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A NOVEL

THEN
AND
ALWAYS

DANI ATKINS



THEN
AND
ALWAYS

A NOVEL

DANI ATKINS



BALLANTINE BOOKS TRADE PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK

My first life ended at 10:37 P.M. on a rainy December night, on a deserted street beside the old church.

My second life began some thirty-six hours later, when I woke up to the acrid aroma of a hospital ward, with a large head wound and a life about which I had absolutely no recollection. I was surrounded by friends and family, and that should have made it better. But it didn't, as one of them had been dead for a considerable period of time.

I wanted to write down everything that had happened, to see if by committing it to paper I could make some sense of it all. Or perhaps I just needed to prove to everyone, even myself, that I wasn't going crazy. For a long time I thought that this story should begin with what happened to me at the church, when my life literally came apart, but now I realize that to understand it all, I have to go back much further than that. For it really all began five years earlier, on the night of the farewell dinner.

1

SEPTEMBER 2008

Long after the screaming had stopped, when the only sound to be heard was the soft crying of my friends as they waited for the ambulance to arrive, I realized that I was still clutching the lucky penny tightly within my palm. My fingers refused to unfurl from around the tiny copper talisman, as though by sheer will alone I would somehow be able to wind back time and erase the tragedy around me.

Was it really only half an hour earlier that Jimmy had picked up the glinting coin from the restaurant's tarmacked car park?

"For luck," he had said with a grin, tossing the coin up in the air and deftly catching it with one hand.

I smiled back and then saw the flicker of irritation flash through his pale blue eyes as Matt quipped, "Jimmy, mate, you should've said if you're a little short of cash, no need to go groveling about on the ground for money!"

Matt had laughed then, and thrown his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to his side. I thought the darkening

expression on Jimmy's face was a natural reaction to Matt's unnecessary comment, which highlighted the differences between their backgrounds. And maybe that was part of it. But it wasn't all of it. There was more . . . though of course I didn't understand that for a long time.

The three of us were standing in the fading sunlight of a warm September evening, waiting for the rest of our group to arrive. Jimmy had already been in the car park when Matt and I had driven in. Matt had made quite a show of circling the empty spaces, looking for just the right spot to park his new acquisition. I guess he was still in that strange honeymoon phase boys have when they're really in love with their cars. I just hoped he'd have the good sense not to gloat about it too much in front of the rest of the group.

The new car was shiny, sporty, and expensive. That's as much as I know about cars. He'd been given it by his parents when the exam results had come out. That alone should tell you enough about Matt's family to understand why comments about money sometimes hit a raw nerve with the rest of us. For the most part, Matt was fairly considerate and didn't rub it in too much. But the odd glib remark occasionally slipped under the wire and lit a spark. I hoped he wasn't going to say anything that would ruin what was probably going to be one of the last nights we would all be spending together for quite a while.

"You've been at work today, Jimmy?" I asked, knowing full well that he had but anxious to steer things back onto neutral ground. Jimmy turned and gave me the smile that I swear hadn't changed at all since he was four years old.

"Yep, this is my last week helping out my uncle; after that I'm happily handing back the wheelbarrow and the pitchfork. The gardening world and I are about to part company."

“Still, look at the bright side: you’ve got a great tan this summer—you’d not have got that stacking shelves in the supermarket.”

And it was true, Jimmy’s normally fair skin was a soft golden brown, and his forearms were definitely more sinewy and defined from months of outdoor work. Of course, Matt and I were both still sporting fairly decent suntans ourselves from our holiday in France at his parents’ villa. That too had been another congratulatory gift—for both of us.

Actually, my dad had taken issue with us over the trip. Sure, he liked Matt well enough; he was a fairly familiar fixture around our house, and we *had* been dating for almost two years. But it had still been touch and go whether he’d allow me to go away for a fortnight with Matt’s family. Part of it had been the money thing, because, of course, Matt’s parents had refused to accept any payment for the trip. The other part—the big part—had been the dad/daughter/boyfriend thing. I guess that’s universal with dads, but it seemed even more so in our case, with no mum around to smooth things over. Eventually Matt and I had managed to persuade him, explaining how everything was going to be all aboveboard, how it was strictly separate bedrooms and that we’d be with Matt’s parents the whole time. Basically, we lied.

This chain of thought had made me wonder, and not for the first time, how Dad was going to cope when the time came for me to leave for university at the end of the month. I felt a frown forming and determinedly pushed the thought away. I’d spent most of the summer struggling with that, and I was *not* going to ruin the last evening with my friends by worrying over things I couldn’t change.

Two cars, both considerably older than Matt’s but no less appreciated by their owners, pulled into the restaurant’s car

park. The rear door of the small blue car nearest to us flung open and Sarah ran over in a clatter of improbably high heels. She tottered alarmingly over the uneven surface before enveloping me in a huge hug.

“Rachel, my lovely, how are you?”

I hugged her back, feeling momentarily choked up as I realized that soon I’d only be seeing her during the uni holidays and not every day. Apart from Jimmy, she was my oldest friend. And however close Jimmy and I were, and had always been, there were still some topics of conversation that were reserved only for your girlfriends.

“Sorry we’re late,” Sarah apologized.

I gave her a wry smile. Sarah was *always* late. For a girl so naturally pretty, she required an incredible amount of time to get ready to go out, with multiple hair and outfit changes before she could be persuaded to step away from the mirror. And she never seemed satisfied with the final effect, which was ridiculous, because with her heart-shaped face, shiny brown curls, and petite frame, she always looked perfectly lovely.

“Have you been waiting long?” she asked, slipping her arm through mine and pulling me away from Matt across the car park to the restaurant’s entrance. This was most likely to ensure that she made it in one piece across the tarmac with those ridiculously high stilettos, although it could have been to avoid watching Trevor and Phil’s knee-jerk reaction to Cathy as she climbed out of the car beside them.

“Just long enough for Matt to piss Jimmy off,” I replied in a voice low enough for only her to hear. She smiled knowingly.

“Oh, no time at all then!”

By now we had reached the patioed doorway at the rear

of the restaurant and stood waiting while the boys (Matt included) tried to pretend that they were not noticing the extremely inviting cleavage displayed by Cathy's low-cut top. Wearing as well a pair of skintight jeans and high-heeled sandals—which, to Sarah's chagrin, she appeared to have no difficulty walking in—Cathy looked as though she were off to a photo shoot. Long blond hair fell around her shoulders and everything about her seemed so perfectly put together that I instantly felt as though I'd got dressed in the dark with clothes that'd been thrown out from a charity shop.

Cathy had been a relatively late addition to our circle of friends. Prior to her arrival into our sixth form, our group had been a tight unit of Sarah and me and the four boys. I suppose the boy-girl ratio had been a bit unbalanced, but we'd all been mates for so long that it wasn't an issue. That said, Cathy's slow inclusion into our group had been welcomed quite vigorously by most of the boys, for obvious reasons. And, looks aside, Cathy was good fun to have around. Her family had moved to Great Bishopsford from a much larger town, and she had seemed much more worldly and clued up than the rest of us. Added to that, she was extremely open and friendly and had a wicked sense of humor, and, when she wasn't flirting outrageously with every male within a five-mile radius, I actually really liked her.

Sarah, though, had her reservations, and on more than one occasion, when Cathy had ruffled her feathers or stepped on her toes, I had heard her mutter darkly, "Last in. First out."

When Jimmy sauntered across the car park to join us, Sarah stepped to one side and began to peruse the menu displayed inside a glassed-in case by the doorway. The others had walked over to admire Matt's car, or Cathy's chest, I thought waspishly, as I watched her bend down low, suppos-

edly to examine the alloy wheels. As if she cared about wheels!

“You look much nicer than her,” Jimmy whispered into my ear, knowing instantly what was on my mind.

“Am I that easy to read?” I asked, smiling back up at him. He gave me the grin I knew so well, the one that crinkled up the corners of his eyes and lit up his whole face.

“Like a book,” he confirmed, “but a good one.”

“Like a battered old paperback, you mean, rather than a glossy magazine.”

He followed my eyes and my analogy as we looked across to where Cathy was standing with Matt, listening raptly while he extolled something or other about the car.

“You don’t have anything to worry about,” Jimmy reassured me, giving my shoulder a friendly squeeze. “Matt would be crazy to look at her when he’s got you.”

“Hmm,” was all I managed in reply, surprised to feel that the warmth of his words had ignited a small blush. I quickly turned away.

Catching my reflection in the restaurant’s window, I didn’t feel my old friend was being entirely honest. If he was, then he seriously should think about getting his eyes tested. I was certainly never going to elicit the kind of reaction from men that Cathy did. Long dark hair, fashionably poker straight, big eyes that hardly functioned at all without their contact lenses, and lips that were a little too wide. A pleasant enough face, but not stunning, and I was honest enough to know I was never going to stop traffic. And that had never worried me before, but since being with Matt, who was, let’s face it, undeniably gorgeous, I seemed more aware than ever of some of my shortcomings.

“And just remember, to me you’ll always be the freckly-

faced girl with the gap in her front teeth, whose ears stuck out.”

“I was ten years old then,” I protested. “Thank God for orthodontia. Do you really have to remember every damn thing about my geeky childhood?”

“I can’t help myself,” Jimmy replied. I would have pursued that strange comment if we hadn’t just then been joined by the others.

“C’mon then,” urged Matt, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly. “Let’s go before they give our table to someone else.”

We walked en masse through the large double doors, arms linked or thrown casually around a neighboring shoulder, never realizing that in the next half hour our lives would be irrevocably changed forever.

We were led directly to our table, which was situated at the very front of the restaurant beside a large plate-glass window, where we had an excellent view of the high street and the church perched high up on the hill. As we wove between the tables to reach our seats, I could see Cathy drawing several appreciative glances from the male diners. Matt too hadn’t gone unnoticed—but in his case by the women. I tried to stifle that small worried voice that had been whispering in my ear for several months.

Matt was a very attractive guy; he naturally drew the attention of other women, it was only to be expected, and while part of me relished the fact that it was *my* side he was standing by, *my* hand that he held in his as we slomed between the closely packed tables, there was an unspoken worry that sooner or later I would have to address: what would happen when he was faced with temptation when we were apart? Would we be one of the couples who survived the university

separation, or would we become victims of the curse of the long-distance relationship?

This line of thinking was interrupted by the softly accented Italian waiter, indicating we had arrived at our reserved table. Tight for space in the crowded restaurant, they had pushed two tables together to accommodate our party, resulting in a rather narrow gap by a concrete pillar. Someone would have to squeeze past it to reach the seat beside the window.

Wishing Sarah had got there first—she was much smaller than me—I nevertheless managed to maneuver through the gap without getting stuck. Matt slid into the chair beside me as the others found their places and sat down. Jimmy took the window seat directly opposite me, with Sarah claiming the chair on his right-hand side. I refused to look at the undignified scrabble of who was sitting by Cathy on the other side of Matt. I guessed pole position was opposite her anyway, with its excellent view down the front of her top. Under cover of the tablecloth, I tugged down on the hem of my own T-shirt, lowering the neckline by an inch or two, then felt myself blushing like an idiot when Jimmy noticed.

“What’s so funny, Jimmy?” Matt asked, and suddenly, by some horrible coincidence, the whole table fell silent to hear his response. I knew my eyes were frantically telegraphing him not to say anything, but I needn’t have worried. Jimmy calmly picked up the menu and gave a casual shrug.

“Nothing, just thinking of something my uncle said earlier, that’s all.”

While everyone else followed Jimmy’s lead and began to study their menus, I looked across and mouthed a silent “thank you.” The smile he gave me back was so full of warm affection and friendship that for some strange reason my

stomach flipped erratically. Confused, I broke eye contact and pretended to be deeply interested in the merits of the lasagna versus the cannelloni.

Matt's arm snaked around my waist, pulling me against him as we chose our meal. When I did look over to Jimmy a few minutes later, he was deep in conversation with Sarah, and although he caught my glance and gave me a small smile, my stomach remained exactly where it should have been.

It was impossible to ignore the nostalgia around the table, and the air of impending separation was almost as apparent as the aroma of tomato and garlic wafting around us. While there were still a few weeks before I left for my place at Brighton, Trevor and Phil were both going to leave after the weekend, and Sarah only a few days later. Somehow I couldn't really imagine the remains of our group—Cathy, Jimmy, Matt, and myself—all getting together in the remaining weeks.

This sudden reluctance to leave struck me unexpectedly with its intensity. It wasn't as though I didn't want to go away to university. Of course I did. I'd certainly worked hard enough to achieve the grades I needed to get on my journalism course. It was just that tonight it was hitting home for the first time that this was really the end of a very important chapter in my life.

Just for the moment I couldn't focus on the new beginnings, because all I could think of was leaving behind my boyfriend and my two closest friends. Ridiculously, I felt my eyes begin to water, and I hastily looked away, preferring the dazzling glare of the rays of the dwindling sun to the reaction from those around the table if they knew I'd been crying.

"You okay?" asked Jimmy softly, leaning forward so only I could hear his words.

Matt was placing the drinks order, so it was safe to reply.

“Oh, you know, just feeling a little emotional, I guess. Changes coming, saying goodbye to everyone, stuff like that . . .” I trailed off, expecting some sort of ridicule, but instead was surprised when his hand reached across the table and encircled my fingers, which were fiddling restlessly with the cutlery.

His grip felt oddly different; not the familiar clasp I had known since nursery school. Perhaps it was just the rough texture of the skin from his summer gardening, or was it more in the way my hand felt so small, so tightly encompassed in his own?

I felt, rather than saw, Matt’s slow awareness of Jimmy’s gesture, but rather than a hurried retreat, Jimmy gave my hand one last squeeze and took his time before withdrawing his own. In an instinctive response, Matt drew his body closer toward mine, reclaiming both my attention and his territory, and it was only after a moment or two that I became aware that when taking back his hand, Jimmy had managed to transfer the lucky penny he had picked up outside the restaurant from his hand to mine.

I held the coin tightly in my palm, imbuing the small copper disc with more significance than it deserved. It was typical of Jimmy to offer to share even the possibility of good fortune with me. We had, after all, shared so much for so many years. He was more like my brother than my friend: in fact, when I thought about it, his whole family were closer to me than many of my own relatives.

Jimmy’s mother and mine had been very good friends long before Jimmy and I were even born, and when my mum had died suddenly when I was just a toddler, Jimmy’s family had reached out and drawn both Dad and me into their lives and their hearts. I realized with a shock that my dad wasn’t the

only family I'd be leaving behind when I went away; it was going to be almost as tough saying goodbye to Jimmy's parents and his younger brother.

When the two bottles of wine Matt had ordered were delivered to the table, everyone took a glass to raise a toast.

"To going away . . ."

"To not dropping out . . .!"

"To our new lives . . ."

". . . and old friends . . ."

The last was echoed by each person around the table as glasses clinked together, catching a brilliant prism of evening sunlight.

As the others sat joking and bantering lightheartedly, I took a second to look around the table, trying to take a mental snapshot of the moment. I knew we were all destined to make new friends at our various colleges and universities, but just now it was hard to believe that the new bonds we would forge could ever be as strong as those that threaded between the seven of us around the table.

As my eye fell on each friend, a memory or emotion erupted in response. So many, it was almost impossible to separate them, but each recollection was another brick in the wall of our friendship, which I had to believe would remain solid no matter where we would all end up.

When I looked at Sarah, I couldn't help but repress a smile. In a strange way I already felt jealous of the new friends she would be making on her art course. Sarah was crazy, loyal, funny, and incredibly caring, and her friendship was one of my most treasured possessions. Whoever they were, these new friends didn't know how lucky they were.

And then there was Jimmy. I'd spent so much of the summer stressing over how it would feel to be apart from Matt

that whenever the thought of also saying goodbye to Jimmy had intruded, I'd hastily stuffed it away to the back of my mind. I knew it was strange, but the thought of not seeing my old friend on a regular basis was just so momentous, so hard to absorb, that I couldn't even allow myself the time to contemplate it.

I realized with some disappointment that I wasn't nearly as ready as I should be to let go of any of them.

As we waited for our meals to arrive, I glanced occasionally through the window beside me and up the road to the church. The sun was just beginning its leisurely descent and the sky was bathed in diluted shades of red and gold, turning the usually drab high street into a magical abstract of colors. There were few pedestrians, but the lines of parked cars flanking both sides of the road meant that the pubs and restaurants were all doing good business that evening. From somewhere in the distance the distinctive wail of a siren could be heard.

"Rachel, are you listening?"

I drew my attention away from the scene outside and realized that Jimmy had been speaking.

"Sorry, I was miles away . . . what were you saying?"

His eyes flickered for a second toward Matt, who was chatting to Cathy at that moment on his other side. Jimmy didn't look comfortable having to repeat whatever it was I had just missed.

"I was asking if you weren't too busy tomorrow afternoon, if you'd be able to come round to my house?"

The oddly hesitant request wasn't like him at all, and I found myself confused, both by his tone and the formality of the invitation. Jimmy and I usually just pitched up at each other's front doors without asking, no invites necessary.

“Sure, I can do that. I was intending to come round to see your mum and dad again before I left, anyway.”

“Actually, they won’t be home tomorrow.” Again, that odd, uncertain tone. “No one will, just me. I . . . er . . . I just wanted to have a quiet word with you. Is that okay?”

Was it the red glow from the sun, or was he actually blushing?

He seemed anxious for an answer, so I quickly reassured him. “Yes, that’s fine. I’ll see you around two o’clock?”

He nodded then and sighed, as though some dreaded task had been accomplished, which only served to heighten my curiosity. I guessed I would have to wait until the next day to find out what was on his mind.

The waiters arrived with the laden plates and began to set them in front of us. Straightening up in his seat, Matt removed his right arm from where it had been resting around my waist, pausing to plant a firm kiss unexpectedly on my lips.

“Pleeease . . . people are trying to eat round here!” groaned Sarah.

I grinned back at Matt and held my face very still while he tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. It was an insignificant gesture, but later I would wonder what might have happened to us all if he hadn’t been leaning so close and seen the car.

“What the hell . . . !” he cried.

I spun around to follow his gaze, my mouth dropping in amazement, as I saw a small red car, with all four wheels off the tarmac, catapult into view over the crest of the hill. Moments later a second car appeared, driving almost as fast and only slightly less recklessly, its flashing blue lights and discordant siren shattering the peace of the summer evening. In

horror I saw a small van emerge from a side street, its driver having to stand on his brakes to avoid losing the best part of its front end as the red car hurtled past. The red car grazed the sides of several parked vehicles, showering the pursuing police car in a cloud of red-hot sparks.

The shrieking scream of rubber from the braking van alerted the rest of the group to the oncoming danger, but Matt was way ahead of us and shot to his feet.

“He’s lost it! He’s out of control. That car’s going to crash! Get away from the window! NOW!”

I felt Matt’s tight grip on my shoulder as he got to his feet, screaming out his warning. The panic became infectious as people around us also began to shout. Distractedly I noticed the waiter dropping two of our plates of food on the floor before retreating hastily away from our table.

Well that’s made a horrible mess, I found myself thinking stupidly.

It wasn’t as though I couldn’t see what was happening, or that I hadn’t fully understood my boyfriend’s cry of warning. It was just that everything had suddenly and strangely slipped into slow motion. There seemed to be no immediate rush; there was plenty of time to get away from the table. No need to have dropped two perfectly good dinners in the process.

Around me was a blur of movement. I saw Jimmy and Sarah get out of their seats and run over to where Phil was standing, screaming for the rest of us to move. Matt’s hand remained pressed in the hollow of my shoulder as I felt him half drag me from my chair. With his other hand he propelled Cathy, who was standing beside him, away from the table.

The chaotic scramble of flung-back chairs and knocked-over wineglasses could only have taken a second or two, but

in that time I did something really dumb: I turned to look back through the window at the approaching car. It straddled the center line of the road, heading straight toward the bend—and the front of the restaurant—with no sign of slowing down.

That was the moment that Matt lost his grip on my shoulder. Horrified, I turned back from the window, and saw that he and Cathy were already some distance away. I stumbled forward to follow them, but Matt's chair had been knocked over and was now wedged firmly against the pillar beside me. My exit was blocked.

I pushed at the fallen chair frantically, succeeding only in wedging it further between the edge of the table and the pillar.

"Rachel!" screamed Sarah at the top of her lungs. "Get out of the way!"

I pushed and kicked at the chair with every ounce of strength I had, fear and adrenaline coursing through me, until the sounds of the restaurant diminished and all I could hear was the roar of the blood in my ears.

In desperation I looked up to Matt, who began to move toward me until, unbelievably, Cathy grabbed his arm and held him back.

"No, Matt, no! There's no time! You'll be killed."

I heard *that* all right, and part of my brain, the part that wasn't focused on trying to not let the rest of me get killed, absorbed what Cathy had just done. If she thought I was going to let that pass, she was very much mistaken.

But then another noise rose from the street behind me: the screech of brakes. I glanced behind me one last time and saw the car was braking, but much too late. The speeding vehicle

grew increasingly larger in the window, so close now that I could make out the terrified face of its young driver, his eyes wide in terror as the inevitable approached.

I never saw him coming. He must have moved at incredible speed to get to me. One moment I was trapped in the tiny space between the fallen chair and the window, and the next two strong arms appeared from across the table and fastened onto my own like a vise.

How he found the strength I never knew, but Jimmy literally hauled me from my trapped position, over the top of the table. I caught the look on his face as he dragged me across the surface, mindless of the scattering bottles and glasses as I plowed through them. His eyes were filled with indescribable fear and the tendons of his neck stood out like cables with the effort he was using to pull me toward him.

I grabbed onto him, trying to help, my feet scrabbling frantically over the cloth to propel me forward. From behind us I heard a loud thump as the car left the road and mounted the pavement.

Jimmy threw me. That's the only way to describe what he did. One minute I was half across the table and the next I was lifted up and thrown like a rag doll, slithering down to the floor some feet away. But that act of impossible strength and bravery had taken up the last precious milliseconds between the car leaving the road and crashing into the restaurant.

Jimmy was still standing directly in the path of danger when the window exploded behind him.

THE FIRST THING I felt was the heat. Something heavy pinned my legs, trapping them under a weight of pain that burned like fire. And there seemed to be water everywhere, thick,

salty water running freely down from my forehead, over my cheeks, into my eyes and mouth. I tried to cry out, but no sound came. There was nothing left in my lungs but smoke-filled vapor. Someone was screaming behind me, someone else was crying. I tried to turn my head but I couldn't see properly with the sticky wetness blocking my vision. Tentatively I raised one hand to my head and attempted to rub my eyes. My hand came away covered in a slick red gauntlet of blood. All around me was a mountain of debris, so thick and dense I couldn't see beyond it to where the crying and screaming people were. The car—half in, half out of the shattered window—was also blocking my view; it was impossible to see what was left of the mangled vehicle, as the air was thick with a dense fog of smoke from the engine and disintegrated masonry from the front wall. I felt the shroud of glass over and under me and knew I must be lying among the remains of the window.

From behind me I heard voices shouting frantically as masonry and rubble shuddered and shifted and I realized that people were trying to reach us. Us. Not just me; *of course* not just me. Jimmy had been there when the car came through the window. Jimmy, who had left his position of safety and had come back to save me.

Ignoring the way the blood flowed even faster when I turned my head, I managed to lift my neck an inch or two off the glass to look for him. The haze of dust and smoke was still too thick, but I thought I could just make out a shape some feet away to one side. Broken masonry blocks and a long twisted piece of metal were lying at a strangely skewed angle on top of a long white board. As my vision began to clear, I realized that it wasn't a board at all; it was what was left of our table. And the reason why it wasn't lying flat against the floor,

but was canted at that strange angle, was that something, or someone, was beneath it.

Mindless of anything else, I flung out my arm, raking it in a desperate arc toward the crushed table and what I knew must be beneath it. At first I felt nothing, and then the very tips of my fingers brushed, just for a moment, against something soft.

“Jimmy!” I croaked hoarsely. “Jimmy, is that you, can you hear me?” No reply. “Jimmy.” I started to cry, the tears cutting small rivulets through the dirt and blood on my face. “Jimmy, oh no, Jimmy. Say something . . .”

The dust and debris had begun to settle a little and I could just make out what it was I had been able to reach. Jimmy’s forearm protruded at a strange angle from beneath what was left of the table. That was all I could see of him, just his forearm. The arm still looked strong and tanned, as it had a few moments before, when it had somehow found the strength to pull me away from danger. Only now it wasn’t moving. Long before the ambulances reached us, I realized that it would never be moving again.

NOVEL

A NOVEL

CULTURAL

REVIEWS

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

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First Edition

Book One

Wishbone

Chapter 1

Ruby Bell was a constant reminder of what could befall a woman whose shoe heels were too high. The people of Liberty Township wove her into cautionary tales of the wages of sin and travel. They called her buck-crazy. Howling, half-naked mad. The fact that she had come back from New York City made this somewhat understandable to the town.

She wore gray like rain clouds and wandered the red roads in bared feet. Calluses thick as boot leather. Hair caked with mud. Blackened nails as if she had scratched the slate of night. Her acres of legs carrying her, arms swaying like a loose screen. Her eyes the ink of sky, just before the storm.

That is how Ruby walked when she lived in the splintered house that Papa Bell had built before he passed. When she dug into the East Texas soil under moonlight and wailed like a distant train.

In those years, after her return, people let Ruby be. They walked a curved path to avoid her door. And so it was more than strange when someone walked the length of Liberty and brought a covered cake to the Bells' front porch.

Ephram Jennings had seen the gray woman passing like a haint through the center of town since she'd returned to Bell land in 1963. All of Liberty had. He had seen her wipe the spittle from

her jerking lips, run her still beautiful hands over the crust of her hair each day before she'd turned the corner in view of the town. He'd seen her walking like she had some place she ought to have been, then five steps away from P & K Market, stand pillar still, her rain cloud body shaking. Ephram had seen Miss P, the proprietor of the store, walk nonchalantly out of her door and say, "Honey, can you see if I got the rise in these rolls right?"

Ephram watched Ruby stare past her but take the brown sack filled with steaming yeast bread. Take it and walk away with her acres of legs carrying her, while Miss P said, "You come on back tomorrow, Ruby Bell, and help me out if you get the chance."

Ephram Jennings had watched this for eleven years. Seen her black-bottomed foot kick a swirl of dust in its wake. Every day he wanted nothing more than to put each tired sole in his wide wooden tub, brush them both in warm soapy water, cream them with sweet oil and lanoline and then slip her feet, one by one into a pair of red-heel socks.

But instead, with each passing year, he watched Miss P do her Christian duty from the corner of his eye. Watched the gray woman stoop to accept the doughy alms. He sat alongside the crowd of men parked on their stools outside P & K. Who read their papers, played dominoes and chewed tobacco. Toothpicks dangling. Pipes smoking. Soda pops sweating. Just as they had the day Ruby arrived back in Liberty. When she'd stepped from the red bus, the porch had crowded her with their eyes. Hair pressed and gleaming like polished black walnut. Lipstick red and thick, her cornflower blue sundress darted and stitched tight to her waist. Ephram had watched her light a cigarette and glare down at the crowd on the market porch in such a way that made folks feel embarrassed for breathing. Chauncy Rankin had said later, "Not

only do her shit not stink, way she act, she ready to sell it by the ounce.”

They had all watched, steadily, as she slipped into madness. Concern, mingled with a secret satisfaction, melted into the creases of their bodies like Vaseline. After a time they barely glanced up from their papers when Ruby walked up to the market. They yawned her existence away, or spit out a wad of tobacco juice to mark her arrival. A low joke might rumble as Miss P handed over her bread, followed by throaty chuckles.

But one end-of-summer day, Ephram Jennings took particular notice. One by one the men on the porch did as well. For instead of walking away with her bread, as she normally did, Ruby didn't move. Her body rooted to the spot. She stood there, holding the brown sack, hand quivering like a divining rod. And then she peed. A long, steady stream that hit the red dust and turned it the color of brick. She did it absently, with calm disinterest. Then, because no one knew quite what to do, Gubber Samuels pointed and hurled out a rough bark of laughter. Ruby looked down and saw the puddle beneath her. Surprise flowered on her face, then fell away leaving a spreading red shame. Her hands leapt to her eyes, but when she brought them down the world was still there, so she dropped the sack in the pool of urine and ran. But it wasn't running. It was flying, long and graceful, into the piney woods like a deer after the crack of buckshot. Ephram almost stood. Almost ran down the porch steps and into the woods after her. But the eyes of men were too strong, and the continued spitting and snickering of Gubber Samuels anchored him against the tug of mercy.

Because Ephram's mama had long since gone to glory, that very day, he asked his older sister Celia to make up her white lay

angel cake because he needed to carry it to an ailing friend. Celia looked at him out of the corner of her eye but made it anyway.

She made it in that pocket of time before dawn, when the aging night gathered its dark skirts and paused in the stillness. She made it with twelve new eggs, still warm and flecked with feathers. She washed them and cracked them, one at a time, holding each golden yolk in her palm as the whites slid and dropped through her open fingers. She set them aside in her flowered china bowl. In the year 1974, Celia Jennings still cooked in a wood-burning stove, she still used a whisk and muscle and patience to beat her egg whites into foaming peaks. She used pure vanilla, the same sweet liquid she had poured into Saturday night baths before their father, the Reverend Jennings, arrived back in town. The butter was from her churn, the confectioner's sugar from P & K. And as she stirred the dawn into being, a dew drop of sweat salted the batter. The cake baked and rose with the sun.

Ephram slept as the cake slid from its tin, so sweet it crusted at its crumbling edges, so light little craters of air circled its surface, so moist it was sure, as was always the case, to cling to the spaces between his sister's long three-pronged silver fork. Celia Jennings never cut her white lay angel cake with a knife. "It'd be like using an ax to skin a rabbit," she'd always say.

The cake was cooling when Ephram awoke. It settled into itself as he bathed and dressed for the day.

Ephram Jennings smoothed the corners of his great-granddaddy's hat for the tenth time that morning. His wide square thumbs running along the soft hide brim. The leather so thin in places the sun filtered through softly like a Chinese lantern.

The magical thing about Ephram Jennings was that if you

looked real hard, you could see a circle of violet rimming the brown of his irises. Soft like the petals of spreading periwinkle.

The problem was that no one, not even his sister, took the time to really look at Ephram Jennings. Folks pretty much glanced past him on the way to Bloom's place or P & K. To them he was just another thick horse brown man with a ratted cap and a stooped gait. To them there was nothing special about Ephram. He was a moving blur on the eyes' journey to more delicate and interesting places.

Ephram had become accustomed to this in his forty-five years of living. Slipping in and out of doorways without so much as a nod or pause in the conversation. At his job it was expected. He was a pair of hands carrying grocery bags to White folks' shiny automobiles. Taking tips and mouthing "Thank ya, Ma'am." Anger or kindness directed towards him indifferently as if he were a lump of coal. Ephram told himself he didn't mind. But with Black folks there were times when a man might expect an eye to catch hold and stick for a moment. Folks never did see his Chinese lamp hat, or his purple-ringed irises, or the way that they matched just perfectly the berry tint of his lower lip. They didn't see the ten crescent moons held captive in his fingernails, the way he moved, like a man gliding under water, smooth and liquid as Marion Lake. They didn't notice how the blue in his socks coordinated with the buttons on his Sunday shirt or smell the well-brushed sheen of Brylcreem in his thick hair.

They didn't notice the gracious pause he'd take after someone would finish a sentence, the way he'd give folks the chance to take air back into their lungs, before he'd fill the space up with his own breath and words.

They didn't see the way his pupils got wide when his heart filled up with pride or love or hope.

But Ruby did.

When her life was only a building long scream that faded into night. Even then Ruby noticed Ephram.



IT WAS after the big Brownsville hurricane of '67. After eighty-six-mile-an-hour winds crashed into Corpus Christi and rippled all the way east to Liberty Township. Splashing the edge of west Louisiana and flooding the banks of the Sabine. It was after the bending of trees, of branches arching to the floor of earth. After Marion Lake had swollen up and washed away Supra Rankin's hen house, and Clancy Simkins's daddy's Buick, and the new cross for the Church of God in Christ.

Hurricane Beulah had come Ruby's fourth year back in Liberty. It was then that she saw Ephram Jennings.

She had lain in the stagnant pools thick with mud and browning leaves. She had knelt before a cracked sugar maple tree and lain in the collecting waters, letting the thick fluid cover her like a bedtime blanket. She felt her skin melt and slip from her bones; her heart, spine and cranium dissolve like sugar cubes in warm coffee.

She had been muddy waters for three hours when Ephram found her. Her nose rising out of the puddle to inhale . . . and dipping back to release. Out and back. Out. Back. Rhythmic, like an old blues tune.

He did not scream. He did not leap over the tree. He did not scoop into her water center to set her free.

For Ephram did not see what anyone else passing down the

road would see: a skinny dust brown woman with knotted hair lying back flat in a mud puddle. No. Ephram Jennings saw that Ruby had become the still water. He saw her liquid deep skin, her hair splayed like onyx river vines.

As rain began to fall upon her, Ephram saw her splash and swell and spill out of the small ravine. Ephram Jennings knew. That is when Ruby lifted her head like a rising wave and noticed Ephram. In that moment, the two knowings met.

They stared at each other under the ancient sky with the soft rain and the full wet earth. More than anything Ephram wanted to talk to her and tell her things he'd kept locked in the storehouse of his soul. He wanted to talk to her about the way Rupert Shankle's melons split on the vine and how honeysuckle blossoms tasted like sunlight. He wanted to tell her that he had seen a part of the night sky resting in her eyes and that he knew it because it lived in him as well. He wanted to tell her about the knot corded about his heart and how he needed her help to loose the binding.

But at that moment Ruby closed her eyes, concentrated, and melted once again into the pool.

Ephram heard himself asking the strangest question, heard it before it left his berry lips. "Are you married?" But before it could lace through the air, he saw that she was once again water. And he couldn't ask that of a puddle, no matter how perfect. So he tipped his hat, and made his way back down the road.



“**E**PHRAAAM! EPHRAM Jennings your breakfast is been ready!”
As he had nearly every morning of his life, Ephram heard his sister's call.

“Yes Mama,” he replied.

Celia had raised him since March 28, 1937, when their mother had come naked to the In-His-Name Holiness Church Easter picnic. Ephram was eight, Celia fourteen. The thing he remembered was his sister running over to him covering his eyes. That next morning, their father, the Reverend Jennings, took their mother to Dearing State Mental—Colored Ward, then packed his own bags and began preaching on the road ten months out of twelve. Celia tended Ephram, cooked for him, cut his food, picked and ironed his shirts, blocked his hats, nursed him within an inch of his life when he came down with that joint ailment. She had paused only long enough to bury their father, the Reverend, when he turned up dead. Lynched a few days after Ephram's thirteenth birthday. Ephram had curled up and lost himself in the folds of Celia's apron where he stayed for the next thirty-two years.

"Ephram come in here boy!"

Ephram knew without looking that Celia was biting her inner cheek, a thing she did whenever a food item wasn't eaten at the proper temperature. The colder it got the more furiously she would gnaw. Then he heard her sweeping with a vengeance. Each morning of his life Celia swept bad luck out of the kitchen door. Every evening she sprinkled table salt in the corners, and every morning she swept it out again, full of any evil the night air held. The sweeping stopped.

"I know you hear me!"

"Inaminute," Ephram called as he smoothed the weathered brim of his hat once more and faced his sister's mirror. This morning, this crisp, end-of-summer morning, Ephram did something he had not done in twenty years. He looked.

He had always straightened the crease in his slacks on Sunday, or picked bits of lint from his Deacon jacket. He had held a

handkerchief filled with ice on his split chin and lip, the one winter in his life snow had slicked the front walk. He had combed and oiled his scalp and plucked out in-grown hairs. He had shaved and brushed his teeth and gargled with Listerine. But in twenty years, Ephram Jennings had not truly looked into a mirror.

His greatest surprise was that he was no longer young. He assessed the plum darkness under his eyes, the grooves along his full nose, the subtle weight of his cheeks. Ephram pressed a cool washcloth to his skin, then he practiced a smile. He had tried on five or six when Celia launched her final call.

As Ephram sat down to eat, his chair scraped against the butter flower tiles.

“Sorry.” Ephram managed.

“S’all right baby, just got to remember to pick it up instead of drag.”

“I will, Mama.”

“And remember not to leave your bad day cane out where folk can trip on it.”

“I’ll put it away after breakfast.”

“Don’t forget now.”

“I won’t, Mama.”

Celia swept the long hall as Ephram dipped buttery biscuits into syrup. She straightened a wood-framed photograph of the Reverend Jennings as Ephram cut into the chicken fried steak. He had gotten the cutlet on special at the Newton Piggly Wiggly, where he worked.

By way of apology Ephram said, “You fixed that cutlet up real nice, Mama.”

“That was a fair cut. Why don’t you get me some more when you go into Newton today.”

“I ain’t going in today Ma’am.”

“Oh. I thought maybe your sick friend was from Newton since you didn’t say who they was.”

“I’ll pick up more of them cutlets on Tuesday, Mama.”

Celia put *Andy Williams—Songs of Faith* on the phonograph while Ephram peppered his grits and four scrambled eggs. She finished sweeping salt from every corner of the house as “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” smoothed across the furniture. Ephram chewed slowly and glanced at Celia’s cake. Flaked white inside, the outside was all honey-gold. He imagined handing it to Ruby Bell and seeing something he had not witnessed in over thirty years—Ruby smiling.

Celia sailed into the room with her dustpan full of salt. “Well, if you ain’t going to Newton, do your friend stay out by Glister’s!”

“No.”

“Cuz Glister got six of my mason jars if you goin’ round that way.”

“I can’t today Mama.”

“I was going to make Supra Rankin some of my fig preserves for her husband’s great-uncle’s funeral on Monday if you was going that way . . . Lord knows it’s a shame that family don’t believe in getting they people preserved right. And how they think the man will keep fresh while they waitin’ on them Mississippi Rankins to get here I don’t know.”

“Shephard’s Mortuary lay folk out nice, Mama.”

“Shamed Mother Mercy last year with them red lips and rubbed-on fair skin.”

“Mama . . .”

“Woman look like a peppermint stick, Lord know. You yet one of Junie’s pallbearers!”

Ephram nodded yes. Celia opened the kitchen door to empty the dustpan, just as a strong wind blew a mouthful of salt into her face. She spit it from her lips, wiped it from her eyes and quickly swept what was left out of the back door.

Celia turned to face Ephram, “You know Baby Girl Samuels back in town.”

Ephram took a bite of eggs.

Celia wiped the table with a damp rag. “Supra Rankin say Baby arrive from New Orleans three days ago, painted up like a circus clown, wrigglin’ like a mackerel all over town.”

Ephram lifted his cup and plate as she cleaned. “Mama—”

“I didn’t say it. Supra Rankin did.” Celia looked hard at Ephram, “Which is why I asked you to get my jars from Glistler, since the Samuels are just past that way.”

“Mama! I ain’t taking that cake to Baby Girl Samuels! I ain’t thought nothing about her in fifteen years.” Ephram stood up. “I got to go.”

“Finish your breakfast.”

Ephram reluctantly sat.

Celia poured the steam back in his coffee. He ate the last of his meal as Andy Williams’s rendition of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” syruped its way through the kitchen. Celia circled back to the sink, emptied water from soaking green beans, sat beside Ephram and began snapping the tips off the beans. With practiced grace she chucked the remaining pod into a pail with a hollow *TING!*

Without looking at Ephram she said, “Run into Miss Philomena yesterday at P & K. She asked after you.”

Ephram ate quietly as the music curled under him. . . . *truth is marching on . . .*

Celia continued, “That Miss P always be so generous. Helping all manner of folk and such.”

The song infused itself into the air.

I have seen Him in the watch fires . . .

Ephram breathed it in.

The beans echoed. *TING.*

Celia continued, “Way she give ’way that Wonder Bread to them folks flooded out in Neches.”

Ephram nodded. . . . *of a hundred circling camps . . .*

TING.

“And her old jerky and pickles to them no count Peels.”

TING. TING.

. . . builded Him an altar . . .

“And don’t she help out that Ruby Bell quite a bit!”

. . . in the evening dews and damp’s . . .

TING.

“Now that Bell gal one sad case, ain’t she!”

I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps . . .

TING.

“You knowed her as chirrun, didn’t you? Pretty thang she was too, with them long good braids.”

Glory glory Hallelujah!

TING.

“Look like”

Glory

“she was gonna”

Glory

“come to something,”

Hallelujah!

“being raised by that White lady after Papa Bell died.”

TING.

“Going off”

Glory

“to New York”

Glory

“City like she done.”

Hallelujah!

“Even going”

His

“to that White”

truth

“folks’ school up there.”

Is marching on.

TING. TING. TING.

The song faded into the wallpaper, but Celia sang on.

“It’s more than a sin how far she fall. Hair nappy with mud, raiment’s torn and trampled. Now I hear she take to doing her pee-pee in the streets! Beggin’ for scraps with crazy scratched acrost her pate. And they say what happens at night with menfolk in old Mister Bell’s house would set his bones to spinnin’.”

Ephram felt little dots of sweat along his temples. “Ma—”

“But I don’t blame them none. You know how men do. Nasty ring its bell and they come running like it’s suppertime in hell. Devil got him a firm foothold in Liberty. I know. I seen firsthand what conjure can do. Folk cut down, men shriveled up like prunes. Leave a body empty of they spirit so they just a hollow thing ’til they lay down dead. Boy, I sat acrost the hearth from Satan, close as you is. Seen him stirring his big kettle a’ souls over a lake of fire. I’m on a first name basis with the Devil, so I know how his mind be working, always looking out for another sinner

to season his brew. So when Glistler say her boy Charlie seen you eyeballin' that Bell gal ever day. Sniffin' after her, I say to her, No Sir. I raise my boy better than to eat at no Jezebel's table and I *know* he ain't bringing dessert."

"Ceal—"

"I ain't got flippers."

"Mama—"

"What?"

Ephram noticed his wrist trembling. Just barely, but there it was. He set his cup down.

"Mama—it's just cake."

"Bait more like it."

"She just—"

"Tell me you ain't lie your own mama into making ho-cake!"

Ephram breathed in a huge gulp of air, as the sleeping pain in his fingers yawned to waking. Far away Andy began singing "Amazing Grace."

"Your bones botherin' you today baby!"

"No." The pain stretched itself into his knuckles, wrists and arms.

Celia took his hand. "Ephram, you always been simple. When you was a boy you'd come back with half a pail a' milk instead of whole. Couldn't never figure out how to stop that cow from kickin' it out from under you. But that's all right. God love simple, but so do the Devil. Cuz simple ain't got the kind of mind to withstand temptation."

Ephram's bones began to shoot through with fire, the very marrow sizzled under his skin. It was the bad day pain, the worst he'd felt in years. He began to perspire. His legs began to shake as a dot of sweat dropped onto the kitchen table. Ephram stood.

“You need your bad day cane!”

He didn't look at her when he said, “I'm not going out today Mama.” Ephram walked to the doorway as Celia took a cloth and wiped away the drop of sweat. He walked past the narrow hallway as she stood and plopped her green beans into a waiting pot on the stove. He crept into his bedroom, slipped off his polished shoes, took off his jacket and hat, then lay back flat upon the iron bed.

Celia called in from the kitchen, “You want a slice of cake, baby?”

“Not now Mama.”

“Well, I'll cut you a piece. Leave it out for when you get up.”

EPHRAM PRAYED against the pain. It came anyway, sizzling like a pit fire. Rising, burning, sucking. Ephram gritted his teeth against it. Sweat poured into the curve of his ear, onto the pillowcase. It began receding. Ephram took in a breath. He felt the bedsprings coiled beneath him. The ceiling low and bumpy from when Celia hired the Pastor's son to scrap stucco gray over the wood.

It started again, clanging like a fire alarm, wrenching his stomach. Ephram balled his fists so hard, all ten crescent moons disappeared to white. It passed. He gasped for air.

The spells were getting worse. Lately, he'd felt like his bones were God's kindling. That God must be awfully cold to set so many fires. As Ephram waited for the pain, he saw Ruby as she used to be, the first time he'd seen her. The sweet little girl with long braids. The kind of pretty it hurt to look at, like candy on a sore tooth.

Ephram gasped in. He could tell this wave would be big. The hurt rose up, and the world crashed down. Ephram's last thought

before passing out was of sorrow, that Ruby would never taste Celia's angel cake.

His body grew limp upon the chenille spread, his bones grinding even in slumber. The Saturday sun ruffling his curtains, sending fingers of light across the floor. Outside something cawed from atop a tree. Something shiny and black. It flew from its perch and made lazy eights over Jennings land, then it drifted down from the sky into a patch of yard just outside Ephram's room. Scratching and strutting until a broom-toting woman yelled at it from inside the house. At that the crow tilted her head, spread her wings and caught the wind. Then she cawed.

Chapter 2

The piney woods were full of sound. Trees cracking and falling to their death; the knell of axes echoing into green; the mewl of baby hawks waiting for Mama's catch. Bull frogs and barn owls. The call of crows and the purring of doves. The screams of a Black man. The slowing of a heart. All captured, hushed and held under the colossal fur of pine and oak, magnolia, hickory and sweet gum. Needles and capillary branches interlaced to make an enormous net, so that whatever rose, never broke through to sky. The woods held stories too, and emotions and objects: a tear of sleeve, bits of hair, long-buried bones, lost buttons. But mostly, the piney woods hoarded sound.

Like the sharp squeak of a wheel from a child's wagon turning round and round. A rusted Radio Flyer, being pulled by a little brown boy, rattling with a lunch pail of chicken and dumplings, biscuits with fig preserves stuffed inside, collard greens and a special dessert wrapped in a red and white napkin.

The boy named Ephram pulled the wagon with great anticipation. He guessed what dessert his big sister had put in his pail. She'd made one just like it for his eleventh birthday four months ago. The white lay angel cake. His mouth watered so that he stopped under the big trees and opened the cloth. He was right. He nibbled one corner and covered it. He paused for a second,

opened it again, then crammed the slice into his mouth. It was like eating sweet air. When he was done he shook the napkin over his face to catch any crumbs, brushed off and walked until he smelled the water.

There were two suns at Marion Lake, the one high above and the one floating on the surface. The water was a blue mirror, surrounded by a hundred trees and a million frogs. Ephram took off his shoes and cooled his toes first thing. He loved Marion Lake, especially on Sunday morning when nobody else was there. He used to go on Saturdays before his mama had gone, but only after he'd finished his chores. She was very firm about that.

Ephram watched the water swirl and skim not too far from shore. He knew the fish would be biting. He baited a bent nail with a bit of fatback from Celia's slop jar. Then hoisted his branch pole between two rocks and sat down to eat his dinner. Ephram knew he might sit there for hours and never catch a fish. Sometimes, he'd feel one tussle with the line, he'd pull it above water and see those invisible teeth still grabbing ahold of the bait. Scales flashing silver, tail twisting . . . single glass eye staring straight ahead until they realized the spot they were in and let go. *Flop! Splosh!* Down into the sky water until it was out of sight. His real mother had called it "feeding," not fishing. He guessed that was true. Otha Beatrice Jennings always took notice of the little things. Maybe that's why she'd been such a good lace-maker. Ephram wondered if they let her make lace up where she was now. He sure hoped so.

The chicken and dumplings were good. Not as good as Mama's, but Celia was a good cook, even though she was too bossy about it. She was bossy about everything since their father, the Reverend, had been asked to step down by the Elders. He would

mumble at bedtime, to no one in particular, “That was a mighty unchristian thing for a pack of Christians to do.”

To make matters worse, the acting preacher was Elder Rankin’s cousin and a part-time janitor at the Piggly Wiggly in Newton, who had only recently heard the call. The Reverend renamed it “the Piggly Service,” then bade Celia and Ephram to never cross its threshold. “We’ll have church in our own house, fifty-two Sundays a year whether I’m here or no.” Celia had kept the faith, making Ephram memorize huge sections of Leviticus and Revelation and recite them perfectly each Sabbath. When the Reverend was in town, Sunday mornings before breakfast and after chores, Ephram and Celia would kneel and he would preach while eggs turned to yellow glue and pancakes shriveled and died. Long. And sometimes, he would pour two fingers of rye, and slip a sip between Ephesians 1 and 2, until he dozed off. That had happened that very morning in fact. Celia had scraped their breakfast into the bin, made the Reverend some coffee, then fixed Ephram’s dinner and told him to go play.

He had just finished eating and was sitting with his pole when he spotted them—Maggie Wilkins and the quiet little girl beside her. They were across the lake. The girl tiptoed and leaned in, her nose almost touching Margaret’s cheek. She was caramel brown with her hair up and fancy, grown-up eyes in a heart-shaped face. She held shining black shoes with white stockings balled into the toes. She wore a pink dress and looked about eight or nine. Margaret was dressed like a farmer. She was one of those grasshopper children, with legs almost as thin as their arms and twice as long. There were six tall rough girls in the Wilkins family including Margaret. All lanky and black brown with a constant sheen of ash on their knees, elbows and shins. Every one of them known for

being bad, but Margaret had the worst reputation. The Wilkins were the Bells' no count relations and they lived just on the edge of Liberty.

Ephram had heard of Margaret—Maggie's right hook getting her kicked out of school long before he'd seen her fight. None of the Wilkins girls stayed in school for long. Most left after half-killing some student or teacher.

After each of the girls spilled a good amount of blood, they stayed home and helped their mother, Beulah Wilkins, farm her twenty-seven acres of cane and cotton. Beulah Wilkins was bigger than all her children put together, a mountain of a woman who made the earth shake just a bit when she walked. Beulah had been his mama's good friend and Ephram had heard his mama saying that staying out of school might be fine for Samella and the other girls, but not so fine for Maggie, since she was the smartest of them all.

Still, he'd never met Margaret face to face. He remembered just last month he'd seen her fight Chauncy Rankin's younger brother Rooster—so named for the rust color of his hair, and the way he liked to crow. He was built like all the Rankins. Big. Maggie was ten, Rooster was fourteen and he'd picked a fight with her because, he said, he wanted to "see if she could really fight." He'd made her take off her boots because they were pointed at the end. She'd beaten him in bare feet. Beaten him bloody. Ephram had seen this horrible thing she had done to Rooster. Seen his pride water down to a puddle, and he couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him. Maggie beating Rooster was all anyone had talked about for weeks. So when Ephram saw Margaret on the other side of the lake, he had no desire to cross paths.

Just as he thought of retreating into the brush, he saw the

quiet girl pointing in his direction. Maggie turned fiercely and cut her eyes at him.

“What you staring at!” she called across the lake.

“I’m not staring.”

“What you doing then?”

“Fishin’.”

“Well you best not be staring at nobody if you know what’s good for you.”

Ephram nodded. “I’m just fishin’.”

“Well see that’s all you do.”

Ephram watched the other girl whisper into Margaret’s ear. The two began to approach, walking along the water’s edge. As they got closer Margaret asked, “You catch anything?”

“Naw.”

“How long you been here?”

“Awhile.”

“You ain’t fishin’, you feedin’.”

Ephram paused and looked at Margaret. Although he was a year older, Margaret towered above him.

“Gimme that pole.”

Ephram handed it over before she asked twice.

“You Celia Jennings’s brother, huh?”

Ephram nodded.

“You got a name?”

“Ephram.”

Margaret slipped a bobby pin from the other girl’s hair and bit off the tip. The girl’s two plaits fell past her shoulders.

“What you using for bait?”

Ephram handed her more salt pork.

She took one look at it and rolled her eyes, “No wonder.” She

walked straight to the lake's edge, dug her hand into the soft earth until she retrieved a long earthworm. She walked over to the pole, fastened the black pin to the string and bent it back. Then she pierced the moving worm with the sharp end of the pin and cast it easily in the water. Ephram and the little girl winced.

"Ruby ain't never had no catfish. This here's Ruby."

Ruby nodded at him. Ephram nodded back.

Margaret continued, "Ruby stay up in Neches most the year with a White lady. They ain't got no catfish where she from."

Ephram ventured, "Ain't they got catfish ever where?"

"What I just say!" said Margaret. The three of them fell silent.

They sat on the lake's shore, Ephram to the left, Margaret in the center and Ruby to the right of her. Out of the corner of his eye, Ephram saw Ruby's sleeve barely touching Maggie's coveralls. Then Ruby leaned back and let her head rest against the soft moss grass. Ephram did the same and they looked into the identical swatch of sky. He hadn't noticed it before but the blue had blown away and a dark flannel had taken its place. Maggie took a cigarette from her left ear and struck a kitchen match against the wedge of her belt.

"Ain't your mama up at Dearing?" Maggie asked out of the corner of her mouth, her eye squinting against the smoke.

Ephram didn't make a sound. Maggie went right on.

"Thought that was you."

Ephram saw Ruby nudge Maggie as if to stop her.

"Naw, I ain't sayin' nothin' bad. Papa Bell usta say some of the best people he know be up there. Say world be better off if them inside come out, and them out go in. How long she been there?"

Ephram cleared his throat. "Three years."

"See then? She not bad off as some. I know a lady who mama

been there fifteen years. Ain't no reason to be shamed." She sucked her teeth. "So, why they send her up there anyway?"

Ruby finally spoke, "It's gonna rain."

Maggie slipped off her overshirt and handed it to her. Ruby covered her shoulders with it.

"What she do?" Maggie repeated, flicking an ash without removing the cigarette from her mouth.

"Nothing."

"She had to do something big else she wouldn't be there. I ain't gone tell nobody, and Ruby going back to Neches this afternoon. I'll tell you what I hear and you tell me if it's right. Say your mama come out naked to the church Easter picnic. That so?"

Ephram just stared ahead at the water. He didn't want to talk about his mama, and he surely didn't want to talk about her to this rusty butt girl.

"Say all them church ladies near wet theyselves. Samella was there for the free food and said they was trippin' over theyselves to throw some clothes on her back and she just took off running, titties flappin' 'til the Rev, your daddy, catch up with her and knocked her cold. Next day she up at Dearing. You was there, huh? When it happen?"

Ruby parted her lips and there was a scream at the edge of her words, "Mag, *stop!*"

"Hush now, s'all right. I'm just sayin' what happened is all. Just tryin' to find out why the boy's mama done that. Seem like if anybody know it be him."

Ephram was standing now. Some flood of courage nearly drowned him, and he found his hands pushing up his sleeves and knotting into two tight fists. "Don't talk about my mama no more."

Maggie started laughing. “Boy, don’t make me hurt you. Sit your scrawny butt down. I ain’t mean no harm.” Just then a fish tugged at the line. Small at first, and then harder. Maggie stood up and just when it seemed it was about to escape she jerked hard and fast on the line. The fish came up wriggling with the black pin sticking through its nose. “Y’all ’bout to make me lose my supper.”

Maggie swung the wriggling fish to the earth and popped its head on a smooth stone. Of all the fish in that lake, luck brought Maggie a catfish. She flicked out her jackknife and split him down the center and ripped out his insides.

Ruby turned away, “Maggie . . . what you do that for?”

“You say you want catfish. So I catch you some catfish.” Then she turned to Ephram. “You, go get us some twigs so we can make us a fire.”

“It’s gonna rain,” said Ruby.

“Not before I cook me some fish. Go on.” Maggie scaled the small fish and chopped off its head and tail as Ruby started to cry. Maggie stood up and looked into her eyes. “There, there, gal. I ain’t did it to hurt him. That fish know what he gettin’ into, swimmin’ in that lake. He ain’t the first fish been caught and fried, and won’t be the last. That’s how he live. That be his life. Swimming and knowin’ that any day, *whoosh*, he gone be on somebody plate.” Ruby cried harder and Maggie wrapped her in her arms. “All right now. See up there? See that wind moving at the top a’ those trees?” Ruby looked up. “That fish be swimming up there now. He ain’t got to stay stuck in some ole lake size of a dime. See? That’s how it be. He come to us. He wants us to make a nice fire and eat him so all his memories of that lake be inside us. See Ruby? You see that fish up there?”

Ruby looked back at Maggie. “You just saying that.”

“I am not. I swear to it. And your Mag-pie don’t lie. Not ’bout catfish anyway.” Maggie winked and grinned.

Ruby smiled back and showed perfect white teeth. Ephram had never thought of the life of a fish like that. He picked up the bits of wood just around them, then gathered a few more behind a wall of thick trunks. He brought them back and Maggie made a fire with her great match sticks. She took out a jackknife and whittled a sharp point on a stick and pierced it through the fish. Then she roasted it, turning it this way and that until its fat sizzled into the fire. When it was done they all sat around that small fire and munched on that fatty, crunchy fish, careful to avoid the bones.

“See what I tell you? It’s good, huh?” Ruby nodded and winked at Maggie. Ephram chewed. He wished he had something to offer up as grand and soulful as that catfish. His heart sank when he thought about that slice of cake he’d gobbled in the woods. Celia’s cake stood up to Maggie’s fish any day. He guessed Celia was right about that gluttony sin after all. When they were done eating, just as Maggie had promised, the wind picked up and it started to sprinkle.

Ruby stood to go but Maggie said, “We got to do one thing first.” Then she took the fish head and dug a small hole beside the water. She placed the head so that it was straight up and she covered it over. The rain was misting the tops of their heads, their noses and shoulders.

“Now we got to make a wish on this good fish we just ate. But you got to make it quick so it’ll come fast.” So they all closed their eyes and wished. Ephram opened his and watched Ruby’s lips say very softly, “Tanny.” Ephram couldn’t imagine what that Maggie would be wishing for, but he cast his for his mama.

Ruby slipped on her shoes, then Maggie took her by the hand and the two walked quickly into the woods. Maggie turned back, “Hope your mama on the mend.”

“Uh-huh.”

Ruby half waved, but Maggie pulled her along and they were gone. Ephram stared after them. He put his dinner pail into the Radio Flyer, thought to leave but got snagged by the rain on the lake instead. By the blue and the gray. It looked like the drops were falling up, catapulted from a thousand tiny explosions. He thought about Ruby Bell. He had heard about her plenty too, but he'd never seen her before today, the Colored girl being raised by White folks up in Neches. Where did she get those eyelashes and that beauty spot on her left cheek? Ephram let himself get bone wet as the rain found the parts on his scalp and trickled down his face. A piece of thunder broke off and rolled about on the forest floor.

Ephram hadn't heard anyone behind him until he felt her hand on his shoulder. He spun around quickly and there she was. That little girl Ruby. She was completely soaked and she was talking. But he missed it. Only seen the movement of her lips and the smell of Dove soap. That and the scent of Dixie Peach and something else he couldn't quite place in the rain. There, he had missed it again. He tried to catch her words in midthought—

“—just ain't called for. See?” She had finished. She was looking up at him and he had no idea where to start or end. Was she chiding or comforting?

She stood for another moment then said, “Well, I gotta go.”

He had to say something before she turned. All he could come up with was, “I was thinking . . .”

She stayed, her face screwed up a bit. “What?”

“Nothing.” He looked down into the mud to hide the lie. “Just thinking about what you said.”

“What about it?”

Scrambling: “About things not being called for.”

She eyed him a moment then seemed to relax. “Thanks. But it ain’t just me who says it. Papa Bell says it too, all the time.”

He was lost again, but nodded his head anyway.

Margaret called from the rise, fenced by post trees and grass. “Ruby we got to be going!”

Ruby called back, “Said I’d be along!”

“Ain’t leavin’ you in all this rain. ‘Sides she gonna be waitin’ on us.”

Ruby screamed and her voice lifted like the wind, “*I said go on!*”

Maggie stood there quiet against the bark of a long-needle pine. Walls of water between them, her head bent down just a bit. She moved away, like a puppy who’d been scolded, until only the top of her head showed above the rise. It did not budge.

“She get jealous a’ everybody. It ain’t just you.”

“Why she act like that?”

“Why you act like you act? Why do your mama?”

“I didn’t mean no harm.”

“Don’t be talkin’ ’bout her. Or askin’ after her. You ain’t nobody to be questioning her.”

Ephram was silent and he was starting to get cold. He wanted to find some shelter but he didn’t want to leave. Instead, he felt himself leaning into her—this girl—and before the idea could gel, he knew that he wanted to kiss her.

Suddenly Maggie appeared beside them. Her eyes sliced into Ephram as if she could read his thoughts, then she took both of their hands.

“Come on, y’all gone catch your death.” They were walking, then running through the wet forest.

“Where we goin’? I’m cold,” Ruby whined.

Ephram and Maggie began speaking at the same time.

Ephram: “They’s a cave on yonder side—”

Maggie: “Ma Tante expecting us Ruby.”

Ephram: “—of Marion, by that clearing.”

Ephram watched Ruby savor their attention. The way her head tilted up in something akin to pride. The way she let them wait for just a beat longer, weighing more than their suggestions in the rain. Finally Ruby looked at them and said, “I hate that old clearing. ’Sides, Ma Tante’s just around that bend.”

Ephram stated, “My daddy say he don’t want me goin’ over there.”

Maggie jumped in, “Well, then, you ain’t got to go, do you, Preacher son!”

Ephram said simply, “I’m going.”

They all walked, then ran, to Ma Tante’s door.

