's full attention. He had invited Churchill there to ask him a question that could greatly affect both of their political careers. The city of Oldham would be holding a by-election that summer, and Ascroft's counterpart, James Oswald, who was sixty years old and had long been chronically ill and conspicuously absent, had made it clear that he would not be seeking reelection. Ascroft was, he told Churchill, "on the look-out for someone to run in double harness with him." Would he like to join the race?

The only barrier now between Churchill and his place on the Conservative ticket was a trial speech, which Ascroft suggested he give in Oldham before the campaign began in earnest. Then a final decision would be made. It was a reasonable and customary formality, but for Churchill the uncertainty was almost unbearable.

It went against every instinct Churchill had to sit still and wait to be called to the test. Desperate to do something, he decided that although he had faith in his star, it couldn't hurt to peer into the misty future to make sure it was still shining. He was not without connections in this unusual area of expertise. The year before, his American aunt Leonie Jerome had taken him to a mysterious little house on Wimpole Street in the West End of London, just one block from the lushly green and stubbornly round Cavendish Square. This was home, at least temporarily, to Mrs. Charlotte Robinson, arguably the most famous palm reader of her day.

Although the Victorian era is most often associated with scientific progress—the establishment of scientific principles, the advancement of medicine, the development of railroads, steamships, telephones and radios, even the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*—it was also a time of growing interest and belief in mysticism. Attempting to look into the future and to make contact with the spiritual world was considered a serious pursuit by everyone from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to the editors of the prestigious magazine *Scientific American,* who sponsored a contest among mediums to see who could show "conclusive psychic manifestations." Even Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, had taken part in séances, and when Albert died in 1861 of typhoid fever, the queen had invited to Windsor Castle a thirteen-year-old boy who claimed the prince had sent her a message through him during a family séance.

Churchill's chosen palmist, Mrs. Robinson, had risen to fame largely because one of her most devoted clients also happened to be one of England's best-known and most infamous authors: Oscar Wilde. Robinson had told Wilde, who was already famous for his controversial and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* that he would "write four plays, and then you will disappear. I cannot see you at all

after that." After this prophecy, between the years 1892 and 1895, Wilde wrote *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest,* all of which were enormous theatrical successes. In April 1895, just two months after his last play debuted at the St. James's Theatre in London, Wilde was arrested and later convicted of "gross indecency" for his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and sentenced to two years' hard labor. He died three years after leaving prison, having written, as Mrs. Robinson foretold, no other plays.

In the wake of Wilde's conviction, Robinson gained a power and prestige that set her apart from even the most celebrated palmists. She charged exorbitant rates, "expecting four guineas for the first visit, two for the second, and ten if she writes down her prognostication," one contemporary newspaper marveled, and refused to appear at parties or private homes, demanding that even her most exalted clients come to her. She had even begun to write a book, *The Graven Palm,* which would become the standard for palmistry in its day.

Unlike her predictions for Oscar Wilde, Mrs. Robinson saw in Winston Churchill's pale young palm so extraordinary a future that she wanted to describe it in her book. In early May 1899, soon after taking leave of Robert Ascroft in the House of Commons smoking room, Churchill sent Mrs. Robinson a check for £2 2s., presumably in payment for a second, more recent session, and wrote in a letter labeled "Private" that he wished to take the opportunity to compliment her on her "strange skill in Palmistry." Three days later, he wrote to her again, turning down her request to tell his story in her book, explaining that he "would rather not have my hand published to the world," but confessing that he was impressed by what she had told him. "I trust," he wrote cheerfully, "you may be right in your forecast."

Churchill's rise to prominence was to begin even sooner than he, and perhaps Mrs. Robinson, had predicted. Just a few weeks after

Churchill dropped his letter in the mail, the town of Oldham, in a stunning turn of events, lost one of its representatives to sudden death. It was not, however, the aged and feeble James Oswald, who had long appeared to be at death's door, but his robust and charismatic partner, Robert Ascroft. Stricken with pneumonia on June 12, Ascroft quickly fell into a semiconscious state. By the eighteenth, his doctors acknowledged that there was "very little hope," and by the nineteenth he was dead.

There was less than a month before the election, and the Conservative Party now needed not one candidate but two. The trial speech was forgotten, and Churchill was on the ticket, whether he was ready or not. In his own mind, of course, he was more than ready. He was chomping at the bit. "There is no doubt," he wrote to his mother, "that if anyone can win this seat I can."

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Because language is a significant mediator of power, status, and privilege, the author has made deliberate choices in the treatment of certain identity-related terms in this book. Variation in capitalization of words like "Black" and "White" is intentional.

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stage one

Early Labor

Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected
are as outraged as those who are.

—Benjamin Franklin

Ruth

The miracle happened on West Seventy-fourth Street, in the home where Mama worked. It was a big brownstone encircled by a wrought-iron fence, and overlooking either side of the ornate door were gargoyles, their granite faces carved from my nightmares. They terrified me, so I didn't mind the fact that we always entered through the less-impressive side door, whose keys Mama kept on a ribbon in her purse.

Mama had been working for Sam Hallowell and his family since before my sister and I were born. You may not have recognized his name, but you would have known him the minute he said hello. He had been the unmistakable voice in the mid-1960s who announced before every show: *The following program is brought to you in living color on NBC!* In 1976, when the miracle happened, he was the network's head of programming. The doorbell beneath those gargoyles was the famously pitched three-note chime everyone associates with NBC. Sometimes, when I came to work with my mother, I'd sneak outside and push the button and hum along.

The reason we were with Mama that day was because it was a snow day. School was canceled, but we were too little to stay alone in our

apartment while Mama went to work—which she did, through snow and sleet and probably also earthquakes and Armageddon. She muttered, stuffing us into our snowsuits and boots, that it didn't matter if she had to cross a blizzard to do it, but God forbid Ms. Mina had to spread the peanut butter on her own sandwich bread. In fact the only time I remember Mama taking time off work was twenty-five years later, when she had a double hip replacement, generously paid for by the Hallowells. She stayed home for a week, and even after that, when it didn't quite heal right and she insisted on returning to work, Mina found her tasks to do that kept her off her feet. But when I was little, during school vacations and bouts of fever and snow days like this one, Mama would take us with her on the B train downtown.

Mr. Hallowell was away in California that week, which happened often, and which meant that Ms. Mina and Christina needed Mama even more. So did Rachel and I, but we were better at taking care of ourselves, I suppose, than Ms. Mina was.

When we finally emerged at Seventy-second Street, the world was white. It was not just that Central Park was caught in a snow globe. The faces of the men and women shuddering through the storm to get to work looked nothing like mine, or like my cousins' or neighbors'.

I had not been into any Manhattan homes except for the Hallowells', so I didn't know how extraordinary it was for one family to live, alone, in this huge building. But I remember thinking it made no sense that Rachel and I had to put our snowsuits and boots into the tiny, cramped closet in the kitchen, when there were plenty of empty hooks and open spaces in the main entry, where Christina's and Ms. Mina's coats were hanging. Mama tucked away her coat, too, and her lucky scarf—the soft one that smelled like her, and that Rachel and I fought to wear around our house because it felt like petting a guinea pig or a bunny under your fingers. I waited for Mama to move through the dark rooms like Tinker Bell, alighting on a switch or a handle or a knob so that the sleeping beast of a house was gradually brought to life.

"You two be quiet," Mama told us, "and I'll make you some of Ms. Mina's hot chocolate."

It was imported from Paris, and it tasted like heaven. So as Mama

tied on her white apron, I took a piece of paper from a kitchen drawer and a packet of crayons I'd brought from home and silently started to sketch. I made a house as big as this one. I put a family inside: me, Mama, Rachel. I tried to draw snow, but I couldn't. The flakes I'd made with the white crayon were invisible on the paper. The only way to see them was to tilt the paper sideways toward the chandelier light, so I could make out the shimmer where the crayon had been.

"Can we play with Christina?" Rachel asked. Christina was six, falling neatly between the ages of Rachel and me. Christina had the biggest bedroom I had ever seen and more toys than anyone I knew. When she was home and we came to work with our mother, we played school with her and her teddy bears, drank water out of real miniature china teacups, and braided the corn-silk hair of her dolls. Unless she had a friend over, in which case we stayed in the kitchen and colored.

But before Mama could answer, there was a scream so piercing and so ragged that it stabbed me in the chest. I knew it did the same to Mama, because she nearly dropped the pot of water she was carrying to the sink. "Stay here," she said, her voice already trailing behind her as she ran upstairs.

Rachel was the first one out of her chair; she wasn't one to follow instructions. I was drawn in her wake, a balloon tied to her wrist. My hand skimmed over the banister of the curved staircase, not touching.

Ms. Mina's bedroom door was wide open, and she was twisting on the bed in a sinkhole of satin sheets. The round of her belly rose like a moon; the shining whites of her eyes made me think of merry-go-round horses, frozen in flight. "It's too early, Lou," she gasped.

"Tell that to this baby," Mama replied. She was holding the telephone receiver. Ms. Mina held her other hand in a death grip. "You stop pushing, now," she said. "The ambulance'll be here any minute."

I wondered how fast an ambulance could get here in all that snow.

"Mommy?"

It wasn't until I heard Christina's voice that I realized the noise had woken her up. She stood between Rachel and me. "You three, go to Miss Christina's room," Mama ordered, with steel in her voice. "*Now.*"

But we remained rooted to the spot as Mama quickly forgot about

us, lost in a world made of Ms. Mina's pain and fear, trying to be the map that she could follow out of it. I watched the cords stand out on Ms. Mina's neck as she groaned; I saw Mama kneel on the bed between her legs and push her gown over her knees. I watched the pink lips between Ms. Mina's legs purse and swell and part. There was the round knob of a head, a knot of shoulder, a gush of blood and fluid, and suddenly, a baby was cradled in Mama's palms.

"Look at you," she said, with love written over her face. "Weren't you in a hurry to get into this world?"

Two things happened at once: the doorbell rang, and Christina started to cry. "Oh, honey," Ms. Mina crooned, not scary anymore but still sweaty and red-faced. She held out her hand, but Christina was too terrified by what she had seen, and instead she burrowed closer to me. Rachel, ever practical, went to answer the front door. She returned with two paramedics, who swooped in and took over, so that what Mama had done for Ms. Mina became like everything else she did for the Hallowells: seamless and invisible.

The Hallowells named the baby Louis, after Mama. He was fine, even though he was almost a full month early, a casualty of the barometric pressure dropping with the storm, which caused a PROM—a premature rupture of membranes. Of course, I didn't know that back then. I only knew that on a snowy day in Manhattan I had seen the very start of someone. I'd been with that baby before anyone or anything in this world had a chance to disappoint him.