A row of dead trees, chopped and dragged from the forest, fenced Ma Tante’s hut. Twigs, moss, mud, cloth and bits of hair had been stirred together and smoothed between each post. The fence door was made of wood and clay. The sky grumbled low as Maggie hauled back her fist and hit the heavy door. It croaked open.

Inside the yard Ruby and Ephram stopped in spite of the torrent. There were mirrors everywhere, glinting and winking, next to open jars collecting wet sky. The entire yard smelled of myrrh. Ephram’s heart tightened as he saw small mounds of earth covered with soaked crimson flags. Smoke churned out of the hut’s stovepipe as what looked like badger and fox skulls clattered on a

clothesline. Spades were jammed into the soft earth and the severed dried wing of a red-tailed hawk stretched across the porch awning. Strange herbs crept up twine and sticks, next to tomato plants with their fuzzy, acrid scent. At the edge of the yard a Gall Oak stood tall, its branches ripe with bottles of colored water, swinging like plump figs. Purple. Green. Red. Black. Blue. Yellow. Tapping against one another.

Maggie pointed to the tree and whispered, "That there's a soul tree. They's souls in them bottles."

"Nuh-uh," Ephram managed.

"Break one and find out."

Ephram hurried on. They were soaked through when they reached the porch. Maggie knocked. The sound was dull and flat in the rain. She knocked again, waited, and then pushed the door open and slipped into the hut.

Maggie spoke from inside of the dark, "Come in. She ain't here."

Ruby shook her head no. "Uh-uh."

Maggie urged, "She won't care none. You just being scared."

"I ain't going in there."

From the black Maggie said, "I won't let nothing happen to you girl."

Ruby shook her head no.

The rain picked up speed and strength. It whipped against Ruby's calves and patent leather shoes. Her white lace socks were soaked through. Ephram's trousers clung to his skin as he slipped his hand over Ruby's. He held her hand as she looked up at him. Before she could smile, Maggie grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her inside. Ephram followed.



TEAM SEVEN

A NOVEL

**MARCUS
BURKE**

Vitals

Pop and Uncle Elroy smoke the strangest cigarettes I've ever smelled. They smell sort of like skunk juice and gasoline mixed with the incense they burn at Nana and Papa Tanks's church, St. Paul's Episcopal. When Pop and Uncle Elroy are both home in the summertime they stay up late at night hanging out in the backyard, sitting below my bedroom window with the streetlights glowing on them from foot to midbelly. The rest of their bodies are hidden under the shadow of the oak trees in our backyard. They always sit facing away from our house toward the next yard over, blowing that smelly-smoke up into my window, and sometimes if I breathe it in long enough it makes me dizzy but in a giggly good way. I like it, it's nice.

I would ask Pop about his strange-smelling funny-cigarettes but I'm afraid to ask him questions anymore. He's always in a rush and never tells me where he's going when he leaves. Whenever I see him putting on his black Rasta cap, I find a reason to be near the door so I can try to stall him up and make him stay. I used to always ask him where he was going and most of the time he didn't hear me and he'd just leave. Other times he simply says, "Out," and forgets to say good-bye. But the last time he left, he yelled at me and this is why I don't ask him questions anymore and would rather spy.

I saw him in the living room putting on his Rasta cap and I

went into the hallway and opened up the closet near the front door where Ma keeps the extra soap, blankets, washcloths, towels, and toilet paper. When I opened the door a stack of washcloths fell from the top shelf. I caught them and looked up, and down came an avalanche of

towels and blankets on my head. I didn't fall, but it dazed me. I heard Pop's footsteps coming and I shook the mess onto the floor. He was wearing his long black leather coat with his black sunglasses and Rasta cap. His shades were so dark I couldn't tell if he saw me or not.

"Where ya going, Pop?" I blurted out, loud, so he could hear me.

He grabbed the doorknob. "Out."

For some reason I was feeling brave and so I did something I'd never done before. I asked him again. A little louder, making sure he heard me this time.

"Out like where, Pop?" I said it loud but nicely. "It's so big outside. You could go anywhere." I smiled and he stopped and took his hand off the doorknob and turned to me.

"Out, I said!"

"I know." I put my hands in my pockets and rocked back onto my heels. "But like—"

"Andre! Don't ask me any goddamn questions." He clapped his hands together and squatted down. He pointed his hand in my face and then at the mess on the floor around me. "Clean. It. Up!"

I could hear the anger scraping through his closed teeth. He didn't understand my question but I didn't want to make him any angrier.

"Better be clean before I get back home!" He stood.

I was too scared to look at him so I looked at the scuffs on his boots and tried to keep my breath.

"Out of order questioning a grown man like you have no broughtupsy."

On the floor beneath us I could see his shadow shaking its head at me.

I focused harder on his boot scuffs trying to stay calm but my lip started shaking too bad and I couldn't breathe. I tried to gulp but whimpered instead and he heard me. He grabbed my shoulder and I dropped to the ground. It didn't hurt as much as it scared me, but I was down and he was standing over me. I hugged my head into my lap. He reached down and snatched me up by the side of the shirt and I hugged into myself as tight as I could.

“Get up and cut it out. Before I give you something to cry for.”

He let me go, opened the door, and slammed it behind him. I stayed on the floor crying in the blankets and towels until

I felt stupid. I wiped my face with a washcloth and got off the floor and stomped to my room. I left those towels there because I didn't drop them, they fell on me and that's not my fault.

The only other place I'd ever smelled the smell of Pop and Uncle Elroy's cigarettes was once at Kelly Park. I was with Ma and it made her really angry. We'd parked up top of the hill at the track and Ma held my hand and we walked down to the basketball courts together. She was only coming down to see me make a lefty layup and then she was supposed to go back up and walk the track, but these older kids were hanging out, taking up half the court. Some of them were sitting around a picnic table playing cards and others were lying on the court and in the grass.

We stopped on the sideline and I recognized the older kids that hang on the other end of our block. I let go of Ma's hand and started dribbling my ball. I knew most of them only by face. They had a car parked at half court with its trunk open, blasting a Wu-Tang Clan song I'd never heard before. I knew I liked the song when my main man Ol' Dirty Bastard started singing and beat-boxing over the beat doing his ad libs. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but it sounded funny and I liked the beat.

Right before the beat drops it pauses and it gets quiet and then ODB yells, “You bitch-ass nigga!” And the song starts.

I started cracking up. Ol' Dirty Bastard's my favorite member in Wu-Tang Clan. His voice is so raspy and mousy he sounds like Mike Tyson with sand in his throat. As I laughed

I looked up at Ma and her forehead wrinkled like a chewed Tootsie Roll. She folded her arms across her chest. I dribbled between my legs as we stood on the sideline watching the older boys swirl their clear plastic cups of what looked like the last couple sips of apple juice. They'd already played, most of them had taken off their shirts and changed out of sneakers into flip-flops. A few of them stood in a little circle and started smoking those cigarettes.

I recognized one of the guys smoking, it was Ma's friend Miss Myra's oldest son, Stanley. I see him around but I don't really know him. He pulled from the cigarette a few times and passed it to the guy on his left. After Ol' Dirty Bastard's ad libs, Stanley turned toward us and started bopping his shoulders and swaying to the music and all the guys started laughing and cheering him on. He was shimmying his way toward us. His eyes were dragon red and he slowly blew smoke out of his nose like an angry bull. When Ol' Dirty Bastard's verse came on, he closed his eyes—and tossed his head back, waving his hands in the air like he was shooting pistols as he sang along with Ol' Dirty Bastard.

As high as Wu-Tang get,
Allah, allow us pop this
shit Just like black shoe fit
If you can't wear it, then don't fuck with it!

He jumped into a ghetto-girl pose, two feet on the ground, leaning hard to his left side, popping his hips, arms crossed like he was mocking Ma. He looked at us laughing. A guy passed him back the cigarette and this is when I first smelled that smell. I'd never smelled anything so strange, but I liked it. I nudged Ma's leg and she looked down at me.

"What's that they're smoking, that smells like that?" I whis-pered. "It's weird."

"Ayo, lil' man. Lemme get a shot. Lil' man!" I was glad Stanley didn't hear me.

I wound up to pass him my basketball when Ma reached down and wrestled it away from me.

“Andre, let’s go.” She tucked the ball under her arm and grabbed my hand pulling me back toward the track and we started walking.

I tried to wiggle away but her grip was too tight.

“But, Ma, I thought—” I whined but she wouldn’t let go. “Ayo, lil’ man?” Stanley called, but we just kept walking. We got to the top of the hill and Ma loosened her grip but

didn’t let go. She looked down at me.

“They aren’t smoking cigarettes, Andre. They’re frying their brains, they’re foolish,” Ma said.

She looked back down the hill at Stanley and yelled, “Kids have to play here too!”

Stanley and all his friends laughed and so did I. I thought she was kidding.

“Why would anyone want to fry their brain, Ma?” I asked her.

“Because they are foolish. You’re not like them, you’re a cut above the rest. Stay away from guys like them, Andre. They’re no-good men.”

I didn’t understand but I said okay. For whatever reason Stanley and his friends brain-frying made Ma angry. It made her so mad I got stuck walking boring laps around the track with her, every now and again trying to get her to let go of my hand.

The second time I smelled that smell, it was midsummer and I was in bed. It came floating into my bedroom from outside, a little bit after Ma kissed me and Nina good night and tucked us in. I woke up to pee and when I went to lie back down I heard voices coming from out our backyard. I thought I smelled that smell but I wasn’t sure, but after another gust of wind rattled my Reggie Lewis and Len Bias posters, I knew it was that same smell from the park. My heart started racing. I had to see who the brain-frying foolish-guys were making noise outside my window.

I snuck out of bed, pushed my toy chest up against the wall, climbed on top, and opened the window. I knelt down, leaning my face against the screen, breathing lightly so I could listen and see. My ears started to tingle and my cheeks got hot when I realized it was Pop and Uncle Elroy blowing that smelly-smoke into my room. I knew Pop was grumpy but I didn't know he was a bad man. I didn't think he was all that bad. I was confused.

If him and Uncle Elroy were foolish bad men then why did Ma and Auntie Diamond marry them? I wasn't sure what it was, but I got a feeling something strange was going on with Ma and Pop.

I could hear the nearby dance hall music so clear, but their voices seemed to only break through the songs in jumbles. Pop and Uncle Elroy both talked Jamaican, not all the time like Papa Tanks and Grampy Battel, they turned theirs on and off. When they hung out together they turned their Jamaican accents on, real thick. At first I couldn't understand what they were saying or talking about. So I started spying on them every night they were out there, and after listening to them a few weeks I started to understand a little bit. I learned that "Jah" has something to do with everything, and everything bad was somehow caused by "Babylon." Whenever they spoke, everything they said started with "I an' I" or "Breth-ren." I also learned that they call their weird-smelling cigaretttes "vitals." After about three or four of those green-bottle sodas and two or three vitals apiece they'd go silent. Two red dots pulsing in the dark.

Every now and again the dance hall music would erupt into gunshots or police sirens and the whole song would flip into rewind and the DJ would scream out over the song. He'd yell Jamaican curses, there's a bunch of them and they all end in a clot: pussy-clot, blood-clot, bumba-rass-clot, anything ending in "clot," really. Or the DJ would say even more random stuff like "Bulla-Bread" or "To-Backfoot." He would shout three or four words tops, and nothing more. Pop and Uncle Elroy would say weird stuff too, like "Selassie-I" or "To-blouse an' skirt," and they'd laugh so hard. Half the

time they said no more than one or two words to each other. It's like they didn't even need words to be friends. I'd kneel, watching them inhaling their vitals until I was dizzy with sleep or Pop said he was going to bed and I'd run back to mine.

Some nights Uncle Elroy wouldn't come back upstairs to Aunty Diamond. Instead he'd hop the fence and cut through our neighbors' yard heading toward the parkway. He wouldn't say bye to Pop either, he'd just laugh and say, "Rid- dim and Spice," and hop the fence. Pop would chuckle and call back, "N'everyt'ing nice." Some nights after Uncle Elroy left, Pop would get up and hop the fence too. Sometimes he'd be home the next morning. Sometimes he'd be gone for days, sometimes weeks.

When he left, I just hoped it wouldn't be for months
like

Uncle Elroy.

On the nights he stayed, I liked it better that way, but I couldn't ever tell if he did. He'd just sit there all alone in the shadows. Without Uncle Elroy he didn't listen to the radio. He'd sit in quiet, with one leg on the ground and one on the edge of his chair, rocking himself side to side, muttering to himself. I always tried but I could never quite hear him. Every once in a while he'd sigh real deep to himself, blowing smoke into the shadowy darkness. One hand holding a green-bottle soda and the other a burning vital.

As much as I spied on him, the one thing I never got to see was what was on his mind. What was out there for him in the streets on the nights he stayed away? When he was gone, I wondered if he was out looking for Uncle Elroy or off doing his own thing.

On the nights he stayed, I'd watch him sitting out there all alone and I don't know why he always seemed so sad but I could just tell. I wondered if he wanted company. If I went out there and sat with him, would it cheer him up?

I wanted to go out there-and sit next to him. Maybe rest
my
head on his shoulder. I'd tell him that I liked the smell

of his vitals. I'd ask him why that smell makes me dizzy and sleepy after a while. I'd ask him why he wanted to fry his brain, and if he knew that Ma thought he was a foolish and bad man. More than anything I wanted to know why he got so mad when I asked him questions and why he never took me out with him.

The nights he stayed I watched him until he'd yawn and stand up muttering, and I'd hop off my toy chest so he didn't see me when he turned around and faced the house. I'd sit in front of my bed, waiting, listening, nervous that he might still change his mind, hop the fence, head toward the parkway and leave. Sometimes he would. Sometimes he wouldn't. It wasn't until I'd hear him rattling through the basement door that I'd smile and get in bed, happy and ready to sleep, wondering what made him stay.

Breakfast of Champions

Gemini stomped his feet on the platform, marching in place, pounding his chest as the crowd cheered. The camera zoomed in on his face and his bushy mustache stretched thin and he growled at the crowd and strapped on his headgear. He adjusted his elbow pads and locked his fingers, stretching his arms out and cracking his knuckles and bouncing his pecs. The camera moved to the other platform where the contender stood. Patrick Sullivan, a redheaded computer programmer from Los Angeles, California. He played wide receiver in high school and club dodgeball in college.

The American Gladiators logo floated across the screen and the picture zoomed in on Patrick's freckled cheeks. He flashed a gap-toothed smile at the camera and scrunched his nose trying to look meaner as he pumped his bony arm at the crowd and the platforms began lifting him and Gemini up into the air.

"A' joke t'ing dat." Papa Tanks stood in the doorway of the den pointing at the TV, waving his fork back and forth. "Look 'pon the broad-back black man, he a'go kill him. Look how him scream up the place like a'leggo beast."

"Who? Gemini? He's my favorite Gladiator on the show. He beats everyone, Pa-Paw," I said.

"Don't correct me." He pointed the fork in my direction.

"No matter, whoever him is he wouldn't beat me. He facing

off against a pink-skin mawga-dog. Him nah' prove nothing, mashing up a lickle man."

"But, Grampy, Gemini's the man!" I crossed my arms and turned away from him. The announcers started explaining the rules, basically they're jousting with each other using what look like giant Q-tips. First one to fall off their platform loses.

"Wha' ya say? Him a'who? You na' know him, wha' mek him a man? I bet him couldn't even cook a one blinking dumpling fi himself. How him a man if him na' cook? Muscles na' mek you a man. See, I am a man, the man of dis house. Me handle me business, protect me yawd, and na' tek bright from no one." Papa Tanks grinned at me and turned his body to the side, flexing his biceps. His rubbery skin stretched tight, puffing out a maze of veins up and down his arms.

The referee walked into the arena and stood on the red bouncy pad below the platforms. He slipped his whistle in the side of his mouth and looked up at Gemini and raised an arm in the air.

"Gladiator, readaaay!!" Gemini rocked side to side, knees bent, slowly nodding yes.

The referee raised his other arm up and looked up at Pat-rick.

"Contender, readaaay!!"

Patrick snapped his head side to side and gave a thumbs-up. The referee leaned back with his hands above his head and right as he went to blow the whistle the theme music came on and it cut to commercial. Papa Tanks went walking into the kitchen shaking his head as he flipped the plantain frying on the stove. We watch *American Gladiators* every morning and every morning he stands in the doorway keeping an eye on his breakfast cooking on the stove, and I sit on the couch in the

front den eating my bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios. Each day he tells me about a new person he remembers from back home in Limón, Costa Rica. He says he and the rest of the Jamaicans that came over to work the fields were built like oxen.

He cooks breakfast for himself and Nana Tanks, because she's got a cold in her knees and some mornings she can't come into the kitchen because it hurts to stand up too long, so she stays in bed watching reruns of *Bonanza*. Papa Tanks always fries some ripe plantain and cuts up some hot dogs, onions, and tomatoes and makes an egg mix-up.

"You think you could beat Gemini, Pa-Paw?" I called into the kitchen.

He walked back over from the stove.

"Champion, you mad or wha'? A'dat you know!" I like it when Papa Tanks talks about how tough he is and flexes his muscles. Sometimes he even does push-ups in the doorway as we watch. "Me a'give him one rattid box in'a him head. Mek him drop like bird out'a sky. From you see how dem size nah match up, you know dem a'bad mind the lickle red hair bump-face boy."

The show came back from commercial and the theme music played as the referee blew his whistle, and a blast of smoke blew up between Gemini and Patrick. When the smoke cleared, Patrick wagged his stick at his waist like he was row- ing a boat. He leaned down pretty low and swung a few times at Gemini's legs. Gemini's eyes locked in on Patrick and he whacked him a few times until Patrick looked stunned and Gemini wound the jousting stick above his head like an ax.

He chopped down and Patrick dodged the strike.

Gemini lost his balance and swung the stick back trying to regain his footing, and Patrick jabbed his stick into Gemi- ni's ribs, and Gemini jerked to the side, dropping his jousting

stick. Before he fell off the platform he turned and caught the side of Patrick's next strike and bear-hugged the padded end of the stick and pulled them both to the ground. It was unreal. I'd never seen anyone beat Gemini. Gemini roared out as they fell to the pad. When his body hit first, before Patrick's, I got a jolt in my knees. I didn't think about it, I just jumped up out of my seat and roared like I was Gemini myself, but instead of me hitting a bouncy pad, milk and Honey Nut Cheerios splashed up in the air and flew everywhere.

"Woi! Boychild, look how you bright up yourself, wha' sweet you?"

"I forgot that my bowl was on my lap, Pa-Paw, but Gemini lost." I looked down at the Cheerios stuck to my legs and the milk at my feet. "I just jumped. I'm sorry, Pa-Paw." I felt my face getting hot.

"Mmm hhhmm." He turned his head, gazed down at me sideways, folded his arms, and smirked.

"I is da real champion—in'a these parts." He flexed his arm at me and we laughed. I looked up at him and he smiled at me and his new dentures gleamed. "I know, Pa-Paw, I know." He came over and put his hand on my shoulder. "You lucky Nana in'a she room this morning, eeh?" He rubbed the top of my head and patted my back a few times. "Come on, get a rag and clean up and pour a next bowl for yourself."

I shook my head. "There's no more cereal, Pa-Paw, and I only had two bites before I dropped it." I sniffled and looked away.

"Ay, don't cry, my yout', you alright. We a'mek you some breakfast, eeh?"

He clicked off the TV and we walked into the kitchen and I got a rag and started wiping up the milk. He took the plantain off the stove and walked the plate in to Nana Tanks.

He came back into the kitchen with a footstool and set it down next to himself.

“Boychild, come here.” I walked over to him and stepped up onto the stool next to him. On the counter in front of me, he put a bowl with two eggs in it and a plate with a short butter knife and a hot dog. He had the same setup in front of himself except he had small pieces of tomato and onion on his plate.

“Hold your knife in your right hand and hold the hot dog steady with your left, and cut it into eight pieces.”

I cut the hot dog down into eight little pink nuggets and looked over at Papa Tanks.

“What now?”

“Crack the eggs. Watch me.” He took an egg and knocked it on the counter until its shell cracked and he pulled it open and the egg dropped into the bowl. “Now you try,” he said.

I picked up the egg and cracked it on the edge of the counter, pulled the shell and the egg fell in the bowl, but some of the clear part got on me and it felt nasty. I dropped my fork and stepped off the stool, wiped my hand on my shorts. I looked at Papa Tanks. “I don’t wanna cook, Pa-Paw, the egg juice got on my hands.” I looked up into the bluish-gray rims around his sagging brown eyes, and he scratched the bald spot on top of his head. He put his hand on my shoulder and looked at me and the wrinkles on his face hung smooth and I could tell he was about to tell me something serious.

“You must learn to cook. Man is only to need a woman for love. If your wife run off and leave you, you na’ go’ dead. Champion, get ya backside back up here.”

I could tell what he said was important, even though I didn’t understand what he was talking about exactly. I hopped back up on the stool and cracked my other egg into the bowl. Papa Tanks looked over and tipped my bowl toward him, and

smiled. I watched Papa Tanks cracking eggs for Nana Tanks's breakfast too, only he took the yellow parts out of the bowl with a spoon and tossed them in the sink.

"Why'd you take the yellow parts out, Pa-Paw?"

"Them is called the yolk. I take it out 'cause Nana has high salt and too much weight squeezing at she heart. She even take pills to equal herself out. Pick up the fork and pop the yolks."

I poked my fork into the yolk and watched the yellow ooze out. Papa Tanks splashed some milk into my bowl.

"Now stir them up," he said as he mixed the eggs in his bowl.

Once the eggs were creamy yellow, Papa Tanks told me to hop down and he picked up the stool and walked it over to the stove and set it down next to himself. He turned on the fire and we sat at the kitchen table. I looked at the sales flyers for the supermarket and Papa Tanks read the newspaper until the oil heated up and I could see the air rippling over the fry- ing pan.

"Come on." Papa Tanks turned back to the counter and got both our plates. He handed me my plate of hot dog bits. "Here, drop them in the pan."

I stepped up onto the stool and the oil swirled around in the frying pan. I forked the hot dogs into the oil. The oil splashed up and a haze of smoke started filling the kitchen. I jumped back off the stool again and almost fell, and Papa Tanks leaned back against the counter holding his sides trying not to laugh at me. I could tell he was laughing, so I crossed my arms and headed for the front den, but his big hand wrapped around my shoulder. "Where you running off to?"

I thought he was mad but when I looked up he was smirk- ing at me. "Lesson you a'go learn today. Step up, champion."

He held his hand out and I grabbed on and he helped me back up onto the stool as the hot dogs sizzled and the oil bubbled and the smoke died down. He handed me the bowl with the eggs in it.

“Pour it in the pan.”

I poured the eggs into the pan and they sizzled.

“Take this.” He handed me an oven mitt and a spatula. I put on the oven mitt and he said, “A man mustn’t fear the heat, boychild.”

He walked behind me, leaned over my shoulder, and held my hand, gripping his hand over the oven mitt and spatula, and we stirred the eggs together. “You just have to know when to turn the gas down.” We kept stirring until the eggs got thicker and started to clump, his arm tracing over mine. He stepped back and loosed his grip. “Now keep stirring until the hot dogs get brown.”

He walked to the cabinet and got me a plate. “Good job, boychild. Dem cook up nice, step down.”

I hopped off the stool and he walked up to the stove and poured the egg mix-up into the plate and walked it over to the table, where he poured me a Dixie cup of coffee mixed with hot chocolate. He poured a cup for himself and opened a pink packet and poured it into his coffee.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s sugar for people who got high sugar, like me. I eat too many sweets when I was a young man and too much sweets nah good fi de blood.”

I nodded okay, not really knowing what was in the packet or what he was talking about. I ate my plate as he cooked eggs for him and Nana Tanks. After he walked Nana Tanks’s plate into their room for her, he came to sit down next to me right when I was on my last bite. He put his plate down, poured us

more coffee, and he ate as I sipped my coffee. We didn't say anything to each other but we'd glance and nod our heads every now and again. I finished my third Dixie cup of coffee and stood up. Papa Tanks looked over his shoulder at me and chuckled a bit.

"Eat and go 'way, huh?"

I smiled at him. "Thanks for breakfast, Pa-Paw." "You get enough to eat?"

"Yes."

I flexed my arm muscles at him and he squinted and patted at the little bulge in my bicep.

"You a grown man now, eeh?" I nodded and he rustled my hair and pulled me into his side and nuzzled his head against mine. He let go of me and said, "Not quite a man yet, but you getting close. You still need to grow some whiskers, soon enough though, my yout'."

I glanced at the clock in the den. *Captain Planet* was about to come on. Papa Tanks slapped his hand on the table and I flinched.

"Ay, boy, you listening to me? You'll never starve 'cause you know how to cook, I say."

He squinted at me, lowered his shoulders to my level from his chair, and poked me in the belly and tickled my sides, and we both laughed and I squirmed until he let me go.

"Alright, now run along, go watch the TV."

"Okay, Pa-Paw," I said and ran into the front den.

I clicked on the TV just as the theme song was playing and

I sang along, "Captain Planet, he's a hero—"

"Bobby-sock, I am the hero!" Papa Tanks called to me from the kitchen.

He let out a big belly laugh and I laughed too.

THE

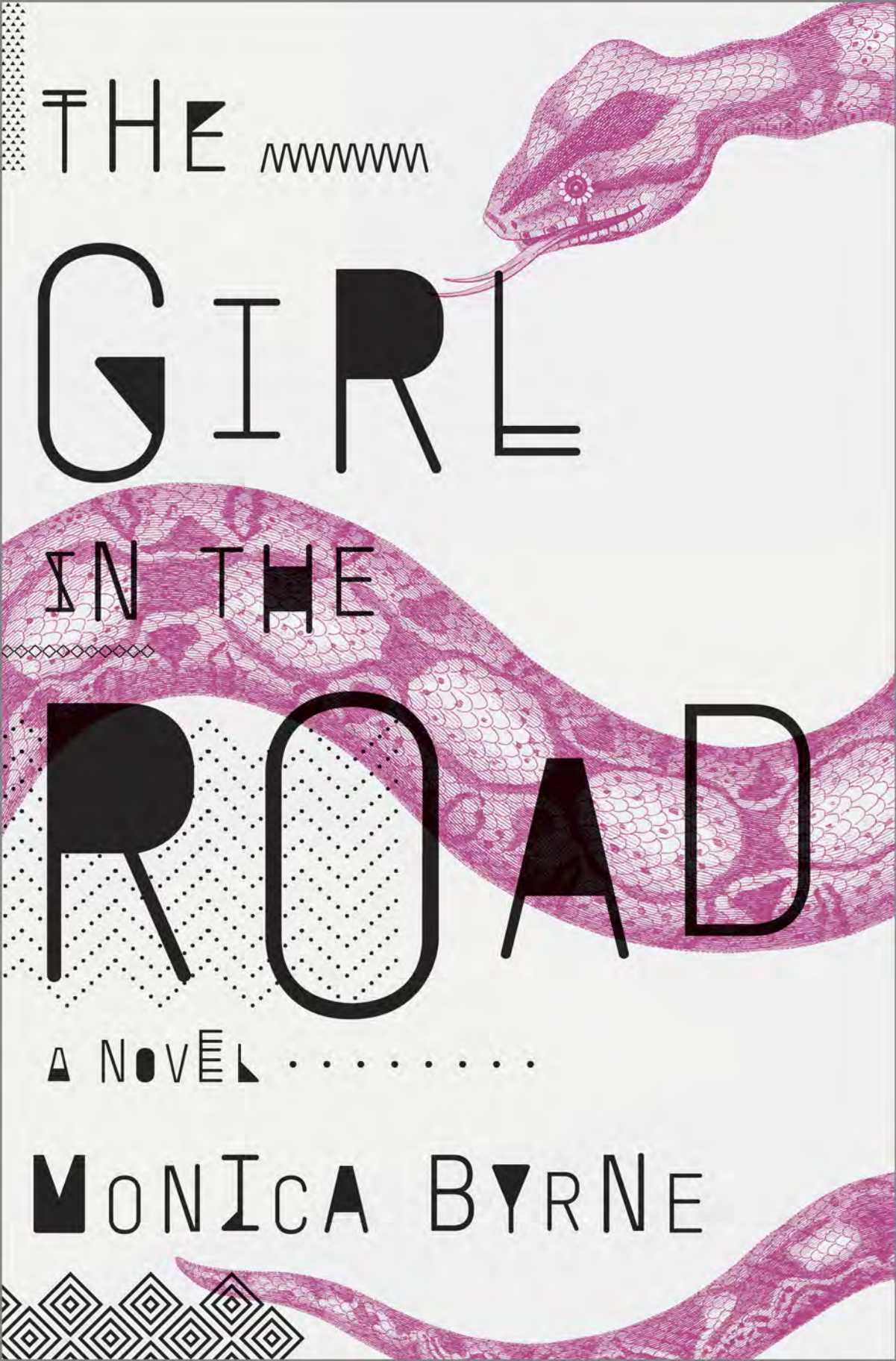
GIRL

IN THE

ROAD

A NOVEL

MONICA BYRNE



THE
GIRL
IN THE
ROAD



THE
GIRL
IN + THE
ROAD



Monica Byrne



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

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First Edition

BOOK I

Meena

The Third Flight

The world begins anew, starting now.

I pick my kurta up off the floor and put it back on. The blood makes it stick to my skin. This is a soap opera. It can't be real. I walk back up the hallway toward the kitchen and press the wounds to see how deep they are. I feel panicked. I need to find a knife and break more glass with it. Instead I remember that I dealt with a wound like this at Muthashi's clinic, once, when we got a little girl who'd been bitten by a snake in a strange place, her solar plexus, down in the hollow between the shells of her breasts. I helped apply ointment and white bandaging in a cross. She looked like a little Crusader.

I become calm. This is what happened to me, too.

I don't know who put the snake in my bed. I just know I need to leave home right now because someone here means me harm. It might be Semena Werk. They say they're a humanitarian organization and not a terrorist one, but I've heard of them migrating south, targeting Keralam, though never so creatively, a snake in a

bed, that's new. And already Mohini's voice is in my head, scolding me for blaming Ethiopians because of my family history, before I know anything, really. Her voice is so strong. I have to remind myself every few seconds that we're not together anymore. We'd been planning a hero's journey as lovers, Sita and Rama, Beren and Lúthien, Alexander and Hephaestion. Instead I'll go alone.

I'm already at the kitchen counter and pick up my satchel, which contains my scroll, mitter, and cash. I walk out the door and around the pookalam we've been growing by adding a new ring of blossoms for each festival day. The steps lead to the iron gate, the gate unlatches, and then I'm by the road, which is steaming from the monsoon.

I hear gunfire in the distance.

Mohini says: Calm yourself. It's just the firecrackers of children celebrating Onam early.

You're right, I say. I'm not in my right mind. I know this. My heart is pumping adrenaline instead of blood. I start walking and physical realities calm me: mist rising from the asphalt. Then the rain starts again and I withdraw back into my head. I have to get used to being solo again if I'm going on this journey alone. I like company, but only the kind that doesn't ask me to explain myself. I'm simple. Do good, be good, feel good.

I pass the cathedral and the stone wall of the old town rises up on either side of the road. I pick up to a jog. My satchel bounces off my ass. I'm soaked. I can't get any wetter than I am. Gold and pink bougainvillea get in my face and I raise my arm to protect myself. Here's another good reason for leaving home: there's so much shit blocking me down here. Like vines. And even when it's not raining, the air is so thick in the South. It's like breathing coconut juice.

My initial path is clear. I need to go north, to Mumbai, and

given the concentration of Ethiopian migrants there, do some research. I have some college friends in the city—Mohan from the Campus Alliance for Women, Ashok from Indian comp lit, Deepti from rugby. I think she lives in one of the fancy high-rises near the Taj that collects rainwater for showers. I'm thinking of Deepti, muscled and dripping in her shower, when I realize I'm already approaching Vaddukanatha at the center of town. I don't remember the last ten minutes. I digress, especially in crisis.

I reach Round East, the road that surrounds the temple complex at the center of the city, and slow to a walk. I'm ringing the heart of the world. There are bright banners arching overhead to celebrate Onam, the end of the monsoon. It's Uthradam Day. We're supposed to buy vegetables today. I see a vendor I talked to just an hour ago and turn away before she sees me. I shouldn't speak to other people right now. I know I'm in a manic state but it also feels like a sanctified state.

I turn onto Round South and there's a parade of children coming toward me, defying the rain, like me. They're dressed in white and gold. They're not well organized. Some boys in the front are carrying a banner that says THRISSUR SPECIAL PRIMARY SAYS WELCOME AND BLESS US KING MAHABALI, but some rowdy girls are breaking rank and rushing forward, touching the ground and darting back in a game of inscrutable rules. I have to change my course to avoid them. One of the girls hails me and I don't answer, so out of spite, she calls me Blackie. Lovely. Another reason to leave.

I pass Melody Corner, where Mohini gives voice and dance lessons, and take a left onto Kuruppam Road. Distance grows between me and the heart of the world. Now there's the march of devotional icons all the way down to Station Road. Shiva and Jesus wear gold to see me off.

I turn into the train station lot. My blood still feels like lemon

juice. The autoshaws sidle up to me, warbling, and I wave them off. I go to the counter and ask for a ticket to Mumbai. I don't make eye contact, which makes it hard for people to hear me, weirdly, always, so the teller has to ask me again. Then he holds out a scanner for my mitter. I hold it out, then snatch it back as if I've been burned. I can't use my mitter because I might be being tracked, either by Semena Werk or by the police, or both. I can't rule it out. Nobody can know I boarded a train to Mumbai.

The teller is startled.

I say, "I'm sorry, I forgot, I need to pay in cash."

He rolls his eyes and fans himself while I dig in my satchel for the wad of rupees. I hand them over. They're soaked. He tells me to look into the retinal scanner. I'd forgotten this, too—all the new security measures. I'm flustered. I tell him I have an eye condition and that I'm sorry I'm such a bother. He reaches under his counter and pulls out a stamp pad and stamps my hand with a bar code and waves me on. An express maglev train leaves in fourteen minutes. I'm fleeing in style.

The platform is sheltered so I can step out of the rain, finally. Once there I realize I haven't eaten since breakfast. I walk to one of the hole-in-the-wall kiosks, where a man looks out from under hanging metal spoons. I order idlee and sambar and hand over a five-hundred-rupee note. He takes it by the corner like it's a rotten sardine and calls a boy to take it and store it in the special box they keep for paper money. I'm lucky I have cash on me at all. I only carry it to buy spices from Sunny, the spicewaala on the corner of Palace Road and Round East, whose cardamom seeds are the freshest because he picks them in his mother's garden. He wasn't there today, though, so I had to go to somebody else. I still have six plastic baggies full of spices for the Onam feast I'll no longer be making.

There's no one to take care of now, and no one to take care of me.

It's clear that life continues after trauma. What's not clear is whether it's worth continuing to live.

A horn sounds in the distance. I look south. The train is coming, saffron yellow, with its silver emblem, the Lion of Sarnath, and its triad of lights, the top one shining like a third eye.

I have thirty seconds to end this story.

Everyone is crowding the platform. Everyone ignores the safety line. Everyone is so close to death. I move through them, toward the track. Some are closer to death than others. I move my right foot forward and then my left. I repeat the motion. Now I'm closer than anyone. I repeat. I repeat again. Now I'm in the track. I repeat. I repeat again.

The train triples in size.

My legs go weak.

I hear a shout from the crowd. The shout multiplies into many shouts and a thicket of hands pulls me forward.

I close my eyes and feel a great wind at my back, so close it makes my muscles itch.

So the dream continues.

When I open my eyes there's a crowd of people reproaching me with big angry eyes and I know I have to offer some explanation and so I emit lies that I hope will mollify them. "Thank you. I wanted to cross the track but I cut it too close. Thank you. I have a blind spot in my right eye. Thank you."

I'm a minor celebrity on the platform now, which is the last thing I wanted. Stupid, chutiya, stupid. I can't draw attention to myself.

I board the train and take my seat. Back to the dream, back to business. I watch the parking lot for another attempt by Semena

Werk, a bomb or an assassin, or for a sudden burst of police saying, Wait, Stop This Train; we need to question one R. G. Meenakshi, also known as Meena, Meerama, Mimi, Nini, Kashi, or M.

I don't see any police. But I do see a girl on the platform, staring at me.

She's not Indian, too dark even for a Malayalee, probably an African migrant, a rag picker or rat catcher. Her dress is rumpled, once pink, now mottled mustard. Her head is covered like a Muslim, but her dress only comes to mid-calf and she's barefoot. They won't let her on the train barefoot. She fits no prepoured religiocultural profile. She might be a new religion, an immigrant religion. It wouldn't be the first time it's happened in India.

I don't know why she's staring at me. I hate making eye contact anyway so I drop my eyes but I can feel her still staring. What the fuck is wrong with her. Though I could also ask what the fuck is wrong with me, given that I just walked in front of a train.

I'm distracted by a mother and daughter who sit down across from me. They're both immaculately dry and dressed in matching purple saris. The daughter lets her eyes go soft and unfocused around my head because she wants to read my aadhaar, my unique ID and cloud profile, to see what sort of person I am and treat me accordingly. But I keep my aadhaar locked. I'm old-fashioned like that. What you see is what you get. This girl is the opposite. I see her life haloed around her head like a charm bracelet: impeccable schooling, tours abroad, a Brahmin surname. And she's definitely not impressed with me, or with my choice not to display my own aadhaar, or the fact that I'm drenched, or my butch clothes, or my "African" cornrows that Mohini braided and teased me that I was asking for it. For a second I want to turn on my aadhaar just to fuck with her and let slip that I'm Brahmin too. But I stop myself. As Mohini also told me, being looked down upon is good for the soul, good for empathy, good training for a human.

The doors of the train pinch closed with a hiss and a woman's voice tells us to seat ourselves. I switch off my glotti because I'm about to hear the same thing in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, English, and Mandarin. Now that I know we're leaving soon I feel safe enough to look out the window. And as soon as I do I wish I hadn't.

The barefoot girl hasn't moved. She's still staring at me. She might be twelve and she has baby-fat cheeks and a button nose. Her dress has slipped off her shoulder. She has this expression on her face like I've betrayed her.

I look away. I have other things to worry about than a mentally unstable African girl.

A warm electric hum runs beneath our feet. I hum the same note under my breath until the tones match perfectly and I can't tell one from the other. The note slides up and the train lifts. We're airborne. We slide forward on silken tracks of air.

The barefoot girl is no more.

My hometown, Thrissur, the center of the heart of the world, passes by. The city turns to suburbs, then paddies and fields, then jungle. The train gathers speed. I forget to be vigilant. Mundane-ness returns. Banana palms beat by like a metronome. I'm always calmed by being in motion. I feel like a tsunami. I can only go forward. I can't stop until I come ashore, wherever that might be.

The mother and daughter across from me are already asleep, their heads tented together. All my adrenaline retreats from service and leaves me beached and my eyelids begin to flutter.

I dream of an age of miracles, when it only takes two hours to ride all the way from Keralam to Mumbai. And then I wake to find that the age of miracles is Now.

Mumbai Live

Dusk in Mumbai. There's one star in the sky for thirty million souls.

I'm stepping off the train with seven hundred fellow humans and I don't have a place to sleep tonight. Not that I'll be in Mumbai long. Just long enough to plan for the wheres and the hows of the journey. I think again of Mohan, Ashok, and Deepti, but they'd ask me why I was in Mumbai and so I'd have to tell them about the snake, which would lead to other questions I don't know how to answer yet.

Right now I'm hungry and my wounds still sting, so I have to take care of my body. I still have my white box of food. I sit down on the platform away from the crowds with my back to the wall. I use one hand to break the idlee and the other hand to slip inside my jacket to palpate the bites in my skin. They hurt. It's a bright, prismatic pain that means infection. So after I eat, I have to locate first aid.

Just when I finish eating, I see the barefoot girl get off the train.

At least, that's my first thought. It looks like the same girl, still head covered, still barefoot, still unplaceable. How did she get on the train? We left her behind. There's no way she could have boarded it unless she hitched and then was let on by a conductor who didn't make her pay. Only wealthy people could afford that train. Did she follow me? I watch her. I grind my palm into the cement until I feel pain. Then Mohini says to me, soothingly: In a manic state, one sees connections where there are none. You're not usually like this. You're of a sullen nature, certainly, but not paranoid.

I'm sitting behind a support beam, so the girl can't see me unless I let her. She joins the flow of the crowd but moves at half the pace. She looks around. She's clutching her dress, fabric balled in her fists. If this were the first time I was seeing her I'd think about approaching her and helping her. Mohini would, in an instant. Her heart bled for the charismatic lost.

She departs through one of the gates to the outside. I put the last of my idlee in my mouth and get up and head out of the train station in the opposite direction.

Outside of Victoria Terminus there's chaos. D. N. Road is a human river, clogged to a halt with cars, trucks, buses, bicycles, rickshaws, autos, and autorickshaws. A local train glides overhead on its way to the suburbs. I smell oil, sparks, and sewage, all the smells I forgot about while living in a hippie Keralite enclave. People on foot weave between the vehicles and animals weave between the people on foot. There are cows, too. I read that the tourism office lets them loose for ambiance.

On the other side of the road begins Azad Maidan, the gathering ground. At one end there's a cricket game in session, at the other end, a protest. From what I can see it looks like Ethiopian domestic workers. I walk faster. They're everywhere, Kerala and Mumbai both.

Not everywhere, says Mohini, Not at all. This is your fear speaking to you. Your family history.

A flock of children runs toward me, breaks around me, and re-forms behind me. I calm down. I know this city. Already I'm remembering the grid and my orientation within it. I feel good. This is the manic phase of psychosis but it feels good for the duration, and only abnormal afterward, so I'll just accept this, that there's nothing I can do to change my course. I remember this is the park where I bought a first edition of *Crime and Punishment* and

read it while eating bhelpuri from a newspaper cone. I sat under the bodhi tree, right over there, the one with the perfect shape. Enlightenment de Dostoevsky.

An explosion goes off.

I fall to the ground and cover my head.

Onam, I tell myself, it's just Onam firecrackers again, even here in Mumbai, they're celebrating a Keralite festival, that's nice.

But then I see a circle of motionless bodies at the end of the green where the protest was and so, it's not firecrackers.

I turn around and see the barefoot girl, staring at me from across the green.

Now things are starting to make sense. I take off in the opposite direction. I'm running perpendicular to everyone else who's either running away from the explosion or toward it. It's like a game. I'm dodging missiles. I collide with someone and I fall so hard my skull bounces. I get up and keep running.

I run till I hit Fashion Street and then turn south. I just assume the barefoot girl's following me. If she's still barefoot, that's fucking dangerous for her, and I can outrun her in boots, especially on stone roads. The faces of people I pass begin to change. First, people who are running toward the explosion. Then, people who only heard the explosion and are worried. Then, people who are still oblivious to any explosion that might have happened and are going about their lives, hefting mangoes at street-side stands.

I'm beginning to get tired. I can't keep running. This is like a movie. What does an action hero do? She takes a turn onto a side street and then ducks into a shop and lets her pursuer run past. So that's what I do. I thank The Film Industry in my head and then take a sharp turn into an alley and count one, two, three shops, then duck into the fourth one, which turns out to be a pharmacy, which solves the problem I began with, of needing first aid.

I get out of sight of the doorway and bend over, wheezing. I

hear a cry from the woman behind the counter. She's asking me if I'm all right. I hold up my hand. I can't talk yet.

"You're bleeding," she says.

I look down at my kurta. So I am. The snakebites have opened up again, probably while I was running.

"Did you come from Azad Maidan? Is it from the terrorists?"

So the news hit the cloud already. "Yes," I say.

"Lie down," she says.

I do, out of sight of the doorway. I watch the ceiling and listen to the sound of drawers being opened, product wrapping rustling. I count to forty.

The attendant's face reappears over me. "Fucking Habshee," she says. "They want to live like Indians now."

Here I would usually say what Mohini would want me to say: first, that I'd like to know which Indians she's talking about. And second, that Habshee is a derogatory word for black people and she shouldn't use it. And third, that Habshee doesn't equal Ethiopian.

But right now I don't care.

The attendant begins peeling up my kurta. And then I remember the nature of the wounds and force it back down. She's startled.

"Sorry," I say, "they're not shrapnel wounds, they're something else. I'll take care of it."

She looks hurt but she hands me all of the supplies she'd gathered. I start peeling a square of clearskin but my hands are shaking. She watches me. Then she snaps her fingers.

"You! You went to IIT-Bombay, yes?"

I look at her face again. I realize it's the exact same attendant who worked here when I was at university nine years ago, and had my little episode over Ajantha, not unlike my current episode. Now it occurs to me that every word I say to this woman, and every minute more I spend here, is a liability.

"I have to go," I say. "I can pay for these."

She waves it off. "But how are you?" she says. "You were so sad. I never forgot about you."

"I'm fine," I say. Then I start making things up in case anyone comes to question her later. "Been living in Gandhinagar. Just in town to see family."

"For Onam? Aren't you Malayalee?"

"Nope," I lie. "Just a darkie Gujarati."

That shuts her up.

I thank her for the supplies and head back to the street. No sign of the barefoot girl, so my ruse worked. Why did I say I was from Gandhinagar? That's where my mother's from. It's deep dusk now. The sky is lilac and all our faces glow.

I have to find another place to apply the dressing, the farther away from the explosion, the better. The barefoot girl can't track me if I'm on wheels. I turn to face traffic and raise my arm to flag down an autoshaw, but one with a driver sees me first and veers to the curb. Its cord is dragging in the street so I pick it up and tuck it back before I get in. I tell her to take me to the first place I think of: Butterfly, a Singaporean club at the north end of Marine Drive. Mohini pointed it out to me when we visited last monsoon. It was very much her scene and very much not mine, but that's a good thing, now. Even if the barefoot girl tracked me there, they wouldn't let her in.

The driver powers up. I can see her smiling in the mirror. She has two dimples big enough to hold cardamom seeds. She might be fifteen.

As we speed up she begins shouting, loud enough to be heard over the wind, and I strain to listen so I can respond, but I realize she's talking to someone in her ear. Her sister. Wedding plans. The caterer has fallen through but she knows someone else, a brother

of a boyfriend, who's cheap but not cheap enough to insult their in-laws.

Then the buildings pull back like stage curtains and I see the ocean. We stop at a red light. It's beautiful, the golden light on black water. The wind blows in from the bay. The ocean tang is stronger here, dirtier and saltier than in Keralam. There are more spices in this sea.

The light turns green and we swerve right onto Marine Drive. When we break free of the swarms and hit open road, she floors the acceleration and hugs the curve and I press my hand to the side to keep from sliding out. A fingernail moon drops into the sea. I fight to keep sight of it. It means something.

It's full night by the time we reach Butterfly. The autorickshaw slides to a stop and the driver says, "Yashna, wait," and turns around, holding out her wrist with a cheap mitter flashing.

"Do you take cash?"

She wags her head and turns over her palm.

I pay her and tip generously. She tucks the bills into a pocket sewn onto her kurta. "Thank you very much!" she says in English without looking back. I step out and she floors the pedal and is gone.

Butterfly is the neon confection I remember. The bathroom is down a black hall with pink track lighting. In the stall I get toilet paper and ball it up and run it under the faucet and then go back into the stall. For the first time, I take off my jacket and peel up my kurta all the way up over my breasts. The cloth is stuck to the dried blood and rips the scabbing when I pull up. Fresh blood wells like tears and runs down my belly. I wipe it up and press the wet wad of toilet paper to the wound, or rather the constellation of wounds, five scratches of varying depths, not deep but not superficial, either. I don't know what kind of snake it was. It wasn't

a cobra, krait, or viper, because I know them all by sight and anyway, I'd be dead by now. This snake was colored golden bronze. I take out my scroll and search for images, but none are the right kind of gold, or at least not native to Keralam. It might be an African species. If it is, that would tell me something.

I wipe up the wounds, apply oil, smear some on my throat because it smells like peppermint, press squares of clearskin to the wounds, and then the larger white bandage over them. I flex my torso to make sure it'll stay in place.

I come out and look in the mirror. I'm still wearing what I put on in our bedroom in Thrissur this morning. I feel the need to alter my appearance. I take my jacket off, then, and stuff it in my satchel. I roll up the sleeves of my kurta past my elbows and undo three more buttons. I can do nothing radical with my jeans or boots. So I start unbraiding my hair. There's something about dressing my own wounds and fixing my own hair that makes me feel invincible. Look on my works, ye Mighty: I both heal and adorn my own body. In fact I could go for a drink, now.

Here is my new strategy: act normal.

When I come out into the club there's a people-scape of black silhouettes against violet light. A Meshell Ndegeocello bhangra remix is making the floorboards shake. The bartender looks like an old Bollywood hero with shaved and pregnant biceps. He's wearing a threadbare T-shirt with holes along the seams, carefully placed, Dalit chic, not authentic. His eyes flicker up around my head and, seeing nothing, look back down at me.

"What can I get you, madam?"

"Jameson's."

He takes a second look at me. "Malayalee?" he says.

How'd you guess, chutiya?

"Nominally," I say. "My family's lived in Mumbai since the Raj." Lying is so easy and useful, I don't know why I ever stopped.

“Isn’t it Onam?”

“I guess.”

“Not much one for tradition, huh?”

“Not really.” This bartender talks too goddamn much. And I’m a quiet person. Talking takes energy and anyway, nothing I want to say comes out right. I use my body to talk, when I can, but that’s not an option here, so I say, “We live in Santa Cruz East. Haven’t been down much lately. What’s going on around here?”

“Oh, bombs on Azad Maidan, the usual.” He concentrates on pouring my drink, looks angry.

“It’s probably Semena Werk,” I say. It’s prejudicial speech that Mohini would warn me against. Given the snake. Given the bare-foot girl. Given Family History. “They can’t be reasonable.”

“So they bomb their own people?”

“They don’t think of them as their own people. They think of them as traitors.”

“True.” The bartender pushes the glass of whiskey to me. I take a sip and, as soon as the sting reaches my stomach, start to unkink. I hadn’t realized how nonlinear the day has been. Now things feel like they’re proceeding in order.

“Looked like you needed that.”

“I did.”

“Glad I could oblige.”

I’m beginning to feel comfortable. This may be the end of the mania. Or it may be a new phase of the mania.

“So what else is going on downtown?” I ask.

“Lots of foreigners moving in, especially because of Energy Park.”

“Which is—?”

“It’s the cluster of towers at the end of Nariman Point, the one that looks like Oz. You should go see it if you haven’t. They have a new museum in the HydraCorp building.”

“A museum of what?”

“Energy.”

“That could mean a lot of things.” HydraCorp is one of the biggest multinational energy conglomerates. They’re also the hippest because they invest five percent of all profits in developing weird new energy sources. I read about a device to power a Gandhian cotton wheel with human shit. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Have you heard of the Trail?” he asks.

I pause. Mohini and I saw an episode of *Extreme Weather!* about the Trail a few years ago. The bartender sees I know what he’s talking about and says, “At the museum, they give you the corporate version, but it’s still worth seeing.”

Now memories come back, shook loose by whiskey. The Trail seemed unreal: a floating pontoon bridge moored just offshore from Mumbai, which spanned the whole Arabian Sea, like a poem, not a physical thing. I asked Mohini what she thought it’d be like to walk on it all the way to Africa. She received my enthusiasm in her gracious way but cautioned that the Trail was all blank sky and faceless sea, the perfect canvas upon which to author my own madness.

“What’s the corporate version?”

“I can’t tell you. Only, don’t call it ‘The Trail’ when you’re there.”

“Why?”

“They try to discourage people from swimming out to it and walking on it.”

I am amazed. “People walk on the Trail?”

“I’ve heard of—hey, Arjuna!”

Another man is in my space. He’s well groomed, wearing a silver-gray shirt, unbuttoned to show a bush of glossy chest hair. He leans across me to kiss the bartender and his leg presses against my knee. He withdraws and presses his palms to me in apology.

And when we make eye contact I realize I know him: Arjuna Swaminathan, half Persian. He was in my nano seminar at IIT. I used to fantasize about him instead of paying attention to the lecture. But unlike the clerk at the pharmacy, he doesn't seem to recognize me.

The bartender says, "Arjuna, I was just telling—what is your name?"

I need to be careful. I lie again. "Durga."

"I'm Sandeep," says the bartender, and plants a clear shot in front of Arjuna, who takes a seat next to me and rolls up his sleeves. His hands are huge. His fingers are muscular. I can see the veins snaking up his forearms. "I was just telling Durga about the Trail. Didn't someone try to walk it last monsoon?"

"Oh yes, people try. They're crazy. Mostly poor kids who hear they can make a living from fishing and so they swim out to it and no one ever hears from them again."

"Arjuna should know," Sandeep says to me. "He works for HydraCorp."

"Do you work on the Trail?"

"No. But I can see it from my office window pretty far into the distance. Every now and then you can see a blur against the sea, so you know someone's camping, because they get special camouflage pods. They only walk at night."

"So they don't get caught."

"I imagine."

"What's the penalty if they do?"

"A night in jail, a month in jail, whatever the police feel like. It's corporate trespassing. But we don't have the resources to patrol it all the time. If you want to just feel what it's like, you can—"

Sandeep snaps his fingers in Arjuna's face. "Don't tell her!"

"Don't tell her what, chutiya?"

"I told her she has to go see for herself."

Then Sandeep leaves to help someone else and Arjuna turns to me, opening his body to face mine, spreading his legs. “He means the museum,” he says smoothly. “I can get you free tickets.”

On another night, I would not be impressed by his moves. But he’s sexy, despite himself. This is a familiar sequence: see someone with potential, want to fuck them, fuck them. It is such a clean exercise of power, such a simple application of effort, leading to a desired result. He hasn’t asked about my aadhaar. He didn’t even check. I appreciate that.

I keep looking at the floor. Sometimes I can only talk to other people if I can make myself believe I’m talking to myself. “Would you go walk on the Trail, if you could?”

He shakes his head, Western-style. “No, I don’t see why. It’s like kids who ride the tops of trains. A thrill for thrill-seekers, but that’s not me. I have a nice enough life.”

And I can tell he does. I can tell he’s a tech prince, an unmarried Third Culture playboy with a modern flat and a few servants. He’s an only child. His parents are divorced. He works out every morning in his tower’s basement gym. I can picture the wings of his iliac crest.

“Who needs thrills?” I say.

He smiles, leans back. “You remind me of someone I used to know,” he says, “a girl at college. She wore heavy boots and a scarf around her neck, even in monsoon. She never looked anyone in the eye. She came to class alone and she never spoke.”

I think: I didn’t make eye contact because eye contact is too intense for daily use and I didn’t speak because nothing would ever fucking come out of my mouth right. Sex was how I said what I wanted to say.

“I heard she dropped out,” he continues. “But I remembered her. Fierce, but shy, like a femme trapped in a butch body.”

I think: How perceptive of you.

But I don't say that. Right now I'm playing Durga, so I say what Durga would say. "What would you say, if you saw her today?"

"Probably? . . . I would ask her for a kiss."

Now my whole loin area is burning. The conversation goes on but the goal is secured, so it's all filler, now, and my mind sustains small talk with Arjuna as I'm having another conversation with myself: I need a place to sleep for the night. He's smarmy but my body needs this. I need the flavor of someone else in my mouth besides Mohini. I can delay planning for my journey or even better, consider this a part of it. I assure myself it makes sense that a day including an assassination attempt and a terrorist attack would end in the urgent need to fuck. In fact I can't even think about anything else right now but fucking this man.

When we leave the nightclub and mount his scooter, before we pull away, I scan the waterfront for the barefoot girl, sitting and looking at the bay, her headscarf rippling along the rampart. I don't see her.

The Trans-Arabian Linear Generator

I wake up alone in a pool of sunlight.

I'm lying in a wad of white sheets. I've slept maybe two hours. I'm still too wound up. The mattress sheet came off in the night and the pillows are all on the floor except the one we used to prop up each other's hips at various points. There are stiff spots in the fabric where our juices dried and left solids behind. I'd forgotten what it was like to have sex with a man. Mohini, by the time I left, had fully changed into a woman with woman-parts. We celebrated with a rosewater cake. I'm a good cook when I want to be. There's

so rarely an occasion that merits my talents. But I was so happy to love her, finally, as she wanted to be loved and in the body she wanted.

But when a man is inside me, I feel like the eye of my body is held open, and I'm not allowed to blink.

And how is it possible that . . . Anwar? I can't believe this but I can't remember his name. My mind is blank. I'm sure it started with an A. This is ridiculous. But regardless of his name, why didn't he recognize me from college? Maybe he does, and he just never said so. Maybe we had sex and now he's going out to get the police, who are looking for me, a Malayalee on the run, nursing a snakebite to the solar plexus. Maybe he was filing away the information to use against me later.

This might be a trap. In fact I'm sure it is.

I can't run out of the room this second. I have to think. I sit down. I use the breathing exercises Muthashan taught me when I was little, but they fail.

I find the bathroom, get in the shower, and turn it on icy-cold. I count to ten.

When I get out of the shower I at least have the illusion that I can think more rationally. I run my fingers over the patch covering my wounds. When I took off my shirt last night, he—*Arjuna*, for fuck's sake, *Arjuna*—didn't even acknowledge it was there. He wasn't really present, in general: a vigorous lover, but too aware of himself, parroting endearments from Bollywood films, never having broken the surface and learned the real language.

I find a towel and spread it on the floor. I sit and lean back against the shower door, naked, dewy bush out. I haven't had five minutes in the last eighteen hours to just sit and plan my next move. I close my eyes and try to remember the flavor of my life one day ago.

It was an overcast morning in Thrissur.

The neighbor's dog wouldn't stop barking.

We had a breakfast of chai and leftover Chinese.

Mohini and I had been planning a trip to Africa to try to understand My Family History, which I knew the facts of, but had never really tried to understand. But Mohini felt this was the root of my restlessness. My parents were murdered by a young woman who'd been their friend, an Ethiopian dissident. My mother was only six months pregnant. They were killed in the hospital where they both worked as doctors. I was saved by the nurses who found them.

So an atlas of the Horn of Africa was open on our kitchen table. I wanted to go right away, but Mohini stalled, because she was slower, more careful, the means of transportation important, given her awareness of energy, responsible usage, modes of travel, better and worse, pros and cons. Meanwhile the map became a tablecloth. Africa was obscured by takeout boxes.

I spot two paper tickets stuck in the bathroom mirror. They're white with silver lettering in a slender font: *Admit One to the Museum*. On the other side is the HydraCorp logo, a stylized multiheaded snake. On one ticket is written, *Wait for me*.

I don't fucking wait for anyone. I used to, for Mohini. She was the only one.

There's a knock at the door. I wrap a towel around my body and look through the eyehole. It's the dhobi with laundry. He looks Ethiopian. I open the door.

"I'm sorry, he's not here," I say.

"That's all right ma'am," he says, looking down. "We settle up weekly." He hands me a stack of shirts, ironed and starched.

I close the door without thanking him.

I drop the stack by the door and press my ear to it. He might be a member of Semena Werk. He might be gathering information on me. I probably shouldn't stay here. At the very least I should leave

before Arjuna gets back. Now I remember he climbed over me and pressed his body down and whispered in my ear that he was going to get me my breakfast and to make myself at home before dismounting and dressing and leaving. A door shut, a lock turned, and footsteps faded to silence.

I'll get my own breakfast. But I can use the ticket for the research I need to do.



Two hours later I'm back on Marine Drive, standing in front of the HydraCorp Museum. White seabirds are dipping and wheeling overhead. The museum is eleven stories tall and shaped like an eight-pointed star. The outer walls are transparent so I can see the exhibits bunched up inside like intestines.

The lobby is hung with flags representing the consortium of participant nations and corporations. India and Djibouti are prominent. I walk to a sickle-shaped desk and hand over my ticket. The attendant, seeing no aadhaar, hands me a map of the museum and a glossy pamphlet about HydraCorp's many projects.

I can see he's unnerved by my not meeting his eye so I try to put him at ease. I wave the pamphlet. "HydraCorp. Funny name for a company with lots of projects," I say.

He smiles, but I can tell he doesn't know what I mean. It's my fault. My jokes aren't really jokes. They're oblique and not funny to anyone but Mohini. We had a shared language. No one else speaks it. I have to remember that. It seems my suavility from last night wore off and I'm beached again on the shore of awkwardness.

The attendant tells me to start on the top floor, so I get in the Lucite elevator and say, "Eleven." The car begins a smooth ascent. I rise higher and higher above Back Bay, the curve of Mumbai. I see a silver thread bobbing on the surface of the water, stretching

toward a hazy horizon. That's that famous Trail, then. I stare at it all the way up.

Once on the eleventh floor I walk in the direction of a black doorway that says CINEMA in silver lettering. The word is comforting. I feel good. I'd like to sit still and watch an educational film. I enter a black velvet room shaped like a half-circle. When I sit, the room senses my presence and the screen dawns blue. I'm relieved it's not an immersive theater where the images get into your head and cup your eyeballs. I like there to be a distance between me and art. Mohini and I argued about that, with her feeling that I was being a Luddite on par with Luddites who impugned film as a valid art form in the early twentieth century. I disagreed. I still do.