The experience of watching Louis being born affected us all differently. Christina had her baby via surrogate. Rachel had five. Me, I became a labor and delivery nurse.

When I tell people this story, they assume the miracle I am referring to during that long-ago blizzard was the birth of a baby. True, that was astonishing. But that day I witnessed a greater wonder. As Christina held my hand and Ms. Mina held Mama's, there was a moment—one heartbeat, one breath—where all the differences in schooling and money and skin color evaporated like mirages in a desert. Where everyone was equal, and it was just one woman, helping another.

That miracle, I've spent thirty-nine years waiting to see again.

stage one

Active Labor

Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

Ruth

The most beautiful baby I ever saw was born without a face.

From the neck down, he was perfect: ten fingers, ten toes, chubby belly. But where his ear should have been, there was a twist of lips and a single tooth. Instead of a face there was a swirling eddy of skin with no features.

His mother—my patient—was a thirty-year-old gravida 1 para 1 who had received prenatal care including an ultrasound, but the baby had been positioned in a way that the facial deformity hadn't been visible. The spine, the heart, the organs had all looked fine, so no one was expecting this. Maybe for that very reason, she chose to deliver at Mercy–West Haven, our little cottage hospital, and not Yale–New Haven, which is better equipped for emergencies. She came in full term, and labored for sixteen hours before she delivered. The doctor lifted the baby, and there was nothing but silence. Buzzy, white silence.

"Is he all right?" the mother asked, panicking. "Why isn't he crying?"

I had a student nurse shadowing me, and she screamed.

"Get out," I said tightly, shoving her from the room. Then I took the newborn from the obstetrician and placed him on the warmer, wip-

ing the vernix from his limbs. The OB did a quick exam, silently met my gaze, and turned back to the parents, who by now knew something was terribly wrong. In soft words, the doctor said their child had profound birth defects that were incompatible with life.

On a birth pavilion, Death is a more common patient than you'd think. When we have anencephalies or fetal deaths, we know that the parents still have to bond with and mourn for that baby. This infant—alive, for however long that might be—was still this couple's son.

So I cleaned him and swaddled him, the way I would any other newborn, while the conversation behind me between the parents and the doctor stopped and started like a car choking through the winter. *Why? How? What if you . . . ? How long until . . . ?* Questions no one ever wants to ask, and no one ever wants to answer.

The mother was still crying when I settled the baby in the crook of her elbow. His tiny hands windmilled. She smiled down at him, her heart in her eyes. "Ian," she whispered. "Ian Michael Barnes."

She wore an expression I've only seen in paintings in museums, of a love and a grief so fierce that they forged together to create some new, raw emotion.

I turned to the father. "Would you like to hold your son?"

He looked like he was about to be sick. "I can't," he muttered and bolted from the room.

I followed him, but was intercepted by the nurse in training, who was apologetic and upset. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just . . . it was a *monster*."

"It *is* a *baby*," I corrected, and I pushed past her.

I cornered the father in the parents' lounge. "Your wife and your son need you."

"That's not my son," he said. "That . . . thing . . ."

"Is not going to be on this earth for very long. Which means you'd better give him all the love you had stored up for his lifetime right now." I waited until he looked me in the eye, and then I turned on my heel. I did not have to glance back to know he was following me.

When we entered the hospital room, his wife was still nuzzling the infant, her lips pressed to the smooth canvas of his brow. I took the tiny

bundle from her arms, and handed the baby to her husband. He sucked in his breath and then drew back the blanket from the spot where the baby's face should have been.

I've thought about my actions, you know. If I did the right thing by forcing the father to confront his dying baby, if it was my place as a nurse. Had my supervisor asked me at the time, I would have said that I'd been trained to provide closure for grieving parents. If this man didn't acknowledge that something truly horrible had happened—or worse, if he kept pretending for the rest of his life that it never *had*—a hole would open up inside him. Tiny at first, that pit would wear away, bigger and bigger, until one day when he wasn't expecting it he would realize he was completely hollow.

When the father started to cry, the sobs shook his body, like a hurricane bends a tree. He sank down beside his wife on the hospital bed, and she put one hand on her husband's back and one on the crown of the baby's head.

They took turns holding their son for ten hours. That mother, she even tried to let him nurse. I could not stop staring—not because it was ugly or wrong, but because it was the most remarkable thing I'd ever seen. It felt like looking into the face of the sun: once I turned away, I was blind to everything else.

At one point, I took that stupid nursing student into the room with me, ostensibly to check the mother's vitals, but really to make her see with her own eyes how love has nothing to do with what you're looking at, and everything to do with who's looking.

When the infant died, it was peaceful. We made casts of the newborn's hand and foot for the parents to keep. I heard that this same couple came back two years later and delivered a healthy daughter, though I wasn't on duty when it happened.

It just goes to show you: every baby is born beautiful.

It's what we project on them that makes them ugly.

Right after I gave birth to Edison, seventeen years ago at this very hospital, I wasn't worried about the health of my baby, or how I was

going to juggle being a single parent while my husband was overseas, or how my life was going to change now that I was a mother.

I was worried about my hair.

The last thing you're thinking about when you're in labor is what you look like, but if you're like me, it's the first thing that crosses your mind once that baby's come. The sweat that mats the hair of all my white patients to their foreheads instead made my roots curl up and pull away from the scalp. Brushing my hair around my head in a swirl like an ice cream cone and wrapping it in a scarf each night was what kept it straight the next day when I took it down. But what white nurse knew that, or understood that the little complimentary bottle of shampoo provided by the hospital auxiliary league was only going to make my hair even frizzier? I was sure that when my well-meaning colleagues came in to meet Edison, they would be shocked into stupor at the sight of the mess going on atop my head.

In the end, I wound up wrapping it in a towel, and told visitors I'd just had a shower.

I know nurses who work on surgical floors who tell me about men wheeled out of surgery who insist on taping their toupees into place in the recovery room before their spouses join them. And I can't tell you the number of times a patient who has spent the night grunting and screaming and pushing out a baby with her husband at her side will kick her spouse out of the room postdelivery so I can help her put on a pretty nightgown and robe.

I understand the need people have to put a certain face on for the rest of the world. Which is why—when I first arrive for my shift at 6:40 A.M.—I don't even go into the staff room, where we will shortly receive the night's update from the charge nurse. Instead I slip down the hall to the patient I'd been with yesterday, before my shift ended. Her name was Jessie; she was a tiny little thing who had come into the pavilion looking more like a campaigning First Lady than a woman in active labor: her hair was perfectly coiffed, her face airbrushed with makeup, even her maternity clothes were fitted and stylish. That's a dead giveaway, since by forty weeks of pregnancy most mothers-to-be would be happy to wear a pup tent. I scanned her chart—G1, now

P1—and grinned. The last thing I'd said to Jessie before I turned her care over to a colleague and went home for the night was that the next time I saw her, she'd have a baby, and sure enough, I have a new patient. While I've been sleeping, Jessie's delivered a healthy seven-pound, six-ounce girl.

I open the door to find Jessie dozing. The baby lies swaddled in the bassinet beside the bed; Jessie's husband is sprawled in a chair, snoring. Jessie stirs when I walk in, and I immediately put a finger to my lips. *Quiet*.

From my purse, I pull a compact mirror and a red lipstick.

Part of labor is conversation; it's the distraction that makes the pain ebb and it's the glue that bonds a nurse to her patient. What other situation can you think of where one medical professional spends up to twelve hours consulting with a single person? As a result, the connection we build with these women is fierce and fast. I know things about them, in a mere matter of hours, that their own closest friends don't always know: how she met her partner at a bar when she'd had too much to drink; how her father didn't live long enough to see this grandchild; how she worries about being a mom because she hated babysitting as a teenager. Last night, in the dragon hours of Jessie's labor, when she was teary and exhausted and snapping at her husband, I'd suggested that he go to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee. As soon as he left, the air in the room was easier to breathe, and she fell back against those awful plastic pillows we have in the birthing pavilion. "What if this baby changes everything?" she sobbed. She confessed that she never went anywhere without her "game face" on, that her husband had never even seen her without mascara; and now here he was watching her body contort itself inside out, and how would he ever look at her the same way again?

Listen, I had told her. *You let* me *worry about that.*

I'd like to think my taking that one straw off her back was what gave her the strength to make it to transition.

It's funny. When I tell people I've been a labor and delivery nurse for more than twenty years, they're impressed by the fact that I have assisted in cesareans, that I can start an IV in my sleep, that I can tell

the difference between a decel in the fetal heart rate that is normal and one that requires intervention. But for me, being an L & D nurse is all about knowing your patient, and what she needs. A back rub. An epidural. A little Maybelline.

Jessie glances at her husband, still dead to the world. Then she takes the lipstick from my hand. "Thank you," she whispers, and our eyes connect. I hold the mirror as she once again reinvents herself.

On Thursdays, my shift goes from 7:00 a.m. till 7:00 p.m. At Mercy–West Haven, during the day, we usually have two nurses on the birthing pavilion—three if we're swimming in human resources that day. As I walk through the pavilion, I note idly how many of our delivery suites are occupied—it's three, right now, a nice slow start to the day. Marie, the charge nurse, is already in the room where we have our morning meeting when I come inside, but Corinne—the second nurse on shift with me—is missing. "What's it going to be today?" Marie asks, as she flips through the morning paper.

"Flat tire," I reply. This guessing game is a routine: *What excuse will Corinne use today for being late?* It's a beautiful fall day in October, so she can't blame the weather.

"That was last week. I'm going with the flu."

"Speaking of which," I say. "How's Ella?" Marie's eight-year-old had caught the stomach bug that's been going around.

"Back in school today, thank God," Marie replies. "Now Dave's got it. I figure I have twenty-four hours before I'm down for the count." She looks up from the Regional section of the paper. "I saw Edison's name in here again," she says.

My son has made the Highest Honors list for every semester of his high school career. But just like I tell him, that's no reason to boast. "There are a lot of bright kids in this town," I demur.

"Still," Marie says. "For a boy like Edison to be so successful . . . well. You should be proud, is all. I can only hope Ella turns out to be that good a student."

A boy like Edison. I know what she is saying, even if she's careful not

to spell it out. There are not many Black kids in the high school, and as far as I know, Edison is the only one on the Highest Honors list. Comments like this feel like paper cuts, but I've worked with Marie for over ten years now, so I try to ignore the sting. I know she doesn't really mean anything by it. She's a friend, after all—she came to my house with her family for Easter supper last year, along with some of the other nurses, and we've gone out for cocktails or movie nights and once a girls' weekend at a spa. Still, Marie has no idea how often I have to just take a deep breath, and move on. White people don't mean half the offensive things that come out of their mouths, and so I try not to let myself get rubbed the wrong way.