The film begins. It's beautifully produced. The narrator is a woman speaking in English with a north Indian lilt and for once it doesn't annoy me. She tells me about the history of artificial energy on our planet. Wood. Water. Coal. Oil. Nuclear. Geothermal. Wind. Solar. The twins Fusion and Fission, both functional in laboratories, but still too expensive to be scaled up. And lastly Wave, which I think is what the Trail is. They call it Blue Energy, the successor to Green Energy. I'm excited for whatever Red Energy and Purple Energy and Orange Energy will turn out to be. I'm starting to feel euphoric.

The narrator doesn't call it the Trail. She calls it the Trans-Arabian Linear Generator, or TALG. She presents a succession of pleasing metaphors: that its technology draws from ancient pontoon bridges which, though remarkable for their time, only spanned distances of a few kilometers, like the Bosphorus or the Hellespont, in times of war. And then they were discarded, more easily disassembled than assembled. The narrator emphasizes that the TALG only resembles a pontoon bridge, as its overall shape is more like that of an upside-down caterpillar. Each segment is a hollow, inverted pyramid made of aluminum, and each sunward

surface is faced with solar paneling, which seems brilliant to me, makes me want to applaud. Between the segments are hinge arrays called nonlinear compliant connectors, each of which contains a dynamo, in each of which is suspended an egg of steel that bobs up and down as the wave does. This generates energy, as does the solar paneling, making the TALG a dual-action apparatus. Mohini would love this—I wonder if she knew about this. And then the energy is imported to its recipient plant in Djibouti—there is an image of a house in Djibouti lighting up, and a Djiboutian family rejoicing—via superconductor threads made of metallic hydrogen, a controversial material whose manufacturing process was perfected ten years ago. Despite its history of catastrophic accidents, metallic hydrogen is metastable, the narrator assures me; structurally sound, like an artificial diamond. She explains how the TALG was also a breakthrough in intelligent self-assembly on a mass scale, because every component of the TALG has an intelligent chip that, like a human cell, “understands” where it goes and what it’s supposed to do and can monitor and repair itself.

Then the tone of her voice changes. This is a pilot project, she cautions. HydraCorp and its partners, mainly the Djiboutian government, rich from recent oil wealth, wanted to know if this is a viable, sustainable form of energy after oil runs out, in which case they’ll build a TILG for the Indian Ocean and a TPLG for the Pacific Ocean and all the world’s oceans could be crisscrossed with energy generators like a fishnet flung across the entire planet. This is incredible. Mohini would be clutching at my sleeve right now if she were here. And how does the TALG stay roughly in the same place? Well, because of breakthroughs in materials science, the TALG is anchored to the seafloor by means of Gossamoor, synthetic silk modeled on the draglines of Darwin’s bark spider, native to Madagascar, which is not only the strongest sub-

stance known but weighs about twelve milligrams per thousand meters. And thanks to HydraCorp's partnership with China Telecom, the anchors parallel the SEA-ME-WE 3 undersea cable that carries data between Mumbai and Djibouti before veering up the Red Sea. And how does the TALG survive the many intrusions of maritime traffic? Well, gentle viewer, it turns out that the segments are programmed to sense oncoming ships and take on seawater, sinking up to thirty meters to let the ship pass, and then pumping the water back out to regain buoyancy.

The Trail is a conspiracy of ideal materials. I am fucking amazed.

When the presentation is done, a static map of the world appears and the narrator urges me to explore it with my fingers. I jump up to the screen. If I press my finger to any city in the world, a pie chart surfaces next to it, detailing the breakdown of that city's energy sources. This is marvelous. I press my finger to Djibouti. Thirty percent of their electricity is currently sourced from the TALG. The results are promising. And now I have a theory brewing in my mind, something I want to tell Mohini, a new field of study altogether, about how the source of a society's energy must necessarily shape their language, art, and culture. In the case of Djibouti, their people will be wavelike. Should I call it the socio-psychology of energy?—that then infuses its culture, even its individuals. Mohini was of a solar nature, certainly.

I need to find out my own.

Maybe that's why I'm here. Maybe the universe is conspiring in my favor.

After waiting a polite amount of time the narrator invites me to explore the rest of the museum and I take her up on it. I need to remember to ask the attendant who the voice actor is. I feel sentimental.

I descend a stairway that is slanted, crystalline. For each type of energy the narrator named, there's a dedicated floor, scientifically, technically, stylistically. I lose my intention of researching travel methods. I give myself to wonder. It's a palace of human invention. The Wood Gallery is paneled in sweet-smelling cedar and features a hologram of proto-Dravidian nomads chopping wood and throwing it onto a fire. They're wearing skins and pelts. They introduce a carcass of some woodland animal, which they roast, and it smokes and blackens. The hologram cuts away before they begin eating it, and resets, to one lone nomad wandering in the forest. She's gazing at the trees in wonder. She selects one, thanks it, and then chops it down with her stone ax. The sequence begins again.

I turn away and look at the exhibits against the wall. There's a display where you can select a wood chip, insert it into a clear box for burning, and then watch how much energy is generated. I burn six wood chips. I don't get tired of it. Everything is amazing to me. The display informs me that this gallery is powered by high-efficiency wood combustion, that in fact every floor is powered by the energy source it features. Next to the display there's a pair of immersive goggles that, when I put them on, casts me as a molecule of groundwater sucked up through a tree root. The journey up through the xylem is exhilarating. When I enter the leaf and get split up, I'm presented with a choice: *If you would like to go with the hydrogen atoms, say "hydrogen."* *If you would like to go with the oxygen atom, say "oxygen."*

I say, "Oxygen."

I'm released from the tip of the leaf and float out into the air. This is like flying. I look below me and there's a forest floor dappled with sunlight. I expect the simulation to pixelate and dissolve. But it doesn't. The trees are sharp and clear and I can see every leaf and flower. I keep floating. The programmer imagined a whole

world for me. She's more than a programmer, she's a storyteller, a creator goddess. I'm crossing over a slow-moving green river and then the land turns to desert, where a caravan of trucks makes its way across the waste.

I take off the goggles. I'm back in the Wood Gallery. The hologram sequence is right at the moment where the animal carcass burns. I watch it a second time and then a third time. I feel like I could watch it all day.

I descend the stairs and explore the Water Gallery, where the walls are made of waterfalls, and eight mills pinwheel on the energy they make. The floor is crisscrossed with streamlets, each of which powers a display table featuring a notable world dam.

Below these are the Coal Gallery (uninspired), the Oil Gallery (depressing), the Nuclear Gallery (neon orange and green), the Geothermal Gallery (my favorite besides the Wood), the Wind Gallery (I set all the turbines spinning), and the Fusion Gallery (a hologram of Enid Chung at her bench, making the discovery).

The Solar Gallery is on the second floor. There's a miniature array I'm invited to manipulate, a model of the Sun Traps in Sudan. I remember from the floating pie chart that they supply twenty percent of Europe's energy and forty percent of North Africa's, after ARAP (African Resources for African Peoples) repossessed the land their governments had sold off and forced new lease agreements. My euphoria increases: despite the snake, despite the terror, overall the world is only getting better.

Now is the time for me to undertake a great journey.

I float down the last staircase. I come to the same lobby where I'd first entered. I ask the attendant: "Where's the Wave Gallery?"

He points to a doorway in the wall behind the front desk. "Down one more flight," he says. "It's in the basement."

So this'll be the room dedicated to the Trail. From the doorway comes a warm chlorine smell. This staircase is concrete, not

crystalline. It looks much older than the rest of the building. I turn around to ask the attendant a question but he already has the answer: "It used to be a warehouse for fishwaalas. We preserved it and made it part of the museum."

I thank him. I wonder if he can see me glowing, if he can see that I'm a different person than I was when I first came in.

I descend the staircase and come into a low, broad room. In the ground there's a rectangular pool, maybe eight meters across. From this side to the far side is a pontoon bridge, each section bobbing with gentle artificial waves. I realize I'm looking at a prototype of the Trail.

A young woman stands up from where she'd been crouching on the opposite side of the pool. She's wearing a red swimsuit and holding a red foam buoy.

"Namaste!" she calls.

"Namaste. Are you the lifeguard?"

"Yes," she says. "The pool is only two meters deep, but that's enough to drown in. Have you watched the film?"

"The what?"

"The film in the cinema. About how the Trail works."

"I thought you weren't supposed to call it the Trail."

"You're right! The TALG. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"Go ahead and try it," she says.

"Try what?"

"Walking on it, silly!" Even from this far away I can see she gets dimples when she smiles. "That's what it's here for. I promise I won't judge you. Believe me, I've seen everything."

I can sense she's eager to see me try. She probably sees couples and families, mostly. Not another woman alone, like her. I can feel she wants me to succeed.

I take a step toward the edge of the pool. The concrete walls

have been painted with murals: a sunset on the left, a moonrise on the right.

I stall.

“So you just . . . walk across it?”

“Well, you can explore it any way you want. You can swim around it if you brought a swimsuit—there’s a changing room over there. But walking on it is the coolest thing, in my opinion.”

“Won’t it sink when I step on it?”

“It’s buoyant,” she says. I can tell she gives this speech a lot, but makes sure to infuse it with warm reassurance every time. “We call the segments ‘scales’ because they ripple. Each scale reaches down one meter and displaces three hundred and forty kilograms of seawater. Each scale is also hollow, made of aluminum alloy and shaped like an upside-down pyramid, with a hundred and thirty kilograms of ballast at the bottom to counteract the weight on the top. So you’re fine! Some water might slosh in and you might get your feet wet, but don’t worry. I haven’t seen them sink yet.”

“Oh yeah? How long have you worked here?”

She laughs. “Only two months, I guess. I’m on break from college.”

“Where at?”

“IIT-Bombay.”

“That’s where I went.”

“You did? What did you study?”

“Nano and comp lit.” I don’t tell her I left my second semester.

“What a mix. I’m studying nano too.”

“It’s useful,” I say. “Lots of jobs.”

She knows I’m still stalling. But she’s gracious enough not to say so. She says, “Do you want me to show you how to walk on it?”

“No, it’s all right,” I say. Now I feel ashamed. Apparently this has been done. I need to get over it.

I take off my boots. I place one bare foot on the surface of the

first scale, right in the center of its solar panel, and then transfer more and more weight to it. I'm surprised that it holds. My weight creates a wave and the wave travels up and down the Trail. The surface is rough like sandpaper, not smooth like what I think of as a solar panel.

I continue forward. I let my knees be soft. I hold out my arms like a dancing Shiva. The scales bob more vigorously and I stop to regain my balance. I keep going. I enter a sublime headspace: my body learns from the mistakes I don't have words for, and my anima makes corrections.

I take a final lurch to reach the opposite side. My feet are wet and leave dark prints on the floor. I come face-to-face with the young lifeguard. She's gorgeously built, short, solid, muscular, like a gymnast. Her smile is that of a girl well loved.

"Good job!" she says. "You're a natural."

"Are you?"

"Oh yeah," she says. "When I get bored here, I just run across it."

"Show me."

She smiles and puts down her foam buoy. Then she jogs across, as if it were a solid sidewalk. I'm amazed.

"How did you do that?"

"You just learn to read it," she calls from the other side. "Your body learns to anticipate how it's going to move when you step on it. It's just a matter of practice."

"I want to try again."

"Do it!"

I love her enthusiasm.

Taking the first step is easier this time. My body makes ten thousand unconscious calculations in terms of ankle, spine, wrist. I don't hurry.

"See? Now you're a pro," says the lifeguard when I'm by her side again.

I want to go back and forth all day and get as good as she is. "Have you ever walked on the real Trail?"

She looks over her shoulder to make sure no one is coming down the stairs, and then she sits down at the edge of the pool and dangles her legs in. I roll my pant legs up and sit down next to her. The water is warm.

"No," she says. "It's illegal. I would if someone took me there, though. It'd be interesting to try it out on the open sea where the waves are a lot bigger."

"Do you think it can be done?"

"People have tried."

"Do you know anyone who has?"

"Not personally. You hear rumors about desperate kids and extreme hikers and such. And then there are rumors *about* rumors, like cults and ghosts and whole villages that live off the Trail."

"What do you think?"

"I think there are more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in our philosophy!"

"Wouldn't expect Shakespeare from a nano major."

"Ohho?" she chides. "Free your mind."

She's right. I feel chastened. It was a cliché I said without thinking, only to prolong the conversation because I like her.

I try again. "So there are ghosts on the Trail."

"Well, I've heard of one, Bloody Mary. Supposedly she walks back and forth on the Trail and preys on travelers."

"Anyone seen her?"

"'Course not. But people never come back from the Trail, and so it's easy to say, oh, Bloody Mary got them."

"And not—"

"Not the hundred other things that could go wrong, right. I think it would be hell. Even if you were well prepared. You can't prepare for everything that could happen, even if you went to the Mart."

“The Mart?”

“It’s some kind of secret store in Dharavi. They cater to fish-waalas, but I heard they also have a special stock for ‘long-term workers.’”

“Like pods.”

“Yeah, camo pods. Walkers have to be careful. Security is lazy, but I imagine they don’t want to take chances anyway.”

“I wonder what walking on the Trail does to them.”

“What do you mean?”

What do I mean? I want to tell her all about my new theory of the sociopsychology of energy. How Mohini was of a solar nature but I’m just realizing here in this moment that I’m of a wavelike nature.

How I’m having a transcendent experience at this museum.

How I was at the Azad Maidan bombing yesterday.

How someone tried to assassinate me in my home in Thrissur.

How a barefoot girl has been following me and I think she’s an agent of Semena Werk but I haven’t seen her in twelve hours and so I think she lost me.

There’s so much I want to tell her. But I can’t get it out of my mouth. So instead I just splash my heel in the water.

The lifeguard smiles, rescues me. “What’s your name?” she asks.

I pause, then remember to say “Durga.”

“I’m Lucia,” she says. She gazes into space. “I’m studying nano because I want to learn how to make things like the Trail. Did you know that metallic hydrogen is what they use as the superconductor? Amazing. Fifty years ago they couldn’t even produce a stable sample.”

I stare at the pool surface. “I think some people are like superconductors,” I say. “They have no resistance to the energy they receive. They just convey it.”

Lucia looks at me and reaches out her hand toward mine.

At that moment, a Chinese couple comes down the stairs. They're wearing kurtas and jeans. They seem embarrassed to have interrupted us. They begin apologizing in English.

"No, it's certainly all right," says Lucia in English. She jumps up. "Would you like to try it?"

As they come forward, I get nervous and step away and raise my arm in farewell to Lucia. She looks sad that I'm leaving. "Durga," she calls, "it was nice talking to you."

I wag my head and begin up the stairs. Leaving so quickly feels wrong but I didn't even know what to say to Lucia when we were alone, much less with other people there.

I come up to the ground floor and see Arjuna at the desk. He is talking to the attendant.

My blood turns to adrenaline again. I turn around and go back down the steps. Back to Lucia. Back to the Chinese couple. They're standing by the side of the pool, looking doubtful.

"Oh, hi again!" says Lucia, brightening when she sees me. "Did you forget something?"

I speak in Marathi, hoping Lucia knows it, hoping the Chinese tourists don't have their glottis turned on. "May I go into the changing room? There's someone upstairs I don't want to see and I'm afraid he's going to come down here."

Lucia sees the look on my face and replies in Marathi, "Yes, of course. I'll cover for you."

As I head toward the changing room, I hear her say to the couple in English, "She needed the bathroom."

I close myself in. It's clear to me now. Arjuna did recognize me from college. He's part of the conspiracy. He means me harm too. The walls are painted with blueprints of the Trail. I stare at them to calm myself. I hear Lucia encouraging the Chinese couple, but as far as I can tell they both just step on the first scale and then back to safety. They thank her and ascend the stairs.

Then a new, manly voice. It's Arjuna. I can hear Lucia greet him but I can't hear what they're saying over the hum of the pool.

He asks her a question, sounding agitated.

She answers, sounding soothing.

He mumbles.

I hear steps.

I brace myself.

I hear an outer door open and close.

Then bare feet padding on concrete over to me. The door swings open.

"Accha, are you a runaway or what?" says Lucia, looking flustered.

"Is he gone?"

"Yes, I said I saw you heading to Churchgate. Cousin?"

"No."

"Husband?"

"No. I just shouldn't see him right now."

"He was hot."

"Yes."

"Are you married?"

"No."

She raises an eyebrow. "This sounds like a juicy story. At the very least you owe me dinner. You can tell me then."

"Okay."

"Want to stay in here a little longer? It's slow today. If anyone asks I'll say the changing room is out of order."

"Yes. Thank you."

She eyes me over, smirks, and shuts the door.

Entanglement

We never make it out to dinner. First she insists on making me chai in her tiny Colaba flat in the old bus depot, cooled only by a ceiling fan, and I tell her that Arjuna's a man I met but don't want to talk to now, which is true, and she seems satisfied.

Then she brings out a box of hashish. I feel anxious but I tell myself that even if Arjuna is part of the conspiracy with Semena Werk, there's no safer place I can be at the moment, and I can use tonight to decide what to do next. So I let my guard down and we smoke. Then we're hungry, so we order tiffin, and when the delivery boy knocks on the door, we scream, and then can't stop laughing when we open the door, and give him a big tip for putting up with us. Then we eat. Then we get in bed together.

She's not like Arjuna. She's very present. She traces my lips and tells me my mouth is shaped like a cowrie shell, which I've heard before. And when we've taken off each other's clothes and her hand passes over the patch between my breasts, she rests her hand back on the spot where I was bitten and asks, "What happened here?"

"Somebody tried to hurt me."

"Why would they do that?"

"I don't know."

In the night, it rains again. I'm still too wired to sleep so I lie awake listening. I've gotten maybe four hours of sleep in the last three days. But I don't feel tired. Meanwhile, Lucia passes in and out of sleep, each time with fresh insights from her dreams. Her innocence is starting to grate.

Near dawn, she whispers, "Durga . . . now we're bound up."

I clench up. This is it. She's going to cling to me like Arjuna did. "How so?"

“It’s like quantum entanglement. Our bodies have exchanged matter and so now we’re interlinked.”

She sounds intimate. I deflect. “I didn’t get that far in nano.”

“You learn it second year!”

I have to lie again. She’s making me lie. “I switched to comp lit after my first year.”

“Oh. Well, it means that if we think of our bodies as particles, our states are the same right now, but then when we separate, we remain entangled. Now it’s impossible to describe you without describing me, and vice versa. We tell each other’s stories by living our own lives.”

I feel angry. As angry as I felt euphoric six hours ago. I try to control my voice. “That could be scary. Depending.”

“True,” she says. “It means that relationships never end. Once made, they just influence each other backwards and forwards in time, for better or worse.” She nudges my arm open and docks her head against my breast. “But I’d say this is for better.”

So hackneyed. I kiss her head but transfer no love. It’s clear she’s suffered little in life and it pisses me off. I close my eyes and try to control my breathing. In general I can tell those who haven’t suffered trauma from those who have just by looking at them. It’s marked on their foreheads and it shows in their eyes. The ones who saw something unbearable and continued living anyway. I’m one of those even though I don’t have a conscious memory of it. As a baby I felt my mother die around me. And after a thing like that, why live?

I open my eyes and the barefoot girl is staring down at me with her finger in her mouth.

JENNIFER CLEMENT

PRAYERS

FOR THE

STOLEN



A NOVEL



PRAYERS
FOR THE
STOLEN

A NOVEL
JENNIFER CLEMENT



HOGARTH
London New York



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

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First Edition

PART ONE



Now we make you ugly, my mother said. She whistled. Her mouth was so close she sprayed my neck with her whistle-spit. I could smell beer. In the mirror I watched her move the piece of charcoal across my face. It's a nasty life, she whispered.

It's my first memory. She held an old cracked mirror to my face. I must have been about five years old. The crack made my face look as if it had been broken into two pieces. The best thing you can be in Mexico is an ugly girl.

My name is Ladydi Garcia Martinez and I have brown skin, brown eyes, and brown frizzy hair, and look like everyone else I know. As a child my mother used to dress me up as a boy and call me Boy.

I told everyone a boy was born, she said.

If I were a girl then I would be stolen. All the drug traffickers had to do was hear that there was a pretty girl around and they'd sweep onto our lands in black Escalades and carry the girl off.

On television I watched girls getting pretty, combing

their hair and braiding it with pink bows or wearing makeup, but this never happened in my house.

Maybe I need to knock out your teeth, my mother said.

As I grew older I rubbed a yellow or black marker over the white enamel so that my teeth looked rotten.

There is nothing more disgusting than a dirty mouth, Mother said.

It was Paula's mother who had the idea of digging the holes. She lived across from us and had her own small house and field of papaya trees.

My mother said that the state of Guerrero was turning into a rabbit warren with young girls hiding all over the place.

As soon as someone heard the sound of an SUV approaching, or saw a black dot in the distance or two or three black dots, all girls ran to the holes.

This was in the state of Guerrero. A hot land of rubber plants, snakes, iguanas and scorpions, the blond, transparent scorpions, which were hard to see and that kill. Guerrero had more spiders than any place in the world we were sure, and ants. Red ants that made our arms swell up and look like a leg.

This is where we are proud to be the angriest and meanest people in the world, Mother said.

When I was born, my mother announced to her neighbors and people in the market that a boy had been born.

Thank God a boy was born! she said.

Yes, thank God and the Virgin Mary, everyone answered even though no one was fooled. On our mountain only boys were born, and some of them turned into girls around the age of eleven. Then these boys had to turn into ugly girls who sometimes had to hide in holes in the ground.

We were like rabbits that hid when there was a hungry stray dog in the field, a dog that cannot close his mouth, and its tongue

already tastes their fur. A rabbit stomps its back leg and this danger warning travels through the ground and alerts the other rabbits in the warren. In our area a warning was impossible since we all lived scattered and too far apart from each other. We were always on the lookout, though, and tried to learn to hear things that were very far away. My mother would bend her head down, close her eyes and concentrate on listening for an engine or the disturbed sounds that birds and small animals made when a car approached.

No one had ever come back. Every girl who had been stolen never returned or even sent a letter, my mother said, not even a letter. Every girl, except for Paula. She came back one year after she'd been kidnapped.

From her mother, over and over again, we heard how she had been stolen. Then one day Paula walked back home. She had seven earrings that climbed up the cupped edge of her left ear in a straight line of blue, yellow and green studs and a tattoo that snaked around her wrist with the words *Cannibal's Baby*.

Paula just walked down the highway and up the dirt path to her house. She walked slowly looking down as if she were following a row of stones straight to her home.

No, my mother said. She was not following stones, that girl just smelled her way home to her mother.

Paula went into her room and lay down in her bed that was still covered with a few stuffed animals. Paula never spoke a word about what had happened to her. What we knew was that Paula's mother fed her from a bottle, gave her a milk bottle, actually sat her on her lap and gave her a baby bottle. Paula was fifteen then because I was fourteen. Her mother also bought her Gerber baby foods and fed her straight into her mouth with a small white plastic spoon from a coffee she bought at the OXXO shop at the gas station that was across the highway.

Did you see that? Did you see Paula's tattoo? my mother said.
Yes. Why?

You know what that means, right? She belongs. Jesus, Mary's son and Son of God, and the angels in heaven protect us all.

No, I didn't know what that meant. My mother did not want to say, but I found out later. I wondered how did someone get stolen from a small hut on a mountain by a drug trafficker, with a shaved head and a machine gun in one hand and a gray grenade in his back pocket, and end up being sold like a package of ground beef?

I watched out for Paula. I wanted to talk to her. She never left her house now but we had always been best friends, along with Maria and Estefani. I wanted to make her laugh and remember how we used to go to church on Sundays dressed up like boys and that my name had been Boy and her name had been Paulo. I wanted to remind her of the times we used to look at the soap opera magazines together because she loved to look at the pretty clothes the television stars wore. I also wanted to know what had happened.

What everyone did know was that she had always been the prettiest girl in these parts of Guerrero. People said Paula was even prettier than the girls from Acapulco, which was a big compliment, as anything that was glamorous or special had to come from Acapulco. So the word was out.

Paula's mother dressed her in dresses stuffed with rags to make her look fat but everyone knew that less than one hour from the port of Acapulco, there was a girl living on a small property with her mother and three chickens who was more beautiful than Jennifer Lopez. It was just a matter of time. Even though Paula's mother thought up the idea of hiding girls in holes in the ground, which we all did, she was not able to save her own daughter.

One year before Paula was stolen, there had been a warning.

It was early in the morning when it happened. Paula's mother, Concha, was feeding old tortillas to her three chickens when she heard the sound of an engine down the road. Paula was still in bed fast asleep. She was in bed with her face washed clean, her hair roped into a long black braid that, during the night sleep, had coiled around her neck.

Paula was wearing one of her father's T-shirts that he'd left behind when he went to the USA ten years ago and never returned. The T-shirt, which hung down below her knees, was made of white cotton and said the words *Wonder Bread* across the front in dark blue letters. She was also wearing a pair of pink panties, which my mother always said was worse than being naked!

Paula was deeply asleep when the narco barged into the house.

Concha said she'd been feeding the chickens, those three good-for-nothing chickens that had never laid an egg in all their lives, when she saw the tan-colored BMW coming up the narrow dirt path. For a second she thought it was a bull or some animal that had run away from the Acapulco zoo because she had not expected to see a light brown vehicle coming toward her.

When she'd thought of narcos coming, she always imagined the black SUVs with tinted windows, which were supposed to be illegal but everyone had them fixed so the cops could not look inside. Those black Cadillac Escalades with four doors and black windows filled with narcos and machine guns were like the Trojan Horse, or so my mother used to say.

How did my mother know about Troy? How did a Mexican woman living all alone with one daughter in the Guerrero countryside, less than an hour from Acapulco by car and four hours by mule, know anything about Troy? It was simple. The one and only thing my father ever bought her when he came back from the United States was a small satellite dish antenna. My mother was addicted to historical documentaries and to Oprah's talk shows.

In my house there was an altar to Oprah beside the one she had for the Virgin of Guadalupe. My mother did not call her Oprah. That is a name she never figured out. My mother called her Opera. So it was Opera this and Opera that.

In addition to documentaries and Oprah, we must have watched *The Sound of Music* at least a hundred times. My mother was always on the lookout to see when the movie would be programmed on a movie channel.

Every time Concha would tell us what had happened to Paula, the story was different. So we never knew the truth.

The drug trafficker that went to the house a year before Paula was stolen, only went to get a good look at her. He went to see if the rumors were true. They were true.

It was different when Paula was stolen.

On our mountain, there were no men. It was like living where there were no trees.

It is like being a person with one arm, my mother said. No, no, no, she corrected herself. Being in a place without men is like being asleep without dreams.

Our men crossed the river to the United States. They dipped their feet in the water and waded up to their waists but they were dead when they got to the other side. In that river they shed their women and their children and walked into the great big USA cemetery. She was right. They sent money; they came back once or twice and then that was that. So on our land we were clumps of women working and trying to raise ourselves up. The only men around inhabited SUVs, rode motorcycles and appeared from out of nowhere with an AK-47 hanging from their shoulder, a bag of cocaine in the back pocket of their jeans and a pack of Marlboro Reds in their front shirt pocket. They wore Ray-Ban sunglasses and we had to make sure we never looked into their eyes, never saw the small black pupils that lay there and was the path inside their minds.

On the news we once heard about the kidnapping of thirty-five farmers who were picking corn in fields when some men with three large trucks drove up and stole all of them. The kidnapers pointed guns at the farmers and told them to get into the trucks. The farmers were in the trucks standing pressed together like cattle. The farmers returned to their homes after two or three weeks. They had been warned that if they talked about what had happened, they would be killed. Everyone knew they were stolen to be field hands and pick a marijuana crop.

If you were quiet about something then it never happened. Someone would write a song about it for sure. Everything you're not supposed to know about, or talk about, eventually turned up in a song.

Some idiot is going to write a song about those kidnapped farmers and get himself killed, my mother said.

On weekends my mother and I went to Acapulco where she worked as a cleaning lady for a rich family who lived in Mexico City. The family went to the holiday resort a couple of weekends a month. For years this family used to drive, but then they bought a helicopter. It took several months to build the helipad on their property. First they had to fill in the swimming pool with dirt and cover it up and then move the new swimming pool over a few feet. They also relocated the tennis courts so that the heliport would be as far as possible from the house.

My father had also worked in Acapulco. He was a waiter at a hotel before he left for the States. He came back to Mexico a few times to visit us but then he never came back. My mother knew that it was the last time when the last time came.

This is the last time, she said.

What do you mean, Mama?

Look at him hard in the face; drink him up, because you're never going to see your daddy again. Guaranteed. Guaranteed.

She liked to use that word.

When I asked her how she knew he was not coming back she said, You just wait, Ladydi, you just wait and you'll see I'm right.

But how do you know? I asked again.

Let's see if you can figure it out, she answered.

It was a test. My mother liked to give tests and finding out why my father was not coming back was a test.

I began to observe him. I watched the way he did things around our small house and garden. I followed him around as if he were a stranger that could steal something from me if I looked away.

One night I knew my mother had been right. It was so hot even the moon was warming our piece of the planet. I went outside and joined my father as he smoked a cigarette.

God, this place must be one of the hottest places on earth, he said as he exhaled the tobacco smoke from his mouth and nostrils at the same time.

He placed his arm around me and his skin was even hotter than mine. We could sear into each other.

And then he said it.

You and your mama are too good for me. I don't deserve you.

I passed the test with an A.

Son of a bitch, my mother said again and again, for years. She never said his name again. He was Son of a Bitch forever after.

Like many people on our mountain, my mother believed in hexes.

May a wind blow out the candle of his heart. May a gigantic termite grow in his navel, or an ant in his ear, she said. May his penis be eaten by a worm.

Then my father stopped sending us a monthly stipend from the USA. I guess we were also too good for his money.

Of course the USA to Mexico rumor road was the most powerful rumor route in the whole world. If you did not know the truth, you knew the rumor and the rumor was always a lot, lot more than the truth.

I'll take a rumor over the truth, my mother said.

The rumor that came from a Mexican restaurant in New York to a slaughterhouse in Nebraska, to a Wendy's restaurant in Ohio, to an orange field in Florida, to a hotel in San Diego, then crossed the river, in an act of resurrection, to a bar in Tijuana, to a marijuana field outside Morelia, to a glassbottom boat in Acapulco, to a canteen in Chilpancingo and up our dirt road to the shade of our orange tree was that my father had another family 'over there'.

'Over here' was our story, but it was also everyone's story.

Over here we lived alone in our shack surrounded by all the objects my mother had stolen for years. We had dozens of pens and pencils, salt shakers and eyeglasses and we had one large plastic garbage bag filled with little sugar packets she had stolen from restaurants. My mother never left a bathroom without taking the roll of toilet paper hidden in her bag. She didn't call it stealing, but my father did. When he was still with us and they used to fight, he said he lived with a thief. My mother believed that she was a borrower but I knew she never gave anything back. Her friends knew they had to hide everything. No matter where we would go, when we returned to our home the stuff was going to appear from out of her pockets, between her breasts and even from her hair. She had a knack for pushing stuff into it. I'd seen her pull small coffee spoons and spools of thread from her frizzy mane. Once she had a Snickers chocolate bar she'd stolen from Estefani's house. She'd pushed the candy bar up under her ponytail. She even stole from her very own daughter. I gave up thinking that anything belonged to me.

When my father left, my mother, who had never placed a lock on her mouth, said, That Son of a Bitch! Here we lose our men, we get AIDS from them, from their US whores, our daughters are stolen, our sons leave, but I love this country more than my own breath.

Then she said the word Mexico very slowly, and again, Mexico. It was if she licked up the word off a plate.

Ever since I was a child my mother had told me to say a prayer for some thing. We always did. I had prayed for the clouds and pajamas. I had prayed for light bulbs and bees.

Don't ever pray for love and health, Mother said. Or money. If God hears what you really want, He will not give it to you. Guaranteed.

When my father left my mother said, Get down on your knees and pray for spoons.

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**THE
WORD
EXCHANGE**

A NOVEL

**ALENA
GRAEDON**

THE WORD EXCHANGE

A N O V E L

Alena Graedon



Doubleday

New York London Toronto

Sydney Auckland

I

THESIS

NOVEMBER

A

Al•ice \ˈa-ləs\ *n* : a girl transformed by reflection

On a very cold and lonely Friday last November, my father disappeared from the Dictionary. And not only from the big glass building on Broadway where its offices were housed. On that night my father, Douglas Samuel Johnson, Chief Editor of the *North American Dictionary of the English Language*, slipped from the actual artifact he'd helped compose.

That was before the Dictionary died, letters expiring on the page. Before the virus. Before our language dissolved like so much melting snow. It was before I nearly lost everything I love.

Words, I've come to learn, are pulleys through time. Portals into other minds. Without words, what remains? Indecipherable customs. Strange rites. Blighted hearts. Without words, we're history's orphans. Our lives and thoughts erased.

Before my father vanished, before the first signs of S0111 arrived, I'd reflected very little on our way of life. The changing world I'd come of age in—slowly bereft of books and love letters, photographs and maps, takeout menus, timetables, liner notes, and diaries—was a world I'd come to accept. If I was missing out on things, they were things I didn't think to miss. How could we miss words? We were drowning in a sea of text. A new one arrived, chiming, every minute.

All my life my father mourned the death of thank-you notes and penmanship. The newspaper. Libraries. Archives. Stamps. He even came to miss the mobile phones he'd been so slow to accept. And of course

he also grieved the loss of dictionaries as they went out of print. I could understand his nostalgia for these things. The aesthetics of an old Olivetti. A letter opener. A quill pen. But I'd dismissed him when he'd spoken darkly of vague "consequences" and the dangers of the Meme. When he'd lectured on "accelerated obsolescence" and "ouroboros" and foretold the end of civilization. For years, as he predicted so much of what eventually came to happen—the attenuation of memory; the ascendance of the Word Exchange; later, the language virus—no one listened. Not the government, or the media, or the publishing industry. Not my mother, who grew very tired of these complaints. Not me, even after I went to work for him when I was twenty-three. No one worried about the bends we might get from progress; we just let ourselves fly higher up.

Well—not quite no one. I later learned that my father had conspirators. Those who shared his rare beliefs. But I didn't find them until after the night he departed. Or, in fact, they sort of found me.

My father and I were supposed to meet for dinner at the Fancy Diner on Fifty-second Street, a childhood ritual revived only a month before—the night my boyfriend, Max, had moved out. Our four years together, turned to dust. Maybe the breakup shouldn't have come as a shock; we'd both tried ending things in the past. But I'd thought we'd finally bound ourselves to something solid and strong, and then—Max was gone.

When I'd stumbled into my father's office, reeling with the news, he'd proposed that we knock off early. I was my dad's assistant—what he called his "amanuensis"—a job I'd thought would be temporary when I'd taken it more than four years earlier, soon after college: just until I could finish my painting portfolio and apply to grad school, I'd assumed. But I'd come to really like my life. I'd relaxed into it, like a bath. I liked having time to watch movies: long, plotless, and Italian; short, violent, and French; action ones, especially with steely heroines; and my favorite, thanks to Dad, anything starring sweet Buster Keaton. I liked stalking the Thirty-ninth Street flea market for vintage jumpers, leather bombers, shirts for Max. Liked inviting friends and family over for lasagnas and soufflés. I liked walking the High Line and the Battery Wetlands with my mom and volunteering with her sometimes in the parks.

And the truth was, I also really liked the job. It wasn't that hard, maybe, but it was fun: combing through contributors' notes and importing edits

to the corpus; filing quotation paragraphs; drafting memos. Even taking editorial meeting minutes wasn't so bad. On days when I felt a little torpid or bored, I still liked the routine, having somewhere to be, with combed hair, not splattered in paint or clay (or uncertainty). I liked my colleagues, some of them as strange as me. And maybe most of all, I liked the time with my dad—whom I got in the habit of calling Doug along with the rest of the staff—even when he made me crazy, which was often. He'd spent a lot of time at work when I was growing up, and I'd sometimes felt as if he were off on an extended trip even when he was sleeping each night at home. I'd missed him, without always realizing it. Getting to spend so much time with him as an adult—coming to know him in all his generous, larking, exacting glory—felt very lucky.

I still spent most weekends in the studio, painting, sculpting, making what Max called my "installations": tiny dioramas, clothes of Kevlar or tinfoil or leaves, animated glyphs of Max and me doing odd routines. "Living in the now," in Max's words. My portfolio never felt quite done, which Doug often gently chided me for. "Are you sure you're not just being hard on yourself? You're capable of far more than you seem to think you are," was a recurring refrain. But it always seemed that I had a little more to do and that finishing could wait.

Max's plans—the MBA, the internships, Hermes Corp.—seemed more pressing, especially to him. "Once I start raking it in," Max would say, "you can be whatever you want." He'd say it to get at me. All my life I'd vexedly accepted other people's money. My grandparents', mostly. (They had a lot, and I had none, and I'm their only grandchild; I still tried to find polite ways to turn it down most of the time.) But there was more truth in what Max said than I'd liked to admit. And I did take it for granted, that we'd get married and start having kids. That was among the things I had to face when he left: myself.

But on the afternoon it happened—*My stuff will b out 2nite*, the text read—I wasn't quite ready for that yet, which Doug sensed. (The tears rilling down my face as I braced against his desk may have been a hint.) That's when he suggested the Fancy. "Let's just see if I'm available," he joked, browsing through his blank calendar. Doug was also single. He was almost always available.

In the month since then—as the Fancy's specials cycled from pot roast to meatloaf to filet of sole to turkey, in anticipation of Thanksgiving—Doug and I had spent every Friday night in the diner's front-corner

booth. We liked it there because it still had a waitress, Marla. She was orange-haired and surly. Brought our food as if she were doing a favor. But even she was mostly for show; we'd order with my Meme, like anywhere. Still, it felt comforting. Mild abuse while we chewed.

We'd meet at seven-thirty, me coming from home, Doug straight from the Dictionary. He'd never been even a few minutes late. He'd usually be the one waiting. Hunched over a sheaf of pages, oblivious to the stares of small children unused to seeing such sustained, public use of pens and paper, he'd edit until I swept in, breathless from cold and the sad, lingering agitation of missing Max. "Give me a full report," Doug would say as I slid in beside him on the tacky vinyl.

But on the night in question, I arrived to find our booth empty.

At first I was unfazed. Vaguely remembered Doug saying he had a late meeting. I tried to order tea, but my Meme changed the order to a hot toddy. When Marla sloshed the foggy glass down in front of me, I relaxed and sipped it gratefully. After twenty minutes, though, my pulse started racing. I thought I'd mixed up the dates—that this was the night of Doug's big party and I should be home getting changed. My father had recently overseen a twenty-six-year revision of the Dictionary—by far the largest project of his career—and the forty-volume third edition was scheduled for release in just over a week.¹ But before my fear of being late could fully bloom in my brain, my Meme trilled with a reminder that the party was the next Friday. Relieved, I turned back to the toddy as the words faded from the screen.

In the end I stayed half an hour, mobbed by sadness, Marla's artless curiosity—"He ain't coming?" were, I think, her exact words; words that inexplicably cut me to the quick—and a growing sense of irrita-

1. The second edition, published in the early nineties, had been Doug's first coup: twenty volumes, and weighing in at 748 pounds. The *New York Times* had raved: "A scholastic Delphi; the new Dr. Johnson proves he's not just standing on the shoulders of giants." But the third edition had received unprecedented interest, probably because it was initially being published only in print, not as a limn. The launch, which would be held at the last remaining branch of the New York Public Library, had become a major social event of the season, surprising me, Doug, my mother, and pretty much everyone. Except, allegedly, Chandra in marketing.

(I feel compelled to disclose that these footnotes are part of my linguistic rehabilitation. I'm told that if I annotate this document, I can cut back on my hours in conversation lab—footnotes are kind of like a conversation with yourself. They can also help improve memory.)

tion. I placed half a dozen calls to Doug's office. Then, feeling slightly tipsy, I beamed Marla the check. I thought of heading home, but instead I trudged the few blocks east and north toward the Dictionary, buffeted by gritty winds.

As I turned the corner onto Broadway, hair lashing my face, I could swear I saw Max retreating off the avenue in a black cloud of suits. My heart beat faster. I thought of hiding, or turning back, but he was going the other direction and didn't seem to notice me.

I'd seen a lot of Max lately. Ordering coffee. Waiting for the train. Resting his arm on someone stunning. Only it was never him. Just a phantom, made from the smoke of old memories. Real Max had moved to Red Hook, deep in the leafy reaches of Brooklyn, to that stretch known as the Technocracy Sector. When I saw that night's version of him in profile, I decided I was wrong. Then I hurried on to the Dictionary.

The glass door to the lobby pushed back bodily when I lurched to open it, and let in one low, ghostly scream of wind as I made my way to security. Rodney was alone behind the desk. "Evening, Miss J," he said. Dipped his grizzled head politely.

"Is he still up there?" I asked, dabbing my nose with my mitten.

"Haven't seen him come down," said Rodney. Looked at me quizzically.

The twentieth floor was dark and desolate. It was after eight p.m. on a Friday and everyone, even the lowliest, loneliest etymology assistant, had left hours earlier. Everyone, it seemed, but Doug. I shuffled down the dim corridor toward his office. Past my cubicle. Past the conference room, which was a disaster. Chairs everywhere. Table littered with cold coffees.

Light spilled from under Doug's door, and I opened it without knocking. Started to ask, "Where were you?" as I stepped in. But then I stopped talking. Because he wasn't there.

I can't say what atavistic anxiety shivered through me, but I suddenly didn't want to leave the bright oasis of my father's office. I also didn't want to stay. But mostly I didn't want to go. I locked the door and dialed the lobby.

"Hmm," said Rodney. "You want someone to come get you? I can't leave the desk, but I could call Darryl down from twenty-two."

I almost agreed, but I felt crazy. And Rodney sounded strange—angry, maybe. Then I spied a familiar item on Doug's armchair: his brown leather satchel. "Forget it," I told Rodney. Wherever Doug had disap-

peared to, I thought, mollified, he'd be back soon. And in the meantime I had a rare opportunity.

To be in Doug's office without Doug was extremely unusual. And unlike his apartment, which was still unnervingly spare more than a year after his separation from my mother, this room was filled with my favorite father detritus. The jackalope hunting license that Aunt Jean had sent from their hometown—and my father's namesake—of Douglas, Wyoming. The glass canister by the phone stocked with both sweet and salted licorice. And next to the desk lamp, the small, stoppered bottle of well-aged sherry vinegar that Doug said was for salad but from which I'd many times seen him take a straight swig.

Near the door were his pneumatic tubes, which emptied into a bin marked "In." This label always struck me as gratuitous. But the same could maybe be said of the whole system. One of the first things Doug had done when he'd started at the Dictionary in 1974, at just twenty-seven (my age), was campaign to have pneumatic tubes installed, for fast, secure transport of "sensitive data" (e.g., neologisms, disputed antedatings, particularly thorny etymologies, etc.). Also the occasional fortune-cookie fortune. Comic book. Chocolate egg. The Dictionary had occupied two floors then, and Doug had argued that the tubes would increase efficiency. He decried the idea that they might be anachronistic, costly, and inconvenient. Dismissed the "rumor" that computers would soon allow the electronic shuffling of information. And against all odds, both his board and the building executives had okayed it. Doug could be extraordinarily persuasive. (Though my mother might disagree.)

It hadn't been easy; the Dictionary shared the building with different entities—in those days, mostly publishers. As a nonprofit run on government and other grants, the *NADEL* was fairly separate. (It also got a bit of a break on rent; executives liked having its prestigious name on the directory.) But after the tubes' success at the Dictionary, they were soon put in throughout the building. And initially nearly everyone used them; stations on each floor, as well as a few offices, like Doug's, were set up for direct delivery. An operator in the subbasement routing terminal directed documents back and forth, and it was a boon to get contracts, memos, notes moved so quickly and easily. Later, when computers had indeed become prevalent; the Dictionary "streamlined" to one floor; and the operator started splitting his day between the terminal

and the (also obsolescing) mailroom; tube use, already dwindling by then, stopped almost completely.

All of this was familiar to me. What I didn't yet know that night in my father's office was that ours wasn't the only building in the city with tubes; at least a couple of other places had them as well—and had installed them far more recently.

Wending past Doug's in-tray, I surveyed his books, too. He was one of few people I knew who still read that way, from a book, instead of streaming limns from a Meme or some other smart screen. Even Dictionary staffers didn't do much analog reading. Except Bart, I should say. Bart was my father's protégé. (I'd always envied that slightly.) He was head of Etymologies—what Doug called the Department of Dead Letters—and the Dictionary's Deputy Editor. Bart also had lots of books. He and Doug weren't alone, completely. There were other holdouts. And collectors, of course, who hoarded all kinds of antiquarian *objets*.

On one of Doug's shelves, in front of a Samuel Johnson biography,² was a half-empty bottle of Bay Rum aftershave, Doug's preference for which, he claimed, required a visit every few years to Dominica, the West Indian island where it's made. Seeing it that night, I felt a deep pang. It reminded me of a trip Max and I had taken there once, right after we'd fallen in love. That bottle, in fact, was probably an artifact: we'd shipped Doug back a case. "An offering for my future father-in-law," Max had said then.

While we were there, we'd also stocked Doug up on pineapples. He had a special affection for them. There were a few pineapple etchings in his office—I could see two from where I stood—and a big bronze pineapple bookend. He also had a small stash of pineapple-print ties, some pineapple-patterned shirts and socks. A small bowl of stale oblong chocolates done up in yellow and green foils. He kept eight potted pineapple crowns under special lamps. That night they were a little dry. I'd tell Doug, I thought. If he ever showed.

I was getting antsy. I checked my Meme. Sneaked a licorice pip from

2. This other Dr. Johnson had authored the first comprehensive English dictionary in the eighteenth century. He and Doug shared lots of affinities: curiosity, doubt, physical rotundity, heartbreak, and a genius for lexicography. Doug often said the name had been his destiny. And he'd come by it honestly: Gram and PopPop Johnson had learned of Doug's eponymous literary ancestor only when he'd begun his undergraduate honors thesis.

Doug's jar. Followed it with a pineapple-wrapped chocolate and squirreled a few in my coat pocket for later, along with a pen of Doug's I'd been coveting. And I tried, for about two minutes, to read a book, until my mind collapsed in boredom.

I also started to feel a tiny twinge of unease, like an invisible hair tickling my cheek. To brush away the feeling, I fetched water for my father's pet bromeliads and soothed myself with the rich, nutty scent of damp earth. Then I felt the delicious frisson of transgression creep over me.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been curious about what Doug kept in his desk. Siphoning off some of my attention to listen for the sound of his tread, I sat and tried all the drawers. Most were filled with work chaff: loose papers, crumpled notes, broken pencil leads. But then I tried the top drawer on the left. Tugged it. And tugged. Shimmied, a little crazily. Finally it came loose with a crack—a pen wedged at the back, I soon learned, had snapped in half—and the drawer released with a rattle.

To say I was surprised by what Doug had hidden there wouldn't be quite true. But it did disappoint me. It was a cluttered (and newly ink-smattered) cache—probably the largest private collection in the world—of photographs³ of Vera Doran. My mother. Douglas Johnson's soon-to-be ex-wife. And I felt very bad for splashing them with ink. But I also felt a tiny, unfair burst of reprisal. As Max would have said, there are no accidents. She was my mother, and I loved her, but sometimes I wished Doug didn't anymore. Watching him suffer had been agony.

Looking back on our whole family life through a new dark lens also hadn't been easy for me. Had my mother really been so unhappy? It hadn't seemed that way. My parents had never been one of those gloomy couples like some of my friends'. They'd hugged and touched and said "I love you," to each other and to me, and it had seemed so obviously true that the words were almost a superfluity. Doug would belt *Don Giovanni* to Vera in the kitchen as she laughingly roasted a chicken, trying not to spill her wine. He'd write love notes and scrawl funny drawings on grocery lists and receipts. Vera would mambo through the living room for Doug and me, or pretend the hallway was a catwalk. It's true that when they'd fought, it had been fulminous—things sometimes went flying—but I'd always taken that as a good sign. And maybe it

3. Doug hadn't made the switch to digital in this realm either. When I was a kid, ca. 2002, we used to make prints together in one of the city's last darkrooms, down in Chelsea.

was, in a way. Over the past few years those fights had slowly come to an end.

Regardless, there was no denying that Doug's photos of Vera were gorgeous. There was Vera Doran as Blanche DuBois in her high school's all-girl production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Vera wearing beautiful bell-bottom flares, hair to there, and in huge orange platform sandals, relaxing near a stage (at Woodstock), joking with some shaggy-haired men (Creedence Clearwater Revival) who were about to perform. Vera in nothing but painted-on jeans bordered by the blocky phrase THE JORDACHE LOOK, in an outtake of an ad, ca. 1978, when she and my father had been married just a few years and she was still modeling to augment their income. Vera on her sixth birthday, a formal princess fantasia at the Dorans' on East Sixty-eighth Street, comporting herself in a tiara encrusted with real diamonds. And my favorite—now tragically dappled with thick black spots—their wedding photo: Vera at twenty-one, a recent Bryn Mawr grad, bedecked in a curtain of blowsy dark-brown hair and a silver lamé minidress. (On seeing it, Mrs. Doran told the bride that it was lucky there was something silver at the ceremony, as she wouldn't be inheriting any.) In it, Vera's being fed a glistening bite of pineapple upside-down cake by her groom, a ruddy, pleased-looking man who was nearly twice her size, hairy,⁴ smiling, in enormous thick-lensed glasses, and sporting a wide pineapple-print tie.

I held that picture for a long time, trying to dab it clean. In it, Vera is arch and easy, laughing out loud as Doug forks cake into her perfectly plump-lipped, large, smiling mouth. She's lolling sideways, considering something invisible to me. He, in contrast, is watching her with adoring absorption, oblivious to all other witnesses at the scene of the crime—a 1975 backyard wedding at the Doran estate in East Hampton.

I was seized then by what my father would call “an attack of sadness.” The photos made me queasy. They seemed like more proof that devotion fades. That everyone you love will someday, in some way, disappear.

There were a few other pictures, these of Doug—all of which would be confiscated later by police. There was one of him as a teenager,

4. His nickname at Oxford, where he'd gone for a master's, had been Ursie, for his resemblance to a bear. Curly reddish blond hair grew on nearly every inch of him, from finger and toe knuckles to chest, back, and ears. The abundance of it had sometimes spooked me on childhood trips to the beach.

with Aunt Jean, each posing with a fat brown trout on the North Platte River. Another of Doug delivering the Graduate English Oration when he received his Ph.D. from Harvard, having also delivered the Undergraduate English Oration, “Johnson & Johnson: A Love Affair with *A Dictionary of the English Language*.” Doug punting on the River Isis in Oxford. And one of him and a twelve-year-old me posed with the Alice in Wonderland sculpture in Central Park. I’d starred in the school play, and he’d made me wear my costume.

There was also something else in the drawer, buried beneath our family history: Doug’s Aleph. I miswrote if I’ve implied that Doug didn’t have a Meme. He didn’t *use* a Meme. (He hated that I had one, but that battle had long been fought. He *had* gotten me to forgo the optional microchip; it made me a little nervous, too. But I was intrigued to see what the new Meme would do—it was supposed to be coming out soon—and I’d contemplated getting one when I upgraded.) Doug did have an Aleph, though, which I’d forgotten about. It was the first model of the Meme that Synchronic, Inc. ever manufactured. It wasn’t widely distributed, but a few had been given to key publishing people when it came out.

From what I understand, Synchronic chose the name Aleph because it represents the number one and the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. But the name tested poorly—no one could pronounce it—and the device was full of bugs. It had a very early version of Sixth Sense software, and its Crown, called a Diadem at the time, had almost no sensors; it could only roughly gauge basic mood states. Even after training it for weeks to recognize preferences, the smart technology could guess what you wanted less than 10 percent of the time. “It’s not actually very smart,” Doug had said, “but it does have a good personality.”

It didn’t, though: lots of users complained that a Chinese weather page loaded during games of Ping, or that they were redirected to Russian gambling sites while trying to watch live poker. When the software and hardware had been fixed about a year and a half later, the device was aggressively rebranded as the Meme, and Synchronic offered a steep discount to anyone willing to trade it in. As a result, very few Alephs remained in circulation. Doug’s was one of them. But the significance of finding it was initially lost on me.

It was massive, nearly the size of a book, with clumsy raised buttons and keys. I flicked it on, guessed the password on the third try—one

of Doug's many pet names for my mother—and while I waited for it to load, I crossed back over toward Doug's window. Wondered where he could be.

The sounds of streets that blinked red and white below were blocked out completely by the nineteen floors beneath me. Sometimes high winds could send our building creaking, as if on high seas. I looked into the window glass, my reflection rising from the surface like an emerging silver gelatin print. The pane became a parallax. For whoever might look in, it made a still. For me, looking out, it was a mirror, my face floating over all the dim shapes outside. And maybe it was my distance from the ground. The sense, from that height, that human life was illusory. But I felt for a moment as if I were falling a long, long way down. As if the girl reflected on the inside of the glass were merging with the one being watched.

The sensation faded but left a residue of sweat. I stepped back from the window with a shiver. Blood rushed through my ears in a kind of nautical orchestra, and I thought I heard a door slam shut somewhere. My heart surged. I grew still, listening for sounds in the hall, and felt the powerful urge to run. But I stayed where I was. Looked again at Doug's satchel. Reassured myself that he'd *be right back*.

Then four things happened more or less at once.

First I heard a familiar sound: the soft *shrr-tunk* of a metal delivery cylinder whirring through Doug's pneumatic tube and the melodic metal ting it made as it struck another one already in the bin. Out of habit, I collected both cylinders and slid open the lids. The messages looked normal. But then I read what they said. The first had been typed on a typewriter.⁵ It was a definition. I still remember exactly how it read: “di•a•chron•ic \dī-ə-'krä-nik *adj* : a method of looking at language that's becoming extinct.” That made no sense to me. It didn't even seem correct grammatically. Was the method fading or the language? It also wasn't clear who'd sent it; there were no initials. Strangest of all, it was smudged with a fingerling smear of dirt.

Hoping to get a clue from the other note, I unrolled it, too. It said, “Received your SOS. Standing by.” It was handwritten and blind-

5. I'd only learned to recognize the brisk, erratic letters recently; a few weeks before his disappearance, Doug had dusted off an ancient Olivetti. I later tried it, to see if its typeface matched this enigmatic note's. It didn't.

stamped *Phineas Thwaite, Ph.D.* I knew the name; he was an outside contributor to the Dictionary. Nonplussed, I prepared to leave both mis-sives on Doug's desk, and I lifted the Aleph to make room. That's when I noticed it had finally loaded. And it was open, curiously, to a page of the Dictionary. It was open, in fact, to a specific page: the one in the *J*'s on which Doug's entry appeared.⁶ Self-involved as he could sometimes be, that surprised me: that he'd leave the limn open there.

Although it surprised me more that he'd used the Aleph at all—I thought it had been years. He'd told me that after his last assistant, Sam, had optimistically programmed it for him, he'd tried it for just a few months before abandoning it. But it occurred to me that it wouldn't even have turned on if it hadn't been at least a little charged. I wondered why Doug had bothered—and of course why he'd been looking at his own entry. Thinking I'd rib him for it when he turned up, I scanned the screen, planning to quote from it. But it wasn't there.

I clicked forward and back through the pages. Scanned again. The entries skipped from Andrew Johnson to Earvin (Magic) Johnson. No Douglas Johnson. No toothy thumbnail photo of my father. No pithy biographical facts. He had vanished.

Feeling the uncomfortable prickling of a premonition, I opened his satchel—and except for one natty brown shirt, it was empty. No pens or papers. No books. No wallet. The thought I had, unbidden, was that the bag was a decoy. He wasn't coming back for it.

The room began to shrink, and the red lights of tiny cars on the ground below seemed to rise up to blink in tandem with the red light on Doug's desk phone.

Which began, at roughly that moment, to ring.

Panicked, but thinking that it must be Doug calling with an explanation, I leaned in to look at the ID screen. There was no photo, but the caller's name appeared: Phineas Thwaite. Before I could decide whether

6. Not all dictionaries published biographical entries—they were absent, e.g., from the *OED*—and Doug would have preferred to omit them from the *NADEL*, too. But bowing to certain trends in the North American lexicographic community, as well as pressure from our board, Doug had allowed entries on some notable people into the second edition. He'd never approved inclusion of his own entry, however—he was nowhere near notable enough to warrant it, he said—and considered making a correction when he saw the “error” in the final printing. “We define words,” he'd written in an angry memo to the staff. “We should leave the defining of people to them.” But he'd ended on a softer note: “I enjoy laboring in obscurity (with all of you).”

to answer, the phone stopped ringing. The screen quickly blinked fifteen, the number of missed calls. It also said something else. Something that helped me decide—if an impulse can be called a decision—to flee.

All office phones were set up with speed dials between bosses and assistants. That night the display on my dad's phone looked strange to me. When I peered at it more closely, I saw it had changed. It said, "Hotline to Alice." And I knew something was wrong. Because my name isn't Alice. Alice is a fiction. One I never thought I'd hear or see again.

Not long before Doug disappeared, he began behaving in a way some might say was strange. But my antennae, tuned to my own sorrows, hadn't picked up the signals. In retrospect I could see that he seemed more secretive than usual, edgier, and withdrawn. On a few days, for instance, he'd wanted to talk only on the train. That presented logistical problems.

One night the week before, as we were waiting for the downtown 1, he began explaining in a whisper that he'd recently received a spate of odd emails. They had different senders and subjects, but all were composed of incomprehensible strings of words.

"Oh, Doug," I said. "You're not supposed to open those. Did they include ads for things?"

"Things?" he whispered, looking guilty.

"You know, for . . . enhancement? Or, like, pain pills?"

"No," he said, discomfited. "Nothing like that. But I wonder why no one told me. I had to stop using my computer. It started going berserk."

"Dad, yeah," I said. "You can't open those. They're not real."

"So you've gotten them, too?" he said. He seemed concerned.

"Of course. Those scams have been around for years. They're as old as me, I think."

"Oh," he continued, shaking his head. "No. Not that."

"No?" I said, unconvinced.

"No," he said. Then, changing the subject, he added, "But that's not the only thing that worries me." That was when the train had pulled into the station. As we boarded, he lowered his voice even more. I could barely hear him when he said, "I looked up our advance sales earlier, and they're hard to believe. At one point before noon we were up to number 213 on Synchronic's sales list. The second edition, too—up to 448."

"Dad!" I said, clapping his shoulder. "That's incredible! Congratulations!"

“No—but it isn’t!” he hissed, glancing at our fellow passengers. They mostly seemed indifferent. “It’s actually very suspicious,” he said more gently.

“Doug,” I said, struggling not to sound annoyed. “Can’t you just be happy? This is *good* news. We should be celebrating.”

He glanced cagily again around the train car. “If only that were true,” he said.

I was expecting him to add more, but just then we’d arrived at Fiftieth Street—my regular stop, where I would have gotten off if I’d been headed home and not to an event with my father—and he nodded emphatically at the platform. I looked up. But all I saw was a motley stream of people on their evening commute. He strained his neck toward the graffiti-scratched window and whispered, “*Tiles.*”

“Dad, what are you talking about?” I said in a normal voice. Vera and I had long since learned that the best method for managing Doug’s eccentricities was benign neglect.

The train started gliding from the station, and he murmured, “The mosaic—look!” I peered out at the pattern, which I’d seen so many times I couldn’t see it anymore.⁷ In blue, black, red, and white lacquer chips, the Queen of Hearts accuses the White Rabbit, whose top hat hovers in alarm.

“Okay,” I said, twiddling my jacket zipper. “And?”

Doug waited until we’d rumbled back into the tunnel. “Did you notice?” he whispered.

“Notice?” I said. “No—what?”

He sloped in close to me, and I could smell the apothecary scent of licorice on his breath. “*Alice,*” he said. “In Wonderland?”

“Doug,” I said, “could you please just spell it out?”

“*Alice,*” he insisted. “If anything should happen to me—which it won’t—but if it does, I want us to use the name *Alice*. To communicate.”

“Uh,” I said.

“Got it?”

“Roger.”

“This is serious,” Doug said, sounding impatient.

7. The image had transformed, for me, into a harbinger of home: the two short blocks from the subway to our apartment and, as I walked in the door, Max calling out a pet name that I’ll omit.

“Okay. And what do I call you?” I teased, feeling a tick of disquiet. I wondered if I should worry—if Doug had slid into a manic state while I’d been cocooned in heartbreak. When under stress, he was sometimes prone to swerves in mood. Frenzied activity. Paranoia.

He looked a little startled, as if he hadn’t gotten that far. “I don’t know,” he said. “Just indulge me, please.”

I nodded absently, trying not to betray my vague trepidation. And then something else happened. Something that laid the track for a certain fate. Though at the time my meter reading of our exchange hardly registered any spike in strangeness.