"Maybe you should hope that Ella makes it through the school day without going to the nurse's office again," I reply, and Marie laughs.

"You're right. First things first."

Corinne explodes into the room. "Sorry I'm late," she says, and Marie and I exchange a look. Corinne's fifteen years younger than I am, and there's always some emergency—a carburetor that's dead, a fight with her boyfriend, a crash on 95N. Corinne is one of those people for whom life is just the space between crises. She takes off her coat and manages to knock over a potted plant that died months ago, which no one has bothered to replace. "Dammit," she mutters, righting the pot and sweeping the soil back inside. She dusts off her palms on her scrubs, and then sits down with her hands folded. "I'm really sorry, Marie. The stupid tire I replaced last week has a leak or something; I had to drive here the whole way going thirty."

Marie reaches into her pocket and pulls out a dollar, which she flicks across the table at me. I laugh.

"All right," Marie says. "Floor report. Room two is a couplet. Jessica Myers, G one P one at forty weeks and two days. She had a vaginal delivery this morning at three A.M., uncomplicated, without pain meds. Baby girl is breast-feeding well; she's peed but hasn't pooped yet."

"I'll take her," Corinne and I say in unison.

Everyone wants the patient who's already delivered; it's the easier job. "I had her during active labor," I point out.

"Right," Marie says. "Ruth, she's yours." She pushes her reading

glasses up on her nose. "Room three is Thea McVaughn, G one P zero at forty-one weeks and three days, she's in active labor at four centimeters dilated, membranes intact. Fetal heart rate tracing looks good on the monitor, the baby's active. She's requested an epidural and her IV fluid bolus is infusing."

"Has Anesthesia been paged?" Corinne asks.

"Yes."

"I've got her."

We only take one active labor patient at a time, if we can help it, which means that the third patient—the last one this morning—will be mine. "Room five is a recovery. Brittany Bauer is a G one P one at thirty-nine weeks and one day; had an epidural and a vaginal delivery at five-thirty A.M. Baby's a boy; they want a circ. Mom was a GDM A one; the baby is on Q three hour blood sugars for twenty-four hours. The mom really wants to breast-feed. They're still skin to skin."

A recovery is still a lot of work—a one-to-one nurse-patient relationship. True, the labor's finished, but there is still tidying up to be done, a physical assessment of the newborn, and a stack of paperwork. "Got it," I say, and I push away from the table to go find Lucille, the night nurse, who was with Brittany during the delivery.

She finds me first, in the staff restroom, washing my hands. "Tag, you're it," she says, handing me Brittany Bauer's file. "Twenty-six-year-old G one, now P one, delivered vaginally this morning at five-thirty over an intact perineum. She's O positive, rubella immune, Hep B and HIV negative, GBS negative. Gestational diabetic, diet controlled, otherwise uncomplicated. She still has an IV in her left forearm. I DC'd the epidural, but she hasn't been out of bed yet, so ask her if she has to get up and pee. Her bleeding's been good, her fundus is firm at U."

I open the file and scan the notes, committing the details to memory. "Davis," I read. "That's the baby?"

"Yeah. His vital signs have been normal, but his one-hour blood sugar was forty, so we've got him trying to nurse. He's done a little bit on each side, but he's kind of spitty and sleepy and he hasn't done a whole lot of eating."

"Did he get his eyes and thighs?"

"Yeah, and he's peed, but hasn't pooped. I haven't done the bath or the newborn assessment yet."

"No problem," I say. "Is that it?"

"The dad's name is Turk," Lucille replies, hesitating. "There's something just a little . . . off about him."

"Like Creeper Dad?" I ask. Last year, we had a father who was flirting with the nursing student in the room during his wife's delivery. When she wound up having a C-section, instead of standing behind the drape near his wife's head, he strolled across the OR and said to the nursing student, *Is it hot in here, or is it just you?*

"Not like that," Lucille says. "He's appropriate with the mom. He's just . . . sketchy. I can't put my finger on it."

I've always thought that if I wasn't an L & D nurse, I'd make a great fake psychic. We are skilled at reading our patients so that we know what they need moments before they realize it. And we are also gifted when it comes to sensing strange vibes. Just last month my radar went off when a mentally challenged patient came in with an older Ukrainian woman who had befriended her at the grocery store where she worked. There was something weird about the dynamic between them, and I followed my hunch and called the police. Turned out the Ukrainian woman had served time in Kentucky for stealing the baby of a woman with Down syndrome.

So as I walk into Brittany Bauer's room for the first time, I am not worried. I'm thinking: *I've got this.*

I knock softly and push open the door. "I'm Ruth," I say. "I'm going to be your nurse today." I walk right up to Brittany, and smile down at the baby cradled in her arms. "Isn't he a sweetie! What's his name?" I ask, although I already know. It's a means to start a conversation, to connect with the patient.

Brittany doesn't answer. She looks at her husband, a hulking guy who's sitting on the edge of his chair. He's got military-short hair and he's bouncing the heel of one boot like he can't quite stay still. I get what Lucille saw in him. Turk Bauer makes me think of a power line that's snapped during a storm, and lies across the road just waiting for something to brush against it so it can shoot sparks.

It doesn't matter if you're shy or modest—nobody who's just had a baby stays quiet for long. They *want* to share this life-changing moment. They *want* to relive the labor, the birth, the beauty of their baby. But Brittany, well, it's almost like she needs his permission to speak. *Domestic abuse?* I wonder.