Doug, likely sensing my concern, changed the subject, tossing off some light remark about the talk we were on our way to attend. I don’t remember what he said. I wish I did. But the way it faded so quickly from my mind, like a text wispig from a screen, is in fact one of the primary reasons I’m recording this history.

Whatever comment he made, buried inside it was a word I couldn’t quite place—a little reservoir of meaning I’d once known that had at some point cracked and drained. And in my brief moment of confusion, I made a stupid, careless mistake: I slid my Meme from my coat pocket and quickly peeked at the screen. (I knew that the Meme, having sensed my small mnemonic lapse, would have logged me into the Word Exchange to retrieve the forgotten term, displaying it in a brief, discreet definition that would quickly melt away.)

I’m sure I thought I was being surreptitious; I knew that if Doug saw what I was doing, he’d give a dire jeremiad. But I’d become so habituated to this routine—one whose frequency had gradually increased without my noticing—that in fact I probably barely bothered to hide it.

When I looked up again, Doug was grimacing. “Not you, too,” he said quietly, face blazoned with dark alarm. “The Word Exchange?”

I felt my face spackle with heat, ashamed he’d finally learned my “secret.” “Dad, yeah,” I said brusquely, looking away. “So? Like most mortals—not you, I realize—I forget the meanings of obscure words sometimes, and I look them up—”

“*Obscure?*” he repeated, nearly bristling. I could tell he was gearing up to elaborate—I was bracing for it—but then he didn’t. We’d roused the interest of a few fellow passengers (Doug’s wary glances alerted me), and as we slid into our station, he stopped talking.

But I didn’t find his silence very comforting; a mild reprimand would

have unsettled me less. It meant he was truly worried, which worried me. Did he really believe I was forgetting things—losing my mental acuity? It wasn't a good thought. And it spurred me to remember the way I'd once made fun of friends who were dependent on the Exchange.⁸ I half hoped Doug's lecture would come later that night, or at work the next week. But we were madly preparing for launch, and it didn't. Then it never did.

That wasn't entirely the end of our conversation, however. "Just one last thing," he said, frowning. "You're not going to like this." Quickly, furtively, he took two small bottles of what I soon realized were pills from his satchel. They were mottled with characters I couldn't read, and he pressed them on me in such a way that I all but had to take them.

"You'll never need these," he said. "But they're good to have. A few years expired, but it shouldn't matter."

"What will I not need them *for*?" I asked, disturbed. "Do they make me bigger or smaller?"

"Neither, I hope," Doug said wearily. "But knowing you have them will make *me* feel better. And in the *extremely* unlikely event that you start to feel sick, and like something's just very . . . wrong—you're tired or confused, you have muscle aches or fever, even mild hallucinations, and especially if you're having trouble speaking clearly, or if you have a very, very bad headache—just start taking these within forty-eight hours—the sooner, the better—and you should be fine. I'm giving you two courses just in case."

"In case of *what*?" I asked, getting very worried. Doug's behavior was officially off the charts. (Although in my defense, not entirely without precedent: every few years he'd press boxes of old flu medicine on me. So even this, hard as it is for me now to believe, didn't raise the red flag as high as it should have.)

But now I'm digressing. What I meant to say was this: we (he) had

8. "Can you pass the, um . . . the, um . . . the—" Ramona would say, gesticulating. "I think the word you want is 'fork'?" I'd tease, handing one to her. Flustered, she'd sigh and say, "Just—my Meme." But at some point it had started happening to me. I began relying on my Meme to anticipate when I'd need it to beam me a word or meaning I'd forgotten "temporarily"—while reading, writing, listening, speaking—often barely registering that it had logged me on to the Word Exchange.

settled on Alice,⁹ and I'd stored this conversation on the shelf in my brain where I keep certain stories about Doug.¹⁰ Then I sort of forgot it—until the following Friday, when I found myself alone in his office, staring frantically at his phone.

Barely thinking, I scrolled through Doug's missed calls. Wrote Phineas Thwaite's number on the back of his blind-stamped note. Then, abandoning Doug's satchel, trying to make as little sound as possible, I unlocked the door and peered out into the dark hall. It took all my will not to make a break for it: run flat out. I forced myself to tread quietly, cursing the husky rustling of my coat. I could barely breathe.

As I neared the elevator I passed Bart's office, and decided, almost as an afterthought, to leave a note. His door was open, and I didn't bother with the light. I meant to hurry in and hurry out. Get to the elevator and pump the button. Descend to Rodney in the lobby. Visit Doug's apartment and, if he wasn't there, call the cops. But something stopped me in the doorway.

Sticking out from beneath Bart's desk was a skinny pair of legs.

9. Nicknames, I should note, were one of Doug's things. Growing up, I'd been Apple and Aps, Pin, Needle, and Nins. Vera was Veils, Vittles, Nibbles, and a million other things. Bart's real name wasn't even Bartleby, which was a Melville reference. But Doug had given me the name Alice with none of his usual ebullience.

10. Normally this one would have been cross-referenced under the subcategories "subway," "Alice," and "crazy."

REMEMBER

ME LIKE

"I admire the architecture of
REMEMBER ME LIKE THIS, its flawless storytelling.
I vouch for the psychological authenticity of this depiction
of any parent's worst fears. I love this novel."

—JOHN IRVING

THIS

A Novel

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON

Author of Corpus Christi

Bret Anthony Johnston

**Remember Me
Like This**

A Novel



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

Prologue

THE HARBOR BRIDGE CROSSED OVER THE PORT OF CORPUS Christi. It was a high steel arc, tall enough to grant barges and freighters access to the ship channel, and stood where the old draw-bridge once did. The city had hosted a contest to name the bridge, and the winner, a housewife who lived out by the oil refineries, was given the honor of riding in the first car to drive across. That was in 1959. She wore a pillbox hat and white satin gloves. She posed for pictures with the mayor. Years later, when she died, her family walked to the top of the bridge and scattered her ashes over the lilt-ing water.

The structure was long and mellow, like a downturned crescent blade. A lattice of girders rose above the bridge's suspended deck, and the crisscrossing beams threw complex shadows on the lanes. After decades of sustained wind and salt from the bay, the joints were starting to erode and loosen. Rust flaked the girders. Each year, if the city could scrape together the money during the holidays, the bridge was strung with Christmas lights. An image of its illuminated reflection on the water had long commanded the cover of the Corpus phone book. A handful of couples had been married at the top, delinquent teenagers stole bowling balls to roll down the lanes or lob off the side, and a small group of citizens met on the first weekend of every month to walk the mile that the structure spanned.

The walkers started on the south side and crossed over to North Beach on the railed walkway that edged the bridge. At the foot of the walkway hung an engraved sign from the Coastal Bend Church of Christ: FEELING DESPERATE? “EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.” ROMANS 10:13.

So, on the first weekend of September, it was the group of walkers who saw the body in the bay before anyone else. They didn’t immediately comprehend the sight. The water was ragged and dirty from the previous week’s storm, and the body floated facedown; it looked like a person snorkeling, except an arm and leg were bent at odd, harsh angles. One of the walkers retched and kneeled on the walkway. Another started praying. Another dug in her pocket for her phone. The rest of the group stared and speculated and tried to trick themselves into thinking the person might have survived the fall. No one could tell if it was a male or female, or how old, and none of them thought of Justin Campbell, the boy who’d gone missing years before. They knew only that the broken-up body was part of them now, that the memory would insinuate itself for the rest of their lives. Two Coast Guard cutters were soon speeding toward the ship channel, and police cruisers were parking on both sides of the port. A few of the walkers stood at the top of the bridge to watch, but most descended without a word. They walked single file, knowing they wouldn’t return to the bridge, and held on to the rail as tightly as possible.

**PART
ONE**

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1

MONTHS EARLIER, THE JUNE HEAT ON MUSTANG ISLAND WAS gauzy and glomming. The sky hung close, pale as caliche, and the small played-out waves were dragging in the briny, pungent scent of seaweed. On the beach, people tried holding out for a breeze from the Gulf, but when the gusts blew ashore, they were humid and harsh, kicking up sand that stung like wasps. By midday, everyone surrendered. Fishermen cut bait, surfers packed in their boards. Even the notoriously dogged sunbathers shook out their long towels and draped them over the seats in their cars, the leather and vinyl scalding. Lines for the ferry stretched for half an hour, though it could seem days before the dashboard vents were pushing in cool air. Porpoises wheeled in the boats' wakes, their bellies pink and glistening.

After the short pass across the Laguna Madre, the ferry docked on the north jetty and drivers moved onto the mainland through the small, flat town of Southport, Texas. They passed an anchor-shaped monument embossed with the words WELCOME ABOARD, then the tackle shops and bait stands and the old rust-pocked pickups where men sold shrimp from ice chests. To the west, behind the leaning palm trees with their husks as dry and brown as parchment, the soapy bay fanned into the horizon. There was the public boat ramp and marina and the half-raised Teepee Motel, now nothing more

than a cluster of concrete teepees hemming a drained kidney-shaped pool. A faded vinyl banner for the upcoming Shrimporee sagged over the diagonal parking places on Main Street, then popped and opened up in the wind; the Shrimporee was in September. On the asphalt, puddles of heat appeared, shimmered, evaporated. The seafood restaurants and a spate of garishly painted souvenir shops lined Station Street, then just before the town yielded to the black-top highway came the Whataburger and H-E-B grocery and Loan Star Pawnshop, whose rusted arrow marquee sign announced, WE BUY WINDOW UNITS! The pawnshop's crushed-shell parking lot was crowded this time of year—shrimpers hocking tools between good hauls, surfers hunting for wet suits, men from the Coast Guard quibbling over fishing rods. Today, the last Wednesday of the month, a man was trying to sell one of the pawnbrokers an old Cadillac, a cream-colored Fleetwood Brougham. The hood was raised and the ragtop was lowered, and the men stood in the pale sun—squinting, haggling, appearing stranded to everyone who passed.

ACROSS TOWN, IN THE VILLA DEL SOL CONDOMINIUM COMPLEX, Eric Campbell stood under a cool shower, listening. He thought he'd heard his phone buzzing, but either it had stopped or he'd been mistaken. He'd left the phone next to his watch and wedding band on the nightstand. He opened the shower curtain, leaned out, waited. The only sounds were the water pulsing through the showerhead and the air-conditioning unit whirring outside, so he drew the curtain and rinsed off. The afternoon sun slanted in through the bathroom's skylight. He wondered if they'd break a hundred degrees today, if they hadn't already. He was glad to have parked his truck in the garage.

The condo belonged to Kent Robichaud. He was a surgeon, and although he and his wife, Tracy, lived on Ocean Drive in Corpus, they'd bought the condo in Southport to be closer to the marina on

weekends. They were in their late thirties, originally from the Midwest; they owned a twenty-footer named *Thistle Dew*. Eric liked Kent. He tried not to think about him when he spent afternoons with Tracy. With summer school in session, they'd gotten into the routine of him coming over after his Wednesday class. Tracy would drive in from Corpus and read the weekly *Southport Sun* in her breakfast nook until Eric's truck appeared on the street. Then she'd click open the garage door and make her way to the bedroom, undressing.

Eric always checked messages before stepping out of his truck. Usually there weren't any. At home, Griffin would still be sleeping, or he'd be playing videogames and waiting for the afternoon to cool off enough to go skateboarding. If Griff wanted to leave the house, he had to call his mother or father for permission; when Eric had thought he heard his phone in the shower, he assumed it was his son. His younger son. Griff had just turned fourteen. Of course, Eric worried it was his wife calling, but he also knew better. Laura rarely dialed his number anymore. Wednesdays were her early shift at the dry cleaner's, but she had, for the last few months, been driving to Marine Lab in Corpus after work. She volunteered a few times a week, stayed out there until dinner. Later, sometimes. When she came home, she was dog-tired and smelled of frozen herring. She wore an expression, so transparent to Eric (and, he feared, to Griff), of practiced contentment. She would update them on Marine Lab—currently, they were rehabbing a bottlenose dolphin that had beached on the National Seashore—then listen to Griff and Eric talk about their days; Griff usually told them about his skateboarding, and Eric spoke of his seventh graders or other faculty members. If there was nothing to report, he'd invent a sweet or comic story to buoy their spirits. On Wednesdays, he always steeled himself for the question of what he'd done after class, but Laura never asked. It was just another thing they didn't discuss. Eventually she would

excuse herself from the table, kiss Griff on his head, then retire to the bedroom. More often than not, the sun was still in the sky, syrupy and molten, coppering the early-evening surfaces.

When Eric shut off the shower, there was only the steady hum of the air conditioner. Tracy might still be lying across the bed, her eyes closed and her dark hair wild on the pillows, or she might have already stripped the sheets and taken them to the washer. He dried himself with a thick towel, stepped too carefully from the tub. For years, he'd had an unfounded fear of falling in the bathroom, of cracking his skull on porcelain. He'd known no one who'd suffered such a fall, and yet the risk felt familiar and menacing, as if he'd suddenly grown ancient and infirm in the shower. In Tracy's bathroom, the vanity was marble-topped, sharp-edged and expensive. The whole condo brimmed with upgrades—Saltillo tile, a Viking range, one air-conditioning system for the first floor and another for the second. Every week, the lavishness sullied him; he wouldn't let his gaze settle on anything. Now, pulling on his boots, he wished he'd already left.

VILLA DEL SOL HAD BEEN BUILT AFTER SOUTHPORT LOST ITS BID for the naval station. Most of the sandstone condos were owned by people from Corpus or by snowbirds, silver-haired retirees who wintered on the coast and caned their way through the souvenir shops on Station Street. "It's snowing," Laura used to say when they'd get stuck behind an elderly driver. They lived in a three-bedroom ranch, a few blocks from the house where Eric had grown up and where his father still lived. Their house was drafty, in need of a new roof, double-mortgaged to put up the reward money. Every couple of years he had to raise the foundation with bottle jacks.

But when Villa Del Sol first opened, Eric had driven Laura and the boys to an open house. Justin was nine, Griff was seven. Everyone wore church clothes.

“Who can afford one of these?” Laura said in the living room of the model unit. “No one we know.”

“We’re not that far off,” Eric said, trying to sound assured. “Besides, no charge for looking.”

The boys were in the courtyard, hunting rocks. Griff had recently started collecting them, because Justin did. Laura watched them through the bay window. She said, “Guess what Justin asked me last night.”

“If Rainbow could sleep inside?” he said. Rainbow was their black Lab, a dog Eric had bought from a man selling puppies out of his truck bed on Station Street. Rainbow was a good, affable dog, but she’d recently been relegated to the backyard after Eric woke to find her chewing one of his boots.

“Yes, but something else,” Laura said.

“About cusswords? The other day he asked me if there were any he could say without getting in trouble.”

“He asked me to marry him.”

“Oh,” Eric said. “Smart boy.”

“You don’t think it’s weird?”

“He’s got good taste in women, is what I think.”

Laura paced across the room with her hands clasped in front of her. She looked like a woman in a museum, taking care not to bump into exhibits. Were she a stranger, Eric would’ve been struck with longing as he watched her languid movements. His wife—it still shocked him—was beautiful. She returned to the window to watch the boys.

“What are we doing here, honey? We’re not—”

“I thought it’d be fun,” he said. He crouched in front of the fireplace, trying to figure if it worked. Just for show, he thought.

“I don’t want to live anywhere else. Neither do the boys. We love our house.”

“It was just something to do.”

“Sometimes I worry you feel like you need to give us more.”

He couldn't remember *not* feeling that way. Though he hadn't yet told Laura, he'd just agreed to teach summer school. His plan was to surprise everyone with a vacation over Christmas break. The boys had never left Texas.

“We have everything we need,” she said. Outside, Griff was trying to show Justin a piece of limestone he'd found.

“What did you tell him?” Eric asked, pushing himself up from the fireplace.

“Who?”

“Your suitor.”

She smiled as if he'd paid her a compliment. Her eyes stayed on their sons. “I said I loved him very much, but I was already married.”

“He must've been heartbroken.”

“Crushed,” she said. “Utterly crushed. But then I helped him sneak Rainbow into his room and he seemed to recover.”

WHEN ERIC STEPPED FROM THE BATHROOM, TRACY WAS STANDING with her back to him. She peered through her bedroom blinds, watching the two sisters who owned the condo across the courtyard. The women were in their eighties, stooped and wire-haired. Tracy loved spying on them. She'd wrapped herself in a sheet that puddled around her ankles and exposed her back. The knuckles of her spine looked like shells in sand. Laura's body, he thought, might resemble Tracy's now; she'd lost weight over the last four years. Twenty pounds, maybe more. And ever since Justin had gone missing, she'd let her hair grow out, a protest of sorts, or a show of solidarity. She'd stopped shaving her legs and under her arms, too. Eric couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his wife naked.

“I think the sisters' air conditioner's busted,” Tracy said. “They're just sitting at the kitchen table, fanning themselves.”

He was tempted to say he'd walk over and take a look, but

checked himself. He didn't want to run into the sisters later. For old girls, they got around just fine. They drove a Lincoln Continental. Eric said, "After I leave, tell them to have someone check the Freon."

"Sexy handyman," she said. "I was just going to visit the pawnshop and see if your father had a window unit I could buy for them."

"He had two yesterday. They're marked at eighty, but he's only got thirty into them. He'll take sixty."

"You're just full of helpful information. Give me ten minutes to repay you?"

Eric slipped his phone into his pocket, clasped his watch around his wrist. He put his wedding band back on and said, "I need to head out."

Tracy raked her fingers through her hair, then parted the blinds again. She said, "How's the whale this week?"

"Dolphin," he said, correcting her. "Running a fever, I think."

"Poor thing."

"I need to pick up some new flyers and make the rounds."

"They don't last long, I guess."

The flyers hung in most storefronts in Southport, taped among the rummage sale notices and advertisements for windsurfing lessons. They were also posted from Corpus to Ingleside and all the way up the I-37 corridor into San Antonio; there were a few donated billboards, too, one standing just outside Southport. If the flyers went unchanged, the sun bleached the image and the words. Eric checked them vigilantly. In the last four years, he'd put forty thousand miles on his truck, most of them within a twenty-mile radius. Today he wanted to leave a stack of flyers at the Alamo Fireworks stand out on the highway. Early on, the flyers had generated a lot of leads; now, they were down to four or five a month, usually from crazies or pranks. They'd used Justin's fifth-grade yearbook photo. In it, he wore a western shirt and his hair was too short. Eric had cut it in the garage the night before; then to make amends for

the botched job, he'd handed Justin the clippers and let him go to town on his father's head. When they'd come inside, Laura had said, *Did y'all use the lawn mower instead of scissors?* and Griff had fussed until Eric and Justin took him into the garage and buzzed his head, too. For months, clippings from his sons' hair would wisp onto the workbench like daddy longlegs. When the detective wanted a DNA sample, Eric spent hours on his hands and knees in the garage, but turned up nothing. It was Laura who'd simply pulled strands of hair from the brush on Justin's dresser.

He'd been eleven, almost twelve, excited to start middle school. He'd been a skateboarder, a boy who loved the Blue Angels and hated the beach.

Now Eric said, "I also need to swing by the marina and pick up some shrimp for supper."

"Your famous recipe," Tracy said.

"Griff hasn't been eating. I think he's in a dustup with his girl."

"The one who's a little older."

"If she heads for the hills, he'll be one lonely cowboy. Most of his other friends have gone AWOL."

"I remember," she said.

"He does okay during the school year. He gets invited to birthday parties and little camping trips. Summers are tougher."

"At least he's not getting in fights anymore," Tracy said.

"At least," Eric said.

She let the blinds snap shut. As she turned from the window and crawled back into bed, Eric saw that she'd been crying. His throat closed. He looked at his boots.

"Sorry," she said.

And then this familiar thought: How did I get here? The pieces that made up his life seemed pulled from another man's existence—the berth he and Laura afforded each other, these bleak and sweaty afternoons with Tracy. Even that he was in his forty-fourth year confounded him; most mornings, he woke feeling like the boy

whose thin arm could inexplicably send a tight, perfect spiral seventy yards. And, of course, Justin. Sometimes he'd pass the closed door of Justin's room and forget for a beautiful moment that he was gone. How often in the last four years had he almost knocked? Then, when his thoughts fitted themselves to reality, he felt cored out and drugged, groping awkwardly through his days as if he'd lost a limb in an accident, an arm or leg whose weight he still anticipated. He recognized its absence, and yet he could still feel the arteries as they dilated, the nerves as they burned.

Tracy rustled under the sheets, bunched a pillow under her head. She was fingering her hair, twisting it, looking for split ends. He smiled so she could see. Maybe she smiled back a little, furtively. His phone started buzzing in his pocket. It was loud against his keys.

Tracy said, "It rang while you were in the shower, too. If you want privacy, I can take the sheets to the washer."

"It's Griff saying he's going to skate," he said without checking. "I'll call him when I leave."

"I wasn't crying about you."

"I'm glad," he said.

"I *do* cry about you, but I usually hold those pity parties after you've left. They're very exclusive."

"I'm not worth—"

"I'm in Alaska this month," Tracy said. She wrote articles for a travel magazine, though she never visited the destinations. Each month, her editor sent a manila envelope pregnant with statistics and featured attractions that Tracy shaped into a story. "I'm in São Paulo," she'd say. Or "I'm in Sag Harbor." Now she said, "And watching the sisters fan themselves, I started thinking about polar bears, how the whole world's melting around them."

"I don't know," he said. "Alaska sounds like a mighty fine place to spend the summer."

"North to the Future," she said.

“North to the Future?”

“State motto.”

He averted his eyes to the window, the blinds laddering light across the bed. The air conditioner droned. Tracy was still studying her hair.

He said, “I should get going.”

“Leave the garage door open. I’ll close it when I put the sheets in the wash.”

“Sure thing.”

“You’re a good father, Eric,” she said. “You think you’re not because of what we’re doing, but you are. You’re a good husband, too.”

Tracy said such things occasionally, and Eric always suspected she was trying to convince herself as much as him. They’d been sleeping together for a year. More and more Eric had the sorry sense that he and Laura were both just treading water, trying to stay afloat until Griff graduated high school. A good husband. A good father. He only knew he’d filled those roles at one time, though he could hardly recall it now. He watched shafts of lurid sunlight slant through the blinds, the dust motes eddying like galaxies.

“It’s the pads of their feet,” Tracy said.

“Do what now?”

“Polar bears,” she said. “Something about those black pads on their white feet makes me really sad.”

He leaned across the bed, pressed his lips to her cheek. As always when he was leaving her, he felt at once restored and ashamed. *This can’t be my life. This isn’t my life.* The feeling he had was one of erasure, as if their time together diminished him, stripped him down to some essence he could concentrate on rebuilding. He would do better from here on out. He’d check the flyers, run by the fireworks stand and the marina, fry shrimp. After dinner, he’d run a hot bath for Laura. They were both off tomorrow, so maybe they’d take Griff to the skate park in Corpus, get his mind off his doomed heart.

Eric passed through the condo and into the garage like a man who was late, a man who'd kept his family waiting too long. As he was backing his truck out of the garage, his phone started up again.

Years later, he would remember very little about that afternoon. Not how he'd parked on the street to dig the phone from his pocket, or how he'd assumed Tracy was calling to elaborate on the polar bears, or how the disparate parts of an idea about taking Laura and Griff to Alaska were crystallizing in his mind. *North to the future*. The light that afternoon washed everything out; the asphalt looked chalky under tremors of heat. Eric could feel eyes on him—maybe Tracy was peeking through the blinds and calling to say he'd forgotten something on the nightstand—but when he reached his phone, the caller ID showed a Corpus prefix, so he assumed Laura was calling from Marine Lab. He thought she'd tell him she was staying late so he and Griff should go ahead and eat. He thought her voice would drip with grief, and despite his earlier resolve, he didn't want to hear her just then. What Eric would remember for the rest of his life was how he almost didn't answer.

ACROSS THE STREET, RUTH AND BEVERLY WILCOX WERE STILL fanning themselves, waiting for their air conditioner to kick in. Bev had woken up worried about money again, so they'd left the air off until Ruth finally said phooey and lowered the thermostat. Now they were watching Justin Campbell's father in his truck. They thought his engine had stalled again, but eventually realized he was taking a phone call. Ruth called his afternoons with the married gal "The Soap." "Time for The Soap," she'd say, and Bev would break out the Lorna Doones. They knew what he'd endured, what he and his poor wife had lost. Everyone knew. Sipping their midday coffee, Ruth and Beverly wondered silently how you'd go on, how you wouldn't just up and die. They were both widows, Ruth to cancer and Beverly to Korea, but to lose a child was an altogether worse kind of hurt, a scar that would absolve all manner of sins. And they

did think of him as scarred. Grief had disfigured him. He looked slackened. Each week there seemed a little less of him. Ruth had been the one to notice how, all these years later, some folks at church still stole pitiful and sadistic glances at him, like he'd been burned, like his face was mottled and waxy with misfortune. She had also noticed how his wife had stopped coming to services. So let him diddle, she thought. So let him find some respite.

"Who's he talking to?" she asked now.

"How in the world should I know?" Bev said.

Ruth hadn't meant to speak the words, or if she had, she'd meant them rhetorically. The truth was she'd been curious about the young man's life even before he started parking his little Toyota truck in the garage across the street. Maybe he reminded Ruth of her own son, maybe she was a little sweet on him, maybe his sadness mystified her the way it did Tracy Robichaud. Once, before his son went missing, he'd held a door open for her and Bev at the Castaway Café by the marina. (His father drank coffee there every morning, Ruth knew. Cecil was a tall man with hard, sad eyes. There were stories that he'd known violence. Oh, she'd like to sop him up with a biscuit.) After she and her sister stepped inside the café, his wife and two sons followed; the boys were rambunctious, slicing around her legs like trout. One of them knocked into her—Ruth believed it had been Justin, but Bev maintained it was the younger brother—and she'd almost toppled. Justin Campbell's father made the boy come back and apologize. It was embarrassing. She could feel her cheeks turning to apples. But Ruth remembered how he kept his palm on the boy's back, how he'd been trying not to smile as his son made amends. After supper, the boy came over to the table and shyly placed a piece of flint in her hand. "I found this for you," he said. She'd made an excited face and told him how pretty it was—he grinned, looked at his feet, then back at his family's booth—then she made a big production of letting Bev see the rock before slipping it in her purse. Today, as the missing boy's father's truck suddenly

rocketed up the street and around the corner (“Wife must be coming home early,” Bev said and cackled), Ruth wished she knew what had become of that small stone. She’d like to give it to him some Sunday at church, tell him she remembered how he’d been trying to raise a good boy. Or maybe that would only wound him more. It didn’t matter. She hadn’t seen the stone since they moved into Villa Del Sol. No, you don’t think to keep an eye on a little thing like that.



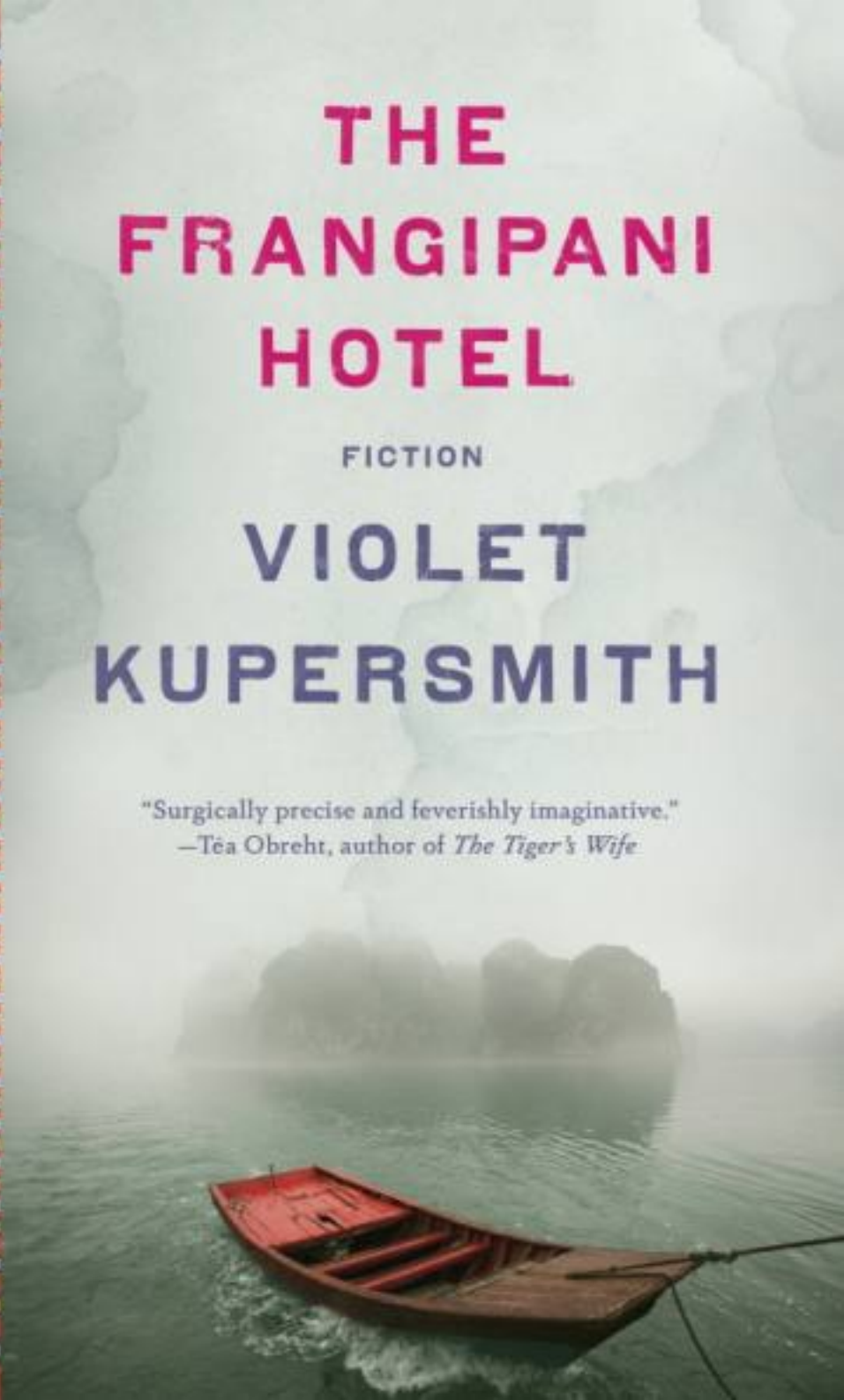
THE FRANGIPANI HOTEL

FICTION

VIOLET KUPERSMITH

"Surgically precise and feverishly imaginative."

—Téa Obrecht, author of *The Tiger's Wife*



THE
FRANGIPANI
HOTEL

—

Stories

—

Violet
Kupersmith



SPIEGEL & GRAU

NEW YORK

THE RED VEIL

I DON'T WANT TO BORE YOU with my own history, with the reasons that I joined the order and the chronicles of my meandering faith; that is not my purpose here. But some background is, I feel, necessary. I sought out Sister Emmanuel during the first year of my novitiate because I was considering leaving the convent. I didn't want to approach Mother Superior for guidance: She was the classic Catholic nightmare, barking after naughty schoolboys with her ruler in hand. Sister Emmanuel was quiet, and from time to time I encountered her taking early morning walks around the garden of the Stations of the Cross. She was a stoop-backed woman with white hair and nut-brown skin crosshatched with wrinkles, and she was always wearing a kind smile and an enormous pair of dark, square sunglasses. I had never seen her without the glasses—she even wore them during Mass—and for this she had acquired secret nicknames like “Sister Kim Jong-il” and

“the Terminator” from some of the younger nuns. But to me she seemed—then, at least—to be at peace. Contemplative. Diligent. Devout. In short, she was all that I wished to be, and was failing at being.

I found her on a Saturday in the kitchen, preparing egg rolls to bring to the parish soup kitchen. She had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and her hands deep in a bowl of minced meat and mushrooms and noodles. It was a bright, cold day, and the sun from the window over the sink silhouetted her dark, hunched form. She looked up when I entered the room, but I couldn’t tell if she was surprised to see me or not; her sunglasses, as usual, were perched on her nose. I tried to explain myself rationally and calmly, but there was an involuntary tremble of emotion in my voice. Sister Emmanuel said nothing during my monologue, and continued to mix the egg roll filling while listening to my presentation. But when I trailed silent, having revealed the turbulence in my mind, she removed her hands from the bowl, wiped them on a checked dishcloth, and then folded them in front of her. For the first time she smiled.

“Would it shock you very much,” she said, “if I told you that I don’t believe in God?”

I hadn’t known exactly what to expect, but I knew that it wasn’t this. She continued: “I want to help you, but I have no answers. All I have is a story. I’ve never told it to anyone before and I think it’s time. You may take what you like from it; look for a moral if you can. Perhaps the story will give you something, though you must be careful lest you give yourself to it instead.”

And as she told it to me she began to roll the filling in paper-thin wrappers, her voice rising and falling with the movements of her hands.

I WILL START at the very beginning—the beginning we all were taught as children.

Thousands of years ago, a dragon prince and a fairy spirit fell in love. They married, and the fairy bore one hundred eggs, which hatched into one hundred beautiful children. However, the dragon lived beneath the sea, while the fairy's home was in the mountains, and they could not be together. Fifty of the children went to live with their mother in the high hills of the North, and fifty of the children went south to the coast, where they learned to fish and make boats while their father watched over them from his palace beneath the waves. These children were the first people of Vietnam.

There is a place very close to the center of my country where the green fingers of the southern mountains almost touch the sea. The water there used to be the loveliest in all of the country—warm, clear, and teeming with fish. The buildings of the fishing hamlet by the bay were painted pink and green and turquoise, and the crumbling remains of a Cham temple overlooked it all from the hills. On the outskirts, where the town began to give way to jungle, in a yellow, colonial house, Vu Nguyen's wife was giving birth. Huong came from a long line of beautiful and tempestuous women, and she thrashed and let out long, guttural screams while Mrs. Dang,

the midwife, tried to calm her. Vu was pacing out by a bamboo grove in the yard, trying to ignore the sounds from inside and occasionally looking up at the rainclouds curdling in the sky. It was the beginning of the monsoon season.

Eventually, there was silence from the house. Vu drew in a long breath, looked up at the dark sky, exhaled, then turned and went in. He came across Mrs. Dang first; she was in the kitchen making a pot of tea, and Vu blanched when he saw that she had not washed her hands. He was a very slight man, and at the sight of her fingers and forearms stained with red he almost fell over.

“Anh Vu, congratulations! I’ll bring you a chicken for supper.” In addition to being the local midwife, Mrs. Dang bred noisy brown chickens that were always escaping from their pen and running loose in the streets. “Now go in and see your children!” She grinned at him with betel-nut–stained teeth.

“My *children*?”

“Ai-ya!” Mrs. Dang exclaimed, striking her forehead with her hand and accidentally smearing it with red. “How stupid—I spoiled the surprise!”

Vu rushed into the bedroom, where he found Huong and his surprise. His wife’s hair was matted and sweaty, and she had a cigarette in her mouth and two little bundles in her arms. Twins. Timidly, he approached their little trinity.

“They’re girls, Vu,” said Huong, exhaling a gray ribbon of smoke. “I know that’s not what you wanted. And there’s two of them.”

Vu came over and sat on the edge of the bed, carefully

avoiding the soles from the birth on the sheets. The babies were awake and blinking their eyes—blue eyes in dark faces. Milky blue eyes, like those of Siamese cats. Outside, the distant rainstorm rumbled. Vu shuddered.

He named the girls Vi and Nhi.

UNLIKE OTHER CHILDREN'S, Nhi's and Vi's eyes never changed to brown. People whispered that it was from the French blood on their mother's side, and that there was a strain of the French madness in them, too. They were such strange children, strange and quiet. As infants they rarely cried, and when relatives and well-wishers came by to congratulate Vu and Huong, they didn't like to linger too long after they met the girls. There was something deeply unsettling about their identical, silent blue stares.

Even as they grew older they never really spoke to anyone except each other. Huong took to locking herself in the bedroom most days with a bottle of rice spirits or occasionally one of her lovers, and Vu, resigned to the fact that he had lost his wife, devoted himself to his job as a civil servant. The twins were left to themselves. They would play in the forest, around the ruins on the hill, or go down to the beach and catch and torture crabs. Sometimes they fought with each other, kicking and biting savagely, not out of anger but boredom. They would alternate which one of them would win.

They began to disappear for days at a time, returning to the yellow house hungry and dirty and with secrets. If they en-

countered their mother on one of her rare excursions from the bedroom, she would immediately stick them both into the bath.

“*Chim con*—my baby birds,” she would mutter. “Chim, why can’t you be *good*?” Then she would go off to find soap and leave them in the tub for hours, and when she remembered them they were gone again.

ONE SUNNY AFTERNOON, Vi went looking for Mrs. Dang. She found her out in the chicken pen holding a brown clay jar in one hand.

“Which one are you?” said Mrs. Dang, narrowing her beady black eyes at Vi.

“Nhi,” lied Vi.

“Eh,” said Mrs. Dang, and took a swig from the jar. “I knew it—you’re the skinnier one. How old are you now?”

“Eight.” This was true.

“Ai-ya! How time flies! What is it you want, precious?” In addition to being the local midwife and chicken breeder, Mrs. Dang peddled home remedies and medicine she got at half price from a relative in the Saigon black market.

“Huong is having the same sickness as last time.” They never called her “mother.”

“Again, eh? Take a bottle of my special tea from the counter in the kitchen. But first, watch how I get my dinner.” With a serpentine strike of her hand, Mrs. Dang caught a chicken by the neck and shoved its beak into the jar, forcing it to drink.

After a minute it stopped struggling. “It’s drunk,” Mrs. Dang said, placing the chicken on the ground and then taking a quick swig for herself from the jar. The creature staggered sideways. “So it won’t feel a thing.” She stroked its head and then, with practiced swiftness, wrung its neck.

Vi left when Mrs. Dang began plucking it. She took a brown glass bottle of dark liquid from inside and walked back toward the dirt road. Nhi was waiting for her by the gate and wordlessly joined her. They took turns holding the bottle on the way home.

Huong was curled up on the bedroom floor, smoking, with the curtains drawn. There was a broken vase next to her, and a bloody clump of black hair was stuck to the wall. When Nhi and Vi opened the door to the room they recoiled at the sight. Their mother’s face was obscured by the clouds of cigarette smoke, and her bathrobe had fallen open.

“Chim? Is that you?” She struggled to sit up and tuck her breasts inside the robe. The room stank. “Bring that here, Chim con. Your *mẹ*’s head hurts very much.” There was an oozing bald patch on her scalp.

The twins inched closer, Vi holding the bottle out toward their mother. Huong stretched out her arm to take it, but then suddenly pitched forward and grabbed Nhi’s ankle instead. Both girls froze. Huong’s grip tightened and her nails dug into her daughter’s skin, making her wince. Then Huong’s head flopped down and her hold went slack. Nhi dropped the bottle on the wooden floor, where it bounced but did not break and then rolled toward the bed. Without lifting her head, Huong

began to grope around for the bottle, her pale hand scuttling across the floorboards, and when her girls fled from the room she did not notice.

The next morning, Mrs. Dang decided to pay a visit to their house, a plucked chicken tucked under her arm as a present. No one answered her knocks, so she opened the door and went in. She wrinkled her nose at the odor that greeted her, and followed it to the bedroom. When she pushed open the door, her face froze and she dropped the chicken: Huong was lying dead in a puddle of vomit on the floor. Mrs. Dang shuffled over and picked up the empty bottle near her. Her eyes grew wide. After she had calmed herself down she retrieved the chicken, went outside, and tossed the bottle deep into the bamboo thicket at the far end of the backyard. Only then did she go out into the street and begin wailing for help.

IT TOOK ME ALMOST a full minute to realize that Sister Emmanuel had stopped speaking. The egg rolls lay finished in rows on the tabletop; the old nun's hands were still. Through the window I could see that the sun was now red and bobbing on the edge of the horizon.

"That seems like more than enough, doesn't it?" she finally said. She paused, and then something that could have been a smile twisted her mouth and she continued, gesturing at the egg rolls, "They'll never be able to eat all of these." She started to cover them with aluminum foil. Because I could not find

anything to say, I took the mixing bowl over to the sink and began to rinse it. My fingers felt clumsy and stiff.

“When do you fry them?” I asked eventually.

“Later,” said Sister Emmanuel. “They’re much better served hot.” There was a pause before she added, “On Thursday I will need to make another batch for the parish potluck.” She left the kitchen without another word.

That night, for the first time since my initial vows, I did not say my prayers.

On Thursday Sister Emmanuel was waiting in the convent kitchen, seated at the table, which, to my surprise, was empty. “Hello, Sister,” she greeted me serenely. “Do not sit down just yet.”

My hand hovered awkwardly above the chair I had been reaching for.

“I would like you to assemble the ingredients for me. Do you remember them?”

I couldn’t help but feel that this was some sort of test. Though I had only a dim notion of what went into the egg rolls, I feared that if I failed to complete the task, she would not continue her story. Trepidatiously, I began selecting ingredients from the refrigerator and cupboards, trying to think back to what I had seen and smelled in the kitchen during our last meeting. Sister Emmanuel’s face, or the few parts of it that weren’t concealed by the glasses, betrayed nothing as I placed each of the items on the table. I finished by setting down the chopping knife, the cutting board, and the mixing bowl. Then

I stood waiting for her judgment with my hands folded. Every so often my fingers twitched nervously.

Sister Emmanuel scanned the collection. "Very well done, Sister," she said. "You only missed one ingredient." Disappointment welled up in my chest. "A small thing," she continued, rising from her chair and crossing the room; "a humble ingredient, and easily overlooked." She returned from the refrigerator holding a single egg. "But this is what binds the entire creation together."

The shell glowed yellow in the afternoon light. She cracked it into the bowl and then resumed her story.

IN THOSE DAYS the law did not look kindly upon anything that could be termed the "unnatural," for it was believed to have a dangerous effect on the general public. If the police had known that the notorious Red Woman of the North would be passing through town they surely would have tried to apprehend her, for she claimed to be a powerful seer with the entire spirit world at her disposal. But she was wily and she was feared. She went by a hundred different names, and in the stories they told of her she was sometimes a wizened old crone, sometimes young and sylphlike. Sometimes she was not wholly woman, and usually she could change shape. She had never been caught.

The news of her arrival spread quietly, quickly through the village. It moved like a disease: exchanged with the vegetables at the marketplace, whispered between neighbors, passed

around on scraps of paper at the local school. Red Woman was stopping for a single night during her journey down the coast. She would demonstrate her power to communicate with the dead, and even to grant them speech again, for a price. There would be only one show. The old temple after sundown; one piaster per person.

Nhi and Vi were thirteen, just becoming beautiful, and the news had made its way to them from one of the young, shaggy-haired fishermen at the docks who stared for too long and raised their voices whenever they passed. At moonrise, they made their way to the Cham temple on the hill. Vi and Nhi linked arms as they approached, Nhi sweeping a long branch in front of them on the path, for snakes. There was rustling jungle to either side of them, and a noisy silence in the darkness like the sound of a held breath. A light, faintly fishy breeze was blowing in from the sea—monsoon season was still a ways off. When they reached the crumbling archway they each handed a coin to a little man wearing old army fatigues, the pants rolled up to the knees. He grinned at them as they entered, and they were treated to a view of his many missing teeth.

For hundreds of years the nearby banyan trees had been slowly strangling the temple—their roots grew up through the bricks and around the columns like long gray fingers. Inside, in the middle of the central chamber, a fire on a grate cast ruddy light on carvings of monkey guards, grinning demons, and dancing goddesses. Nhi and Vi took a place on the floor and looked around at the other villagers who had come:

mostly men and curious children, but there were some women there, too—both young and old—and the twins knew that several of them were there to try to speak with their husbands or sons who had been soldiers. These women stood near the back, where the shadows hid their hollow faces.

In front of them all, before the fire, squatted the largest, darkest woman they had ever seen. She had shoulders as broad as a water buffalo's, and sinewy forearms that were folded in front of her chest. The firelight flickered off her russet-colored face, immobile as the stone carvings on the wall, and points of flame were reflected in two black, glassy eyes. Her eyebrows were shaved off, and she wore a red silk scarf twisted turban-like around her head. Behind her loomed the tall sandstone sculpture of a grimacing creature that looked to be half lion, half dragon.

The smiling man waited a moment longer for stragglers, counted the money, and stowed it away in a hidden pocket. He strode in, arms spread wide, and spoke.

“Mesdames, messieurs! Welcome!” He had a strange hiss in his voice, and Nhi and Vi weren't sure if it was his missing teeth or an accent they could not place. “Thiss night, can you not feel the spiritsss? They are, hmmm . . .” He paused, closed his eyes, and sniffed at the air like an animal. Then he opened his eyes again, winked, and darted sideways into the darkness of the temple recess. There were confused murmurs from the audience, and people looked around, waiting for him to reappear. Then they heard a chuckle coming from above them. He was seated astride the neck of the lion-dragon, leaning his

elbows on its stone head with his hands laced under his chin. He leered down at them, flashing his black gums. Then he continued: “They are . . . everywhere—they swarm. And perhaps your own loved one is among them, ah? With a message for you, hmmm? Or perhaps they have something that must be finished . . .” He let his words die out slowly and allowed an uncomfortable silence to fill the space before whispering, “Now, the mistress of the spirits; the woman who can cross between our world and theirs.”

He vaulted from the dragon and into the shadows again as the enormous Red Woman rose. In one fluid motion, she unraveled the scarf from around her head, releasing a curtain of dark hair that fell past her waist. She shook out the red silk in front of her, and there was a curious symmetry in the black shroud of her hair and the scarlet shroud in her hands. Red Woman spoke, her voice low, hoarse, and halting.

“To bring the spirits I must cover myself. They will only speak through the faceless; they will not be seen by our eyes . . .”

She lifted the cloth high, then lowered it over her head, where it draped fluidly down over her torso, turning the woman into a smooth pillar of red that glowed in the light of the flames. For several long minutes everything was still, save for the occasional animal scream from the trees outside the temple and the fidgeting of the audience within. Suddenly Red Woman began to chant in a low drone that echoed off the stone and vibrated deep in the chests of all in the audience: strange, rippling syllables that sounded as if they had three or

four pitches at once. Time was twisted with the sound, and no one was sure how many minutes passed before, with a sharp intake of breath, the chanting ended as abruptly as it had begun. Silence descended again. But then a new voice, high and quivering, from beneath the veil:

“Chim?”

At the word, Nhi’s shoulders immediately hunched up. Vi clenched her teeth and her eyes narrowed.

“Chim con? Chim? Where are you?” The figure in the sheet was now moving toward them with lurching steps.

“Such naughty little girls. You never listened. Tell me you’re sorry. Very bad. Very bad girls. Why won’t you come here? Chim?” It was right in front of them now, red and rippling and horrible. The villagers in the audience couldn’t agree on what happened next. Some said that it was one of the twins who yanked off the veil. Others said that they saw the fabric snag on the stone claws of one of the temple’s statues. There even were a few who claimed later that a long, thin shadow crept out of the forest and did it. But they all saw the same thing when the cloth fell away: Red Woman’s head was thrown back and her eyes were rolled up into her skull, all whites; her hands twitched and rhythmically clenched and unclenched. A trickle of foam was starting at the corner of her mouth.

In the audience some shrieked, some found their voices dried up in their throats, some leapt to their feet, others were paralyzed where they sat. None of them could tear their eyes away from the convulsing figure of Red Woman. “Help her!”

someone cried out from the back, but no one seemed willing to physically touch the woman, whose shaking was growing stronger.

It must have been during the commotion that the wind—cooler and saltier than before—began to pick up. It set the fire in the grate flickering violently but did not put it out. It lashed Nhi's and Vi's hair in front of their eyes. The red fabric rose from where it had puddled on the floor and wafted first into a far corner of the temple, where it fluttered for a moment from a spire-like carving, and then with another gust it was whipped away into the night. It was only then that Red Woman stopped shaking. Softly, for such a large woman, she dropped to her knees, then pitched face-forward into the fire. It was then that the man with the missing teeth leapt out from the shadows and yanked her back by the shoulders, but he wasn't fast enough—the acrid stench of burning skin and hair filled the temple, and the seer was bellowing in agony with both hands clasped to her face. When she let her hands fall away, a wail of horror rose from the audience and echoed off the ancient stones.

Nhi and Vi were already on their feet and making for the jungle, but they turned to look back over their shoulders at the sound. Though they were halfway through the temple arch, they could still see Red Woman's face clearly: The coals had seared away the flesh around one eye, and the socket was black and gaping like a second screaming mouth. In unison, the twins turned away again and ran into the darkness.

“WHY, SISTER, WHAT ARE you doing?” Sister Emmanuel suddenly exclaimed.

“What? I’m not doing anything!” I protested.

Sister Emmanuel gave me a funny look. “Your hands, Sister,” she said softly.

I looked down at the tabletop where I had been resting my forearms. With a shock, I saw that my hands were moving strangely, clenching and then relaxing in a slow but relentless rhythm, the wrists rolling backward and forward each time my fingers tightened. I had been so engrossed in the story that I had not noticed.

Sister Emmanuel wiped her own hands off on a dishcloth and then placed them on top of mine. My body shuddered, and the clenching stopped. “Perhaps that is enough for today,” Sister Emmanuel said, rising from her chair. It took me an awfully long time to realize that I was alone in the kitchen.

We had not made a plan to meet again, but when I came to the kitchen the following afternoon, she was there. The egg roll filling was already prepared, but this time it had been divided between two mixing bowls. “Here,” she said, sliding one over to me as I took my place at the table. “You are ready to make them, too.”

I looked down at my clumsy hands. I had woken up several times in the night to find them moving of their own accord at my sides. “But I don’t know how!” I protested.

“Of course you do.” Sister Emmanuel readjusted her sun-

glasses, then sank her hands into the bowl. “I have been teaching you.”

IN THE YEARS SINCE his wife’s death, Vu had grown increasingly detached from the world outside his routine of work, sleep, and two bowls of rice daily. He became a colorless, insubstantial man. Each morning the townspeople would watch Old Vu ride his rickety bicycle to the office—his back bent, his head lowered, his bony knees looking like they were about to pierce through the material of his baggy, grayish suit with every pedal—and each evening they would watch him ride home again. He never spoke to anyone, not even to Mrs. Dang when she came over with a plump hen to try to entice him into eating more.

“The man’s not long for this world,” she would say to anyone who would listen. “One day I’ll find him dead in that house, and I don’t know if my weak old heart will be able to take another shock like that—I was the one who found Huong, you know? Have I told you that story before? What a tragedy, eh? And a mystery, too—no one has any idea what killed the poor woman, no idea at all . . .”

Naturally, it came as a surprise to everyone when Old Vu quietly announced that he was going to remarry. The woman was a religion teacher at a school in Cam Ranh, never married and now past her prime, who had answered the newspaper advertisement that Old Vu had placed a few months back.

There were no apparent benefits to the union—neither was particularly wealthy, and Vu’s hair had been white for years while the schoolteacher was rumored to be exceptionally plain.

“At least his back is so stooped that he’ll never have to see her face,” the townspeople whispered among each other. “But what do you think she’ll do when she meets the girls?”

Vi and Nhi were the last ones to find out about their father’s new bride. In fact, they did not know that there was to be a wedding until the very day of the ceremony. An unspoken agreement existed between the twins and their father, and they had managed to cross paths only a handful of times in over two years. Old Vu left for work before Nhi and Vi woke up in the morning, and they were gone long before he came home in the evening. The twins were now sixteen and menacingly beautiful. They didn’t go to school; they had no interest in housework or cooking. They maintained the same half-feral existence that they had as children, spending their time traipsing around the jungle or the beaches, except now they stayed far, far away from the temple on the hill. When they needed to sleep, they slept. When they needed to eat, there was leftover rice in the pot or a jar of money in the corner of the kitchen that Old Vu left for them. Sometimes they would make an appearance in town, walking with their heads held high and their arms linked, relishing the stares of the bystanders. The twins had a weakness for mangosteens and would buy several dozen at a time, meeting the curious gaze of the fruit seller with two pairs of narrow blue eyes that lacked anything resembling

human warmth. Then they would swing themselves easily into a high tree and eat their fruits, throwing the dark purple peels at anyone who happened to come too close.

Mrs. Dang, who had long given up trying to socialize the girls, was the one who informed Nhi and Vi of the impending nuptials. On the morning of the wedding, she came by the yellow house dressed in her best ao dai to find the twins curled up asleep beneath the kitchen table. The soles of their feet were caked with black mud and their hair was tangled together.

“Ai-cha! Get up, the pair of you! Your new stepmother will be here very soon!” Mrs. Dang prodded Nhi, the nearest one, with the pointed toe of her special-occasion embroidered slippers. The girls crawled out from underneath the table and stood, stretching their necks and shaking out their long, slender limbs like egrets in a rice paddy. The news did not appear to elicit a reaction from Nhi or Vi, but as Mrs. Dang supervised their cleaning and dressing—she didn’t trust them to get the job done by themselves—she noticed that their eyes kept meeting over the washbasin, as if communicating something that she was not privy to.

Despite the fact that Mrs. Dang and the twins were the only audience members in attendance, the schoolteacher from Cam Ranh had the church filled with flowers and wore a white, Western-style dress, complete with a train and lace veil. “These foolish modern women,” Mrs. Dang clucked to herself from a pew. The bride had also chosen to forgo the traditional tea ceremony and bowing before the ancestral altar, which Mrs. Dang thought most unwise. She doubted that they had

even consulted their astrological charts before becoming engaged.

Nhi and Vi slipped out of the church silently before the final vows. They hadn't even seen the bride's face.

IT TURNED OUT that Xuan, the new wife, was just as plain as the rumors had predicted, with heavy, sunken cheeks, a thick waist, and hair coarse as straw that she always pulled back into a severe bun. But her eyes sparkled with intelligence and she carried herself differently from the other women. With them, you could see it in the curve of their spines—the weight of generations of famine, of husbands and brothers and sons leaving home for war and never coming back. Xuan may have had the plodding features of a peasant, but she possessed a lightness that they did not. Old Vu could not love her—he was far too out of practice for that—but he could fear her a little. Not the same fear that he had felt for his old wife, with her fits of wailing and drunkenness and violence, but a kind of formless anxiety, the feeling one gets setting out for home after the sun has already begun to set, of trying to outrace the darkness. He supposed it meant that he cared for her. They took walks together, they ate the meals that Xuan cooked together, they slept together in the bed where the twins had been born, on the mattress that still had a burn hole from when Huong had once tried to set fire to it with a cigarette. Old Vu was certain that they were doing everything a good married couple should. Still, he could not shake the sense of apprehension that he felt

whenever he interacted with his new wife. When he was at home he tended to lapse into silence and just watch her moving about, him trying to give a name to the strange dread he felt. But no one watched her more warily than the twins.

They lurked in the bushes, they stared at her from the shadows. Now that she lived in the house, they didn't sleep under the kitchen table anymore; because it was the dry season they moved to the roof, peering at her through gaps in the thatching that Old Vu had neglected to mend, spying silently until they fell asleep beneath the stars.

In her own way, Xuan studied the girls just as closely as they studied her. She noticed that the burnt rice crust at the bottom of the pot vanished whenever she wasn't paying attention, and she noticed the muddy footprints that appeared before dawn some mornings. Xuan was intrigued by the girls, as a naturalist would be by some rare specimen of bird, but she could not figure out how to get closer to them. She left a box of sweets from Saigon—one of her few wedding presents—out on the kitchen table, but they were never touched. The handful of times she caught them and tried to strike up conversation, they would only stare at her with empty blue eyes before fleeing. Xuan knew three and a half different languages, but she could not understand the girls. Nhi and Vi could barely read, and were unhindered by any sense of morality or responsibility. They knew other things instead: how to shinny up a palm tree with a knife clenched between the teeth, where to go to swim without worry of leeches, what to say to make even the briniest of fishermen blush. But they did not know what to

make of Xuan, either. They could not comprehend what she was doing there, living in their house, leaving her books on the table where the ancestral altar had once been, lying in wait in the kitchen to ask them questions about what they did and where they went. But they did not like or dislike her yet, so they just watched her. The eyes were everywhere in the yellow house: Old Vu watched Xuan who watched the girls who watched her, and from a distance, leaning against the fence of her chicken coop, Mrs. Dang watched them all.

IT HAD BEEN three months since the wedding. Xuan still wasn't used to her new role as Old Vu's wife and Nhi and Vi's mother, and still didn't feel that she was fulfilling it. She didn't regret it quite yet, but she was beginning to question her decision to leave her hometown to marry a man nearly fifteen years her senior. She had done it because she was lonely, but here, in the yellow house, she felt more isolated than ever.

Perhaps this was why Xuan felt strangely reassured when she began hearing voices from the bamboo grove. It meant that she was not alone. Having grown unchecked for years, the grove had become sprawling and almost impenetrable, devouring the land. When Xuan began to hear the sounds, she knew instinctively that they were coming from that darkness at the far end of the lawn. At first it was faint and wordless, whispering to her as she and Old Vu lay in bed at night with their backs to each other. She started leaving the bedroom window open, telling her husband it was because the breeze

helped her sleep, when really all she wanted was to listen to the murmurs. Then one afternoon, when she was hanging out the laundry in the yard, it finally became clear; the wind rustled the bamboo and she heard her name, *Xuan, Xuan*, the soft chanting of a hundred voices, over and over. They were calling for her.

Another woman might have run back inside the house in fear, but not Xuan. She had no fear. She had read Plato and Aquinas and Descartes. She walked straight into the bamboo. “Who’s there?” she called out, picking her way through the thick forest of stems.

“Xuan,” the voices replied simply. “Xuan.”

They became quiet when she was deep in the thicket and everything was in cool green shadow. Xuan waited but they did not speak again. She turned to make her way back out again, but suddenly she tripped over something—an old glass bottle, almost invisible in the shade—and she had to clutch wildly at the stems around her to stay upright. They shook, but she regained her footing. Several small birds, spooked by the commotion, shot out of the bamboo and flapped away noisily. Xuan tilted her head back and watched them become specks against the sky. And then she saw it fluttering down toward her between the branches. Like the birds, it, too, had been shaken loose from its bamboo perch. She caught it in her fingers: a piece of silk, tattered and filthy, now worn down to a square the size of a piece of parchment, but still as red as a fresh knife wound, and fine as a tongue of flame.

Xuan had been given less than her fair share of loveliness

in this lifetime, and so she held on tightly to this delicate cloth that had fallen into her possession. She carried it out of the bamboo and held it up to the light.

Nhi and Vi lay on their bellies on the edge of the roof, watching. When they saw the red shadow the silk cast across her face, their mouths formed identical hard lines, and they reached for each other's hand.

SISTER EMMANUEL'S VOICE trailed off. Without warning, she pulled her hands out of the mixing bowl and pushed it away from her violently. I handed her a dishcloth but as her fingers closed around it she began to shake, and the cloth fell to the kitchen floor. I dropped down to retrieve it for her. But I did not get up immediately; it was only there—kneeling at her feet, squeezing the cloth in my clammy hands that would not keep still, my face averted—that I was brave enough to ask her: “Which one are you?”

Sister Emmanuel was still shaking. “Not yet,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

XUAN HEARD THE VOICES even when she was away from the house. They still called out her name from time to time, but now they mostly sang her a song, always the same one. It was a simple song, made up of four notes and a handful of repeated words, but Xuan practiced it relentlessly even when the voices were quiet.

“*Chim, chim, I will find you. Chim, I will find you,*” she sang alone in the kitchen. She could see the bamboo through the window but at the moment it was silent. Her left eye was itchy, so she rubbed it with one of the ends of the red cloth that she wore tied loosely around her throat. “*Chim, I will find you, and you will be mine. Chim, chim, I will find you—*” She stopped and rubbed her eye with the cloth again.

When the silk wasn’t around her neck she wore it in her hair or had it folded up and tucked secretly in between her breasts. When she lay in bed at night, she would fall asleep twisting it between her fingers while Old Vu snored beside her and had nightmares about his dead wife. She had to be touching it at all times.

The twins had begun keeping their distance from their stepmother, but they still needed to eat. They would alternate between which one had to sneak into the yellow house to scavenge for leftovers and raid the money jar. One muggy summer afternoon, while they were perched in their usual tree and their stomachs began to growl, it was Nhi’s turn.

It was so oppressively hot that any sane person should have been napping; Nhi was certain she would not be seen. But just to be safe, when she left Vi in the tree and set off for home she went by the forest instead of by the road. This route concealed her from whatever eyes might have been watching, but it also forced her to walk through the bamboo grove.

Nhi entered the green thicket. Though she was so thin she could weave through the bamboo stalks without disturbing them, above her the long, tapered leaves began to move. It

didn't occur to Nhi that it couldn't have been the wind, for there was none that day—the air was heavy and damp and still. The noise of the thousands of leaves brushing against one another was maddeningly loud, and because of it, Nhi did not hear the sound of Xuan singing inside the house. It was the usual tune, but this time the words were slightly different:

“Chim, chim, I will feed you. Chim, I will feed you, and you will be mine.”