"Davis," she chokes out. "His name is Davis."

"Well, hello, Davis," I murmur, moving closer to the bed. "Would you mind if I take a listen to his heart and lungs and check his temperature?"

Her arms clamp tighter on the newborn, pulling him closer.

"I can do it right here," I say. "You don't have to let go of him."

You have to cut a new parent a little bit of slack, especially one who's already been told her baby's blood sugar is too low. So I tuck the thermometer under Davis's armpit, and get a normal reading. I look at the whorls of his hair—a patch of white can signify hearing loss; an alternating hair pattern can flag metabolic issues. I press my stethoscope against the baby's back, listening to his lungs. I slide my hand between him and his mother, listening to his heart.

Whoosh.

It's so faint that I think it's a mistake.

I listen again, trying to make sure it wasn't a fluke, but that slight whir is there behind the backbeat of the pulse.

Turk stands up so that he is towering over me; he folds his arms.

Nerves look different on fathers. They get combative, sometimes. As if they could bluster away whatever's wrong.

"I hear a very slight murmur," I say delicately. "But it could be nothing. This early, there are still parts of the heart that are developing. Even if it *is* a murmur, it could disappear in a few days. Still, I'll make a note of it; I'll have the pediatrician take a listen." While I'm talking, trying to be as calm as possible, I do another blood sugar. It's an Accu-Chek, which means we get instant results—and this time, he's at fifty-two. "Now, *this* is great news," I say, trying to give the Bauers something positive to hold on to. "His sugar is much better." I walk to the sink and run warm water, fill a plastic bowl, and set it on the warmer. "Davis is definitely perking up, and he'll probably start eating really

soon. Why don't I get him cleaned up, and fire him up a little bit, and we can try nursing again?"

I reach down and scoop the baby up. Turning my back to the parents, I place Davis on the warmer and begin my exam. I can hear Brittany and Turk whispering fiercely as I check the fontanels on the baby's head for the suture lines, to make sure the bones aren't overriding each other. The parents are worried, and that's normal. A lot of patients don't like to take the nurse's opinion on any medical issue; they need to hear it from the doctor to believe it—even though L & D nurses are often the ones who first notice a quirk or a symptom. Their pediatrician is Atkins; I will page her after I'm done with the exam, and have her listen to the baby's heart.

But right now, my attention is on Davis. I look for facial bruising, hematoma, or abnormal shaping of the skull. I check the palmar creases in his tiny hands, and the set of his ears relative to his eyes. I measure the circumference of his head and the length of his squirming body. I check for clefts in the mouth and the ears. I palpate the clavicles and put my pinkie in his mouth to check his sucking reflex. I study the rise and fall of the tiny bellows of his chest, to make sure his breathing isn't labored. Press his belly to make sure it's soft, check his fingers and toes, scan for rashes or lesions or birthmarks. I make sure his testicles have descended and scan for hypospadias, making sure that the urethra is where it's supposed to be. Then I gently turn him over and scan the base of the spine for dimples or hair tufts or any other indicator of neural tube defect.

I realize that the whispering behind me has stopped. But instead of feeling more comfortable, it feels ominous. *What do they think I'm doing wrong?*

By the time I flip him back over, Davis's eyes are starting to drift shut. Babies usually get sleepy a couple of hours after delivery, which is one reason to do the bath now—it will wake him up long enough to try to feed again. There is a stack of wipes on the warmer; with practiced, sure strokes I dip one into the warm water and wipe the baby down from head to toe. Then I diaper him, swiftly wrap him up in a blanket like a burrito, and rinse his hair under the sink with some Johnson's

baby shampoo. The last thing I do is put an ID band on him that will match the ones his parents have, and fasten a tiny electronic security bracelet on his ankle, which will set off an alarm if the baby gets too close to any of the exits.

I can feel the parents' eyes, hot on my back. I turn, a smile fastened on my face. "There," I say, handing the infant to Brittany again. "Clean as a whistle. Now, let's see if we can get him to nurse."

I reach down to help position the baby, but Brittany flinches.

"Get away from her," Turk Bauer says. "I want to talk to your boss."

They are the first words he has spoken to me in the twenty minutes I've been in this room with him and his family, and they carry an undercurrent of discontent. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to tell Marie what a stellar job I've done. But I nod tightly and step out of the room, replaying every word and gesture I have made since introducing myself to Brittany Bauer. I walk to the nurses' desk and find Marie filling out a chart. "We've got a problem in Five," I say, trying to keep my voice even. "The father wants to see you."

"What happened?" Marie asks.

"Absolutely nothing," I reply, and I know it's true. I'm a good nurse. Sometimes a great one. I took care of that infant the way I would have taken care of any newborn on this pavilion. "I told them I heard what sounded like a murmur, and that I'd contact the pediatrician. And I bathed the baby and did his exam."

I must be doing a pretty awful job of hiding my feelings, though, because Marie looks at me sympathetically. "Maybe they're worried about the baby's heart," she says.

I am just a step behind her as we walk inside, so I can clearly see the relief on the faces of the parents when they see Marie. "I understand that you wanted to talk to me, Mr. Bauer?" she says.

"That nurse," Turk says. "I don't want her touching my son again."

I can feel heat spreading from the collar of my scrubs up into my scalp. No one likes to be called out in front of her supervisor.

Marie draws herself upright, her spine stiffening. "I can assure you

that Ruth is one of the best nurses we have, Mr. Bauer. If there's a formal complaint—"

"I don't want her or anyone who looks like her touching my son," the father interrupts, and he folds his arms across his chest. He's pushed up his sleeves while I was out of the room. Running from wrist to elbow on one arm is the tattoo of a Confederate flag.

Marie stops talking.

For a moment, I honestly don't understand. And then it hits me with the force of a blow: they don't have a problem with what I've done.

Just with who I am.

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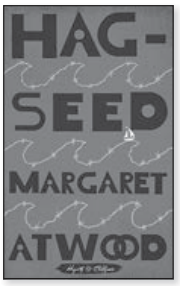

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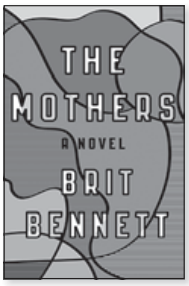

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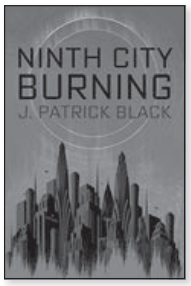

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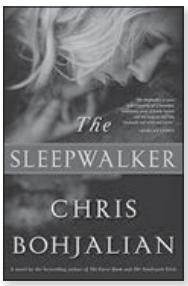

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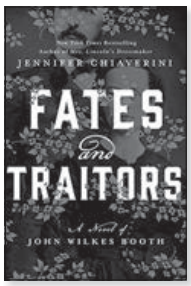

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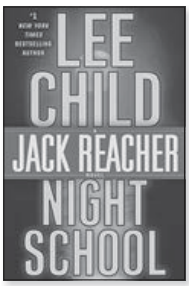

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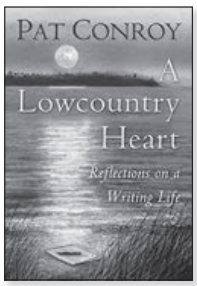

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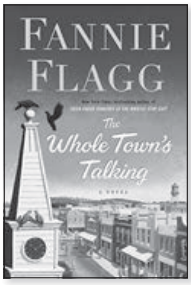

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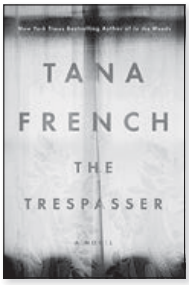

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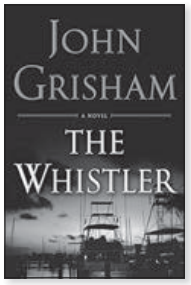

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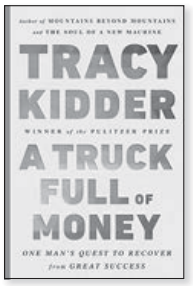

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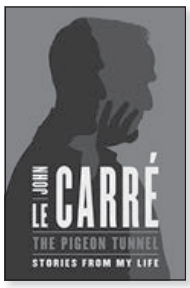

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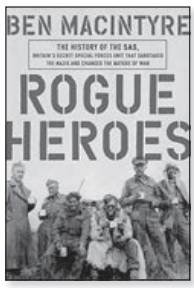

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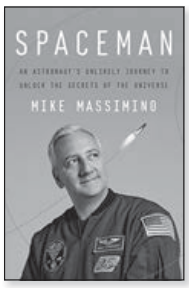

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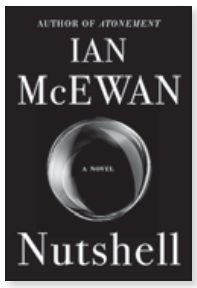

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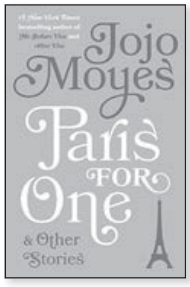

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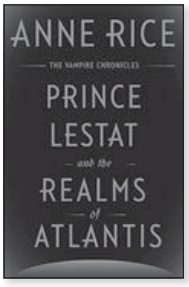

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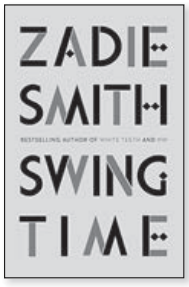

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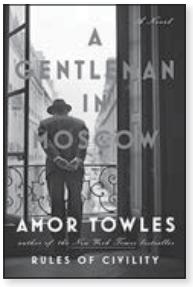

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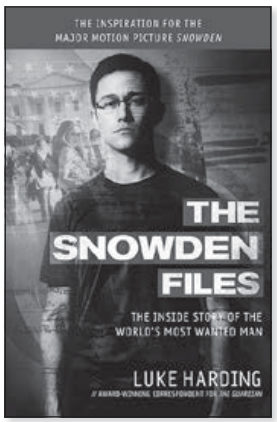
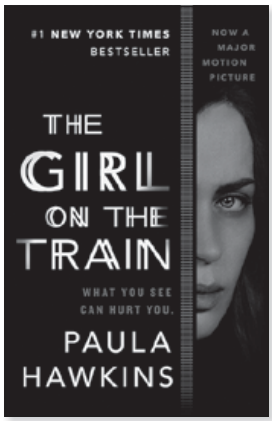
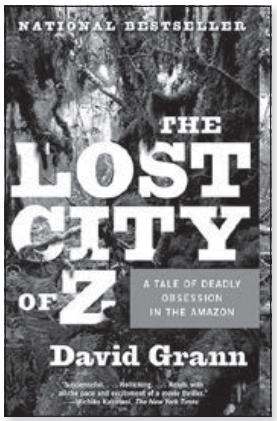