Nhi didn't notice it until she had already climbed into the house through the window of her mother's bedroom. A photograph of Old Vu and Xuan's wedding was hanging on the wall, conveniently covering an old bloodstain. The twins were not in it. When Nhi heard the singing she cocked her head to listen, but the noise of the bamboo leaves was still muffling everything, subtle but relentless, like the sound of waves, and she could not make out the words. Curious but suspicious, she dropped to all fours and moved silently toward the kitchen.

The words were still unclear but now Nhi could hear pots and pans being moved around. As she crept into the room she saw that Xuan was preparing something by the gas stove and crooning her strange melody—the words lost in the clanging of cookware—with her back to the doorway. The jar of money was in the corner, and Nhi would have to act fast if she didn't want her stepmother to catch her. She was considering her next move when Xuan suddenly stopped singing. Outside, the leaves of the bamboo went limp and quiet once more. Without turning around, Xuan spoke sternly. “Nhi, stop behaving like an animal and stand up.”

Nhi was so startled that she obeyed her stepmother instantly.

“That’s better,” said Xuan, still keeping her back to the girl. She lit the stove and the flame leapt to life. After a few seconds the kitchen was filled with the scent of oil warming. Nhi knew she should just bolt out the door or the window, for she was frightened, but she was also angry—seething at herself for submitting to an order, and even more furious with her stepmother for giving it. She chose not to run because she wanted to punish the woman.

Xuan, meanwhile, had dropped something into the hot oil and it was beginning to sizzle. Nhi wasn’t sure what was cooking, but her stomach growled. She made a fist and ground it into her abdomen to make it stop.

Xuan had heard, though, and she giggled over by the stove. Giggling did not suit her; it was an unnatural sound. “Sit down, child,” she said. “It will be done soon.”

Nhi took a seat at the table without protest; her attention was now focused on the red silk looped around her stepmother’s neck. It was tied in a simple overhand knot, and Xuan had thrown the ends of it over her shoulders to keep them out of the way. Nhi coolly considered walking over and shoving Xuan’s face into the pot of hot oil, imagined the sound her skin would make as it fried, how the red silk would dangle into the gas flame below the pot and ignite. Then she rejected the idea—she didn’t want to burn herself. Xuan had finished cooking and was now removing little morsels from the oil and putting them onto a dish. Nhi eyed the ends of the red scarf

again. The silk looked strong, as if it could be pulled *very* tightly and not break, she thought with a sly smile.

“Naughty child,” said Xuan, as if she could perceive her stepdaughter’s violent thoughts. “Stop that. It’s time to eat.” She picked up the loaded plate and two sets of chopsticks; then she finally turned around.

Nhi noticed at once that something was wrong with Xuan’s eye. The left one. When she sat down across from her at the table, Nhi could see that it was bloodshot and watery, the veins visible, the pupil strangely dilated. The right one, however, appeared normal. Nhi didn’t want to look at her anymore. She turned her attention instead to the plate that Xuan had set down between them, piled with hot egg rolls. They were perfect cylinders, each the same size and hue. A golden pool of oil was collecting beneath them.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” said Xuan. “My mother taught me the recipe when I was a girl. I learned how to shape them with her hands around mine.” She lifted her scarf up to her eye and began scrubbing at it roughly. Nhi watched the red silk move and her fingers tightened into a fist. Xuan continued speaking while she rubbed, the fabric concealing most of her face. “But I haven’t made them in years; I thought I was better than this.” She gestured toward the rolls with her free hand. The hand that still held the cloth to her eye was moving in quick little circles, like she was trying to wash a stubborn spot clean. “Better than cooking and kitchens. Better than husbands. Better than my own mother. I used to believe that I was too clever for that world.” Her hand stopped moving. “But

now I have a daughter of my own, and she will not make my mistakes.” With this, she allowed the red silk to fall away from her face.

There was now a droplet of blood in the outer corner of the eye. Nhi watched with fascination as it quivered but did not fall.

“Don’t you see? This is our place. We are the children of tradition. We must learn what we are taught, and then repeat it. Let me teach you, Nhi.” Xuan placed one of the pairs of chopsticks on the table before the girl.

Nhi unclenched her fist to take them, and saw the crimson edges of Xuan’s eye twitch. The droplet in the corner jiggled. Nhi imagined leaping out of her seat and sinking the chopsticks deep into the socket. In the distance, the leaves of the bamboo began to rustle again. She thought of her sister waiting alone in the tree, and raised her hand slowly.

“Yes. Yes, that’s it,” said Xuan, pushing the plate toward her. “This is our inheritance; take a bite.” She smiled, and the motion finally squeezed out the tear of blood. It left a thin red trail on her cheek.

Nhi hesitated for only a moment, then brought the chopsticks plunging down.

SISTER EMMANUEL WAS SILENT. Our own egg rolls rested, complete, on the table; our mixing bowls were empty. I had been hiding my hands in my lap so she wouldn’t see the way they were still moving. “You can’t stop there!” I cried out. “What did she do?”

Sister Emmanuel gathered up the dirty dishes and brought them over to the sink, refusing to look at me. But I would not give up. “It can’t end like that! Tell me how it really ends!” I yelled, forgetting the convent walls that surrounded us, the peace I was disturbing. “Tell me! I must know!”

Sister Emmanuel still said nothing. She simply turned to face me and then lowered her sunglasses.

BY MORNING SISTER EMMANUEL had disappeared from the convent, without—as investigation later proved—taking anything with her. There was some initial disquiet when word got out, but the affair was mostly hushed up. After a few months she was never even spoken of, as if the very memory of her had vanished from this place. But how could I forget? I, who had lost both my faith and the only person on earth who knew my apostasy.

Some of the other sisters did worry when my shaking began occurring too regularly to hide, and voiced their concerns to Mother Superior. Eventually the abbess called me into her office and advised me to go see a doctor about the “trouble with my hands.” She was terribly confused when I tried to explain to her that the real problem was not with my hands but my vision.

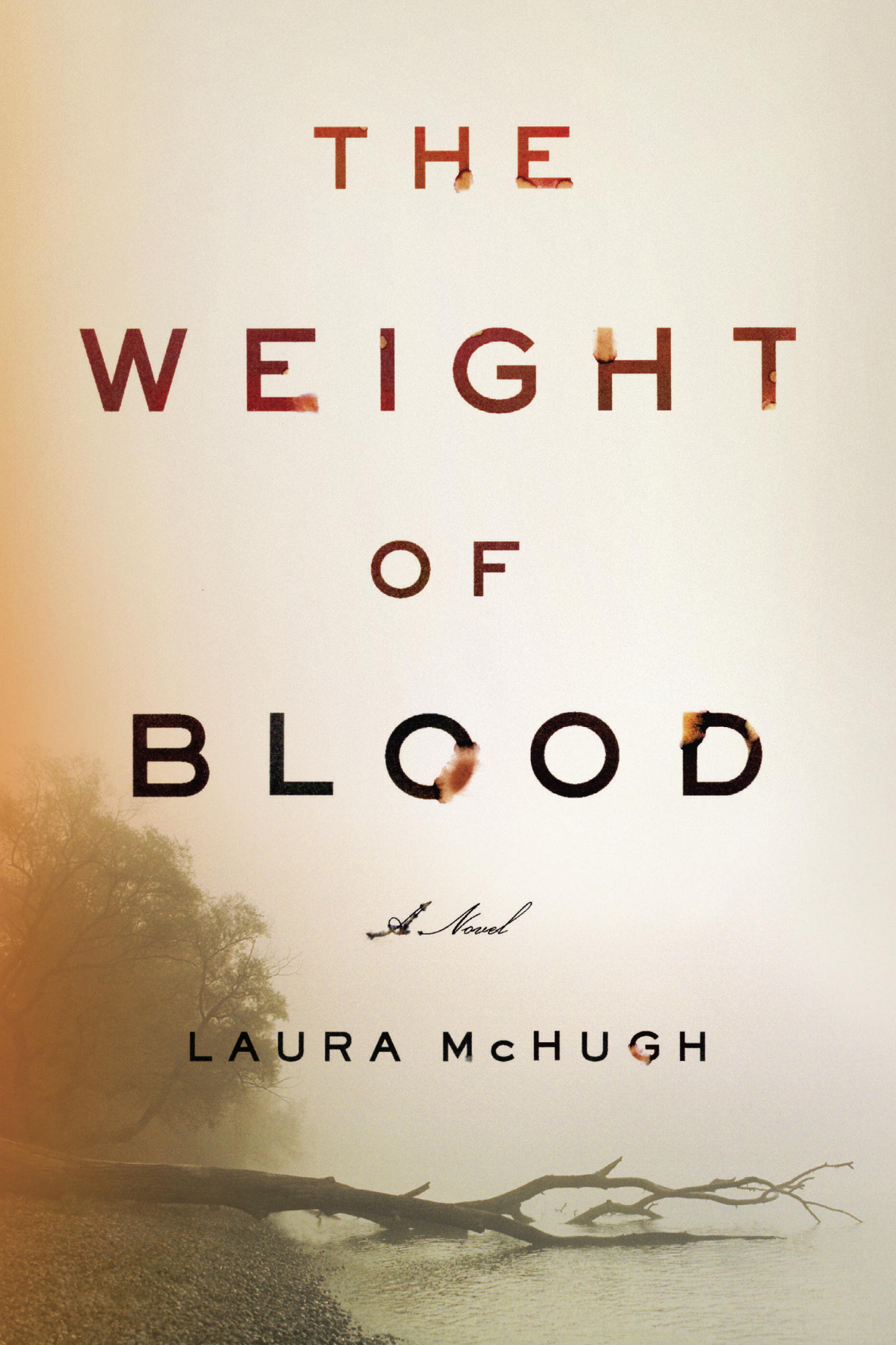
“But your eyes are fine, dear girl!” she insisted.

“My eyes work perfectly, but I cannot see the way I used to,” I replied.

“You mean that you are going blind?”

“Precisely the opposite, Mother Superior. I see too much.”
She sighed, and dismissed me.

I’ve since learned that the only way I can stop the shaking is to retreat to the kitchen and make egg rolls. My hands remember how. It keeps the parish soup kitchen well stocked, which perhaps is the story’s happy ending. Sometimes I even sing while I work.

The background of the cover is a sepia-toned photograph of a misty riverbank. A large, dark log lies horizontally across the water in the foreground. The trees on the left are shrouded in fog, and the overall atmosphere is quiet and somber.

THE
WEIGHT
OF
BLOOD

A Novel

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CHAPTER I

LUCY

That Cheri Stoddard was found at all was the thing that set people on edge, even more so than the condition of her body. One Saturday in March, fog crept through the river valley and froze overnight. The morning sun crackled over a ghostly landscape across the road from my uncle's general store, the burr oaks that leaned out over the banks of the North Fork River crystallized with a thick crust of hoarfrost. The tree nearest the road was dead, half-hollow, and it leaned farther than the rest, balanced at a precarious angle above the water. A trio of vultures roosted in the branches, according to Buddy Snell, a photographer for the *Ozark County Record*. Buddy snapped pictures of the tree,

the stark contrast of black birds on white branches, for lack of anything better to print on the front page of the paper. It was eerie, he said. Haunting, almost. He moved closer, kneeling at the water's edge to get a more interesting angle, and that was when he spied the long brown braid drifting in the shallows, barely visible among the stones. Then he saw Cheri's head, snagged on a piece of driftwood: her freckled face, abbreviated nose, eyes spaced too wide to be pretty. Stuffed into the hollow of the tree were the rest of Cheri's pieces, her skin etched with burns and amateur tattoos. Her flesh was unmarked when she disappeared, and I wondered if those new scars could explain what had happened to her, if they formed a cryptic map of the time she'd spent missing.

Cheri was eighteen when she died, one year older than me. We'd lived down the road from each other since grade school, and she'd wander over to my house to play whenever she felt like it and stay until my dad made her leave. She especially liked my Barbies because she didn't have any dolls of her own, and we'd spend all day building little houses for them out in the woodpile, making swimming pools with the hose. Her mom never once called or came looking for her, not even the time I hid her in my closet so she could stay overnight. My dad found out the next morning and started hollering at us, but then he looked at Cheri, tears dripping off her face as she wolfed down the frozen waffles I'd made her, and he shut up and fried us some bacon. He waited until she finished eating and crying before giving her a ride back home.

Kids at school—including my best friend, Bess—thought Cheri was weird and didn't want to play with her. I knew Cheri was slow, but I didn't realize there was actually something different about her until fourth or fifth grade, when she disappeared into the special ed class for most of the day. Newspaper articles after the murder described her as “deficient” or “developmentally disabled,” with the mental capacity of a ten-year-old. We weren't as close in high school—I'd outgrown her

in certain ways and spent most of my time with Bess—but we still shared a bus stop at the fork of Toad Holler Road, and she was always there first, sitting on a log under the persimmon trees, smoking cigarettes she'd steal from her mother and picking at her various scabs. She always offered me a cigarette if she had one to spare. I didn't know how to inhale, and she probably didn't, either, but we sat there every morning, elbow to elbow, talking and laughing in a cloud of smoke.

One morning I beat Cheri to the bus stop. I got worried when the bus rumbled up the dirt road and she still wasn't there, because her mom always sent her to school, sick or not, if only to get her out of the way. Days passed with no sign of her, so I walked through the woods to her mom's trailer and knocked and knocked, but nobody answered. There were rumors she'd dropped out of school, and when somebody from the county finally went to check it out, Doris Stoddard said her daughter had run away. She hadn't reported her missing because she figured she would come back.

Flyers were posted in shopwindows around town, and I taped several up at my uncle's store, Dane's, which had been in our family for generations. Above Cheri's picture, in thick black print, was the word **RUNAWAY**. I wasn't convinced that she'd left on her own, but no one shared my concern. In time, the flyers faded and curled, and when they came down, no new ones went up in their place.

A year passed between Cheri's disappearance and her murder, and during that time hardly anybody spoke of her. It felt like nobody missed her besides me. But as soon as her body turned up, it was all anybody could talk about. It was the biggest news to hit our tiny town of Henbane in years. Camera crews arrived in hordes, parking their vans by the river to get a shot of the tree, which had sprouted a modest memorial of stuffed animals and flowers. They barged into Dane's demanding coffee and Red Bull and complaining about the roads and poor cellphone service. People who had ignored Cheri while she was alive were suddenly eager to share their connections to the now-famous

dead girl. *I used to sit behind her in health class. . . . She rode on my tractor one year in the Christmas parade. . . . I was there that time she threw up on the bus.*

The whole town jittered with nervous speculation, wondering where she'd been for that missing year and why she'd turned up now. It was common knowledge that in the hills, with infinite hiding places, bodies disappeared. They were fed to hogs or buried in the woods or dropped into abandoned wells. They were not dismembered and set out on display. It just wasn't how things were done. It was that lack of adherence to custom that seemed to frighten people the most. Why would someone risk getting caught to show us what he'd done to Cheri when it would've been so easy to keep her body hidden? The only reasonable explanation was that an outsider was responsible, and outsiders bred fear in a way no homegrown criminal could.

In the wake of Cheri's murder, Meyer's Hardware ran out of locks and ammunition. Few people went out after dark, and those who did were armed with shotguns. My dad took precautions, too. He worked construction jobs where he could get them, usually a couple hours away in Springfield or Branson, and he had been letting me stay home alone a couple days at a time while he was gone. After Cheri's body was found, he went back to driving the round-trip every day, spending hours on the road so he could be home with me at night.

I replayed our mornings together, Cheri's and mine, sifted through our last conversations. She'd talked mostly about her "boyfriends," pervs who hung around her mom's trailer and told her she was pretty and tried to feel her up. Boys our age, the ones at school, were cruel. They called her a retard and made her cry. I told her to ignore them, but I never told them to stop, and that's what I remembered when Cheri's body turned up in the tree: the ways I had failed her. Like how I'd been her best friend but she wasn't mine. How I'd worried something bad might have happened when she went missing, but I didn't do anything about it. All the way back to when we were little, me being

less of a friend than she thought I was. I gave her my Happy Holidays Barbie, not because it was her favorite but because I had ruined its hair.

Spring was short-lived. The hills were ecstatic with blooms, an embarrassing wealth of trees and wildflowers: dogwoods in cream and pink, clouds of bright lavender redbuds, carpets of phlox and toothwort and buttercups. Then the leaves filled out the canopy, draping the woods in shadow. The vines and underbrush greened and resumed their constant creeping, and the heat blossomed into a living thing, its unwanted hands upon us at all times. Cheri had been buried at Baptist Grove in a child's casket—which was cheaper and plenty big to hold what was left of her—but I couldn't stop thinking about her, how she'd shared so much with me but hadn't said a word about running away.

By the end of May, there were no real leads in Cheri's case. Everybody in town still talked about the murder, arguing about whether the tree where she was found should be cut down or turned into some type of memorial, though most folks had gone back to their normal routines. Dad got tired of his daily commute and went back to leaving me alone for a day or two while he worked. As time passed, it seemed less and less likely that what happened to Cheri would happen to anyone else.

The shock and fear over Cheri's death had faded to the point that kids joked about it at school. Most of my classmates thought Mr. Girardi, our former art teacher, had killed her, despite his alibi. He had returned to Chicago around the time Cheri disappeared, having lasted less than a semester in Henbane. Back then, kids gossiped that Cheri had run away with him, that he was hot for retarded girls. Why else, they asked, would he have encouraged her pathetic attempts in class or let her eat lunch in the art room?

Mr. Girardi had been doomed from the start for the simple fact that he wasn't a native, but he made it worse every time he opened his mouth. He didn't know that a *haint* was a ghost or that *puny* meant

sick or that *holler* was the way we said hollow. *Ah!* he said when he figured it out. *So a holler is like a valley!* When a kid in class welcomed him to God's country, Mr. Girardi wondered aloud why the churches in God's country were outnumbered by monuments to the devil. It was true: the spiny ridge of Devil's Backbone, the bottomless gorge of Devil's Throat, the spring bubbling forth from the Devil's Eye—his very anatomy worked into the grit of the landscape. Mr. Girardi spent an entire class period comparing Henbane to paintings of hell. The land was rocky and gummed with red clay, the thorny underbrush populated by all manner of biting, stinging beasts. The roads twisted in on themselves like intestines. The heat sucked the breath from your chest. *Even the name*, he'd said before being fired for showing us a Bosch, which was full of boobs, *Henbane. Another name for nightshade—the devil's weed. He's everywhere. He's all around you.*

I'd felt sorry for Mr. Girardi because he didn't understand why everyone treated him like a trespasser. Tourists came through on the river, but strangers rarely moved to town, and they naturally aroused suspicion. Even though I'd lived in Henbane all my life—had been born in the clapboard house my grandpa Dane built not a mile from the North Fork River—no one could forget that my mother was a foreigner, that she had come from someplace else, even if that place was only Iowa. Some folks didn't think it possible that the cornfields and snowdrifts of the North had produced a creature as mysterious as my mother, so they had crafted origin myths involving Gypsies and wolves. As a kid, I didn't know if such things could be true, so I'd studied photographs of her, seeking proof of their claims. Was her long black hair evidence of Gypsy blood? Did her ice-green eyes spring from a wolf? I had to admit there was a hint of something exotic in her olive skin, the fullness of her mouth, the wideness of her eyes. I'd read somewhere that beauty could be measured by scientific means, calculated in symmetry and distance, scale of features and angles of bone. Certainly my mother was beautiful, but beauty alone couldn't account for the effect

she'd had on our small town. There was something deep-rooted, intangible, that the pictures couldn't quite grasp.

Part of it was that they didn't know her, Dad said. She came to work for my uncle, and folks didn't get why he'd hired an outsider. She had no family and wouldn't talk about her past. A woman without kin, in the town's eyes, had been cast out, and surely not without reason. Rumor spread that she was a witch. People still told the story of my mother turning Joe Bill Sump into a snake. They said she emitted a scent that would seduce you if you got too close. That her eyes had the same rectangular pupils as a goat's. Some even said that her grave was dug up, revealing nothing inside but a bird. None of these things was true. She had no grave because we had no body. Most of Dad's kin, the aunts and uncles and cousins on his mother's side, broke away, treated us like strangers—like we were tainted because of her. But I didn't mind the talk of witchcraft, however ridiculous it was. All the better if people were wary and left me alone. It was preferable to hearing them whisper about the one undisputed truth: that when I was a baby, my mother had walked into the inky limestone labyrinth of Old Scratch Cavern with my father's derringer pistol and never returned. Before Cheri's death, my mother's disappearance had been the biggest mystery in town.

On the last day of school, I walked home from the bus stop alone. Over a year had passed since Cheri made the walk with me, and I remembered how she used to linger in my driveway before continuing down the road to her trailer. As my house came into view, I noticed that without Dad's truck parked out front, the place looked almost abandoned. The yard was a mix of rock and scrub, with Queen Anne's lace bordering the fence. The house once was white, but the paint had worn down to a dull, splintery gray. It was a simple two-story rectangle with porches on the front and back, one of the nicer homes around

when Grandpa built it, before it started to succumb to dry rot and age. It sat in a grove of walnut trees, and Grandpa Dane crowded the foundation with viburnum bushes. Grandma Dane once fell from a second-floor window while cleaning the glass, and Grandpa claimed the viburnum broke her fall and saved her life. Inside, the wood floors had long since lost their varnish, but the walls in each room were the bright cheery colors of Easter eggs, pink and aqua and orange, painted by my mother in a fit of nesting before my birth.

We kept a vegetable garden in a clearing beside the house where I'd spent countless hours picking rocks and pulling weeds. No matter how we tended the soil, the stones never stopped surfacing, denting the tiller blades every spring as they pushed their way out of the earth. Behind the house was a trickle creek that raged in the spring, and beyond that, on three sides of our property, the trees closed ranks and marched up the hillside into the Ozark Mountains.

I was in the kitchen tacking up flypaper when I heard Birdie, our nearest neighbor, warbling *hullo!* from the road. Birdie had been widowed for twenty years and had a habit of wearing her husband's old overalls, the legs cuffed to fit her barely five-foot frame. She came by to check on me when Dad was gone, and even though she'd been in this house for my birth, she always hollered from the property line before coming into the yard. It was old-fashioned etiquette, she insisted, that you didn't step on somebody's porch without permission unless you wanted to get shot. I'd told her that kind of thing didn't happen anymore, but she wasn't one to break old habits.

I walked out to meet her and patted her coon dog, Merle. Birdie squinted into the late-afternoon sun, her face a web of wrinkles. When the breeze ruffled her thin white hair, pink scalp showed through. "You behaving yourself while the gravedigger's gone?"

I held back a smile. Dad worked construction, but Birdie, like a few older folks in town, remembered the Danes as gravediggers and saw

Dad as a continuation of the line. While he knew how to bury a body, he was rarely asked to do it. Still, Birdie called him “gravedigger” the same as she’d call someone “doctor,” implying pedigree and respect.

“I’m doing fine, Birdie, how about you?”

She held up the burlap sack she was carrying. “I shot a possum getting into the dog food this morning, and when I went to pick it up, wouldn’t you know, it had these darned little babies stuck all over it.” She opened the sack and Merle whined softly, glued to Birdie’s side.

I peered in. A litter of possums, each about the size of my thumb, crawled over one another. Grown possums are ugly as sin, but the babies in the bag were unbearably cute, with their tiny pink noses and feet and delicate hairless tails.

“What’re you gonna do with them?” I asked, assuming she’d probably already diced their mother up in a stew. She ate most anything she shot, with the exception of feral cats, which she threw in the burn barrel without any hint of regret.

“They’re too little to cook,” she said matter-of-factly. “Hardly any meat on ’em. Figured Gabby might want ’em, seeing how she’s got all them animals.” She handed me the sack. “Think you could run ’em over there before dark?”

Gabby, Bess’s mom, took in every type of stray, man or beast, and couldn’t turn away abandoned babies—me being an example. She and Birdie, along with my uncle Crete, had taken turns keeping me until Dad emerged from his whiskey-soaked grief with the realization that Mom wasn’t coming home.

“Sure,” I said.

“When you get back, you’re welcome to come for supper. Spare room’s always ready if you care to stay.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Just depends when I get back, I guess.” I had no intention of sleeping at Birdie’s if I didn’t have to. I used to stay with her all the time when my dad was away on construction jobs, and

when he finally agreed to let me stay home alone, it was only so long as Birdie checked in on me. He knew she kept a close watch, shuffling the half-mile to our house periodically to make sure I wasn't burning the place down or starving to death or whatever else he thought would happen without her supervision.

"Don't dawdle, now," she said.

We nodded goodbye and I carried the bag through the backyard, pausing to pluck some pennyroyal and rub it on my arms and legs to ward off ticks. A deer path led from the creek up toward the river, where Bess and Gabby lived in a double-wide behind Bell Tavern. The woods I walked through belonged to my dad and uncle. Each had his own chunk, though it was hard to tell where the property split. Grandpa Dane had left the general store to Crete, who was the first-born and arguably the better businessman. Dad wasn't bitter about it; he preferred construction work anyhow. And he hadn't come away empty-handed. He got the house and took over the family vocation of gravedigging, though it was no longer the profitable business it had been in Grandpa's day. It had diminished to a nearly forgotten craft, like making bentwood chairs or apple dolls, and didn't take much time away from Dad's real job.

Private burial was legal as long as it was done on private property, outside the city limits. Most of Dad's business came from old folks who lacked the funds for a "city" burial, which was what they called anything involving a funeral parlor. There were others, too: hippies from the commune on Black Fork who'd rather rot in the woods than be embalmed; a preacher from the snake-handling church who hadn't been worthy enough for God to save from the venom. There were shady circumstances, too, but Dad was known, as Danes have been known for generations, for looking the other way. Sometimes when he was drinking, he'd tell me stories I was not to repeat, of people burned up in meth lab explosions, shot in drug deals, beaten to death by jeal-

ous lovers. When he sobered up, he would apologize for scaring me and make me swear he hadn't told me any names.

The trees thinned and I could hear the river where it raked over the shallows. "Lucy-lou," Gabby hollered as I came into view. She was sitting in a lawn chair on the wobbly front deck, with her bare feet propped up on a cooler, her frizzy blond hair bushing around her head like a lion's mane. She wore a terry-cloth swimsuit cover-up minus the swimsuit. "When you gonna listen and call me for a ride? You know I don't like you walking those woods alone."

"Sorry," I said. Bess and I had roamed freely before Cheri's murder, and Gabby had always encouraged it. *Please*, she'd say. *Go disappear for a while*. I kept hoping her newfound concern would wear off.

A joint smoldered between Gabby's thumb and forefinger. "God-damn," she said as I walked up the steps. "You look more like your mama every time I see you. Got your hair halfway to your ass just like her. And you're finally getting yourself some titties, praise Jesus. I was starting to worry."

I'd always been told I looked like my mother, but over the past year, as my hair grew out and I got taller and slightly less awkward, Gabby had compared me to her constantly. It made me happy at first, to know how much I resembled my mom, but lately Gabby seemed troubled by it. I didn't like the way she looked at me, her face all sorry and sad.

"I brought you something," I said. She took a long drag on the joint, burning it up to her fingertips, and stubbed the roach out on her armrest. I opened the sack for her to see.

"Oh, Lordy!" she said, scooping up one of the possums and cupping it in her palm. "Where'd you get these adorable critters?"

"Birdie," I said.

"I'm surprised she didn't eat 'em." Gabby stroked the possum's silky little tail, and it curled around her finger.

The screen door squeaked open and Bess joined us on the deck,

pulling her home-bleached hair away from her neck and fanning herself. “More strays?” The trailer was already home to an unknown number of cats and a rabbit with a mangled leg.

“Just look, Bessie,” Gabby said, holding up her finger. The possum hung upside down by its tail.

“Birdie shot their mom,” I said.

“Perfect.” Bess rolled her eyes at Gabby. “We know how you love the motherless.”

Gabby ignored her. “Lucy, I’ve got a nursing mama cat out in the woodpile. I’ll see if she’ll take ’em on. We’ll start with one, ’case she eats it. That happens, we bottle-feed.”

“You think a cat’ll nurse a possum?” Bess said, examining the roach to see if there was anything worth salvaging. “You’re nuts. That’s a crime against nature.”

“I’ve seen stranger things,” Gabby said.

“C’mon, Luce.” Bess slid her feet into a pair of flip-flops. “Let’s go to Bell’s. I’m out of cigarettes.”

“Forget it,” Gabby said. “Gonna get dark here right quick. I don’t wanna be picking pieces of you out of the river.”

“We could just as easily get chopped up in daylight.” Bess ran a finger under the edge of her shorts and tugged them down.

“I said no.” Gabby took the baby possums out of the bag one by one and draped them on her chest, where they clung to the terry cloth with tiny paws.

“You weren’t so worried about our safety when you used to lock us in the station wagon and whore yourself out at the Red Fox,” Bess said.

“If I wasn’t worried, I wouldn’t have locked the doors.” They glared at each other until Gabby stalked off, cradling the possums.

“Why do you have to bring up stuff like that?” I asked.

“It just pisses me off,” Bess said. “You know how she had that come-to-Jesus moment after the whole Cheri thing, went back to A.A., started

asking where I'm going all the time." She twisted her hair into a bun and then shook it loose. "It's annoying. She thinks she's mother of the year now. I just like to remind her."

"She's still smoking," I said. "How's that work with A.A.?"

Bess laughed. "Pot's not a *drug*, it's her *medicine*—she says it's for her anxiety. Like Xanax or something. It's the only thing that keeps her sane. I'm actually looking forward to working at Wash-n-Tan so I don't have to spend all summer stuck in the trailer with her."

"I wish you were working with me at Dane's."

"Your dad hasn't even said he'll let you."

"I know, but he will. He doesn't have any good reason to say no." For the past two years, he'd told me I was too young for the job, but he could hardly argue now that I was seventeen.

Bess smirked. "Maybe he's worried that if you hang around your uncle too much, you'll wind up like Becky Castle."

"Holly's mom? I don't even know if Crete's still seeing her. And she was a wreck before they started dating." Holly was a few years younger than us, a tiny girl so pale and white-blond that Bess used to call her an albino. The three of us had been in 4-H club back in grade school and had done a team project together, raising rabbits to show at the fair. Holly's mom, Becky, was always forgetting to come pick her up after club meetings.

Bess nodded. "Yeah, but have you seen her lately? She looks like a wrung-out dishrag. She was over at Bell's one night, dancing by herself in front of the jukebox. Had jizz crusted all down the back of her hair."

"How do you know it was *jizz*?" I asked, laughing.

Bess shrugged. "Just saying, if your dad thinks *I'm* a bad influence, I can see where he wouldn't want you around somebody like her."

Crete never bothered to introduce any of his girlfriends to me or Dad, probably because Dad was always telling him that he had terrible taste in women. None of the relationships lasted long enough to get serious anyway.

“All right, I need to get home,” I said, wadding up the burlap sack that had held the possums. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You know she’ll wanna drive you back.”

“Tell her you tried to stop me.” I smiled and blew Bess a kiss.

She pretended to catch the kiss in her palm, then pressed it to her lips, something dumb we’d done since we were babies. “Try not to get dismembered,” she said. *Dismembered*. The word came easily, like she’d said it a hundred times. It was a newspaper word, one that grew too comfortable with repetition, from countless articles in dozens of papers and broadcasts on the Springfield nightly news. It was easy to think of Cheri as *dismembered*. It was harder to think of someone leaning on a blade to saw through her joints, to cut muscle, windpipe, bone. It didn’t seem fair to condense what had happened to her into one clean word.

I took the long way home, crossing onto conservation land to stare into the mouth of Old Scratch Cavern, where dogs had tracked my mother’s scent when she went missing. Old Scratch, of course, was a nickname for the devil. I didn’t go in; narrow tunnels and false floors gave way to an underground river that never saw light. Things lost to the cave stayed lost, and if my mother’s bones rode blind currents in the earth, I’d never find them.

When I was old enough to hear the story, I thought the worst part of my mother’s disappearance was the uncertainty, not knowing what really became of her. The sheriff was convinced she’d killed herself, but no one could prove she was dead. The search parties Dad pulled together yielded nothing definitive. Bloodhounds followed her scent toward the cave but didn’t find her. The most worrisome part was that my dad’s pistol had disappeared with her, and she’d left with nothing else, but even that didn’t prove anything. I wasn’t the only one who didn’t take the official explanation as gospel; as with anything concerning my mother, there were rumors and stories and whispers of magic.

That she haunted Old Scratch and roamed the hills at night. That she'd traded spirits with a crow and flown away, or slipped off with traveling Gypsies. Without evidence of her death, I could continue to believe she was alive somewhere, that for some reason she'd had to leave but would someday come back for me. I begged Gabby and Birdie (and my dad, before he stopped talking about her) for stories, details, any scrap of who she was and what she did. I pieced her together over time, a mosaic of others' words: witch and ghost, woman and girl, magic and real. I wanted more, but that was all I had.

When Cheri turned up in the tree, I knew uncertainty wasn't the worst part. It was a luxury, a gift. The worst part was knowing for sure that your loved one was dead, and I was grateful then that my mother's body had never been found. The mystery eats away at you, but it leaves a thin rind of hope.

It was dark already among the trees, fireflies flaring and burning out like flashbulbs, but the path was familiar, and I was more cautious than scared. I'd avoided the woods after Cheri's murder, just like everyone else, but after a while the fear dulled. I knew the land better than any stranger who might wander through. If I paid attention to my surroundings and kept up my guard, I'd be fine. I wasn't like Cheri, who'd been vulnerable as a wounded fawn, the easiest kind of prey. No one looking out for her. Not even me.

When I got home, I fixed myself a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of tea to take up to my room. I snapped on the bedside lamp, sending shadows scurrying up the lavender walls, and turned on the fan in the window next to my bed. Fresh air flowed into the room and slowly flipped the pages of the notebook I'd left on my pillow. It was a journal of sorts, mostly lists. "Things I Know About My Mother" (almost a full page, including a strand of hair I'd found on an old nightgown of hers and taped in the margin). "Boys I've Kissed" (five: four from a spin-the-bottle game at a river party where I got drunk on apple

wine, and one a visiting pastor's son Dad caught leading me—willingly—toward sin on the front porch). “What Happened to Cheri?” Her death hadn't answered that question, hadn't narrowed the list of possibilities. She'd run away or she'd been taken, and the last year of her life was a question mark.

When I wasn't scrutinizing Cheri's list, I jotted down notes about places where I wanted to travel. Iowa, of course, to see where my mother had lived, but I wouldn't stay there long. It wasn't far enough away. Sometimes I wanted to put so much space between myself and Henbane that it would take days to cover the distance. Dad had never taken me farther than Branson, and he had no interest in going anywhere else, even if we could afford it. He had my life plotted out in three bullet points: get good grades, stay out of trouble, go to college. He hadn't accomplished any of them himself, but he insisted it was what my mother wanted for me. He'd added a fourth bullet after the incident with the pastor's son: Don't let a boy get in the way of numbers one through three.

Dad couldn't complain about my grades, which came easily. He said I must have gotten that from Mom's side of the family. And I hadn't been in much trouble except the occasional scuffle with Craven Sump, nephew of Joe Bill, who—if you believed the story—had slithered off into the brush, never to be seen again after my mother turned him into a snake. Dad said Joe Bill ran off to avoid paying child support, but Craven and his kin believed in black magic. He called me “witch” or “devil's spawn” every chance he could, and sometimes I got tired of it and called him a dumbass or gave him a little shove and he'd report me to the office. The principal would sigh and tell me I had more potential than anyone else in my class, but I needed to work on my charms and graces if I wanted to get somewhere in life. Sometimes I'd glare at Craven, focusing all my energy on a mental picture of snakes clotted in a den, but he remained in his annoying human form.

If my mother truly had transformative powers, she hadn't passed them on to me.

I sprawled across the bed to eat my sandwich and pulled my paperback copy of *Beloved* out of the crack between the mattress and footboard, thumbing it open to a photocopied bookmark from Nancy's Trade-A-Book. Henbane's tiny library ("library" being an exaggeration — it was just a room in the basement of the courthouse) never had anything good, so I'd made a list for Dad, and whenever he passed through Mountain Home, he'd stop at Nancy's and see what he could find.

When I couldn't keep my eyes open to read any more, I got ready for bed in the pink bathroom across the hall and turned off all the lights. I padded over to the double window opposite my bed, the one that looked out across the backyard and into the hills. We'd learned in science class that stars looked brighter here than in most places because there were no competing lights. Henbane was a dark spot on the globe seen from space.

Black flakes like falling ash scattered across the moon as bats swirled through the sky. They spilled out of Old Scratch on summer nights and swooped through the valley to feed, their presence as familiar and comforting as the bugs and frogs that sang me to sleep. Dad once spent a month working a construction job in Little Rock, sleeping in a hotel, and when he came home, the nighttime sounds were deafening to his unaccustomed ears. The hotel room had been too quiet at first for him to sleep, but in time he'd gotten used to the absence of night music. I wondered if it would be the same for me when I left Henbane, if all the little pieces of home would so quickly be forgotten.

I had deer steaks and gravy in the skillet when Dad walked in Friday night with a book under his arm. Even though it wasn't quite summertime, his skin was already dark from working outdoors every day.

“That deer smells like heaven after a week of McDonald’s,” he said, grinning and pulling me into a hug. He let go and handed me the book. “I know you been wanting this one.”

Song of Solomon, its pages brown and swollen as if it had been dropped in a bathtub. “Thanks, Dad.”

“So you’re all done with school, right? How was the last day?” he asked, flipping through a week’s worth of junk mail on the counter.

“Fine. Nothing new.” I laid the food out on the table and poured glasses of tea while Dad pulled his boots off and set them by the back door.

We sliced our steaks in silence. The venison was tough. Birdie had taught me how to make it several years back, though her recipe involved soaking it in milk for twenty-four hours, and I never managed to start a meal that far in advance.

“Have you talked to Uncle Crete?” I asked.

“Yep. He seems to think you’re coming to work for him.”

“So? What do you think? Maybe I could finally get my own phone. And I could save some money for college.” I thought surely I’d hook him on that one.

“You don’t need a cellphone. And you’ll get scholarships.”

“Dad.”

“I didn’t say no.” He pulled a piece of gristle out of his mouth and set it on the edge of his plate while I waited for him to continue. “But there’s gonna be some rules.”

I smiled. This was going better than I’d hoped. I was already following the long list of rules he’d created for when I stayed home alone. A few more couldn’t be that bad. And with him gone, he’d never know when I bent the more ridiculous ones. “Go on,” I said in my most dramatic voice.

“I’m being serious here,” he said. “No working after dark. No walking home alone through the woods after dark. No socializing with your uncle’s pals over there.” I thought of Becky Castle with her crusty hair.

No temptation to break that rule. “And you’re gonna save most of your paycheck.”

“Sure,” I said. “Is that it?”

His knife and fork stopped moving and he was quiet for a moment, a strange look crossing his face. He stumbled around whatever he was trying to say. “Crete’ll be looking out for you . . . but you need to use your best judgment. You don’t know what kind of folks you might run into up there, and . . . you just need to mind your business and do your work and stay out of anything that don’t concern you. And if anything makes you uncomfortable, let me know. I can give him some reason you gotta quit.”

“What’re you talking about?” I asked. I could tell he wasn’t joking around, but I couldn’t imagine what had him worried. “I’ll be renting canoes and selling worms. It’s not exactly dangerous.”

His left eyebrow curled down like it did when he was about to lose his patience. “I want you to take in what I said, and I want you to agree to it.”

“Sure,” I said. “But you don’t have to worry about me. I’m really good at taking care of myself.”

“I know,” he said softly, looking down at his plate. As though he regretted that fact.

THE SETUP MAN

A NOVEL

T. T. MONDAY

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1

My dad wasn't a ballplayer. In his teens he did some boxing, but he spent his adult life in the straight world, inspecting aircraft welds at the McDonnell Douglas plant in Long Beach. He told me that if I wanted to make easy money—and he always believed this was the best kind of money to make—I should look into relief pitching. I remember one afternoon we were sitting in the den, watching the Dodgers get clobbered by the Cincinnati Reds on TV. A left-handed reliever named Matt Young had just bounced a curveball off the plate, walking home a run. “Look at this fool,” Dad said. “Guy couldn't find the strike zone with a pebble. He works ten minutes a day, and he's making a killing. I bet his kids will never have to work a day in their lives.”

Dad was almost correct. This was 1987, a few years before the agents grabbed the owners by the balls and journeymen like Matt Young started buying vacation homes with cash. I did some research, and in 1987 the Dodgers paid Matt Young \$350,000. He appeared in forty-seven games, pitched fifty-four innings, and posted an earned-run average of 4.47. Believe it or not, those are decent numbers. I put up a similar line last year. But times have changed. Last year I made a million five.

My name is Johnny Adcock. I am a thirty-five-year-old

American man, six feet two inches tall, 190 pounds, with a cholesterol count on the high end of normal. Women have told me I'm handsome, but I know not to listen. Even ugly ball-players get compliments. Here are the facts: I have gray eyes, a straight nose, and one slightly pronounced canine tooth. I wear a uniform to work. I travel the country on a chartered jet. I'm divorced, with a thirteen-year-old daughter who lives with her mother in Los Angeles. For now they live well—a house in Santa Monica, private school, organic groceries—but let's be realistic, I am one torn ligament away from permanent unemployment. Ginny, my ex, knows that. She sends me vitamins to prevent injuries. That's her idea of work.

In an average week, I spend approximately two hours throwing a baseball, including warm-ups. Roughly every other night I get called upon late in the game to face a single batter, always a lefty. Conventional wisdom says that it is better to have a left-handed pitcher face a left-handed batter, because the curveball will break down and away, out of the batter's reach. I don't throw a curve, but baseball is an orthodox religion, and orthodoxy resists exceptions. I can count on one hand the number of right-handed batters I have faced this season.

Here is a typical night's work: I walk in from the bullpen, throw my eight warm-up pitches. The batter, too, takes his time to get ready. He says a prayer, checks his grip, maybe does a little baton flip with his bat. If he's at home, he might check out the crowd. Then he steps into the box and we go at it. I throw my strikes and he takes his cuts. The whole dance lasts ten minutes, tops. If I get him, they pull me and put in the closer. If I don't, they probably pull me anyway. Ten minutes a night, seventy-plus nights a year, plus the playoffs if we're lucky.

If you look at this backward, you'll notice that I have a lot of free time. Enough to stun an average man. The best relief

pitchers are ruminants, men who desire nothing more than a seat on a bench, a game to watch, and a half-pound bag of David Sunflower Seeds. In college I read a poem about a man who measured out his life in coffee spoons. Good relievers measure theirs in seeds. But I am not a good reliever, because I'm restless. Maybe if I had been a position player—a shortstop, let's say—things might have been different for me. I might have taken extra batting practice in the cages under the stands. I have that option. I carry in my wallet a magnetic card that gets me into the clubhouse twenty-four hours a day. But relievers don't bat enough to make extra batting practice worthwhile. The last time I batted was four years ago. Nightcap of a doubleheader, the starter got in trouble early, and Skipper gave me the ball in the second inning. I went four frames, batted twice, and struck out both times, once on a foul bunt.

You might imagine that ballplayers go out and party after games. Some do, but there are lots of games, and the next is usually tomorrow. After a game, the next day's starting pitcher goes directly to sleep. Most guys go back to the hotel and watch TV, maybe Skype with their kids. But hotel television has never been enough for me. I need something more stimulating—especially after those hours waiting on the bench. I could have taken graduate courses through the mail, studied for life after baseball. Lots of guys talk about doing that. This is my thirteenth year in the bigs; I probably could have had a Ph.D. by now. I could have read every book ever written. But reading requires a still mind. Mine darts around like a knuckleball. I suppose I could have written books like Jim Bouton, great tell-all books about baseball and America, but again there is the problem of stillness, and also the question of why readers would want to peek inside my head.

Luckily, I found something better to do with my free time.

Ten years ago, my teammate Charley DeAngelo took me aside and told me his wife was fooling around. He had no evidence, but there were plenty of hints—jewelry he didn't remember giving her, strange numbers on the caller ID. He was going to follow her around for a day, see what he came up with. Could be boring, he said, so did I want to keep him company? I was recently divorced and had nothing better to do in the endless mornings before reporting to the stadium. So I rented a car and drove to the rendezvous spot. But DeAngelo never showed. There I was, parked across the street from the wife's gym, waiting for her to finish Tae Bo or whatever. What the hell, I said, I'm here, I will follow her, and, lo and behold, I discovered she was cheating—and not even hiding it. She went to an Italian restaurant for lunch, where she was joined by a gentleman in a business suit. They ordered Prosecco and oysters. Afterward they went to a hotel. I remember that I debated whether to tell DeAngelo. In the end I did, but only on the condition that he pass my name around to anyone else who needed this kind of help. DeAngelo thanked me for my effort and said he would put the word out.

An hour later, the phone rang. Word spreads fast in the major leagues.

A decade in, this sideline has earned me lovers and haters. The former are the guys who have required my services, at this point a cast of several hundred. The latter are those—managers, front-office folks, team PR personnel—who would prefer to ignore the ugly side of baseball. My detractors think the investigations represent a conflict of interest, even though I would never do anything to affect the outcome on the field. Mostly I think they're scared. They know sometimes I find dirt that implicates the wrong people. We're a tight group, baseball people, and our lives tend to touch like paper dolls. To some of us, that is frightening.

The appeal for me is the same as it ever was. Playing a child's game for money can be hard on your self-respect. Even now, I'm still not a doctor or a diplomat, but I'm more than I was. I'm more than a guy on a bench cracking seeds, waiting for a lefty to bat in the eighth.

God help me if a man's not entitled to that.

We are in Denver, last game of a road trip that started two weeks ago in Houston. The Bay Dogs of San José (that's my club) have been playing surprisingly well; if we win tonight we will be seven and five on the trip, but we're still buried in the standings thanks to a shit-poor first half of the season. Tonight's contest starts at 7:05 p.m., which means the bus leaves the hotel at three. I don't even think about these things anymore, I just feel them like tides. At two-forty-five, I am pulled magnetically to the lobby. The clubhouse guys are scurrying around, tagging our luggage. After the game we will go directly from the park to the airport. I am early, as usual; most of the other guys are still upstairs packing. I spent the morning and early afternoon down on the Sixteenth Street Mall, looking for a birthday present for my daughter, Isabel. She wants a certain kind of jeans, a brand called Miss Slinky. I did not find them.

Let me rephrase that: I spent the early afternoon looking for jeans. I spent the morning in bed with a young woman named Constance O'Connell. Connie is the cousin of my buddy Jerry Simmons, who pitches for Detroit. Three or four years ago, when Jerry was still with the Bay Dogs, a bunch of us were drinking beer by the pool after a day game. It was this very

same hotel, now that I think about it. Anyway, this group of half a dozen girls shows up, college-aged but well dressed. Jerry waves them over and buys their drinks. We assume that he has ordered in some talent, but it turns out the girls are strictly volunteers. Jerry introduces us around, and right away I'm drawn to Connie. She has these inky black eyes, a perfect little upturned nose. She laughs easily and often. We talk about northern California—she has just graduated from Sonoma State, where she ran track and earned a degree in library science, whatever that is. I ask if she does experiments with books. She says she does, and gives me her number. She tells me to call her next time we are in Denver. I do call, but it isn't until the Division Championship Series in October that we actually meet for drinks. The Bay Dogs lost that series, but I gained a friend. Life is funny that way. Did I mention her hair smells like a pine forest? I love Denver.

Our backup catcher, Frankie Herrera, takes the seat next to me on the bus. Frankie's about twenty-five, in his second year in the bigs. Like me, he grew up in L.A., but on the opposite side of town. It might as well have been another country. He tells me about gang fights and cockfights and cat fights—basically, his whole neighborhood was fighting all the time. He may have become a catcher just for the protective equipment. But Frankie is about as clean-cut as they come. In this era of gaudy tattoos, of Matt Kemp and Yadier Molina racing Mike Tyson to the last unmarked patch of hide, Frankie has just one decoration: the word "Granma," misspelled just like that, across his right hip. It was a casualty of high school, he says—a friend was practicing to be a tattooist and Frankie volunteered his ass. He never told his grandma about the tattoo, but he did donate money to build a new baseball diamond in her village in Sonora. He strikes me as uncommonly generous for such a young kid, and it's obvious he values his family. He

and his wife have twin sons, a big house in San Diego near her folks. He's just genuinely nice, no drama.

"What's the good word, Adcock?"

I exhale. "Not 'cutter.' But I've been working with Phil, and I think we found the problem."

Phil Sutcliffe is our pitching coach. After I gave up the go-ahead run our first night in Houston, he watched me throw and said I was snapping the wrist too early when I released the cutter. A cutter, or cut fastball, is a pitch thrown more or less like a fastball, but with most of the pressure on the middle finger. I have made the adjustment suggested by Sutcliffe, and we'll see what happens. The body forgets, so you have to remind it. The problem is that it forgets again.

"Bad night," Frankie says. "Don't worry about it. Actually, I need to talk to you about something else. Something besides baseball, if you know what I'm saying."

Even though everybody on the team knows what I do in my spare time, they speak about it only in whispers.

I slide in closer to Frankie.

"What's on your mind?"

"That's it? I just tell you?"

"How did you think it worked?"

"I thought we'd meet in an alley or something."

"An alley, Frankie?"

"I don't know—"

"This isn't Boyle Heights. I'm not selling drugs."

Herrera pulls a phone from his jacket pocket, checks for new messages, puts it back.

"It's my wife," he says. "I got a problem with my wife."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He looks at me sideways. "Why are you sorry? I haven't even told you the problem."

"Listen, buddy, you're not the first, and you won't be the last.

We're on the road a lot. Everybody knows how it goes. Sixty to seventy-five percent of my work is guys who think their wife is fooling around."

"And are they?"

"Most of the time."

"Well, that's not the problem."

"Lucky you."

He checks his phone again. When he looks up, his expression is suddenly paranoid. He grabs my arm with surprising force and says, "This has to stay on the down low, Adcock. You can't tell nobody. I need your word."

"You have it," I say. "That's what I'm here to do."

He releases the grip and just looks at me, giving himself one last chance to bail out. Everyone does this the first time. A problem isn't a problem until you tell it to me. After that, it's a straight line to the solution. Not everybody wants their problems fixed.

"When I met my wife," he says, "she wasn't, you know, such a good girl."

"How do you mean?"

"She worked in clubs."

"Okay."

"You know the kind of clubs I mean?"

"I think so."

"And also, a couple of times, she needed money at the end of the month. For rent and bills. So she made some movies."

I could have told Frankie the rest of the story myself, I've heard it that many times, but I let him finish. A guy wants to be heard first of all. I sometimes think that is half the service I provide.

"Of course, now she's different. She is a different person since she had the twins."

"Sure, I bet."

“I thought everybody forgot about the videos. But then, the day before yesterday, I got this message on my phone.”

“What kind of message?”

“A text message with a link to a Web site. One of those free porn sites.”

“And the video was hers?”

Frankie nods.

“Do you know who sent it?” I say.

“The number was blocked.”

“There are ways to get around that.”

“I was hoping.”

“On the other hand,” I say, “anyone can buy a prepaid SIM card. She’s not still in touch with the photographer, is she?”

“He told me he’d never do anything with the files. Maria doesn’t know this, but I paid him a nice chunk to just sit on them. But I swear to God, Johnny, if I ever find that motherfucker . . .”

“Easy, Frank. You have a lot to lose.”

“I know. Maria tells me the same thing.”

“Good woman.”

“Tell you the truth, all I want to do is find the files and erase them. I don’t need revenge or nothing. I just don’t want my boys to grow up and find out their mom was, you know, that kind of actress.”

“How old are they now?”

“Gonna be five in October.”

“Time flies, huh?”

“That’s what everybody says.”

“So it was just the link, no message with it? Normally, you get a demand—not necessarily in the same package, maybe by mail, or a phone call?”

“You’ve seen this kind of thing before, huh?”

“Unfortunately.”

This seems to make the kid feel better. He pulls out his phone again but doesn't even look at the screen before putting it back in his jacket.

"Nah, there's no demand. You think they want money?"

"Maybe. I'm going to need the phone."

Frankie's face drops. "For real?"

"Sorry, Frank, but I need to see the video. You can transfer the number to another phone, but I need the message, in its original form."

"Promise you'll keep your hands by your sides?"

"Come on—"

"She's my wife, Adcock."

"I know she is, and I promise to give her video the respect it deserves, regardless of how effective it may be."

"I appreciate that. So—how does this work? Do you charge by the hour?"

"We can talk about that later."

"Okay. I'll have my agent call yours. You're with IMG, right?"

"It doesn't work like that, Frank."

"Oh. Right."

"Don't worry about it. Just get me the phone. Call Verizon or whoever, tell them you lost your handset."

"Yeah, okay. I can do that."

"The sooner the better," I say. "You know where to find me."

3

Tonight our starting pitcher, Tim Harlingen, scatters six hits over seven innings. The Rockies' only run comes in the bottom of the seventh, when our center fielder loses a routine fly ball in the lights. Harlingen is a prideful guy, he wants to finish the game, but the score is tied, 1–1, going into the top of the eighth, and Skipper pulls him for a pinch-hitter (who strikes out, but that's how these things go). Bottom of the eighth, we send out Mitsu Yushida to face the top of the Rockies' order. Yushi gets the first two on grounders, but then he loses his concentration and walks the third and fourth guys on something like nine pitches. I have been warming up for exactly this scenario, because the Rockies' number-five hitter, Tom Kelton, is a classic Adcock adversary: a lefty batting thirty-five points lower against left-handed pitching.

As I jog in from the pen, I go over Kelton's scouting report in my head. You're supposed to jam him inside to start the count, maybe he fouls off one or two, and then put some junk on the outside corner and hope he chases. Kelton and I broke into the league the same year. We have faced each other dozens of times. Like most scouting lines, this one is factual but insufficient. The truth is that if Kelton is feeling good he will put your best pitch in the cheap seats. Inside, outside—it doesn't

matter. He's a drinker, though, and it is after ten o'clock. I cross my fingers and hope he's jonesing.

Skipper puts the ball in my glove. "See you in a few," he says. I nod.

Our starting catcher, Tony Modigliani, the third member of our little committee on the mound, goes over the plan: "Let's start him with fastballs up and in. Got it?" Physically, there are two types of major-league catchers. First is the short, stocky guy with a thick skull, the Mutant Ninja Turtle. Frankie Herrera fits this mold, along with greats like Yogi Berra, Mike Scioscia, and the brothers Molina. Most Turtles took up the position when they were young because it suited their physiques. Growing up, they spent the vast majority of their practice time behind the plate, not beside it, so they tend to be only average hitters. But catching is the most specialized position after pitching—just handling pitchers and their egos takes a degree in psychology—so a guy like Frankie Herrera can expect to enjoy a long career if he stays healthy. Tony Modigliani is the other kind: tall and lithe, maybe six four and 220, with the long, strong arms of an outfielder. In fact, Modigliani played outfield until college, when his coaches told him to try catching. Less competition, they told him, more chance to stand out if you can hit. With those long arms he hits for power—forty homers in his rookie season alone—and because he trained as a hitter, his eye is well developed (he led the National League in walks last year). The problem is that these long-limbed guys are not cut out to be squatting four hours a day, two hundred days a year. Eventually, their knees give out, and they have to move to first base, or join an American League club, where they can DH. There are plenty of examples of this type, too: Mike Piazza, Benny Santiago, Joe Mauer. Everyone loves them—when they're healthy.

One more thing: for some reason, long-limbed catchers tend to be dicks.

“Up and in,” Modigliani repeats, “you got that?”

“Got it,” I say.

He trots back to the plate, flips down the mask. I take my eight warm-up pitches while the crowd watches bloopers on the big screen. Then the ump gives the signal, and Kelton steps into the box.

I do as I am told, spot a fastball up and in. It has good velocity, a little trailing movement, and it is headed right for Diggy’s waiting mitt when Kelton turns and jacks it over the right-field wall.

The runners come home—one, two, three—and the score is now Rockies 4, Bay Dogs 1.

“One pitch,” Skipper says to me as he takes the ball. “I think that’s a record.”

“What can you do?” I say. “Line on Kelton is up and in.”

Skipper taps my ass. “Maybe it’s time we rewrote the line.”

On the flight home, I hide behind my headphones. One of the problems with being on the road with a baseball club is that you’re never alone. There’s always someone around—teammates, coaches, trainers, writers, video crews. If you want the world to disappear after a bad night on the mound, you can’t just put a blanket over your head. The best you can do is crank up the music and shut your eyes. Most people respect that, even if the sulking player is far too old to be wearing a purple headset labeled “EarCanz™ by Weezy.”

Know what I’m really too old for? Late-inning homers. If a kid with a triple-digit heater hangs a slider and loses the game, you forgive him. You take the long view and trust he will work

out the kinks by his next outing. After all, he's still bringing the heat. With me it's another story. My hard-throwing days are long gone. My game is about location, changing speeds, and outsmarting the hitter. The moment I lose the ability to fool a drunk like Tom Kelton, I become expendable. No head-phones can drown that out.

When we reach San José, Herrera finds me in the players' parking lot.

"So, hey," he says, "do you think maybe we could erase the link before I give you the phone?"

"Afraid not, buddy."

"Do you really have to watch the clip?"

"Lucky me, right?"

"Look, Adcock—"

"I'm just kidding. I'll close one eye, how's that?"

He hands me his iPhone. The case is decorated with children's drawings.

"Great," I say. "Let's see what we can find."

"I've got my fingers crossed. Thanks for your help, by the way."

"Don't thank me yet."

Frankie laughs and pulls out his keys. "Yeah, I guess that would be smarter." His black BMW chirps. He flips his suitcase into the trunk, slips behind the tinted glass, and disappears into the night.

My own iPhone starts vibrating around seven the next morning. I am in my apartment, on the twenty-first floor of a building in downtown San José. It's not a glamorous address, but it suits me. The ballpark is walking distance, so I don't need a car. I keep a motorcycle in the garage for emergencies. The view is a nice bonus. From my living room I can usually see the hills on both sides of Silicon Valley, the little horsetail clouds above the ridges, the windmills in the passes. In front of me, northward, are the backwaters of the Bay, the toxic red sludge in the evaporating ponds, the stinking marshland, the abandoned railroad trestles. On a clear day you can see all the way to San Francisco. This morning, though, I see nothing. We are fogged in.

"This is Adcock."

"Johnny, it's Bil Chapman."

Bil is the Bay Dogs' clubhouse manager, a middle-aged man trapped in the body of a teenager. Though he must be over forty, his face is ravaged by acne and he sweats through his shirt most days by noon. Bil still lives with his mother, but he claims that it is the other way around, that his mother lives with him, in a house he owns. As though that makes any difference: Bil's life is a series of small, almost unnoticeable rebel-

lions, for example leaving the last “l” off his first name. He tells me that’s edgy.

“You know what time it is, Bil?”

“Johnny, I have some bad news. Frankie Herrera died in a car accident last night.”

I wind up to tell him it’s too early to be fucking around, and then it occurs to me he’s serious.

“Skipper is asking everyone to report two hours early,” Bil says. “We’re going to have a meeting, and then there will be time with grief counselors—”

“Grief counselors. What happened?”

“It was a car accident.”

“Yeah, you said that. How? Where?”

“We got a call from the Highway Patrol at five this morning. They found Frankie’s car on the road to Half Moon Bay. Highway 92. He went over the edge.”

“Half Moon Bay? Frankie’s apartment is in Santa Clara.”

“Yeah, I know. Maybe he went for a drive? I mean, he went for a drive, obviously.”

“When did it happen?”

“They’re saying around three a.m.”

I go back in my head. We landed at SJC at twelve-thirty or one. Back at the stadium parking lot, one-thirty. It occurs to me that I may have been the last person to see Frankie Herrera alive.

“So there’s a meeting?”

“One-thirty sharp.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“I’m really sorry, Johnny. I know Frankie liked you a lot.”

By eight-thirty, I’m in San Mateo, teasing my bike through the gridlock on 101. The interchange with Highway 92 is a giant

flyover weaving between office buildings emblazoned with the names of Internet companies selling electronic real estate. This is the suburb where Barry Bonds grew up, where he was the only black kid in his high school. I bet even today he would be the only one. This is still mostly a white area, but it has been filling up lately with Indians and Chinese pushed north out of the deeper parts of Silicon Valley. I think about Barry's childhood friend, a white guy, who went on to become his trainer and is currently serving time for refusing to testify in the steroid trial. I wonder if any Indians or Chinese would have done that for him. Not that I approve, of course.

As the road winds uphill into the Coast Range, I leave suburbia and plunge into the redwoods. The temperature drops ten degrees. It occurs to me that I do not know exactly where along the next ten miles the accident occurred. I don't even know what I am looking for. I pass a peloton of cyclists in DayGlo Lycra—computer geeks and bankers who just remembered they have bodies. Every year at least a dozen of these guys go over the edge on this road. The county has installed guardrails on all the curves, but nothing like that is going to stop a cyclist careening downhill at sixty miles per hour. Might stop the bike, but not the rider.

I get plenty of nasty looks as I pass the cyclists. It makes me feel better to know that I could strike out any one of them on three pitches. Of course, a couple are probably rich enough to buy my contract. I think it must be better to be a pro ballplayer in Cincinnati or Pittsburgh or Milwaukee, where the league minimum salary puts you near the top of the local pecking order. Here in the Bay Area, a million five a year makes me solidly middle class.

Three curves after Skyline Drive, I find the spot. There's no mistaking it: a section of the guardrail has been replaced with yellow police tape, and three uniformed cops stand next

to their cruisers, shooting the shit. Two Highway Patrol and a San Mateo County sheriff. I ride past them, around the next bend, and hide my bike in the bushes. I lock up my helmet and open the goody box, a stash of Bay Dogs paraphernalia I take with me everywhere, because you never know when you might meet a fan.

When the sheriff's deputy sees me walking toward the yellow tape, he comes over and shakes his head.

"You can't be here," he says.

Very politely I ask, "Is this where Frankie Herrera's car went off the road?"

He looks at me like I just told his five-year-old daughter where babies come from. "No comment," he says, waving his hand. "You have to leave."

"Because he was my teammate," I say. I put out my hand. "Johnny Adcock."

"No shit." The deputy loses himself for a minute. I wait while he regains his cop composure. "I'm really sorry about Mr. Herrera," he says.

"Yeah, he was my wife's favorite." I smile like I'm embarrassed. "She liked 'em young."

"My old lady likes Modigliani. But they all do, right?"

I pull a baseball from the pocket of my leather jacket. "Give her this."

The cop turns the ball, finds Modigliani's signature, smiles. "So, Mr. Adcock," he says, "you want to see where it happened?"

"I do."

He goes over to the two patrolmen, and they chat for a minute. Then he waves to me. "Sorry for your loss," says the CHP captain, a middle-aged white man with a handlebar mustache and thighs that push the capacity of his golden uniform tights. I've always marveled at how much cops look like out-of-shape second basemen—or maybe how much second basemen (Jeff

Kent, for example) look like in-shape cops. “Tough luck yesterday,” he says. “One pitch.”

“Scouting report called for a fastball high and tight,” I explain. I shake my head to indicate (hopefully) that I would like to leave it at that.

“That Kelton is a killer,” says the captain.

“You’re telling me.”

“Guess they thought you might get him this time, huh?”

I bite my tongue. “Guess so, yeah.”

I give the captain and his partner autographed balls, and they walk me over to the guardrail. On the way, we cross a set of fresh-looking tire tracks cutting across the road from the east-bound lane to a point just a few feet from the rail. Looks like Frankie was on his way home when he died.

“These from Frankie’s car?” I ask the cops.

“Most likely,” the captain says. “Though, to be honest, those look a bit wide. What was the deceased driving, Cam?”

“BMW 328,” the partner replies.

“I guess you can get those with wide tires, right? Anyway”—he puts his gloved hand on the mangled steel rail—“here is where he went over.” This stretch of Highway 92 is set into a hillside that has been encased in concrete to halt erosion. Imagine a miniature Hoover Dam; add fog. The cop nods to a spot downhill a hundred yards, on the next curve, where two more police cruisers are parked, with their lights flashing soundlessly. “And that is where he ended up.”

“Can you take me down there?”

The captain rolls the baseball in his hand. “I don’t know, Mr. Adcock. That would be against our procedures.”

“Where are you from?” I say. “You want to see the Giants? I can comp you a pair of tickets.”

He smiles at his partner. “The real question is, will you win?”

“Is this about last night? With all due respect, officer, if you

want to try to throw a baseball past a hulk with a club, go right ahead. I wish you all the luck in the world.”

The cop retreats from his pose. “I didn’t mean it like that. I know how hard it is. I played ball in high school.”

“And?”

“And I joined the Highway Patrol the week after graduation.”

To save the guy’s pride, I look away.

As we pick our way down the hill, I hear the captain cursing me under his breath: “Fucking left-handed assholes. . . . One pitch! Fucking jerkoff thinks he’s such hot shit. . . .”

At the lower site, Frankie’s BMW is a mess of twisted, smoking steel. The air smells like gasoline, burning hair, and plastic. I try to breathe through my mouth.

The captain points to a gash in the roof where the metal has been pried open. “See that aperture? That’s where the crew removed the bodies. They sent the Jaws of Life, but this was no salvation job, I’m afraid. Sorry if that sounds insensitive, Mr. Adcock, but that’s just the truth.”

“Did you say ‘bodies’?”

“Two. Your friend Mr. Herrera and an unidentified female.”

I try to act cool, as though this is what I expected to hear.

“Actually, Captain,” the partner pipes in, “she had ID.”

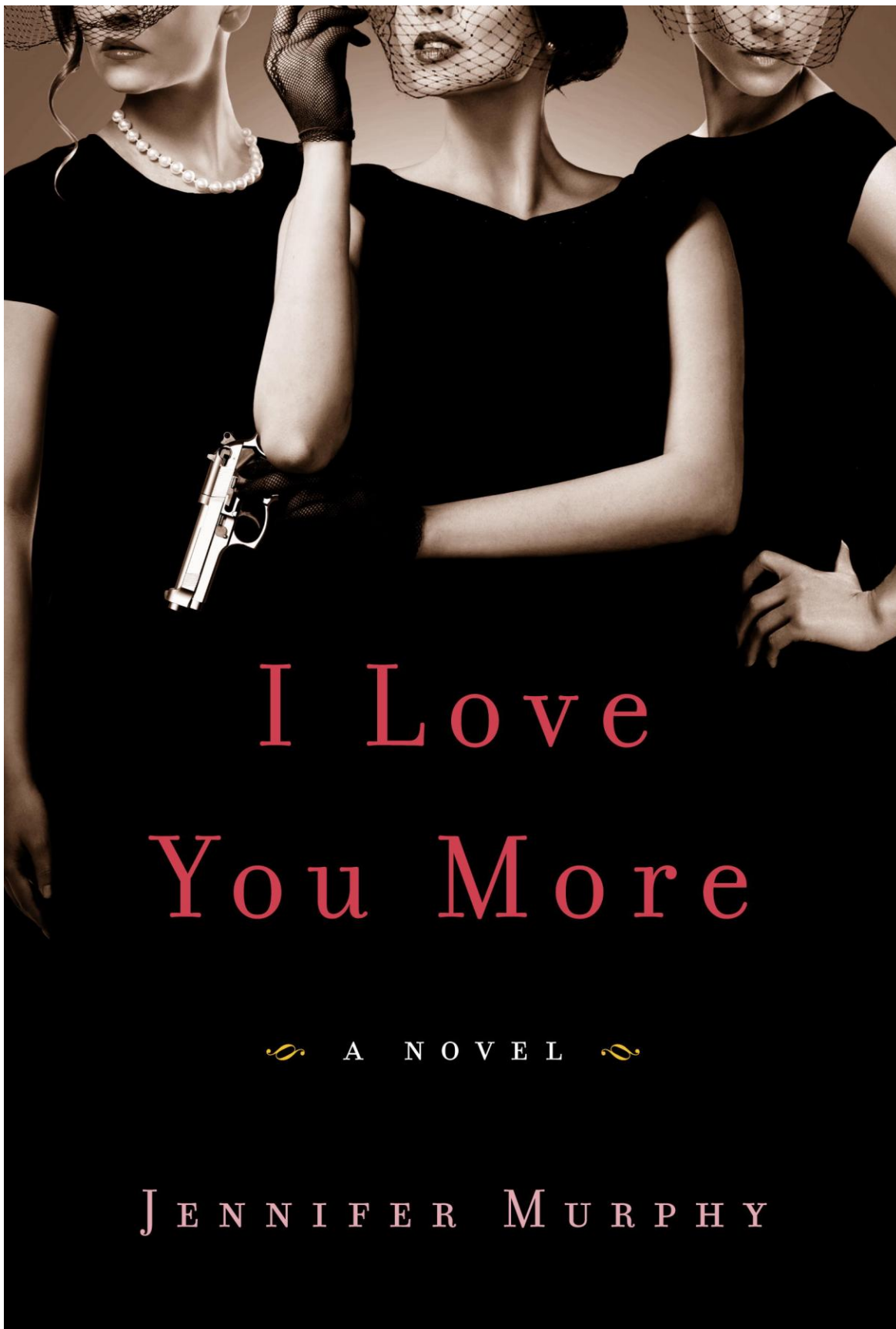
The captain fixes him with a withering stare. “We can’t say her name,” he says slowly, “because she was a minor. Seventeen years old.”

“Oh yeah?” I say.

“Mr. Adcock, I could lose my job if I told you her name—”

“I understand.”

“—but because you were his friend, I will tell you this much: they weren’t family.”



I Love
You More

∞ A NOVEL ∞

JENNIFER MURPHY

I Love You More

A Novel

Jennifer Murphy

Doubleday

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

One

Rumors

(The Events Surrounding the Murder)

Who brings a tale takes two away.

—Irish proverb

Picasso

The rumors started before my daddy's body got cold. I'd made my peace with the lies by then—lies I've learned are a necessary evil—and, being from the South, I'm used to *cloying* (that means sickeningly sweet) smiles, but I hadn't figured on the sideways glances, hushed talk, loud silence. Feigned ignorance. I mean someone's dying had always made the front page of the *Hollyville Herald*. Even Mrs. Morgan's twenty-year-old cat got a paragraph, but not my daddy. The particulars of Oliver Lane's funeral were tucked in the ad section between an upcoming gun show, an irony I'm sure was lost on the editor, and a JESUS LOVES YOU, standard filler for slow news days. Thankfully there was no mention of murder, or of the fact that the police suspected Mama or one of those other two ladies. It wouldn't be polite to put such things in writing.

My name is Picasso, like the artist. Mama said she named me Picasso because he painted about truth, but I think Mama misinterpreted his words. What Pablo Picasso said was this: *Art is a lie that makes us realize truth*. What I think he meant is that great art is born from skillful lying, and something else, something much more profound, that lying is okay as long as its end goal is altruistic. Well that's how I read it anyway, and that's how I've been able to justify what happened that day.

Looking back, it all started three years ago when the first lady showed up at our house. I was ten years old at the time. Daddy was out of town on business; he'd been traveling a lot. Mama was sticking a couple of frozen chicken pies in the oven when the doorbell rang. It was August and hot, the kind of hot it gets in North Carolina in the dead of summer. The kind of hot where your skin melts and your tongue swells the minute you walk out the door, and the last chore you want to do is take out the trash because the smell's so bad. Mama's long, straight

blond hair was tied up in a ponytail, her face and neck covered in sweat beads, her mascara running.

“Run and get the door, Picasso,” she said.

The lady had blue eyes like Mama and me, and skin as pale as an onion. She was tall, but not as tall as Mama, and skinny. The navy blue suit she wore looked like it was painted on, it fit so perfect. I figured she was selling religion.

“You must be Picasso,” the lady said, and forced her bright peach lips into a big smile that displayed perfect white teeth. “You’re even prettier than your picture.”

Funny, how I didn’t think much about that statement at the time. Shouldn’t I have wondered how she’d seen my picture? But there’s so much I didn’t wonder about back then, at least not right away.

Mama had come up behind me. “Can I help you?” she asked the lady.

“I’m Jewels. I know your husband.” Her voiced cracked. “We have two children. Twin boys.”

She tried to unzip her handbag—I saw that it was the exact same handbag Daddy had gotten Mama for Christmas that year. Its strap got twisted with that of her briefcase. Both fell to the ground. Files spewed across our front porch. She kneeled. Her shoulders shook. While choking out a couple of sobs, she gathered the papers, stuffed them back in the briefcase, stood, and rearranged the bags on her shoulder. A tear trailed from her eyes, removed a crooked line of makeup from her face. She straightened, wiped her cheek with the palm of her hand, smearing her caked foundation even more, pulled a picture from her handbag, and handed it to Mama.

Mama’s face went white. I couldn’t tell whether she was scared or angry. Daddy used to say that Mama was an expert at covering her emotions. “Picasso, go upstairs and do your homework,” she said, sternly.

“I don’t have any homework, Mama,” I said. “School doesn’t start until next week,

remember?”

She raised her voice. “Don’t you have summer reading?”

I’d finished my reading two months earlier, but I knew she didn’t care about that one way or another.

“Come in,” I heard her ask Jewels as I climbed the stairs. “Would you like some iced tea?”

“Yes,” Jewels spluttered. “Thank you.”

It was a couple of months before Jewels showed up again, this time with another lady. That morning, the light through my window was duller than usual. Rainwater drooled on the windowpane. The alarm went off just as I looked at my clock. I took a shower, brushed my teeth, put on my school uniform, and went downstairs to prepare my breakfast: a glass of orange juice and a cinnamon Pop-Tart.

I was in the kitchen scraping butter on the Pop-Tart when I caught a whiff of perfume. Mama was wearing her favorite low-cut, form-fitting black dress, and she’d done up her face like she did when she and Daddy were going out on one of their “adult nights.” The dress was also one of Daddy’s favorites. Whenever Mama wore it, he would run his hands over her hips and breasts, and usually the two of them would end up kissing their way up the stairs and into their bedroom, and sometimes they wouldn’t go out after all.

“Do you have a meeting or something?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It’s raining.”

Mama liked to sleep in, so usually I walked to school, but on rainy days, like that one, she’d drag herself out of bed, throw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, not even brush her teeth, and drive me to school.

She turned on the teakettle and opened the kitchen blinds. “Looks like it will clear up later.”

I rinsed my glass and plate, put them both in the dishwasher, and started gathering my books.

“You forgot to put the butter away,” Mama said.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Mama rushed to open the door.

“I know we’re early,” I heard a lady’s voice say.

“I was just getting ready to drive Picasso to school,” Mama said.

“We can wait in the car?” the lady asked more than said. “Oh, hi Picasso. Don’t you look pretty today?”

Now, you can see the kitchen clear from the front door because our house isn’t that big and has what Mama calls an open floor plan, but I was still startled when I heard the woman say my name. Like the last time, Jewels wore a tailored business suit, this one beige. The suit and her hair were wet from the rain. It crossed my mind that it wasn’t very smart of her not to bring an umbrella, but mostly I started wondering why she showed up again. She carried the same handbag, the one like Mama’s, but not the briefcase. Another woman stood next to her. I learned later that her name was Bert, short for Roberta. She wore a stretchy green dress, also wet, and Birkenstocks. Her belly stuck out so far it looked like it would burst any minute. She was shorter than both Mama and Jewels and chubby, and in my opinion not very pretty. Her hair was a mousy brown, her eyes that muddy color that some people call hazel, and she had a mole on her cheek that was the size, and shape for that matter, of a small beetle.

Mama turned around. She looked surprised, as if she’d forgotten I was there. “Can you give us a minute, Picasso?”

I wasn’t sure what she was asking, so I sat down on one of the island stools.

“No, I mean, will you go upstairs? And brush your hair. It’s sticking up all over the place.”

When I came back down, Jewels and Bert were gone.

“Much better,” Mama said, looking at my hair. “You ready?”

“Who were those ladies, Mama?”

“Oh, they’re just members of a committee I’m working on.”

“What committee?” I asked.

Mama was busying herself in the coat closet. “Where is that raincoat of mine? Oh, here it is.”

“How does that one lady know Daddy?”

She messed with her zipper. “What did you say, Picasso?”

“That one lady said she knew Daddy.”

“I don’t remember her saying anything about knowing Daddy,” Mama said.

“She did say it,” I said. “Last time she was here.”

“Last time?” Mama asked. “Those two women have never stepped foot in our house before.”

“Not both of them, Mama. Just that one. Jewels.”

“You’re mistaken, Picasso. Now skedaddle. You’re going to be late for school.”

Mama had never lied to me, at least that I knew of, but it wasn’t the lie itself that bothered me. It was the why of the lie.

Mama and I weren’t big car talkers, so she turned on the radio and listened to some lady who was helping callers figure out how to decorate. Mama was forever changing stuff around in our house. Back then our house was mostly white: white kitchen cabinets, white trim, white sofa, and sort of white furniture (Mama called it distressed). Daddy always said Mama got a gold star in decorating. He also said she got a gold star in money spending so it was good he made a lot. The line for the drop-off circle wasn’t very long, which meant I was close to being late.

“Hurry,” Mama said, when one of the new teachers, Miss Chest (her real name was West), opened the door for me. “Remember, I’ll pick you up if it’s raining. Otherwise, just walk.

Okay?"

Mama was rocking on the porch swing when I got home from school that afternoon. Daddy was right: Mama was the prettiest woman in the entire world. She wore a light pink sundress and black flip-flops. Her hair was hanging loose, catching the wind. I slid off my backpack, kicked off my shoes, scooted in next to her, and laid my head against her shoulder. Her hair smelled sweet, like flowers.

She kissed the top of my head. "How was school?"

"Fine," I said.

It wasn't. Ryan Anderson, the boy I'd had a big crush on since kindergarten, still hadn't noticed me, and those Think They're All That Girls had up and started calling me Pee-pee Picasso again, which wasn't too creative given the fact that it had been a very long time since that particular adjective made any sense at all. I didn't see any reason to tell Mama that. I tried not to share that kind of stuff with Mama; I didn't want to upset her. Mama's never been very good at hearing bad things. Back in kindergarten, when those girls first started calling me that name, I told Daddy about it.

"Everybody has accidents now and then, Partita (an instrumental piece composed of a series of variations)," he'd said.

Daddy never called me Picasso. He called me all kinds of different P words, so I would learn them. It might be an hour or it might be a week, but sooner or later Daddy would ask me what every one of my names meant. "You shouldn't worry about it. Those girls will forget before you know it."

"They're mean, Daddy," I said.

"Do you want me to talk to your teacher?" he asked.

"Will you?"

"Sure thing." He looked around to make sure Mama wasn't there, leaned in close, and

whispered in my ear, “How about we drive into town and get you some of that homemade ice cream you like?”

“Mama will get mad,” I said. “We haven’t had dinner yet.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” He made his secret smile, the one where instead of showing his teeth, the ends of his lips went up just a little and his eyes widened.

Daddy had five smiles. On top of the secret smile, there was what Mama called his charming smile (or sometimes, usually when she was mad, his get-what-he-wants smile), where he opened his mouth wide, causing little dents to form in his cheeks and his nose to wrinkle, and twinkled his eyes at the camera or whoever he was looking at. He also had his private-time smile, which he used exclusively for Mama, and his proud smile, where on top of curling his lips, he cocked his head, squinted his eyes, and looked off in the distance. I didn’t see the fifth smile very often. I called it the unsmile, not only because it wasn’t a smile exactly (it was more like a cross between a smile and a glare), but because sometimes I wasn’t even sure I saw it, it went away so fast.

Daddy never did talk to my teacher, Mr. Dork (his real name is York), about those All That Girls and their stupid name-calling. Daddy didn’t do a lot of things he said he would.

“Why do I have such a dumb name?” I asked Mama as we swung back and forth.

“Picasso’s a beautiful name,” she said. “I told you it means ‘truth.’ You were the first true thing that ever happened to me, and the first and only thing I’ve ever truly loved. The moment you came into the world, I unzipped my heart, stuffed you inside, and zipped it back up real tight so nobody else could get in there.”

“What’s love got to do with truth?” I asked.

“Everything,” she said.

“Didn’t you put Daddy in your heart too?”

She stared at the air, as if something far, far away had caught her attention. “Promise me

you'll never get married."

"Why not?" I asked.

She cupped my chin in her hand and looked straight into my eyes. "Promise me."

"I promise."

"Good. I love you, Picasso." She kicked the toe of her flip-flop on the porch's light turquoise, painted-wood floor to keep the swing going.

Daddy used to say that there was something about Mama that pulled him like a magnet. He said he felt it the first time he saw her. I was just a baby the first time I saw Mama, so I don't remember ever not feeling Mama's pull. I've always loved Mama more than anyone or anything, loved her so much that the fear of losing her was always just one step behind the love.

I was sleeping when Daddy got home that night. The fight woke me. I got out of bed as quietly as I could. The mattress springs squeaked when I lifted my behind. I stood there for a moment, still as a lamp, and then snuck out to the top of the staircase to listen.

"What is wrong with you, Di?" Daddy was saying. "You can't really just be upset that I forgot to put gas in your car. I'll fill it tomorrow before I go to work. Okay?"

"It's not just the gas, Oliver," Mama said. "It's everything. You're never home. A few nights ago, one of the smoke alarms malfunctioned. It was three in the morning. And there I was dragging a ladder in from the garage and fixing the damn thing. It's not that I can't fix stuff, when I was single I fixed stuff all the time, but I'm not single now. I'm married." I thought I heard her snuffle. "It's just that sometimes I don't feel married. You're gone so much."

Then she was blubbering, which surprised and worried me. I'd never heard Mama cry before. When I was little, Daddy once told me that Mama was born on an island called Ice, because that's what all its inhabitants were made of. In the middle of the island there was a big thermometer that was always set below zero so that the people wouldn't thaw out. Every hundred years a big refrigerated boat would stop at the island, and if you just happened to be eighteen

years old when it arrived, like Daddy said Mama was, which I thought was lucky, you could journey to the college of your choosing. Mama chose the University of North Carolina. When I asked Daddy why Mama didn't melt when she moved to the southern portion of the United States of America, he said, "People don't change just because they move to a different place."

"I'm sorry, Di," Daddy said. "You know I love you more than life itself. I promise I'll try to be home more. Okay?"

I heard that slobbering sound their lips made when they kissed.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" Daddy asked.

"No," Mama said. "Not tonight. I'm not feeling well. You go on. I've got some reading to do." Mama was a domestic engineer (that means she ran our home and family relations) so mostly she just read fiction books, or her Junior League stuff. Back then she held a pretty important position at Junior League. I guess she was also a Junior League engineer.

I scurried back to bed. Only seconds after I'd pulled up the covers and closed my eyes, Daddy came into my bedroom. I pretended I was asleep. He sat on my bed for a long time. Then he kissed my cheek and left.

As the months passed, Mama and Daddy talked to each other less and less. They stopped kissing and even hugging. Mama had so many bad moods it seemed like they were growing together into one big one, like our neighbor Mr. Buttons's eyebrows. She stared into the air more than she didn't. By Thanksgiving break, Ryan Anderson still hadn't so much as glanced in my direction, and although those All That Girls quit calling me Pee-pee Picasso, they figured out a new and better name for me: Plump Picasso.

When I told Daddy about that name, he said my being a little plump wasn't a bad thing at all. "Girls with a little fat on their bodies grow into shapely, attractive women. Just look at your mama."

"Mama was fat?"

“Not fat, just a little plump.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, skeptically.

“I saw a picture of her when she was your age,” he said. “I’ll find it and show you. And look at your mama now. She’s as beautiful as the goddess of love. Her Roman name was Venus. Do you remember her Greek name?”

“Aphrodite,” I said.

“That’s right. Ares, the god of war, fell in love with Aphrodite the first time he saw her. Just like I did with your mama.”

“Was Aphrodite plump when she was my age?” I asked.

“She never was a little girl,” he said. “She emerged from the ocean a full-grown woman. The gods found her standing on a seashell. Whenever we’re at the beach and I watch your mama coming out of the water after one of her morning swims, and I see her long blond hair matted against her head and shoulders, the sun making her wet skin glisten, I swear she’s Aphrodite reincarnated.”

When Daddy talked about Mama, his face and eyes lit up, and sometimes he said things like that about her, gushy, embarrassing things, and usually, just like he did that day, he’d end the conversation by saying, “I love you and your mama more than life itself.”

That day I still believed him.

I heard them laughing before I saw the bright blue convertible. The car was parked in the church parking lot at the end of our street. Since it was so pretty out, and I’d left home early enough, I decided to take the long way around to school. It wasn’t quite spring yet, but it was warm and the sun was so bright that even the saddest people couldn’t help but have minutes of happiness. So bright I couldn’t see who was sitting in the car. I shaded my eyes with my hand. Two women with longish, straight blond hair and dark sunglasses sat in the car. Both wore red

blouses with matching head scarves that tied under their chins. They could've been twins they looked so much alike. Even though they'd changed their hair color, I was pretty sure I knew who they were.

I crossed the street slowly, being careful not to make any noise. I was so busy watching the two of them and making sure they couldn't see me that I didn't notice the mess of dirt and gravel that had spilled from Mrs. Jesswein's newest flower bed onto the road's shoulder. My feet skidded; my heavy backpack shifted. I lost my balance. Stones shot through the air, sprayed on Mrs. Jesswein's lawn. Before I knew it, I was on the ground, my legs splayed out in front of me, my skirt hiked up, my behind and hand stinging. I stole a look in the blue car's direction. They hadn't seen me; they still laughed. I gathered myself and slunk away. Like Kinsey Millhone, my all-time favorite female detective, I ducked behind some tall bushes between Mrs. Jesswein's house and the parking lot, crouched down, and spied on them. I could see the two of them very clearly. One had a beetle-shaped mole on her cheek.

It felt strange listening in on their conversation. The air was still; I could hear them as clear as if I was listening from my spot at the top of the stairs.

"What's taking her so long?" Bert asked.

"You know Diana," Jewels said. "She's probably perfecting her makeup."

"You should talk," Bert said.

"I don't wear that much makeup."

"You wear enough."

"I didn't used to."

"You mean when you were three?"

In the distance, I heard a house door slam, then heels clicking in my direction. It was Mama, which confused me. She wasn't even dressed when I saw her last. She passed by my hiding spot and got into the backseat of the blue car, I saw that she was wearing a red head scarf

and blouse too. Rather than turn to greet her, Jewels simply nodded as she repositioned the rearview mirror. Even though she wasn't looking in the mirror, Bert nodded too. The car backed out of its parking space and drove away, the tires screeching. Within moments all I could see were three sets of blond hair flapping in the wind like wings, and then they were gone.

Kyle

My first thought was: God, she was beautiful. It wasn't just her flawless features; it was also her elegance, fragility. Later, I wondered whether she always exuded that sense of vulnerability, or if its presence was a response to the situation. But I didn't think about that then. My second thought was: Lucky bastard. My third was: Sorry bastard. I'd always counted out my thoughts like that when I arrived at a murder scene. After the day was long over, I'd sit down at the rickety wood dining table in my small, sparsely furnished apartment with my nightly three fingers of Redbreast, and write each word on an index card. Then I shuffled them, laid all but the last facedown, and one by one turned them upright. With my practiced poker face, I challenged myself, attempted to solve the crime over and over, from different angles and varied perspectives. Although it had been awhile since I'd worked a murder case, the word list flew through my mind like a banner behind a plane.

Beautiful, lucky, sorry.

It was the Fourth of July weekend. The temperature, in the upper nineties and climbing, was the highest in recent history. Good for tourism but challenging for suit coats and ties. Mack and I had rolled down all the unmarked Buick's windows before we braved its scorching black leather seats, but that hadn't helped much. Even the wind was hot. We were complaining about the car's broken air conditioner when the call first came in. I thought we'd be responding to another drunken teenage party. We'd already answered six the night before and one that morning. Then the dispatcher gave the response code.

"Did she say 187?" Mack asked.

"Sure sounded like it," I said. I stuck the flasher on the roof, turned on the siren, and hit the gas.

We don't have many murders in the Outer Banks, and even less on Cooper's Island. A domestic disturbance or two, a barroom brawl, a cat caught up a tree is about the extent of it, except from mid-March to mid-April when high school and college kids head our way for their spring breaks, or during the holidays inside and around the lazy heat of summer: Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day. The island itself is roughly eight square miles of sand and wild "brownery" interrupted by a small business district, clusters of houses and trees, and the occasional touristy gift shop. Driving can be a challenge. Most of the roads are ancillary, narrow passageways that accommodate only one car at a time, some paved, some dirt. Luckily Mack and I had been driving along Route 122. Paved and even partially striped, it runs through town and continues in one big circle around the island.

It had been two years since I'd been back and I can't say I'd missed working murder cases, but I did get that old rush. There's a smell to fear and blood. A stale, sour stench that doesn't only soak your nostrils; it gets into your skin, hair, clothing, and mind like bar smoke, and not even a change of clothes, shower, or solving a case will wipe it completely away. I used to hate that smell, but not that day. The minute I got that first whiff, I felt like I'd come home.

We parked. A steep sandy embankment covered with smatterings of tall grasses and weeds led down to one of the more deserted stretches of beach on the island. Less than ten feet of grade separated the dirt driveway from the edge of the drop-off. There was no guardrail and no streetlights, a standard characteristic of our eastern shores. Although it didn't happen often, an impaired driver or an accidental push of the gas pedal instead of the brake had led to more than a few cliff-hangers. Seagulls circled low over the shallow mid-tide water searching for small fish or crustaceans that may have washed ashore, their high-pitched squawks a battle song. The usual breeze off the ocean was noticeably absent, the air eerily still. The only sign of human life was a sand castle in the making and a child's red plastic pail.

The house was your typical Cooper's Island rental, a one-story shingled box, this one a

shit-brown color, with a wraparound wood deck that had weathered to a silver gray. Three long flights of stairs, also weathered wood, separated by bench-lined landings led from the back deck down to the beach. Although I couldn't see it from where I stood, I imagined sliding glass doors opening onto the deck. A short set of stairs led to the house's side-entry door.

The door was wide open.

"I'll secure the perimeter," Mack said. Mack and I had been together since my return to the island. When I first laid eyes on him, I swore he'd just graduated from Cooper's High, not to detective third grade. He is boyishly handsome, with bushy dark hair and a well-earned six-pack. I'd just transferred from Detroit PD. When he asked me why I'd traded Motor City for Podunk, I told him I wanted to spend quality time with my ailing mother. That's been my story.

I knocked on the doorframe before I walked in. The swamp cooler drummed loudly; the heat pouring in through the open door had no doubt put it into overdrive. In addition to the vic, I counted three people in the tight space: a middle-aged woman with fiery red hair, a bald-headed man wearing a Cubs baseball hat, and *her*. She sat on the sofa wearing a red one-piece swimsuit, white towel held tightly over her shoulders, blond hair matted to her head and neck, her piercing blue eyes seemingly fixated on the picture above the fireplace directly opposite her, a cheesy deserted beach scene with a lone seagull flying in the sky. Like one of those replicants in *Blade Runner*, her profile was perfectly chiseled, her posture proud. I could've stood there looking at her forever. I've always been a sucker for a thing of beauty, and not just women. A Vermeer painting, Brioni suit, Aston Martin sports car.

The body was lying prone in front of a white-brick fireplace, head turned toward me, eyes open, right arm tucked beneath the stomach as if cupping it, the location and size of the blood pool suggesting a gunshot to the abdomen. The place was tidy, no obvious signs of a struggle. Like many of its kind, it was a mishmash of tacky and tasteful. Eating bar and wicker stools sporting pink-and-blue shell-patterned cushions immediately to my right. Small kitchen

beyond it. White appliances. Bleached-wood cabinets. Gray laminate countertops with chipped corners. Hallway straight ahead, bathroom door open, probably bedrooms either side of it. Living room to my left. Surprisingly clean transition from the kitchen and entryway linoleum to Berber carpeting. Fireplace on the wall opposite the side entrance. Bookcases either side of it. Just as I thought, sliding glass doors—why were they closed?—leading out to the deck. Two chairs upholstered in the same shell fabric as the barstools, one in the far corner opposite the fireplace and one almost blocking the side-entrance door. Coffee table and woven taupe sofa between them.

The red-haired woman spoke up first. Your usual beach retiree type. Expensive salon hairdo and manicure. Sixtyish. Too-tan skin. Floral swimsuit cover-up. Bright pink lipstick. Plump around the middle, but otherwise well kept.

“I’m Clara Butterworth,” she said. “My husband and I were first on the scene.” She looked over her shoulder. Mr. Cubs leaned back against the kitchen cabinet, his arms crossed, eyes closed like he was napping. In addition to the hat, he wore a short-sleeved plaid shirt and just-over-the-knee-length khaki shorts, making him appear shorter and rounder than he probably was. “And before you ask, yes, just like the syrup.” She let out a little laugh, but caught herself. “Oh, I am so sorry. This isn’t any time for jokes, is it?”

“Detective Kyle Kennedy.” I reached into my breast pocket, took out my notebook, handed her my card, extended one toward the wife (at least I thought it was the wife). “Ma’am?” She didn’t acknowledge me.

“Oh, she hasn’t said a word since we got here, Detective,” Mrs. Butterworth said.

“You say you arrived first Mrs.—um—ma’am. How long ago was that?”

“Fifteen minutes? It was seven forty-five, right Melvin?” Melvin was as unresponsive as the woman on the sofa. “Well, anyway, you could probably verify that. I called 911 the minute we walked through the door.”

“How do you know the victim?”

“I don’t, Detective. He was lying there like that”—she pointed at the body—“when we came in. We’re staying down the street. Same place we stay every summer. We’re from Lake Forest.” She looked at me as if she wanted acknowledgment. “Illinois?”

I walked past her to get a closer look at the vic’s body.

“He’s dead, Detective,” Mrs. Butterworth said. “I already checked.”

“You touched the body?” It was always the well-meaning witnesses that contaminated crime scenes.

“Just his wrist,” she said.

Since the right arm wasn’t exposed, Mrs. Butterworth would’ve had to walk around the body. I noted her shoes. Gold lamé slides with a short stacked heel. No apparent blood transfer or impressions on the tightly looped carpet.

“Did you touch anything else?”

“I don’t think so, Detective. Did we, Melvin?”

Mack came through the door carrying the crime scene kit that we kept in the trunk of the Buick. “Brass and CSIs are on the way.”

“How far out?”

“Depends how backed up the ferries are. Thirty minutes max I should think.”

“Half an hour?” Mrs. Butterworth asked. “That seems awfully excessive, Detective, don’t you think? Even for here.”

I stood, cleared my throat. “Detective Jones, this is Clara Butterworth. She and her husband were first on the scene.”

“Ma’am,” Mack said and nodded, then headed to the body.

“I’ll need to ask you a few questions if that’s okay, ma’am,” I said. In Detroit, I would have ushered her to a private room and questioned her after the scene was properly secured—

body inspected and outlined, evidence bagged, photos taken, site sketched—but this wasn't Detroit. This was Cooper's Island where the homicide division boiled down to Mack and me, and proper procedure was a luxury.

"Of course, Detective." Before I'd even crossed the room the woman's tongue launched into motion. She and her husband had just sat down to breakfast when she heard the shot. Quarter after seven, she said. No she didn't check the time on the clock because she didn't think much of it. Thought it was fireworks. But she and her husband always ate breakfast at seven fifteen. "My husband is very punctual."

"What made you come over if you thought it was just fireworks?"

"We went to get the paper after breakfast like we always do—the doctor says Melvin needs his exercise—and we saw that the door was open." She leaned through the doorframe, pointed. "Everyone within a quarter mile of here gets their mail and paper from that same bank of mailboxes across the street. If Melvin had his druthers we'd get the paper before breakfast, but it doesn't get delivered until—"

I interrupted. "Did you say the door was open?" I'd just assumed it was left open by the Butterworths.

"Yes. Very open."

"Go on," I said.

"Well, as I was saying, the paperboy like everyone else on this island, including your crime scene investigators I should say, is slow as molasses. At home our paper is on our stoop by five thirty; that's when Melvin rises. He prefers to do his exercise and shower before breakfast, but here he has to wait until after. Anyway, we were almost to the box when I saw the open door. I asked Melvin if we ought to check it out, and he said we should go right over. Didn't you, Melvin?"

Not even a cursory nod.

“There was this odd smell as we approached. I can’t quite say why, but I had this strange feeling that something was wrong, and I must say I was a little scared of what I might find, but I said to myself, Clara, you need to get over your fears and get in that house, now.”

“You said it was seven forty-five when you arrived. You sure about that?”

“On the nose,” she said. “It takes us twenty minutes to eat, another five for me to clear the table and rinse off the dishes, and five to walk to the mailboxes. I do the dishes when we get back while Melvin reads the paper. He likes to sit out on our deck with his second cup of coffee. Two’s the limit, you know.”

“Do you remember seeing anything or anyone out of the ordinary either on your walk over or when you arrived at the scene?”

“Do you mean like someone leaving the scene or sniffing around the house?” she asked. “Like an intruder? I don’t think so. But maybe it’ll come back to me later, you know like those witnesses on TV. Do you want me to close my eyes and recount my entire morning? What I heard and smelled and all that? I’d be happy to do that.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but that won’t be necessary.” I hate TV crime shows. “What happened when you entered the house?”

“I saw her first.” Mrs. Butterworth indicated the woman on the sofa. “I introduced myself, but she didn’t say a word. Then I saw the body . . . well, him.” She pointed at the victim. “He looked pretty dead, but I thought I better make sure. So I marched right over and felt for his pulse.”

“Two shots,” Mack said. “See here? Exit wounds. I don’t want to flip the body until the CSIs get here, but I’d say one to the chest and one to the abdomen. Looks by the trajectory of the bullet holes in the wall”—he pointed at two dark spots near the wall’s corner between the fireplace and sliding glass doors—“that the shots came from the direction of the side door.”

Beautiful, lucky, sorry, gun.

I was just about to bring up the gun when Mrs. Butterworth scolded us for talking in front of the child. Child? There she sat right next to her mother, fingers tightly laced in her mother's. How had I not seen her before? She looked about the age of my nephew, my sister's son. Was he ten now? Eleven? All I could see beneath the towel that enshrouded her was a pair of spindly white legs and a thick head of curls. She had her mother's blue eyes and the dead man's dark hair (Mediterranean descent?), but her skin tone was much lighter than both of theirs. Her eyes and cheeks were damp, as if she'd been crying, and there was something about the way she looked at me, something beyond sadness, beyond pride or defiance or even protectiveness that I knew I'd seen before but couldn't quite place.

"What's your name, sweetie?" I asked.

She looked down at her feet.

"I'm real sorry about your daddy," I said. "I know you must be sad."

Nothing.

"I saw this really cool sand castle on my way in. Did you make that?"

"My daddy and me," she said, without looking up.

"Wow, cool. My dad used to build sand castles with me too." A lie. Not the sand-castle building part, the dad helping me part. "Maybe you could give me the official castle tour?"

She eyed me suspiciously. Progress at least.

"If you don't want to, that's okay." I addressed Mack. "Do me a favor, will you? Take this young lady to her bedroom and keep her company for a while. Play a game or something." I had no idea what girls that age played with. Mack's face wasn't the only one that registered disapproval.

"Fine," the kid said. "I'll give you a tour." There was no mistaking her defiant tone.

I looked through the sliding glass doors just beyond the vic's body. The sand castle was within eyesight. It looked safe enough. "Why don't you go on out. I'll meet you there."

“Mama, I’m going down to the beach, okay? I won’t be far.” She pried her mother’s hand loose, set it gently down on her lap, rose, took a step, hesitated—

“Don’t worry about your mama,” I said. “Detective Jones and I will take good care of her.”

She exited through the side door, her expression blank as she passed by me. I could barely hear her footsteps on the wood deck as she rounded the house and headed down the stairs.

“I’ll do a quick check of the rest of the house,” Mack said.

I gave my attention back to Mrs. Butterworth. “We’ll need you to sign your statement once we get it typed up, but otherwise I think we’re done here. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.” Mrs. Butterworth didn’t seem too keen on leaving.

“Clara,” a deep, commanding voice said from behind me. So Melvin had lungs after all. “Time to go.” An order. Ex-military?

Her body shot to attention. She extended her hand to shake mine. I didn’t take it. There’s nothing cordial about a murder scene. “Oh, well, all right then. I have your card if I think of anything.” She smiled conspiratorially. “Thank you, Detective.”

“Thank *you*, ma’am.”

Melvin all but dragged his wife out the door.

Mack emerged from the hallway. “Vic’s name is Oliver Lane. Thirty-eight years old. Business card says he’s some sort of lawyer. Wife’s name is Diana.” He nodded toward the sofa. “Thirty-six. She’s carrying a passport but I couldn’t find a driver’s license. Looks like they live in a small town called Hollyville. My phone says it’s over there by Cape Fear.”

“What about the kid?”

“Picasso, according to this mystery book. *I Is for Innocent*. My wife loves Sue Grafton.”

“Picasso? Like the artist?”

“Spelled the same way.”

“Any luck on the murder weapon?”

“Nope. Once the CSIs have done their job and the body’s gone, we’ll get some boys in here to tear this place up.”

“Maybe the intruder took it with him or dumped it. Make sure they search any nearby trash receptacles and bushes. There’s some high grass in that field across the street.”

When I turned my head in her direction, Diana Lane’s eyes met mine. It wasn’t that I’d forgotten she was there, a man could never forget a woman like that was in the room, but her despondence had fooled me into thinking she wasn’t listening. Tears ran down her face. She leaned forward, put her head in her hands, started to sob. Her entire body shook. The towel fell from her shoulders. Her wet swimsuit didn’t do much to hide her curves, her breasts, her erect nipples. Goose bumps rose on her arms. I took off my suit coat, wrapped it around her shoulders. She leaned into me, closed her eyes, dipped her head slightly forward. Without thinking, as if I’d been doing it my entire life, I sat, took her in my arms, held her while she cried. Mack’s expression was blank, controlled, but however hard he was trying to hide his disapproval, it was palpable. I released her, straightened, stood, nodded at Mack, as if to say, *I know, I know, I lost it there for a moment.*

“Is there somebody I can call?” I handed her my handkerchief.

She dried her eyes, blew her nose. “I don’t have family here. I don’t have family at all. Just Oliver and Picasso.”

“Are you okay to answer a few questions?” I asked, trying to regain my business voice. “Or we can talk later. After—”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine.

“Do you have something you can take? To calm you?”

She pointed toward the kitchen. “Windowsill above the sink.”

I found some Aleve and two prescription bottles with Oliver Lane’s name on them:

zolpidem and lorazepam. The lorazepam was the same dose my mother used to take for panic attacks; I figured it was safe enough. I made a note of the doctor's name and filled a glass with water.

"Here," I said when I got back to her. "Take this. It might help take the edge off."

She washed down the small white pill, drank the entire glass of water. "Where's Picasso?" she asked as if she'd just noticed her daughter wasn't there. The kid was stealth.

"Outside," I said, glancing through the sliding glass doors. "Building a sand castle. We'll need to question her as well. I need your permission to do so without your presence, or I could ask her to come back inside."

"No," she said. "I don't want her here. Picasso has seen enough already."

"Mack, I'm going to head outside and talk to the kid. Why don't you take over from here?" Given my brief lapse in judgment, I thought it was best that way.

"Sure thing," he said.

Diana Lane's eyes met mine again.

"I won't be long," I said.

The crime scene van was already parked in the driveway when I walked through the door. The bloodsucking media wouldn't be far behind. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mrs. Butterworth bustling toward me.

"Oh, Detective," she called. "Can I have a brief word?"

"How can I help you, ma'am?"

"Well, it may be nothing, but I thought I should at least say something."

"What's that?"

"Well, when I came into the house, the child was talking to her father."

"Talking?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "She was kneeling next to him. She seemed very upset. I don't know

exactly what she was saying, but I thought I heard something about her mother being sorry.”

“Did she say what her mother was sorry about?”

“No, not that I heard anyway.”

“What made you think she was upset?”

“She was crying, and it was like she was pleading with him.”

“Pleading?”

“Yes, you know, like begging him not to die. Oh, and just one more thing. I told 911 that a man had been shot, but that I thought he was still alive. Since the child was saying something to him and all. So I hope I’m not in trouble for giving them false information.”

“I’m certain you aren’t,” I said.

“Oh, I hope not. Will you tell them that it was an innocent error?”

“I’ll do that,” I said. “Thank you, Mrs. Butterworth. You’ve been most helpful.”

“My pleasure,” she said. “And you know how to find me.” She smiled and began walking up the drive.

“Mrs. Butterworth,” I called after her.

She turned. “Yes, Detective.”

“Where is it that you’re staying exactly?”

She pointed at a thicket of trees at least three hundred yards west of the crime scene—all I could see was a portion of red roof—and continued on her way. No wonder she and her husband hadn’t seen anything.

I descended the weathered beach steps, all the while watching the kid gather sand in her hands, meticulously pat it onto the wall of her sand castle. So concentrated. So vulnerable. So screwed. Poor thing. Her father was dead, and there was a good possibility that her mother had killed him. Although I loved my sister’s kids, I’d never really wanted any of my own, never wanted to bring children into this fucked-up world. When I was a few feet away, the kid stopped

working and gave me that same look, the one I'd seen inside, like she was staring into my soul, and I remembered where I'd seen it before. It was in an affluent Detroit neighborhood, a house robbery gone wrong. We arrived at the scene to find a man and woman dead on the living-room rug; they'd been shot in the back of their heads execution style. A low growling sound came from somewhere upstairs. A German shepherd paced before a closed closet, blood dripping from a wound in his chest, his eyes wild, fiercely protective, posture vigilant, a dead six- or seven-year-old boy maybe a foot in front of him. We thought that was the end of it until we tranquilized the dog and opened the closet door. A baby no more than three months old lay sleeping in a pink blanket. I found out later that the dog didn't make it. It was weeks before I could get the look in that dog's eyes out of my mind. I never did find out what happened to the baby.

As I walked toward the kid, I thought about what Diana Lane had said just before I left the house: *Picasso has seen enough already.*

What *had* Picasso seen?

Dust

A novel

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

DUST

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

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First Edition



First, this book is dedicated to you,
La Caridad.

¶

*Beautiful, beautiful, beloved Tom Diju Owuor
(Couldn't you tarry,
Just a little bit, Daddy?)*

1936–2012

¶

*My dazzling, adored, life-hope-beauty-breathing mama,
Mary Sero Owuor*

¶

*For you my cherished siblings,
Vivian Awiti, Caroline Alango, Genevieve Audi,
Joanne Achieng, Alison Ojany, Chris Ganda, and Patrick Laja;
Joseph Alaro, François Delaroque, Rob de Vries,
and John Primrose. The next generation angels,
Karla, Angelina, Taya, Nyla.
For those gone ahead, for the ones still to come.
Thank you*



1

HERE. SHE COULD PAINT THIS; HOLD THE BRUSH AS A STABBING knife. There. Coloring in landscapes of loss. She could draw this for him, this longing to hear his particular voice, listening for echoes of bloodied footsteps, borrowing dead eyes to help her find him again. Here. Jagged precipices of wounding, and over cliffs, an immense waterfall of yearning, falling and falling into nothingness.

Her father, Aggrey Nyipir Oganda, is a slender, dark stone statue in front of her. Only his eyes roam spaces, taking everything in, the emptiness, too. Eyes reddened and popping out, shadowy tear streaks on an ebony face. His old policeman posture is intact. Straight, stiff, steady, he is old-world dapper in a slightly shabby 1970s coat and 1950s brown leather fedora. Tinged with the gray of age, clandestine wrinkles congregate at the corners of his eyes. As with so many men of Kenya from his time, his manner is genteel English colonial stranded in time's paradoxes.

A twist deforms Ajany's full lips. *Here.* The evidence. They are descendants of a lineage of Living Dead. Breathing in, she shifts her body to stare at a beige coffin, habitat of the new and unquiet dead on a day when distorted election results will set a bucolic country afire. The

outside world is drenched with human noises of accusations and counteraccusations, election rigging, and the miracle of mathematical votes that multiply and divide themselves. But within their world, in a self-contained, haunted compound with its lone, misshapen grevillea tree, upon which a purple-blue bird tweets, and where death prowls at half past three, Ajany bends forward to listen to and for her brother, Odidi, whose story-words had created vessels that always carried her into safe border.

Hours ago: Inside a morgue with its forgotten dead, the unprepared dead, and the happy dead, a chill had turned all their hands a pale yellow, same shade as Moses Odidi Oganda's long, thick fingers. They had rummaged among the discarded dead in order to find and retrieve their own.

Post-autopsy, after a smoke-stained attendant had stitched him together again, father and sister had dressed Odidi up: olive khaki suit, black socks, and tan leather shoes, purchases from a half-closed, guarded, nearby mall whose managers balanced the fear of waiting for hell's inevitable descent with the thirst to milk the last flow of money from panicking citizens. By three-thirty, documents signed, all protocol adjusted and therefore observed, Moses Ebewesit Odidi Oganda was officially dead.

Arabel Ajany Oganda stands under gray skies where shadows dart. A pair of bateleur eagles—prophet birds, like marabou storks—survey the ground for cooling bodies. Savanna birds encircling a city that is dashing toward an abyss, while here four men advance toward a white hearse with tattered red ribbons fluttering from its front windows.

Ajany breathes into her hands and shivers. Blisters and bruises burst in hidden places within, while her outside eyes glue themselves to Baba's glowing brown shoes that underline his efficient out-of-place-ness. Bile in throat burns, dissolving her screaming. *I hate . . .* What? She swallows, focuses on Nyipir's fixation with the wooden coffin, his guttural breathing out of a lullaby. *Oombe, Oombe / Nyathi maywak ondiek chame. . .* She listens for Odidi. Listens for words that return life into a still body she has seen and touched. *Odi, wake up*, she begs with her breathing.

Nyipir Oganda lifts his hand. Six other eyes have been waiting for his sign. Three men: A mortuary attendant, sinewy and lame, one of his incisors elongated and peeping out of his mouth as if from another existence; his eyes ooze a brown substance and madness. Dr. Mda,

DUST

police pathologist, a short man of shiny baldness, whose cherubic, pock-marked face carries a too-large mustache set off by big ears and eyes that dart hither and thither; his beige trousers are a size too small. Ali Dida Hada as Ajany had never seen him before—in police uniform, adorned with the insignia of an assistant commissioner of police, carrying a black baton under his arm. An emaciated line, mirroring his strip of mustache, serves as a smile on his mouth. When she was eight years old and the then newly arrived Ali Dida Hada had been pretending to be an itinerant herdsman for her family, she had spied him mesmerizing the family camels with songs sung in a falsetto. She had told Odidi: “He has gold mirrors inside his eyes.”

Nyipir signals. The men hoist up the coffin.

It is a short walk to the white hearse.

They fit the box into the runners.

Bruised faces belie outward harmony.

Earlier, there had been a tussle next to the silver autopsy bay.

Nyipir had said, “I’ll take my son home now.”

Dr. Mda had screeched with moral valor, “A *Mporis* case. The *cadaver brings* to the state.”

His tone had caused Nyipir to grab the rotund man’s neck and squeeze as a long python might. Supervising Officer Ali Dida Hada had watched, face placid, head tilted.

“*Heup* me,” Mda choked.

Ali Dida Hada had been nonchalant. “Me, I say there’s no case.”

Dr. Mda bleated, “You *mbrought* me here.”

“*Eh!* To reveal through science how this *cannot* be a police case.”

“Oh!” croaked Mda.

Nyipir had released Mda’s neck.

A practical man, Dr. Mda had looked to the mechanics of death for an answer that would not compromise his only partially tainted soul: *exsanguinations caused by pneumothorax and heart failure*, a footnote on a death certificate so that Moses Odidi Oganda could go home.

Distant sirens.

In the compound, near the grevillea and its cheerful bird, life collapses into the squeak of the opening door of a hearse, the view of a coffin from a rear window, the deep gaze of other strangers, and more shuffling footsteps. No flowers. No cortège—a brother’s leave-taking of a sour morgue where other corpses wait for their living. She remembers that the

hearse driver's name is Leonard. His thin face bones cast fragile shadows. He has wrapped a white handkerchief around his coat's upper arm and assumed a funereal look. It suits him. Earlier, Leonard had brought Ajany and Nyipir from the airport in a bright-yellow taxi. It is gone now.

Ajany scrubs her face and stares at two sides of the world. *Before-now* was four hours and forty-three minutes ago. Rained-upon earth mingling with smoke and age and dust and sun and cows on a father's coat, and her head tucked into its folds in welcome at the airport, the scent of coming home from all her Far Aways. *But-now* is icy eternity, thick with the terror of the voicelessness of her big brother. *But-now* is made of the murmured anguish of other strangers—a ragged quartet oozing old-clothes smell. Wet eyes, life-hardened faces, as unadorned as the ill-nailed empty coffin on the cement. Panel-beaten features. The woman's look is a hemorrhage. Wife? Sister? Daughter? Ajany looks away from these other citizens of the sea of absence.

A lethargic white-striped lizard pauses between tiny yellow flowers before lumbering across Ajany's blue-painted toes, which peep out of absurd dark-blue Brazilian high heels. A howling *Where are you?* Resonance of fear, which pounds its hooves, galloping through her soul. Madness neighs. Her fingers press long, painted nails into palms. These bend and break. Groping darkness behind her eyes. Exhaling slowly so as not to disrupt stillness, Ajany breathes, but it is too late. Now is when forgotten ghosts return to claim beginnings. She could paint these arrivals, but for now she is gnawed by the ghastly bawling of a baby that only she could ever hear. Ajany calls for him, her story maker. *Odidi*. He knew water songs that soothed. He always knew what to do.

Outside sounds:

Étude of squealing tires.

Bird chirp.

Machine-gun opening sequence.

A scream.

Fragments of a song from some unseen citizen's room.

Franklin Boukaka's plaintive summons—*Aye Africa . . . kokata koni pasi, soki na kati koteka pasi*—and for a whole minute it overwhelms the frenzied crescendo screams of *Haki yetu*, "Our rights."

It has begun.

Inside Ajany's heart, a sobbing begins. Farther up the road, a pre-

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pubescent girl with a tank top, belly ring, and red sneakers hurries off somewhere, clutching her Nakumatt white-and-blue plastic bags. A big hand lands on Ajany's shoulder. She jumps.

Her father croaks, "Wadhi." Let's go.

Nyipir and Ajany Oganda approach the hearse. Then they both stop in front of the car door. The veins on Nyipir's neck throb, and sweat pebbles crown his head.

In Ajany, a feeling as if her name had become tactile; she reaches for the sensation and glimpses tendrils of brother, strings thrown into this life from another dimension. She pulls at it and wraps the cord around her wrist. "Come, Odi." A murmur.

Nyipir rubs his eyes before folding himself into the car.

Ajany follows.

They settle in, hugging beige seats, suffused by new-car-in-a-bottle smells. Leonard puts the vehicle into gear. No one acknowledges the pulsating ghost next to them. Like all the others, it is molded out of entombed silences.

Ali Dida Hada, the mortuary attendant, and Dr. Mda watch the white hearse's departure. They also hear the sudden and explosive rhythms of a country shooting its people and tearing out its own heart. The mortuary attendant wrinkles his nose. "Aieeee! So much work . . . and before the new year. Now, when do I see my ma?"

Massive purple clouds rush in from the eastern coast. Ambushed by a warm wind in Nairobi, they scatter, a routed guerrilla force. At Wilson Airport, a *ghat*-carrying eight-seater plane weaves its way off the apron. The last small plane out of Nairobi without top-level permission for the next week. Above the airport din, egrets circle and ibises cry *ngangan-ganga*. Father, daughter, and son are going home.

Dusk is Odidi's time. In the contours of old pasts, Ajany retrieves an image: She is sitting on a black-gray rock, spying on the sun's descent with Odidi. Leaning into his shoulder, trying to read the world as he does, she stammers, "Where's it going?" He says, "Descending into hell," and cackles. She had only just learned the Apostles' Creed.

. . .

The plane lifts off.

The coffin and its keepers are nestled amid bales of green herbs. Straight-backed, stern, silences reordered, Nyipir is a chiseled stone icon again, an archetypal Nilotic male. But there are deep furrows on his forehead. She can paint these, too. Trail markers into absence. Ajany had once believed Baba was omnipotent, like God, ever since he had invoked a black leopard to hunt down the mean and red-eyed inhabitants of her nightmares.

She trembles.

Nyipir asks, "Cold?"

Baba's baritone, Odidi's echo. Dimpled handsomeness. The Oganda men were gifted with soft-edged, rumbling voices.

Ajany turns. The light of the sky bounces on her thin face, all bones and angles. Fresh bloodstains on her sleeves. The frills of her orange skirt are soiled. She is tinier than Nyipir remembers. But she had always been such a small, stuttering thing, all big hair and large eyes. More shadow than person, head slanted as if waiting for answers to ancient riddles. He clears his throat. From the gloom of his soul, Nyipir growls, "Mama . . . er . . . she wanted to . . . uh . . . come to meet you."

Ajany hears the lie. Sucks it in, as if it were venom, sketches invisible circles on the window. Stares at the green of coffee and pineapple plantations below.

"Yes," Nyipir says to himself, already lost, already afraid. He shifts. The dying had started long ago. Long before the murder of prophets named Pio, Tom, Argwings, Ronald, Kungu, Josiah, Ouko, Mbae. The others, the "disappeared unknown." National doors slammed over vaults of secrets. Soon the wise chose cowardice, a way of life: not hearing, not seeing, never asking, because sound, like dreams, could cause death. Sound gave up names, especially those of friends. It co-opted silence as an eavesdropper; casual conversations heard were delivered to the state to murder. In time neighborhood kai-apple fences were urged into thicker and higher growth to shut out the dread-filled nation. But some of the lost, the unseen and unheard, cut tracks into Nyipir's sleep. They stared at him in silence until the day his disordered dreams stepped into daylight with him to become his life:

They had pointed a gun to his head.

Click, click, click.

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He had fallen to the ground, slithered on his belly like a snake, hissed, and vomited, because he had forgotten how to talk.

Today.

Sweat on palms, heartbeat quickening, Nyipir swallows. A groan. Ajany hears a father's leaching anguish. She scratches an ache where it itches her skin, gropes inside-places as a tongue probing cavities does. Expecting to be stung.

Today.

The past's beckon is persistent.

From the air, Nyipir peers down at an expanding abyss. His country, his home, is ripping itself apart. Stillborn ballot revolution. These 2007 elections were supposed to be simple, the next small jump into a light-filled Kenyan future. Everything had instead disintegrated into a single, unending howl by the nation's unrequited dead. This country, this haunted ideal, all its poor, broken promises. Nyipir watches, arm-pits damp. A view of ground-lit smoke. Dry lips. His people had never set their nation on fire before.

On the ground, that night, in a furtive ceremony, beneath a half-moon, a chubby man will mutter an oath that will render him the president of a burning, dying country. The deed will add fuel to an already out-of-control national grieving.

Nyipir turns from the window.

He is flying home with his children.

Yet he is alone.

Memories are solitary ghosts.

He lets them in, traveling with them.

Downcountry.

December 12, 1963.

Lengees, a soldier, hoisted a red, black, green, and white flag up in a park. The flag collected sparks, and visions drifting like clouds. In that arena of spectacle, Nyipir Oganda had led a cavalcade, lugging a smaller red, black, green, and white flag while riding on a high-stepping black horse. He had shrieked as if expelling a fiend:

“Eyeeeeees left!”

Clop-clop-clop-clop. Hooves and blurring vision. Men on a podium, some who he thought had died. Two men he knew had pounded other men to death. Another had been detained for his own safety and been supplied with a stream of world literature and unlovely comfort women, one of whom he married. He had focused on one man—Tom Joseph Mboya, who had colored in the red, green, white, and black flag. He had, years before, scoured the landscape and found promising souls that he sent to America to study, experience, and then come back home with transcendent dreams. The Leader of the Nation had tilted his head at the tracker-policeman carrying the Kenya flag, a dark man on a black horse. In his sweaty palms, the flag had almost slipped as Nyipir had bellowed, “Eyeeeeees front!” A mosaic people had cheered. Wanderers, cattlemen, camel herders, fishermen and hunters, dreamers, strangers, gatherers and farmers, trading nations, empire builders, and the forgetful. Such were the people for whom Nyipir had carried the new Kenya flag. There was also the anthem created from a Pokomo mother’s lullaby:

Eh Mungu Nguvu Yetu

Ilete Baraka kwetu

Haki iwe ngao na mlinzi. . . .

O God of all creation, Bless this our land and nation, Justice be our shield and defender. . . .

Blended cultures, intoxicating fusion—the new, revised Kenya. Bead *kofia* on his head, cloaked, fly-whisk flicking, the Leader spoke. His voice was a bass drum. Glory! Goodness! Forgiveness! Education! Work hard! Nyipir had tended the fire-lit euphoria inside his body. *Harambee! Harambee!* A nation brought to task in a clarion call that had hauled steel across the land and built a railway. The national summons. Response—a howled *Eeehhhhhh!*

But then came the fear.

It split words into smaller and smaller fragments until words became secret, suffocating, and silent. No one cried when the voracious, frenzied seizing of lives began. A new word slithered into the landscape—*Nyakua*: plunder, possess. Entitled brigandage. But it was cleansed to mean “hard work.” In the nation, slow horror, as if all had woken up to a vision of violating, crowing ghouls crowding their beds. Nyipir remembers how bodies started to stoop to contain the shame, the loss, the eclipse. Such eyes-turned-inward silences so that when bodies started showing up mutilated and truly dead, the loudest protests were created

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out of whispers. To protect new post-independence citizen children, like most new Kenya parents denying soul betrayals, Nyipir built illusions of another Kenya, shouting out the words of the national anthem when he could as if the volume alone would remove the rust eating into national hopes. Keeping mouths, ears, and eyes shut, parents had partitioned sorrow, purchased even more silence, and promised a “better future.”