In Theaters
SEPTEMBER 16TH

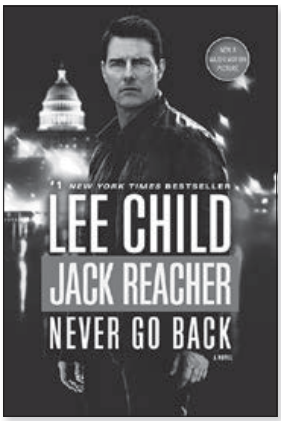
In Theaters
SEPTEMBER 30TH



In Theaters
OCTOBER 7TH



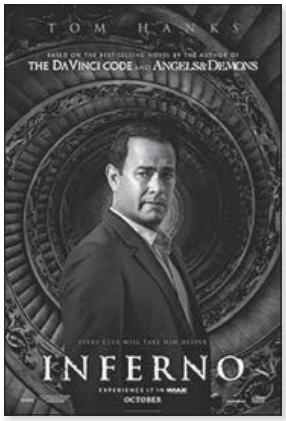
In Theaters
OCTOBER 15TH
(New York Film Festival)



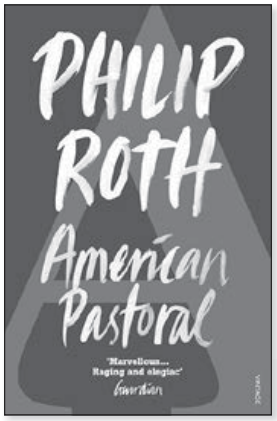
In Theaters
OCTOBER 21ST

To learn more about these and other books hitting the big and small screens, visit . . .

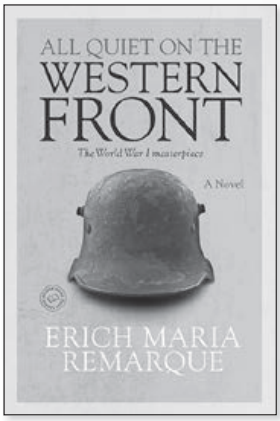
Adaptations of these books will debut on the silver screen this fall.



In Theaters
OCTOBER 28TH

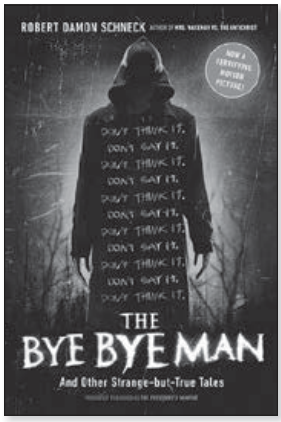


In Theaters
OCTOBER 28TH

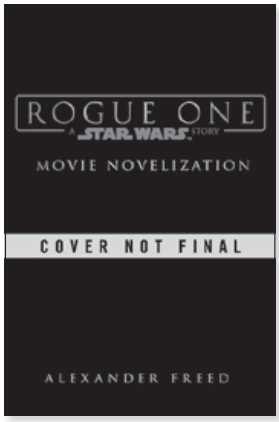


In Theaters
NOVEMBER 11TH

In Theaters
NOVEMBER 23RD



In Theaters
DECEMBER 16TH



In Theaters
DECEMBER 21ST

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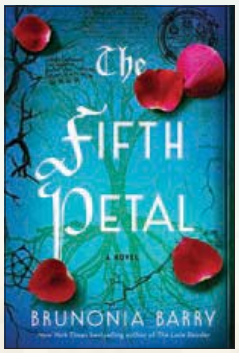
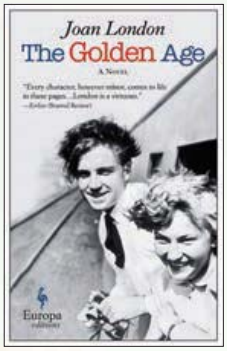
What Will You Read Next?

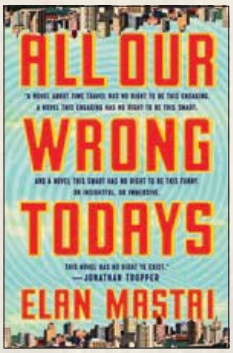
Take a look inside for a taste of these wonderful new books.



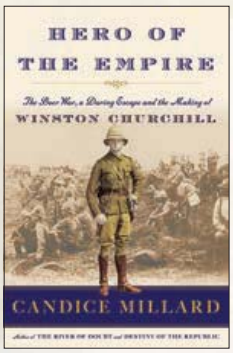
The Fifth Petal: A Novel
Brunonia Barry
Crown
January 2017



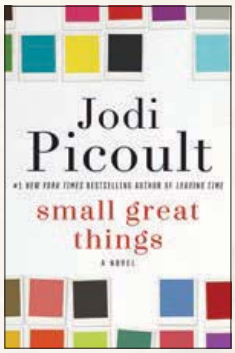
The Golden Age: A Novel
Joan London
Europa Editions
August 2016



All Our Wrong Todays:
A Novel
Elan Mastai
Dutton Adult
February 2017



Hero of the Empire:
The Boer War, a Daring Escape, and the Making of Winston Churchill
Candice Millard
Doubleday
September 2016



Small Great Things:
A Novel
Jodi Picoult
Ballantine Books
October 2016

Read
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Penguin Random House

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