Plane drone, slight turbulence.

They bounce. “Better future.” It is a groan in Nyipir’s head. He rubs its tautness. His daughter is staring through the plane’s window. Below, more greenhouses. Flower farms. Ol Donyo Keri—Mount Kenya, a sentinel that is a revelation.

Nyipir shouts, “The mountain!”

The pilot looks back.

“My son . . . uh . . . he likes . . .” Nyipir’s voice cracks.

The pilot scans the horizon and swings the plane right to circumnavigate Mount Kenya. “Batian, Lenana, Macalder,” he intones. The late-afternoon sun has colored the sparse snow crimson. Ajany squashes her face against the windowpane and feels their northward swing in her body. Soon the flamingos appear, on oyster-shell-colored water next to the milk-blue Anam Ka’alakol-Lake Turkana. The pilot says, “There’s Lake Logipi.” They know. This is their territory. Teleki’s volcano, a brown bowl, windy landforms. They pass over Loiyangalani, toward Mount Kulal. Shift northeast, toward Kalacha Goda. They level over the salt flats fringing the Chalbi. Hurri Hills in the dusk light, and then, below, a wide unkempt stripe carved into the land. The plane flies through the layers of time, reveals the hollowed brown rock below from which Ajany and Odidi would survey the rustling march of desert locusts, dry golden-brown pastures where livestock browsed, and they would run after homemade kites, eat cactus berries, and curse one of the land’s visiting winds, which had ripped the kites to shreds.

Wuoth Ogik.

Home.

Ajany crushes the screaming stuck inside her mouth, clutching a secret string and squashing it in her fist. First landing aborted. They veer upward. Ajany scrunches her eyes shut, grits her teeth, and prays they

will stay suspended in space and lost to time. Second descent. She is anticipating the crash. The end. The plane evens out, crabs into a soft landing. Dust twirls on their tail.

There were outposts in the world where the sun's rays burned into lingering phantoms of the British Empire. Babu Paratpara Chaudhari was wiping the jar containing his teeth when through the sunlit door of his angry-green-colored store in a crowd of nine, he saw a Caucasian-looking man elevating a shiny object as he approached the shop. Babu always saw the Caucasians first. It was his way of connecting to an England he had imagined, loved, but never experienced directly. Willful journeying to and displacement in a foreign landscape had turned his Brahmin family into merchants. But clinging to sapless straws of caste, Babu Chaudhari had contented himself with assigning his geographical compatriots the place of the *panchamas* while he settled into amorphous, self-stranded being in a Not-England African space. Babu Chaudhari's father's father had set up supply shops through the Kenyan northern lands and then gone to Ethiopia. He lingers with the memory, wondering, as he often did, why he had not joined the rest of the family after they left East Africa for Rushey Mead, Leicester, England, in 1962. He had been left behind to sell the family shops, but when he reached this one, the seventh of seven, a customer and then five more had shown up. He had served each one, intending to close shop at the end of the day. To assure himself that he was only transiting, every January he handcrafted a recruitment notice for a shop manager, which he glued to the door: *Salary negotiable. Accommodation and food provided. Only Hindi, Urdu, or Gujarati speakers should apply with certificate of higher education.* He had not received one suitable applicant. Forty-six years later he was still in the same place.

A fly hovers over a sack of five-year-old turmeric.

"Shhh. Shhh." Babu urges the fly away.

He props up his chin.

Babu barely moved. Gout and gallstones. Glowering was his normal expression. It concealed disenchantment. Settling into his tubbiness, he noted the Caucasian man's carriage—it was proper, the way he felt English posture should be. He frowned at the double-strapped haversack the man carried, relented when he saw it was made of pebble-grain leather and not Chinese plastic. Expensive dark-green army-style cargo

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trousers, a beige jacket over a loose-fitting cream shirt, all of which, Babu knew, would become red and brown with dyelike dust by the end of that day. The large man was clean-shaven, broad-shouldered, finely muscled, with shaggy dark-gray-flecked hair plastering his forehead. Babu bet to himself that after five days the man would let his beard grow wild. As he waited for the man to speak, his eyes alive, Babu did a mental scan of goods to offload: expired Malariaquin, 1970s curries and spices. He would blend these and hint that the result healed tick fever. If he attached a mantra to the package and proposed that it be consumed while wild sage was being burned, he could imply that this ritual would reveal the image of God. Caucasians appreciated that kind of thing. It would also explain the cost.

Babu chewed on his gums, glared at an aged donkey. Its distressed braying afflicted his days and most of his nights.

Isaiah William Bolton slipped his suddenly dead cell phone into his pocket and strode into the shop, straightening out the creases on his coat, the result of a cramped flight in a four-seater that he suspected was a crop duster. He took in the sardines, garlic, pepper, and Cadbury's chocolate. A giggle behind him. He turned. Two kohl-eyed women looked back. One of them winked as a camel would—long lashes, slow, blink, blink. Isaiah gave a half-grin. This was definitely a world he could get to know.

"Shhh. Shhhh." Babu Chaudhari shooed flies and women away, his mouth downturned. Vile, this threat of tainting genealogies.

Babu Chaudhari's skin was blotched in most of the shades of brown now, but in his prime, he had been cherished for his blond-streaked hair, fair sunburning skin, and almost blue eyes. He was especially fond of his narrow nose—its stern symmetry. From the moment of his emergence from the womb with his golden curls, he had been a favored child, and an instantly desirable prize for families committed to blanching bloodlines.

The visitor speaks: "Afternoon. Could you please tell me how far it is to Kalacha Goda?"

Babu beamed. Definitely English. Dark English, but English nevertheless. "Wery far." A gnashing of gums.

"How far is *wery*?"

"Wery, wery, wery far."

“How would I get there?”

“Fertainly not today, or ewen tomorrow.”

“I see. Do you know where I might get a room for the night, then?”

“Yef.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“Lovely. A single. How much?”

“For you, free fifty.” He had doubled the room rate. To be fair, if the visitor had been American, he would have added another zero. Moreover, he was offering this man his best space—mostly insect-free, and reserved for “strictly vegetarians only.”

Isaiah pulled out four hundred shillings, eyes transfixed by a jar behind Babu Chaudhari in which teeth were floating.

“No, no, no!” Babu said. “Fay tomorrow.” He tilts his head. A coy smile appeared. He could not wait. “England?”

“Yes!”

“Goot. Goat fless fe queen. . . . Do you know Mr. Clark—a fentleman—and Mr. Harry, affofiate of fe Royal Feographical Fofity, who if right now wif uf?”

“Er, don’t think so.”

“Tell me, man, fif frime minifter ve hawe . . .”

The visitor paused, laid aside political agnosticism, ignored what ethical orientations a second-tier public-school education had implanted in him, leaned over the counter, and for nearly an hour explained the rise and fall and rise and definite future fall of Gordon Brown.

“A Fcottish fentleman,” Babu confided. “Not really Englif.”

They shared a knowing and rather contented laugh as twilight crept in.

Outside murmurs. A woman hurled an epithet. Another cackled in response.

“Fey are not af far in fe fourney af ve are,” Babu whispers.

“Who?” Isaiah asks.

“Fem. Feofle here. But ve accomfany fem. Carrot and ftick, carrot and ftick.”

A donkey brayed, a cock crowed, a thin-voiced and distant muezzin called someone to prayer. Bewilderment engulfed Isaiah and flushed his skin. He had forgotten how far away from home he was.


Later, he would leave Babu’s shop with a room for the night, three tins of corned beef, three cartons of milk, a SIM card, a small box of




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sixty tablets, shaving cream, two razors, a rusted pair of large scissors, two tins of condensed milk, a container of yellow curry with brown and black spices that would destroy parasites in food, water, and the soul, a small green bucket, and the hopeful news that if he did not mind riding with livestock destined for an abattoir, a lorry leaving the following evening was headed in the direction of Wuoth Ogik.

When Isaiah saw his roundish room with its doum-palm ceiling, a safari bed leaning too far to the left, two unlit kerosene lamps, a box-shaped dark-gray creature the size of a small cat fleeing at his approach and escaping through an invisible hole, and a shattered oval mirror above a rudimentary green plastic basin—the bathroom—he was seized by a certainty that he should not have left England.



“I’ll be going to Kenya,” Isaiah had told his mother, Selene, over two years ago, after an old book had reached him through the post. Its owner’s name was etched in the blank page at the front, and a painted image nestled in its inner pages. Selene was at that time being carved up by an odious cancer. She had said nothing while huge tears tumbled down to stain her hospital gown. He canceled his travel plans.



Now here he was in Kenya.

Isaiah dreams that night of cold and gray: the sensation of skimming pinnacles of splendid corporate conquests, just before tumbling down and crashing into the earth, clutching pennies, residues of a big gamble lost. Cold and blue: textures of loss, of seeking and never finding. Abandonment. Cold and red: the color of grasping at air, of hoping to be found or chosen or wanted for more than a season, for more than what he owned. Cold and cracked: the impossible-to-reach broken parts of the soul. Cold and hard: rebuilding. But when he thought he had won again, irascible life currents drove him away and would not let him return, not even once.

Fog—amalgam of mistlike griefs. Fear—the state of being haunted,

possessed by unrelenting uncertainties. He had thought to pierce the mists—discovered war zones—and became a voyeur with a camera, but whenever he surfaced for air, Isaiah ran. Streets, beaches, indifferent town marathons; running past finish lines, teeth bared, fists pumping, striving to elude disgrace’s phantoms.

He dreams of his mother, her death, its horrid stillness. How, later, he and his stepfather, Raulfe, had taken her life-things and stored them in boxes, swept her closets and cupboards clean and sent her clothes to charity shops. Selene had bequeathed her remaining money and a wedding ring to Isaiah. She had left her other jewelry, letters, and novelty items to the care of Raulfe, who before Isaiah could react, had sealed them all in a safe deposit box, to be opened only after he was dead, and Isaiah had turned sixty.

Isaiah had confronted his stepfather: “Why?”

Raulfe had hobbled away, humming a broken version of “It Is Well with My Soul.”

Inside Isaiah a barrage of feeling had exploded: Rage-Hurt-Defiance. Needing to get away, Isaiah chose to cross skyways to retrieve the first ghost he had ever known, and to find a way to bring it back home, where it belonged.

Still.

The fog—amalgam of mistlike griefs, and fear—the state of being haunted, possessed by unrelenting uncertainties.

SPARE PASTURES, EPHEMERAL WATERING HOLES. DUST-FILLED cupules containing red, black, green, and white pebbles speckle the land; unfinished sand games entice drifters to sit and play. Fresh dung tracks on gold-flecked violet stones. They zigzag. Pilot, Nyipir, and Ajany, carrying Odidi between them, while Nyipir intones: *March, march, march, left turn, march, march, halt*. The coffin edge digs into Ajany's right shoulder. They stumble past two giant milkweed bushes with flamboyant fleshy leaves oozing white life. Beneath a knobby gold-green acacia, they steady the coffin and lower it to the ground.

Weak-kneed, her hair matted, and unable to let go of tenuous contact, Ajany huddles down right there, studying the dust of home, the progress of safari ants in an evening that stinks of wretchedness.

Nyipir Oganda looks down at his daughter before trundling away to retrieve her travel bags. The pilot follows him, clasps and unclasps his hands before saying, "*Mzee*, condolences. Sorry."

Nyipir nods. He hauls down orange and red luggage and nods at the pilot over and over. And then Nyipir waits, a solitary form. Soon, the plane taxis, wobbles, and then lurches skyward. The pilot circles Wuoth Ogik, offers a lilt and waggle. Nyipir brings his hand up to his forehead and returns the salute.

Five kilometers away, a slow-moving dust-devil giant lops over the land. Ten minutes later, the formerly green, now rust-colored family Land Rover, long in tooth and loud in rattle, bounds toward the waiting pair. Nyipir faces the car, not breathing. The Land Rover creaks to a stop and emits the smell of a burning clutch. Two people emerge: Galgalu, who had grafted himself onto the family before the children were born, and Nyipir Oganda's wife, Akai Lokorijom.

She flows like magma, every movement considered, as if it has come from the root of the world. Tall, willowy, wasp-waisted, her breasts still large and firm, she is made of and colored by the earth itself. Something ferocious peers out of dark-brown eyes, so that even her most tender glance scalds. Her voice, a bassoon-sounding, gravel-colored afterthought. At unpredictable moments, for nameless reasons, she might erupt with molten-rock fury, belching fire that damaged everything it encountered. Akai was as dark, difficult, and dangerous as one of those few mountains where God shows up, and just as mystifying.

When he sees Akai, Nyipir's hands pour sweat. Ajany's bags slip from his grip and tumble to the ground.

Galgalu, carrying a lit kerosene lamp behind Akai, lifts a hand to Nyipir in greeting, but Nyipir's eyes are fixed on the bald patches on Akai-ma's scalp where she has torn out her hair. Scratches and tear marks on her face. Blood cakes her body in thin strips. One of Nyipir's AK-47s, the four-kilogram 1952 with a wooden butt stock and hand guard, is strapped to her body, cradled in a green kanga with an aphorism written on it: *Udongo uwahi umaji*, "Work with wet clay."

Nyipir shambles toward his wife. He is preparing to steer away from echoes of a conversation that started one day in August 1998, after a distant-living coward detonated a bomb in Nairobi. He should have known it was a forewarning.

"My son!" Akai-ma had wailed at him then, while a BBC Radio news bulletin retold the story of an explosion in Nairobi. "I want my son."

"He's safe," Nyipir had answered.

Akai Lokorijom had said nothing. Disappeared, reappeared—Vaselined and fresh, with a small bag, ready for a journey.

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“Now where’re you going?” Nyipir had asked.

“To find my son.”

Nyipir grunted, “I’ll go.”

He had started toward Nairobi, the city that had tried to kill him. He’d made it past shifting dunes into the North Horr airstrip when he bumped into Ali Dida Hada, who was also on his way to Nairobi, summoned to the Kenya National Police headquarters at Vigilance House.

“As if we don’t have enough fools of our own,” Ali Dida Hada griped, not commenting on Nyipir’s sweat-bleeding body, his tremulous voice.

“He’s my only son,” explained Nyipir.

“I’ll look.”

“Akai would die . . .”

“I’ll find him.”

“Moses Ebewesit Odidi Oganda.”

“I know him.”

“She’ll break if something has hurt him.”

“I know.”

A tacit admission of a situation that neither would acknowledge existed. “I’ll look. I’ll call you,” said Ali Dida Hada.

They had parted.

They had not shaken hands.

Nyipir had changed directions, slunk off toward Maralal to monitor the news. Eight days later, with a crackle of the radio, Ali Dida Hada informed Nyipir that Odidi Oganda was safe, and contributing to the after-attack relief efforts. He also said Odidi was a successful Nairobi engineer servicing large contracts.

A pause. “You saw him?”

“I did.”

“What did he say?”

Silence.

Nyipir now inhales the orange sun, the dry grasslands, and the chirping of early-evening crickets, to escape, for even a second, the horror of the story he must repeat to a mother: the roiling country, the murdered son. The fire in Galgalu’s kerosene lamp wavers. Nyipir circles the area, hurries to shield Akai from seeing the coffin.

Her mother. In Ajany, a concentration of absences from seven and a half years twinge in her heart like a torn string clanging lost music. She



exhales and bounds over, an eager dog closing in on its mistress. Akai-ma pivots. Another direction. Ajany stops.

Nyipir stretches out his arms. "Akai." He starts his explanation.

Akai shoves him aside.

He stumbles.

She reaches the coffin. Wind hurls dust around, a pair of creamy butterflies. Silence. Soft voice. "Who is it?"

Nyipir enters the breach. "Our son. Odidi." He bows his head.

Akai asks, "Who is it?"

"Odidi."

"Who?"

"Akai . . ." pleads Nyipir.

"No!" she explodes.

She glares at them all, paces up and down a portion of the field, her arms thrown up and then down; then she returns and pinches Nyipir's arm, her eyes sly. "Where's my son?" She won't wait for his reply. She returns to the coffin, clutching her waist, scratching her left arm.

"Mama," Ajany calls.

Akai waves a hand at the noise. "Nyipir, where's my son?"

Nyipir's head swings left, right, left, right. "I tried everything, I tried," he croaks, hands gesturing upward. "Akai . . ."

"Nyipir! I told you, 'Bring my son home.' Didn't you hear me?"

Nyipir's hands move upward again. His mouth opens and closes. Saliva clings to his jaw.

"Nyipir—*where's my child?*" Akai's eyes bulge.

"M-mama?" stutters Ajany.

Akai points at the coffin. "Who?"

Galgalu moves closer. He props the lantern against the tree. Uses his whole arm to wipe tears off his face. He had known it would come to this. He had known.

Akai hobbles past. "Show. Me."

Galgalu unscrews the large bolts and opens the coffin lid.

No time. No space.

Akai-ma falls, arms stretched forward. She crawls, leans over Odidi's body, reaches in, takes it by the shoulders, holding him to her breast, keening in intermittent groans, lips on Odidi's forehead. She rocks her son, strokes his face, rocks her son. *Odidi*, she croons. *Odidi, wake up. Son. Listen. Ebewesit. I'm calling you.*

To name something is to bring it to life.



DUST

A churning heat, like heartburn with a rusty aftertaste, grows in Ajany's gullet. *Cry*, Ajany tells herself. An ugly jealousy, of wanting to be the dead one held by her mother, being invoked to life by such sounds. Shame. Akai's whimper. *Cry*, Ajany tells herself. Watches her brother limp in her mother's arms. *Live*, she commands Odidi. But her eyes are dry.

Akai-ma moans furiously. She batters the earth with one hand, while the other grips Odidi. "*Take me. Here, you thing, take me.*" Akai holds Odidi with dust-stained hands as if he were just born. She adjusts his shirt, moves his headrest, and swabs invisible drops from his face. She holds him to her breast, her head resting on his. She hums, her voice large, deep, husky, and ancient. She stares at the sky, rubs her face with her son's hands. All of a sudden she looks over her shoulder and stares with intent at Nyipir.

Ajany flinches at what hurtles between them. Nyipir shakes his head, palms out. "Akai." A gray shadow descends around him. From his mouth, a whistling of deflation, and then his face is sunken and old.

Akai-ma turns again to rock Odidi, humming.

Nyipir lumbers toward her.

Ajany kneels, watching them.

Nyipir approaches; Akai lifts up her hands. She screeches, "Don't. Touch. Me. You. Don't. Touch . . ." She points at Nyipir. "Don't."

Nyipir stands still in the middle of an eternal landscape that seems to foreshadow the end of life.

Akai: coded prayers, unrepeatable curses.

Galgalu pleads with her. "Mama, mamama . . ." Akai looks through him.

Galgalu says, "Ma, give me the boy. I'll put him to sleep."

Akai places her head against Odidi's.

Connecting.

Galgalu kneels next to her, his face close to hers, her rifle floating in and out between them. Sticky wet of sorrow tears merging.

"Odidi?" Akai-ma purrs, easing her son, she imagines, into wakefulness.

It is more than an hour before Akai-ma lets Galgalu return Odidi's body to the coffin. She adjusts Odidi's shirt, strokes his sewn-shut eyes. "I can't see," she whispers to Galgalu when he seals the coffin's lid.



Galgalu places the lantern on top, a miniature beacon, then wipes its surface with his shawl and helps Akai up.

Ajany and Nyipir creep closer to her.

“M-mama,” Ajany calls.

Akai-ma straightens up and blinks. “You?”

A cold stone inside Ajany’s stomach flutters.

“Arabel Ajany,” Akai-ma says. “Arabel Ajany.” Her voice falters.

Ajany takes four steps toward Akai-ma, a history of longing in the movement. Akai’s arms reach out. Ajany steps in, inhales Akai-ma’s rancid, sad warmth. Incense, hope, and softness. Almost touching, almost disappearing into her mother. But then Akai shoves Ajany away. She drops her arms; her eyes dart left, up, and right. She groans, “Where’s your brother?”

Ajany goes rigid.

Nyipir intervenes. “See, Akai, see, Ajany’s home.”

Akai-ma sucks air. “Why?” Childlike sound: “Where’s Odidi?”

Ajany *not* thinking. Then thinking, *And me?* Thinking, *Where am I?* But before the ground dissolves under her, she throws herself at her mother, grabbing her back. *And me?* The feeling pushes at her mouth. She clings to Akai’s neck, an unyielding hold. Mucus and saliva, blood and bitterness from a palate cut.

Akai recoils, tears herself away. Her eyes are thin slits, her nostrils flare, and when Ajany looks again, her mother is a still, steady point with a finger on a trigger and a smile on her face. *Click-clack*. Selector set to burst. Clear gaze. Gun pointed to heart, a glint from the barrel like light on a pathologist’s scalpel. *Certainty*. Akai will pull the trigger if Ajany moves in her direction again.

Ajany drops to the ground.

She lies down flat.

Hands scrabble at the earth.

Mind focused and roaming around the barrel of a gun. She senses its position. Tenderness because her mother is at the other end. She hears Nyipir’s soft chant. *Akai, Akai, Akai, Akai*. Feels the soft departing of day.

She could paint this. Could even paint the nothing, its sliver of warmth on her skin. Ajany sniffs the earth, dust flecks on her face. She twists her neck to glance at the purpling sky. Not trusting thought. Finding nothing to trust. In that moment, she stops waiting to be born. She is willing to re-enter her half-death, aches for fire that may return her to silence. She rests her head upon her arms and waits.



DUST

Shift of pressure, rush of air. Running feet, a question, and the distant slam of doors. Car engine revs, wheel squeal. Nyipir shouting—*Akaaaai! Akaaaai!*

Akai Lokorijom is leaving.

Ajany waits for her body to come together again, all those parts she had stopped feeling—hands, feet, face. She raises her head to see the lurching, stopping, starting, and stalling green car. She tells herself that she can also leave. She can also go away. And then she is in pursuit of a ramshackle family Land Rover. Behind her, Galgalu also runs. The car jolts ahead of them. Low-lying thornbush scrapes Ajany's feet, stinging. Galgalu overtakes Ajany. Ajany reaches for and drags him back, hanging to his right arm, fighting not to be left behind again, not thinking, she bites into his arm. Galgalu snatches his hand away; he snarls and tumbles. She falls over him. Ajany reaches for Galgalu's hand. She rubs off her saliva and tooth marks. On the coffin, the lantern's flame flickers.

Galgalu pats Ajany's back. "*Ch'uquliisa,*" he croons. "*Ch'uquliisa.*" Grasping for clarity. "*Ch'uquliisa,*" Galgalu says, reading Ajany's soundless hiccups. He knows her voices. He had urged Ajany into life from Akai's womb, had sucked mucus out of tiny nostrils, and had understood her stupefied silence when she saw the world she had come to. Later, he had scooped her from beneath a tree where patient vultures watched over her. On that day he had told four-year-old Odidi, while he arranged Ajany in his arms, "*This is your baby.*"

Raro Galgalu is an intermediary between fate and desire, a cartographer of unutterable realms. He has lost faith in tangible things. Now he scrutinizes the skies. The portents are cruel. A pale-orange veil shrouds the world. He recites "*La illaha illa 'lla Hu. La illaha illa 'lla Hu.*"

Galgalu seeks the mind of his dead father. His father had been *ayyaantuu*—an astrologer, in Hargagbo. After a gruesome drought that he predicted would be the worst—it was—had passed, and a locust invasion he foretold would destroy all pasture had done so, rumors of sorcery slithered across the landscape and followed the family. Mad, the older Galgalu predicted his own death. His son Raro tried to pray him back to life in a season of almost white skies, while his mother sought refuge in herbs and hope. But one moonless night on the day after a total solar eclipse, Galgalu heard his father cough—a rattling sound.



Then Raro saw his father's shadow lift itself from the body on the mat, felt it brush against him as it glided out into the darkness.

"*Ch'uquliisa,*" Galgalu sings to Ajany. "*Ch'uquliisa.*"
His arms around her.

One wild afternoon, by decree of elders, Raro Galgalu was chosen as scapegoat for all clan guilt. He had been bringing home a kid that had sprained its leg. Its mother bleated behind him while men surged around him and inflicted the ritual curse. He tore at his heart, to pull out the malediction. The scars were curved lines across Galgalu's chest. The kid tumbled from his arms, and his goats cried as he was driven away with sticks, stones, dust, and dung. Driven by billows of unwantedness, he marked his progress by cairns in the daytime and falling stars at night. He wandered, a solitary, bowlegged creature intending to walk itself to death.

Until, that soft dusk of December 12, 1963, when, down in the city, a doleful officer unwrapped the last Union Jack that would ever soar over Kenya, Galgalu stumbled in front of a coral-hued edifice. Wuoth Ogik. A brown-and-black-patched cattle dog that had a lot of hyena in its ancestry had appeared and wagged its tail at him. Galgalu stroked its head. It licked his hand. He would learn that its name was Kulal, after the cherished mountain. By the time he saw the tall, dark, long-limbed spirit flowing toward him, its arms swinging in wide swoops, he was ready to die. *Ekhaara*. A roaming spirit. It carried a headrest and club—things men carried—and a gourd of sour milk, herbs, and grasses. Its feet were dusty in *akala* tire sandals. It had hitched its sarong up on its thighs. Its eyes took in everything. Raro Galgalu had closed his eyes.

Woitogoi! Akai Lokorijom exclaimed when she saw him.

She reached for him.

The dog whined.

Galgalu quivered.

Akai stroked his head. "*Woitogoi!* You're a bone, small boy!" She had clucked. "Your name?" She giggled.

He had wanted to laugh with her. Instead, he wailed, because he understood he might live after all.



DUST

Galgalu tells Ajany, "Always, she comes back home."

"We didn't catch her shadow," Ajany replies in between hiccups.

"No," he agrees.

When Ajany and Odidi were children, Galgalu would scoop the soil where their daylight shadows fell and cast the dirt into holes where dusk shadows gathered, so the departing sun would take with it any evil that had threatened them. Galgalu had tried to scrape the earth under Akai-ma's shadow, to try to exorcise those ghosts that made her wander. Ajany and Odidi had colluded with him by trying to make their mother stand still. They always failed. As long as there was sun, Akai jumped from place to place.

Footsteps.

Nyipir hobbles to join them, blinking at the track.

Speaking to Ajany: "Mama . . . she . . . um . . ." Nyipir's voice cracks. "She's happy you're here. Just . . ." He waves in the direction of the coffin.

Ajany nods.

He says, "I tried to . . . but Odidi . . . um."

Ajany nods again.

There is something unnamed and shameful about loneliness created out of rejection. Ajany takes refuge in stillness.

Nyipir says, "Once, when I was a boy, a leopard used to escort me home."

Galgalu and Ajany have heard the story before.

Nyipir continues: "A black leopard used to weave in and out of the shrubs, and his body contained all the nights of the earth. His eyes were made of stars."

"D-did he make a noise?" Ajany asks, as she did when she was ten years old and scared of night.

"Footsteps like silence. When I reached home, the leopard left." A brittle note. "Don't ever call out a leopard's name. Say *gini*, 'this thing,' or *gicha*, 'that thing.' *Kwach, no!*"

Kwach.

Ajany squelches the word on her tongue. The temptation to howl it hurtles around her skull. She presses down on the need, suffocates it with memory.

One evening, long ago, Nyipir had found Ajany sitting inside the broken courtyard fountain, waiting for him. She had asked, “Baba, did *gicha* come?”

“No. Not today,” he replied.

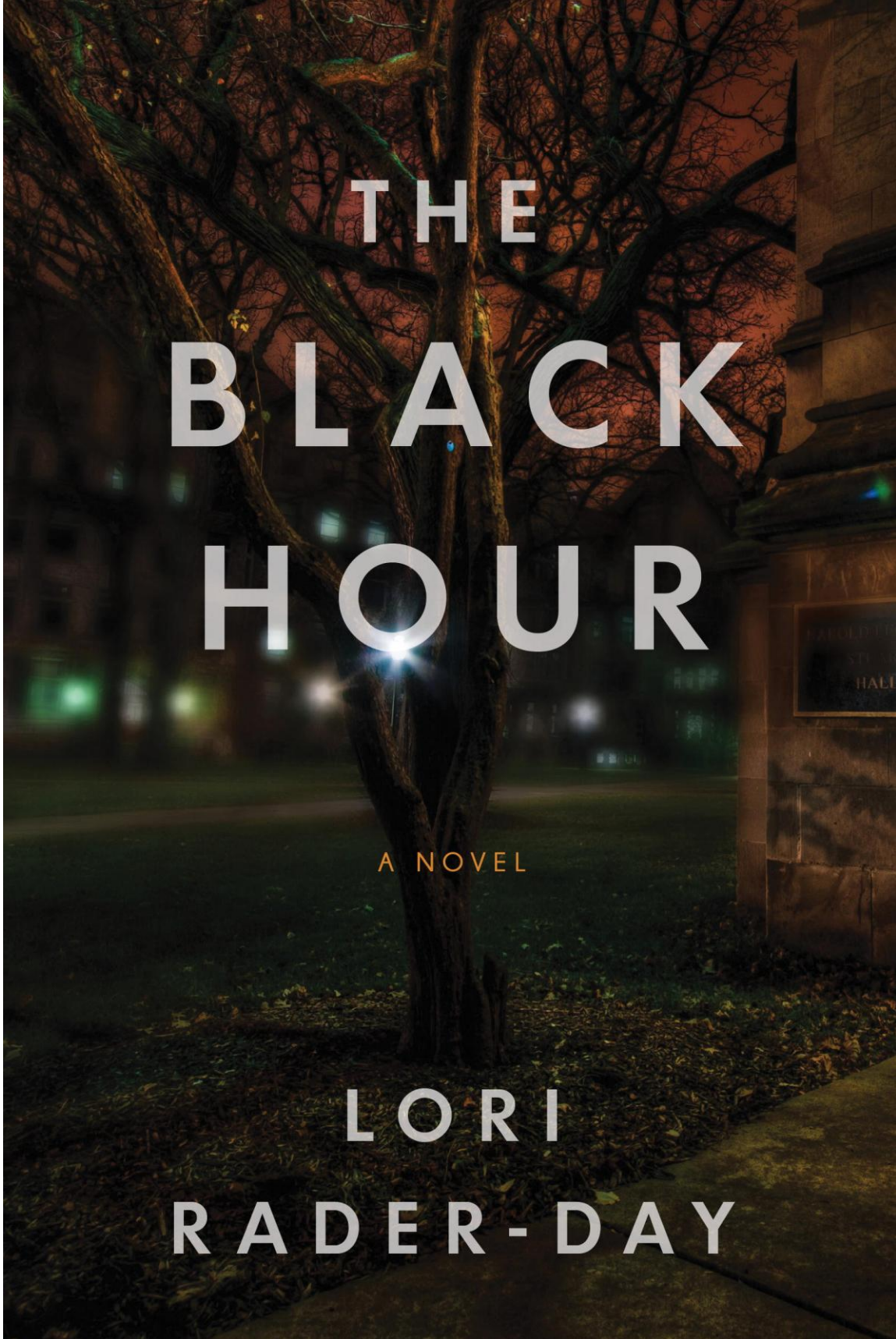
Years later, after Ajany had left Wuoth Ogik and Kenya, she suddenly understood that Nyipir’s stories about the black leopard’s visits coincided with the seasons of Akai’s disappearances.

Now.

Ajany says, “We forgot Odidi’s flowers.”

Nyipir answers, “Oh!”

Three people listen to four winds creeping through rattling doum palms. Winds cover the car’s tracks, sprinkling dust over them. They race southward, to the part of the nation where unsettled ghosts have set the land afire and a gang of men are howling and dancing down a city street, dangling a man’s cut-off head. The dead man’s fingers, with their stained voter’s mark, are scattered around his new blue bicycle, next to his national identity card.



THE
BLACK
HOUR

A NOVEL

LORI
RADER-DAY

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

AMELIA

My lungs clawed for air as though I were drowning. I stopped, hunched over my grandmotherly cane, gasping. The curved walk up from the parking lot stretched out before me longer than I remembered, steeper. This is how it would be. Every task more difficult than before. Every step a public performance.

That's when I heard the camera.

I'd been expecting someone, hadn't I? One of the lawyers, a campus cop. I always expected to be watched now. Why else had I parked not in the handicapped spot in the faculty lot but the one just next to it?

The guy with the camera was too young to be a lawyer or the police. His hair punked, his chin smooth. The student press had provided my welcoming committee.

What did I look like to this kid? From a distance, ignoring the cane, without the zoom lens, maybe I could pass for a student. A grad student. My hair swung loose and long. I'd made an effort. After ten months on the couch, I'd pulled out the good shampoo, the high heels, *lipstick*.

The cane, though, wasn't fooling anyone.

"Did you get a shot up my skirt—" I couldn't chase down my breath. I readjusted my bag across my chest. "—when I was digging myself out of my car? Did you get that? Pulitzer stuff?"

He lowered the camera, paying close attention to his lens.

"You're not the one who claimed to be my nephew in the emergency room, are you?" My face felt hot. Through the zoom lens, clutching the swan's neck of my cane, I wouldn't look anything like a

student. Dark circles under my eyes. Shaking hands. Maybe the photographer couldn't see that I already regretted the heels. Maybe he wasn't really looking. "Or are you the one who prank calls me at two in the morning? Don't get me wrong," I said. "I'm up. The pain's good for that."

He looked now.

"Get my good side, OK?" I posed, both hands on the cane, chin lifted toward the lake. It sat like a blue jewel on the horizon. A beautiful day to rise from the dead.

The camera stayed silent.

"What? Are you waiting for me to drop my clothes so you can see the—"

I'd been looking forward to this day and had planned an early arrival to avoid a few stares. Hoping to get one minute with my old life before the new one caught up with me.

"Here's what I think," I said, continuing past his spot against the ivy and on to the front door of Dale Hall with what I hoped looked like dignity. "A restraining order isn't the best way to start your career."

I reached for the door. An electrical charge shot through my belly, my hip, down through my leg. A crushing bolt of lightning I couldn't predict and couldn't control. I was on fire. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the photographer raise his camera.

I launched myself through the pain and into the lobby.

The kid didn't follow. No one came running. I took my time, clutching the cane and fighting for the surface. At last I felt the ground steady under my feet. After a few shuddering breaths, I could smell the deep musk of Dale Hall: wood paneling, dusty books, and disinfectant that never quite reached the corners. It was a smell more than a hundred years in the making. Home. Only one place in the world felt more inviting than this spot, and that was the small, drafty room upstairs that served as my office.

I lurched toward the elevator, then stopped.

I had taken the elevator, able-bodied, many times. But the path to the elevator would trot me past the glass doors of the dean's suite, past

his gossiping assistant, and through an open atrium, where my clicking and clacking would only be magnified.

To my right, the staircase rolled out like a tongue, a taunt.

At the summit, just up there, lay the scene of the crime. Peering up into the darkness, I felt a cold finger of fear slide down my spine.

The dark hall, a hand rising—

No.

I'd begun to think of my memory as a high shelf at the back of a closet. I couldn't reach everything, no matter how hard I stretched. When the shelf of memory wobbled, I righted it by force.

There were twenty-five or so stairs, and then one more after the landing pivoted. That was all. A physical challenge, sure, but how hard had I fought, only to have a few stairs stop me? I could do this. I had to.

I positioned myself at the first step and took stock.

Up, lead with the good leg, the physical therapists had said. Down, lead with the bad. I didn't like thinking that half my body had turned on me, but who could blame it? I took a first gentle step with my right leg, no problem, then positioned the cane and pulled the left—bad—leg up behind, only to be met with a pinprick of outrage deep in my gut. I eyed the next step like a foe.

We'd make it a game, the cane and I. Right leg, weight shift, cane-tap up, left heel up, *ouch*, weight shift, right again, repeat. I lost track of the game and stopped to rest. I glanced over my shoulder. I'd climbed four steps.

Below, a young man stood watching.

A different kind of electricity shot through me. I noticed his heavy backpack, his empty hands. A student. I'd always liked the students. You had to, or none of it was worth it.

I didn't have to like them anymore.

I went back to my climb, suddenly understanding why the dean hadn't wanted me to return.

Jim Perry, his bushy white eyebrows like a pair of hamsters shading his eyes, had come to see me at home a week ago. An unexpected visit, me still in the sweatpants I'd worn for three days. I didn't look like I

had it together, but I promised him I did. The university would offer me retirement, he announced, as though I'd won an award. With a settlement and health benefits. I needed those. "Amelia, you should take more time to get over this," he said. He'd already called it *the accident*. "We want to see you healthy. We want to see you well."

In other words, they didn't want to see me at all. Retire? I'd only received tenure two years ago, only been handed my PhD a handful of years before that. An academic career was supposed to be long and steady. A marathon—though the metaphor stung—where you ran hard and long, and at the finish line your peers gathered around you with precariously full wineglasses and seethed with jealousy. No more teaching. No grading. No advising earnest graduate students. No more *obligations* beyond your own research interests. The ultimate tenure.

But you had to earn it. You had to run the marathon, or you were just unemployed.

I took a deep breath and leaned into the next step. I could not believe how many stairs there were to the second floor. I had enough time to think about architectural trends, the ascent of the modern style. Short ceilings, manageable flights of stairs—what was wrong with squat, one-story buildings? Nothing. I loved this building, loved the wide stairs worn with footsteps, the smooth wooden rail I clutched to pull myself up. Even at first sight, Dale Hall had seemed to me a venerable finish line. Not bad for a girl from the sticks, for the hardship case who'd gone to a state university and only by the grace of full funding. Not bad, and highly unlikely. That first year at Rothbert University, I'd hardly relaxed, certain that someone would pull out the rug. But I'd earned my post and then tenure to keep it. I'd be damned if they were going to take it from me.

Though just now I'd have given it all away to work in one of those sprawling suburban junior college malls instead of this relic.

A hesitant footstep sounded behind me. I clung to the railing, leaving plenty of room to get by. Whoever it was hung back.

"OK," I huffed and waved them ahead with the cane.

"Good morning, Dr. Emmet." The kid from below caught up with

me, his hair flopping into his eyes. Of course. They'd all know me now. "Do you need—"

"OK," I said.

His quick shoes hurried ahead and around the corner.

What did I need? I needed to take the elevator.

Right foot up, cane-tap, left—*oh, jumping Christ that hurt.*

What would happen if I couldn't make it up the stairs, if I could not force my body to finish what I'd started? I was more than halfway now, but sweating and deaf to everything but my own ragged breath. All the worries came rushing up to greet me. I might never walk without the cane. I might never live without that bolt of lightning through my gut. I would never carry children. I had trouble imagining in which universe I would ever again hope to have sex. Doyle's face came to me, but that didn't help. I was alone, damaged. Old fears I thought I'd pushed away roared back. Never good enough. Now that everyone was looking, I couldn't hide it.

Step by excruciating step, I rose toward the landing, glaring at the last riser. Cane-tap, and now there was a pause, a brace against what was coming, *goddamn heel up*—and the searing pain in my hip and through my pelvis, so much pain that I wanted, just for a while, to lie down and give up.

My boss wanted it. Maybe they all did.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I'd said the morning Jim came to talk me out of my life.

Like everyone else I'd heard from while I was in the hospital or on leave, like the insurance detectives and the kid's family's lawyer who wasn't supposed to contact me but tried, like all of the reporters and the bottom-feeding curious who had no real excuse to want to know what happened. Like the voice on the other end of the line most mornings at two. Like everyone else, the dean thought I must have done *something*.

Something unspeakable. Something so bad no one could think what it could be.

"What could have caused that kid to . . . did you even know him?" Corrine had asked. When they finally let someone visit me in intensive

care, Corrine was the only person I wanted. Even she, my officemate and best friend, couldn't make sense of it. "What *happened?*" she kept saying.

Highly medicated, I'd hardly managed Corrine's name. I could barely speak, barely think. I couldn't tell her.

I couldn't tell anyone why that kid had shot me.

I didn't know.

The landing. Cane-tap, pause. The last step might buckle me, but I had come this far. I had come to—drumroll—the second floor.

It didn't seem like much, but the roar of my bones and belly assured me it was something. Even weak and gnarled, I could climb a few stairs. I could get to my office. I could work.

Of course I'd never be able to get back down. I'd have to wait until everyone else had left so I could take the elevator. Tomorrow, the next day, the rest of the academic year? I couldn't begin to think about the life ahead of me.

At the very least, though, I had a life to dread.

I turned to face the hallway, and there, leaning against the wall outside my office, his back to the stairs, was a man. My brain supplied the image—a *hand and gun rising out of the dark*—

It couldn't be.

What about the second explosion? And the open hand, like a flower, on the carpet? The hand that was not mine. Memories rushed at me but didn't link up.

My heaving breath roared in the silent hall. I collapsed against the handrail, waiting. If someone had come to finish what the student before had started, I couldn't stop it. I was too weak to do this, all this, again.

The man turned. It was the kid from the stairs.

What was in his backpack? What was that look on his face? Shame, stealth, a resemblance.

The moment passed. His features rearranged into uncertainty.

"What?" I panted.

"I was hoping to, uh, catch you."

“Not moving that fast. What do you want?”

He glanced away. “I think you’re my advisor.”

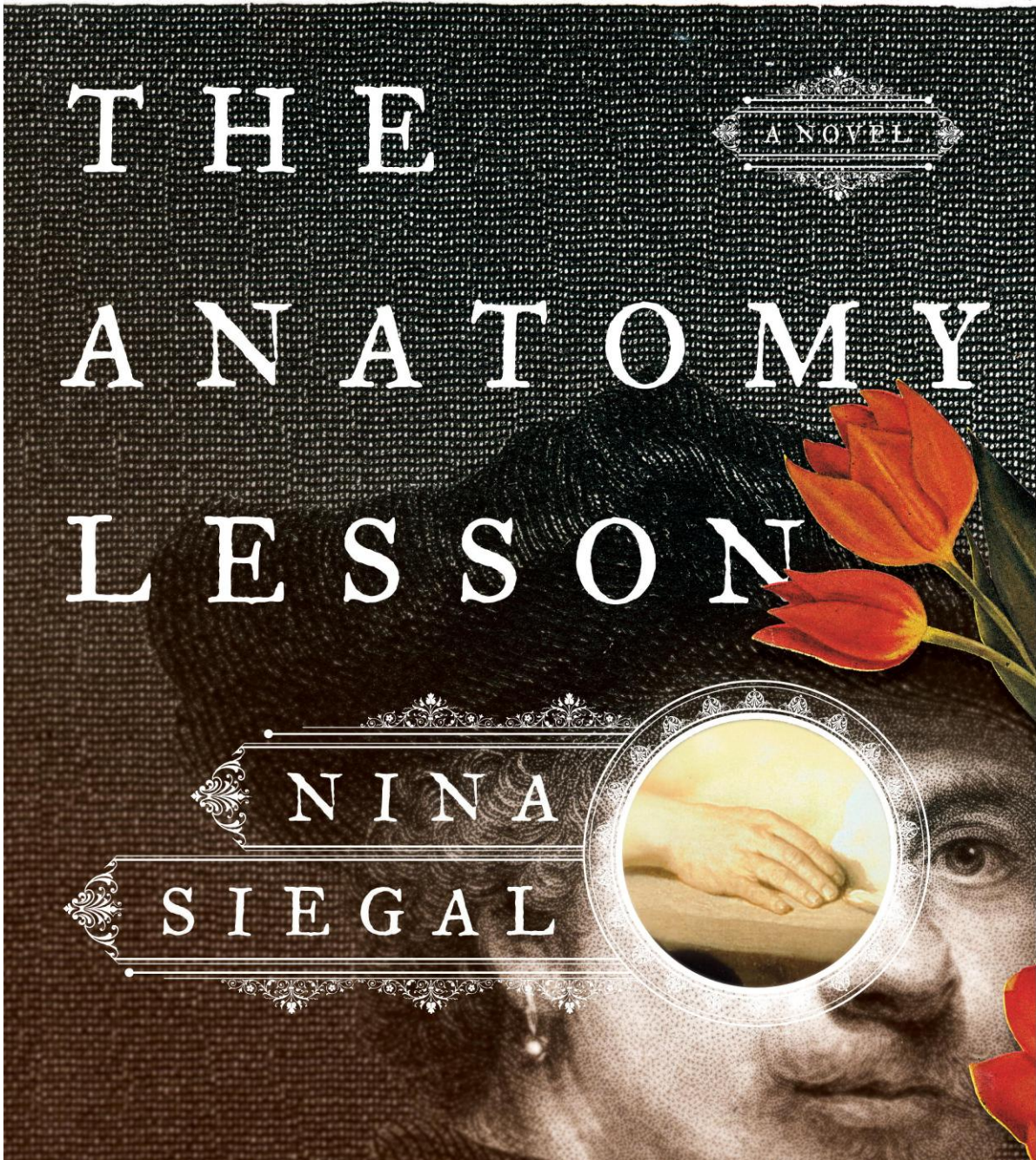
“Your advisor?” I tried my weight on the cane. This last step was Kilimanjaro. It was Everest. Who’s to say I wouldn’t fall? Someone somewhere had already placed that bet.

“Your *advisor*.” I mopped my forehead with the back of my hand. “If I were you, I’d have mixed feelings about that.”



THE
A NOVEL
ANATOMY
LESSON

NINA
SIEGAL



Author's Note

I knew Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* as a child, for it hung in my father's study, but I never knew its title or its origins. During an art history seminar in grad school, I was assigned to "read" a painting—i.e., unravel the narrative within it. We were allowed to pick any painting; and as my professor clicked through slides of potential examples, it showed up on the screen and I thought: That one! I'll finally find out the real story behind that painting.

I moved to Amsterdam, drawn by the idea of writing a novel about the dead man in the painting, Adriaen Adriaenszoon, or Aris Kindt. I had a grant to research the period and to walk the streets and absorb sights of Rembrandt's world. I lived in a house built in 1624; I worked in an office that was once the warehouse for the Dutch West India Company. Horses clip-clop through the still-cobbled byways of the Old Center, now packed with international sightseers, who, if you squint in a certain way, could be sailors and traders. And in Amsterdam's city archives, I was able to find the complete dossier of the crimes committed by a recidivist thief named Aris Kindt.

One afternoon when I was sitting in front of the original Rembrandt portrait in the Mauritshuis in The Hague, I looked at the nearly naked corpse on the dissection slab and I thought: Before he became the centerpiece of this anatomy lesson, someone had cared for that body. Someone had touched that body. That someone was a woman. I named her Flora. And that's where my story began.

I

Hanging Day

The Body

At the first toll of the Westerkerk bell Adriaen Adriaenszoon bolts awake in a dank stone jail inside Amsterdam's town hall. He is shivering and sweating at the same time. Shivering because winter gnaws through his meager leather jerkin, sweating because of the nightmare out of which he's just awakened.

What he remembers is no more than an assemblage of symbols—a dog, a wall made of doors, an old woman with a pail full of sand—but fear is pounding through him insistently, demanding he return to sleep to see out the dream. There is the promise of solace through one of those doors, and a bed to lie on, something tells him. But his eyes will not close again. His other senses are already registering the day.

Horse's hooves tromp in the puddles somewhere nearby. There's a whinny and the sound of clacking steel on cobblestones. The street, which he can see only through the tiny window, is glistening from last night's downpour. The air smells of mineral soil, sweat, and piss.

He crosses himself before remembering where he is, then glances around nervously in hopes that no guards have seen this. He presses his callused palm through his coarse hair and slumps against the cold wall. There's only his cell mate, Joep van de Gheyn, the fishmonger killer, still asleep on the plank against his own wall. Aris wipes his sweat from his brow with his left hand, then rubs the stump over its bloody bandages, stifling the throbbing of the limb, which pulses with every heartbeat. "That's all right now. Easy there," he says, massaging the limb.

Hearing the bells ringing out the final chimes of the morning hour, he slaps himself to full wakefulness. This is his last day living. Each time the bells ring he's one step closer to the gallows.

Outside, there's a festive feeling in the frigid air. Damp and cold as it is, with clouds that hang so low they form a ceiling over the city's tile rooftops, there's still a raw excitement that pulses like a current through Amsterdam's quiet canals and byways. Some would call it bloodlust.

The streets echo with silence, hollow and expectant, like an empty tankard waiting to be filled. As dawn starts to creep across the water and the wharves from the swampy eastern marshlands, workers from the docks arrive with wood planks to build the hangman's scaffold. They drop the boards like pieces of a coffin on the square and the hammering begins. Nearby, vendors are setting up their stalls to sell delftware, wool mittens, or fresh-baked bread to all who'll come to gawp.

Tacked to the town hall door is the justice day schedule:

- R. Pijnaker, age fifteen, will receive a birching for willfully stealing from a tavern keeper's till.
- Brothel madam S. Zeedijk shall be beaten upon her neck with a rolling pin for general lewdness, moral corruption, and running a house of debauchery.
- Three burglary conspirators, R. Tolbeit, A. Schellekamp, and F. Knipsheer, to be flogged and branded with the Amsterdam A on their chests before being banished from the city for their brazen attempt to break into a diamond cutter's shop.
- A confined convict H. Peeters shall be whipped and marked with

burning spears for his violation of confinement and other evil acts before his lifelong imprisonment is renewed.

- German convict E. Eisenstein caught smoking in the rasp house and, when scolded, cursed and spit at his jailors, shall have an ear sliced off. He will return to the rasp house to work the twelve-blade saws cutting brazilwood for the dye works until his hands are as good as his ears.
- The hanging of J. v. d. Gheyn, the notorious murderer of good fishmonger Joris van Dungeon.
- The hanging of A. Adriaensz. alias Aris Kindt, evildoer and recalcitrant thief.

Adriaen Adriaensz., Adriaen, son of Adriaen of Leiden, alias Aris Kindt, Hans Kindt, or Arend Kint: he's used different names in different towns where he was arrested, then banished, then arrested again. Arend was his father's nickname for him, meaning "eagle." These days he goes by Aris, which means nothing. It was others who tacked on "Kindt" or "The Kid" years ago, on account of his small stature and since he was still lithe and smooth-skinned when he committed his first offenses.

Aris draws his jerkin tighter, clinging to it with his one hand making a fist over his heart. His nightmare has already fragmented into shapes—the terrible slimness of a starving dog's back, a room of doors leading onto still other doors, his own hands painted gold, clutching a goose feather pillow. A goose feather pillow.

Beside him, snoring, is Joep van de Gheyn, the fishmonger killer. By profession he is a tailor—a fact that Aris finds secretly ironic, since he has spent much of his own adult life stealing fine coats and selling them to men who couldn't afford tailors. Still asleep like a babe in

his mother's arms, the tailor has his hands pressed together in prayer under his pulpy jowls, his left foot kicking an invisible attacker.

Idiot, thinks Aris.

Still sitting, he extends his foot out toward his cell mate and nudges Joep in the ribs, not gently. "Sleep when you're dead," he says.

The cell mate's eyes open, and without knowing that he's just been victim of a minor assault, he comes coughing out of sleep. His hacking continues until he sits up straight, only to emit two consecutive sneezes. He pulls a dirty rag out of his pocket and blows his nose profusely.

"Well, then," he says, blinking his eyes to daylight.

The two convicts sit in their small cell, neither one fully awake. In the idle haze of this first hour of the last day of his own life, Aris thinks: A pillow? Has he ever laid his head on a goose feather pillow?

Flora, comes the answer. When she'd mended him those months after he'd got that beating in the tavern. *Flora*. There she was, her proud, sturdy shoulders, the catlike curve of her neck, that comforting broad backside. She had cradled his bruised head and placed a pillow underneath, hadn't she?

Flora. Would Flora be out there?

The Hands

The tolling of the Westerkerk bell can be heard more distinctly at the stately canal-side mansion belonging to Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, who is pacing across the checkered marble floor of his sitting room. He is preparing himself to recite the speech he intends to give tonight, his wife, Margaretha, as his test audience. She is propped up in a high-backed wooden chair in front of

him, with an enormous swath of damask silk she's embroidering in her lap, her hands motionless, waiting.

How lovely to have the new church tower so close by their home, she thinks, though she doesn't always love the hour bell. What she does love is when the organist plays something special for the hour, like her favorite, Sweelinck. She would like to go and see that carillon some afternoon soon if Nicolaes could be persuaded to join her. The churchwarden from the Westerkerk had invited them personally, because of her husband's position, of course, but he hadn't yet accepted. Of late, he had been so preoccupied with politicking that he had no time for any leisure activities. Tomorrow will be election day at last, and tonight he had the opportunity to convince the city's current burghermasters and aldermen that he was sufficiently learned and stoical to be elevated beyond a mere magistrate.

She hoped her husband would accept the warden's offer. It was a rare thing that such a grand church should be erected so close to their home, and she could use a small diversion from the household and his five children. Perhaps she would suggest the warden might be a useful ally in his campaign. They might even be among the city's first visitors to the beautiful tower. What a view there must be from up there!

Tulp takes a ceremonial step forward. "Most excellent and ornate men of Amsterdam: Honorable Burgomaster Bicker, Amsterdam burghers, gentlemen of the Stadtholder's court, magistrates, inspectors *Collegii Medici*, physicians, barber-surgeons . . ." he begins a bit shakily.

"Welcome to the second public dissection of my term as praelector of the Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild . . ." He continues, and Margaretha follows the rhythms of his inflections and gathers the melody of his voice, working its way up and down the scale. She begins drawing her needle back and forth through the fabric, looking down on each stitch to check her progress on the tulip she is incorporating into the damask curtains of the entry hall.

She has based the design on the potted admiraal over on the mantel, a recent gift to her husband from Roemer Visscher, in appreciation for treating the poet's gallstones. So far, she has managed to complete the white of the petals and now she is continuing with the red parts; her embroidered flower has no stem. She is considering adding a stem now, but that would involve going back upstairs to get the green floss in the basket that she'd absentmindedly left on the landing. The green floss. If only she'd remembered to bring down the green floss. She doesn't want to disrupt her husband, who'd lost sleep for several nights already in anticipation of the important evening ahead, but if she had the green floss she could perhaps finally finish this tulip while listening.

“At the request of the governors of our noble guild, I do humbly come before you to offer my annual lecture upon the human body and the fabric of nature . . .”

He has commissioned this new painter at Uylenburgh's studio to commemorate his dissection tonight. It's his second year as praelector, but this follows a tradition. Each of the previous praelectors has commissioned a portrait of the guild when they've taken the helm, with themselves at center stage. She hopes the artist will focus on his kind, almost innocent eyes, which were what attracted her to him and which she still finds comforting whenever she looks up from her embroidery. He is a doctor of great compassion and skill, willing to rush out in the middle of the night to see any patient. He is a good man. A man of character.

The painter, she hopes, will capture his full head of dark hair and an ample beard that makes him look still so young. His eyes are just a tiny bit dreamy, though he works hard to appear stern and eagle-eyed.

Perhaps the painter will notice the deftness of his hands, which are, she has always felt, a touch feminine, with long elegant fingers that he often presses to his lips when in thought. He is no hearty man of the fields, certainly. The blue tint of his veins is visible through his pale skin; he's always had a kind of ethereal pallor that made her think he was closer to the angels. When

he gives his lectures, he attempts to mask it with a touch of her rouge. The men he seeks to impress—like those who will assemble tonight in the Waag chamber for his annual anatomical display—are not worthy of such self-concern.

She knows, as well as she can recognize the dull end of the needle now pressing against her thumb, that he is a man of character, who will rise to his natural position in Amsterdam society in due time. Already he's chief praelector of the City of Amsterdam, Dr. Nicolaes Pieterszoon Tulp, occasionally referred to by the Latinate Tulpius. She sees how eager he is to rush this process along. Perhaps the portrait itself is even a bit premature.

He clears his throat—the sudden evacuation of a busy lecture hall—and begins reading his speech again from the beginning, this time trying out a slightly lower vocal pitch, more sober and authoritative.

“Most excellent and ornate men of Amsterdam: Honorable Burgomaster Bicker, Amsterdam burghers, gentlemen of the Stadtholder's court, . . .” he says, glancing up to notice that his wife is still quite attentive, though her fingers have begun to work her floss through her embroidery. “Before me, gentlemen, lies the body of a notorious criminal sentenced to death by the honorable magistrates of Amsterdam for wrongdoing and evil deeds and hanged by the neck this very day. . . .”

She adds a few more red details to this tulip instead, and muses to herself about whether the tulip curtains might not be one step too far in the florescence of their home. There is garishness to it, Margaretha thinks, especially as the tulip has just now become such a ridiculous craze.

When they had moved into this mansion it was just a bit of silliness. There was a gable stone with a tulip just above their front door and so when he'd purchased the carriage for his nightly house calls, he had a tulip painted on its side. Soon enough he became known around the

town as Dr. Tulp, and the name stuck. He eventually adopted the name instead of his original, Claes Pieterszoon. After all, there were already a few Pieterszoon in town but only one Tulp.

Since then, friends and grateful patients often arrive at the house of Tulp with tulip-shaped gifts: tulip vases and tulip dishes, tulip-shaped silver cups, and actual tulips, too, sent from wealthier patients in earthenware vases with many small spouts, which the servants arrange on mantels positioned beneath oil paintings they'd been given, too, of tulip bouquets. All these beautiful flowers signify love and respect, Margaretha knows, but every once in a while she can't help feeling she resides, not in a home but in a tulip nursery. She draws the needle through the fabric until it stops.

Her husband has paced away again, but now he is moving toward her. Margaretha isn't listening exactly, and he has noticed. She hopes he will not take it personally, but she can see that he is agitated, looking for some way to capture her attention. He flips through the pages of his manuscript. Seeming as though he has a new idea, he shifts the papers from one hand to the other, then raises his free hand and begins to gesticulate. He's making a strange movement, rotating his wrist in a somewhat comical twirl, his index finger pointed toward the ceiling.

"Observe the motion of my right hand," he tries. "The hand, with its opposable thumb, as the great Galenus has revealed to us, is unique to mankind. To what do we owe to this appendage that sets us apart in form from all other barbarous creatures and brutes?"

He pauses to address her. "I have heard tell that the chimpanzee may also have opposable thumbs, though it is not yet confirmed. I wonder if I should mention this? Or does it confuse the point?" He muses to himself, drawing his hand across his beard, and then raising his hand again.

She suppresses a smile that wants very badly to form on her lips as her husband's hand continues to histrionically twirl in the air, like some grandiloquent Othello. He doesn't seem to notice, but he abruptly paces away from her, dropping his head and muttering something to

himself. He holds his fist to his forehead and remains silent for some time. She looks down to check the red detailing, which has gone amiss.

“Don’t you think it’s quite fascinating that we associate so many negative things with the left hand,” his wife observes idly, after the silence has gone on for a while. “Think of it: the Latin *sinister*, which you use so often in your speech, for the left hand, means ‘evil or ‘inauspicious,’ ‘foreboding.’ And when someone is left-handed, we fear they have powers of witchery.”

She glances up to see his exasperated expression, before he drops his arms to his sides and some papers flutter to the floor. “My love, are you paying any attention at all?” He shakes the remaining pages of the manuscript at her. “I must memorize the speech by this evening. So far, I have not even completed the writing. I shall embarrass myself and our whole household.”

Margaretha takes in the plaintive look in her husband’s eyes. She’d heard him rustle in the adjacent chamber at least three times in the night. She should’ve gotten up to heat milk for him, or at least forgotten all about the green floss and not mentioned the Latin just now.

She runs her needle into the fabric, just where the stem will eventually reach the blossom, and leaves it there. She reaches out her hand to take her husband’s. “You’re absolutely right, my love. I shall not interrupt you again. Please start again from exactly where you left off.”

The Heart

Flora can hear no bells, not even the distant chiming of those of her own cathedral ringing for the fourth time since the dawn, only the quiet rustle of the rushes as the wind blows across the Rhine. She crouches on the ground behind her home, holding her belly and vomiting into the tall grass.

It had come on of a sudden, her stomach cramping, her mouth filling with salty bile; and then, in a second, her throat was convulsing. Six months along and still she suffers from morning sickness, running from her own home into the garden to erupt into the grass.

She brings foods to her lips and the smell is revolting, as if everything, all at once, has gone sour. A boiled egg, perhaps, she can manage. The smell of cooking goat can make her gag, the scent of cheese is overpowering. In the mornings, though, it comes on without the help of any food or smell.

It comes again, her stomach heaving, and again it is over sooner than she'd expected. Once she finishes, she turns onto her back and lies there. Her belly still aches, but the feeling will lessen, she knows. Flora opens her eyes to see the full globe of the sky. It was a luminous dawn, and it will be a clear day, she tells herself, and now that the demons have escaped her body, she will be able to work. Her stomach, at least, in peace.

She thinks on Adriaen again and imagines what his reaction will be to her news. He'd told her once that he thought he wasn't the right kind of man to be a father. Adriaen didn't ever think very much of himself as a potential anything. Adriaen had his troubles, and he had his wandering, but maybe the babe would bring about a change in him. Once he will look into eyes that contained such love and innocence, maybe he'll see his own innocence as well.

It is then that she hears the yelling and the loud crack that follows. She sits up. No, it sounds more like something being smashed. It is fast, and now it is over. A cry, a loud crack, and the sound of feet running. Boys, making trouble. She pushes herself up, still holding her belly, and starts toward the front of the house. If she can glimpse the back of their heads as they run away, their clothes even, she'll know them. She knows all the boys in this town. All the boys and their mothers.

They'd screamed something. *Gekke heg*, she thinks: crazy hedge. What a strange thing to scream before throwing cobblestones. Was there something in the yard, with the bushes? No, she

realizes as she turns onto the path that leads to the front of the house. One boy is still standing there, though the others have run off. He is a small boy, with bright blond curls. His mouth is gaping wide as if he's spotted a sea monster.

Heks, she thinks. That is what they'd cried. Witch. A witch, they'd called her. A crazy witch.

"Crone!" The small boy cries now again, before running off to catch up with his friends.

She stops where she is, a rock under her toe. She takes a few steps of retreat, fearing that perhaps they didn't really run away. Maybe they are waiting. Maybe they are hiding behind a tree, waiting to see if a man was in the house to protect her. They'd called her a witch. The neighborhood boys had come to taunt her.

But why? She'd been called other names, and maybe less flattering names. But never this. Stones thrown, curses hurled.

What had she done to offend someone? She could think of nothing. Since she'd gotten round in her belly she rarely left her property. A friend from a neighboring farm took her eggs to market for her, brought her purchases back home.

Has something happened in the town? she wonders. She had heard rumblings of a renewed war between the Remonstrants and the Counter-Remonstrants, but what had this to do with her? Could it be that the Spanish have won the southern wars and have returned? It could be that. Spaniards.

She runs into the house to look around for anything that could condemn her. What will they look for? What will they take? What is there to protect?

There's another noise outside and she jolts. It is not loud; maybe it isn't anything but the wind. But she can't stay here. What if the boys return? What if more are coming? She grasps her belly and speaks to the child inside, "We're okay. We'll be okay. I will get you somewhere safe."

There's nothing to take, she thinks, nothing worth saving. But where can she go? Who will protect them? When the Spaniards were here last, her mother and cousins had hidden at her church. But will they take her there, now that she carries a bastard child?



Amy Talkington

LIV, FOREVER

"Nimble and heartfelt, with knowledge rich and deep of what it means to be different."

—Anna Godbersen,
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Ruth

Chances of a girl like me ending up at Wickham Hall were next to nothing. I was a farmer's daughter, and neither of my parents even finished grade school. But I loved to read. I read every single book I could get my hands on. And, fittingly, it was in a novel that I first heard of Wickham Hall.

I can't recall which book it was. Fitzgerald's new one, maybe? But it said something like, "Presidents go to Wickham Hall." And that sounded dandy to me. A girl could do worse in life than become a president's wife, especially if he was dreamy like Calvin Coolidge. Oui! Oui! A president's wife would just go to parties and entertain, with oodles of free time to read books.

I wrote a letter to the school, asking for admission, dramatically explaining my plight in life, and several weeks later I received a letter back from the headmaster himself inviting me to join the student body. Can you imagine la joie?! I never filled out an application. I didn't even know there were such things until I

heard everyone complaining about how long theirs had taken. Mon Dieu. I was lucky, I thought.

It's hard to tell by looking at me now, but I was a happy girl and not bad looking. The boys just adored my red hair, and I was pretty witty, too. You'd have thought I'd have more sense than to fall for an anonymous note, a request to meet at the weeping willow tree. But no. Silly me. I thought, "Quelle coincidence!" I'd always loved those kinds of trees. And there were so many handsome gentlemen at Wickham Hall. It was just too intriguing an invitation to decline.

As I got dolled up—pin curls, of course, and my sole, fine-beaded dress—I started to hum that "Weeping Willow" song. It was very popular at the time. Then I strolled over. I leaned against the trunk underneath those willow branches and looked up. They made a silhouette against the moonlit sky. From below, those weeping arms looked like suspended streaks of rain.

Then something grabbed my forehead from behind, pinning my back to the tree, and I felt the chill of a blade gliding across my neck. It didn't exactly hurt. It was just cold. And terribly shocking.

I didn't even know I was dying until I looked down and saw the blood soaking into my dress. To think, the very last thing I wondered—while still a living, breathing girl—was, "How am I going to get this dress cleaned in time for Fall Festival?"

CHAPTER 1

A man in a black suit was waiting for me. He had polished shoes and white gloves and held a sign that read WICKHAM HALL. It was written in the same font I'd seen on their website. I'd call it "ye oldy worldy." But that's just me. It's the kind of font you can't really read. The kind that screams to the world, "We're so important, we don't care if you can read our logo." It's the kind of font you'd see on a gravestone in London. Not that I've been to London. But I'm into fonts. It's part of what I do.

The man looked at me with—well, pity might be a little strong. But it was certainly on the pity spectrum. Perhaps it was just sympathy. He noticed my fingernails and asked if I needed to go to "the powder room."

"It's not dirt. It's ink," I told him. "It's permanently there." The pity turned to something more like poorly veiled disgust. "No, not like tattoo ink. Like pen ink. I draw things." He nodded his head like he couldn't care less.

I'd said, "I draw things," as if it were no big deal. Just something I do, like take a shower or go to school. But it's *all* I do. Or at least it's all I do that matters. I was certain it was the reason I was standing at baggage claim in Boston's Logan Airport headed to the best prep school in the country for my last two years of high school. My grades certainly didn't get me into Wickham Hall. I assumed it was my portfolio. I'd worked on it for months. I knew it was my only hope of getting out.

The man was surprised by how little I'd packed. One duffle bag for my clothes. And one very heavy suitcase.

"Shoes?" he asked as he lifted the suitcase with effort from the carousel.

"No, books, vintage magazines. Ink." For my collages. I brought as much as I could carry. I wasn't going to take any chances with the Wickham Hall school store.

As he rolled my bags to the car, I got my first taste of humidity. I'd always heard about it, and now it was hitting me in the face, as thick as the paint on a Monet canvas. I'd never been east of the Mississippi. I'd never even been east of the Grand Canyon. Fine, I'd never been east of Las Vegas. I'd hardly been out of Las Vegas. We went to Reno once. That was our biggest family vacation to date. My parents aren't big on vacations. Not because they don't like not working—they *love* not working—but vacations cost money. And that they never have.

So you can imagine what I thought when the man approached a limousine. I'm not kidding. A black stretch limousine. With tinted windows. "I was kinda

more expecting a good ol' American school bus. You know, the yellow ones?"

"Not at Wickham Hall."

AFTER WE LEFT THE Boston area, I tried to roll down my window, but it was locked. I could see in the rearview that the man had noticed, but he didn't offer help. Finally I asked. He obliged. I stretched out across the back seat, lying on my back so I could look straight up toward the sky. The sky and trees became blurry fields of color—blue, white, and green—stacked like a Rothko painting. Except Rothko almost never used green.

When I sat back up, we were already in New Hampshire, where LIVE FREE OR DIE is on every license plate. What a state motto. Much better than Nevada's ALL FOR OUR COUNTRY—what does that even mean? LIVE FREE OR DIE is something I could get behind, and not just because it contains my name (phonetically). It's passionate and romantic. I like all things Romantic. And I don't mean mushy, cheesy romantic. I mean truly Romantic with a capital R. As in Byron, Shelley, Keats, and of course, William Blake.

LIVE FREE OR DIE. It made me think of how Modigliani's muse Jeanne Hébuterne jumped to her death while pregnant with their second child the day after he died from tuberculosis. Or how the Dada artist René Crevel gassed himself the day before the French painter Léon Bonvin hanged himself when he realized he would never be able to make a living from his art.

There are countless stories from days past, but it's hard to imagine someone actually dying for freedom or even

for love these days—in this country at least. Everyone I know is way too apathetic to consider it. My parents rarely bother to vote. Even the guys at school who talked about joining the army only care about job security and free college. No one says he wants to do it for his country or for freedom. But maybe that's because they think it'd sound lame. It wouldn't sound lame to me.

Would I die for freedom? For love? I liked to think I had that in me, but how can you die for love if you've never felt it? And I don't just mean I'd never had a boyfriend. I mean I'd possibly never felt love at all. The social worker said it was a protective mechanism. Maybe it was. I'd had four different foster families before I was finally adopted. I was practically bred not to love.

Or maybe it's just that I got matched with the wrong family. It could happen, couldn't it? Just ending up with the wrong parents the same way you could end up with the wrong guy on an Internet date.

Headed to the far north finger of the state, we passed through Salem then Concord, and after several more hours, penetrating deeper and deeper into woods that were more dense than I'd seen before, we approached a tall stone wall. I recognized it immediately from the website. It's something they tout: fully enclosed within a wall built in 1781. I think it originally had something to do with the Revolutionary War. We drove along the perimeter for some time. It was so much bigger than I'd imagined. I wanted to say something to the man, but to be honest, he kind of scared me. So I saved it. Instead, I pulled out my Moleskin notebook and ink.

WE WERE RUNNING LATE. The man made sure I was aware it was not his fault but rather due to my plane's delay.

"Tardiness is not tolerated at Wickham Hall," he snipped. He told me he'd take me straight to Main to join the transfer tour. I asked him if I could skip it. But he said it was required—then shut the window between us, ending the conversation.

I looked at my reflection in the tinted glass. Just a trace of me but enough to see the unfortunate circles under my eyes and a silhouette of my dark, tangled hair. The locket I always wore around my neck glimmered like a disco ball as the light came and went. I started to raise the back of my sleeve to wipe the shine off my nose, but we turned and the gates opened as we passed a security booth. My focus shifted from my reflection.

A stretch of perfectly manicured gardens unfurled as far as I could see. I've always questioned the so-called perfection of surfaces. If you looked close enough, there was always a flaw. And sure enough, in the distance beyond those gardens, the jagged outline of an old cemetery crowned a plump green hill. That was more like it. Out the other window was a cluster of big colonial buildings. We'd studied Mount Vernon in history class, and they looked just like four Mount Vernons—each imposing and symmetrical, painted white with black shutters and capped with a pointed cupola.

Then we passed a spectacular Victorian mansion, its gingerbread trim delicately elaborate. And another one.

And another. Signs out front announced these were faculty housing. I wanted to ask him to stop, but then I saw the Art Center. This one I'd studied of course. It was the reason I wanted to come to Wickham Hall. Designed by Philip Johnson, it was, according to the website, their only modern building. The school had called it a "perfect celebration of art." They were right about that, at least. To me it looked like an explosion of everything I loved. I couldn't wait to go there, unpack my suitcase, and actually have a studio.

Up until now, I'd worked in my room. I'd had to cover my floor with painters' drop cloths because our apartment had wall-to-wall carpet. My mother said if I got a single drop of paint on it, I'd have to pay for it myself. When it wasn't too hot, I'd work in the alley or in a park nearby. But it was almost always too hot.

I'd just spotted a Gothic chapel in the distance when the limousine stopped in front of the main building. The man came around and opened my door before I thought of it. He waved me toward a small gathering of students at the top of the stairs.

"Your things will be waiting in your dorm: Skellenger," he said, then closed the door and drove away.

There was a small group of five or six students halfway up the steps of Main, following a girl with straight blonde hair. They were all dressed similarly in what the school website called "class dress"—dress shirt, tie, and sport coat for guys and for girls, a knee-length skirt and a blazer.

I called out to the blonde. No response. So I ran up the stairs.

“Olivia Bloom. You’re late,” she snapped once I’d caught up. Not exactly the warm greeting one might have hoped for after coming clear across the country to attend a new school.

“Sorry, my plane was delayed.”

“Well, we’re on a tight schedule.” She got back to her tour, perturbed to have been interrupted. “Where was I?”

One of the fawning male transfers said, “Presidents.”

“Yes, as I was saying, two of the most illustrious presidents of the United States lived in those rooms,” she said, gesturing up to the windows of Main. Then she motioned over to the Mount Vernons. “And two others lived over there. Google it if you don’t already know. The point is: Wickham Hall has a rich history, renowned alumni, and a powerful network that extends around the entire world.” She spoke as though delivering a soliloquy for an unseen camera. “Now, come along. We have a lot to see.”

She turned her back on us and scaled the stairs. From behind, I couldn’t help but stare at her hair. I’d never seen such straight hair cut in such a straight line. Surely some blog would proclaim this the perfect bob. But to me it looked like a piece of tracing paper wrapped around a head.

We entered the lobby of Main, a stately, masculine sitting room with a hand-carved fireplace and a massive pewter chandelier. It looked like the kind of place where cigars were smoked . . . or pipes—definitely pipes. Strangely, there were no students lounging in the deep leather chairs. I realized I hadn’t yet seen a single student on the campus aside from our small group.

Perfect Hair led us through the lobby to a small door and then down a spiral staircase that was so narrow we had to walk single file. I was last, so by the time I reached the bottom of what seemed like hundreds of steps, I'd missed the beginning of her speech. Not that I really cared.

"And you may or may not have heard the frivolous rumors that Wickham Hall is haunted. Students have passed ghost stories down from generation to generation, mostly as a means of diversion. And non-Wickies like to snicker about our ghosts because frankly, there is nothing about us in the *real* world they can snicker at."

"*Wickies?*" I asked.

"Yes, Wickies," she replied, completely without humor. She turned to lead us down the dark hallway. I lingered back and looked around. I paused at an arched doorway and looked inside—a small nook—as she continued. "We call these the catacombs. They connect all six of the original academic buildings. And, as you can see, they are not, in fact, haunted."

Right then, the lights went out. Pitch black. The group had moved several yards ahead, but I could hear our guide trying to remain calm. I laughed quietly—because it was as if a ghost were protesting its nonexistence (not that I believed in ghosts)—but right then, I felt it. I turned quickly to look. It felt like someone had opened one of those giant freezer doors at the grocery store—that cold burst of air. Except here there were no doors. No windows.

"Hello?" I called. I waved my arms.

The guide assumed I was talking to her. "Is that Olivia? We're up here! Please don't get separated from the group!"

I moved toward her shrill voice and the general rumble rising from the group of nervous transfers. “Everyone follow me,” she barked. “Stay close!”

Just as I caught up with the group, there came a long and anguished howl. A textbook howl, really. One of the transfers screamed and grabbed me. Their chatter got louder. The panic was palpable. The guide had to yell to be heard. “Everyone calm down! Please! I’m leading us out the fastest way!”

We started up some steps, rough and uneven underfoot, as if they were stone. And I could smell the dankness. While the other transfers whimpered and whispered, I remained silent. We were inside a protected fortress, after all. What could happen? I had no idea I’d be so still in the face of fear. I just listened to each pulse of my blood, surprised I could actually hear it pounding in my ears. And I felt my heart banging through my chest like in an old *Loony Tunes* cartoon.

As we mounted the stairs, a faraway shriek rose eerily from somewhere deep in the catacombs. One of the guys pushed me aside to save his own life. Nice. We all moved to get out of there as fast as possible, piling on top of one another.

“This way!” the guide yelled, sounding quite overcome herself. We came around a bend to blinding bright lights and thundering noise. Oxford shirts. Blazers. Laughing faces. Perfect teeth. Lots of them. Kind of like those paintings by Yue Minjun—everyone laughing hugely and wearing the same clothes—except all these people weren’t Chinese. In fact, none of them were.

I looked up and saw Gothic arches. To my left were some men and women, all delighted, and a pulpit. We were in a chapel. On stage. In front of the entire school. One of the men onstage approached a microphone, stifling a chuckle. “Welcome! Welcome transfers to Wickham Hall! Did you get a fright?”

I looked to my fellow transfers. They were all quick to smile and play along, pretending that was absolutely the most charming greeting they’d ever received. I stood in disbelief. Disoriented, but mostly shocked.

The man at the microphone, wearing a stiff blue suit, went on. “I’m Headmaster Thorton. We always welcome our new transfers with a grand prank. And, thanks to our star thespian Abigail Steers, we got ’em good!”

Our guide, apparently named Abigail, stepped forward and took a bow. And then another one. The students cheered, and I noticed some adults I had to presume were faculty members also clapping and cheering for her.

“So that was supposed to be funny?” I didn’t plan to say it. The words just fell out of my mouth. It wasn’t accusatory. It was a sincere question. I was truly grasping to understand why they would do this. The headmaster went silent, and I knew he had heard me. Everything went silent, and everyone was looking at me. Accusing me. Or so it seemed. I’m sure it wasn’t that bad, but I’m not the type to stand onstage. I’m the type who hides in her closet, drawing. For an instant it all felt very dramatic.

But the headmaster ignored me, turned away as if I’d said nothing, and looked out to the student body, continuing his well-oiled speech. “As I was saying, welcome.

You, transfers, are the chosen few, carefully selected to fill the scarce open spots at Wickham Hall. You will spend your remaining years in preparatory school getting the best education this country has to offer. But be forewarned, we are an institution of traditions. Big and small. From our beloved Headmaster Holidays to our secret societies, we are founded on a tradition of excellence, of high performance, of, dare I say, *perfection*.”

That’s when I noticed him. He was standing next to the headmaster, still looking at me even though the others had turned away. Dirty blond. His expression was different than the others’. Not disapproving or shocked. It almost looked like wonder. I noticed his shirt was partially untucked. And his teeth were *not* perfect; one buckled ever so slightly in front of the other. Our eyes met, and I quickly looked away. But I could feel his gaze linger. I desperately willed my face not to flush, my lips not to purse. Suddenly I was aware of every single muscle in my face. I even think I invented some. I tried to focus on the headmaster’s words.

“As you all know, this is Wickham Hall’s sesquicentennial. We’re celebrating one and a half centuries as the country’s premier secondary school. We celebrate Wickham Hall’s birthday every year with Fall Festival, but this year, we have a *very* special alumni celebration planned.”

He kept talking, but I no longer heard him. I looked up at the Gothic ceiling, but all I saw were those mesmerizingly imperfect teeth.

CHAPTER 2

When I got to my room, my clothes were already unpacked, and whoever had done it felt leggings deserved to be hung up. I couldn't decide if that made me feel fancy or violated. I was trying to appreciate Wickham Hall, so I decided to feel pampered, like I'd checked into a hotel so lavish they unpacked your bags. And this invisible valet had made my bed, too. The crisp white sheets and pillowcases had *WH* monogrammed on the edge. I wasn't used to having my bed made for me. Or crisp sheets for that matter.

It's not that it was so bad at home. My parents were nice people. Nice people—I always spoke of them as if they were someone else's parents. Legally, they were mine, and it's not that I wasn't grateful they got me off the foster-home circuit; I was deeply grateful. But I felt about as close to them as I did to my chemistry teacher. And chemistry was not exactly my favorite subject.

My dorm, Skellenger, was one of those Mount Vernon

buildings in the stretch known as Dorm Row, but the style inside wasn't quite as presidential. The room was simple and small. A bed, a desk, and a giant wardrobe with a mirror. Cold linoleum floors.

The first order of business was to rearrange the furniture. I always did this. My foster parents had always been so surprised when they'd come to see how my first nap was going, only to find I'd rearranged the room. Some would laugh; some were impressed by the strength of such a slight girl. But usually they'd get angry. I guess it was my way of making those short-term rooms feel like my own. Or, if you want to psychoanalyze, you might say I did it as a way to assert some control over my erratic life. Or it might just be that I've always liked things to look a certain way.

I decided to move the giant wardrobe so that it blocked the view of the room when someone entered. It provided some mystery and privacy. I pushed the bed into a corner and the desk beneath the window. Then I pulled out my homemade cardboard portfolio. I'd brought a few collages to hang on the walls to create some semblance of home.

My collages were mostly black and white with an occasional streak of color, and always very precise. I used text from old books and magazines, pencil, ink, and acrylic paints. Sometimes I wrote in big words. Not big as in fancy, S.A.T. vocabulary, but small words that represent big ideas. *Love. Truth. Beauty. Death. Home.* Stuff like that. I always avoided God, not because I was afraid of some divine retribution, but because I wasn't yet sure where I stood on that particular issue. My parents belonged to a Bible church where they dragged me as often as possible,

but I could just never get with the being-gay-is-a-sin thing. I mean, does Jesus love you or not?

I liked to use duct tape to hang art, but we'd been specifically instructed to use only poster tack on Wickham Hall's historic walls. They were so serious about this rule that they provided me with two packages of Elmer's Tac N' Stik in the welcome pack I found on my desk. As if they knew. Had my parents told them?

I should call them and tell them I'm here and safe.

I tried to get through several times, but the signal wouldn't hold. So much for the omnipotent iPhone I spent six months saving up for. Finally, I just texted. Then I sat down and started something new—a picture of a girl floating. A self-portrait. Almost all my drawings are self-portraits. They don't necessarily look like me—in fact, they rarely do—but they represent me. It doesn't take a degree in art history to imagine why I'd draw myself floating. I jumped, startled, when someone rapped on my door. "There's a mandatory dorm meeting in the common room," a clipped voice announced from behind my wardrobe.

THERE WERE ABOUT TWENTY girls draped in a variety of relaxed poses over the chairs and low tables in the common room. I never realized people could look so uptight and so relaxed at once. Abigail Steers sat in the center of the most central couch, surrounded by the others. They seemed so at home, and considering most of them had been living at Wickham Hall for at least two years already, they probably *were* home. It's a feeling I'd never felt, and I certainly didn't feel it then.

But there was something else. You know how they say girls who live together will start to get their periods at the same time? Well, it was like these girls had started to *become* the same. They dressed the same. Their hair was almost identical. Their skin was milky with the occasional bout of freckles. Their noses even turned up in the same way. But mostly, they all talked the same. They talked about prefects and proctors and coxswains. Harkness. The Tuck. I didn't have a clue what they were talking about, but the Head of the Charles sounded pretty gruesome.

The dour dorm mistress, Mrs. Mulford (think pitchfork lady from *American Gothic*, but in ill-fitting slacks and a Wickham sweater) introduced me to the disinterested group of Sloans and Charlottes and Elizabeths. She announced that Abigail was our appointed dorm prefect. "A student monitor," she explained to me, as if I were three years old. Then she went over the standard safety issues and quizzed me on Wickham Hall's strict code of conduct. Just me. When I couldn't tell her the exact protocol required to leave campus, the girls tittered. Mrs. Mulford suggested I reread the student handbook. She went over the main dorm rules: curfew at 9 P.M. and no boys allowed in our rooms. Period. Then she excused us to get ready for dinner.

I THOUGHT I WAS dressing properly for dinner when I changed into my vintage sundress. Big mistake. When I arrived at the dining hall, I found all the girls in sleek cocktail dresses and the guys in dark suits. I quizzed a custodian-looking person near the entrance. "First Dinner,"

he sniffed. Another phrase that had no meaning. No one had told me about First Dinner. Was it a Wickham Hall tradition for the students to dress formally for the first dinner back at school? The word “perfection” rang in my ears.

The dining hall *was* perfect, with dark, wood floors and a hand-carved vaulted ceiling. Students sat at dozens of round tables, served by waiters. Waiters? What kind of school had waiters?

In an effort to avoid the dreaded looking-for-a-seat-in-a-new-cafeteria moment, I decided to walk with purpose until I saw an empty seat or a friendly face. The problem was, I didn’t see any empty seats. Or friendly faces. So I kept walking, and the more I walked, the more I began to hope I’d see a back door I could just slip through. No door, either.

But at the farthest end of the room was a table with just one person. His wasn’t a friendly face—he was looking down, his darkish long hair hanging over his eyes. But it was a seat, so I took it to spare myself the embarrassment of having to parade, underdressed, back through the enormous dining hall.

Just as I sat down, everyone in the room started to stand up. *Perfect*, I thought. I stood back up. The guy at my table also stood, and I could see he was dressed even more shabbily than I was—beat-up cargo pants and a dark hoodie over an old, indecipherable band T-shirt. They all raised their hands to their hearts—all except the guy at my table. I expected to hear the Pledge of Allegiance, but instead they started to sing, “*Wickham Hall, oh Wickham Hall, our joy and our pride! Wickham Hall, oh Wickham Hall!*” Then the

guy leaned in close so I could hear him defiantly change the lyrics, “*You’ve got nowhere to hide!*”

I pulled away from him.

“Don’t be afraid of me,” he snarled. “Be afraid of *them*.”

I thought he was making some sweeping generalization about the student body, but then he gestured across the room and I looked. There was a group of four students carrying a giant silver platter with a dead animal draped across it, and they were followed by five or six other students, all swinging silver carving knives back and forth to the beat of the song.

“What is that?”

“A *boar*,” he delighted in telling me. I had to laugh, which immediately put him more at ease. “I’m Gabe,” he offered.

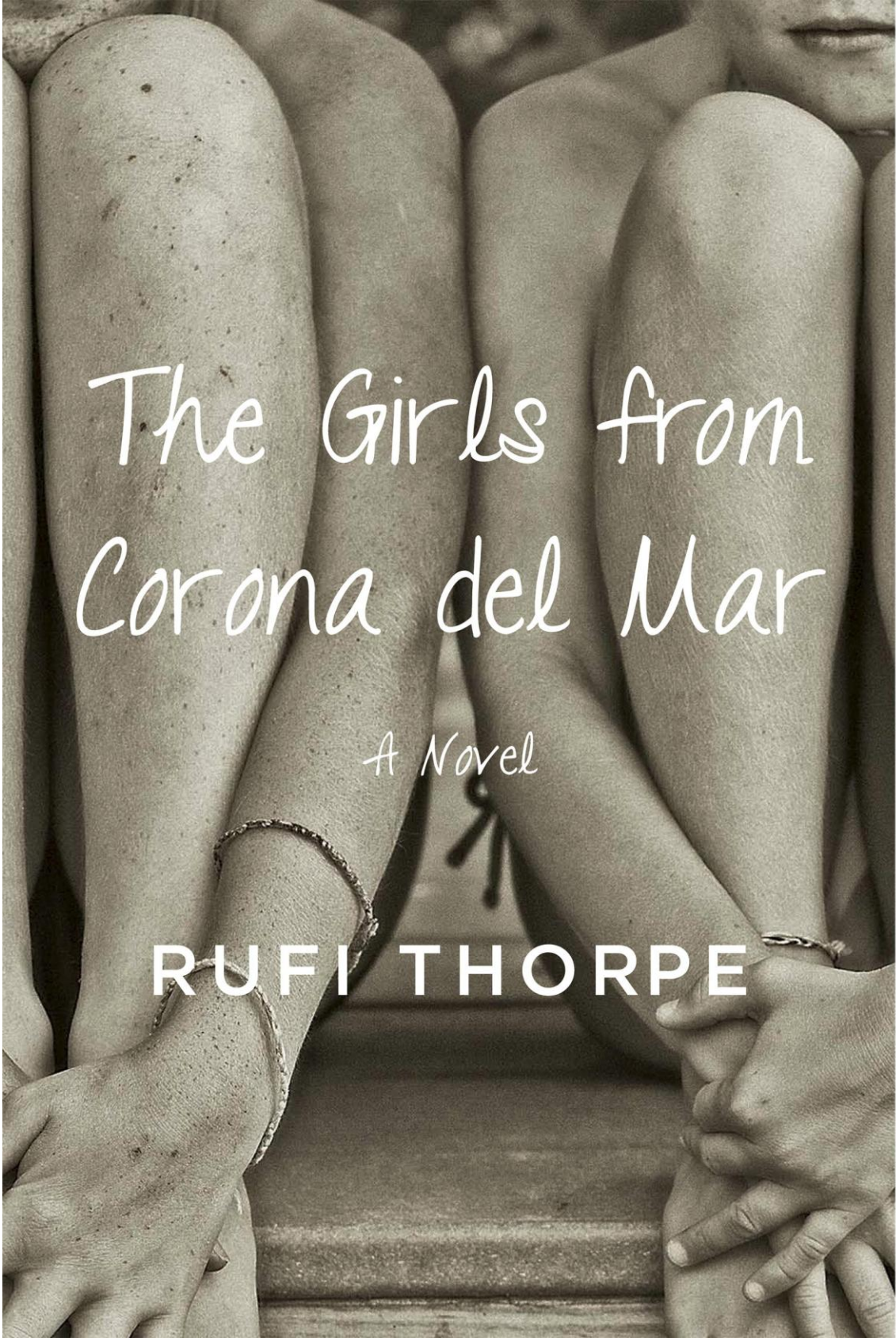
“Liv,” I said.

He was skittish and intense, but his brown eyes were gentle. Still, I wanted to keep at least three feet away. He was almost exactly how I’d always pictured Vincent Van Gogh—in other words, pretty crazy.

While everyone continued to sing the Wickham Hall alma mater, the students placed the boar platter onto a table in the center of the hall. The students with the knives quickly and deftly carved it up. Then everyone clapped and took their seats. All I could think was, *There’s been a terrible mistake. I need to go home. I don’t belong in this place.* I didn’t know people ate boar or that they even still existed.

Gabe turned to me and said, “It’s crazy, right? Am I crazy, or is it crazy?”

I cringed. “It looks pretty crazy to me.”



The Girls from
Corona del Mar

A Novel

RUFITHORPE

The Girls from Corona del Mar

By Ruff Thorpe

Alfred A. Knopf

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CHAPTER ONE

The Best Tea in the World

“You’re going to have to break one of my toes,” I explained. Lorrie Ann and I were sunning ourselves in the tiny, fenced-in patio of my mother’s house on thin towels laid directly over the hot, cracked pavement. We had each squeezed a plastic lemon from the supermarket into our hair and were praying for blonde, our eyes closed against the sun. There was jasmine on the wind.

In the narrow cove of our 90’s California neighborhood, there was no girl more perfect than Lorrie Ann Swift, not so much because she was extraordinary, but because she was ordinary in a way that surpassed us. Her parents loved her, and she loved them. In fact, it was difficult to even get an invitation to their house, so much did they prefer each other’s company to the company of outsiders. Even her older brother, instead of cruelly taunting her or running her over with his bike, shared his CD collection and advised her on her breaststroke.

Most of our parents had wound up in the sleepy ocean hamlet of Corona del Mar through a series of increasingly devastating mistakes. The southern California real estate market, which had seemed throughout the 80’s to have no ceiling, had suddenly crashed, and many fathers were now stay-at-home dads whose time was divided equally between the bottle and the couch, an icepack over their eyes, as their wives scrambled to become certified dental hygienists. One girl, Miranda, had a mother who worked at Disney Land during the day and then worked all night

from home as a telephone hotline psychic. “It pays better even than phone sex,” Miranda reported one afternoon as we licked sugar-free orange jello powder from tiny saucers. I remember too that they had four extremely aging Rottweilers, two of whom had lost control of their bowels.

Mostly, our parents had assumed that life would be self-explanatory and that, bright and eager as they were, they ought to be able to handle it just fine. This faith, a faith in their own capableness, was gradually leaving them and being replaced, at least in the case of my own mother, with an interest in the occult and a steady red wine habit. Some have characterized the Boomers as optimistic, but to my view they were simply soft and rather unprepared. They didn’t know how to cook or sew or balance their own check-books. They were bad at opening the mail. They got headaches while trying to lead Girl Scout meetings, and they sat down in folding chairs with their fingers pinching the bridges of their noses, trying not to cry over how boring and hard life had turned out to be, as around them feverish little girls screamed with laughter over the fact that one of them had stepped in poop.

Lorrie Ann’s parents were not losing faith, though. They were living in some other, better world. They went to church every single Sunday. They rented classic horror movies every Friday night and even Lorrie Ann’s older brother, then sixteen, stayed in to watch, as they ordered Domino's and made popcorn in the tiny one bedroom apartment all four of them shared. Her father, Terry, had an earring (a big golden hoop like a pirate) and wore a black silk top hat to parent/teacher night. He was a Christian rock musician, and Lorrie Ann’s mother, Dana, was a preschool teacher who collected gnomes: ceramic and wooden gnomes of all sizes and styles, standing on the floor and on tables and shelves of their house, their backs to the wall, their dull eyes turned on the center of the room.

Certainly, it seemed to me, Lorrie Ann would never have been stupid enough to get pregnant in tenth grade by a boy she didn’t even like, which was precisely what I had done. And

yet, the spring I was fifteen, it was Lorrie Ann who came with me to get the abortion, who helped me to plan it all out. She had already turned sixteen and gotten her license, but I didn't just need her as my driver. I needed her, in all her goodness and her primness, to forgive me, to give her consent by participating in my scheme.

"Can't you just say you're having your period? Why do I have to break your toe?" Lorrie Ann asked, her eyes hidden behind the dusty lenses of my mother's borrowed sunglasses.

"Who misses a championship game because they have cramps?" I argued. Trying to get an appointment at Planned Parenthood had been a nightmare. There wasn't any way I could reschedule, and I doubted I could play in a game the very next day. I wanted Lorrie Ann to break my toe so that I could show my coach a real and visceral damage. Also, in some strange way I viewed the breaking of my toe as the price of the abortion itself, a way of reassuring myself that I was still a decent person-- it was the punishment that makes the wicked good again. Though raised entirely without religion, I was somehow Catholic through temperament alone.

"Just say you're sick!" she insisted.

"I don't like lying, and this is as close as I can get to making everything true."

Lorrie Ann looked at me dolefully. "You're nuts," she said. "You lie all the time."

"Yes, and I hate it. It'll be fine. We'll get drunk and you'll just do it."

#

It made a lot of intuitive symbolic sense to force the beautiful, pure and good Lorrie Ann to break my toe and punish me for my abortion. To us, Lorrie Ann's family was magic, and this magic transferred to Lorrie Ann herself. It honeyed her golden hair and deepened the oceanic blue of her eyes. It made her upturned nose seem elegant, instead of Irish. It was what made it sweet, not dorky, that Lorrie Ann was the last girl in 6th grade to start shaving her legs. I think we all were jealous of those fine golden leg hairs, like a shimmer of fairy dust along Lorrie Ann's calves. Why did it look so beautiful on her and so ugly and shameful on our own stolid

little shins? Why did Lorrie Ann look graceful in beat up Keds and shorts a bit too small for her? Why was it charming when she snorted from laughing too hard?

Yes, we were jealous of her, and yet we did not hate her. She was never so much as teased by us, we roaming and bratty girls of Corona del Mar, thieves of corn nuts and orange soda, abusers of lipgloss and foul language, daughters to sham psychics and newly certified phlebotomists.

And so, just after high school, when terrible things began to happen to Lorrie Ann, we were all shocked. It was like some bizarre post-modern rendition of Job. We were transfixed, struck dumb, without access even to the traditional gestures of delivered casseroles and decent silences. The story of Lorrie Ann became the thing stuck in our throats, keeping us quiet as we nervously chose careers and, with many doubts and superstitions, consented to marry the men we were in love with. (All of our parents had gotten divorced— how could we fail to be afraid? All of our parents, except, of course, Lorrie Ann's.)

In a way, Lorrie Ann made me everything I am, for my personality took shape as an equal and opposite reaction to who she was, just as, I am sure, her personality formed as a result of mine. People do that kind of thing. They divvy up qualities, as though reality, in order to be manageable at all, should be sorted, labeled, pinned down. To this day, my mother considers herself the smart one and her sister the pretty one, even though her sister went on to get a PhD in Marine Biology and my mother became a make-up artist. For me, my friend Lorrie Ann was the good one, and I was the bad one. She was beautiful (shockingly so, like a painting by Vermeer), but I was sexy (at thirteen, an excess of cherry chapstick was all that was required). We were both smart, but Lorrie Ann was contemplative where I was wily, she earnest and I shrewd. Where she was sentimental, I became sarcastic. Normally, friendships between girls are stowed away in boxes of postcards and ticket stubs, but whatever was between me and Lorrie Ann was not so easy to set aside.

#

And so, the following weekend, we had gone to the Planned Parenthood on 19th Street in Costa Mesa, gotten the abortion, and then eaten In-N-Out afterwards. I felt ill enough that probably we should have just gone home, curled up on the couch like it was a sick day in elementary school. A heating pad and a handful of Advil would have been heavenly. But I didn't want to admit that I needed coddling. I wanted to be tough, even violently blasé about what had just happened, because maybe if I acted like it didn't matter, then it would actually matter less. When I requested In-N-Out, Lorrie Ann had no choice but to drive me there. "Are you sure?" she asked. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fucking aces," I said, and Lorrie Ann laughed nervously.

But after we ordered and were sitting on the scalding stone picnic bench with food that neither of us wanted, we didn't seem to be able to talk, and I knew that in order for us to be friends completely once more, I would need to find a way to let her in, to give her access to those cold and brightly lit minutes I had just spent without her.

"The nurse had kind of a mustache," I said finally. I was thinking about her face, hovering over me during the procedure-- that was what they had kept calling it, "the procedure." The expression in her eyes was hard to parse; it was not pity, but it was not judgement either. There was no overt emotion, and yet her face was honest and open. Finally it struck me: the nurse was looking down at me in the same casual way one looks at one's own face in the mirror-- studying it without any sense that the face belongs to another.

"I think she hated me," I said. "Or else she hated all of it: abortions and young girls getting them on Saturdays. Or maybe she was just bored. Maybe she was just bored during my abortion. That's weird, isn't it? That it can be the biggest, scariest, worst thing that's ever happened to me, and for her it's just another day at work?"

"I'm so sorry," Lorrie Ann said, setting down a fry. She flicked her fingers to get rid of the salt. "I just keep thinking that I wish it was me, that I could have done it for you so that you didn't have to do it yourself." She was on the verge of tears, which was helpful. If she was going to cry, then I couldn't, and it was easier to comfort her than to comfort myself.

"It really wasn't that terrible," I told her. "They kind of keep it from all the way happening to you. They hide it from you. Maybe it would be better if they didn't, if you got to see, if you knew. But really, I've had trips to the dentist that were worse on a pain and ickiness scale."

Lorrie Ann looked at me then laughed softly. "Fucking liar."

#

Afterwards, we went back to my house, where my mother was annoyingly home and annoyingly drunk. What was most upsetting about my drunken mother was how sentimental she became. "I love you girls so much," she whispered as she tweezed our eyebrows for us, her own eyes filling with tears. "You're so beautiful."

I remember I was bleeding like a Romanov, going through Kotex after Kotex all afternoon, as she gave us facials, the one fan making a clicking sound every time it feebly rotated around the living room. I had to lie and say I had the runs to explain my frequent bathroom breaks and glassy-eyed distraction. I could feel Lorrie Ann worrying about me, and I kept trying to smile and shrug at her, mouth that I was fine, whenever my mother's back was turned. But the finer I claimed to be, the more frantic I became inside, which resulted in a peculiar, languorous anxiety.

My brothers, struck dead by the heat, lounged on the leather sofas. Really, they were my half-brothers, fathered by my new step-father, Paddy. My real father was off living some kind of glamorous car-salesman life in San Francisco, where I visited him annually, usually only for two or three days, which was even too long for us. We were tired out from trying to be nice to each

other by the evening of the first day. My father never felt like family, not like my brothers. They were five and six then, naked except for their Superman briefs, their satiny tan skin seeming to glow against the black leather.

“This is an exfoliating serum,” my mother informed us, slurring only slightly. She was a makeup artist for Chanel and my whole life was a series of test-sized beauty products: tiny tubes of cream pressed into my palm as talismans against danger.

All afternoon and evening, Lorrie Ann and I waited: for our new faces to be revealed, for my mother to finally pass out, for my little brothers to go to bed (they still loved Goodnight, Moon then— God, what a boring book! Goodnight this, goodnight that, over and over again.) Finally, past midnight, Lorrie Ann and I snuck out to the small patio with the claw hammer.

I remember Lorrie Ann was chewing on her fingernails. Her mother, Dana, to discourage this habit, had painted them with a product disturbingly called “Hoof Hands: Stop the Bite, Kick the Habit.” But, Lorrie Ann confessed to me that she liked the bitter taste and positively gnawed the polish off in flakes that melted on her tongue like battery acid, only to beg her mother to please paint them again.

“I can’t, Mia,” Lorrie Ann said, setting down the hammer and immediately beginning to chew on her nails again.

“Bitch, do it!” I shouted. We were both very, very drunk. My mother had begun to buy jugs of Carlos Rossi ever since my stepfather had been fired from the Italian restaurant where he worked. Supposedly, now he was going to become a hair stylist.

“I just can’t,” Lorrie Ann had said, starting to cry.

“Fine,” I said, “you fucking baby.” I remember that the night sky was clear, simply swimming with stars. And I grabbed up the hammer and brought it down as hard as I could on my toe.

#

As to how I had gotten pregnant in the first place, I was one of what must be a magnificently small percentage of girls who become pregnant at the loss of their virginity. In my case, his name was Ryan Almquist, and he had insisted that the condom, when I asked for one, went on at the end. We were in his van, which smelled of surf board wax and mildew, a combination that was not entirely unpleasant.

“At the end?”

“Yeah, dummy,” he said, kissing my neck.

Since I knew that the condom’s purpose was to catch all the sperm and that this definitely happened at the end, and was, in fact, The End of sex, it did not seem so improbable to me. Afterwards, and especially after I realized I was pregnant, I was mortified by my naivety.

I would have been angrier if I believed Ryan had intentionally deceived me, but I felt fairly sure he really was just an idiot. That was, after all, part of why I had chosen him to lose my virginity to. Lorrie Ann had been patient with me as I explained my reasoning to her, though I could tell she was not convinced: one of us had to go first, I argued, and it might as well be me. Ryan was a.) harmless, b.) hot, and c.) in possession of a van. Besides, he went to a different high school and so resulting gossip would be minimal.

“Don’t you want to love the person you do that with?” Lorrie Ann had asked.

“No,” I said. “Because what if it hurts and it’s awful and you wind up embarrassing yourself and crying or bleeding or farting or something? It’s better to do it with someone you don’t care about at all.”

“I think I’d rather do it with someone I loved,” Lorrie Ann said softly.

“Well, that’s an option for you,” I said, “but who am I going to love with this black heart of mine?”

Lorrie Ann and I often joked that my heart was nothing but a small, dark stone, lodged painfully in my chest, glittering dully like graphite or charcoal.

“I don’t even love my own mother!” I would cry out as Lorrie Ann collapsed in peels of laughter.

“You do too,” she would say.

“No,” I would say, breathless, laughing, “I really don’t.”

#

Years and years later, in Istanbul, I would still worry that my heart was a stone. It was Franklin, a visiting scholar at UMich, who introduced me to cuneiform, the very first system of writing ever invented, which was his subject, and it was also he who first made me wish my heart were made of something else: bunny rabbit essence, perhaps, or pixie dust and nougat, or just whatever tender flesh a regular girl might have.

I had not studied cuneiform before; my subject was Classics, in particular Latin. But in the spring of 2005, we decided to try and do a translation together of the full Inanna cycle, a series of ancient songs that told the story of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. As a Classics scholar, I had come across my share of goddesses. In fact, I credit my mother's mid-life crisis purchase of *Goddesses in Every Woman* for my later decision to study Greek and Roman literature and culture. I can still remember reading that peeling paperback in the bathtub as my brother Alex pounded and pounded to get in so he could use the toilet. I was fascinated by the Gods: their amorality, their capriciousness, their bloodlust. But even in all my reading, discarded books littering my apartment like the carapaces of beetles, even in graduate school, those seven strenuous years of tugging myself slowly towards excellence, I had never come across a goddess like Inanna. She was a fucking rockstar. She tricked her father into giving her all his wisdom while he was drunk and then gave it as a gift to her people. She married a mortal man and made him a king. And then, when she had it all, when literally all the world was hers, she developed a hunger for death and insisted on traveling by herself to the underworld where she was killed and then reborn.

No one had ever published the full Inanna cycle before. Her story was still unsung, waiting inside those clay tablets simply covered in peculiar wedge-marked script, the writing without punctuation or spaces between words so that it reminded me of the lacy designs on Ukrainian Easter eggs. Only small pieces of it had been published in papers all through the last hundred years, so in the fall of 2006, we received the grants and the funding and we moved to Istanbul together to begin the first cohesive translation of the entire Inanna cycle.

Before Franklin, I literally hadn't heard of Inanna. Franklin explained there was a reason for this. When the fragments, which had lain undiscovered for some four thousand years in the ruins of Nippur, were discovered in 1889, the spoils had been divided evenly between the University of Pennsylvania, who was funding the excavation, and the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, who was allowing the excavation to take place. But no one was reading the tablets as they were being sorted, so they were simply divided equally and shipped off to their separate destinations. And so it came to be that half the tablets containing the story were in Istanbul, and half were in Philadelphia, and no one alive had read the entire story.

So that's what I was doing in Istanbul: turning Franklin's rough translation into something Americans would actually want to read and falling in love with a goddess no one had worshipped in thousands of years. In our apartment building, there was a little girl named Benu, which means, "I am water." She lived in the apartment below us and was perhaps five, with a pursed plum of a mouth and huge, rolling green eyes that seemed fashioned out of lab-synthesized emerald, and a tongue which curled out neat little phrases of English or Turkish, as though she were a toy designed by a multicultural idealist. And because of the innocence I projected onto her, I was time and again surprised by the perversity of Benu's whimsy.

"Just for a minute," Benu said to me. "Just for ten seconds," she said.

What Benu wanted was for me to stop in the stairwell, set down my grocery bags, and pretend to drink tea out of a plastic doll shoe. She did not have a tea set, and so she made do with

the shoes of her biggest doll. She poured the tea into these shoes by artfully tilting a pin cushion that must have belonged to her mother.

Some days I gave in, and some days I did not. But when I did, Bensu raised her doll shoe and smiled at me, her eyes twinkling, “My tea is very good, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Bensu,” I said, “What do you put in it that makes it so tasty?”

Bensu sipped slowly at the air inside the doll shoe. “That’s a secret,” she said.

“No fair!”

“Even if I told you the secret,” Bensu sighed, tired and patient, “you would not be able to make it taste as good as I can make it because I make better tea than anyone in the world.”

“In the whole world?” I asked. “Wow. That’s incredible.”

Bensu nodded modestly, sipped once more from her doll shoe. Suddenly and with great passion, she reached out for my knee. “Don’t worry,” she said, those huge emerald eyes glittering as though lit from within, “I’m sure someone will still marry you. Even though your tea is not very good.”

“My tea isn’t very good?” I asked.

Bensu shook her head sadly. My tea was so bad that it made her sad.

“It will be very difficult, but we will find you a husband,” Bensu said.

“What about Franklin?”

Bensu knew Franklin, my boyfriend, who lived with me upstairs.

“I’m afraid he’s been being paid off.”

“Paid off?!”

“Yes, your mother has been paying him to pretend to be in love with you.”

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“Because she felt sorry for you because of your tea.”

#

I never knew this kind of canny cruelty that lurks in even very little girls when I was growing up, half-raising my little brothers who were more like animals than children at times: perfect, golden little animals. Lion cubs. But even five-year-old Bensusan was able to detect that there was something wrong with me that would keep me from finding a mate.

Was Lorrie Ann ever this cruel? I don't know anymore. I cannot say. I can only answer for myself, the girl who once literally spat in her mother's face, the girl who chose a boy to fuck because he was dumb, the girl who once, shamefully, kissed her two-year-old brother full on the mouth just to see what it would be like: yes, yes, yes. I was and am awful and terrible. I am sure I said treacherous things when I was five. In fact, I seem to remember informing a babysitter that our dog liked to hump everyone but her, and that it was probably because she was ugly.

And yet it was not me, but Lorrie Ann the vultures of bad luck kept on visiting, darkening the yard of her house, tapping on the panes of her windows with their musty, blood crusted beaks. "Wake up, little girl!" they cried. "We've got something else for you!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lost Worlds, Both Invisible and Physical

To be perfectly precise I suppose I would have to say that tragedy began to nibble at Lorrie Ann as early as Junior year of high school, though at the time it all seemed so glamorous that we were not able to be suitably sympathetic, but were, instead, almost jealous of her. A full year after my de-virginization debacle and ensuing abortion, Lorrie Ann's father, Terry, was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Because her father didn't survive the crash, and because the other driver (of a bright blue 1984 Toyota Pick-up) was drunk, it was never entirely clear what happened. "I didn't see him. I didn't even fucking see him!" the pick-up truck driver insisted. He had turned left directly in front of Terry's bike, which was going about forty miles an hour— five miles under the speed limit. It was mid-afternoon. No one was clear on why the pick-up truck driver was simply unable to see Terry, who was a large man on a large Harley. Even dead drunk, the driver should have been able to see him— the only vehicle in those lanes of oncoming traffic.

"I didn't even fucking see him," the man repeated to Dana in the hospital waiting room, as though these words could do anything for her. I was waiting with Lorrie Ann in that room, the two of us perched on chairs like nervous birds, ready to take flight. We did not yet know that Terry "hadn't made it." We were waiting for the doctor to come out, to let us know what was going on.

"Didn't even fucking see him." I remember the look on Dana's face as she regarded the man, still slightly drunk, presumably under arrest, but present at the ER for his own injuries. His attendant police officer, a chubby woman with dolorous eyes, wearing sharp perfume, shifted her feet as though to lead him away. But Dana only looked at him with the same sad patience as if he had been a child asking her to take a snotty Kleenex.

“I know you didn’t,” she said, with a kind of grace I knew my own mother would never have been capable of. My mother would have said something snide and then begun crying.

#

The whole family, of course, was devastated and mourned in the beautiful way that only perfectly happy families can. When Tori Stephenson’s little brother Graham had died of leukemia when we were in 8th grade, her mother had gotten drunk at the funeral reception and had barfed in a plant. On the way to the car, Tori’s stepfather, Rex, had slapped her, leaving a huge red handprint on her cheek.

Dana and Lorrie Ann and Bobby did not barf in any plants, nor did they cry too loudly, nor fail to cry enough, nor slap each other, nor do anything except do everything just right. Lorrie Ann looked miraculously beautiful in her black dress—a simple cotton thing that managed to make her look almost freakishly long waisted, as though she spent summers performing in Cirque du Soleil. Her bitten fingernails, crimson and bloody, served only to show off her long fingered, elegant hands. The black eyeliner my mother put on her made her look like a dwarf hotot rabbit, the pure white kind with black rings around their eyes that they sold at the mall, so shy they simply froze when you lowered your hand into their pen, their tiny hearts hammering with the fury of a kamikaze pilot’s. Lorrie Ann was full of this same ferocious vulnerability after her father’s death, which made it almost painful to look at her.

To be honest, I was insulted that her sadness seemed to somehow exclude me. I had imagined us weeping together, imagined myself comforting her. We had always shared even our smallest and most ridiculous tragedies with one another. Instead she was behind layers and layers of glass. It made me furious. I was seventeen; I had a little black stone for a heart; what more can I say? But Lorrie Ann had suffered a profound loss.

#

Terry had been, to a large extent, the *raison d'être* of the entire Swift family. It was for him, and out of love for him and his dream of being a musician, that they all scrimped and saved and shared the tiny one bedroom apartment. (Lorrie Ann had annexed a portion of the living room behind some bookcases; Bobby had moved onto the balcony and slept in a tent out there even when it rained.) Dana faithfully taught preschool, which paid badly, but was work she enjoyed, and Terry played as a set musician sporadically, but lucratively, and pursued his own musical projects full time. They believed they were blessed to be so lucky as to do work that they believed in.

His band, called Sons of Eden, despite the name, did not sound particularly Christian. None of their songs even mentioned Jesus. Then again, they didn't mention sex, drugs or alcohol either, which was remarkable in and of itself in a rock band. Terry didn't want to shove his religion down anybody's throat. He just wanted to be a decent man who was also a musician. It bothered him that so many rock stars were such revolting ethical specimens. Why on earth did people take a musician more seriously if he was loaded? How did that make his music "realer"? And yet it seemed to. Terry experienced every day this peculiar kind of discrimination. "Even if you're not loaded, try singing like you're loaded," a record exec had once advised him.

But Terry would not, and his crisp vocal annunciation and technically brilliant guitar playing allowed him to get small record contracts that rarely made any money at all, but which provided a creative outlet and some tangible proof for the family that all their sacrifices had been worth it.

I remember that I found it particularly maddening that he wrote songs for Lorrie Ann. We went once to a summer festival where his band was playing. It was a glorious day, filled with cotton candy and sunburn and corn dogs. Andrew's friend Tio was there, and I was convinced that somehow Tio might fall in love with me and decide that our six year age difference was of no consequence. Both boys were indulgent of us and let us follow them around without making

us feel like hangers on. It was wonderful. And just as the sun was setting, Sons of Eden took the stage, and they started the set like this: “This song is for my angel, my little girl, my Lorrie Ann.”

And then Terry proceeded to sing the most beautiful song I think I’d ever heard, with strange surreal lyrics I could barely follow wherein Lorrie Ann seemed to be conceived as some kind of barefoot angel that went around Southern California on the bus system, giving comfort to homeless schizophrenics and fat little kids and women who were afraid their husbands no longer loved them. The chorus went: “Get back into the bus, Lo-Lola/ Get back into the bus, Lo-Lola!”

I had never been so jealous in my life.

#

And so when Terry died, an era ended for the Swifts. They went on living in the one bedroom apartment. Lorrie Ann kept on going to high school. Bobby kept on going to community college, though what his ultimate plans were became vaguer and vaguer. But now they were all living in an untenable situation surrounded by far, far too many gnomes for no good reason. In a very literal sense, their life had lost its music, its rhythm. Without Terry, they slowly stopped gathering for Friday night horror movies or family trips to the world’s oldest McDonalds in Downey.

Perhaps the worst part of all this was that Lorrie Ann stopped singing. She had always been a talented singer with a sweet and natural soprano like one of those Appalachian folksingers. Her voice had a crystal clear quality that made your heart shiver, as though the notes were all wineglasses falling, but never hitting the floor. She had loved to sing complex harmonies with her father, and he had been teaching her both the six-string and the twelve-string guitar, at which she had shown tremendous promise. She stopped practicing entirely, as far as I knew, though perhaps she began again after I went off to college.

Everything was changing so fast. And Terry’s death was just the first thing, the first tap-tap on Lorrie Ann’s windowpane by those bad luck vultures. Over the next few years, more and

more of them would come, bobbing their burned-looking heads, the skin of their faces red and raw and peeling.

#

In fact, the Corona del Mar in which Lorrie Ann and I grew up actually ceased to exist almost at the exact moment we left it. You can, of course, still go there now, but you will find only young women pushing Bugaboo strollers in Lululemon yoga pants, flaunting their postpartum tummy tucks. The playgrounds are swollen with little Jayden's and Skyler's. The old bungalows have been ripped down and replaced with mini-mansions with two car garages. More and more expensive restaurants serving "American Cuisine" have opened along the highway, and boutiques have replaced most of the mysterious Oriental Rug emporiums that once dominated that stretch of the Coast Highway.

But when Lorrie Ann and I were girls, Corona del Mar was half-empty, somewhat decayed, beautifully perfumed. Always there was jasmine on the wind, or the subtler, greener scent of potato vine, or the almost hostile peppery scent of bougainvillea. In every median and useless ditch, ice plant grew with frightening tenacity and you could break off the sprigs of it and write with water on the sidewalks, secret messages that the sun would dry to invisibility like disappearing ink. There were tufts of some kind of sour yellow flower you could chew as you marched along the highway, swinging your backpack on your shoulders so that it whacked you in a satisfying rhythm, on your way to the Chevron where you intended to buy Dr. Pepper, but steal gum. There were hardly any cars, hardly any people. You walked around on sidewalks as blank and shining as drafting paper!

It was a distinctly unreal place, and I don't think any of us had any intention of staying. There were no jobs in the area; the houses were too small and too expensive. We couldn't picture ourselves making actual lives there. Even our parents planned on leaving, on moving somewhere more reasonable, eventually.

Still, back in the spring of Terry's death, we had no idea how quickly we would lose Corona del Mar. We thought, or at least I thought, that Terry's death was just another of the exciting things that was happening to us, a plot event planned out by the writers in advance to provide occasions for good dialogue and new romantic entanglements. I thought we were just a few digits off from being 90210, and, frankly, I resented the Terry-Death Plot because it seemed to cast Lorrie Ann in the lead, and she was always cast in the lead!

When would it be my turn? When, when, when?

If my thoughts during this period were both predictable and disappointing, Lorrie Ann's were doubtless more interesting. I was given only fleeting glimpses into the labyrinth of her mind, and so was forced to piece together her inner world through inference and observation.

I already knew that Lorrie Ann had a peculiar predilection for the ethical. As a simple example, when we read *Little Women*, her favorite character was Beth. It so happened that I had read ahead and knew what happened in the book. (We often read books together, and I often read further and faster than she did, so that it became our practice to buy only one paperback copy, which I would then tear in half once I had reached the nadir of the novel, giving her the beginning and reserving for myself the end.)

"You can't like Beth best," I told her. "Pick someone else."

"But Beth's my favorite!" Lorrie Ann had insisted.

"You should like Jo," I said. "Beth's stupid."

"She is not. She's the only one who really cares about the soldiers and the war. She's always knitting socks and things. All the other girls are just kind of selfish."

I craned my head to look up at her. Lorrie Ann was sprawled on her narrow twin bed, which was canopied in a waterfall of fluffy mosquito netting and pink ribbons, her mother's budget-version of every little girl's dream, and I was sitting with my back braced against the side of the mattress, facing away from her, so it hurt to crane my head to look at her. Her face was

upside down to me, which made her mouth look like the mouth of a frightening monster, even though her teeth were nice and straight. (My teeth were not. They suffered from “crowding.” I had had braces at one time, but then something catastrophic happened, and we were no longer able to afford it, and so I was given a retainer instead, which I promptly lost.)

“Beth dies,” I said.

“No, she doesn’t,” Lorrie Ann insisted, sure that I was just messing with her.

“She does. Skip ahead. She dies.” I was still craning my head awkwardly to look up at her upside-down face. Lorrie Ann bit her lip, and then— and this was such a Lorrie Ann thing to do, it almost made me sick— she said nothing.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked.

“So she dies,” Lorrie Ann said. “She’s still my favorite.”

You simply couldn’t disabuse her of this kind of nonsense.

It was similar regarding the death of her father. Because she believed a number of untrue and contradictory things, her inner world began to have strange, Escher-like spatial contradictions that kept her going in unending and insoluble logic loops.

If there was a God, then life was meaningful.

And if life was meaningful, then things happened for a reason.

And if things happened for a reason, then her father was meant to die.

And if her father was meant to die, then there must be something she was supposed to learn from it.

But there was nothing to learn. There was nothing to fucking learn! Except maybe that the guy driving the pick-up truck was a fucking idiot, loser, no good, piece of shit, who deserved to die for taking out one of the best men I have ever known and the father of a girl who deserved to have her daddy one day walk her down the aisle. I had fantasies almost constantly of finding

the driver of that pick-up and poisoning him or loosing bees inside his apartment or hammering an icepick through his eye socket and into his brain.

I may have been jealous of Lorrie Ann at times, but she was mine. The Swifts were mine. He had no right to interfere with their lives so stupidly, so wastefully, so tastelessly.

Anyway, Lorrie Ann, during this period, began to worry that perhaps her father had been taken from them as some kind of punishment. If there was a reason for his death, maybe she was the reason. All of this is almost classically textbook, I know, but at the time I had read no such textbooks and neither had Lorrie Ann.

And so she became a vegetarian. She made a conscious effort to no longer gossip and refused to laugh at any of my jokes about poor Brittany Slane, whose downy, thin, baby hair had never filled in and who would eagerly announce at the slightest provocation that she was a direct descendent of Abraham Lincoln. Weirdly, Lorrie Ann's new desire to be virtuous, however, did not extend to things like cigarettes, which she still smoked with me, filched Camels from my mother that we puffed behind the handball court at Grant Howald Park as we shredded yellow dandelion flowers between our fingers. In fact, I came to understand, the cigarettes were a form of self-abuse, much like a hair shirt.

It wasn't that Lorrie Ann was becoming a goodie-two-shoes. It wasn't that she wanted to be perfect or loved or approved of. No.

She wanted something much more dangerous. She wanted meaning. And she thought it could be gotten by following the rules.

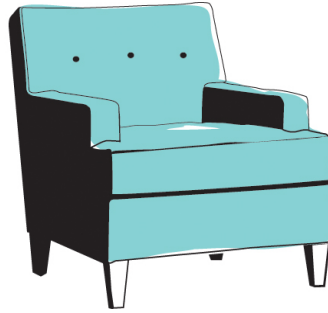
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For the rest of her life, Lorrie Ann would regret not breaking my toe for me. She would remember forever the way I brought the hammer down, too hard and too wildly, so that my baby toe did not just break, but became a pulp, its tender bulb split and flattened like a squashed grape, the concrete of the patio beneath it cracked and slick with blood. She would think: I could have

broken her toe so much better. She would think: what failing is it in me that masquerades as pure-heartedness? And what was one to do if goodness was so duplicitous as to require you to wield a claw hammer at fifteen on a patio, serenaded by the barking of sea lions and the pounding of surf, just outside a bedroom where two little boys slept in a tangle on an air mattress, their golden limbs unblemished and soft as suede, their sleeping eyelids trembling with unknowable dreams, their very cells thrumming with the futurity of all that would happen to them, the men they would become, the things that they would want and do and fuck and know and taste?

These questions would become even more pressing for Lorrie Ann when two years later, just after our graduation, she discovered that she too was pregnant.

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